

"Hero Strong" and Other Stories: Tales of Girlhood Ambition, Female Masculinity, and Women's Worldly Achievement in Antebellum America

Jen Manion

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Review

Manion, Jen

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Cohen, Daniel A. and Gibson, Mary F.W.. *"Hero Strong" and Other Stories: Tales of Girlhood Ambition, Female Masculinity, and Women's Worldly Achievement in Antebellum America.* University of Tennessee Press, \$69.00
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Making the Case for a Forgotten Antebellum Writer

"Hero Strong" and Other Stores: Tales of Girlhood Ambition, Female Masculinity, and Women's Worldly Achievement in Antebellum America makes important contributions to our understanding of women's writing as labor in antebellum America. By tracing the biographical pieces of the life of Mary F.W. Gibson, the book shows how one particular woman navigated quite restrained options and found a way to support herself that also gave her a career and a voice at a time when few women had either. Gibson herself was orphaned and raised in Vermont as a young girl. She put her few years of formal schooling to good use and began publishing poems and other stories by the age of seventeen in her new home -- Boston. Her marriage in 1852 to a much older wealthy man briefly opened the door to a life of financial security and heteronormativity, but she quickly slammed it shut by leaving him after just several months of marriage.

The editor of this volume aims to establish Gibson's place among the other more esteemed women writers of her era including Louisa May Alcott, E.D.E.N Southworth, and Fanny Fern. The stories reprinted here represent "tales of girlhood ambition" that were typical of domestic fiction written by the others: overblown plots centered on young girls who overcome substantial hardships to achieve success and recognition as a result of their own efforts (18). Gibson pushed the boundaries of this genre in crafting heroines who were "strikingly masculine" in their attributes and pursuits. Cohen notes that Gibson's characters were bolder, stronger, and more masculine in every way than Alcott's more famous tomboy protagonist, Jo March. He suggests this is part of the reason Gibson's protagonists have been lost even to historians and literary scholars

while Alcott's *Little Women* remains a beloved literary work. Cohen makes a compelling case in presenting ways in which the careers of these writers overlapped or intertwined. Gibson admired Fern and likely incorporated her name consciously into her own pen name, Winnie Woodfern. Gibson complicated her own ability to establish a following and a legacy by publishing under numerous names with little evidence connecting them, including Winifred Woodfern, Mary W. Stanley Gibson, and Margaret Blount (xiii).

The ten stories reprinted here were originally published between 1853 and 1859. The title story "Hero Strong" was the cover story of *True Flag* August 18, 1855. An advertisement for the story ran the prior week declaring, "The heroine's character is embodied in her name. She *is* strong and a hero...Read it, all who love purity or strength." (20) "Hero Strong" portrays an idealized vision for life, friendship, and love that many young women of the time would have dreamed. The protagonist for whom the story was named, "Hero Strong" lived life to the fullest, smoking cigaritos in the company of close friends, singing songs into the night. Her features might not have been conventional but they were desirable nonetheless, "The full red lips denoted pride and passion, but they also told of an inexhaustible fund of merriment and good humor" (106). Hero was an accomplished writer whose art reignited the flame in her long-standing love interest, Clinton Howell. Howell shared "One of your books came to me, and when I read it, I knew what the lost glory was. It was you and your love that I wanted" (119). What more could a woman want than to make a successful career from her art and have that inspire a good man to love and respect her?

Scholars and teachers will enjoy the convenience of having these remarkable stories printed together in one place. Cohen's introduction provides important framing within both historical and literary scholarly debates. Gibson is a figure of significance better understood in the context of the historical scholarship on women's education, writing, and labor. Gibson's writings enter a well-worn debate over the boundaries between and importance of various nineteenth century literary genres. For scholars working at the intersection of history and literature in antebellum America, this volume is indispensable.

Jen Manion is Associate Professor of History and Director, LGBTQ Resource Center at Connecticut College.