

A close-up photograph of a bouquet of flowers, featuring several red roses and yellow roses. A green ribbon is visible on the left side of the bouquet. The background is softly blurred.

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**From Contraband to Robert Dane: The
Language of Personhood in Louisa May
Alcott's "My Contraband"**



Black male characters occupy a uniquely complex place in the literature of the American Civil War period. Louisa May Alcott's short story "My Contraband" offers an excellent insight into the complexity of Black male identity in this historical context. This essay discusses how the identity and masculinity of Black men were constructed through the language used in Civil War literature, focusing in particular on "My Contraband." It examines this topic through two interrelated lenses: first, the words and adjectives used to describe the story's principal Black character; and second, the significance of the various names he assumes over the course of the narrative. "My Contraband" thus uses shifting descriptors and names to underscore the unstable racial identity and contested masculinity of Black men during the Civil War.

The story primarily revolves around two characters. Faith Dane, the narrator and focalizer of the story, is a recurring character in Alcott's collection of short stories *Hospital Sketches*. Her companion, however, is arguably the person the plot itself revolves around. While the reader experiences the events through the eyes of Faith Dane, it is Bob that drives those events in equal or even greater measure. Bob, later Robert, and finally Robert Dane, is the titular contraband, a formerly enslaved man in pursuit of justice. His experiences are undeniably shaped by his identity as a mixed-race man, as he finds himself not belonging to any predetermined racial group (Alcott 173). His identity is undetermined, defined by a lack of certainty and belonging, and this is





reflected in the way he is presented to the reader by Faith, who struggles to place him within her culturally marked mental framework of race relations. Throughout this essay Bob/Robert/Robert Dane will be referred to as “Robert” to reflect the narrative’s movement toward recognizing his personhood, while remaining attentive to the imposed and shifting nature of his identity.

To fully understand how Alcott frames Robert’s identity, it is important to consider how the term *contraband* came about in the historical context of the Civil War. The aforementioned mental framework was, at the time when the story was both set and published, at the forefront of public discourse and was undergoing changes as emancipation and the abolition of slavery came closer to becoming a reality. As a result of the ongoing Civil War, African Americans were fleeing to Union-controlled areas of the so-called slave states, but their status remained uncertain. For example, as Kate Masur describes, when three enslaved men escaped to Fortress Monroe, held by Union General Benjamin F. Butler, Butler understood their potential value to the Union, but emancipation was not yet an option, and so they were categorized as “contraband of war.” This decision was pivotal in shaping how escaped enslaved people were viewed by the wider public, and the word and concept spread quickly through all available means of communication (Masur 1050-1051). Masur explains that because *contraband* was originally used to refer to confiscated material goods, its application to fugitive





slaves both justified their retention in the Union territory and implicitly reinforced the view of them as property, denying their full humanity.

By 1863, Alcott's characters used the term without any preamble, as it was self-explanatory, and the author herself titled the story after it. The term reflected the precarious and transitional position of the people it described, especially in the eyes of Northerners wrestling with the implications of abolition. Faith Dane may be counted among these Northerners, as she, a self-proclaimed staunch abolitionist, shapes a mental image of "her" contraband, Robert, through her personal attachment to and affection for him. Yet, rather than being a simple practical descriptor born out of necessity, the word *contraband* would instead become a key marker of racial discourse in the era.

However, this linguistic representation of racial discourse does not remain confined to one term. To further understand how Alcott explores the racial and gendered identity of Black men during the Civil War, one must examine the language used to describe them, particularly the recurring use of the word *boy* to refer to adult Black men. This issue is addressed explicitly in the text, with Faith saying: "All colored men are called 'boys,' even if their heads are white; this boy was five-and-twenty at least, strong-limbed and manly, and had the look of one who never had been cowed by abuse or worn with oppressive labor" (Alcott 171). This passage reflects Robert's role in





infantilization by the system, but the description that follows makes his masculinity clear. As Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the commander of a Black regiment, noted, “Till the blacks were armed, there was no guaranty of their freedom. It was their demeanor under arms that shamed the nation into recognizing them as men” (qtd. in Patterson 148), highlighting the deep cultural link between visible masculine strength and social recognition during the war.

It is also important to note that Faith herself refers to all the wounded as *boys*, a gesture resembling motherly affection for the injured soldiers. There is, nevertheless, a clear shift from referring to Robert as a *boy* to a *man*, exemplified most clearly by Faith’s proclamation that “the captain was a gentleman in the world’s eye, but the contraband was the gentleman in mine” (Alcott 176). The use of the term *gentleman* in particular demonstrates that he has metaphorically moved up in the ranks of her mental hierarchy, owing to his passionate love for his late wife and Faith’s sympathetic attitude toward his plight. In this way, Robert’s “manhood” becomes visible not only through his actions but also through the evolving lens of Faith’s narration. However, his masculinity is confirmed in the eyes of the world only at the end of the story, through his sacrifice in the Battle of Fort Wagner. As Robert himself is not a narrator or focalizer, his agency and his experiences are expressed through the more overt action of joining the Union army in the moments of his grand sacrifice for the Union cause, his lack of





narrative voice is emphasized in text: “He knew me, yet gave no greeting; was glad to see a woman’s face, yet had no smile wherewith to welcome it; felt that he was dying, yet uttered no farewell” (Alcott 11). In exchange for his voice, Robert “gets” to be an example of racial sacrifice – in the words of his brother in arms, “If our people’s free, we can afford to die” (Alcott 193). The story concludes by portraying Robert as gaining eternal liberty in death, which is furthered by the fact that Robert dies in battle with his former master. This narrative is part of a common trend in literature of the era, and this fixation on racial sacrifice may not have directly brought about the passing of the 15th Amendment, which led to the enfranchisement of Black men, but it certainly led to a shift in public perception that helped the idea gain traction (Patterson 162).

The evolution of Robert’s name throughout the story, from “Bob” to “Robert” and finally to “Robert Dane,” signifies a gradual transformation in how he is perceived by others and how he perceives himself. Notably, both changes in his name are closely connected to his relationship with Faith Dane. The first change, from “Bob” to “Robert,” is initiated by Faith in an attempt to use a more formal mode of address, thereby both differentiating him and, in her mind, granting him a degree of dignity. This intention is evident in the following exchange:

“What is your other name?” I asked. “I like to call my attendants by their last names rather than by their first.”





"I've got no other, Missis; we has our masters' names, or do without. Mine's dead, and I won't have anything of his 'bout me."

"Well, I'll call you Robert, then, and you may fill this pitcher for me, if you will be so kind." (Alcott 4)

Faith thus attempts to equalize Robert with her other patients to the best of her ability, but in doing so, she also imposes a new name upon him, one he does not choose for himself. Robert's final transformation appears to culminate in an act of symbolic gratitude, as he adopts Nurse Dane's surname. While on the surface this may seem like a gesture of mutual respect or personal empowerment, the underlying implications complicate that reading. As Bleu-Schwenninger observes, "Even though the avowed motive for Robert's adoption of Nurse Dane's family name is gratitude, the fact remains that his gesture is strongly reminiscent of the slaveowners' practice of calling their slaves by their own name. In any case, it testifies to Nurse Dane's absolute control over Robert" (11). Although she is a woman, Nurse Dane finds herself in a position of power over Robert due to her race as well as his role as her assistant. Robert taking on Faith's name also mirrors the tradition of a woman adopting her husband's surname in marriage. While Faith's implied attraction to him might suggest a romantic dimension to this act, it is also emblematic of deeper societal power structures. As sociologist Anne Lise Ellingsæter notes, "At the institutional level the patrilineal naming tradition in





which women take their husband's surname upon marriage is a patriarchal institution indicating that women (and children) belong to men in a hierarchical order" (46). Therefore, even this subversion of gendered naming conventions simultaneously reinforces ideas of racial hierarchy and echoes structures of possession and domination, raising the question of whether Robert's transformation constitutes true liberation, or rather a reinstating of dependency under a more benevolent guise. This mirrors the double-edged nature of the term "contraband," as Robert's personal names were derived from, and in part imposed by, a white Northern representative of the Union cause, but, to a degree, they continue the hierarchical relationship in a new format.

In fact, arguably the only choice Robert makes entirely on his own is to discard his former master's surname. As Nurse Dane observes, "the look and gesture with which he repudiated his master's name were a more effective declaration of independence than any Fourth-of-July orator could have prepared" (Alcott 4). This choice is Robert's rejection of not only his legal enslavement, but also the symbolic legacy of it. This renunciation gains further complexity with the revelation that the injured Confederate officer, Ned Fairfax, Robert's former master, is also his half-brother, a relationship that directly reveals Robert's mixed-race parentage and highlights the violations of intimate relationships that the system of slavery produced. His relationship to the surname is, to a degree, also familial. The familial connection





illustrates how the institution of slavery distorts and undermines traditional ideas of family. As historian Brenda E. Stevenson argues, “slavery corrupted the family by denying legal recognition to enslaved unions and by producing biological relationships between white owners and the people they enslaved, while refusing to acknowledge them as such” (95). Robert’s rejection of the Fairfax name, then, is more than a mere result of circumstance, as it also signifies his removing himself from a family structure built on coercion and inequality.

In summary, Louisa May Alcott’s “My Contraband” is a short story with choices of names and descriptors that carry a great deal of cultural significance and complexity. Alcott uses names and descriptors to portray the instability of the identity and masculinity of Black men in the Civil War period. The story reveals how even moments of apparent progress, such as Robert’s symbolic adoption of a new name, remain embedded within larger systems of control and hierarchy. Both the titular term *contraband* and Robert’s progressive name changes signify the paradoxical position of partial freedom, as Black characters are separated from their enslavers, but their portrayal retains the implications of oppression. The only moment of agency that fully belongs to Robert, his rejection of his former master’s, as well as his biological father’s name, functions as an act of self-definition in a system that has destabilized even traditional notions of kinship. Robert dies in battle with his half-brother, his former





master, finally attaining his full personhood and masculinity only in death, where, according to the narration, he finally finds “eternal liberty” (Alcott 197), exemplifying the sacrifice of a generation of Black men for the liberty of those who would follow them.





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