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## ***Little Women* travelling to Scandinavia**

### **The Reception of Louisa M. Alcott in Sweden, Denmark and Norway**

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**Abstract:** The publishing history of an American classic in Sweden, Denmark and Norway illustrates how literature travels between countries and how translated books become integrated in the new national cultures. Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868) still figures on lists of the most cherished, translated and influential children’s books. Sweden can probably boast of the longest translation history of all, starting in 1871, the latest translation appearing in 2016. The Danish material more or less replicates the Swedish, whereas data mining of the stacks of Norway’s National Library demonstrates to what extent a national culture is affected by translated foreign literary impulses and the wealth of sources in which canonized authors may leave a mark. “*Little Women* travelling to Scandinavia” addresses why Alcott’s book did so well there, why it appealed to readers, and in what circumstances it was read.

**Keywords:** Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, Scandinavian publishing history, Scandinavian translations of world literature

## **Introduction**

The seventh – stellar casted – film adaptation of *Little Women* opened to universal acclaim in the US on Christmas Day 2019, confirming the “timelessness” of Louisa May Alcott’s story about one year in the life of four young sisters during the American Civil War. Released globally the following days and weeks,<sup>1</sup> the film collected tribute and nominations all around, proving its ongoing *transnational* popularity and box office potential.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Deadline*, January 4 and 14, 2020, <https://deadline.com/2020/01/little-women-international-box-office-greta-gerwig-saoirse-ronan-emma-watson-1202820655/>; <https://deadline.com/2020/01/little-women-china-release-date-box-office-oscars-1202830284/>

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Translated to more than 50 languages, the long and impressive publishing history at home and abroad testifies to the status *Little Women* (1868) quickly attained as a classic in world literature. What follows is a discussion of its Scandinavian wing, a publishing history and reception study of Alcott's major work translated into Danish, Swedish and Norwegian. Basically, the empirical findings demonstrate that texts are inherently fluid and adaptable (Bryant 2002) and that publishing necessarily implies reception. A truth succinctly put by Jerome McGann that "[a]ll editing is an act of interpretation" (1991, 22), manifests itself in the translations and the accompanying paratexts.

How and why the adaptations differ in these linguistically and otherwise closely related countries are among the questions investigated, for instance why there are relatively few Norwegian adaptations compared to Danish and particularly Swedish ones and no full text versions at all. The Norwegian reception material expands dramatically if we combine a study of editions and translations with digital humanities. By data mining the digital stacks of Norway's National Library, we may explore the multiple and surprising traces an author of beloved childrens' books leave in a recipient culture besides "mere" translations. Unparalleled in the world because of an agreement with copy right holders, the Norwegian web library offers a unique opportunity to study how a national culture is affected by foreign literary impulses. Unknown sources come to light and a book's history can be approached from below.<sup>2</sup>

"*Little Women travelling to Scandinavia*" may be seen as a supplement to *The Afterlife of Little Women* (2014) and American scholar Beverly Lyon Clark's history of the book's reception in America as well as around the world. Detailing the popularity and adaptations of *Little Women* in countries like England, France, the Netherlands and Japan, Clark mentions Sweden and Denmark just in passing, although Sweden can probably boast of the longest translation history of all. A tradition starting in 1871, just three years after the first American edition saw the light of day, the latest full text Swedish edition appeared in 2016. The first French (Suisse), German and Dutch translations were published in 1872, 1873 and 1876 respectively (Clark 2014, 16). The first Danish translation came out in 1876, the latest in the 1990s. Due to an undeveloped national publishing industry in Norway (having been a part of Denmark until 1814), Danish editions covered the Norwegian market well into the twentieth century.

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<sup>2</sup> The Norwegian Library's digitized stacks contain in total about three million full text units of books, newspapers and journals in Norwegian – original Norwegian texts and also translated works published in Norway.

John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) constitutes a kind of frame story in *Little Women*. To appreciate how a children's book wrapped in seventeenth century puritan attire could attain such a long-standing position in secular countries like the Scandinavian, a closer look at the story itself and its origin seems called for.

## How it all started

Published in 1868, *Little Women* introduced a new genre for children. The four March girls aged 16 to 12, named in the subtitle as *Meg, Jo, Beth* and *Amy*, present the readers with alternative options for coming of age and finding their identity. Mr March, the family head, is absent for most of the action, working as a chaplain at the front. Mrs March constitutes the girls' guiding force until she is called away to nurse her fatally ill husband and they have to hold the fort, supported by neighbours and an old servant.

Considered to be the first book in literary history specifically aimed at girls, it nevertheless became an instant hit with both male and female readers of all ages (Clark 2014). Fans demanded a sequel and *Good Wives* (1869) – also called *Little Women Wedded* and frequently packaged as part two of *Little Women* – was published a few months later, although never attaining a position equal to the first.

*Little Women* came about at the request of Louisa May Alcott's publisher, Thomas Niles in Roberts Brothers. Initially she could not see herself as a children's writer and was not particularly interested in girls, being herself more of a tomboy (Shealey 2013, 41). But she was always open for suggestions of how to make money, her father unable or unwilling to provide for the family (Matteson 2007). The second of four sisters, Alcott had for years supported her family writing popular stories. She experienced a boost as an author in the wake of *Hospital Sketches*, published in 1863, a book based on letters she wrote while serving as a nurse at the Northern front during the Civil War. After just a few weeks she contracted typhoid fever and nearly died.

Despite her misgivings, Alcott decided to base a story for girls on her own background (Cheney 1890, 189; Clark 2014, 8–9). Nobody could have predicted the tremendous success that *Little Women* immediately achieved, or the public's craving for more (Clark 2014, 10–11). Readers wanted to learn how the March girls fared and see them happily wedded. Alcott had originally not planned that any of them should marry, and especially not the second oldest. Rebellious Jo, the most independent of the sisters, had been fitted with many of the author's own

traits and interests. As an advocate for women's rights, Alcott would rather show that women had other opportunities than matrimony and she remained unmarried herself (Cheney 1890, 94, 275, 342).

Beth, the second youngest, dies in volume two, the three remaining sisters get married. The author only partly caved in to romantic conventions. Instead of satisfying widespread expectations that Jo would marry the rich and charming Laurie next door, Alcott lets her heroine decline his proposal and opt for a poor, older German professor. Readers all around were terribly disappointed. Simone de Beauvoir for one writes in her memoir both about identifying intensely with free spirited and literary Jo and about feeling personally betrayed when Jo turns down the coveted man that young Simone herself had fallen in love with. To make it even worse, Laurie ends up marrying Amy, the youngest sister, whom Simone thought vain and stupid (*Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, 1958).

The books portray an idealized family, the author's own childhood and adolescence dominated by poverty and hard work. *Little Women* proved a golden ticket to fame and economic security. It triggered a growing interest for Alcott's writing among publishers the world over that made her a wealthy woman.

## Alcott and Bonnier's Yellow Series

In Sweden, Bonnier first noticed the scent of success. During the 1870s, translated titles were more important than homegrown Swedish fiction for the rise to prominence of a publishing house such as Albert Bonniers Förlag, established in 1837. Louisa May Alcott was one of their main imports, Karl Otto Bonnier, the son of founding father Albert, explains in his history of the family business (vol. 3, 1930, 211, 212). Albert Bonnier initiated a series for young readers in 1869 ("Läsning för ungdom"), all titles equipped with a simple carton binding, a yellow front and a red cloth back. The series achieved its breakthrough in 1870, thanks to the good sales before Christmas of one of Albert's fortunate discoveries ("verkliga fynd"), *An Old-Fashioned Girl* by Louisa M. Alcott. Albert came up with the title for the translation himself: *En Krona bland flickor* (A crown among girls). The year after followed the first version of *Little Women* in another language than English: *Unga Qvinnor: Eller Margret, Hanna, Betty och Amy: En Tafla ur Lifvet i Hemmet* (1871, Young women. Or ... A picture of life in the home).

Karl Otto Bonnier writes about the triumph of the yellow series in general and of Alcott's in particular, what she meant to Bonnier and to the many readers who sympathized with her sound values and sense of humour:

[*An Old-Fashioned Girl*] and its many successors by the same American authoress: “Little Women”, “Good Wives”, “Eight Cousins”, “Rose in Bloom”, “Little Men” and a few others, how weren’t they read by Swedish girls of the 70s and 80s, how wasn’t Miss Alcott with her sound and healthy view of life and sympatic humour a true educator for a whole generation of Swedish women, and how beloved weren’t these “yellow books with red backs”!<sup>3</sup>

Bonnier continued to publish the immensely popular yellow series for many years after Albert Bonnier died in 1900. Of all the authors, Alcott figures with the largest number of titles and reprints. Before Christmas in 1877, *Rosen i blomning* (*Rose in Bloom*) sold splendidly (“strykande”), and was repeatedly reordered by the bookstores (Bonnier 1930, 216).

From Karl Otto Bonnier we learn nothing specifically about the most widely read and published of all Alcott titles and therefore nothing about considerations made in the adaptation process that had implications lasting 66 years. When translating *Little Women* into Swedish, Bonnier (or the anonymous translator?) decided to change three of the sisters’ names, choosing for some reason to call them Margret, Hanna and Betty, retaining only Amy (twelve years old) from the original. In accordance with the subtitle, Alcott consequently let the three oldest March girls – Margaret (sixteen), Josephine (fifteen) and Elizabeth (thirteen) – go by their shortened names. For Jo this is a major and rather existential issue as she would much rather have been a boy and hates being confined to the restricted behavior befitting her gender. The shortened name matches her boyish appearance and preferences.

It is Jo’s independence, her literary leanings, opposition to traditional gender roles and protests against the limited range of possibilities open to women that endeared her to readers (Clark 2014). They saw Jo as the main person in *Little Women* and she became Alcott’s best known and admired character. Much later, play with gender roles and with sexual ambiguity made the author and her writing an object of study for feminists and gender theorists (see e. g. Trites 1999). Jo’s dreams of becoming a famous author, supporting herself and her family financially, were ambitions more common for a grown man than a young girl when the book first appeared.

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3 «Denna bok och dess många efterföljare av samma amerikanska författarinna: ‘Unga kvinnor’, ‘Våra vänner från ifjol’, ‘Rosa och de 8 kusinerna’, ‘Rosen i blomning’, ‘Gosskolan i Plumfield’ och ytterligare några till, hur blevo de ej lästa av 70- och 80-talets svenska flickor, hur blev ej miss Alcott genom sin sunda och friska livsuppfattning och sin sympatiska humor en verklig uppfostrarinna för en hel generation svenska kvinnor, och hur älskade blevo ej dessa ‘gula böcker med röda ryggar’! – Serien fortsattes av Albert ärligen så länge han levde och fortfor med framgång många år efter hans död [1900]». (Bonnier 1930, 216. The translation from Swedish, Danish and Norwegian here and elsewhere is my own if nothing else is indicated.)

## Translation Oddities

Why did Bonnier change Jo's name to Hanna and keep it in full – like Margret and Betty (no indication that the third sister's full name was Elizabeth)? One consequence is that Jo's role as an oppositional figure is somewhat subdued. Her name only functions as a statement insofar as it retains masculine connotations. Perhaps that was the purpose of replacing boyish Jo with Hanna, a biblical name of Hebrew origin? Another consequence is the resulting necessity for changing the text. When Alcott has Jo complaining bitterly that instead of going to fight in the war herself, like a man, she has to stay at home, knitting socks for the soldiers, Beth answers in the original: “Poor Jo; it's too bad! But it can't be helped, so you must try to be contented with making your name boyish, and playing brother to us girls” (2013, 40). In *Unga Qvinnor*, Betty obviously does not touch upon her sister's (feminine) name but comments that Hanna has to content herself with acting like a boy and play brother to her sisters.<sup>4</sup>

Although the March family is poor and both Meg and Jo have to earn money for the family maintenance they nonetheless have an old maid called Hannah, whom the Swedish editor therefore had to rename in order to avoid misunderstandings. In *Unga Qvinnor*, the maid goes by Elsa. Again: why choose Hanna as a name for Jo and create difficulties for themselves? Josefin became a popular woman's name in Sweden after the marriage in 1823 of King Oscar I to Napoleon's granddaughter Joséphine of Leuchtenberg, known as Queen Josephina (Josefina). If Swedish girls could be christened after the queen, it ought to be a fitting name also for fictional characters.

We do not know why the publishers acted as they did. The textual changes all the same reflect on their reception of Alcott's work as well as their translation strategies to make it accessible for Swedish readers at the time, and thereby putting into practice notions of textual fluidity and adaptation. Textual commentary is another strategy opted for by Bonnier. The translator has supplied *Unga Qvinnor* with a few footnotes, explaining where and when the action takes place, who Samuel Johnson is, the background for the American declaration of independence, and that the italicized words in the first chapter are taken from John Bunyan's edifying allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1687).

Alcott could be said to have written a modernized girl's version of Bunyan's allegory, adding an ironic and distancing effect to one of the most circulated of

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4 “Stackars Hanna, det är för tråkigt! Men då det nu inte kan hjälpas, måste du söka nöja dig med att bete dig som en pojke och att agera bror åt oss flickor” (1871, 4–5).

all protestant books. *The Pilgrim's Progress* became over the centuries “a spectacular international success and was translated into some two hundred languages” (Hofmeyr 2004, 1). From the first translation of *The Pilgrim's Progress* into Swedish in 1727, *Kristens resa* has been published a remarkable number of times in all kinds of editions, including family and children's versions, with new ones appearing even in the twenty first century, according to library catalogues.

The story of Christian, who leaves home and family behind on his journey to find salvation in heaven, constitutes an intertextual narrative frame for the four sisters' efforts to overcome personal shortcomings: vanity (Meg), temperament (Jo), extreme shyness (Beth) and egotism (Amy). They dress like pilgrims, enact scenes from Christian's journey, and chapters have Bunyan-like titles such as “Burdens” (“Bördor”, 1871, 44), “Beth Finds the Palace Beautiful” (“Betty finner palatset Prydelig”, 77), “Amy's Valley of Humiliation” (“Amys Förödmjukelsens dal”, 86), “Jo Meets Apollyon” (“Hanna möter Apollyon”, 96) and “Meg Goes to Vanity Fair” (“Margret kommer till Fåfångans marknad”, 111).

Notwithstanding the wholesome norms, the praising of family loyalty, frugality and spiritual values, *Little Women* likewise praises independence and artistic ambitions. It questions gender roles and contains plenty of fun and humour, youthful energy and melodramatic playacting. Jo's literary efforts cater more to a taste for mystery and sensation than to priggish conventions and highbrow aesthetics. The polyphony of voices partly accounts for *Little Women's* lasting popularity and for why it has not dated as much as other children's books from the same period. Another reason is the enduring actuality in the motif of Jo trying to make her way in a man's world.

## Bonnier Reprints

After the first *Unga Qvinnor*-edition (1871), new print runs followed in 1876, 1888 and 1903, all typeset anew. The title in 1903 was changed to *Unga kvinnor* in line with the spelling reform of 1888 (and the sixth edition of *Svenska Akademiens ordblista*). Except for the modernized spelling, the fourth print run looked the same as the previous ones, the translator still not identified.

In 1919, Bonnier published what may be counted as the fifth edition although no reference to the print history was included. Several paratexts have been changed, the old standardized design – the yellow front and red back – is gone and the generic series name altered from a rather nondescript “Läsning för ungdom” (Reading for youths) to the brand-conscious “Bonniers ungdomsböcker” (Bonnier's youth books). Both *Unga kvinnor* and its sequel, *Våra vänner*

*från i fjol* (Our friends from last year, i. e. *Good Wives*), are divided into two parts and sold separately (probably for economic reasons, since all the titles in “Bonniers ungdomsböcker” cost the same regardless of length and works by Alcott were voluminous).

For the first time, the Swedish adaptation comes without the author’s preface, a twelve line rhyming poem which in Alcott’s original opens with “Go then, my little Book” (“Gå ut, min lilla bok”). The custom for authors to personify their books and send them into the world, may be traced back to Antiquity, to Horace and Ovid. In *Epistles* 1.20 and *Tristia* 1.1 respectively, the poets urge their volumes to speak their – the authors’ – case. From the Renaissance onwards, when this kind of preface or opening poem became conventionalized, the books were seen as personified messengers of the poets’ words (Haarberg 2010). It was almost impossible *not* to begin books in this way. Typical examples in Scandinavia are works by the Norwegian authors Petter Dass and Dorothe Engelbretsdatter. Danish Elias Naur starts his main work, *Golgotha paa Parnasso* (1689) with the same admonition as Alcott on the other side of the Atlantic almost 200 years later: “Gack, liden Bog”. The modesty – or *humilis* – topos (“little”/“liden”) is inherent to the tradition, the writer pledging humility on behalf of his creation and himself in the service of God.

Alcott informs her readers that the poem prefacing *Little Women* is “Adapted from John Bunyan” (Alcott 2013, 35). Consequently, from the very beginning of her story she points at its intertext and what we in Gérard Genette’s terms may call the book’s *hypotext* (Genette 1997, 5), drawing attention to a religious theme and to Bunyan’s widely circulated title. Urging her own book to befriend little girls, to teach them of mercy and how to follow God, Alcott in accordance with print culture convention refers to its gender as feminine (She/Hon). Irrespective of linguistic gender (as for instance neuter in German, *das Buch*, and masculine in French, *le livre*), personified books are presented as the author’s *female* servants, so to speak impregnated with ink. Conversely, in script culture – pre print – a book (or manuscript scroll) was referred to as male (corresponding to *liber* in Latin being a masculine noun). A long-standing discourse linking procreation and authorship was intensified and renewed following the invention of printing technology, sexualizing the relationship between an author and his pen on the one hand and the page (book) on the other (Brooks 2005).

None of the four first Bonnier versions contains any reference to Bunyan at the end of the author’s preface and in 1919, the whole introductory poem must have been considered obsolete and even to constitute a negative paratextual threshold to *Unga kvinnor*. The explanation cannot have been that Bunyan’s days at that time were over in Sweden. However, what did disappear at the end of the nineteenth century was the literary convention of personifying books as characters,



an outdated tradition that did not concur with the modern image Bonnier aimed at in 1919.

When the yellow editions of *Unga Qvinnor* first arrived on the scene in 1871, they were up to date and reflected the industrialization of Swedish bookbinding that took place during the 1860s (Lundblad 2010). The black lithography illustration on the front showing a street scene with tiny figures in Victorian clothing could still work for the fourth reprint in 1903, but not after the First World War. The colour illustration of four girls seated in a stylized outdoor scenery on the cover of the 1919 edition, gives a modernistic and contemporary post-war impression. The bareheaded girls have loose hair and loose clothes, one of them wearing a long vertically striped dress, another sporting a dress with polka dots. Except for some stylistic changes and linguistic modernization following the 1906 spelling reform, the exterior updating was most noticeable. The content was the same and the text rendered *in extenso*, but divided into two volumes. For the last time in a Swedish translation, Jo appeared as Hanna.

## Competing Editions

From 1870 and for two decades onwards, Albert Bonnier each year published either a new Alcott title or reprinted an old. Thereafter the editions came more sporadically. Despite Bonnier's position as Alcott's publisher in Sweden, competing firms took a chance on some of her titles as early as 1870, when Fahlstedt published their own translation of *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (*En gammaldags flicka*). Thus, Swedish readers could choose between two versions of the same American novel published in the same year.

The most serious effort to challenge Bonnier's Alcott list was launched by B. Wahlströms Bokförlag in the 1920s, when they, too, published a Swedish edition of *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (*En pråktig flicka*, 1921), continuing with translations of *Eight Cousins* (*Åtta kusiner*, 1926) and then of *Little Women* in 1928. Wahlström kept Bonnier's main title (*Unga kvinnor*), dropped the long explanatory subtitle and returned to the original names: Meg (Margaret), Jo (Josephine), Beth (Elizabeth) and Amy. No more Hanna, except for Hanna Mullet, the maid, and a curious slip at the beginning of the second chapter, where Jo is called "Hanna", making one wonder how much Wahlström relied on Bonnier's version. The text moreover contains the same number of chapters but has been somewhat condensed.

This led to the initiation of a completely new translation published by Bonnier in 1937, in a new series called "De odödliga ungdomsböckerna" (Immortal books for young readers, published from 1937 to 1968). The new edition copied some

of Wahlström's features: no subtitle, the original names intact and the translator's name mentioned for the first time. Since Sonja Bergvall was born in 1907, she could not have been responsible for the first five Bonnier adaptations. However, Bonnier has stuck to Bergvall's translation ever since, in editions of *Unga kvinnor* published 1954, 1984, 1995, 2011 and as late as 2016. No abridgements were made in Bonnier's editions (except exclusion of the preface/opening poem as of the fifth in 1919).

In addition to Bonnier and Wahlström, several other Swedish publishers also issued their own versions of *Little Women/Unga kvinnor*, all editions more or less shortened, first Svensk Läraretidnings Förlag (Swedish Teachers' Journal Press) in 1965, in their "famous books" series ("Sagas berömda böcker"). Reader's Digest offered an abbreviated Swedish language version of *Unga kvinnor* in 1967, sold together with three other "Best loved books for young readers" in one volume. And then no less than five *Unga kvinnor*-editions were published during a seven year period, 1981–88 (including Bonnier's from 1984), in a country counting 8,3 million inhabitants (1981).<sup>5</sup>

The 1980s constitute a remarkable peak in the Swedish publishing history of *Little Women/Unga kvinnor* but it was not over yet. Bonnier published a new edition in 1995, with photos on the front cover from the 1994 American motion picture dramatization, starring Susan Sarandon as Mrs March and Winona Ryder as Jo. In 2011, *Unga kvinnor* was re-launched in a box with four other classical coming of age stories and in 2016, Bonnier Carlsen reissued *Unga kvinnor*, with a print run of 6000.<sup>6</sup>

## Testimonials

Alcott's strong position may to some extent be understood in light of the extensive contempt for novels dominating the literary discourse in Western countries during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The contempt ("romanföraktet") was particularly explicit in Sweden and more lasting than in Denmark and other

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5 Two of the editions (from 1981 and 1988) are actually the same version, as Lindblad's series of classics was still an imprint of B. Wahlström in 1981, but no longer in 1988. Lindblad/Wahlström translator Ingalill Behre was likewise responsible for the text of an international coproduction issued in Sweden by Bokorama in 1983, the copyright of this heavily illustrated adaptation owned by an Italian publisher. Finally, in 1988, the fifth Swedish edition during the 1980s came on Niloé.

6 Information from Bonnier Carlsen's sales department in an e-mail to me, 18 January 2018. Bonnier Juniorförlag and Carlsen merged in 1993.

Protestant countries, Magnus von Platen claims (1968, 251, 263, 268). Fiction scored socially and morally low in the literary genre hierarchy and few Swedish authors made serious attempts. When the popularity of prose fiction and invented stories increased among a wider public, publishers had to rely on translations. Generically not labelled as novels, Alcott's stories conveyed a "sound and healthy view of life" (Bonnier 1930, 216) and could not be dismissed as morally corruptible. But endorsement of Christian virtues hardly explains the popularity of *Little Women*. The Puritan heritage that may account for Bunyan's long history in Sweden functioned as a framework for more subversive and in the long run more important issues. In Jo March's universe, young people were encouraged to lead active lives. Girls ran about out of doors, dreamt of independence and questioned gender roles. Readers sympathized with the characters and their endeavours.

Numerous Swedish sources testify to Alcott's significance collectively and individually. Eva von Zweigbergk notes in her history of children's literature in Sweden from 1750 to 1950, that Louisa May Alcott was the big name of the 1870s, her books filled with lifelike characters (1965, 213), while Gurli Linder, leading Swedish critic of children's literature at the beginning of the twentieth century, points to Alcott as a writer of beloved books, remembered with appreciation generation after generation (Linder 1916). In anthologies published by Bibliotekstjänst förlag (Library Service Press) discussing long-lasting children's classics (1977, 1985 and 1992), professor Vivi Edström defines Jo March as "*the* girl of children's literature" (1992, 10). She emphasizes Alcott's innovative writing, how her books influenced Swedish literature for children in a realistic direction and had a strong impact in all respects. Among passionate readers, Edström names famous Swedish writers such as Selma Lagerlöf, Ellen Key and Agnes von Krusenstjerna (15).

According to critic and editor Olof Lagercrantz, von Krusenstjerna admired Alcott for the portrait *Unga kvinnor* draws of a tight knit female world that Agnes had longed for all her life. In his doctoral dissertation (1951), Lagercrantz also claims that the March sisters influenced Krusenstjerna's own portraits of lively women. A girl called Meg appears in one of Krusenstjerna's short stories, bringing greetings from the American curate daughters («Balkonversation», *En dagdriverskas anteckningar*, 1923).

Summing up the afterlife of *Unga kvinnor* since its publication, critic Ying Toijer-Nilsson in *Svenska Dagbladet* (Swedish Daily Paper) compares her own reactions to Jo March's rebellious conduct "now" (1982) and when she was introduced to the book as a child in the 1930s. Only with hindsight, Toijer-Nilsson realizes how groundbreaking Jo's protest was and that it reflected Alcott's own protests against women's circumstances. She speculates that the durable impact of *Little Women* stems from its autobiographical foundation. The gap between ideals and reality added vitality and depth to the story.

Toijer-Nilsson highlights relations between Alcott and Swedish literature, showing that impulses went both ways. Like Jo, Alcott was an avid reader, her preferences reflected in *Little Women's* abundant intertextual references. Twice she refers to the Swedish author Fredrika Bremer: once directly, when we in chapter 8 hear about Mrs March reading aloud for her girls “from Bremer, Scott, or Edgeworth” (2013, 125) and once more covertly, in chapter four, where Amy’s nose is compared to “poor ‘Petrea’s’” (2013, 85), one of the characters in *The Home, or Family Cares and Family Joys* said to be based on Bremer herself.

Curiously, Bonnier’s translator felt the need for identifying what author named Bremer Mrs March is reading by adding “Fr.” in front of the name (Alcott 1871, 102). Walter Scott and Maria Edgeworth are not introduced in the same way. Furthermore, the reference to Petrea is left out altogether (cf. Alcott 1871, 53). Thus, Bonnier seems to have had less faith in Swedish readers knowing the work of their own compatriot (who had passed away only a few years earlier and whose work Bonnier actually published) than Alcott who seems to have trusted that her American public would understand what and to whom the book refers. She read the English translation of Bremer’s *Hemmet, eller Familjesorger och -fröjder* (1839) in 1843, the same year it appeared on the Anglo-American market (Shealey 2013, 85, n25).

## From Sweden to Denmark and Norway

If we juxtapose the first Swedish and Danish editions both translators adapted the pronouns of address to national conventions at the time, letting Jo and her best mate Laurie address each other politely and formally as if they were grownups, with second plural pronouns (“ni”/“er” and “De”/“Dem” respectively). The original “you” might just as well have been interpreted as an informal singular pronoun address, especially considering the teenagers’ slang and the many abbreviations found in their dialogues (you’ll, I’m, don’t etc.). Both Scandinavian language adaptations apply a formal style more in line with the revised American edition that Roberts Brothers published in 1880–81. Whereas Alcott had wanted to create characters who talked like authentic persons, the revised edition came in answer to reviewers in religious and didactic publications who criticized *Little Women* for its lax grammar and colloquialisms and for not offering the right kind of exemplary models to young readers. The publishers hoped the linguistic standardization would increase Alcott’s respectability (Shealey 2013, ix–x).

At least 17 different titles by Louisa May Alcott have been translated into Swedish, some of the titles several times. *Unga kvinnor* alone has been issued at least 18 times (ten by Bonnier), not counting audiobooks, digitalized and elec-

tronic versions. In comparison, eleven titles were translated into Danish, most of them published by Wilhelm Prior, the translator identified from the beginning as J. E. (Julius Emil) Wørmer contrary to Bonnier's practice of anonymity until 1937. Entitled *Pigebørn eller Meg, Jo, Beth og Amy*, the first Danish version of *Little Women* appeared in 1876. The year after, Prior published a translation of the sequel (*Good Wives/Little Women Wedded*), calling it *Unge Kvinder* at the risk of confusing the book with Bonnier's first volume. Although Sweden and Denmark (with Norway) functioned as separate book markets, numerous titles all the same crossed the national borders and readers had few problems understanding the neighbouring languages. Advertisements in Danish and Norwegian newspapers for Swedish books and *vice versa* for Danish books in Sweden confirm that publishers knew they had buyers for popular titles in the other Scandinavian countries.

Wilhelm Prior produced more reprints of the second volume than Bonnier did, but *Pigebørn* – the first part of *Little Women* – was also in Danish incomparably the most popular Alcott work, published 15 times. After Wilhelm Prior issued its fifth reprint (1876, 1885, 1891, 1900, 1908), eight other publishing houses sent their versions on to the market: some based on Prior's translation but a majority new, more or less abridged adaptations. It varies what chapters have been dropped or combined in order to heighten the pace and reduce the number of pages, whether the textual cuts include leaving out the religious frame altogether or whether references to *The Pilgrim's Progress* are merely shortened along with other elements. The slimmest edition is an illustrated international coproduction from 1964 containing only the basic story line, stretching the concept of textual fluidity to an extreme.

From Prior published *Pigebørn* for the first time in 1876 and throughout the twentieth century at least one new edition came out every decade, except for the 1980s (the peak decade of Swedish editions). The last versions were published in the 1990s (1991, 1995). On the front cover of its 1991 edition of *Pigebørn*, Høst & Søn boasts that this supposedly was the first unabbreviated translation into Danish ever, thus disregarding the six complete editions published between 1876 and 1912. The second part (*Unge kvinder*) appeared with Høst in 1997.

The publication history of *Little Women* in Sweden started earlier and lasted longer than in Denmark, but the number of Danish editions (15) and Swedish ones (18) is about the same. All Wilhelm Prior's nine Alcott titles were extensively advertised in Denmark as well as in Norway. According to the first Norwegian reader survey of its kind, published in 1902, Alcott was a favorite among respondents born before 1870 (Caspari 1902).

When Norway gained independence from Denmark in 1814 after 400 years of dependency, the two nations continued to function as one book market for an-

other hundred years, partly due to the official Norwegian language continuing as a version of Danish until the language reform of 1907. Authors with the most symbolic capital remained on Danish presses and a large number of books sold and read in Norway still came from (or via) Denmark. Bonnier hardly advertised their Alcott translations in Norway at all. Not until 1925, when the Norwegian section of the Danish publisher Gyldendal was nationalized with Norwegian capital and authors such as Henrik Ibsen “returned home”, did Denmark lose its cultural stronghold on Norway.

## Norwegian Translations

Although six short stories by Alcott were translated and published in a Norwegian literary magazine for children (*Illustreret Tidende for Børn*) during the last part of the 1880s (1886–89), the first Norwegian book length translation materialized as late as 1908, the year Aschehoug published an abridged version of *Little Women* entitled *Smaafrøkner*. The second part followed in 1909 («*Smaafrøknerne*» *gifter sig*) and then, in 1910, a Norwegian version of *Little Men: Life at Plumfield with Jo's Boys* (*Hjemmet paa Plumfield*) – Alcott's third Jo March title (of four), originally published in 1871.

No full text version of *Little Women* exists in Norwegian. Prior kept on advertising their Danish translation for a few years parallel to Aschehoug's but was bound to lose ground for linguistic and ideological reasons – Danish being associated with Norway's colonial past in an era marked by strong nationalistic currents. Norway had gained independence from Denmark in 1814 only to be forced into a union with Sweden. When full independence was achieved in 1905, the struggle for establishing Norwegian as an independent written language became a primary marker of national identity. One might argue that claiming such a popular American children's author as Alcott from the Danes was a strategic step in turning Aschehoug into a competitive Norwegian publishing house. But in order to beat an established and recognized classic like *Pigebørn* their version had to appear as new, fresh and different.

Aschehoug marketed Alcott alongside titles by the celebrated Norwegian author Dikken Zwilgmeyer,<sup>7</sup> who joined Aschehoug in 1903 after having published 15

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<sup>7</sup> The following is based on hits from a search on “Alcott” in the digitized collection of the Norwegian National Library in 2016. The search netted 582 hits in different types of books and also advertisements, reviews and other kinds of material published in 21 newspapers nearly all over the country (see Egeland 2016).

books elsewhere (13 for children). In Zwilgmeyer's writing, we can find similarities with Alcott and transtextual relations of the kind Genette discusses in *Palimpsests* (1997). There are good reasons for claiming that Zwilgmeyer must have been familiar with several Alcott titles in Danish translation (Egeland 2018). They both published in *Illustreret Tidende for Børn*, even in the same volume (1888–89).

Judging from contemporary reviews that praised *Smaafrøkner* for its warmth and humour and for not being too sentimental and goody-goody, the abridged – Norwegian – version of *Little Women* apparently fit the new times in more ways than the linguistic. The religious frame had been deleted along with other passages slowing down the textual pace. Readers seem not to have missed Bunyan, a reaction (or lack thereof) that could be interpreted as a sign of increasing secularism and cultural independence from the Church and that religious-didactic literature for children was losing its grip on the market. Dikken Zwilgmeyer's success may be interpreted as an indication of the same. She became one of the biggest contributors to *Illustreret Tidende for Børn* and increasingly so the last years of its existence (22 texts altogether 1888–94). Nearly all her magazine stories feature lively, tomboyish Inger Johanne, who vaguely resembles a young Jo March.

Comparing Norwegian *Little Women* adaptations critic Kari Skjønberg estimates that Aschehoug had cut away about half of the text (Skjønberg 1979). Aschehoug reissued *Smaafrøkner* in 1923 (the spelling in the title changed from *aa* to *å*: *Småfrøkner*). Between 1940 and 2012, a Norwegian version has appeared six times on four different publishing houses (none of them Aschehoug). The three last editions (1951, 1961 and 2012) are all heavily shortened. Only four Alcott titles have been published in Norwegian altogether (*Åtte syskenborn*, 1954, in addition to the three mentioned above) on seven different publishing houses.

Several factors may account for Alcott having been translated decidedly less in Norway measured against Sweden, Denmark and the countries Beverly Lyon Clark investigated in her reception study (eleven titles translated to Japanese; at least 14 new editions of *Little Women* published 1946–95 in The Netherlands; 26 new illustrated editions issued in France after 1960 and about 70 illustrated English language editions published after 1960 in addition to non-illustrated versions, Clark 2014, 144, 186).

One obvious reason is the much smaller book market Norwegian publishers could rely on in a population of about 2,2 million inhabitants in 1900 and 3,3 million in 1950, when Sweden had more than twice as many. Admittedly, the population in Denmark was not that much bigger than in Norway (about 2,4 mill. and 4,3 mill. respectively), but Danish publishers could for many years also count on Norwegian buyers for their books, whereas Norwegian publishers to a much lesser extent sold their titles across the borders. Due to geographical and topological differences, the distribution of books was a lot easier in small, flat and densely

populated Denmark than in long, mountainous and sparsely populated Norway. Although no statistics exists that makes it possible to compare the size of the publishing industries in the three countries, there can be no doubt that the number of published titles in Norway was by far the smallest. As late as 1957 only 1773 Norwegian titles were published that year, a figure which includes all kinds of books for all ages and purposes in addition to translations, reprints, governmental reports, dissertations etc. (Den norske Forleggerforening 1974, 21). Accordingly, fewer Norwegian Alcott translations than in Denmark and Sweden were only to be expected.

## Alcott in Surprising Places

A search in the National Library's digitized stacks of Norwegian language material proves that from early on Louisa May Alcott nevertheless was a name to reckon with in Norway as well. Numerous hits from translated American or other foreign language sources refer to the author and her work, hits that reflect to what extent a small country like Norway faces outwards, culturally and economically. The list reveals how her impact spreads in phases by way of media and institutions.

From 1877 onwards, Norwegian newspapers around the country printed advertisements for Danish Alcott translations sold in local bookstores. Rental libraries at the same time also started advertising her work. During the 1880s publicly funded libraries began offering Alcott titles to their borrowers and entries about Louisa M. Alcott started appearing in Norwegian and/or Scandinavian encyclopedias. Upon her death at the age of 55, 6 March 1888, newspapers printed Alcott's obituary. School books began mediating her work in the subsequent decade.

A digital search of "alcott" and "småfrøkner" in the national web library thus facilitates the study of an author's canonization in all its wealth of unanticipated details. The resulting list discloses sources we often forget in traditional reception studies, where reviews, criticism, translations, literary histories and biographical texts play a major part. We certainly find loads of predictable hits. Deliberations about feminism and children's literature confirm the kind of mixed reception Clark presents in *The Afterlife of Little Women* (2014). In Norwegian language sources, Alcott received adulation as well as her share of gendered disparaging directed at popular women authors writing for children. A fair number of intertextual literary references befitting a canonized and much translated author likewise popped up, both in "highbrow" and "lowbrow" works of fiction.

More surprising, at least to me, were all the reference titles and nonfiction texts containing information about Alcott and sources I never would have stumbled on otherwise. The hit list reveals entries on Alcott in numerous Norwegian



encyclopedias, general and specialized ones, single and multi-volumed. Several publishing houses competed on the same market until institutional changes and the internet made printed encyclopedias superfluous. A notable number of handbooks in all sizes for cross word puzzlers appear from the 1980s, listing “Alcott” as an author’s name in six letters starting on A.

Unexpected was also the vague quotations and use of Alcotts famous name in more speculative connections, in new age literature about angels (*Engler. Din hjelper finnes*, 1999) or reincarnation (Shirley MacLaine, *Out on a Limb*, 1983; *Ut på en gyngende gren*, 1983) and self-help books like Dale Carnegie’s. Dale Carnegie (1888–1955) had nothing to do with The Carnegie Foundation or the Carnegie Hero Medals. He changed his name from Carnagey because of Andrew Carnegie’s standing and became himself tremendously successful. His first book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), still sells over 100.000 copies a year and habitually makes it to lists of “All-Time 100 Nonfiction Books” (*Time Magazine*) or “100 Best Nonfiction Books of All Time” (*The Guardian*).<sup>8</sup> Entitled *Hvordan vinne venner og virke på mennesker* it was published in Norwegian for the first time in 1951 and has over the years appeared in several editions on different publishing houses (the latest print edition is from 2017, as audiobook in 2018). And why does *Hvordan vinne venner* figure in this study? Because Dale Carnegie tells his readers two farfetched anecdotes about Louisa May Alcott that are made to fit his advice of how to handle people to one’s own advantage.

Sponging on Alcott’s name to advance various kinds of products complements editions of *Little Women* reduced almost out of all recognition. Only the title and remnants of the story survive but apparently that seems to be enough for marketing a brand name.

## Memories of Reading

On the hit list, memoirs constitute a category of its own, original Norwegian texts appearing alongside translated memoirs where authors such as Simone de Beauvoir reminisce of favorite childhood authors (Norwegian transl. 1996, *En veloppdragen ung pikes erindringer*). The memoirists write about the comfort of reading during difficult times, of using literature to fight illness and loneliness, what it

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://entertainment.time.com/2011/08/30/all-time-100-best-nonfiction-books/slide/how-to-win-friends-and-influence-people-by-dale-carnegie/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/07/100-best-nonfiction-books-how-to-win-friends-and-influence-people-dale-carnegie-donald-trump>

means to have books as friends and literary characters to identify with, how literature may function as introductions to other cultures.

The sources document the many functions reading may have besides passing the time or complying with the habits of specific environments. We learn about the contexts reading enters into, whether reading is conducted alone or together with others and how the readers get hold of Alcott. A majority reads at home and by themselves, others read aloud or have somebody read to them. Carl Joakim Hambro (1885–1964), journalist, politician for the Conservative Party and President of the Norwegian Parliament, reports with enthusiasm from the family reading sessions of his childhood, when the children – irrespective of gender – would be given sowing tasks to do while their mother read aloud. Alcott was “a favorite” of both children and adults (*Far og sønn*, 1948, 31, Father and son). The Hambros must have read Wilhelm Prior’s Danish translations.

Alcott’s books are inherited, received as gifts, found in the library or read as part of the school curriculum. The Nobel Prize winner in Physics, Isidor Isaac Rabi (1898–1988), tells of a life changing discovery at the age of ten, stumbling across the public library in Brooklyn. At home, they only had religious books in Hebrew and Jiddish, but in the library he read all the children’s books, starting with Alcott in the fiction section and working his way through the alphabet. Although it was a book on astronomy that came to be decisive for the direction of Rabi’s life, library users can recognize his story of starting on the first shelf. Just a few years ago, I realized that the Norwegian *Little Women* I had once picked up as a child at my local library was an abridged version. To be honest, I doubt that I would have enjoyed it as much if I had come across the full-text Danish translation with the religious frame intact.

Alcott appealed to bookish outsiders like Simone de Beauvoir as well as to socially privileged girls like Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan (born Vanderbilt, married Spencer-Churchill) and the president mother Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy. In their memoirs, *The Glitter and the Gold* (1952) and *Times to Remember* (1974) respectively, they both describe how much they enjoyed Alcott’s writing. As a ten year old, Rose Fitzgerald drove her horse and cart to the library in Concord, Alcott’s home town, to borrow the books. The translation of Balsan and Kennedy’s memoirs into Norwegian shortly after the original titles were published (*Gull og glitter*, 1954; *Alt har sin tid*, 1974) reflect their position at the time as public persons of interest.

That Alcott has been on the English syllabus in Norwegian schools for most of the period investigated is hardly surprising, given her position in Anglo-American literature and repeated appearance on lists such as “The 100 greatest novels of all times” (The *Observer*, 2003) and “The 100 best novels in English” (The *Guardian*

2014<sup>9</sup>). Harold Bloom even deemed *Little Women* worthy of inclusion in *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994) albeit in the appendix, together with American luminaries such as Mark Twain and Henry James who like Alcott neither made it onto Bloom's short list of the 26 most essential Western authors of all times. Because his book was translated into Norwegian (*Vestens litterære kanon: Mesterverk i litteraturhistorien*, 1996), both he and his canonization of Alcott may be found in the National Library's digital collection.

The Alcott search indicates problematic side effects of the Western Canon being globalized and of what can be defined as cultural imperialism. Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga's autobiographical debut novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988; Norwegian transl. *Sisi Tambu*, 1990) tells of life in a patriarchal Shona family and of women's conditions in postcolonial Rhodesia. Alcott enters the story when the main character and her classmates at a missionary school have to take an entry exam to a more prestigious school. "Herded" into their classroom, the girls are supposed to answer questions about Louisa M. Alcott's *Little Women*, to multiply acorns and find an un-matching pair of footwear among wellingtons, galoshes, snowshoes and slippers. How much could Sisi be expected to identify with Jo March or relate to Alcott's story, to see it as amusing or instructive?

## Geographical and Cultural Differences

My study of *Little Women* in Scandinavia confirms Beverly Lyon Clark's summary of its life "around the world" (Clark 2014, 142). English speaking nations naturally constitute a stronghold. Sweden, Denmark and Norway are typical in the sense that publishing houses in most European nations have adapted the book to national language versions, and more so in Western Europe than in the Eastern part. All three countries are Protestant (Lutheran) and ethnically quite homogenous (at least until immigration resulted in greater diversity from about 1970). The book's moral universe – including the intertextual representations of the religious norms inherent to *The Pilgrim's Progress* – would have been recognizable to Scandinavian readers, as would depictions of the frugal daily life in the March family.

Despite the "Americanness of Alcott's books" noted by critics (Clark 2014, 15) and cultural and religious differences in the target languages, *Little Women* has

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<sup>9</sup> Robert McCrum signed the presentation of *Little Women* in *The Guardian* 2 February 2014 (published on the web 3 February 2014): "An instant bestseller, and a coming-of-age classic, it continues to appear in polls of Anglo-American reading, and remains among the most widely read novels of all time."

also travelled to Latin American and Asian countries (such as China, Iran, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Sri Lanka). The 2019 film adaptation has made it to Brazil and Mexico as well as to China, South Korea and Russia. This does not automatically imply that *Little Women* represents *universal* experiences. The book has been less translated and read on the African continent. More knowledge about publishing policies and infrastructure, economic issues and social variables concerning readers would be helpful when we try to explain both why some titles travel more than others and why the results vary geographically. The Norwegian survey from 1902 indicates that at least in the 1870s–90s, Alcott was first and foremost read by a well to do public who had the time and means to immerse itself in books.

To understand why the Norwegian case differs from the Swedish and Danish examples, other factors in addition to geography, demography and a late developing publishing industry should likewise be considered. Authors played a crucial role in the nation building process after Norway won its independence, first from Denmark and then from Sweden. Interestingly, Alcott is notably absent in *Norsk kvinnelitteraturhistorie* (1988) and in *Norsk barnelitteraturhistorie* (2005) despite declarations of her importance for Norwegian readers and authors made by an early generation of critics (cf. Egeland 2018). When subsequent generations canonized homegrown Dikken Zwilgmeyer as a pioneer and inventor of stories about active girls, Alcott's role as an ancestor was buried. National pride won over awareness of transtextual relations and transnational influences.

And why did the “partnership” of Bunyan and Alcott fare better in Sweden and Denmark? Throughout the twentieth century, Bunyan in Norway circulated almost exclusively within a religious book circuit. Packaging a story for girls in *The Pilgrim's Progress* would not have appealed to the general – secular – market that such a title depended on to survive economically. Full text Swedish and Danish versions could rely on the status *Unga Kvinnor* and *Pigebørn* had achieved as timeless classics, with promises of a “complete version” signalling quality and authenticity.

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