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“Gold Would Cure That”: Economic Feminism in Olive Harper’s *A Fair Californian*

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Abstract: In 1889, Minerva Press published a lost-race fantasy entitled *A Fair Californian*, by the controversial journalist, author, lecturer, and poet Olive Harper (Ellen Burrell D’Aperly, 1842–1915). The novel incorporated its author’s beliefs about “economic feminism”, which advocated expanding economic opportunities for women, rather than on achieving women’s suffrage. There are obvious similarities between the novel and contemporary feminist utopian fiction, but Harper’s emphasis on economic opportunity for women (in particular, the novel’s protagonist, Dolores) clearly distinguishes *A Fair Californian* from the far more politics-focused work of more widely known feminist utopian writers.

Keywords: lost-race, utopian literature, feminist literature

1. Introduction

In 1889 the small New York-based Minerva Press released a highly imaginative fantasy entitled *A Fair Californian* by the controversial journalist, lecturer, author, and poet Olive Harper (1842–1915). The book, which deals with a young woman who discovers a fantastic civilisation at the centre of the earth, was well received and went through at least sixteen printings (*American Bookseller* 95; “World of Letters” 1). It appears that *A Fair Californian* was one of only three novels Harper wrote that contain elements of fantasy and her only foray into

“lost-race” or “lost-world” literature, the template for which had been established only three years earlier by H. Rider Haggard in *King Solomon’s Mines*.¹

The *SF Encyclopedia* describes the populace of the subterranean civilisation depicted in the novel as a “race of feminists” (Clute). Although the novel has some points in common with contemporary feminist utopian fiction, there are also very significant differences. These differences stem from the fact that Harper’s motives in writing the novel and her feminist beliefs varied substantially from those of the feminist utopian writers of her time. A close examination reveals that the ideas relating to the status, roles, and rights of women that are embedded in the novel reflect a particular strain of largely forgotten but still very relevant 19th-century feminist thought that has since been labelled “economic feminism” (Stanley 38). Elements of economic feminism and related ideas concerning marriage and childrearing are woven into the novel in various ways, and, in particular, are embodied in the character of Dolores, the protagonist of the novel.

2. Olive Harper

Dolores is clearly an idealisation of Harper herself, who, like her main character, managed to overcome severe obstacles to achieve success. Although little-remembered today, Harper enjoyed a considerable degree of fame in her own time. “Olive Harper” was the pen name of Ellen Burrell, who was born in Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania on 28 September 1842.² In 1849, Harper’s father, Albert, immigrated to San Francisco, and shortly thereafter became one of the founders of a settlement that would grow into the city of Oakland (“Oakland News” 16).³ His family joined him there two years later.

Oakland retained a rough and rowdy frontier character throughout Harper’s youth. Occasional gunplay, periodic disease, and dangerous wildlife such as grizzlies and rattlesnakes made life precarious. When Harper was twelve, she and her younger sister contracted diphtheria during an epidemic; her sister did not survive. Harper described herself as the “wildest of a wild lot of children” in the town (*Stormy* 47). She was a precocious learner and voracious reader who excelled academically, but a fierce intolerance of anything she perceived as hypocritical or snobbish resulted in frequent clashes with fellow students, as well as teachers and other adults in the community.

At age fifteen, against her parent’s wishes, Harper married 42-year-old George Gibson, a business acquaintance of her father’s. As his business enterprises faltered, Gibson sank deeper into alcoholism and became increasingly abusive. Harper sustained herself and her three children through shrewd real-estate dealings and, for a time, through operating a millinery and dressmaking shop. After about fourteen years of marriage, Harper divorced Gibson for “cruel and inhuman treatment” (583). In the midst of divorce

¹ The other novels with elements of fantasy are *The Show Girl* (1902), adapted from a comic musical by R. A. Barnett that involves a magical fez, and *A Sociable Ghost* (1903), an effective satire that shares some themes with *A Fair Californian*. For a more detailed discussion of these thematic similarities, see Balfour, “Afterword” (168–69).

² Unless otherwise noted, details from Harper’s early life are drawn from her unpublished memoir, *The Stormy Petrel*.

³ In Beth Bagwell’s book *Oakland*, Harper’s father is misidentified as Alfred (27).

proceedings, Harper contracted what she described as “typhoid pneumonia” followed by “severe rheumatism”; complications from these ailments forced her to walk on crutches for the remainder of her life (577). In a memoir written near the end of her life, Harper describes her initial despair:

Can you realize what that all meant? It meant that I, the strongest, most active woman alive, almost, was cut down like this, never to run, walk, dance, climb, work, never to have free use of the splendid strength God gave me, and all this had fallen upon me out of a clear sky I went in to the sick bed a strong, young, proud woman, proud of the great strength and powers of endurance beyond that given to the strongest of her sex, at about 27 years old, and came out of it a hopeless cripple at 29. (*Stormy* 589–91).

Following her divorce, Harper – a single mother with three children to support – decided to pursue a career as a professional writer (Harper, “Will I Ever” 1). Against heavy odds, she met with rapid success and was soon regularly contributing articles and poetry to the *Daily Alta California* and a variety of other newspapers across the United States (“Lady Journalist” 1). She also became a popular lecturer, known for her outspokenness, her biting humor, and her occasional treatment of erotic themes in her poetry (Cummins 120). Despite, or perhaps because of, her success, Harper was the frequent target of criticism from her male colleagues. For instance, one characterised her prose as “slush and drivel” (“Good Letters” 2), another lamented the “fathomless obscenity” of her verse (*The Wasp*), and a third offered the gratuitously cruel judgement that her “narrative hobbled horribly, as though it went on crutches” (“Letter from London” 28).

In 1873, the *Daily Alta California* and the *St. Louis Globe* dispatched Harper to Europe to report on the Vienna Exhibition as well as the other cities she visited *en route* (“Woman’s Writes” 3). While in London, she generated considerable controversy through two sharply critical articles about Ambrose Bierce, at the time a rising literary star residing in the English capital, as well as the English poet, novelist, and critic Algernon Charles Swinburne (Grenander 406–22; Sypher 5–14). While in Vienna, Harper met, and shortly thereafter married, Telemaque D’Apery. The Franco–Turkish son of a Napoleonic officer, D’Apery had risen from the ranks of the Ottoman army to become imperial treasurer. They moved to Constantinople, where they were implicated in an alleged plot against the Sultan. Although D’Apery managed to flee to Athens, Ottoman authorities arrested and imprisoned Harper until the American consul intervened to gain her release, whereupon she rejoined her husband (“Her Romantic” 6; Harper, “Letters: Number 28” 6). The couple eventually settled in New York City, and in 1877, Harper gave birth to a son, Tello (“Boy’s” 10). Harper’s writing career flourished for several years following her return to America. She continued to publish articles on a range of topics for a wide variety of newspapers and produced several novels and numerous short stories. When other work began to dry up, beginning about 1902 and over the course of roughly a decade thereafter, she turned out at least thirty novelisations of sensational plays for Ogilvie Publishing (“*Famille*”; “*Compleat*”). She died on 2 May 1915 at the age of 72 following injuries suffered in a fall on a train (“Olive Harper Dies” 15).

3. Olive Harper and “Economic Feminism”

As a professional journalist, Harper promoted the cause of working women. An article that appeared in several newspapers, including the *Ithaca Daily Journal* for 19 August 1887, reveals that for a time Harper served as secretary for the Women’s National Industrial League, or WNIL (G.G. 1), an organisation founded in 1882 by Charlotte Smith (1840–1917), the leading advocate for women’s economic rights during that period. Smith’s prescription for advancing the cause of women’s rights was at variance with that of the more well-known suffragists of the time, who, as their name suggests, concentrated almost exclusively upon winning the vote for women. Smith instead “considered money more vital than the vote, and equal access to training and fairly paid work the likeliest route to social equality for women” (Stanley 10). In particular, she championed a woman’s right to pursue any profession she chose and to be paid equitable wages for her labor, being among first to demand “equal pay for equal work” (Stanley 12). Harper’s work for the WNIL included gathering statistical data, which was shared with a senatorial committee investigating conditions of female labor, and contributing letters to the *New York World* and the *New York Mail and Express* “embodying information gathered at the time” (G.G. 1).

Harper and Smith may have initially met in 1876 at the US Centennial Celebration in Philadelphia, which Harper attended in her capacity as a correspondent for the *Daily Alta California* and other newspapers (Stanley 91–92; Harper, “Centennial Letter” 4; N. 4). However, long before that date, Harper had espoused ideas similar to those of Smith. As early as 1872 she dismissed what she called the “folly of female suffrage” (“Lectures” 2) and argued that women could more effectively exercise power through private influence over the men in their lives, particularly their husbands and sons (“Olive Harper’ as Lectress” 2). Nonetheless, Harper’s work with the WNIL may have served to sharpen and focus her thinking on women’s rights, especially those of working women. In a brief item in *The Cincinnati Daily Star* on February 6, 1877, the anonymous author notes that Harper “holds strongly to woman’s right to labor and to be paid for her labor” (“Personals” 2), and in 1893, Harper herself wrote that women’s “intellect and courage” made them fit to fulfill any occupation successfully, save those that required a man’s “strength and power” (Harper, “Our Lucky” 11).

Harper then, was in agreement with Smith on what can be seen as the core tenets of “economic feminism”: that women should enjoy equal opportunity to men in the workplace and that their sex should not bar them from gainful employment of their choice; that they should be paid equitably for their work; and that the wealth that women attained through such economic freedom, rather than the vote, was the real key to women achieving social equality with men.

In addition, Harper, like Smith, held generally traditional views on marriage and childrearing, despite the fact that both had endured difficult marital unions (Stanley 70, 79, 83). She sometimes humorously lamented the travails related to bearing and raising children (“The Centennial” 6). However, a fellow reporter who interviewed her in 1877 remarked, “I have rarely met a woman who seemed to feel so deeply the exalted privilege of being a mother” (N. 4), and such reverence is frequently expressed in Harper’s own writings. For

instance, in dismissing the need for women to vote, Harper remarks caustically, “I have got all the rights I want. I have the undeniable right to be a mother, and that the tyrant man can never usurp” (“Lectress” 2). And, in 1873, she asserted:

I love babies. I hated them until I had one of my own, and ever since I have loved every baby I have seen The woman whose heart does not respond to infantile tears or smiles, pains or pleasures – whose heart does not grow tender toward the clinging grasp of helpless baby fingers, is not worthy the name of woman. (“Loveableness” 330)

Likewise, Harper supported traditional marriage, and in an 1893 article entitled “Our Lucky Fair Sex,” argued that American wives were treated much better by their husbands than wives in Europe and Asia (11). Nevertheless, as the survivor of an abusive first marriage, Harper remained acutely sensitive to the mistreatment that wives sometimes faced at the hands of violent or irresponsible husbands (Harper, *Letters* 7), and her writings are spiced with occasional but highly caustic comments about men, especially husbands. For example, in a story concerning the Women’s Pavilion at the Centennial in Philadelphia in 1876, she writes:

Men are useless in all things, and they are an encumbrance on the face of the earth. We can get along far better without them. With their disappearance from the face of the globe would also disappear many more of the things we complain of, also, babies. Soul exalting thought! No husbands to abuse us and keep us down; no babies to bother us; no orders to obey but those of our own will. What a happy divine and glorious world it would be! What a millennium this mundane sphere would be and how everlastingly would it last; this state of peace! (“The Centennial” 6)

4. Economic Feminism in *A Fair Californian*

Olive Harper was very much a working professional who wrote primarily to support herself and her family. Nevertheless, Harper regularly infused her own views into her original fiction, and, along with other of her ideas and interests, her economic feminist beliefs are very evident in *A Fair Californian*. The novel is narrated by Dolores, a young woman from San Francisco who is in love with Roy Lewis, handsome of face but infirm in health. When Dolores is informed by Roy that he cannot marry her because she would be unable to support him and his aged parents, she sets out to seek a fortune prospecting in Mexico. She succeeds in locating a cave filled with enormous quantities of gold, but exploring further passes through an increasingly fantastic series of subterranean landscapes until she stumbles upon a civilisation located at the centre of the earth.

The population of this Sacred City of the Seven is divided into seven houses. One of these – the House of the All – rules over the remaining six, each of which represents some aspect of their society. The denizens of this city have achieved immortality through their mastery of advanced science. In doing so, however, they have become estranged from their souls, which have been condemned to suffer a perpetual cycle of tortured incarnations in the bodies of

various life forms on worlds scattered across the universe. Meanwhile, after thousands of years, immortality has become a burden to the city’s occupants. They seek only to reunite with their souls and achieve salvation in the afterlife. They recruit Dolores to help them achieve this end, and upon being administered drugs that allow her astral form to range across the cosmos, she embarks upon a series of journeys to other worlds to retrieve their souls. As each soul is reunited with its original body, that body quickly ages and dies, and the soul ascends, presumably, to heaven.

Once her task is completed, however, Dolores learns from Clarice, another surface-dweller who had earlier been abducted and brought to the city, that she has been cruelly deceived. The seemingly benevolent residents of the city had in actuality been evil and debauched worshippers of the demon-god Shaquina, to whom they regularly offered human sacrifices. No sooner does Dolores learn this than Shaquina destroys the city by a massive earthquake, and she and Clarice barely succeed in escaping with a fortune in jewels. Shortly after they reach the surface, Clarice loses her reason and dies from hunger and thirst. Dolores, however, through remarkable resourcefulness and determination, survives an arduous journey across a barren landscape and, with her newfound riches, manages to return to civilisation and marry her beloved Roy.

In the novel, Harper expresses both sides of her feelings about marriage, men, and children. Her more positive views on these topics are represented by Dolores, whose main goal is to marry Roy and, it can be surmised, bear and raise children. Conversely, when Dolores questions a female denizen about the absence of marriage and reproduction in the City of the Seven, the response she receives closely mirrors Harper’s scathing remarks at the Philadelphia Centennial:

What is maternity but agony? What is carnal love but a lowering of the spiritual nature? What is wifely affection but degradation of will, and delivery of all one’s finest sensibilities into the hands of another, a complete surrendering of all the holiest thoughts and divinest aspirations into the hands of another to defile if he so wills to do?

What is it to be subject to the will and caprice of mortal man? If men were angels, it would still be choosing the better part to live as do we. (*Fair* 77)

Harper’s more specific concerns about the abuse of women at the hands of men are evident when Dolores, in her astral travels, visits a planet populated by ape-like beings and witnesses the following:

I floated along aimlessly, and found myself inside one of the houses, and there saw a strange-looking little creature, whether human or animal I could not at first determine. He looked so like a monkey, that I thought he must be one; and then, again, he looked so like a man, that I thought he was one.

I watched in expectation of seeing him do something which would determine what he was, when there entered another one of the same species; and in her hands she bore a tray of fruits, which she set down in front of him, at the same time standing at a respectful distance, as if fearing that he was about to throw something at her.

This gave me the opinion that they were human; and I reflected on the strange fact, that, in no matter what country, the male always asserts himself as the stronger of the two. After the man – if man it was – had eaten all he wanted, he deliberately emptied all that remained on the ground; for these places had no floors, being little more than thatched huts. The woman gathered the scattered fruit, and made off with it to a corner of the garden, where she devoured the remains....

I ... flew away towards the other habitations There was a man and a woman in each place; and everywhere the man seemed to find his only pleasure in doing something to annoy the woman, and to show the utter contempt in which he held her. (109–10)

Further exploration reveals a more violent tableau:

At last I came to a place where there were some twenty or thirty of the most abominable and ferocious looking monkey-men I had seen yet; and they were making a hideous howling noise, and striking with clubs and sticks at something which lay moaning piteously on the ground. Instantly I flew there, and saw a female of their species, lying bleeding and quivering under their cruel blows; and, as I drew near, they rained their blows upon her, still more fiercely; each one breaking a bone, or cutting or tearing a deep gash, from which the blood gushed in torrents. (111)

Harper's opinions on women's political and economic rights also find expression in the novel. In the City of the Seven, women enjoy a higher status than those in the surface world. The exclusively-female "House of the Under-World" – associated with art, beauty, and all the "grains and fruits which rise out of the earth" (86) – shares equal standing with the male houses, excepting only the House of the All, and occupies an equally prominent place in a magnificent procession of the houses that Dolores witnesses:

Then came the Priestess of the House of the Under-World, – out of which comes all that graces life, – and her maidens; and their gleaming white garments had sewn upon them in shining threads the growing, ripening grains; the different fruits; the symbols of plenty, of art and beauty, and the production of the wonderful pottery which they wrought from the clay and calcined bones, endowing each with a soul which emanated from their own like bubbles from a pipe.

The robe of the priestess was so scintillant with light from its jewels, that the eyes ached and burned from one glance.

Each one of her maidens carried in one hand a garland of flowers, and in the other a golden torch, which, instead of holding flame, emitted the most exquisite fragrance. (81)

In addition, the chief priestess of the "sisterhood" (79) of the Under-World occupies a position on the "Supreme Council," along with the chief priests of the male houses. Nevertheless, just as Harper was willing to cede political primacy to men in her own world, ultimate authority in the City of the Seven rests in the hands of an all-powerful patriarch. As Dolores explains, "all [are] under the control of, and owing obedience to, the Master of the Great House, The All, who is the recognised head of the whole cult of the Sacred Seven in one. He occupies a position in their religion, almost as supreme as the Pope of Rome

in his” (104). The awe and reverence with which this patriarchal figure is regarded is evident from his first appearance:

His stature was unusually tall, and his face and form god-like. Instead of wearing a crown of flowers on his head, he wore a crown with seven points, all separate, and yet all part of the superior seventh, which was a mass of blazing jewels.

His robe was of a royal scarlet; that color which in ancient days was called Tyrian purple. On the upper part, over the chest, it was covered with one splendid mass of jewels, in form of a sun, surrounded by crescent moons; and these in turn were bordered by gleaming stars. The centre of the sun was of one enormous yellow topaz, and the rays were alternate diamonds and topaz. The moons were formed of pale bluish-white diamonds, and the stars of the same. On the border of his robe and tunic were embroidered in jet black, mystic letters, and what looked like flames also in black. On his bare arms he wore intertwined serpents of jewels, which threw off rays of every color. On his feet he wore sandals, with jeweled straps. (81)

The economic standing of women in the city is, similarly, largely reflective of Harper’s economic feminist beliefs. The social system in the city is essentially socialistic. Though there is a rigid division of labor in the City of the Seven, which Harper would have found unacceptable in her own world, both women and men are expected to be productive members of society, and their labor is afforded equal value. Interestingly, it is the men who prepare and serve meals, although, Dolores notes, those who serve are as “worthy to take their places at the tables as those who were seated there” (*Fair* 74). On the other hand, women are bound to responsibilities such as pottery making, needlework, and embroidery. Neither set of occupations signifies any degree of subjugation to the other; in fact, as related by Dolores, the making of pottery carries a religious significance vital to the salvation of the inhabitants of the city:

The priestesses made the sacred pottery, weaving and kneading a portion of the owner’s soul in with the clay, so that, when that person died, the water-jar and plate must be broken, to set their souls free to go to their future abiding-place in heaven, where they were to have such joys as words would fail to paint. (104)

The clearest manifestation of Harper’s economic feminist ideas, however, can be found in the character of Dolores, who, like her creator, combines a mawkish Victorian sentimentality with a steely resolve and extraordinary resourcefulness. Although Dolores’s chief aim – winning the man she loves – is the same as that faced by the heroines of countless Victorian melodramas, her means of achieving that end are decidedly unconventional and dovetail neatly with the economic feminist contention that women can best achieve their goals by gaining financial independence. In considering that lack of wealth is the source of her dilemma, Dolores straightforwardly concludes: “gold would cure that” (33). Or, as she vows to Roy:

I will be rich, Roy, I swear it. I will make money somehow; and then there will be no obstacle I will go out alone into the world, and single-handed, with no aid save determination and integrity, and I will conquer fortune. (39)

In recounting Dolores' effort to gain riches so she may marry Roy, Harper, consciously or not, reverses the well-established trope, common at least since medieval chivalric literature, of the young, unproven male who embarks on a quest for fortune and glory to prove his worthiness to the fair maiden. This same trope has been employed in a number of lost-race novels, including H. Rider Haggard's *People of the Mist* (1894) and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912).

Most significantly, in her search for wealth, Dolores proves herself to be the intelligent and highly competent woman who, as Harper and Smith contended, ought to possess the right to pursue any occupation she wished. In the novel, Dolores asserts that when facing difficult circumstances, she is "cool and calculating" (*Fair* 47), with a "heart of rock" (100), and guided by the "practical side of [her] nature" (148), characteristics more often attributed to the masculine heroes of fantasy literature. Harper allows Dolores to display these qualities at several points, carefully detailing, for instance, her meticulous and prudent efforts to prepare herself for her quest, her arduous, solitary journey through the harsh Mexican wilderness in search of riches, and her daring astral travels.

The character of Clarice stands in strong counterpoint to that of Dolores. Harper's portrayal of Clarice as vulnerable and dependent – a female stereotype that would have been quite familiar to readers of popular Victorian literature – serves to bring Dolores's fortitude and competence into sharper relief. Clarice had originally been designated for the cosmic rescue mission that Dolores eventually accomplished, but failed, according to the Master of the Great House, because "she lacked the essential of courage" (*Fair* 127), and she is regularly depicted as trembling (131), shivering (134), crying (141), fretting (141), and clinging to Dolores "with fear" (132). In their hasty preparations for escape from the City of the Seven and in their tribulations once they reach the surface, Dolores assumes the typically masculine roles of provider and protector of her "poor little frail" companion (*Fair* 141). Despite these careful ministrations, Clarice rapidly degenerates into a delusional, childlike state, and finally perishes, leaving Dolores to carry on alone.

Dolores's skill, intelligence, bravery, and perseverance are most evident in the novel's late chapters that recount her grim, solitary struggle for survival following the death of Clarice. Here, the tone shifts from dream-like fantasy to gritty realism, as Dolores contends against hunger and thirst amid a desolate and arid surface landscape. To illustrate her hero's remarkable qualities, Harper relates at some length Dolores's tireless efforts to obtain food and to escape the remote valley in which she has found herself. After finally locating a river in which she can at least quench her thirst, Dolores remarks, "I was always, even as a little child, famous for finding means to get out of difficulties," and then goes on to relate in exacting detail how she unravels the threads of a mantle that Clarice had worn as a head covering, braids the threads into a sturdy line, uses her teeth to fashion a hook from a pin that had fastened her skirt, chipping a front tooth in the process, and adding parenthetically, "This did not worry me at the time, though afterwards I found I was still woman enough to regret it." Dolores then digs up worms with a sharp stick, baits her crude hook, weights the line with a small stone, and (after repeated failed attempts over several hours) finally lands "three fair-sized fish" (147–48).

Dolores’s ingenuity and doggedness are even more evident as she devises her means of escape from the valley via the river. She fashions a dugout from a fallen tree-trunk by an arduous, two-month-long process of gradually burning and scraping out the interior. Having completed her vessel, Dolores shows equal proficiency and tenacity in provisioning and launching it. An example of how Harper describes this process demonstrates her attention to illustrating the varied strengths of her protagonist:

Now, my next undertaking was to get my boat into the river, and to keep it from floating away while I would be stocking it with my scanty store of provisions, and building a sort of stove there; for I could not bear to go off and leave my fire, which I looked upon as my only friend. I remembered having seen a vine of fibrous-looking stems some distance away; and I went there, and found that it would answer my purpose, as it was tough and flexible, and certainly long enough; but I could neither break it, nor tear it up by the roots, and I had to sit down deliberately with a stone, and rub and scratch my way through it. Before I had it cut through, and had its lateral branches trimmed off, it was almost dark, and I had a heavy weight of its coils to reach the boat with. I fastened it to one of the roots, which, having grown upward, I had left as a sort of stern-post, and found that it would easily reach a tree which grew upon the bank. Therefore I could secure my boat while getting ready to trust myself to the current

I laid a thick bed of grass in the bottom [of the dugout], and fixed a place for my fish, which, however, it was not my intention to put in until the last thing: then I set about hunting for a pole of some kind, that would assist me in the management of my not unhandsome boat. I was fortunate enough to find a sapling that was just what I wanted, but it took me three whole days to trim off the branches and get it cut down. There was one branch that had somehow grown downward; and this made a sort of natural boat-hook out of it, which I felt would be of great service.

At last the day came that my boat was to float or sink; and I dug and scraped away the soil, and the current of the river helped me, so that the last foot of earth gave way, and I had the satisfaction of seeing it rock gently on the water. (*Fair* 150–51)

Prior to the 20th century, lost-race fantasies written by women were not all that uncommon, but those featuring a strong, central female character were, at least up to the late 20th century, much more scarce. One is hard-pressed to find a single example in 19th-century fantasy literature of a woman who exhibits the same strength of character as does Dolores in *A Fair Californian*. The female protagonist of a roughly contemporary lost-race novel, *The Day of Resis* (1897) by Lillian Frances Mentor, displays some initiative and courage early on, but as the novel progresses, gradually assumes the more deferential and dependent characteristics of a typical Victorian heroine. Similarly, in the early chapters of the feminist utopian novel *Mizora: A Prophecy* (1880–1881) by Mary E. Bradley Lane, the female narrator exhibits considerable toughness and perseverance in escaping a Russian prison and making her way across the Siberian tundra, but thereafter serves as little more than a passive observer of the marvels of an underground civilisation that she discovers on her journey.

5. *A Fair Californian* and Feminist Utopian Literature

In addition to resilient female narrators, *A Fair Californian* shares other points in common with *Mizora* and other works of feminist utopian fiction that proliferated during the period. These early feminist utopian fantasies accompanied the so-called first-wave of feminism that emerged in the second half of the 19th century and continued until 1920, when women achieved voting rights in the US. They reflected many of the same feminist ideals and progressive policies advocated by those in the women's movement (Lewes 1, 42–48; Lough 1199–200; Kessler, *Daring* ix–x, xx; Lake 1277).

In several of its aspects, the all-female utopia described in Lane's *Mizora* bears a marked resemblance to Harper's City of the Seven. It is a scientifically advanced, socialistic community that has eliminated the social ills that beset the surface world. Utopias featuring one or more of these characteristics had also appeared in a number of other feminist utopian works prior to the publication of Harper's novel (Kessler, *Daring* xvii, xix, xxiv, Lake 1278; Lough 1200). Such commonalities suggest that Harper borrowed liberally from earlier utopian writers, just as she did from previous speculative literature in general. For example, Dolores's method of travelling across the cosmos with the aid of a consciousness-expanding elixir is quite similar to that employed by the female hero of Marie Corelli's best-selling fantasy, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, published just three years prior to Harper's novel.

In spite of these similarities, there are fundamental differences between *A Fair Californian* and feminist utopian literature. Some of these differences reflect the disparities between Harper's economic feminist beliefs and the broader goals of the more mainstream feminist movement of the period. Feminist utopian writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries routinely posited the moral superiority of women over men and were virtually unanimous in viewing patriarchy as the primary source of the various problems – poverty, class conflict, war, and the like – that plagued their own societies (Pearson and Pope 266, 268; Kessler, *Daring* xviii; Lewes 91). In their works, women have liberated themselves from male domination and established communities “within which the female protagonists are able to reach their full potential” (Lough 1195). These utopian visions range from egalitarian societies wherein the sexes are fully integrated, such as Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant's *Unveiling a Parallel* (1893) and Elizabeth Corbett's “My Visit to Utopia” (1869); mixed-sex societies in which women have established some measure of dominance over men, as in Corbett's *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (1889), where men are barred from holding political office; and, finally, exclusively female societies such as those depicted in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) and *Mizora*, in both of which women reproduce through a process of parthenogenesis. In all cases, it is through female agency that the problems resulting from male dominance have been eradicated, and it is women who are responsible for all of the positive attributes of the communities depicted. Briefly stated, these utopias are utopian due to female influence.

Harper, on the other hand, did not fully share the utopianists' unqualifiedly negative view of patriarchy, and although women share equal status with most of the male citizens, all in the City of the Seven are ruled by a patriarch. Further, though the City of the Seven displays many of the usual characteristics of fictional utopias – advanced science, absence of disease, social harmony, and the like –

Harper offers nothing to suggest that the women of the city are primarily responsible for this state of affairs. It can be seen, then, that – leaving aside the fact that it ultimately proves to be a dystopia – the City of the Seven does not match the criteria for a feminist utopia implicitly established within the genre.

Other differences between *A Fair Californian* and contemporary feminist utopian works stem from the fact that Harper's intentions in writing the novel were markedly at variance with those of the utopian writers. Brian W. Aldiss has referred to utopian writers as "moralists who use the fantastic to make their point" (68), and since Plato composed *The Republic* in the 5th century B.C.E., utopian writers have employed their visions of a perfect society to illuminate the imperfections of their own, as well as to serve as a model for which to strive. The feminist utopian writers of Harper's time shared these aims. Rachel DuPlessis, among others, has noted the "didactic and hortatory" nature of feminist utopian fantasies (197; see also Kessler, *Daring* xv–xvi; Lewes 1). Collectively, she categorises such works as "apologues" (DuPlessis 262), which Carol Farley Kessler has succinctly defined as "teaching stories that show us, as readers, how we might change our world" ("Fables" 189). Kessler adds elsewhere that the feminist utopian authors who wrote during the first wave of feminism "fully expected their fiction to effect social evolution, if not revolution" (Kessler, *Daring* xv–xviii; see also DuPlessis 179, 197; Lewes 19).

Lanes's *Mizora* serves as a good illustration of the heavily didactic nature of much feminist utopian fiction. The story concerns an aristocratic Russian noblewoman who, as discussed earlier, escapes from Siberian exile and subsequently discovers an all-female utopia deep beneath the surface of the arctic. The novel is largely expository, and consists mainly of a dialogue between the residents of the city and the visitor, a form common in such works (Lewes 12; Lake 1299). This dialogue is intended to convey the intellectual, political, economic, social, and cultural superiority of the exclusively female Mizoran civilisation over the male-dominated world from which the narrator has fled. The following passage, in which the narrator envisions reshaping her own masculine-dominated society in the model of the feminist, enlightened *Mizora*, is typical of the tone and thrust of the novel:

The poor should be given work, and justly paid for it, instead of being supported by charity. The charity that had fostered indolence in its mistaken efforts to do good, should be employed to train poverty to skillful labor and economy in living. And what a world of good that one measure would produce! The poor should possess exactly the same educational advantages that were supplied to the rich. In this *one* measure, if I could only make it popular, I would see the golden promise of the future of my country. "Educate your poor and they will work out their own salvation. Educated Labor can dictate its rights to Capital. (ch. 10)

Like the feminist utopian writers, Harper was genuinely interested in social reform and, as noted earlier, regularly infused her own social and political views into her original fiction, including *A Fair Californian*. Nevertheless, unlike them, she did not have as her exclusive, or even foremost, aims to promote feminist ideals and foster social change. Writing was Harper's livelihood, and, almost certainly, her primary motive in writing *A Fair Californian* was to produce an engaging narrative that would generate substantial sales and income. Consequently, the novel is less forcefully didactic and not so narrowly

focused as most contemporary feminist utopian literature. The central point of feminist utopian fiction is to convey its authors' feminist ideas. By contrast, Harper's economic feminist views are just one of several personal concerns and interests that are evident in the novel. Indeed, while her economic feminist ideas are conspicuous, the author's liberal religious views and her deep distrust of "priestcraft" figure even more prominently in the narrative.⁴ It is the profound deceitfulness and corruption of the priesthood, for instance, and nothing related to the status or treatment of women, that is presented as the City of the Seven's chief evil when its dystopic nature is finally revealed.

It is likely that Harper hoped that at least some discerning readers would understand and appreciate the points about a woman's capabilities that she was making in the novel. Nonetheless, in this regard, her ambitions seem to have been more modest than those of the feminist utopian writers, and she likely did not envision that her fiction would serve to bring about the sweeping social change, much less the "revolution", for which the feminist utopian writers strove (Kessler, *Daring* xv–xviii). Accordingly, despite some oblique criticisms scattered throughout *A Fair Californian*, Harper offers no systematic, thoroughgoing critique of her own society or a blueprint for a more perfect world. Rather, after witnessing suffering and injustice on all the worlds she has visited in the course of her astral travels, Dolores adopts a tone of resignation:

...is there not, in all this great universe, some celestial spot where there live mortals who are yet superior to mankind? Is our people the acme of all human beings? These men and women who prey upon each other, who work evil to themselves and each other, who quarrel and kill and steal, and abuse poor dumb and helpless creatures, are they the best of God's human creations? If not, and you know of another world wherein peace, love, charity, and purity exist, divide my soul from its body now before you go, and let me stay there, and not go back to our world again. (132)

Finally, consistent with her intention to attract and entertain a wide reading audience, Harper places much more emphasis upon plot and character than did the feminist utopian writers, for whom "character and plot function mainly as the bearers of propositions or moral arguments, whose function is to persuade" (DuPlessis 179). And although Harper employs the character of Dolores to convey her convictions regarding the capabilities of women, she does so in a more artful way than most utopian writers. Duplessis remarks that in feminist utopian fiction, "characters may be flat because they function as manifestos, bringing undiscussable messages", and "ideas, not the character, are well-rounded" (179; see also Lewes 1). By contrast, the carefully drawn character of Dolores is much more than a simple manifesto, and emerges from the pages of the novel as a full-blooded and well-rounded human being.

6. Conclusion

Reflecting, as it does, Harper's economic feminist beliefs, *A Fair Californian* helps to shed light on a branch of 19th-century feminism that, while less known

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of Harper's religious views and how they are reflected in the novel, see Balfour, "Afterword" (167–169).

today than the suffragist movement, was nonetheless significant in its time and still extremely relevant today. The novel also features one of the strongest and most compelling female characters in all of 19th-century speculative fiction. That Harper intended Dolores to serve as a vehicle through which she could express her deep convictions regarding the capabilities of women is demonstrated by the great care, attention, and detail that Harper devotes to portraying Dolores’s numerous strengths. Dolores epitomises the intelligent and skillful woman that economic feminists argued could compete on equal terms with males in the workplace. Moreover, in exhibiting great courage and unshakeable resolve in surmounting several daunting obstacles, Dolores proves herself a character worthy of her creator, who overcame an abusive marriage, disabling illness, and scorn from male colleagues to carve out a successful career as a pioneering female journalist, poet, and novelist.

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