
‘I feel like Columbus going to discover a new world’: The New ”New World,” White US American Feminist Liberation in Europe, and the Labor of Dark Foreign Men in Louisa May Alcott’s Diana and Persis

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Abstract

This paper examines Louisa May Alcott’s representation of Europe as well as romantic relationships between US and non-US citizens in *Diana and Persis*, a sentimental novella set in Europe that was based on May Alcott’s life that Louisa May Alcott wrote in 1879 but which was left unpublished until 1978. I argue that Alcott uses transnational relationships and the adulation of France and Italy to question gender and racial inequities in the US, as well as to encourage US American women to escape the dominant patriarchal ideology through emigration. As such, the novel radically departs from the usual storyline found in works about women traveling and living abroad that were written by Alcott’s contemporaries, such as Susan Warner, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry James. Whereas Europe is usually figured in nineteenth-century US fiction as the Old World and a site where women’s feminine virtue (and sometimes even their livelihood) are endangered, in Alcott’s story, Europe stands as the New World. Both *Diana* and *Persis*, who stand as revised models of sentimental womanhood, substantially improve the quality of their professional and personal lives when they move abroad and enter into relations with dark foreign men. The story sends a surprisingly powerful anti-American message that challenges US American nation-building rhetoric of the nineteenth century, as well as racial hierarchies. Importantly, however, the foreign men to whom these two white middle-class heroines are attracted are almost always racialized. Although these transnational relationships challenge gender and racial hierarchies in powerful ways, they also reinforce the subordination of dark foreign Others. Moreover, even as the novel criticizes the US, it often supports imperialistic impulses by encouraging the US to compete with Europe in their race for world dominance. In sum, in its effort to propagate its feminist agenda, *Diana and Persis* proves to complexly challenge and participate in racial subordination and the US’s imperial project.

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