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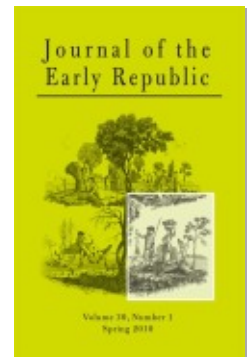
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Making Hero Strong

Teenage Ambition, Story-Paper Fiction, and the Generational Recasting of American Women's Authorship

DANIEL A. COHEN

“Hero Strong: or Three Ways of Living Woman’s Life,” Winifred Woodfern’s lead story in the August 18, 1855, issue of Boston’s popular story paper, the *True Flag*, opens with a memorable scene of teenage comradery and ambition. In an academy boardinghouse at the end of summer term, three girls have gathered for one last nostalgic night together before leaving school forever. Hero Strong lounges in an armchair by a window, wearing a loose velvet outfit, sporting a heavy signet ring on her finger, and smoking a perfumed cigarito, while her friends, twin sisters Jennie and Julie Leland, sing together to the accompaniment of a guitar. Hero’s short, curly hair is “parted on one side, like a boy’s,” and when she joins the chorus, it is in a “deep contralto voice” that adds strength to the higher tones of the sisters. After engaging in some playful banter, the three intimate friends talk seriously about their future plans. “I must be wealthy and famous—then famous and wealthy—and then both together,” Hero exclaims, referring to her dream of becoming a successful author. “This is the burden of my song—fame and

Daniel A. Cohen is an associate professor of history at Case Western Reserve University. He would like to thank Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray for sharing some very helpful passages from their research notes; the Vermont Historical Society Library for providing him with copies of unpublished materials in their collection and for permission to quote from them; and the American Antiquarian Society, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and Case Western Reserve University for their generous support of his scholarship. He is also grateful to Elizabeth Bussiere, Morris L. Cohen, and Adrienne Rich for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this article.

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riches. And both must be won by this good right hand.” So saying, she proudly holds out a small and seemingly delicate hand whose muscles are, in fact, as “strong as iron.” “I want my own glory; not that which is reflected, faintly from another, near and dear as he may be,” she resumes. “If, after all this, an unfaltering love and a happy home is offered for my acceptance, well and good.” The Leland twins have very different life goals: Beautiful Jennie intends to excel as “a belle and a flirt,” while warm-hearted Julie wants only “a quiet home” in which she can love and care for others and be loved in return. In the tale that follows, each girl fulfills her self-appointed destiny, with Hero Strong becoming a “world-renowned authoress.”¹

Although she usually wrote under the pseudonym Winnie (or Winifred) Woodfern, the author of “Hero Strong” was actually Mary Field Williams Gibson, a teenage orphan from Vermont who had moved to Boston sometime after July 1851. By the following summer, the seventeen-year-old had begun publishing poems, sketches, and short stories in several of the city’s “family” or “literary” newspapers (also known as “story papers”), weekly periodicals that imitated the format of conventional newspapers but were filled mostly with popular fiction. Over the next several years, Gibson established herself as a workhorse for two Boston story papers—the *True Flag* and the *American Union*—and as a regular or occasional contributor to several others. Her writing during that period was remarkably eclectic, including poems of various types, prose reveries, light satirical sketches, comical pieces in Yankee dialect, saccharine domestic narratives, tales of romantic intrigue, violent adventure stories, and supernatural thrillers. Amid that varied output, “Hero Strong” was one of half a dozen tales that she placed in the *True Flag* between 1853 and 1856 about teenage girls who display masculine traits, violate conventional gender norms, and struggle to fulfill high literary or artistic ambitions.²

1. Winifred Woodfern, “Hero Strong: or Three Ways of Living Woman’s Life,” *True Flag*, Aug. 18, 1855, 1.

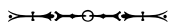
2. Boston story papers in which Gibson published between 1852 and 1856 include the *Olive Branch*, *Waverley Magazine*, *Dodge’s Literary Museum*, the *True Flag*, the *Yankee Blade*, the *Yankee Privateer*, and the *American Union*. In 1852 and 1853, Gibson wrote for the *Olive Branch* under the pseudonym “Green Mountain Mary”; she used the Woodfern pseudonym for all other known publications prior to 1856 (including in the *Olive Branch* after 1853), often replacing “Winnie” with “Winifred” after mid 1854. For the different genres, see *True Flag*,

Mary Gibson's "tales of teenage ambition" shed significant new light on the transformation of women's authorship in the United States during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. In recent years, scholars have tended to attribute the emergence of a new American conception of the woman author as literary artist (and the concurrent eclipse of domestic fiction) to the influence of an elite, male-dominated mode of high cultural production, centered in such exclusive venues as the *Atlantic Monthly*, that gained increasing influence during the 1860s and 1870s. The cases of Gibson and many other teenage girls or young women who launched writing careers during the early 1850s, however, suggest a different account of the transformation of American female authorship—pushing its inception back into the antebellum period and locating its origins in more popular venues. Far from waiting for the elite imprimatur of the *Atlantic*, aspiring young writers such as Gibson took quick advantage of the dramatically expanded opportunities for publication provided by midcentury story papers, especially in Boston. The editors of those papers increasingly sought out original work by American authors; regularly intermixed a myriad of fictional genres in order to appeal to readers of both sexes, all ages, and of the widest possible range of classes and tastes; and were willing to purchase or otherwise obtain such varied copy from whoever could best supply it, irrespective of age or sex. Literate and ambitious Yankee girls eagerly supplied much of that heterogeneous demand and, in the process, not only abandoned many of the inhibitions of domestic fiction—and of the broader ideology of domesticity—but also embraced alternative romantic models of female authorship. Gibson's tales probably reflected her own aroused aspirations for fame, fortune, and artistic expression; they certainly presented startling images of female ambition, authorship, and artistry to tens of thousands of story-paper readers.³

July 31, 1852, 4 (sentimental poem); Oct. 23, 1852, 1–2 (domestic tale); Oct. 22, 1853, 2 (sentimental sketch); Oct. 29, 1853, 4 (satirical sketch); May 19, 1855, 1 (ghost story); *American Union*, Jan. 1, 1853, 2 (tale of romantic intrigue); June 11, 1853, 4 (prose reverie); June 3, 1854, 1–2 (comical dialect piece); July 22, 1854, 4 (violent adventure story); Mar. 31, 1855, 4 (supernatural thriller); Apr. 7, 1855, 4 (satirical poem). She also published several poems in Philadelphia and New York monthlies; see *Peterson's Magazine* 25 (Dec. 1853), 268; *Godey's Lady's Book*, May 1854, 451; *Home Magazine* 3 (May 1854), 333.

3. On the 1860s and 1870s, see Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, 1993), 69–106,

Taking an influential study by Richard Brodhead as its point of departure, the first section of this article surveys recent interpretations of nineteenth-century women's fiction in the context of America's broader literary marketplace—highlighting the view that new high cultural models helped persuade postbellum woman writers to abandon the conventions of domestic fiction. The second section describes antebellum story papers and their authors, providing a foundation for my alternative hypothesis: that story papers of the early 1850s played a crucial role in sparking the literary ambitions of young women and encouraging them to free themselves (in various ways and to varying degrees) from “literary domesticity,” even before they felt the allure of such high cultural venues as the *Atlantic Monthly*. The next two sections embody the central case study, tracing Mary Gibson's early life and career as a story-paper writer and then analyzing her tales of female ambition. The fifth section draws on the personal writings and reminiscences of Ellen Louise Chandler Moulton and Louisa May Alcott, two other story-paper authors of the same cohort, to verify that the new attitudes dramatized in Gibson's stories actually influenced the lives and aspirations of other young women of her generation. The final section examines several of the underlying social and cultural developments that helped to unleash expansive new ambitions—literary and otherwise—among American teenage girls of the early 1850s.



In his analysis of Louisa May Alcott's early writing career in *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (1993), Richard H. Brodhead describes three modes of fiction that coexisted but were as yet imperfectly differentiated in America's literary marketplace of the 1850s and 1860s. One was the tradition of women's authorship based on the themes and values of “home, family, and religion” that were central to the self-definition of antebellum America's

142–76; Anne E. Boyd, *Writing for Immortality: Women and the Emergence of High Literary Culture in America* (Baltimore, 2004); Naomi Z. Sofer, *Making the “America of Art”: Cultural Nationalism and Nineteenth-Century Women Writers* (Columbus, OH, 2005), 1–17, 105–38, and passim; also see Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–1870* (Ithaca, NY, 1978), 32, 178–79, 298. On midcentury Boston story papers, see Mary Noel, *Villains Galore: The Heyday of the Popular Story Weekly* (New York, 1954), 18–55.

emerging middle class. Such “domestic fiction” achieved its greatest cultural visibility and commercial success during the early 1850s with such massive bestsellers as Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* (1854). It was Cummins’s novel, which sold more than seventy thousand copies in less than a year, that provoked Nathaniel Hawthorne’s petulant complaint concerning the “d——d mob of scribbling women” whose feeble “trash” supposedly dominated the midcentury literary marketplace.⁴

After being denigrated by scholars throughout much of the twentieth century, antebellum domestic fiction finally began to receive more careful and respectful treatment at the hands of feminist literary historians during the 1970s and 1980s—a rich vein of scholarship that Brodhead occasionally draws on in his own analysis. In *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–1870* (1978), for example, Nina Baym identified a single “overplot” that “absorbed the full energies of almost all the women novelists in America for fifty years.” In nearly every case, they chronicle the trials and triumph of a young heroine who overcomes social hardships and injustices through her own efforts, and is finally rewarded with social recognition and a happy marriage. Whereas Baym (and later Jane Tompkins) claimed that the genre actually conveyed a sweeping critique of society’s masculine “ethos of money and exploitation,” other feminist critics have implicated domestic fiction in the rise of American imperialism, consumerism, and possessive individualism. But despite interpretative differences, virtually all scholars agree that the “literary domestics” (as authors of such novels were dubbed by Mary Kelley) embraced the nineteenth-century ideology of domesticity, with its core assumption that men and women are “essentially different” and hence destined to assume different social roles. That assumption not only governed the plots of their novels but also shaped their self-justifications as commercial authors: They published—often ambivalently or reluctantly or apologetically—not to express individual genius or literary artistry, but rather as an extension of their domestic care-giving and pedagogic duties as wives and mothers. Most typically, they claimed to write either to support themselves and their children in the face of adverse personal circumstances, or in order to convey valuable moral or

4. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 22–27, 42–68, 69–106, 155 (quoted), 159, 168–69.

religious messages to readers. Even those women singled out by modern scholars for their pride of authorship or aggressive pursuit of commercial advantage generally chose to justify their literary output in terms of familial obligations or didactic aims.⁵

The second literary tradition identified by Brodhead is that of story papers (and related paperbound novels), exemplified by the sometimes sensationalistic tales that Alcott peddled to several Boston weeklies during the 1850s and 1860s. Though Brodhead acknowledges that such periodicals were not, in the 1850s, “sharply differentiated” from domestic fiction, he nonetheless argues that antebellum story papers already displayed characteristics that would more sharply distinguish them later in the century. In contrast to the domestic mode’s didactic moralism and relative realism, story papers preferred “genres of high-colored romance and sensational adventure,” written in simple language and packaged in short weekly installments. In addition, story papers were among the cheapest and most widely accessible forms of popular fiction. While conceding that the readership of antebellum story papers overlapped somewhat with that of middle-class domestic novels, Brodhead (drawing on the work of Michael Denning) suggests that it also attracted readers from lower and less “feminized” social strata, including “farmboys, soldiers, German and Irish immigrants, and men and women of a newly solidify-

5. For a typical pre-1970 treatment, see Fred Lewis Pattee, *The Feminine Fifties* (New York, 1940). For sympathetic reappraisals, see Baym, *Woman’s Fiction*, 11–50 (quoted at 12–13, 18, 27); Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1984); Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790–1860* (New York, 1985), 122–85. For evidence of Brodhead’s debt to Kelley, in particular, see *Cultures of Letters*, 54, 168, 216–17n46. For more critical feminist views, see Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977); Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, CA, 1990); Amy Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” *American Literature* 70 (1998), 581–606; Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham, NC, 2000). On the ambivalence of the “literary domestics,” see Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*. On authorial pride and commercialism, see Susan Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990); Joyce W. Warren, *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1992); Melissa J. Homestead, *American Women Authors and Literary Property, 1822–1869* (New York, 2005).

ing working class.” He further argues that story-paper writers were distinguished from other authors of the 1850s by the particular terms of their employment and, hence, by their own self-images as cultural producers. The proprietors of weekly story papers, he explains, purchased huge quantities of formulaic fiction from “hundreds of writers whose names have been lost to memory.” That system of standardized mass production allowed little room for “individuated self-expression” or “artistic aspirations” but rather pressured its writers to produce mechanically, along the lines of an “industrial hand.”⁶

Yet Brodhead’s description of Alcott’s actual experience as a story-paper writer is oddly incongruent with his depressing assessment of that authorial mode. Far from replicating the grueling and regimented work routines of a factory, story-paper authorship provided Alcott with wages superior to those that she could earn in the other occupations available to her as a young, single woman (e.g., teaching, nursing, sewing, or household service)—and it did so under flexible “working conditions” that provided not only “the greatest income,” but also “the maximum independence” and “the greatest freedom from coercion and exploitation by others.” Drawing on the feminist interpretations of Madeleine Stern and Judith Fetterley, Brodhead further concedes that “story-paper writing brought Alcott an elsewhere-unavailable degree of imaginative freedom” and permitted her the unfettered expression of powerful personal

6. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 77–79, 82–83; Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London, 1987), 1–61. Also see W. H. Bishop, “Story-Paper Literature,” *Atlantic Monthly* 44 (Sept. 1879), 383–93; Quentin Reynolds, *The Fiction Factory; Or, From Pulp Row to Quality Street* (New York, 1955), 3–118; Noel, *Villains Galore*; Ronald J. Zboray, “Technology and the Character of Community Life in Antebellum America: The Role of Story Papers,” in *Communication and Change in American Religious History*, ed. Leonard I. Sweet (Grand Rapids, MI, 1993), 185–215; Ronald Weber, *Hired Pens: Professional Writers in America’s Golden Age of Print* (Athens, OH, 1997), 62–74; Dawn Fisk Thomsen, “‘It is a pity it is no better’: The Story Paper and Its Critics in Nineteenth-Century America,” in *Scorned Literature: Essays on the History and Criticism of Popular Mass-Produced Fiction in America*, ed. Lydia Cushman Schurman and Deidre Johnson (Westport, CT, 2002), 83–94; Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley, CA, 2002); Paul Erickson, “New Books, New Men: City-Mysteries Fiction, Authorship, and the Literary Market,” *Early American Studies* 1 (Spring 2003), 273–312.

drives—such as “female rage” and “aggression”—for which she had no other literary outlet. On top of all that, Alcott found that the seemingly “infinite demand” for such fiction was “easily met” and elicited not only high wages but also high praise from story-paper editors. Indeed, one of the only points of convergence between Alcott’s own experience (as sketched by Brodhead) and Brodhead’s more general assessment of story-paper writing is in their shared low opinion of its literary quality. As befit the daughter of a prominent Transcendentalist intellectual, Alcott insisted on publishing most of her story-paper pieces pseudonymously (despite offers from editors to pay her more if she used her real name), and she repeatedly referred to such output as “rubbish”—a designation strikingly similar to Hawthorne’s nearly contemporaneous dismissal of popular women’s domestic fiction as “trash.”⁷⁷

The third tradition that Brodhead describes in conjunction with Alcott’s early career is the elite mode of “high-literary culture” that was just beginning to differentiate itself from the mass of popular production during the 1850s and 1860s. During that period, a group of mostly male authors, critics, editors, and publishers based in New England began to define an American high literary canon that would remain largely intact through much of the twentieth century. A key development in that process of cultural stratification was the establishment in 1857 of the *Atlantic Monthly*, a Boston magazine that quickly emerged as “the premier organ of literary high culture in America,” with a relatively small but socially elite audience. Though influenced by European romantic notions of literary genius and artistry, the *Atlantic* generated its own distinctive ideal of the author as “a single-minded devotee of a highly specialized craft.” As the daughter of Bronson Alcott and a Concord neighbor of Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott lived in tantalizing proximity to that emerging world of high literary culture and internalized its standards. During the early 1860s, she even managed to publish several pieces in the *Atlantic*. In the wake of a “palpable stiffening” of that journal’s “selection criteria in the mid-1860s,” however, Alcott withdrew from a struggle that she found increasingly humiliating and turned to

7. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 76, 82–84; Madeleine B. Stern, *Louisa May Alcott: From Blood & Thunder to Hearth & Home* (Boston, 1998; cited hereafter as *From Blood & Thunder*), 73–82.

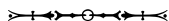
domestic fiction for children—achieving unexpected fame and fortune as the author of *Little Women* and its sequels.⁸

In a subsequent chapter of *Cultures of Letters*, Brodhead describes how Sarah Orne Jewett succeeded where Alcott had failed: winning an enduring (albeit minor) place for herself in the pantheon of American high literary culture as defined by such elite organs as the *Atlantic*. She did so, he argues, by abandoning literary domesticity, embracing the aestheticized values and techniques of high-brow authorship, and forging social connections with key members of Boston's cultural elite. More recent studies by Anne Boyd and Naomi Sofer have expanded that argument, identifying a "whole generation" of American "women writers" who, during the 1860s and 1870s, largely abandoned the domestic mode, violated "the taboo against ambition in women," and embraced a model of author-as-artist (influenced by European romantic conceptions of the artist as "genius," "creator," and "prophet") that had previously "been considered available only to men." In explaining those developments, Boyd emphasizes the inspiration provided by such trans-Atlantic exemplars as Madame de Staël, George Sand, Charlotte Brontë, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. She particularly notes the impact of the "European women's *Künstlerroman* tradition" (novels depicting a female artist's personal development) in inspiring American writers to "create autobiographical artist heroines who reject the path of ordinary women and develop maculine ambitions." In accounting for the new model of woman-author-as-artist, Boyd and Sofer, like Brodhead, also highlight the central importance of the *Atlantic* as a prestigious venue that, at once, defined a new high-cultural conception of authorship, "created a stable market for artistic literature," and was (initially, at least) "hospitable to women writers." Women of that generation, Boyd concludes, "witnessed the birth of a high American literature" in the *Atlantic* and "longed to be a part of it."⁹

8. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 80–82, 87–88; 142–76; Brodhead, *The School of Hawthorne* (New York, 1986), 17–80; Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 3–39, 186–201; Boyd, *Writing for Immortality*, 241–46; Louisa May Alcott, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine B. Stern (Boston, 1989; cited hereafter as Alcott, *Journals*), 157–70.

9. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 142–76; Boyd, *Writing for Immortality*, quoted at 3, 9, 16, 18, 36, 80, 86, 128, 185; Sofer, *Making the "America of Art,"*

One weakness in the otherwise valuable accounts of Boyd and Sofer is that they overlook the key role of midcentury story papers in allowing women writers to liberate themselves from some of the constraints of literary domesticity and thereby transform both their own and popular conceptions of female authorship. And while Brodhead does not neglect story-paper authorship, he may be too quick to consign it to a plebeian realm. Indeed, in suggesting that story papers of the 1850s and 1860s were geared to a low-brow, lower-class readership and to a quasi-industrial mode of formulaic mass production, he reifies invidious distinctions made at the time by partisans of the new high-brow mode who sought to stratify the undifferentiated midcentury literary field so as to denigrate their competitors and seize the cultural highground for themselves. As Michael Newbury has shown, associating certain types of authorship or publishing with industrial labor was a common nineteenth-century rhetorical device designed to discredit “particular types of literature and literary production as subliterate” by portraying them “as mass-produced, unskilled, and routinized work unfit for higher minds.” Such hostile characterizations should no more be taken at face value by modern scholars when directed at story papers and their authors than when applied (as they were by jealous male rivals, such as Hawthorne and Melville) to the now critically rehabilitated “literary domestics.”¹⁰



The distinctive periodicals devoted to popular fiction that eventually would become known as “story papers” evolved from earlier types of weekly papers that combined literary pieces and other non-news features with considerable quantities of conventional news. With the rise of cheap, urban daily newspapers during the 1830s, city readers, in partic-

1–16, 21–25, 67, 75–83, 96, 106–17, 132–46, 157–77, 199–208 (quoted at 3, 200); Baym, *Woman’s Fiction*, 32.

10. See Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 78–79, 82–83; Michael Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford, CA, 1997), 19–70; Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 17–46; but cf. Barbara Sicherman, “Ideologies and Practices of Reading,” in *A History of the Book in America: Volume 3: The Industrial Book 1840–1880*, ed. Scott Casper et al. (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007; cited hereafter as *Industrial Book*), 296–99. Brodhead’s treatment of story papers relies heavily on Denning, much of whose evidence derives from the 1870s through 1910s.

ular, increasingly turned to the “penny press” or other dailies for their news, pressuring weeklies to focus more heavily on fiction in an effort to hold their customers. Some of those weeklies gradually broadened their horizons, eschewing partisan politics, minimizing local reportage, and aiming for a national audience by filling their columns with literary sketches, stories, and poems. Throughout the 1830s, such “literary” or “family” papers, as they were often called, relied heavily on material pirated from English and French sources. During the 1840s, however, several print-industry entrepreneurs in Boston established literary weeklies that increasingly featured original American stories written especially for their papers—often, in fact, produced in enormous quantities by the editors themselves or by a small circle of other male authors drawn largely from among their associates in the lower ranks of the local printing trade. Such versatile operatives frequently alternated fiction-writing with other publishing chores and, according to Paul Erickson, conceived of authorship not as an elevated “profession” or “calling” but rather as a form of “productive, industrial labor” or “a job like any other” (a stance consistent with Brodhead’s view of story-paper authors as akin to industrial hands). Yet despite their extraordinary productivity, that limited group could not fully meet the soaring demand; as a result, even weeklies with such patriotic titles as *Uncle Sam* (est. 1841) were still forced to supplement their original American pieces with reprinted foreign fiction.¹¹

By the late 1840s and early 1850s, however, as papers boasting of their reliance on original works by American writers proliferated in Boston and other cities, editors increasingly reached beyond their circle of male associates to obtain fiction from a wider range of contributors, including women and teenage girls of genteel or middle-class backgrounds. Some editors, harking back to older traditions of amateur authorship, managed to obtain needed copy at little or no expense. Such, for example, was Moses A. Dow, the editor and proprietor of *Waverley Magazine* (est. 1850), a popular and long-lived Boston story paper. Dow reportedly refused to pay for submissions but instead largely filled his weekly

11. Noel, *Villains Galore*, 4–55; Erickson, “New Books, New Men,” 273–312 (quoted at 297, 301, 312); Erickson qualifies this claim somewhat at 299–300; Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 82. A keyword search of the phrase “story paper” in ProQuest’s American Periodical Series Online 1740–1900 suggests that the term had entered into common usage by the late 1850s, if not earlier.

sheets with poems, sketches, and stories submitted by amateurs who, far from demanding cash remuneration, were themselves willing to pay—via subscriptions to *Waverley*—for the privilege of seeing their work in print. Other successful papers launched in Boston during the same period, however, such as the *Flag of Our Union* (est. 1846), the *American Union* (est. 1848?), and the *True Flag* (est. 1851), adopted a different business model: Appealing to quality rather than vanity, they assembled more seasoned and talented contingents of regular contributors (in some cases, drawn from the upper ranks of *Waverley* amateurs) by paying for most, if not all, of the original literary pieces that filled their columns. For a few years, at least, the balance of supply and demand seems to have shifted markedly in favor of authors. “Stories, give us stories!,” Boston editors frantically demanded, and aspiring young writers of both sexes gladly answered their calls.¹²

However they obtained their copy, the most successful story papers of the early 1850s claimed a status superior to that of the presumably more plebeian weeklies established during the previous decade. Thus, the editor of *Waverley* characterized one of Boston’s oldest story papers, *Uncle Sam*, as a journal “of the ‘baser sort,’” and criticized “several of the *lower caste* of papers” for stealing material from *Waverley*’s columns in an effort to “raise their own character to a standard of respectability.” In order to maintain their own aura of respectability while also maximizing their readership among America’s vast middling social strata, the new story papers seem to have been careful to provide a varied mix of genres (designed to appeal to men and women, young and old, urban and rural)—and to maintain a rough balance between male and female authors. In publishing a list of regular contributors in 1853, for example, the editor of the *American Union* carefully organized his honor roll into two columns of equal length: One listed twenty-five men; the other, twenty-five women. During the mid 1850s, when Robert Bonner began to transform *The New York Ledger* into America’s greatest story paper, he did so largely by raiding proven authors of both sexes from the literary stables of more established weeklies in other cities, especially Boston.

12. *Waverley Magazine*, July 19, 1851, 25. Noek, *Villains Galore*, 28–55; Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1850–1865* (Cambridge, MA, 1938), 9–11, 35–38, 41–42; Reynolds, *Fiction Factory*, 14; John Townsend Trowbridge, *My Own Story with Recollections of Noted Persons* (Boston, 1903), 135–36 (quoted).

Indeed, in brashly boasting at the beginning of 1856 that he would send “the best family papers in the Union” into oblivion, Bonner listed three Boston weeklies among his four principal competitors. And his formula, like that of the *American Union*, included a wide mix of genres and a rough balance between male and female authors; when Bonner published lists of the *Ledger*’s regular contributors during the late 1850s, he also sometimes organized them into neatly matching columns of men and women.¹³

Boston’s leading story papers clearly aimed to reach a national audience. Most were distributed through wholesale agents in several cities outside of New England, including New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Cincinnati, and all portrayed themselves as operating on a national stage: The *Olive Branch* claimed to be “a National Paper . . . second to none in the United States,” the *American Union* likewise dubbed itself a “NATIONAL NEWSPAPER,” and the *True Flag* claimed to be sold by “all the newsmen and periodical dealers in the United States.” During the late 1840s through mid 1850s, editors of Boston’s most popular story papers variously claimed weekly print-runs, circulations, or readerships of between thirty and one hundred thousand. Of course, the notable successes of the Boston papers would all be dwarfed by the truly vast audience drawn to the *New York Ledger* by 1860, when Bonner claimed a circulation of four hundred thousand. Authors who published regularly in the *Ledger* thus presumably reached a *weekly* readership of a size only achieved over many months or years by a handful of the very best-selling American novels of the nineteenth century.¹⁴

13. *Waverley Magazine*, Aug. 28, 1852, 141; Sept. 11, 1852, 168; *American Union*, Apr. 30, 1853, 3; Bonner, quoted in Noel, *Villains Galore*, 55; *New York Ledger*, Sept. 26, 1857, 4; June 5, 1858, 4. On the predominantly middle-class audience of story papers, see Noel, *Villains Galore*, 289–93; but cf. Denning, *Mechanic Accents*; Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 78–79.

14. *Olive Branch*, Jan. 3, 1852, 2; Dec. 18, 1852, 2; Jan. 1, 1853, 2; Dec. 24, 1853, 2 (quoted); *American Union*, Jan. 1, 1853, 3 (quoted); May 20, 1854, 3; *True Flag*, Oct. 29, 1853, 3; Nov. 5, 1853, 3 (quoted); Oct. 28, 1854, 3; *Waverley Magazine*, July 12, 1851, 8; Streeby, *American Sensations*, 86–88; but cf. Homestead, *American Women Authors*, 154–60. For print-run, circulation, subscriber, or readership claims, see *Olive Branch*, Dec. 27, 1851, 2; *Waverley Magazine*, Oct. 9, 1852, 232; *American Union*, Oct. 23, 1852, 2; Oct. 15, 1853, 3; *True Flag*, Jan. 27, 1855, 3; [Dodge’s] *Literary Museum*, Sept. 25, 1852, 255; Edward Everett, *The Mount Vernon Papers* (New York, 1860), 484–87; Mott, *A History of*

Several of the writers who reached such massive audiences were mature women who had turned to commercial authorship in response to unwelcome exigencies in their personal lives. For example, E. D. E. N. Southworth (b. 1819) and Fanny Fern (b. 1811), two of Bonner's earliest and most important female recruits during the mid 1850s, resorted to newspaper writing around midcentury in order to support themselves and their families in the wake of broken marriages. Though often included by modern scholars among the ranks of "literary domestics," both women published primarily in story papers throughout their long careers. Southworth placed her first short story in a Baltimore weekly in 1846; serialized her first full-length novel in the *National Era* (an abolitionist weekly based in Washington, DC) in 1849; and, after being recruited by Bonner in 1857, published most of her subsequent novels on the pages of his *New York Ledger*. Fern (Sara Payson Willis) launched her meteoric career in 1851 with a series of brief sketches in two Boston papers, the *Olive Branch* and the *True Flag*; after being successfully courted by Bonner in 1855, she continued to produce such sketches for the *New York Ledger* until her death in 1872. Far from being anonymous hacks or literary analogs to industrial hands, Southworth and Fern were two of the most famous and successful American authors of the 1850s. Harriet Beecher Stowe (b. 1811) was another middle-aged author who achieved great celebrity shortly after midcentury—in her case, on the strength of a single newspaper novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851), published serially in the *National Era*, the same paper that had carried several of Southworth's early works. Whereas Southworth and Fern justified their resort to commercial publishing on the basis of familial need, Stowe offered an alternative rationale also favored by "literary domestics": She wrote not as a literary artist but as a selfless transmitter of moral and religious messages. Indeed, Stowe repeatedly disavowed personal credit for her most famous work, claiming that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had actually been written by God Himself.¹⁵

American Magazines, 1850–1865, 9–11, 35–38, 41–42, 356–63; Noel, *Villains Galore*, 4–5, 33, 40–41, 44, 52, 66–71, 120; Reynolds, *Fiction Factory*, 9–36, passim; Madeleine B. Stern, *Publishers for Mass Entertainment in Nineteenth Century America* (Boston, 1980), 140, 142; Zboray, "Technology and the Character of Community Life," 202.

15. See Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*; Baym, *Woman's Fiction*, 110–26, 250–55; Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment & Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame* (New York, 1999), 160–80; Dobson, "Introduction,"

But not all of the female writers who surged onto the pages of American literary papers during the early 1850s were mature women such as Southworth, Fern, and Stowe. Inspired by the extraordinarily success of such older exemplars, many dozens, if not hundreds, of teenage girls and unmarried women in their early twenties also rushed to submit poems, sketches, and stories to papers in Boston and elsewhere. Louisa May Alcott (b. 1832), for example, was part of a cohort who launched their careers at about the same time as Fanny Fern but at much younger ages. Alcott published her first story in the *Olive Branch* in May 1852, more than six months before her twentieth birthday, and spent much of the next decade and a half of her literary career writing thrillers and other types of tales and poems for Boston weeklies. Others were even more precocious than the future author of *Little Women*. Mary Gibson (b. 1835), for example, began her career as “Winnie Woodfern” at a younger age than Alcott—and with dramatically greater initial success. In 1852, the same year in which Alcott managed to publish her first two tales in Boston story papers, seventeen-year-old Gibson placed twenty or more pieces of poetry or prose in at least five different Boston weeklies (including both of Alcott’s venues). The following year, Gibson published at least seventy poems, sketches, and stories in such periodicals, while Alcott evidently published nothing at all.¹⁶

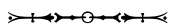
in Southworth, *Hidden Hand*, xiv–xxvi; Regis Louise Boyle, *Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth, Novelist* (Washington, DC, 1939); Homestead, *American Women Authors*, 150–91; Christopher Looby, “Southworth and Seriality: *The Hidden Hand* in the *New York Ledger*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 59 (Sept. 2004), 179–211; Joyce W. Warren, “Uncommon Discourse: Fanny Fern and the *New York Ledger*,” in *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Kenneth M. Price and Susan Belasco Smith (Charlottesville, VA, 1995), 51–68; Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stow: A Life* (New York, 1994), 133–42, 202–23, 288–322, and passim; S. B. Smith, “Serialization and the Nature of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” in *Periodical Literature*, ed. Price and Smith, 69–89; on Stowe’s claim that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had been written by God, see Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*, 293.

16. On Alcott’s earliest publications, see Stern, *From Blood & Thunder*, 46–48, 130–31, 139; Alcott, *Journals*, 64–68. In 1852, Gibson published in the *Olive Branch*, *Waverley Magazine*, *Dodge’s Literary Museum*, the *True Flag*, the *Yankee Blade*, and the *Yankee Privateer*. On Gibson (or Woodfern), see Albert Johannsen, *House of Beadle and Adams and Its Dime and Nickel Novels: The Story of a Vanished Literature* (3 vols; Norman, OK, 1950–1962), 35–36, 3: 23–24; Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Literary Dollars and Social Sense: A People’s*

Gibson's prodigious early success was by no means unique. Two other leading contributors to the *True Flag* and the *American Union* during the early 1850s were Louise E. Cutter (b. 1835) of Medford, Massachusetts, and Ellen Louise Chandler (later Moulton; b. 1835), of Pomfret, Connecticut, both several months younger than Woodfern. Virginia F. Townsend (b. 1836), a teenage friend of Chandler's from Connecticut, also began publishing extensively in papers such as the *True Flag* not long thereafter, as did Clara Augusta Jones (later Trask; b. 1835 or 1839) of Farmington, New Hampshire. All of those teenage story-paper writers were part of the same age-cohort as several of the women identified by Boyd and Sofer as forging an ambitious new artistic model of female authorship during the 1860s and 1870s. As story-paper writers during the early to mid 1850s, however, Alcott, Gibson, Cutter, Chandler, Townsend, and Jones could not possibly have been inspired by the high-cultural standards of the yet-to-be-founded *Atlantic Monthly*.¹⁷

History of the Mass Market Book (New York, 2005), 5, 232n10. Publication totals for Gibson are based on scans of surviving copies of Boston story papers; because complete "runs" do not survive for some of the papers, those totals probably understate Woodfern's productivity.

17. On Chandler's early career, see Lilian Whiting, *Louise Chandler Moulton, Poet and Friend* (Boston, 1910), 18–33; Louise M. Young, "Louise Chandler Moulton," in *Notable American Women, 1607–1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, ed. Edward T. James et al. (3 vols.; Cambridge, MA, 1971), 2: 595; *True Flag*, Dec. 13, 1851, 4; Dec. 20, 1851, 4; Oct. 14, 1854, 1–2; *American Union*, May 28, 1853, 1; Sept. 17, 1853, 1. On Cutter, who died of consumption in 1854 at the age of nineteen, see "Obituary," *True Flag*, Aug. 12, 1854, 3; *True Flag*, Apr. 10, 1852, 4; Apr. 24, 1852, 4; Aug. 7, 1852, 1; Mar. 5, 1853, 1–2; *American Union*, Nov. 5, 1853, 1. On Townsend, see Bertha Monica Stearns, "Townsend, Virginia Frances," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, ed. Dumas Malone (20 vols., New York, 1928–37; cited hereafter as *DAB*), 18: 621; *True Flag*, May 13, 1854, 4; July 22, 1854, 4; July 29, 1854, 4; Oct. 28, 1854, 4; Feb. 10, 1855, 1–2. On Trask (a.k.a. "Clara Augusta"), see Johannsen, *House of Beadle and Adams*, 2: 273–74; *True Flag*, Feb. 10, 1855, 4; Mar. 17, 1855, 2; May 12, 1855, 2. While Johannsen (following other sources) places her birthdate in 1839, census records from 1850 and 1860 suggest that she was born in 1835. See U. S. Federal Census, 1850, Farmington, Strafford Co., New Hampshire, Roll M432-440, 323, image 269 (<http://www.ancestry.com>); U. S. Federal Census, 1860, Farmington, Strafford Co., New Hampshire, Roll M653-680, 431, image 432 (<http://www.ancestry.com>). On several other woman novelists who also launched careers around midcentury while still in their teens; see Helen Waite Papashvily, *All the Happy Endings: A*



Like many orphaned heroines in nineteenth-century domestic novels, Mary F. W. Gibson could barely remember her own parents. She was probably born in Vermont in January 1835, but her mother died while she was still a toddler, leaving her and her three older sisters to be raised by their father, Dr. Willard Gibson. One of the first graduates of a small medical school in Woodstock, Dr. Gibson may have been practicing medicine in the nearby town of Windsor at the time of Mary's birth. During the fall of 1838, however, Mary's father fell ill and died. Having lost both parents, all four Gibson girls were initially placed under the guardianship of Joseph Churchill, a Woodstock house painter, but two were soon sent elsewhere. In 1842, seven-year-old Mary suffered yet another blow when her oldest sister, Hannah, died of consumption at the age of fifteen.¹⁸

In recalling her early life, Mary described herself as a "romp" (or tomboy), a pattern of girlhood that was just beginning to gain visibility in the United States during the mid nineteenth century. Hers had been a "queer" but "happy" childhood, she explained, in which her restless "ambition" grew with her "strength." In an account suggestive of later scenes in Alcott's *Little Women*, Gibson recalled playing heroes and vil-

Study of the Domestic Novel in America (New York, 1956), 61-62, 98-99, 146, 154, 186-87.

18. See Vermont Vital Records to 1870, Reel 104, New England Historic and Genealogical Society; but cf. Edmund Wheeler, *The History of Newport, New Hampshire, from 1766 to 1878* (Concord, NH, 1879), 137 (which claims that "most" of the Gibson children were born in Newport). See Green Mountain Mary, "The Shadow of My Mother," *Olive Branch*, July 2, 1853, 4; Mary W. Stanley Gibson, "The Child's Love," *New York Ledger*, June 21, 1856, 3; Marguerite Blount, "Shadows," *Reynolds's Miscellany*, Apr. 1858, 218; *Vermont Mercury*, Nov. 2, 1838, 3; Windsor County, Vermont, Windsor District, Probate Records, Guardian Records, Vol. 4, 319-20 (Probate Court, N. Springfield, Vermont). On Joseph Churchill, see Gardner Asaph Churchill and Nathaniel Wiley Churchill, comps., *The Churchill Family in America* (n.p., 1904), 97-98; Henry Swan Dana, *History of Woodstock, Vermont* (Boston, 1889), 44-45, 162, 600; Winnie Woodfern, "A Remembered Picture," *True Flag*, July 1, 1854, 2. On Hannah Gibson, see Woodstock, Vermont, Cemetery Records, 1744-1869, 262; Green Mountain Mary, "The Shadow of My Sister," *Olive Branch*, July 2, 1853, 4; Gibson, "Child's Love," 3.

lains in juvenile theatricals staged in her adopted family's garrett. In the role of the great Scottish warrior-patriot Sir William Wallace, for example, Mary would charge against her foes—"broadsword in hand"—and chase them "ingloriously down the stairs." She also described her secret hideout in a woodshed attic, where she clambered recklessly over boxes and across narrow planks, ate stolen apples, read ghost stories and old romances such as *Don Quixote*, stuck a carving knife in her belt, brandished a Revolutionary-era musket, and mounted an old saddle fixed to a barrel on which she gallantly rode to vanquish imaginary enemies.¹⁹

In 1850 or 1851, at about the age of sixteen, Mary Gibson left Woodstock to attend Thetford Academy, a coeducational boarding school in east-central Vermont. Unlike her oldest sister, Hannah, who had reportedly excelled academically at New Hampshire's Kimball Union Academy a decade earlier, Mary seems to have focused mainly on Thetford's extra-curricular activities. In nostalgic story-paper sketches, she described forging intense friendships with other schoolgirls; obsessing over male students; singing and playing guitars in private rooms; writing poetry; and devouring romantic fiction, including George Sand's daring novel, *Consuelo*. She also confessed that she and her friends smoked in their rooms ("almost under the preceptor's nose"), purloined food from boardinghouse larders for midnight snacks, and recklessly violated other school rules.²⁰

19. Green Mountain Mary, "Shadow of My Mother"; Woodfern, "Fame Vs. Love. A Woman's Choice," *Olive Branch*, June 17, 1854, 4; Gibson, "The Old Chamber," *New York Ledger*, July 25, 1857, 7; Gibson, "Some Memories," *New York Ledger*, June 29, 1861, 3. On tomboys, see Michelle Ann Abate, *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (Philadelphia, 2008), 1–49; Elizabeth Segal, "The Gypsy Breynton Series: Setting the Pattern for American Tomboy Heroines," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 14 (Summer 1989), 67–71; Anne Scott MacLeod, "The Caddie Woodlawn Syndrome: American Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century," in *A Century of Childhood, 1820–1920*, ed. Mary Lynn Stevens Heininger et al. (Rochester, NY, 1984), 97–119; Sharon O'Brien, "Tomboyism and Adolescent Conflict: Three Nineteenth-Century Case Studies" in *Woman's Being, Woman's Place: Female Identity and Vocation in American History*, ed. Mary Kelley (Boston, 1979), 351–72. On Alcott's amateur theatricals, later fictionalized in *Little Women*, see Stern, *From Blood & Thunder*, 13–31.

20. See Green Mountain Mary, "Shadow of My Sister"; *Catalogue of the Trustees, Instructors and Students of Kimball Union Academy, at Meriden Village, Plainfield, N. H., for the Year Ending April, 1841* (Windsor, VT, 1841), 18; *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Thetford Academy, at Thetford, Vt., for the Academi-*

Perhaps for financial reasons, Mary Gibson left Thetford after just one academic year and reportedly sought factory work in Lowell, Massachusetts. But by the summer of 1852, if not earlier, she moved to Boston, where she began writing for literary newspapers, mainly under the pen name “Winnie Woodfern”—a pseudonym undoubtedly inspired by the extraordinary success of Fanny Fern. As of July of that year, Woodfern was listed as one of the regular contributors to *Waverley Magazine*, the popular venue for aspiring amateurs, but before month’s end a startling development promised to alter the trajectory of Mary Gibson’s life. At the age of seventeen, she married fifty-seven-year-old Alonzo Lewis, a well-known engineer, landscape architect, historian, and poet from Lynn, Massachusetts. But the marriage evidently fell apart within a matter of months, by one account exposed as a “sham” when Lewis discovered that Gibson was already married to another man who had abandoned but not divorced her. Back in Vermont, local gossip simply reported that Gibson had “left her husband” and turned to “writing stories under the assumed name of Winnie Woodfern.” Whatever the cause of the breakup, Gibson’s marriage to a wealthy older man was over.²¹

Now that she presumably had to support herself, Mary Gibson no

cal Year 1851 (Concord, NH, 1851?), 16; Green Mountain Mary, “A Reminiscence of a Boarding School,” *Olive Branch*, May 21, 1853, 1, 4; Woodfern, “Thetford,” *Olive Branch*, Mar. 17, 1856, 4; Gibson, “Twenty Years After,” *New York Ledger*, Nov. 19, 1859, 3; Gibson, “Lucy’s Flittin’,” *New York Ledger*, May 18, 1861, 6; Gibson, “A New England Seminary,” *New York Ledger*, July 6, 1861, 2; Gibson, “Years Ago,” *New York Ledger*, Aug. 26, 1865, 2.

21. Charles Morris Cobb Journal, transcribed by Michael E. McKernan (1988; cited hereafter as Cobb Journal), Feb. 6, 1852; Nov. 6, 1854, Vermont Historical Society Library, Barre, Vermont (I am very grateful to Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray for providing me with key excerpts from the transcript of Cobb’s journal and to Paul A. Carnahan, Librarian of the Vermont Historical Society, for sending me the full text of that transcript and giving me permission to quote from it); “Contributors to the Magazine,” *Waverley Magazine*, July 3, 1852, 8; Mott, *History of American Magazines, 1850–1865*, 41–42; Noel, *Villains Galore*, 50; Massachusetts Marriage Records, 60:81 (Reel 6), 62:81 (Reel 7), Massachusetts State Archives; *Bay State* (Lynn, MA), Aug. 5, 1852, 3; *Lynn News*, Aug. 6, 1852, 3; Alonzo Lewis and James R. Newhall, *History of Lynn, Essex County, Mass.* (Boston, 1865), 544–66; David N. Johnson, *Sketches of Lynn* (Lynn, MA, 1880), 439–54.

longer enjoyed the luxury of publishing in vanity papers such as *Waverley*. During the summer and fall of 1852, even before the breakup of her marriage, Gibson had already begun placing poems and stories in several other Boston weeklies, including the *True Flag*—at the time, one of the city's newest and most successful story papers. As its editors had explained in launching their venture the previous November, the *True Flag* tried to distinguish itself in two ways from other literary newspapers: First, their paper would print no advertisements, allowing them to devote more space to literary content; and, second, they would print no serials or “continued” stories (dragged out in successive installments over many weeks or even months)—ensuring that each issue would be complete in itself. During its very first month of publication, the fledgling paper also had the immense good fortune of procuring the services of literary newcomer Fanny Fern, whose alternately sentimental and satirical sketches quickly established her as one of America's most popular story-paper authors.²²

Every issue of the *True Flag* consisted of four pages, each containing seven columns of text. The front page was dominated by the issue's lead story, which generally occupied at least five columns on the first page, and sometimes spilled over to fill one or more columns on the second. Most issues also included one or two shorter stories, usually filling from two to four columns; a few brief essays or sketches, such as those produced by Fanny Fern, each typically less (often much less) than one column in length; and several brief poems, most of which were stacked together in the far left-hand column of the fourth page. In contrast to many earlier weeklies of the 1830s and 1840s that relied on recycled material taken either from other American papers or from foreign sources, most of the literary pieces in the *True Flag* were original compositions by American authors. In addition to stories, sketches, and poems, the editors filled out each issue with a variety of miscellaneous matter, including editorials, humorous anecdotes, and snippets of local, national, and international news, as well as theatrical, musical, and book notices,

22. *True Flag*, Nov. 1, 1851, 3; Oct. 18, 1856, 3; Noel, *Villains Galore*, 45, 49–50, 224–25; Warren, *Fanny Fern*, 90–119. For early pieces by Woodfern, see *True Flag*, July 31, 1852, 4; Aug. 7, 1852, 4; Sept. 11, 1852, 1–2. Several other Boston story papers also adopted no-serials and no-advertisements policies; see *Waverley*, Aug. 21, 1852, 120; Aug. 28, 1852, 141; *American Union*, Sept. 18, 1852, 2; Oct. 2, 1852; Noel, *Villains Galore*, 31, 50.

and previews of future issues. Most of those materials regularly appeared on the third page.²³

Unlike the tight-fisted proprietor of *Waverley*, the editors of the *True Flag* (and of other Boston story papers) generally paid for original literary pieces, compensating their contributors either by the piece or by the column, with rates varying considerably depending on the venue, the genre, and the author's reputation. In writing short sketches for the *True Flag* and the *Olive Branch* during the early 1850s, Fanny Fern was reportedly paid two dollars per column. That seems to have been the best standard rate then offered by Boston story-paper publishers. According to the reminiscences of John Townsend Trowbridge, an aspiring young fiction writer and editor in Boston during the late 1840s and early 1850s, only the "most flourishing" story-paper publishers paid as much as "two dollars a column," while some paid "only half" that rate, and still others (such as *Waverley*) "paid very little, or nothing at all, relying for contributions upon amateurs." At a dollar or two per column, story-paper writing may not have yielded married men enough income to support a family in middle-class comfort, but it could be more lucrative than most other occupations available to unpropertied women. By the end of the 1850s, for example, full-time wages for women in most branches of manufacturing ranged between \$3.00 and \$4.50 per week, and such work tended to pay better than the more traditional female options of sewing or household service. By comparison, a story-paper writer might earn two dollars from a successful Boston weekly for a one-column sketch (about a thousand words), four to six dollars for a multicolumn tale, and ten to fifteen dollars or more for a single lead story. At a time when room and board for women in most American cities cost between \$1.50 and \$3.00 per week, a young single woman such as Mary Gibson (who, unlike Fern and Southworth, had no dependents to feed) could probably support herself comfortably by publishing a steady stream of pieces in such well-paying venues as the *True Flag*—especially if she occasionally managed to place lead stories.²⁴

23. For the emphasis on American authors, see *True Flag*, Oct. 16, 1852, 3.

24. *True Flag*, Apr. 23, 1853, 3; Warren, *Fanny Fern*, 101; Trowbridge, *My Own Story*, 135–36; Leona Rostenberg, "Some Anonymous and Pseudonymous Thrillers of Louisa M. Alcott," in Stern, *From Blood & Thunder*, 74–80. On remuneration for story-paper poetry, see Noel, *Villains Galore*, 62, 219–21; Stern, *From Blood & Thunder*, 77, 80. For women's manufacturing wage rates and boarding costs, see Virginia Penny, *The Employments of Women: A Cyclopaedia of*

The proprietors of the *True Flag* may have had their own urgent reason for cultivating Winnie Woodfern as one of their premier contributors. In September 1852, a periodical publisher in New York City had signed their star author, Fanny Fern, to a contract at double the rate offered by the Boston papers. Although the *True Flag* temporarily retained Fern's services by boosting her pay, it seemed likely that she soon would be lured away. The last of her original columns for the *True Flag* appeared in April 1853, whereupon she moved from Boston to New York City and eventually agreed to a sensationally lucrative deal with Bonner's *New York Ledger*. Having lost Fern, the *True Flag*'s publishers began grooming Winnie Woodfern as her successor. Between May 1853 and March 1854, Gibson published more than twenty short sketches in the *True Flag* under her Fern-like pen name, many of them written in Fern's satirical style, and most appearing near Fern's accustomed site on the second page.²⁵

During the same period, Gibson also published regularly in several other Boston weeklies, including the *Olive Branch* and the *American Union*. The *Olive Branch* was not an entirely typical story paper but rather a "semi-religious" Methodist weekly. It had been the other Boston weekly to feature original sketches by Fanny Fern, and its editor may have also used Gibson to fill the gap left by Fern's departure. As appropriate to a quasi-religious venue, many of the sketches that Gibson placed there had a somewhat contemplative and spiritual cast. By contrast, the evolving editorial preferences of the *American Union*, a story paper with a format nearly identical to that of the *True Flag*, pushed Gibson's output in a very different direction. In May 1854, the *American Union*'s proprietor sold the paper to his editor and office manager; thereafter, the new owners gradually altered their paper's content, moving away from a heavy reliance on conventional domestic fiction to a more eclectic mix of genres, including comical tales, adventure stories, and

Woman's Work (Boston, 1863), xiii, 488–90, and passim. Gibson's direct payments from editors may have been supplemented by other forms of patronage; see Wheeler, *History of Newport*, 137.

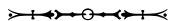
25. Warren, *Fanny Fern*, 90–159; Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*, ed. Joyce W. Warren (New Brunswick, NJ, 1986), xiv–xix; Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*, 155–58; Baker, *Sentiment & Celebrity*, 164, 218n16. For examples of Woodfern's Fern-like sketches, see *True Flag*, May 14, 1853, 2; June 18, 1853, 2; Aug. 20, 1853, 2; Aug. 27, 1853, 2.

thrillers. By “varying the style of story every week,” the new proprietors explained, they hoped to avoid “the monotony of a succession of Domestic Stories and Sketches.” Gibson evidently leaped at the opportunity provided by that editorial shift; between June and December of 1854, Winnie Woodfern published a variety of stories in the *American Union*, including several violent or supernatural thrillers and a number of humorous Yankee dialect tales. Significantly, many of those pieces appeared as first-page leads, thus raising Mary Gibson’s income and Winnie Woodfern’s visibility as an emerging story-paper star. Perhaps in recognition of Woodfern’s rising reputation, or out of fear of the growing competition for Gibson’s services, the editors of the *True Flag* also increasingly allowed her to move beyond her original role as a substitute for Fanny Fern: They let her publish in a wider range of genres and gave her greater access to their first page. Among Woodfern’s last lead stories in the *True Flag* were three supernatural thrillers, involving ghosts, murders, and revenge in rural New Hampshire.²⁶

Though her sketches and stories continued to appear in the *True Flag* through mid May 1856, Mary Gibson had already left Boston for a grander literary stage. Following in the footsteps of Fanny Fern, she relocated to New York City near the end of 1855 and by January 1856 was a regular contributor to the weekly that was rapidly becoming America’s most popular and best-paying story paper: Robert Bonner’s *New York Ledger*. Unlike Fern, however, twenty-one-year-old Mary Gibson did not retain the literary persona (as Winnie Woodfern) that she had crafted as a teenager in Boston. Whereas Sara Payson Willis Parton continued to publish as Fanny Fern for the rest of her career, Gibson’s sketches and stories in the *Ledger* appeared under a close variant of her birth name: As

26. See *Olive Branch*, May 21, 1853, 1, 4; May 28, 1853, 4; June 4, 1853, 4; June 18, 1853, 4; June 25, 1853, 4; July 2, 1853, 4; July 23, 1853, 2; July 30, 1853, 4 (all under the pseudonym of “Green Mountain Mary”); Trowbridge, *My Own Story*, 136; *American Union*, June 3, 1854, 1–2; Aug. 26, 1854, 1–2; Oct. 18, 1854, 1; Dec. 30, 1854, 1–2; Mar. 31, 1855, 4; June 30, 1855, 1; for the changes in ownership and editorial policy, see *American Union*, May 20, 1854, 3; May 27, 1854, 3; Jan. 20, 1855, 3 (quoted); Dec. 22, 1855, 3. It is impossible to know the exact number of stories that Gibson placed in the *American Union* because no complete run of that paper survives in institutional hands. For her supernatural thrillers, see *True Flag*, May 19, 1855, 1; Feb. 9, 1856, 1; May 17, 1856, 1.

Mary W. Stanley Gibson, she joined the honor roll of Bonner's regular contributors in the company of several of America's most famous and successful woman authors.²⁷



The half dozen tales of teenage ambition that Mary Gibson published as Winnie Woodfern between 1853 and 1856 illustrate the emergence of striking new conceptions of women's authorship and artistry in antebellum America. In their varied length, format, and positioning on the pages of the *True Flag*, they also trace her own development as one of Boston's most popular and successful young story-paper writers. The first of the tales appeared in October 1853, while the *True Flag* was still using Woodfern mainly as a replacement for the paper's departed star, Fanny Fern; hence, it is a one-column sketch (not far from Fern's typical format), and it appears on the issue's second page (Fern's regular location). The next two tales, published in late 1853 and early 1854, are more than twice as long as the earlier sketch, but each is placed on the paper's back page and designated "A Story for the Ladies"—suggesting that the editors may still have viewed Woodfern as a niche writer. By contrast, Woodfern's last three tales, published in 1855 and 1856, are first-page, lead stories, confirming her status as an emerging literary star of broad appeal.²⁸

Despite those variations, the narrative structure of all six tales loosely conformed to the standard overplot of mid-nineteenth-century domestic fiction: A young woman, often an orphan, struggles, overcomes adversity, and finally achieves social recognition and personal fulfillment through her own efforts. Into that conventional formula, however,

27. See *New York Ledger*, Jan. 12, 1856, 8; Jan. 19, 1856, 6; Jan. 26, 1856, 8; Feb. 2, 1856, 8; "Special Contributors," Sept. 13, 1856, 4; "Regular Contributors," Aug. 15, 1857, 4.

28. Winnie Woodfern, "Will Triumphant," *True Flag*, Oct. 1, 1853, 2; Winnie Woodfern, "Three Magical Words. A Tale of the Inner Life," *True Flag*, Dec. 3, 1853, 4; Winnie Woodfern, "Hearts of Iron, Hearts of Gold, and Hearts of Steel. A Story I Heard the Other Day," *True Flag*, Feb. 4, 1854, 4; Winifred Woodfern, "The Good Angel of Georgian Eden's Life," *True Flag*, Nov. 3, 1855, 1; Winifred Woodfern, "Hero Strong: or Three Ways of Living Woman's Life," *True Flag*, Aug. 18, 1855, 1; Winifred Woodfern, "The Star Window: or The Old Man's Darling," *True Flag*, Mar. 15, 1856, 1.

Woodfern inserts a series of unconventional heroines who display strikingly masculine attributes and seek worldly empowerment through artistic or literary expression. Several of her stories focus particularly on a protagonist's struggle between the pull of individual creative expression (with its promise of public success) and the seemingly incompatible goal of romantic fulfillment through marriage. In that regard, her tales can be understood as contributions to the women's *Künstlerroman* tradition pioneered by de Staël's *Corrine* (1807), repopularized around midcentury by such Romantic icons as Sand and Browning, and perpetuated during the 1860s and thereafter by such American authors as Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Stoddard, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Constance Fenimore Woolson. According to Ann Boyd, those later American contributors to the *Künstlerroman* tradition were pessimistic realists who concluded that female "writers and artists" would inevitably be "forced to choose between their desire for expression and self-realization as artists and their desire for heterosexual love." Although Woodfern's tales of female ambition offer various resolutions to the same dilemma, several suggest a more optimistic outlook—anticipating the happy union of art and love described by Browning in *Aurora Leigh* (1856), a famous *Künstlerroman* published not long after the last of Woodfern's stories. Ironically, the very optimism of a few of Woodfern's pieces may have allowed them to be read in sharply divergent ways: as radical accounts of gender role-reversal and female empowerment, or as conventional domestic tales culminating in a heroine's marriage to a worthy man.²⁹

In "Will Triumphant" (October 1, 1853), the first and simplest of the tales, a seventeen-year-old orphan has arrived in the city "entirely alone," determined to support herself as an artist. She refuses a landlord's kind offer to take her into his family, preferring to live alone so that she can devote every spare moment to her art. Over the following weeks she contends with many unspecified "obstacles," toiling on "without friends or love." With a spirit as indomitable as Napoleon's, she decides to submit a painting of the French emperor's coronation to an upcoming art competition. When the diminutive girl wins the contest, the audience initially murmurs in disbelief; but as she receives the floral wreath and

29. On the standard overplot, see Baym, *Woman's Fiction*, 11–13, 22, 35–41. On the *Künstlerroman* tradition, see Boyd, *Writing for Immortality*, 80–125 (quoted at 87); Sofer, *Making the "America of Art,"* 54–55.

resets it on her head, they see on her face a “flush of gratified power” and “intensity of purpose” like that of her “hero-king” and respond with a “perfect storm of applause.” Such applause, Woodfern concludes, “shall surely come to genius and determination, for ‘Will is Fate!’”³⁰

Having introduced her basic theme in a short sketch, Woodfern added complexity in a pair of longer, three-part stories. “The Three Magical Words” (December 3, 1853) tells the tale of an anxious and insecure orphan who successively achieves power, freedom, and love. In Part I, the ungainly girl is being raised by a “cold, stern” guardian whose beautiful daughters often taunt her. She finally responds by knocking one of the girls senseless with a single “powerful blow,” after which she grabs a rusty old sword and launches into a joyful “war-dance.” Spying a portrait of Napoleon on the wall, she is convinced that she has discovered the meaning of power: “Power! Power! it is mine, and I can feel it!” In Part II, the heroine travels across Europe, where she meets a young American who instantly expresses his love for her, while espousing a radically unconventional philosophy. “We *exist* in the world and among the world’s customs,” he explains, “but we never *live* till we shake off our bondage and stand forth free and responsible human beings.” Hence, he urges her to engage in a self-reliant fight for “Freedom.” In Part III, the protagonist moves into a small attic in New York City, where she pursues both her aspirations as an artist and her friend’s daring social philosophy. After her own efforts have made her “strong, and healthful, and happy,” she reunites with the young man. “Power and Freedom had long been mine, and now a divine Love was given to fill my life with beauty,” she concludes. “For these three things must all men have—without them, life is poor and weak and incomplete:—POWER, FREEDOM, LOVE!”³¹

Woodfern’s next three-part story, “Hearts of Iron, Hearts of Gold, and Hearts of Steel” (February 4, 1854), contrasts the marriages of two very different women to the same despicable cad. Part I recounts the wedding of Eustace Ellingwood, a dissolute young Englishman, to Aileen Grant, a sixteen-year-old innocent. Part II describes the couple’s unhappy life together. While Eustace neglects his spouse and pursues other lovers, Aileen plays the role of domestic saint and victim: As a wronged wife, she weeps, sacrifices for those in need, lavishes love upon her chil-

30. Woodfern, “Will Triumphant.”

31. Woodfern, “Three Magical Words.”

dren, and finally dies of consumption. Part III introduces the story's real heroine: Hilda Siler, a wild and passionate fifteen-year-old orphan from an American "mountain home." Reared "in the absence of feminine society or employment," she has all the courage and energy of a man; she can "load and fire a musket with the fearlessness and dexterity of a veteran soldier, or rein and guide four fiery horses." After Hilda's guardian dies, she travels to a city, where she marries the young widower, Eustace Ellingwood, and gives birth to a daughter (who later dies). But with the soul of a "prophet," the "sensitive nature of a poet," and the "wild, fearless heart" of a mountain woman, Hilda soon rebels and falls in love with another man. When she finally abandons her unworthy husband, however, Hilda flees not to a paramour but to the "high and useful life" of a poet.³²

"Hero Strong: or Three Ways of Living Woman's Life" (August 18, 1855) was the first of Woodfern's tales of female ambition to appear as a lead story. Following the boardinghouse scene that opens this article, Hero Strong and the Leland sisters leave school to pursue their chosen paths. Three years later, Jennie, still gay, heartless, and beautiful, has tormented many lovers; her sister Julie has settled into domestic life as a wife and mother; and Hero has struggled to achieve success as an author. But she has also fallen in love with Clinton Howell, an attractive young man who is oblivious to her true feelings; when they part, she trembles "like a leaf" and cries bitterly. After five more years, the story's heroine has become "the successful and world-renowned authoress—the wealthy, beautiful, and brilliant Hero Strong!" When Howell, having fallen "madly" in love after reading one of her books, nervously proposes marriage, Strong calmly accepts. "In the love of a true and noble heart," the story concludes, "the world-weary woman found the happiness that fame and riches could never bring!"³³

"The Good Angel of Georgian Eden's Life" (November 3, 1855), another lead story, opens with nineteen-year-old Georgian Eden torn between her engagement to an effeminate invalid named Philip Sidney and her overriding ambition. "Oh, Helen! I long to leave my home . . . that I may become an artist," she explains to her cousin, Helen Ormsby.

32. Woodfern, "Hearts of Iron." In Part III, the scene shifts from England to the United States.

33. Woodfern, "Hero Strong."

"I cannot marry Philip now, and settle down quietly as his wife. The world must hear of me first—I must have fame and wealth to satisfy my wildest dreams, and then I will return to make his life happy." And so "the ardent and ambitious girl" travels to Italy, where she becomes a renowned artist. Feeling homesick despite her success, Georgian receives a letter from Helen Ormsby, informing her that she has married Philip Sidney. "You loved him," Helen admits defensively, "but you also loved Art and Fame and a thousand other things." Yet Ormsby also confesses that Philip still loves Georgian passionately. In response to this news, Eden marries Gordon Etheridge, a British artist who adores her. Meanwhile, Philip's dying request to Helen is that she should thenceforth become "the good angel" of Georgian's life, showing her the way to God. "A meek and sincere Christian," Helen honors her husband's dying request, molding Georgian Eden into "a better woman, a better wife, a better artist." When Georgian falls ill, returns home, and dies, she is buried beside her first love, Philip Sidney.³⁴

Finally, "The Star Window: or The Old Man's Darling" (March 15, 1856), one of Woodfern's last first-page stories in the *True Flag*, features an incestuous love triangle involving a teenage orphan named Clyda Stanton; her guardian, Aleck Hamilton; and Aleck's nephew, Clyde Hamilton. They are "all related, in a distant way," and Aleck raises the two children "together like brother and sister." The youngsters are alike in physical appearance but opposite in character: Whereas Clyde is "gentle and yielding in disposition," Clyda is "singularly determined and fiery." Though Aleck's observation that "Clyda should have been Clyde" troubles the girl, she is unable to subdue her "headstrong" impulses. After an abortive engagement to Clyde, Clyda travels to a "distant boarding-school," hoping to "see the world" and ascend "the mountain tops of Fame." Following another failed love affair, she struggles "alone" as "an active and daring swimmer" on the "ocean of life." Stanton's success as an author exceeds her wildest dreams: Thousands are "swayed and guided" by her "written words." Yet even as she basks in public "adulation," she senses that the whirl of fame is "false and hollow." Discovering that Aleck has loved her all along, she hurries home to marry her former guardian.³⁵

34. Woodfern, "Good Angel."

35. Woodfern, "Star Window."

Among the most striking attributes of the young protagonists in Woodfern's stories are their brash ambitions for personal power, individual autonomy, public recognition, and worldly success. The unnamed protagonist in "Will Triumphant" is relentlessly single-minded in her pursuit of artistic achievement and claims victory with a "flush of gratified power." Hero Strong is determined to achieve "fame," "riches," and "glory" through her own efforts as a writer; she intends to "live a striving life" that will "gratify" both her "ambition" and her "taste for the beautiful." Likewise, Georgian Eden is determined to become "an artist" and achieve enough "fame and wealth" to satisfy her "wildest dreams." The early aspirations of the other three protagonists are less explicitly focused on art or authorship, but they are equally determined to achieve personal power and autonomy. Thus, the heroine of "The Three Magical Words" is "intoxicated" by her first taste of "Power!" and subsequently pursues "beauty" and "freedom" in her European wanderings; Hilda Siler has a "free, impetuous spirit," yearns for "liberty," and prays daily to "the goddess of freedom"; Clyda Stanton is "daring" and "headstrong," pines for "a larger and freer life," and seeks to climb "the mountain tops of Fame."³⁶

In their pursuit of individual autonomy and achievement, all of those protagonists wilfully defy the gender norms and social conventions of nineteenth-century domesticity. The orphan in "Will Triumphant" rebuffs the landlord's kind offer to adopt her into his family, explaining that she prefers to live alone to devote herself entirely to her art. The heroine of "The Three Magical Words" rejects the "bitter conservatism" of her upbringing, breaks "away from the control of conventionality," and embraces the radical view that one cannot truly "*live*" until one defies "the world's customs." Hilda Siler indulges in an illicit love affair, abandons her husband, sheds "no tear" over her daughter's coffin, and becomes a poet—a "useful" role that the story's narrator invidiously contrasts to the prison-like domestic norm. "Hers is not the tame existence of some women, who have no idea that is not bounded by four walls," Woodfern explains. "Out in the glad free sunshine she stands—the blows she strikes upon the present age, tell of an indomitable courage, and a

36. Woodfern, "Will Triumphant"; Woodfern, "Hero Strong"; Woodfern, "Good Angel"; Woodfern, "Three Magical Words"; Woodfern, "Hearts of Iron"; Woodfern, "Star Window."

strong purpose.” Lastly, Hero Strong, Georgian Eden, and Clyda Stanton all initially reject the conventional domestic destiny of marriage, preferring to pursue expansive personal ambitions that send them out into the world as free and autonomous actors.³⁷

A third trait shared by Woodfern’s teenage protagonists is the masculine cast of their characters. The very names of several point in that direction. Hilda Siler’s first name probably alludes to the biblical character Hulda, one of the few women in scripture to assume the role of prophet. Hero Strong’s first name ordinarily denotes a male protagonist, while Georgian and Clyda are ambiguous variants of popular men’s names. The masculinity of Woodfern’s protagonists extends beyond names to attributes and behaviors. She explicitly equates the intense determination of the teenage protagonist in “Will Triumphant” to that of Napoleon. The heroine of “The Three Magical Words” is also inspired by Napoleon; after physically assaulting a girl, she waves an old sword in a triumphant war dance. Hilda Siler is “brave, and stern, and fearless” and displays “the fearlessness and dexterity of a veteran soldier.” Hero Strong parts her hair like a boy, smokes small cigars, wears a heavy signet ring (an emblem of worldly authority), sings in a deeper voice than her girlfriends, and has muscles as “strong as iron.” Like Hero Strong, Georgian Eden is determined to gain “fame and wealth” through her own exertions—a style of brash, worldly ambition still typically coded as masculine during the nineteenth century. And Clyda Stanton has a disposition so “determined and fiery”—that is, so manly—that her guardian wistfully observes that “Clyda should have been Clyde.”³⁸

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid. On Hulda, the biblical prophet, see Sarah Josepha Hale, *Woman’s Record; or, Sketches of all Distinguished Women, from “The Beginning” Till A. D. 1850* (New York, 1853), 42–43. Hilda Siler’s first name may also conceivably allude to the seventh-century abbess and princess Saint Hilda (“Saint Hilda,” *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, ed. Clarke F. Ansley, New York, 1935, 828). According to Martha Vicinus, “Gender inversion [women’s assumption of masculine traits] remained the chief signifier of same-sex desire” throughout the period from 1778 through 1929 (Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928*, Chicago, 2004, 230 and passim). This may be one of the many respects in which Gibson’s fiction has autobiographical implications; more overtly homoerotic themes are evident in a number of Gibson’s other early story-paper writings (not discussed in this article), and, much later in life, she lived with a woman in what may have been a “Boston marriage” (see text and note 69 below).

The masculine characteristics of Woodfern's teenage heroines are further accentuated by their juxtaposition to two other character types: conventionally domestic women and feminized men. "Hearts of Iron, Hearts of Gold, and Hearts of Steel" contrasts the very different fates of Aileen Grant and Hilda Siler in their successive marriages to the same unworthy man. Perhaps implying that traditional domesticity has become anachronistic, Woodfern places Grant's part of the story in Old England and in "the olden time, when Bloomerism, Women's rights, and female lecturers were not." In marrying Ellingwood, "innocent Aileen" is, in effect, "thrown as a victim beneath the wheels of the Juggernaut." Betrayed by her husband, the "gentle and faithful wife" suffers, weeps, and finally dies of consumption. By contrast, the free-spirited American mountain woman, Hilda Siler, is herself a juggernaut: Realizing that her marriage is a mistake, she abandons Ellingwood, plunges into an illicit love affair, and finally assumes the "high and useful life" of a poet. Despite Woodfern's praise for Aileen's womanly virtues, it is clear that her real heroine is the wild, fearless, and passionate Hilda. A similar pattern plays out in Woodfern's juxtaposition of two cousins in "The Good Angel of Georgian Eden's Life." Strictly speaking, the meek and conventionally domestic Helen Ormsby *should* be the story's heroine; after all, she is the "Good Angel" of the title and it is she who eventually marries Philip Sidney, the man whom they both love. Yet there is no doubt that Georgian Eden, the ambitious artist, is the plot's actual heroine: Her strong personality and unconventional life dominate the narrative; she wins Sidney's passionate love and holds it even after his marriage to Ormsby (a point that the bride ruefully concedes); and, in the end, it is Eden who is buried alongside Sidney, leaving Helen to stand passive vigil at their graves.³⁹

In her last three tales, Woodfern also juxtaposes masculine heroines to feminized men. Clinton Howell, for example, is a beauty with "curls of sunny hair," "dreamy lips," and "long, silky, golden" eye lashes. (In what may be a typographical proto-Freudian slip or perhaps an intentional prank, the story's compositor, after itemizing those girlish attributes, momentarily transposes Howell from a "him" into a "hir.") Philip Sidney, Georgian Eden's fiancé, cuts an even more effeminate figure than Howell: The frail invalid has "small, but exquisitely chiselled" features,

39. Woodfern, "Hearts of Iron"; Woodfern, "Good Angel."

framed by “thick, soft curls,” and “long and curling eyelashes” of a “beautiful golden hue.” The story opens with him lounging on a couch, draped in a crimson shawl, with a diamond ring sparkling on one “white and slender hand,” while his other hand dangles “listlessly by his side.” Woodfern offers an equally blatant inversion of gender traits in contrasting the two cousins, Clyde Hamilton and Clyda Stanton. Though the pair look alike, Clyde is “gentle and yielding in disposition,” while Clyda is “determined and fiery”; his voice is a “fine, clear tenor,” while hers is a “deep and rich contralto”; he is content in “the quiet vallies of peace,” while she restlessly seeks “the mountain tops of Fame.” Judging by nineteenth-century gender norms, there is a complete mismatch between the pair’s sexual identities and character traits.⁴⁰

Woodfern is not entirely clear or consistent in explaining the manliness of her heroines or the feminine traits of her male characters. On the one hand, she seems to present the inversions embodied by Clyde and Clyda as quirks or accidents of nature; after all, they are raised in the same isolated household by the same guardian, making it unlikely that the pattern could be explained by differences in upbringing. Likewise, she repeatedly implies that the heroic traits of the protagonist in “Will Triumphant” are intrinsic to her character; thus, she refers to the presumably inborn attributes of her “heart,” “spirit,” “soul,” and “nature.” On the other hand, she suggests that Hilda Siler’s personality is, at least in part, the product of her upbringing and childhood environment. Hence, Woodfern notes that the mountain girl is “influenced by the wild life she led, and the wild home in which she dwelt” and also emphasizes that Hilda had been raised “in the absence of feminine society or employment.” Similarly, one might conceivably attribute Philip Sidney’s gentle passivity not to his inner soul but to his chronic illness. Whether Woodfern ascribes her characters’ gender inversions to nature or nurture, however, she never denies their right to act on their impulses and aspirations, even when they diverge from conventional gender roles. She no more condemns her heroines for their masculine traits than she blames Howell and Sidney for their effeminate curls or Hamilton for his placid disposition.⁴¹

40. Woodfern, “Hero Strong”; Woodfern, “Good Angel”; Woodfern, “Star Window.”

41. Woodfern, “Star Window”; Woodfern, “Will Triumphant”; Woodfern, “Hearts of Iron.”

In short, Woodfern's tales of teenage ambition repeatedly subvert the central premise of nineteenth-century domestic ideology: that men and women are fundamentally different by nature and, hence, must assume correspondingly different social roles. Paradoxically, however, she does this in a way that does not directly dispute her culture's deeply embedded gender-based dualism; her stories do *not* challenge the assumption that human beings tend to fall into two broad personality types, each defined by traits commonly associated with either the "male" or the "female" gender. Rather, she simply rejects the notion that those two bundles of attributes are invariably assigned to people according to their biological sex. In effect, Woodfern turns domesticity's own rigidly dualistic conception of human character (based on gender) against its correspondingly rigid program of bifurcated social roles (based on sex), celebrating women who embody and pursue various forms of "female masculinity." Whatever its flaws as a strategy for systematic social reform, the female appropriation of masculine traits and behaviors—both in life and in art—was one of the means by which a number of nineteenth-century woman authors and artists not only expressed themselves privately but also staked their claims to public recognition and respect.⁴²

Mary Gibson's fictional characters not only violate the ideological and behavioral constraints of domesticity but abandon its literary inhibitions as well. In contrast to the stances typically assumed by antebellum "literary domestics," the aspirations of Gibson's teenage heroines as authors or artists are not vitiated by expressions of modesty, unworthiness, or self-deprecation; they are not contingent on claims of dire familial need or economic necessity; and they are not strictly subordinated to the

42. On other woman authors or artists who assumed male garb, styles, or roles, see Boyd, *Writing for Immortality*, 27–28, 130, 136–37; Nicole Tonkovich, *Domesticity With a Difference: The Nonfiction of Catharine Beecher, Sarah J. Hale, Fanny Fern, and Margaret Fuller* (Jackson, MS, 1997), 77–79, 85–87; Warren, *Fanny Fern*, 182–86, 225–26; Renée M. Sentilles, *Performing Menken: Adah Isaacs Menken and the Birth of American Celebrity* (New York, 2003), 91–114, 166–99; Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 31–55, 98–108, 143–70, 215–27, and passim; Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1999), 80–204, passim; Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York, 1981), 216–17. For a brilliant study of "female masculinity," see Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC, 1998).

conventional didactic goals of moral or religious instruction. Nor do her protagonists view their creative activities as routine forms of manual or artisanal labor (the attitude sometimes attributed to story-paper authors). When Helen Ormsby equates Georgian Eden's future life work to the "constant toil" of a farmer unloading hay, the aspiring painter is indignant. "I shall labor—not mechanically, as he does—but with my whole soul," she exclaims, expressing what Nicholas Bromell has identified as a common antebellum dichotomy between mental and bodily labor. "Don't ever compare an artist's life to that of a farmer again, as you love me!" As indicated by that exasperated rejoinder, Woodfern's protagonists (and perhaps, through them, Mary Gibson herself) embrace the Romantic tradition's view of the artist or author as a whole-souled and autonomous creator.⁴³

Indeed, several definitive traits of the Romantic author—as self-willed creator or heroic genius; as social and sexual rebel; and as heterodox mystic or inspired prophet—are manifest in one or another of Woodfern's protagonists, especially in her first three tales. As signaled by the story's title, the heroine of "Will Triumphant" succeeds as an artist because she has a nature as "ardent" and "aspiring" as that of Europe's great "hero-king" Napoleon; as declared in the tale's last line, the orphan's victory in the art competition is a product of individual "genius and determination." (The girl's self-crowning with the wreath of victory not only replicates Napoleon's coronation but also resembles a similar scene in de Staël's *Corrine*—thereby linking Woodfern's sketch to the European *Künstlerroman* tradition.) Suitably punctuated by epigraphs from Shelley, "The Three Magical Words" accentuates social rebellion and sexual freedom. When the story's protagonist liberates herself with the help of a mysterious young guide, she feels her "strong, true soul, bursting away from the control of conventionality." Embracing her mentor's "outré notions" on "freedom" and "love," she escapes the "bondage" of "the world's customs" and approaches a Romantic ideal: Without losing "individuality," she and her guide "unite in one harmonious whole." Freed from convention and empowered by love, she is "well qualified to give expression to the God-fire within." In "Hearts of

43. Woodfern, "Good Angel"; Nicholas K. Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America* (Chicago, 1993), 7–11; on literary domestics, see Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*.

Iron, Hearts of Gold, and Hearts of Steel,” the heroine’s unorthodox mysticism takes an explicitly prophetic turn: “Hilda, like the prophet, opened the windows of her soul thrice a day, and knelt, with arms outstretched toward the east, invoking the goddess of freedom.” That divine communion not only authorizes the breaking of her marriage vows but also seems to animate her bold, creative expression as a poet: “The blows she strikes upon the present age, tell of an indomitable courage, and a strong purpose.”⁴⁴

Though *Hero Strong* is described as a “young *sybil*,” Woodfern’s last three tales of teenage ambition tend to downplay such overtly mystical and heterodox themes. Instead, they focus on the central dilemma of the women’s *Künstlerroman* tradition: how, or whether, a woman artist can reconcile her creative aspirations with her desire for fulfillment through romantic love. On that point, the resolutions of the first three tales had been either ambiguous or highly unconventional. By contrast, *Hero Strong* and *Clyda Stanton* are both about to marry happily at the end of their tales, while *Georgian Eden* is also married (albeit not to her true love) at the time of her death. The prospective marriages of *Strong* and *Stanton*, in particular, so closely resemble the conventional denouements of domestic fiction that one might plausibly speculate that Gibson had retreated from the more radical implications of her own plots in order to avoid offending readers—or, more cynically, to safeguard her continued access to the *True Flag*’s lucrative first page. Following that line of reasoning, one might resort to Susan K. Harris’s strategy of interpreting

44. Woodfern, “Will Triumphant”; Woodfern, “Three Magical Words”; Woodfern, “Hearts of Iron.” On Romantic conceptions of the author or artist, see Boyd, *Writing for Immortality*, 16–19, 127–30, 139–41, and passim; Sofer, *Making the “America of Art,”* 108–77, passim; Newbury, *Figuring Authorship*, 6–29, passim; William G. Rowland, Jr., *Literature and the Marketplace: Romantic Writers and Their Audiences in Great Britain and the United States* (Lincoln, NE, 1996); Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington, IN, 1989), 1–102 (passim); Brodhead, *School of Hawthorne*, 17–47; Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (London, 1958), 30–48. On the crowning episode in *Corinne*, see Boyd, *Writing for Immortality*, 82. At least one stray passage in “The Three Magical Words” suggests a more traditional relationship between the first-person protagonist and her mentor: “I felt that he would be as a God to me, and . . . I hoped and believed that I might prove a blessing to him.”

conservative endings in women's fiction as "cover stories" designed to obscure more radical messages embedded in earlier portions of the text.⁴⁵

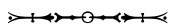
Yet Woodfern's first-page endings need not be read as either cynical or conservative. Though they deprecate the superficiality of wealth and fame, they do not repudiate each heroine's pursuit of power, freedom, and autonomous expression; rather, they simply insist that true happiness *also* requires love—precisely the message conveyed earlier by "The Three Magical Words." Indeed, the endings of "Hero Strong" and "The Star Window" may not reflect creeping conservatism so much as deepening optimism—particularly when viewed in the context of the women's *Künstlerroman* tradition. In contrast to de Staël's *Corrine* (and to a series of later works by American authors such as Alcott, Stoddard, Phelps, and Woolson), Woodfern's last three stories suggest that marriage and artistic aspiration may be compatible goals for women, after all. Far from serving as obstacles to romantic fulfillment, Hero Strong's accomplishments as an author actually *empower* her to marry on favorable terms: Initially, Howell is oblivious to her romantic interest, leaving her trembling and in tears; after reading one of her books, however, he falls "madly" in love. In finally proposing, *he* is the one who is "pale and trembling," while *she* remains poised and in control. Unlike Hilda Siler, who must abandon an oppressive marriage to free her prophetic soul, Hero Strong appears to be one "young *sibyl*" who can have it all.⁴⁶

Mary Gibson and her teenage protagonists also appear to be more optimistic than many contemporary male authors that literary achievement can be combined with commercial success. Romantic writers such as Hawthorne and Melville, following the lead of earlier British Romantics, often expressed the fear that artistic greatness was incompatible with popular acceptance and adopted a correspondingly wary stance toward the literary marketplace. To some extent, their feelings of doubt, ambivalence, and alienation reflected their own relative lack of commercial success, especially when viewed in comparison to the series of unprece-

45. Woodfern, "Will Triumphant"; Woodfern, "Three Magical Words"; Woodfern, "Hearts of Iron"; Woodfern, "Hero Strong"; Woodfern, "Good Angel"; Woodfern, "Star Window"; Boyd, *Writing for Immortality*, 80–104; Susan K. Harris, *19th-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies* (Cambridge, UK, 1990), 12–33 and *passim*.

46. Woodfern, "Three Magical Words"; Woodfern, "Hero Strong"; Woodfern, "Star Window"; Woodfern, "Hearts of Iron."

dented bestsellers produced by American women during the early 1850s. The situation must have looked very different, however, from the perspectives of Gibson and other young women just breaking into print on the pages of America's flourishing story papers. Such ambitious teenagers surely felt inspired, not threatened, by the triumphs of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Fanny Fern, among others. And for Gibson, in particular, there would have been little reason for anxiety over audience reception by the mid 1850s; just a few years into her career, she was publishing at will in a number of Boston's most popular story papers—and was even appearing regularly on their lucrative first pages. Indeed, by the time her last tale of teenage ambition appeared on the *True Flag's* first page in March 1856, she had surpassed even those achievements by moving to New York City and becoming a leading contributor to the greatest story paper of them all: Robert Bonner's *New York Ledger*. Given that steep and rapid ascent, it would be no wonder if she fantasized (like Hero Strong) about “fame and riches,” or expected that (like Clyda Stanton) “thousands” who had never seen her face would be “swayed and guided” by her written words.⁴⁷



To judge by Gibson's tales of teenage ambition, young woman writers and artists of the early 1850s adopted remarkably assertive and optimistic attitudes toward their creative endeavors. And it is certainly tempting to draw inferences regarding Gibson's own subjective experiences from those of her fictional characters. After all, Gibson was a teenage orphan, just embarking on a literary career, who wrote stories describing teenage girls, including several identified as orphans, who were just embarking on similar careers. In a few cases, the biographical parallels are even more striking: Just as Gibson was an orphan from the mountains of Vermont who moved to Boston, married Alonzo Lewis, and supported herself by writing after the breakup of that union, so does Hilda Siler, an

47. Newbury, *Figuring Authorship*, 1–78, passim; Rowland, *Literature and the Marketplace*; Brodhead, *School of Hawthorne*, 17–47; Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago, 1985); Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America* (Princeton, NJ, 1999); Woodfern, “Hero Strong”; Woodfern, “Star Window.”

orphan from the mountains, move to a city, marry an older man, and then abandon the relationship to pursue a literary vocation. Similarly, close parallels between the opening scene of “Hero Strong” and published sketches of Gibson’s experiences at Thetford Academy suggest that this heroine may also have been modeled, in part, on the author herself. Still, since Gibson’s tales *are* works of fiction, it certainly would be useful to have biographical corroboration from diaries, letters, and memoirs—documentation that is not abundant in Gibson’s case. Fortunately, the personal papers or reminiscences of two other young authors of her cohort provide strong evidence that the new assertiveness and optimism were more than mere fiction.⁴⁸

Suggestive evidence of a rapid midcentury transition in authorial attitudes is found in the case of Ellen Louise Chandler who, along with Gibson, was one of several teenage workhorses for both the *True Flag* and the *American Union* during the early to mid 1850s. When she submitted her first poem to a newspaper at the age of fourteen (in 1849 or 1850), Chandler did so with an ambivalence and trepidation often associated with earlier generations of “literary domestics”: She remembered sending it secretly, “almost as if it were a crime.” Yet once she saw the published poem, she was not embarrassed or ashamed but elated, experiencing her first appearance in print as a “wonderful and glorious event.” Chandler’s growing self-confidence was further indicated by the changing ways in which she signed her publications and allowed them to be packaged. Although her earliest poems deployed the cryptic byline “Nellie C.,” she later switched to the somewhat more revealing “Ellen Louise.” In editing a gift annual in 1852, at the age of seventeen, she still used that fragmentary name, but the elegant volume also included an engraved portrait of the compiler and an illustration of her childhood home.⁴⁹

48. For evidence of the autobiographical grounding of “Hero Strong,” compare Woodfern, “Hero Strong” to Woodfern, “Thetford.”

49. Whiting, *Louise Chandler Moulton*, 18–22; “Ellen Louise” [Chandler], ed., *The Waverley Garland, A Present for all Seasons* (Boston, 1853 [actually Dec. 1852]), portrait opposite title page; engraving of childhood home at 153. *Waverley Garland* was reprinted the following year as Ellen Louise [Chandler], ed., *The Book of the Boudoir; or, Memento of Friendship. A Gift for All Seasons* (Boston, 1853). On the ambivalent attitudes of “literary domestics,” see Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*, 111–37, 180–214, and *passim*, but cf. Coultrap-McQuin,

When her first sole-authored book appeared in 1854, the teenager's full name—Ellen Louise Chandler—appeared boldly on the title page, as it did in the bylines of most of her subsequent newspaper pieces. Her description of the publicity surrounding the volume suggests that her growing openness to the celebrity of authorship was encouraged by an increasingly aggressive publishing industry. “I remember the huge posters with which they placarded the walls, headed, ‘Read this book and see what a girl of eighteen can do,’” she recalled many years later. “I think I had the grace to be a little shocked at these posters, but the reviews were so kind, and said such lovely things that—Ah! shall I ever be so happy again as when I read them!” Even after marrying one of the proprietors of the *True Flag* at the age of twenty, Chandler continued to publish in that paper under her maiden name for many months thereafter, as if both she and her husband were reluctant to do anything that might dilute her celebrity as an author.⁵⁰

The childhood and early career of Louisa May Alcott offer even more striking parallels to Mary Gibson and her fictional heroines, both in terms of her affinity for masculine roles and in her creative ambitions. As revealed both by her early letters and journals and by her later reminiscences, Alcott (like Gibson and like Alcott's own avowedly autobiographical protagonist, Jo March) was a tomboy who defied social conventions and expectations. “I am old for my age, and don't care much for girl's things,” she wrote in her journal at the age of thirteen. “People think I'm wild and queer.” In a letter to a young male friend in 1860, she insisted, “I was born with a boys nature & always had more sympathy for & interest in them than in girls, & have fought my fight for nearly fifteen [years] with a boys spirit.” When the Civil War broke out, she observed, “I long to be a man, but as I can't fight, I will content myself with working for those who can.” Finally, at about age fifty, she con-

Doing Literary Business; Homestead, *American Women Authors*; Sofer, *Making the “America of Art”*, 11–12, 245n28.

50. Whiting, *Louise Chandler Moulton*, 26–33; Ellen Louise Chandler, *This, That, and the Other* (Boston, 1854). Chandler began publishing in story papers under her full name in early 1854; for the continued use of maiden name after marriage, see *True Flag*, Jan. 12, 1856, 4; Jan. 26, 1856, 4; Feb. 16, 1856, 1; July 19, 1856, 1–2.

fessed (to Louise Chandler Moulton) that she was “half-persuaded that I am a man’s soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman’s body.”⁵¹

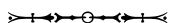
As a girl and young woman, Alcott repeatedly expressed admiration for those of her sex who gained fame for their creative or artistic achievements—and fantasized about following in their footsteps. “She must be a happy girl,” Alcott wrote at age eleven of Jenny Lind, the world-renowned Swedish singer. “I should like to be famous as she is.” At age eighteen, having acquired a passion for the stage, Alcott longed to become another Sarah Siddons, a celebrated English actress of an earlier generation. In a subsequent letter to her father, she wistfully confessed: “I should love to be a great star *if* I could.” By age twenty-four, her ambitions had turned to literature. “Read Charlotte Bronte’s life,” she wrote in her journal in 1857. “Wonder if I shall ever be famous enough for people to care to read my story and struggles. I can’t be a C. B., but I may do a little something yet.”⁵²

Not surprisingly, Alcott responded to her early publishing successes not with ambivalence or self-deprecation but with elation—and with brash expressions of wordly ambition startlingly similar to those uttered by Woodfern’s fictional heroines, Hero Strong and Georgian Eden. After her first book, a collection of children’s fables composed years earlier, appeared in 1855, Alcott wrote in her journal: “I feel quite proud that the little tales that I wrote . . . when I was sixteen should now bring money and fame.” When she published a potboiler in the *Saturday Evening Gazette* early the following year, she was thrilled to spot yellow advertising placards posted on the street to announce it. Years later, Alcott recalled “feasting” her “eyes” on the bold notices, oblivious to the bitter January cold and to passersby jostling her on the sidewalk. As she proudly told herself, “This, this is fame!” Her sisters even stole one of the posters and waved it before her “like a triumphal banner.” A few

51. Alcott, *Journals*, 59, 79; Alcott, *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine B. Stern (Boston, 1987; cited hereafter as Alcott, *Letters*), 14, 51–52, 105; Louise Chandler Moulton, “Louisa May Alcott,” in *Our Famous Women: An Authorized Record of the Lives and Deeds of Distinguished American Women of our Times*, ed. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Harriet Beecher Stowe et al. (Hartford, CT, 1884), 49 (quoted in Boyd, *Writing for Immortality*, 68); Ednah D. Cheney, ed., *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals* (Boston, 1890), 30.

52. Alcott, *Journals*, 51, 63–64, 85; Alcott, *Letters*, 14.

months later, when boys teased her “about being an authoress,” she defiantly replied that she would “be famous yet.” With reference to her literary aspirations, Alcott’s sister once described Louisa as “living for immortality.” And, in 1863, when her work briefly appeared to be gaining elite, high-cultural acceptance, Alcott crowed about being “praised & glorified” as “‘a new star’ and ‘a literary celebrity.’” Though some of her retrospective accounts may be tintured by irony, the pattern of youthful ambition is unmistakable—and suggestive of the similarly high aspirations expressed by Winnie Woodfern’s teenage protagonists.⁵³



Young woman writers of the 1850s differed in their attitudes not only from “literary domestics” of earlier decades but also from the somewhat older women who launched careers at about the same time that they did. Though story-paper icons such as Fanny Fern and E. D. E. N. Southworth took both pride and pleasure in their literary triumphs, they had only turned to professional authorship as mature women and in response to urgent familial needs created by broken marriages. And it was precisely in such conventional domestic terms that they justified their careers. For them, professional authorship was a fall-back option—something that had to be grafted onto, or built around, mature personalities and existing social commitments, relationships, and reputations. For youngsters who already aspired to literary careers as girls and actually began publishing as teenagers, however, authorship (as both aspiration and reality) must have been integral to their personal development, helping to shape their dreams and daydreams, daily activities, friendships, self-perceptions, social opportunities, and, not least, economic prospects. That is precisely the pattern dramatized by Gibson’s tales of teenage ambition.⁵⁴

The writings of earlier cohorts of “literary domestics” may have been constrained by “the restrictive character of their lives” and “of what they

53. Alcott, *Journals*, 73, 78, 81, 103, 119; James Parton, *Noted Women of Europe and America* (1883; repr. Springfield, MA, 1884), 82–84; Stern, *From Blood & Thunder*, 8; Boyd, *Writing for Immortality*, 165–73

54. On Fern, see Warren, *Fanny Fern*, 61–142; Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*, 138–39, 145, 152–59, and *passim*. On Southworth, see Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business*, 50–78; Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*, 145–46, 159–63; Baym, *Woman’s Fiction*, 110–14.

could imagine in life.” But for young female authors after midcentury that dynamic had been reversed: Far from feeling constrained in their thinking by old limitations, many of their writings were animated by new experiences, new ambitions, and new expectations, many of which challenged traditional gender roles. Gibson’s passing reference to “Bloomerism, Women’s rights, and female lecturers” is certainly suggestive, but the midcentury upsurge of women’s authorship coincided so closely with the inception of the women’s rights movement that one development cannot have caused the other; rather, both were probably effects of some of the same underlying causes. One such cause was a market revolution that transformed many aspects of American society in the early republic—including the lives of children and teenagers—by undermining the household economy, subtly altering familial relationships, establishing reading as “a necessity of life,” and challenging the previously widespread assumption that farmers’ sons would necessarily become farmers and that farmers’ daughters would, in turn, become farmers’ wives.⁵⁵

Concurrent with those economic changes were improvements in elementary education, and an expansion of secondary education reflected in the establishment of hundreds of academies during the early national and antebellum periods. Many of those new secondary schools were restricted to boys, but some were coeducational and still others were exclusively for girls. Although female academies were founded as early as the 1780s, it was not until the 1820s and 1830s that they regularly instituted curricula comparable in their scope and rigor to those at male colleges of the same period. Indeed, according to a recent study by Mary Kelley, such institutions helped to shift the balance of American opinion

55. Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*, 221 (quoted). On the market revolution and its cultural impact, see Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York, 1991); Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge, MA, 2000); Catherine E. Kelly, *In the New England Fashion: Reshaping Women’s Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY, 1999); Thomas Dublin, *Transforming Women’s Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca, NY 1994); Christopher Clark *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, NY, 1990); William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780–1835* (Knoxville, TN, 1989); Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (Cambridge, UK, 1981).

decisively in favor of the view that “women had the same intellectual potential as men.” Beyond inculcating academic skills, those schools also taught the lessons of “self-reliance” and “independent thought.” Not surprisingly, many of the women who flooded into the literary marketplace as authors and editors had attended such academies.⁵⁶

The education offered in antebellum academies (both same-sex and coeducational) encouraged ambition, assertiveness, and confidence in students, whether boys or girls. To motivate their young charges, teachers relied heavily on competition and performance-based rewards, in the form of tests, grades, prizes, class rankings, and public end-of-term examinations and honors. Similar practices also became common in elementary schools, which were often taught by former academy students. The parallel findings of Kelley and Anya Jabour suggest that many academy girls wholeheartedly embraced those various incentives, striving both for “academic achievement” itself and for the opportunity to display their intellectual prowess at public examinations. Indeed, between the 1820s and 1840s a lively controversy arose over the encouragement of competition in American schools, stemming in part from concern over its impact on female students. Educators feared that the “restlessness, excessive ambition, [and] attachment to materials marks of success” supposedly inculcated by academic competition might particularly damage young women. By midcentury, however, the debate was over: Americans had tacitly accepted the proposition that girls were just as capable as boys of handling the rigors, stresses, and attitudinal consequences of academic competition.⁵⁷

56. Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand & Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), 9–10, 28–29, 32, 66–92 (quoted at 71), 109 (quoted), 276; Margaret A. Nash, “Rethinking Republican Motherhood: Benjamin Rush and the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (Summer 1997), 171–91.

57. J. M. Opal, “Exciting Emulation: Academies and the Transformation of the Rural North, 1780s–1820s,” *Journal of American History* 91 (Sept. 2004), 445–70; Leon Jackson, *The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America* (Stanford, CA, 2008), 190–98; Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), 55–61 (quoted at 61); Kelley, *Learning to Stand & Speak*, 92–99; Jane L. Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood* (New Haven, CT, 2002), 169–221; Nancy Green, “Female Education and School Competition: 1820–1850,” in *Woman's Being, Woman's Place*, ed. Kelley, 127–41 (quoted at 133).

Although Mary Gibson may not have been a serious student herself, her older sister Hannah, who attended New Hampshire's coeducational Kimball Union Academy during the early 1840s, appears to have been just the sort of diligent, achievement-oriented student described by Kelley and Jabour. In a sketch published in the *Olive Branch* in 1853, Gibson describes her frail sister's triumphant performance at an end-of-term examination just six months prior to her death. In a schoolroom crowded with spectators from nearby Dartmouth College, fifteen-year-old Hannah bests her peers of both sexes in one discipline after another—Physiology, Greek, Latin, French, Hebrew, Geometry, Mensuration, and Surveying—answering questions that none of the other students can handle. When the school's preceptor awards her "the highest honor the Academy can bestow" and places a "gold chain and medal around her neck," the audience responds with "thunders of applause." The scene is unmistakably suggestive of the climax of "Will Triumphant," published in the *True Flag* just three months later. Gibson and her readers evidently understood that the confidence, ambition, and assertiveness acquired by female students at antebellum academies could be applied to other vocations or creative endeavors. Indeed, story-paper publishers themselves often adopted the competitive model, attempting to attract new submissions—and pique reader interest—by staging story contests that offered large cash prizes to the winning entries.⁵⁸

The aspirations of antebellum girls were also transformed by their increased reading of books by and about prominent women. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Americans had ready access to a wide array of novels and other publications by eminent female authors of various nationalities. For example, in rummaging through a family library as a girl in Woodstock, Mary Gibson perused works not only by famous male authors but also by the Swedish novelist Frederika Bremer and the English writer Jane Porter. In her own early fiction, Gibson also alluded to two famous novels in the European *Künstlerroman* tradition. In a sketch of academy life published in 1853, Gibson describes school-girls swapping allusions to George Sand's *Consuelo*. And the following

58. Green Mountain Mary, "The Shadow of My Sister," *Olive Branch*, July 2, 1853, 4; Woodfern, "Will Triumphant." On story-paper prize competitions (some of which were fraudulent), see Jackson, *Business of Letters*, 186–234; Zboray and Zboray, *Literary Dollars*, 6–7; Noel, *Villains Galore*, 8–9, 31–35.

year, in brief tale about a teenage story-paper writer, she invokes de Staël's famous *Künstlerroman* by having her heroine imagine herself "a second Corrine,—crowned, triumphant and beloved." Meanwhile, in 1852, Louisa May Alcott included Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on a list of her favorite books. (Ann Boyd and Karen Tracey also provide much evidence of the influence of such international icons as de Staël, Sand, Brontë, Eliot, and Browning on American literary women born during the 1820s through 1840s.) Not only did the very act of reading books by prominent female writers tend to verify for girls that they could aspire to become famous authors themselves, but the actual content of some women's fiction, such as the novels of de Staël and Sand, conveyed messages that subverted restrictive gender roles in other ways as well.⁵⁹

The expanded aspirations and unconventional impulses of American girls were also encouraged by numerous popular accounts of "celebrated" or "heroic" women, variously treated in full-length biographies, collections of shorter biographical sketches, and works of historical fiction. Whereas many examples of those thriving antebellum genres lauded the accomplishments of "learned women" such as teachers and authors, others also lavished praise on female sovereigns, female warriors, and other women who dramatically appropriated masculine roles. While the decline of household production (an eventual byproduct of the market revolution) may have occasionally provided antebellum tomboys with more time to run around their attics or backyards brandishing guns or swords, popular accounts of Joan of Arc and of other martial heroines may have provided them with some of the inspiration.⁶⁰

59. Gibson, "Some Memories," *New York Ledger*, June 29, 1861, 3; Woodfern, "Beloved Smile," *Olive Branch*, Aug. 12, 1854, 2; Green Mountain Mary, "Reminiscence of a Boarding School"; Alcott, *Journals*, 67–68; Boyd, *Writing for Immortality*, 80–104; Karen Tracey, *Plots and Proposals: American Women's Fiction, 1850–90* (Urbana, IL 2000), 16–21. The achievements of female celebrities in other fields had a similar impact on antebellum girls (see Alcott, *Journals*, 51, 63–64).

60. Daniel A. Cohen, "Heroic Women Found: Transgressive Feminism, Popular Biography, and the 'Tragical Deaths of Beautiful Females,'" *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 109 (1999), 51–97; Kelley, *Learning to Stand & Speak*, 191–222; Baym, *American Woman Writers and the Work of History, 1790–1860* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1995), 214–39; Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography & Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC,

Both Gibson and Alcott appear to have been well acquainted with those genres of popular female biography. In a story Gibson published in the *New York Ledger* in 1861, the narrator—a teenage story-paper author—claims that “nature” had “intended” her to be another “Maid of Saragossa” (a Spanish military heroine of the Napoleonic wars) or “Grace Darling” (a British lighthouse-keeper’s daughter who rescued shipwreck victims in 1838 and was lauded in many literary treatments). “I am sure I could have stormed a breach, or manned a life-boat with either of them,” she continues. “Danger was my element—guns, pistols, and swords my favorite playthings.” And the same list of Alcott favorites that cited *Jane Eyre* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* also included biographies or historical novels depicting Philothea (a Roman military heroine), Hypatia (a fifth-century female philosopher), Madame Guyon (a seventeenth-century French mystic), and Madame de Staël—all typical subjects of women’s biographical compendia. Shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War, Alcott stood on the wall of a fort and commented that she felt “very martial and Joan-of-Arc-y.”⁶¹

Beyond new patterns of domestic economy, schooling, and reading, the most important factor in the dramatic transformational upsurge of American women’s authorship at midcentury was the burgeoning literary marketplace itself. In that dynamic setting, story papers played multiple enabling roles: As we have seen, some of their stories conveyed new messages of possibility to young female readers; their successful authors provided role models for less advanced aspirants; and their harried editors—constantly on the hunt for new talent—provided a seemingly limitless demand for copy. The fact that many story papers of the 1850s sought to incorporate a variety of genres geared to both sexes and a multitude of tastes encouraged ambitious would-be authors to experiment with different styles and voices, and, in the process, to traverse traditional literary and gender lines. Indeed, in her aggressive pursuit of literary opportunities—as reflected, for example, in her rapid mastery of

1999), 106–19, 158–78; Casper, “An Uneasy Marriage of Sentiment and Scholarship: Elizabeth F. Ellet and the Domestic Origins of American Women’s History,” *Journal of Women’s History* 4 (Fall 1992), 10–35.

61. Gibson, “My Friend at Laurel Vale,” *New York Ledger*, July 13, 1861, 3; Alcott, *Journals*, 67–68, 85, 105. For short biographies of all of the “celebrated” women mentioned in this paragraph, see Hale, *Woman’s Record*, 51–52, 76–79, 111–12, 160–62, 280–81, 337–38, 517–19, 597–604.

a myriad of formats and genres, and in her opportunistic submissions to multiple papers—Gibson appears to have differed little from ambitious young male authors of the same period. (Though other young woman writers, such as Alcott, Chandler, Cutter, Townsend, and Jones, may not have been *quite* as versatile as Gibson, they also published in a variety of genres and styles.) Innovative business models and editorial strategies further enhanced the opportunities for unseasoned or marginal talents: *Waverley* provided a training ground for would-be authors not yet good enough to be paid; the exclusion of advertisements from several popular papers provided more space for fiction; and (by preventing a single work by a single author from monopolizing the space for weeks or even months at a time) the adoption of a no-serials format by several of Boston's premier weeklies provided first-page access to greater numbers of up-and-coming literary stars.⁶²

By the mid 1850s, story papers appear to have established a self-generating cycle and an ever-expanding circle of inspiration, imitation, and innovation, attracting successive cohorts of teenage girls and young women into their authorial ranks. Initially, older stars played a critical role; Fanny Fern, for example, influenced Mary Gibson in many ways, not least in her choice of a pseudonym. But soon even contributors barely out of their teens were providing models for girls their own age or just a few years younger. Clara Augusta Jones (later Trask) was born in rural New Hampshire during the 1830s and published her first poem in a Boston periodical in 1853; she went on to a prolific story-paper career that lasted more than fifty years. Over the course of several decades, one of her favorite pen names was "Hero Strong," the title character of a story that Gibson had published at the age of twenty. Evidently, the tale of an ambitious girl seeking "fame and riches" as a popular author had made a lasting impression.⁶³

62. For evidence of the versatility of Gibson (as Woodfern), Cutter, Chandler (later Moulton), Townsend, and Jones (later Trask), see citations in notes 2 and 17 above and 63 below. On Alcott's versatility, see Stern, *From Blood & Thunder*, 4–5, 46–58, and 105–43, *passim*. On male authors, see David S. Reynolds, "From Periodical Writer to Poet: Whitman's Journey through Popular Culture," in *Periodical Literature*, ed. Price and Smith, 35–50; Trowbridge, *My Own Story*, 134–59, 192–96, 203–10, 226–33, 250–58; George Harvey Genzmer, "Trowbridge, John Townsend," in *DAB*, 18: 655–56.

63. Johannsen, *House of Beadle and Adams*, 2: 273–74; *People's Home Journal* 22 (Jan. 2007), 22 (noting Trask's versatility); Woodfern, "Hero Strong." For

That self-perpetuating cycle of emulation and authorship appears to have continued through the 1860s and beyond. For example, Mary Kelley has described the career of Hattie (“Effie Ray”) Burleigh, born in 1845 into a New Hampshire household filled with “books, monthly periodicals, and weekly story papers.” As early as age seven, she began writing stories and packaging them into handmade, self-illustrated booklets. Having attended a local academy, she placed her first publication in a Universalist magazine at the age of eighteen and participated actively in an association of that periodical’s young readers, known as the “Merry Band of Cousins.” An admirer of Fanny Fern and a devoted reader of the *New York Ledger*, Burleigh continued to publish tales and sketches after her marriage in 1867, placing pieces in two Boston story papers to which Mary Gibson had previously contributed during the early 1850s. She had almost completed her first novel when she died suddenly at the age of thirty.⁶⁴

By the 1870s, however, only the most naive of aspiring writers could still have believed that story-paper authorship was a viable path to respect or recognition by America’s self-appointed cultural arbiters. To the contrary, the process of literary differentiation and stratification described by Richard Brodhead in *Cultures of Letters* had, fairly or not, already consigned the entire genre to a subliterate netherworld that was, at best, of sociological interest. Thus, in 1879, W. H. Bishop published an essay entitled “Story-Paper Literature” in that most authoritative of high-brow venues: the *Atlantic Monthly*. “Disdained as it may be by the highly cultivated for its character,” the Yale-educated author pompously explained, “the phenomenon of its existence cannot be overlooked.” According to his account, story-paper plots were sensationalistic, unrealistic, and hackneyed (well suited to those with “simple wants and

conflicting evidence regarding Trask’s birthdate, see note 17 above. Trask used the pseudonym “Hero Strong” especially for tales of crime, adventure, and/or suspense; see, for example, *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture*, May 15, 1869, 4; *Peterson’s Magazine* 99 (Feb. 1891), 137; *People’s Home Journal* 22 (June 1907), 11; *People’s Home Journal* 22 (Sept. 1907), 4–5.

64. Kelley, *Learning to Stand & Speak*, 60–64. See also Angela J. Farkas, “Bride of the Tomb, or, The Story Paper Debut of Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller,” in *Pioneers, Passionate Ladies, and Private Eyes: Dime Novels, Series Books, and Papers*, ed. Larry E. Sullivan and Lydia Cushman Schurman (New York, 1996), 233–49.

aspirations,” for whom “lack of culture is a continuous childhood”); the writing, though marred by “bad grammar,” was simple and clear, and hence easily accessible to those with only rudimentary reading skills; and, though ardently read by boys of various backgrounds, the papers were produced “almost exclusively for the lower classes.”⁶⁵

The teenage girls who had plunged into story-paper writing during the early 1850s responded in different ways to the hardening of literary hierarchies—alternatives reflected in the divergent destinies of three young women. As in Woodfern’s story “Hero Strong,” one took advantage of her physical attractiveness and personal magnetism, the second achieved success by embracing children and domestic values, and the third followed a more venturesome path. Ellen Louise Chandler’s marriage in 1855 to one of the co-proprietors of the *True Flag* enabled the beautiful farmer’s daughter from Connecticut to secure a prominent niche for herself in the elite world of high-brow culture. Supported both by her husband’s story-paper wealth and by her own extraordinary social skills and graces, she established a popular Boston salon frequented by much of New England’s newly canonized literary elite, including (among the older generation) Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, and Emerson. Splitting her time between America and England in later years, she presided over a similar salon in London, where she cultivated successive cohorts of young literary artists, including Oscar Wilde, William Butler Yeats, and even Ezra Pound. Yet Louise Chandler Moulton (as she became known) was not simply a literary hostess and patron; she also channeled her teenage ambitions into a long career as a professional author. Though she received the most “praise and adulation” for her poetry, she actually published in a variety of genres, and across a range of middle- and high-brow venues, including *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and the *Atlantic Monthly*.⁶⁶

With personal ties to the likes of Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne, but without Moulton’s winning social graces and marital wealth, Louisa

65. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 69–106; W. H. Bishop, “Story-Paper Literature,” *Atlantic Monthly* 44 (Sept. 1879), 383–93 (quoted at 383, 389).

66. Young, “Louise Chandler Moulton,” 595–96 (quoted); Whiting, *Louise Chandler Moulton*; Harriet Prescott Spofford, “Louise Chandler Moulton,” in *Our Famous Women*, ed. Phelps and Stowe et al., 498–520. On her husband’s wealth, see U. S. Federal Census, 1870, Boston, Ward 11, Suffolk County, Roll M593–647, 85, image 173 (<http://www.ancestry.com>), which lists William Moulton’s real property at \$112,000 and his personal property at \$50,000.

May Alcott tended to be viewed by the arbiters of elite culture as a “poor relation.” Despite gaining tenuous access to the *Atlantic* during the early 1860s, Alcott eventually retreated from her struggle for high-brow recognition and carved out a comfortable niche for herself as an author of domestic stories for children. Through Jo March, the heroine of *Little Women*, Alcott helped to popularize the emerging literary image of the tomboy. Avowedly based on her own childhood, Jo March marked a striking diminution of her creator’s expansive teenage ambitions: Through the nonthreatening figure of the tomboy, Alcott essentially reconceptualized her own aggressive pursuit of masculine roles and heroic public achievements as an ordinary stage of schoolgirl development. Much as W. H. Bishop had construed story-paper reading as a “continuous childhood” for the culturally deprived, so did Alcott reconfigure her own high worldly ambitions—variously but persistently expressed from her pre-teens through early thirties—as a childish phase or fantasy. As a tomboy, Jo March had been an avid writer of sensationalistic story-paper fiction; after talking with her much older future husband, however, she dutifully acts on his moralistic advice—and consigns her undomestic oeuvre to the flames. Having long since internalized the elite judgment of story-paper writing as “rubbish,” it was a relatively painless way for Alcott to mark her larger defeat.⁶⁷

Mary Gibson followed another path. Moving to New York near the end of 1855, she quickly won a regular spot on the pages of the *New York Ledger*. For a brief time, Bonner’s promotional statements treated Gibson as one of his top prose authors, standing behind only Fern and Sylvanus Cobb, Jr. (yet another Boston story-paper veteran). But as Bonner recruited additional talent, including Southworth, Gibson’s star gradually faded. With the *Ledger*’s first-page serials monopolized by the likes of Cobb and Southworth, Gibson churned out a seemingly endless succession of short stories or even shorter sketches, mostly in the conventional domestic mode. Perhaps dissatisfied with her constricted role, Gibson moved to Great Britain during the late 1850s where, under the pseudonym Margaret (or Marguerite) Blount, she wrote for *Reynolds’s Miscellany*, one of England’s most popular story papers. In 1862, she

67. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 69–106; Boyd, *Writing for Immortality*, 165–73; Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women or Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy* (2 vols., 1868–1869; single-volume ed., Boston, 1880), 325–33, 418–34, 519.

even established a short-lived London weekly of her own. Returning to the United States, she continued to write for various story papers, even after moving back to the vicinity of her childhood home in central Vermont by about 1867. Between 1869 and 1871, Gibson published approximately sixty pieces in the *New York Ledger*, several more in 1874, but none thereafter.⁶⁸

In the Federal Census of 1880, Gibson was listed—under yet another name, Mary O. Francis—as a “Story writer” in West Woodstock, Vermont. There she lived with a single “boarder” (the eldest daughter of her former guardian) in what may have been a “Boston marriage.” Shortly thereafter, the biographical trail of Mary Gibson, or Mary Francis, runs cold, perhaps because of her lifelong habit of shifting names. Yet wherever she may have been living, and whatever her personal circumstances, tales by Margaret Blount (which seems to have remained Gibson’s primary pen name) continued to appear in story papers and as dime novels throughout the 1880s, 1890s, and even into the early 1900s—though, by then, given the industry’s practice of recycling old copy again and

68. For several of Gibson’s earliest pieces in the *Ledger*, see *New York Ledger*, Jan. 12, 1856, 8; Jan. 19, 1856, 6; Jan. 26, 1856, 8; Feb. 2, 1856, 8; Feb. 9, 1856, 3. On Gibson’s initially high status among the *Ledger*’s authors, see *New York Ledger*, Apr. 19, 1856, 4; Aug. 2, 1856, 4. On Cobb, see *New York Ledger*, Apr. 19, 1856, 4; May 10, 1856, 4; Pattee, *Feminine Fifties*, 177–200; Noel, *Villains Galore*, 52–55, 69–71, 92–94. On Bonner’s recruitment of additional talent, see *New York Ledger*, Sept. 6, 1856, 4; Aug. 15, 1857, 4; Sept. 26, 1857, 4; Dec. 31, 1859, 4. On his deal with Southworth, see Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*, 21–22; Dobson, “Introduction,” in Southworth, *Hidden Hand*, xviii. On Gibson in England and as Margaret Blount (and later as Mary O. Francis), see Johanssen, *House of Beadle and Adams*, 3: 23–24. For documentation of Gibson’s return to Vermont (under the name of Mary Francis), see Woodstock Land Records, 23: 20–21, 330–31, Woodstock Town Clerk, Woodstock, Vermont; U. S. Federal Census, 1870, Woodstock, Windsor Co., Vermont, Roll M593-1629, 686, image 554 (<http://www.ancestry.com>); U. S. Federal Census, 1880, Woodstock, Windsor Co., Vermont, Roll T9-1350, 372.4000 (<http://www.ancestry.com>); Mary Francis to Robert Bonner, Jan. 24, Jan. 31, Feb. 4, 10, May 5, undated [June?], 1874; Nov. 10, 1876; Sept. 9, Oct. 20, 1881; Francis to Unnamed Correspondent in Bonner’s Office, Aug. 22, 1874; Francis to Hugh Smith (in Bonner’s office), Sept. 30, 1874, all letters in Robert Bonner Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library (cited hereafter as Bonner Papers). The totals of pieces in the *New York Ledger* are based on a page-by-page scan of all issues between 1856 and 1875.

again, it is not at all clear that she was even still alive. As late as 1907, for example, Margaret Blount appeared as one of more than eighty names in a “Galaxy of Star Contributors” to the New York story paper, *Good Literature*. Just a few places above her on the list was the pseudonym of another story-paper veteran—a name purloined from an ambitious teenage heroine conjured up by Mary Gibson more than fifty years earlier: Hero Strong.⁶⁹

69. U. S. Federal Census, 1880, Woodstock, Windsor Co., Vermont, Roll T9-1350, 372.4000 (<http://www.ancestry.com>). The new surname may have been linked to another abortive marriage. On Laura Churchill (Gibson’s “boarder”), see Churchill and Churchill, *Churchill Family*, 97–98; U. S. Federal Census of 1850, Woodstock, Windsor Co., Vermont, Roll 930, 58 (<http://www.ancestry.com>); Cobb Journal, Aug.–Sept., 1851, 294, 305–306; Feb. 6, 1852; June 3, 1852, 561; Aug. 8, 1852, 605; May 15, 1853, 880; Nov. 6, 1854, 1142; Woodfern, “Remembered Picture”; Woodfern, “Laura and Lucia,” *American Union*, Apr. 21, 1855, 2; Woodfern, “Laura,” *American Union*, Sept. 8, 1855, 4; Gibson, “Some Memories”; Gibson, “The Pot of Gold,” *New York Ledger*, Aug. 3, 1861, 6. On “Boston marriages,” see Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 190–230; Leila J. Rupp, *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America* (Chicago, 1999), 43–53. For late (possibly posthumous) appearances of Margaret Blount in story papers and dime novels, see Johannsen, *House of Beadle and Adams*, 3: 24; Margaret Blount, “Winning Ways; or, Kitty Atherton’s Double Troth,” *Hearthstone*, Mar. 1902, 3–4; “Coming Attractions,” *Hearthstone*, May 1902, 12; “Our Galaxy of Star Contributors,” *Good Literature*, Nov. 1907, 8.