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# From Women Who Write to Women Writers: E. Dickinson, L M Alcott, and Collaborative Authorship

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## Abstract

Although it was Walt Whitman who wrote that the pronoun "I" contains multitudes, his female contemporaries were the ones that lived the reality of this insight everyday. Navigating the nineteenth-century spaces of print, domesticity, and wage labor required women writers to invent and travel between different configurations of the self. A glance at the different signatures that fracture Emily Dickinson's correspondence and that of Louisa May Alcott reveals that the figure of the nineteenth-century woman writer is a collection of identities and relationships. Writing to family and friends they are simply "Emily" and "Lu." To T.W. Higginson, both women adopt authoritative and gender-neutral names: E. Dickinson and L M Alcott. The latter even dissociates herself into the fictional A.M. Barnard when writing her three blood and thunder tales. When Dickinson writes to her lifelong companion and collaborator Susan Huntington Dickinson she blurs interpersonal boundaries and creates "Combined Girl" (HB178). Alcott's stories also explore mediating characters that seem to inhabit two selves at once: black and white, masculine and feminine, genteel and working class. Both Dickinson and Alcott share the name "woman writer" on syllabi every year. In their case, the term refers to a multitude of identities, but do our discussions of the work they create acknowledge this multiplicity? Learning from recent scholarship in Dickinson studies on epistolarity, collaboration, and print publication, this paper puts two discourses and authors into conversation to ask broader questions about who the "woman writer" is, how she is made, and what kinds of work she engages in. I explore collaboration as both a theme and compositional principle in Dickinson and Alcott. It's true that both women (especially Alcott) wrote about and modeled the figure of the independent woman. And yet, reading through depictions of women's labor and artistic production in Dickinson's letter-poems, Alcott's novels *Work* and *Little Women*, and both authors' correspondences, I find many challenges to the individualist model of women's authorship and empowerment. Although Emersonian individualism ran deep in the Homestead and "Apple Slump" (indeed still does in our institutions today), can we recover an alternative narrative of literary genius that acknowledges not only the importance of E. Dickinson and L M Alcott, but also the artistic contributions by their constitutive networks of laborers-family, lovers, friends?

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