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**"HER BEST TEACHER, COMFORTER, AND FRIEND": THE GENDERED POLITICS  
OF LABOR IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S *WORK: A STORY OF EXPERIENCE***

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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## I. Introduction

"I only ask for a chance to be a useful, happy woman," exclaims Christie Devon in the opening pages of Louisa May Alcott's *Work: A Story of Experience* (Alcott 9). And so Christie sets off from her rural New England farm, initiating a decades-long journey in pursuit of an activity she believes will furnish her with adventure, purpose, and joy — that is, work. Over the book's span of twenty years, Christie participates in many forms of work, from the waged labor of a governess to the domestic labor of housework and the religious labor of active Christian faith. Published in 1873, *Work* is a semi-autobiographical novel based on Alcott's own experiences in the working world. The first half of the book follows Christie as she works a variety of jobs outside her house, from actress to governess to seamstress. In the second half of the book, however, she switches to mainly doing unpaid work inside the house — what might commonly be understood as "housework." This mirrors a wider shift in the book, from an endorsement of waged work set outside the house to an endorsement of unwaged work conducted primarily from one's own home.

Although not published until 1873, *Work* was a book a long time in the making. Alcott began the manuscript in the 1860s, then titled *Success*. However, it was not until over ten years later — post-Civil War and post-*Little Women* fame — that she finished the manuscript, in the process changing the title to *Work: A Story of Experience* (Yellin 528). Scholar Janet Fagan Yellin argues that this decade-later revision and resulting *de facto* split between the 1860s-penned first half and 1870s-penned second half "suggests that [Alcott] had difficulty dramatizing the successful life of a woman who applied the theories proposed by nineteenth-century social critics" (Yellin 528). These "theories proposed by nineteenth-century social critics" were Transcendental, feminist, and abolitionist in nature, and, most relevantly for Alcott, frequently

centered around a women's right to independence and work. In this thesis, I build on Yellin's argument to suggest that this split also mirrors the divide between the forms of labor Christie finds the most meaning in, as Alcott eventually comes to endorse domestic, reproductive labor more firmly.

As such, I argue that in *Work*, the "split" between the first and second halves of the book does not represent a disavowal of labor in favor of the "non-work" environment of the domestic sphere. Rather, applying a social reproduction theory lens to the text helps reveal how Christie's movement back into the domestic sphere simply represents a shift to a different form of work. Alcott's ensuing endorsement of the move to domestic labor serves as an acceptance of implicit gender norms that help to naturalize unpaid reproductive labor as women's work and also serve to legitimize the underlying capitalist structures of the market economy Christie lives in. Even Christie's time in the world of external, waged work and the resulting labor reform attempts she undertakes afterwards only ultimately serve to reform capitalism in a way that entrenches it, rather than truly challenging or diminishing it.

In the first half of *Work*, the range of jobs Christie holds share many similar traits: while the majority of them take place in a household (or spaces reminiscent of the home, such as the seamstress house), significantly, they do not take place in Christie's own home, and Christie receives wages for all of them. This represents a break in common conceptions of womanhood in antebellum New England, which is when and where the book begins — as scholar Nancy Cott explains, under the dominant separate spheres ideology of the time, the "norm for an adult woman remained household occupation, which implied dependence on a man's initiating economic activity" (Cott 21). In defiance of this, Christie emphasizes her desire to seek independence, both personally and financially. She rejects her Aunt Betsey's explanation that in

her own youth, she moved past her "discontented fits" of wanting independence, for as soon as her husband "Enos came along, ... I forgot 'em" (Alcott 8). By analyzing the ways in which Christie's experiences with productive labor are contrasted with her experiences with unpaid labor, I aim to make visible labor (primarily domestic and reproductive) that is hidden in *Work*, including facets of Christie's labor so effectively concealed that even Alcott herself is not fully aware of them. I explore the paradoxes created by the impossibility of Alcott's romanticized portrayal of domestic work, as contrasted with her demoralizing depiction of external work, to investigate how she attempts to reconcile the two — and her ensuing (lack of) success. I argue that Alcott endeavors to write into existence an idealized world of labor for women, despite her awareness that this romanticized world did not — and could not — align with nineteenth century labor norms for women.

## **II. Social Reproduction Theory as a Means of Understanding the Hidden Labor in *Work***

*Work* follows the orphaned Christie as she leaves her aunt and uncle's farm and moves to the city, working variously as a servant, actress, governess, and companion. She eventually enters the textile manufacturing world as a seamstress, which is a watershed moment in her relationship with work. The social isolation, material deprivation, and moral degradation she experiences as a seamstress pushes her to the edge, and she jumps off a bridge. At the last minute, however, Rachel, a friend from the seamstress house, comes along and saves her, in a major turning point for the story.

After that point, Christie roots herself in the domestic sphere, in spite of her earlier disavowal of it. Christie goes to live with elderly Quaker Mrs. Sterling and her son, David

Sterling, to busy herself doing domestic work as a means to help her spirit recover. She and David eventually wed and have a child, but he is killed while fighting for the Union in the Civil War. Christie works her way through her heartbreak, resolute in her determination to continue to work and to instill in her daughter the value of work — however, she never returns to wage labor. Instead, she remains firmly in the domestic sphere, living in a household with a constructed sisterhood who vow to always work so that "the coming generation of women will not only receive but deserve their liberty, by learning that the greatest of God's gifts to us is the privilege of sharing His great work" (Alcott 443).

To comprehend the multiple forms of labor in *Work*, this thesis explores the text through a social reproduction theory lens. To do so, I will first explain what social reproduction theory is and how it allows us to better understand Christie's relationship with work, including how she valorizes certain modes of external labor, while downplaying other forms of domestic labor. Social reproduction theory revolves around exploring and expanding understandings of where and when labor happens. Not only does capitalism require the productive labor of the prototypical worker in the factory, but it also relies on the reproductive work carried out by the not-so-prototypical laborer outside of the factory — often inside the home — to reproduce the labor power integral to the continued existence of the wider capitalist system. In her book, Marxist feminist scholar Tithi Bhattacharya attempts to home in more clearly on what is meant by "social reproduction theory." Labor power is unique in that it is *the* commodity that keeps capitalist production in motion, yet it is essentially the *only* commodity not produced inside the usual cycle of productive labor. That is, (as of now, at least) there are generally no human-producing-factories that provide the social processes — sleep, kinship, housing, food, etc. — that humans need in order to regenerate their labor power enough to continue to return to work. To

begin resolving this tension, Bhattacharya calls for a "spatial understanding" of capitalist production; that "there are two separate but conjoined spaces—spaces of production of value (points of production) and spaces for reproduction of labor power" (Bhattacharya 7). These "spaces of production of value" tend to be conventional sites of work — e.g. waged labor occurring during the nominal workday. It is the work that those in the "free labor market" undertake, in order to access necessities like food and shelter, and it is the basic place of labor that Marxism analyzes, as the site of exploitation of the worker's labor.

By contrast, "spaces for reproduction of labor power" are outside what is typically considered the sphere of labor: it is non-waged labor in the privatized home, the domestic sphere. Social reproduction theory is a step beyond Karl Marx's analysis of productive labor, which he accomplishes by moving beyond the market and "sphere of circulation" to "the hidden abode of production" that undergirds the public marketplace. This shift of the locus of analysis uncovers "not only how capital produces, but how capital is produced. We shall at last force the secret of profit making" (Marx VI-253-54). That is, for Marx, examining the sphere of productive labor is key in unveiling the real dynamics of capitalism. Switching focus from the "public" sphere of market exchange to the "hidden abode" of production reveals the truth about capitalism: it revolves not around an "exchange [of] equivalent for equivalent," but, rather, through an unequal power balance that results in the appropriation of the workers' labor for the benefit of the capitalist.

However, this rhetorical move has potential for further critical insights beyond just this one epistemological switch. In her essay "Behind Marx's Hidden Abodes," scholar and theorist Nancy Fraser contends that there are other "equally momentous epistemic shifts which are implied in Marx's account of capitalism but not developed by him. These moves, to abodes that

are even more hidden, are still in need of conceptualization" ("Behind" 61). Social reproduction theory is one such switch, from the "hidden abode" of production to the even more hidden abode of social reproduction; that is, "the forms of provisioning, caregiving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds" ("Behind" 61). In other words, if productive labor is the hidden, exploitative precondition behind market exchange, reproductive labor is the even more hidden, even more exploitative precondition behind productive labor.

Using this framework to understand Christie's arc and her engagement with work becomes essential to understanding *all* the forms of work she engages in throughout the novel: the labor she engages with is not just physical or waged and is certainly not just the activities she engages in outside of the house. And while the novel gestures towards some of the ways that what Christie does in the house is work — her more physical responsibilities in Mrs. Sterling's house, such as sewing, cooking, and setting the table, are called "wholesome work" (Alcott 243) — there are dimensions of reproductive labor that Christie engages in that the text is not so self-conscious of, such as how it is also work that Christie does in favorably orienting her family towards labor.

Along with Bhattacharya's mapping of social reproduction theory's origins and aims, scholar-activist Silvia Federici's argument in her seminal essay "Wages Against Housework" is also useful in understanding the interplay between the waged labor Christie performs outside the house and the unwaged labor Christie performs inside the domestic sphere. In "Wages Against Housework," Federici uses the language of the wage as a rhetorical tool to reveal how "housework" is an essential type of labor in a capitalist society, in order to show how labor exploitation does not just happen in spheres of waged, external work, but inside the home as well. She is not genuinely arguing for a wage to be paid to women who engage in housework.



Instead, she is suggesting the wage can be an instrument of disruption as "the demand for a wage makes our work visible, which is the most indispensable condition to begin to struggle against it" (Federici 81). In addition, it pushes back against the coding of reproductive labor along gendered lines; the way "it has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality" (Federici 76-77).

This examination of the constructed nature of femininity and its assumed "affinity" for reproductive labor enables a more expansive reading of Christie's attitudes towards work. The invisible nature of reproductive work continually emerges in Christie's justifications of work, which always rest on moral edification and societal use — she starts the book by saying "I only ask for a chance to be a useful, happy woman" (Alcott 9). Additionally, adding this framework also shows how Christie's (and, by extension, Alcott's) justification of work in these moral (rather than economic) terms reflects a wider cultural belief about the "proper" roles for women being inside the home, as well as how the language used to affirm this belief masks sites of labor and exploitation. In the conclusion of her essay, Federici asks "And we [women] also delude ourselves that we can escape housework. But how many of us, in spite of working outside the house, have escaped it?" (Federici 87). Under this framework, not only is social reproduction theory useful for analyzing Christie's time in the house, but it also points to the ways in which, even when Christie is nominally engaging in waged, productive labor, she is emulating expectations for women's inherent domestic nature.

It is this examination of Christie's time in the world of productive, paid labor — though not through this specific social reproduction theory framework — that much of the existing scholarship around *Work* revolves around. The majority of scholarship focuses on Alcott's depictions of women's waged labor and how she attempted to push back against gender norms

for working women of the time. Scholar Kristin Allukian puts *Work* into conversation with Eliza Potter's 1859 autobiography *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life* to explore Alcott's attempts to expand conceptions of "acceptable" labor for middle-class women in the nineteenth century. She suggests that by depicting Christie working a variety of jobs, from servant to actress to nurse, Alcott pushed back against the extremely limited jobs deemed allowable for women (Allukian 580-81). Janis Dawson agrees with Allukian that Alcott attempted to expand possibilities for working women, as well as defend their respectability. However, critiquing the efficacy of Alcott's attempts, Dawson analyzes *Work* alongside Alcott's other major semi-autobiographical text, the 1868-69 novel *Little Women*, to point to the ways in which Alcott ultimately promotes the domestic ideal as inherently women's place (albeit with *some* contact with the marketplace) (Dawson 127). In doing so, Dawson argues that, paradoxically, the centering of the domestic ideal for women ultimately serves only to further reinforce the poor working conditions that Christie ends *Work* attempting to reform. If women are thought to belong in domestic spaces, then there's no need to reform working conditions for women, as they are not even meant to be in workplaces of paid labor (Dawson 128). While Allukian and Dawson's explicit contrast between Christie's experiences outside the house with her time inside it illustrates how Christie engages with different modes of labor, less consideration is given to the specifics of the activities Christie is undertaking in the domestic sphere — that is, her reproductive labor.

Scholar Sarah T. Lahey engages in this more specific analysis of Christie's time in the domestic sphere by giving her experiences there a name: leisure, as juxtaposed with labor, as undertaken outside the home. Through tracing the motif of the "busy bee," Lahey asserts that by the end of *Work*, Alcott's critical insight is to challenge the dominant work ethic of the time by

contending that "leisure can be as productive as the busy bee's most industrious efforts" (Lahey 148). Lahey's argument acknowledges that Christie is performing different duties inside the house than she does outside. However, Alcott literally ends the novel with the declaration that she and the rest of her family have committed to working so they may experience how "the greatest of God's gifts to us is the privilege of sharing His great work" (Alcott 443) — a statement referencing both the religious labor of actively practicing Christianity but, also, the more earthly labor Christie has just spent the whole book engaging in. Thus, this is not a statement that places labor on an equal foothold with leisure, but, rather, a firm exhortation for labor above all else.

Due to this tension, I align more closely with scholar Tara Fitzpatrick, who focuses on the sentimental language Alcott employs in *Work* to reveal how this "sentimental economy" conceals truths about class and labor. Such sentimental language suggests that women derive reward from labor via gaining things like "love," rather than concrete, economic benefits (Fitzpatrick 31). Consequently, Fitzpatrick suggests that the ending of the book doesn't tether Christie to leisure as well as labor, but instead tethers her to a specific sentimental, unwaged domestic labor performed inside the house. Centering understanding how Christie is still performing *work* in the house, rather than just engaging in pursuits of leisure, allows for a more thorough understanding of *all* the labor that Christie engages with in *Work*. While Fitzpatrick focuses on the mechanism of the sentimental economy that enacts this process of erasure, I focus primarily on tracing the nuances and contours of this specific domestic, reproductive labor that Christie is engaging in. To do so, I examine the novel through a social reproduction theory lens to understand how Christie's ending labor reform attempts ignore how unpaid reproductive work is also essential in sustaining capitalism and how this critical omission negatively impacts their feasibility.

### III. The Moral Contradictions of Alcott's Construction of Waged Work

To better understand the nuances of the reproductive, domestic work Christie engages in, I will first discuss her experiences in the world of productive, waged labor to show how later on, her reproductive labor is conspicuously set up against this productive work. Christie has a complex relationship with productive work: she begins the novel by professing her desire to work outside her rural New England community and become a more virtuous, useful, and happy person. However, despite her hard work, in the middle of the book, the external, productive work she's engaging in nearly crushes her. She ends the novel back in a primarily domestic space, but she reaffirms her commitment to work and continued belief in the ultimate moral benefits of work for women. Initially, this seems like a major tension: Christie repeatedly frames work as deriving value from its edifying nature, yet, in the middle of the novel, she is engaging in productive labor purely to ensure her continued survival. This is a mode of labor that amounts to, at best, moral stagnation or, more realistically, moral degradation, as this work is producing neither moral nor material improvements in her life. However, through this tension between Christie's endorsement of work in moral terms, yet periodic dependence on it for physical survival, Alcott builds a critique of external, productive labor centered around working conditions, rather than the structure of work under capitalism.

Christie's framing of work construes it as positive for women based on three central characteristics: it offers her usefulness, independence, and moral edification that leads to happiness. The prongs of this argument can be seen when Christie is explaining to Uncle Enos her desire to go out and try to make her own living. Defending herself against his claims that her attempts will only be futile, she tells him, "I'm willing to work, but I want work that I can put my heart into, and feel that it does me good, no matter how hard it is. I only ask for a chance to

be a useful, happy woman, and I don't think that is a bad ambition'" (Alcott 9). With this, Christie explicitly names being a "useful, happy woman" as the outcome of work, suggesting that she has reified work as *the* (rather than *an*) avenue to living a useful, happy life. Her insistence that she wants this, "no matter how hard it is," implies she sees the morally fortifying property of work as so inherent in labor that it supersedes any potential for material, physical or moral damage. Thus, she explicitly roots being useful and being happy — both self-focused and self-directed traits — with doing labor. Additionally, just a few lines before this declaration, in response to Aunt Betsey's explanation that she lost her desire to go out and work once she married Enos, Christie says, "My Enos has not come along yet, and never may; so I'm not going to sit and wait for any man to give me independence, if I can earn it for myself" (Alcott 8). She thus frames independence as something that needs to be *earned*, as opposed to being bought or given. Thus, if it's to be earned, she must need to carry out certain activities — here framed as labor — to meet the conditions necessary to merit the item in question. By placing this avowal of independence in the midst of her explanations for why she wants to leave the farm, she also posits work as a means of obtaining independence.

The type of useful work Christie desires revolves around a specific gendered and classed form of use. It's not just a generally useful person that Christie wishes to become, but a useful *woman* specifically (Alcott 9). This localizes her conception of use as arising from how it relates to the particular capacities of femininity. This gendered mode of use is seen again and again throughout the text, as Christie refines her conceptions of work: it's all about *women's* work, at its core. She does engage with some discussions of what men's work should be: when her upper-class friend Bella asks how she should get involved with the labor reform movement, Christie tells her she must focus on upper class women and "promising young men learning to conceal or condemn the high ideals and the noble purposes they started with" (Alcott 437). However, in

determining the best labor for herself, it's always about the best labor for her as a woman. This narrowing of her labor reform project also occurs along class lines. In Christie's appeal to be allowed to labor, she explicitly disavows working solely for the sake of money, telling Uncle Enos "I am discontented, because I can't help feeling that there is a better sort of life than the dull one made up of everlasting work, with no object but money" (Alcott 9). This deliberate repudiation of money as motivation divorces labor from wages and posits labor as carrying value independent of monetary compensation. This is a view incongruous with the historical reality of the nineteenth century — as women moved from domestic work to waged labor in the nineteenth century, due to "social restrictions against wage work, [working-women] were likely to be poor. Necessity was the first determinant" (Kessler-Harris 70). So, Christie's affirmation of work as valuable regardless of wages does not represent the attitudes of the majority of the female labor force at the time. This means that, from the outset, her view of labor is not feasible or realistic for the majority of women who would be working at this time. However, Alcott does not totally ignore this historical incongruity — the impracticality of Christie's construction of productive labor begins to set up the tensions that build to her breaking point in the world of external, waged labor.

Christie's total dependence on labor to survive in the middle of the text, despite it not providing enough for her materially or morally, also builds to this breaking point. In the most intense period of waged work Christie experiences, while she retains her independence, she is certainly not more useful or more content. As a seamstress, Christie is completely alone, in deep debt, and, though working night and day, unable to make ends meet, revealing a systemic inability to actually obtain labor's purported rewards. Leaving from (yet another) rejection to her solicitations for work, she looks over a bridge, and, experiencing an ultimate low, finds her burdens too much to carry. She thinks, "Why should I work and suffer any longer for myself

alone? ... why wear out my life struggling for the bread I have no heart to eat? I am not wise enough to find my place, nor patient enough to wait until it comes to me. Better give up trying, and leave room for those who have something to live for" (Alcott 157). At this point, Christie is toiling around the clock just to try to pay her debts and feed herself. Yet, despite this acute devotion to work, she's regressed into seeing herself as a person without "something to live for." This dichotomy contrasts her earlier views of work as something that, if done heartily, will inevitably advance her moral standing, sense of place in life, and "use" — in fact, it has accomplished essentially the opposite. Christie is giving her all to her work, but rather than helping her find purpose and joy, it is instead causing her to think that she ought to "give up trying." She feels she has nothing to live for, she is still broke, and she feels more isolated than ever before. Additionally, Christie certainly cannot claim suicidal ideation as moral betterment. Thus, the narrative of work as moral fortification is called into question, for Christie is putting everything into her work, but it is still draining the life out of her. More broadly, the framing of work as generally "good" is also questioned, for the existence of any work that drives its laborers to suicide casts serious doubts on the feasibility of claiming that work as overall dignifying, rather than demeaning. Through this divide between Christie's positive conception of productive work and her unhappiness actually engaging in it, Alcott begins to deliberately move away from Christie's earlier unqualified endorsement of productive labor. While Alcott still casts productive labor as well within women's abilities, she also suggests it is something not morally productive or sustainable.

Alcott also frames Christie's despondency in this period as resulting from a lack of sociality stemming from the reality of her productive labor, rather than a surplus of independence — and in this process, she draws a clear line between the two qualities. While describing Christie's depression, Alcott says: "It is not always want, insanity, or sin that drives women to

desperate deaths; often it is a dreadful loneliness of heart, a hunger for home and friends, worse than starvation, a bitter sense of wrong in being denied the tender ties, the pleasant duties, the sweet rewards that can make the humblest life happy" (Alcott 150). Through the emphasis on the "loneliness of heart" and denial of "the tender ties...that can make the humblest life happy," Alcott localizes Christie's sadness as arising from her lack of companionship, rather than her independence or any inherent inadequacy at performing productive work. If the ultimate source of Christie's despondency was her needing to pay the bills herself, or a fundamental inability to work outside the house, *then* would women's capability to do productive work be called into question. But this is not what's emphasized — instead, it's Christie's emotional distance from any care or affection, brought about due to the intense conditions of the seamstress house, that is her breaking point. Indeed, Alcott literally posits this denial of friendship as "worse than starvation," hierarchizing lack of sociality as far more dangerous to women than an excess of independence. In this way, Alcott attempts to walk the line between not casting doubts on her earlier project of affirming a woman's right to productive labor as a means of independence, and yet also arguing that companionship is required for a woman to survive doing productive labor in the world. This depiction of the total alienation present in a sociality-deprived environment also shows how a lack of care — one of the dominant activities of reproductive labor — is inhospitable to the sustaining force of capitalism: the workers. Thus, the importance of socially reproductive activity, such as kinship ties, is reinforced as essential to maintaining a productive labor workforce. Christie, the productive-laborer-as-a-seamstress, ultimately is unable to sustain her productive labor due to her utter lack of close attachments. Additionally, it is this inability to sustain herself in the world of productive labor that creates the impetus for Christie to return to the domestic sphere (albeit, modified) where she shifts to primarily performing more hidden reproductive labor.



#### IV. How Christie Engages in Reproductive Labor

Mirroring Christie's switch in modes of labor, I will now switch from focusing on productive labor to reproductive labor, to show how the reproductive labor Christie engages in is an equally fierce field of work — but much more invisible. Though there has been much scholarly discussion about the gendered constructions of wage labor that Alcott engages in, there has been less attention paid to the specifics of the domestic work that Christie roots herself in at the end of the text. I contend that despite the initial focus on productive labor in the text, by the end, Christie has solidly embraced reproductive labor as the dominant sphere in which she engages in work.

In her essay "Contradictions of Capital and Care," Nancy Fraser explicitly links the economy of capital production with socially reproductive activities that happen outside the realm of waged labor, for "the capitalist economy relies on—one might say, free rides on—activities of provisioning, caregiving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds, although it accords them no monetized value and treats them as if they were free" ("Contradictions" 101). By the end of the novel, Christie has definitively returned to the domestic sphere. Unlike the first half of the book, she is not in any place of external, waged labor — no longer is she caring for someone else's children, performing under the theatrical limelight, sewing under the watchful eye of the forewoman, or nursing in the bustling Civil War hospitals. Instead, she is in her own household, surrounded by her daughter, mother-in-law, sister-in-law, and the rest of her constructed family. However, it is an altered type of domesticity that Christie has built, as compared to her previous experience of domesticity with her aunt and uncle. Scholar Nancy Myers points to the way that Christie's ending positionality synthesizes her experiences in the

city with her household experiences by "moving the tenets of domesticity into social reform and moving important social reform into the home through women's rhetorical conversation" (Myers 48). Despite the way that this domestic space is somewhat qualified, the fact remains that Christie is not idle while in her domestic space, and neither is the rest of the household. Yet, their work is an outwardly communal sort; in response to Uncle Enos's disgruntledness at the fact that Christie shares two-thirds of all she makes with her mother-in-law and sister-in-law, she says:

“Ah, but we don't make bargains, sir: we work for one another and share every thing together.”

“So like women!” grumbled Uncle Enos. (Alcott 419)

With this exchange, Alcott draws a distinction between external, waged places of work, and the household Christie is living in. Within a traditional factory floor, waged work occurs in a regimented, individualistic manner, with wages apportioned out according to the individual worker's productive output. There is often a lack of community between the workers — look at Christie's experiences inside the seamstress house, where her attempt to stand up for Rachel leads to her eventual social alienation and firing. In this domestic sphere, by contrast, money is not so strictly tied to quantified outputs of productive labor, and there is a closeness between the women of the household, unrelated to labor, that leads to this more communal way of sharing money. Additionally, Enos's grumbling that that is "So like women!" connects this alternative, domestic sphere specifically to the nature of women. In this way, domestic labor is gendered and distinguished from external, productive work, which occurs outside one's house in a family outside one's own. However, despite this labor appearing to be more socialist, it's important to note that the women *are* still ultimately participating in the capitalist marketplace, as this communal form of sharing food, raising Ruth, and more evenly apportioning money all still occurs under the dominant logic of capitalist accumulation.

Christie engages in socially reproductive work within the domestic sphere through her discussions and justifications of work on the basis of morality. One aspect of social reproduction theory is the hunt to unearth labor that's hidden by the fact that it occurs outside the factory floor and inside the home. As such, that includes examining and deconstructing language used in discussing work done inside the house compared to work done outside it, and how that language is gendered. As Fraser puts it: "Associating [social reproduction] with women and [economic production] with men, they have remunerated 'reproductive' activities in the coin of 'love' and 'virtue', while compensating 'productive work' in that of money" ("Contradictions" 102). This is a process that occurs *all* throughout *Work*. Christie very rarely discusses money when explaining and justifying her desire to work — at the beginning of the novel, she pinpoints her discontent to the "feeling that there is a better sort of life than the dull one made up of everlasting work, with no object but money" (Alcott 9) — to the very end of the novel:

“Me too!” cried little Ruth, and spread her chubby hand above the rest: a hopeful omen, seeming to promise that the coming generation of women will not only receive but deserve their liberty, by learning that the greatest of God’s gifts to us is the privilege of sharing His great work. (Alcott 443)

Intertwining the appeal of labor with a religious imperative and the promise of "liberty" for women, labor is cast in terms of "love" and "virtue" — and certainly *not* associated with money or other financial benefits. In doing so, the realities of labor, especially women's labor inside the house, are actively hidden by this process of concealment. Because they are associated with these more flowery — and thus more abstract — rewards of "liberty" and religious approval (in the next life, of course) the ways in which this is still *labor* the women are engaging in is obscured by Alcott's description. Federici points to the fact that women do not receive a wage for housework as a big part of the disconnect between escapist conceptions of housework and the

reality of its necessity to the continuation of capitalism — and this language only helps to further conceal this.

The fact that it's the "chubby hand" of "little Ruth" that gets the last word in the novel — and a word in favor of work, importantly — also points to the socially reproductive work that Christie engages in in the text. Part of social reproduction theory is understanding how the home is often (though not always) "the site of individual renewal of labor power" (Bhattacharya 7). Actions taken at home — supposedly "outside" the sphere of production, in that they are unwaged and occur outside of the "workday" — help reinforce norms of capitalism and even entrench it further, by ensuring that the labor force that powers capitalist production both can and will return to work the next day. This can be as basic as the realization of "generational replacement through childbirth in the kin-based family unit" (Bhattacharya 7) or more complex, such as how children are oriented towards work at home. This family socialization towards work can be seen when Christie is gardening in David's home garden and planning ahead for her daughter's future: "[Christie] did not fear poverty, but the thought of being straitened for the means of educating little Ruth afflicted her. She meant to teach her to labor heartily and see no degradation in it, but she could not bear to feel that her child should be denied the harmless pleasures that make youth sweet" (Alcott 416). The rejection of the possibility that one would ever see "degradation" in labor suggests that work is something that Christie is explaining to Ruth in morality-based terms. Specifically, she is associating work with moral edification, education and self-actualization. Consequently, Christie primes Ruth to view work in a preordained way, as a natural part of life — and in this process, Christie reifies work not just for herself but also for Ruth. In doing so, Ruth will be more inclined to work; and ultimately, any positive inclinations towards work help to sustain and reproduce the capitalist system as a whole

by replenishing the labor force. Thus, the ending scene of Ruth's hand reaching up to join the other women in their vision for the future takes on a double meaning. On the surface, it's a heartwarming image of the young daughter steadfastly resolving to follow her independent mother's example; but also, it's an image of a young worker successfully being primed for the embrace and reification of labor.

Even when Christie is not engaging in direct reproductive labor, she still faces social issues with productive labor evocative of her trials with reproductive labor. In *Work*, a significant amount of the titular work revolves around the external, productive labor that Christie engages in. In the first half of the book, this is reflected even in the chapter titles of the book — the first six chapters of the book are all defined by whatever paid job Christie is engaged with at the time: "Chapter II: Servant," "Chapter IV: Governess," "Chapter VI: Seamstress," and so on. However, even though these are waged, productive jobs, Christie is still influenced by the conventions of reproductive labor. In "Wages Against Housework," Federici posits that, in a capitalist society, expectations for a housewife carry over into everything she does — even productive labor that is distinctly *not* the reproductive labor of housework. Not only do women "become nurses, maids, teachers, secretaries...but we are in the same bind that hinders our struggles in the home: isolation, the fact that other people's lives depend on us, or the impossibility to see where our work begins and ends, where our work ends and our desires begin" (Federici 83-84). Nearly every paid job of Christie's echoes "feminine" domestic ideals presumed of a woman: as a servant, she is expected to ensure her employers' comfort in their homes — a paid iteration of the housewife's labor. As an actress, she is literally performing femininity. As a governess and a companion, in a similar vein to paid domestic labor, she is participating in paid care-taking — a waged variation of motherhood. Her time as a seamstress, which is the closest she comes to

industrial labor, is still in many ways a performance of domestic labor as a manifestation of inherent feminine inclinations. Christie's initial interest in it is justified through her "feminine love for pretty things, and enjoy[ment] seeing delicate silks, costly lace, and all the indescribable fantasies of fashion" (Alcott 129).

It is the second aspect of Federici's argument — the ways in which the struggles of housework also arise for women when engaging in external productive labor — that maps onto many of the challenges that Christie experiences with waged work. The isolation of the household rears its head during Christie's darkest period, when it's the "dreadful loneliness of heart, a hunger for home and friends, worse than starvation" (Alcott 150) that partly prompts her suicidal ideation. It is an isolation born of Christie's lack of immediate companionship, but also, an isolation from the self due to the way that her entire being becomes welded to labor. Thus are her paid jobs haunted by the specter of reproductive labor — and the fact that when she experiences desperation in her productive labor, she ultimately returns to the domestic sphere casts reproductive labor as inevitably inescapable.

## **V. How the Language of *Work* Reinforces Reproductive Labor as Woman's Sphere**

Alcott spends much of *Work* showing characters engaged in work; however, she spends practically as much time *discussing* characters involved in work and having them discuss among themselves the nuances and perks of work. Through these discussions of labor, Alcott foregrounds what she wishes work was like for women — set against the reality of work, as conveyed through Christie's experiences in the world of both productive and reproductive labor. While I previously discussed how Alcott builds a gendered conception of productive work through Christie's engagement in waged labor outside the home, the gendering of labor occurs

differently in her discussions of reproductive work than in her discussions of productive work. The language in *Work* during discussions of labor and femininity reinforces the idea that reproductive labor is an expression of a woman's inherent feminine nature, rather than another form of true labor — despite characters' depicted experiences engaging in work serving as evidence to the contrary.

Alcott repeatedly suggests women have a special touch in the home that men don't, helping to naturalize domestic, reproductive labor as just part of a woman's innate character, distinctly separate from the masculine aptitude for productive work. From the first days Christie lives with Mrs. Sterling and David, she busies herself with household tasks; work encouraged by both Mrs. Sterling and David in different ways. It is the latter who reaches out to Christie for help with a flower arrangement one day, telling her, "I want them to look lovely and comforting when the mother opens the box ... Will you give it a touch? women have a tender way of doing such things that we can never learn" (Alcott 235). In asking this, David draws a distinction between feminine and masculine natures and how that influences their aptitude for work. Woman's talent for making things "lovely and comforting" is a skill that not only do men not naturally possess, but they are in fact unable to *ever* acquire it. Thus, aptitude for the domestic labor of making things "lovely and comforting" is not attributed to anything specific about Christie; rather, it is a function of her womanhood and corresponding special faculty for administering care. In this way, domestic work is drawn as woman's sphere, and, on top of that, uniquely suited to women and their natural capacities.

Not only does Alcott tie domestic labor to the unique abilities of women, but she also posits it as the most fulfilling form of labor for women, especially when compared to productive labor. In *Work*, the affirmation of woman's autonomy in determining her relationship with labor

is tied directly to David's fate; that is, David must die in order for Alcott to endorse women's right to choose what work they do and where they do it. After Christie's arrival at the Sterlings, for a moment, it seems like *Work* might ultimately conform to the marriage plot: David and Christie undergo a courtship that overcomes various obstacles and results in a wedding and child — but there are two rather major divergences. First, their marriage explicitly occurs only due to the threat of the Civil War (Alcott 362-63), and second, David dies early on into their marriage. These differences carry major import in uncoupling Christie's arc from the traditional marriage plot and preventing Alcott's argument about women and their right to work getting quashed. This is because, throughout *Work*, Alcott continually emphasizes Christie's independence, setting up the argument that Christie be allowed to choose her own path forward. Thus, any version of *Work* in which Christie weds David, David *does not* die, and then Christie switches to primarily domestic labor cannot effectively convey Alcott's argument that women have the right to choose fulfilling labor for themselves. If Christie married David with no war looming in the background, or with a resolute intention to not work for wages anymore after the marriage, then she would conform to the more typical marriage plot — but Alcott has already taken pains to set Christie against this. Indeed, in the first chapter, after Aunt Betsey waves away Christie's questions about Betsey's aspirations when she was young, Christie emphatically stresses her own self-reliance and her lack of interest in waiting for "any man to give [her] independence" (Alcott 8). For Christie to then pivot to becoming a housewife would completely undercut her earlier exhortations of earning her way in the world, diminish her current agency, and retroactively weaken her previously earned independence.

Additionally, if David did not die, Christie's engagement with reproductive labor would not be the result of an active choice as to how she wants to work to support her family. Instead,



she would just be engaging in household tasks in line with the social norms of the time. David's death offers a very plausible reason to plunge back into the world of external, waged labor — it is likely a more guaranteed way for Christie to support herself and her family. So, Christie's choice to instead stay tethered to her household as she works highlights that it's a *choice* she's making to center domestic labor, rather than just a path she was forced down as a housewife in the mid-nineteenth century. That is, David dying allows Alcott, via Christie, to make the case that women should be able to voluntarily choose their own engagements with labor. In turn, Christie's active choice of domestic, reproductive labor means Alcott also argues that women will find the most fulfillment in the sphere of voluntary reproductive work, rather than forced reproductive, domestic work. I contend that this is a significant distinction that Alcott could not meaningfully make if David continued to live, as Christie, as a housewife, would be understood as defaulting to domestic labor — rather than making an active choice to do so.

Interestingly, this distinction Alcott makes ultimately presents a sharp contradiction. For the first half of the book, Alcott is primarily disrupting the strict separate spheres ideology of the nineteenth century; what Nancy Cott calls the "canon of domesticity" which "made woman's household occupation her vocation" (Cott 74). Alcott pushes back against this by emphasizing both women's right to seek work outside the household and ability to perform such labor, via Christie's range of jobs. Furthermore, even though Christie does not end the novel focusing on productive labor, as previously discussed, Alcott does not frame this as resulting from an inherent inability to do this productive work. Rather, it's the lack of sociality Christie experiences in her engagement with productive labor. Alcott continues to make another progressive argument with David's death by refusing to give into the marriage plot and undercut Christie's previously earned autonomy. However, this "progressive" refusal of the marriage plot ironically means that

Alcott makes an ultimately conservative move. This is because by positing women as finding the most fulfilling work in the domestic sphere, Alcott participates in the gender coding that suggests that home is the place most naturally fitting for women — a traditionalist argument that mirrors the gender coding that undergirds separate spheres ideology, even as Alcott also moves to refute the larger separate spheres societal framework.

Alcott also frames reproductive labor as the more fulfilling realm for women through the character of Rachel, the former prostitute who Christie befriends in the seamstress house who also turns out to be David's long-lost sister. Rachel's arc in *Work* serves to reinforce the propriety of women engaging in reproductive labor by warning of the degradation of sexual work, without requiring Christie to transgress the taboo line of engaging in prostitution herself. In the chapter "Origin and Development of Sexual Work in the United States and Britain," Federici traces the increasing state regulation of prostitution and sexual work in the second half of the nineteenth century, and how this in turn lead to the "idealization of 'female virtue,' ... [being] extended to working-class women to hide the unpaid labor expected of them" ("Origin and Development" 92). By "unpaid labor expected of them," Federici references the reproductive labor that women were expected to undertake to ensure that men were continually becoming a "healthier, more disciplined, and more productive labor force" ("Origin and Development" 91). The shift to separate spheres ideology was also buttressed from this increased regulation of sexual work. Female domestic virtue was championed to ensure a class of female subjects who would engage in the necessary domestic work to reproduce the male laborers that made up the majority of the productive labor force. This was accomplished by both regulatory means (such as pushing out female laborers from the factories) and by messages pushing the "correct" moral code for women. Because regulating housework was not possible without also regulating sexual work

("Origin and Development" 92), police and medical professionals began to supervise sex work more directly, crucially leading to the development of two polarized, mutually exclusive figures: the mother and the prostitute. As Federici puts it, it was the creation of "the institutionalization of a maternity without pleasure and a 'pleasure' without maternity" ("Origin and Development" 94). Thus, although prostitution was generally the most accessible form of labor for women in the nineteenth century, this moral framework positing the pleasure-less mother as the ideal woman meant that women who did engage in any sort of sexual work were increasingly relegated to a lower class and isolated.

This process plays out in *Work* with Rachel, who starts morally "pure" and in a more solidly middle-class position as Letty, in the Sterlings' morally chaste and pure Quaker family. However, as soon as she starts to succumb to the eroticized pleasures of having a lover — David says of Rachel, "when temptation came in the guise of love, she could not resist ... she was gone, never to come back, my innocent little Letty" (Alcott 343) — she is punished, in a direct application of what Federici calls "the whip that most has served to keep women in place." This is how "the prostitute, at the proletarian level, has been forced to live, as she increasingly was isolated from other women and subjected to constant state control" ("Origin and Development" 94). Rachel is estranged from her family after they find out about her engagement in sexual work, which is a major act of isolation that is also the catalyst for Rachel to end up in the seamstress house with Christie. Rachel's isolation doesn't stop with just this familial divide. Even in the seamstress house (which, as previously discussed, is characterized repeatedly as a very lonely place), Rachel's former status as a prostitute — a woman *not* rejecting personal pleasure, and indeed, even aiming to survive off of it, rather than focusing her energy on unpaid reproductive labor — is transgressive enough that she still is punished for it. Thus, Rachel is cast

out from the seamstress house due to her stained moral past. Furthermore, by virtue of refusing to renounce her friendship with Rachel, so is Christie (Alcott 140), showing the power of this tool of control exercised on those with any sort of connection to prostitution.

Crucially, it is only when Rachel again yields to the domestic ideal that her needs for sociality, care, and survival are met, and her class status is restored to what it formerly was. There are steps Rachel must take before being able to redeem herself from being "fallen," which starts with her initial attempts to work at the seamstress house. In Alcott's time, Magdalen societies were quite prominent — reform societies devoted to reforming "fallen women" by providing them shelter and labor until they could be satisfactorily redeemed morally (Magdalen Society 4). While Rachel explicitly rejects such societies, calling the "Magdalen Asylums ... penitentiaries, not homes" (Alcott 139), Christie's attempt to "take any work to [Rachel] that you will give me, to keep her from want and its temptations" (Alcott 139-40) still mirrors the logic underpinning these societies — productive labor as means of chaste moral reform. Even after being forced out from the seamstress house, Rachel details how she "'knew how many poor souls went wrong when the devil tempted them; and I gave all my strength to saving those who were going the way I went'" (Alcott 161), showing her actively seeking external labor to continue her journey of reclaiming her honor. This is posited as Rachel's great act of redemption; indeed, she says with "every one I helped my power increased, and I felt as if I had washed away a little of my own great sin" (Alcott 161). However, it's not purely productive work Rachel engages in. This specific work of attempting to help other fallen women contains aspects of reproductive labor, in that even though this is work external to Rachel's household, it is a form of work centered around care. Not only is she exerting a nurturing influence over the women she's interacting with, but her guidance of these women away from prostitution helps increase the

number of women engaged in reproductive work. It is only after sustained engagement with this blend of productive and reproductive work that Rachel gains back access to her family, systems of care, and the ability to focus on solely reproductive work. In this way, Alcott frames productive labor as a necessary step of atonement for women before being restored to the domestic sphere. Thus also, Alcott's treatment of prostitution in *Work* again endorses reproductive labor as the most satisfying — as well as the safest — place for women.

Alcott's tying of reproductive labor to higher moral frameworks, such as religion, also helps frame women's domestic labor as a sort of inherent societal and moral responsibility, born from the inherent nature of femininity — rather than just another type of constructed work. This concretization of reproductive work can be seen when Christie is working in the garden shortly after Ruth has been born:

[Christie] did well this part of the work that David bequeathed to her. It was a pretty sight to see the mother with her year-old daughter out among the fresh, green things: the little golden head bobbing here and there like a stray sunbeam; the baby voice telling sweet, unintelligible stories to bird and bee and butterfly; or the small creature fast asleep in a basket under a rose-bush, swinging in a hammock from a tree, or in Bran's keeping, rosy, vigorous, and sweet with sun and air. (Alcott 415-16)

The following activities are literally framed as "part of the work that David bequeathed her," so Alcott is aware, to at least some degree, that the activities Christie is participating in *are* a form of work. However, the fact that it's specifically work "bequeathed" to her by David gives the work a higher moral authority. The language of inheritance shifts the source of labor from an earthly construct to a more spiritual expression of the inherent nature of the world. Because David is dead, under the Christian framework of the text, it suggests that by fulfilling his wishes, Christie is following through on an imperative to work from a higher authority: both David from Heaven, as well as God, the great power of Heaven. This is reinforced by the description of David as residing in the "higher rank he had won" of death, as he was promoted to by "the Great

Commander" (Alcott 411). This framing of Christie's duties as originating with God preemptively avoids any suggestions that this labor may contain human fallacy — instead, its depiction as part of God's design lends it an air of infallibility.

Furthermore, Alcott's use of flowery, pastoral language while describing female labor in domestic spheres also helps to frame such work simply as the way of nature. The language used to describe Christie and Ruth in this scene is incredibly idyllic — the appearance of the "bird and bee and butterfly," "fresh, green things" and cherubic "little golden head bobbing here and there like a stray sunbeam" work together to create a garden image. The sheer loveliness and tranquility of the scene create a pastoral scene reminiscent of an Eden on Earth. By portraying Christie's work in the domestic space of the garden, where her daughter is close by her side, with this lush, near-Biblical language, Alcott both naturalizes the work as intimately connected to the living world and also as a reflection of the higher design of the God of their Christian society. Thus, Alcott portrays Christie simply as carrying out her natural duty (as understood under the Protestant moral framework of the time), rather than actually performing *labor*.

This idyllic language used in connection to domestic work serves to obscure the ways in which such activities are still constructed labor and ultimately only further the system of capitalist production. While Alcott does call these activities "work," she does not connect that to Christie's motives for working in the garden, which are portrayed as familial, charitable, and religious — importantly, *not* financial. Shortly after the scene in which Christie is working in the garden with Ruth, Christie visits Uncle Enos, their first reunion in a considerable time. Enos probes for the details of her life, attempting to evaluate it for himself. Eventually, he turns to the question of money, saying to Christie "You haven't made much money, I guess. If you don't mind tellin', what have you got to live on?" asked the old man, unwilling to acknowledge any life

a success, if dollars and cents were left out of it." Christie responds that her only sources of income are "David's pension and what I can make by my garden" (Alcott 418-19). This reveals that Christie is ultimately *not* just participating in the garden for familial, charitable, and religious reasons, in pursuit of David's last wishes. She's just had a daughter, so she must also consider Ruth's needs, to ensure she materially and financially has what she needs to survive. However, there's no space given — both metaphorically in the garden and literally on the page — to think along those lines, as Christie is unwaveringly firm in her statements that work's importance is solely derived from its being good for the soul. Christie's initial description of her actions as "work" is a minor concession, but it's not a concession that meaningfully changes the evocative work being done. Describing the work in such beautiful terms just makes it seem more natural and further divorces it from the idea of wages. So, while it may be recognized as a site of "work," it's not recognized as a site of "labor." This gap suggests that Christie does not see her activities as deserving compensation via money or other tangible wages, despite her later revelation that the gardening business is one of the income sources — along with David's pension — needed to keep her and Ruth (in addition to her other family members) afloat. Thus, this reveals the disconnect between the playful language of nature and joy used to frame the domestic work Christie enmeshes herself in and the reality of the necessity of the work to Christie and her family's continued existence. This is one of the major aims of social reproduction theory: revealing the ways in which labor is rendered invisible, both as actual work and as a process that is inherently necessary for workers' continued survival — because it's often only upon this realization that mobilization against structures of capitalism can begin to occur.

Alcott takes this disconnect to an extreme with the inheritance that Christie receives from Enos. During Christie's first reunion with Enos in nearly twenty years, he asks her what

charitable causes he should donate to once he dies; while she suggests a number of options, he doesn't settle on one that day, saying he'll think about it. However, before long, he is "'took suddin'" and in the end leaves all of his money to Christie:

Not an immense fortune, but far larger than she expected, and great was her anxiety to use wisely this unlooked-for benefaction. She was very grateful, but she kept nothing for herself, feeling that David's pension was enough, and preferring the small sum he earned so dearly to the thousands the old man had hoarded up for years. A good portion was put by for Ruth, something for "mother and Letty" that want might never touch them, and the rest she kept for David's work, believing that, so spent, the money would be blest. (Alcott 423)

There is a missing piece to this framing of the inheritance, hinted at by the fact that while Christie expresses gratitude, she says that she still prefers "the small sum [David] earned so dearly to the thousands the old man had hoarded up for years." This is a viewpoint that can only be asserted with the underlying knowledge that if David's modest pension were to ever fail (even just once), there *is* a safety net that Christie can fall back upon. The inheritance ensures that Christie and her family never will end up back in the place Christie gets to in the first half of the novel — working desperately to survive and yet still nearly dying. Additionally, Christie's emphasis that this is an "unlooked-for benefaction" suggests that she sees this modesty as necessary to be justified in receiving such a gift, and thus also suggests that if she had looked for an inheritance, she would not deserve to receive one. This idea of there being necessary activities to "deserve" or earn compensation again plays out in her juxtaposition of the inheritance with David's pension — David's pension is a thing he "earned so dearly" whereas the inheritance is simply what Enos "had hoarded up for years." Under a social reproduction theory framework, this inheritance *could* potentially be construed as a "deserved" compensation — specifically, as compensation for the reproductive labor Christie has demonstrated such a commitment to. However, this is not a line of thinking ever entertained. Christie is adamant in saying that this



money is unearned, especially in comparison to David's pension. In this way, Christie again naturalizes the work she is doing as something innate and not deserving of financial compensation in the same way that the productive labor she, David, or others carry out is. While both kinds of labor are referred to as "work," the competing ways in which they are valorized again sets up this dichotomy. External, waged, productive labor is deserving of monetary compensation — as played out through David's pension — while domestic, unwaged, reproductive labor is not deserving of financial compensation. Instead, reproductive labor gets only the far more abstract compensation of love, as played out through Enos's bequeathment.

Through this staging of the inheritance, Alcott also ultimately suggests that women engaging in unencumbered (re)productive labor is only an unachievable fantasy under the working conditions of antebellum America. The inheritance is essentially a *deus ex machina*. Christie's financial situation is tighter than she ever explicitly says — she has David's pension and his gardening business, but that is about all she has in terms of income. Before receiving the inheritance, her situation is not dissimilar to her days of productive labor: she is working to survive. So, her unremitting insistence on the innate morally fortifying character of labor comes across as fantasy. Even though she's justifying it along these lines, in reality, it comes down to the same thing as her time as a seamstress: she needs to not starve or freeze or isolate herself to death. However, the existence of the inheritance allows her to begin to turn this fantasy into her reality. Through her ensuring that a "good portion was put by for Ruth" and "something for 'mother and Letty' that want might never touch them" she is able to focus the majority of her time and money towards "David's work" — but with the concrete knowledge that, if that plan should fail, they will still be materially taken care of. This referenced "work" is not just David's day-to-

day botany business, but also his wider charity work. Yet, similarly, charity "work" is a mode of labor that can only be seriously pursued if one has a secure financial base.

What of the women without such a safety net, however — both the subjects of the in-book female labor project and the potential female readers of the novel? Alcott gets caught in a paradox here. She wants to suggest that financial realities are not something women should have to worry about — that they should be free to pursue productive *or* reproductive labor, as they desire (though she certainly makes a much stronger suggestion for women to engage in reproductive labor). Yet, she has to deal with the earlier depiction of Christie as driven to suicide by the pressures of external, productive work. So, she localizes Christie's work to the reproductive sphere but still has her living off of money she can claim has been truly "earned" (David's pension) as opposed to "unearned" (Enos's bequeathment). However, it's the unearned money's existence that allows her to make this choice in the first place (because, ultimately, it's a safety net). Thus, I suggest that Alcott *wishes* that women should not have to worry about economic realities and should be able to freely choose to do wholesome, fulfilling (reproductive) labor. However, the earlier arc of Christie's story means, that, narratively, Alcott ultimately must concede to the logic that suggests the only way out of unstable working and financial conditions for women is via this fairy godmother-like intervention — ultimately positioning this portrayal of work as inaccessible for the majority of women.

This gap between discussions of labor and practical experiences with labor is a disconnect that pops up again and again in *Work*. I argue that while Alcott is aware of this gap, she is trying to paper over it by writing an idealized version of what she wishes work looked like for women — rather than explicitly drawing the reader's attention to the hazardous and inaccessible reality of work for women. Drawing attention to it explicitly would necessarily call

for a reform project centered around changing the structures of work so that it is broadly accessible to women in the way that Alcott wants it to be. However, as I will later discuss, that clashes dramatically with the working condition-based reform project Alcott ultimately pursues. Thus, while Alcott must be aware of the ways in which her characters' discussions of work conflict with their experiences doing it — for instance, Reverend Power's insistence on the "saving power of work" (Alcott 310) to Christie, in spite of her experience jumping off a bridge while working around-the-clock, is a particularly conspicuous example of this juxtaposition — her unrelenting insistence that work *can* be good, healthy, and accessible for women comes off as genuine. She seems to truly believe in the ability to make this vision into reality, despite how analysis from a social reproduction theory lens might not be so optimistic.

## VI. The Instability of Christie's Labor Reform Project

While Alcott's idealized portrayal of reproductive labor for women is framed as needing a fairy-godmother like intervention to actually become attainable, this is not quite the same approach Alcott takes in relation to making *productive* labor accessible to women. While her discussions about reproductive labor vaguely hint at it being a kind of work, Alcott ultimately naturalizes it as work that is a part of a woman's inherent nature, helping to reify it and conceal how it is still labor and how it helps prop up capitalist systems. Now, I return to looking at Christie's engagement with productive labor to reveal how her discussions of productive labor ultimately also reinforce capitalism — but with one difference. The reform projects Christie (and thus Alcott) endorses focus primarily on *conditions* of work, rather than critically interrogating the structures of work. I argue that this arises primarily from the text's ending pro-working woman project of labor reform: a project centered on making sure women can continue work, just in "better" working conditions.

Multiple *Work* scholars have gestured to the fact that both Alcott and Christie's attempts to reform working conditions ultimately only serve to enshrine capitalism more fully. As previously discussed, Dawson maintains that this occurs through Alcott's propping up of the domestic sphere as women's place. She argues this justified low wages and other poor working conditions for women in the world of waged labor, as women were told they did not ultimately belong there, so they consequently did not need fair working conditions (Dawson 128). In a similar conclusion, though via a different rhetorical move, Fitzpatrick argues this enshrining of capitalism happens through the excessive focus on "love: conjugal, familial, and sororial" (Fitzpatrick 31) as compensation for women's labor. This conflation "proved the ideal model for a challenge to the ethic of the capitalist marketplace that finally could pose little challenge at all" (Fitzpatrick 39). Both of these scholars focus on the ways that Alcott portrays domesticity as the vehicle via which the capitalist marketplace is legitimized. However, I wish to build on this further by arguing that even Alcott's discussions of productive labor help further espouse capitalist ideals, for it hinges upon the idea that there is such a thing as "good" working conditions.

This can be seen in the ending chapters of *Work*, when Christie attends a meeting between working-women and upper-class women, dedicated to the topic of reform for female laborers. Christie asks to speak in the meeting, citing her decades-long experience as a working-woman as authority to add her voice into the mix. To the large crowd of women assembled, both genteel and working-class, she goes on to say that, "Having found in labor her best teacher, comforter, and friend ... no matter how hard or humble the task at the beginning, if faithfully and bravely performed, it would surely prove a stepping-stone to something better, and with each honest effort they were fitting themselves for the nobler labor, and larger liberty God meant them

to enjoy" (Alcott 428-429). By positing work as the means through which to gain the "larger liberty God meant them to enjoy," Alcott infuses a religious quality to the imperative to work. She associates labor with a near other-worldly quality and again props up the act of work itself, for now it's being placed as the source of both increased liberty and increased religious connection. The use of the word "liberty" also implies that there is a freeing aspect to work that Christie still values — perhaps surprising at first, considering that Christie is earlier nearly driven to suicide by a specific form of harsh work. However, in this passage, despite the hard times she experienced while working, she still posits labor as "her best teacher, comforter, and friend." In doing so, Christie suggests that labor still intrinsically carries value. Her harsh experiences with work are then framed as reflecting the need for better working environments for women, rather than reflecting anything about the nature of work itself, which now is cast as an ultimate good for Christie. Thus, Alcott embarks on a reform project that suggests that all that's needed to improve life for working-women is better working conditions, in order for women to gain all the positive moral value that they can from working — rather than generally moving away from the rhetoric of the importance of work for a good life.

Accordingly, when Alcott ventures into the specifics of such a reform project, the details also often continue to reproduce norms of the liberal capitalist society in which she lives. When talking to Bella about how she can best use her positionality as an upper-class woman to enact labor reform, it is a highly class-based reform project Christie endorses, telling Bella "I never advise pretty creatures like you to tuck up their silk gowns and go down into the sloughs with alms for the poor, who don't like it any better than you do, and so much pity and money are wasted in sentimental charity" (Alcott 435). In this way, Christie urges Bella not to cross class lines — yet it's framed as genuine concern for both the upper-class and lower-class women and their "natural" sympathies, rather than just a reproduction of the constructed category of class.

Thus, even when Alcott does go into the specifics of her reform project, her uncritical approach casts doubt as to their efficacy and shows how they often only help prop up other dimensions of capitalism, such as class.

While the arc of Christie's experiences in the novel does represent dissatisfaction with the current structures of labor for women, the slant of the critique Christie makes (and Alcott's wider reform project of the time) ultimately serves only to enshrine work more firmly into women's lives. In *The Problem with Work*, Marxist feminist scholar Kathi Weeks says that "to call these traditional work values into question is not to claim that work is without value. It is not to deny the necessity of productive activity ... It is, rather, to insist that there are other ways to organize and distribute that activity and to remind us that it is also possible to be creative outside the boundaries of work" (Weeks 12). Through this lens, Christie's reform project cannot be understood to meaningfully challenge the boundaries of work: above all, Christie is still positing labor as the vehicle through which "something better" is achieved. By pushing for reform of working conditions as the means to *better* work, rather than pushing against the idea of work as the ultimate place for self-actualization, Christie (and Alcott) both posits work as able to reach such an idealized form and as the ultimate locus of self-improvement and moralization. Focusing on improving work means that work is reified as natural and necessary to a complete, fulfilled life, which simply naturalizes work by diverting attention away from the constructed reality of waged work to solely looking at material conditions of labor.

## VII. Conclusion

Using social reproduction theory as an analytical framework to understand Christie's arc in Louisa May Alcott's *Work: A Story of Experience* dramatically opens up the scope of labor that Christie engages in throughout the text. Such a framework reveals how the external,

productive labor Christie engages in is only half the labor she performs in the book, as well as how that other half of her labor — the reproductive labor of the domestic sphere — reaches even further than Alcott is consciously aware of. Many aspects of the reproductive labor Christie engages in are concealed, yet they represent work that is comparably intense to the productive work Christie engages in in the first half of the text. Furthermore, examining the many contradictions between *Work's* discussions of labor and actual depictions of labor reveals Alcott's idealized vision of what labor for women could and should be — and also, its incongruence with the reality of labor for women in the nineteenth century.

Ultimately, this reading of *Work* reveals the nuances and contours of Alcott's thinking around labor and women — and the ways in which, although more nuanced than many conceptions of women's work of the time, it ultimately remains missing some key pieces. I contend that while Alcott is doing important work in pushing boundaries of what women's work can look like — as well as in emphasizing women's right to *choose* what kind of labor they engage in — the ultimate conception of the dimensions of domestic work comes up short. In turn, this means that Alcott primarily reinforces the domestic ideal without meaningful nuance. Social reproduction theory offers even more comprehensive conceptions of labor to flesh out Alcott's conceptions of work to unlock the state of women's labor more entirely — and begin to identify the loci of truly transformative possibilities of labor for white female workers of the nineteenth century.

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