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Corra Harris's *The Recording Angel* (1912):  
Why is One of the Best Comic Novels  
Between *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*  
and *As I Lay Dying* Out of Print?

BY PETER SCHMIDT

In literary history, writers of comic fiction tend to be enjoyed when they're living and gradually forgotten once they're dead. There are exceptions, of course, including Twain, O'Connor, and Welty. More representative are the several failed attempts to entice new readers to the sparkling and shrewd mid-twentieth century novels of Dawn Powell, though recently, with the help of handsome new editions, these efforts may finally have succeeded. In light of Powell's worthy resurrection, or the respect now given F. Scott Fitzgerald's stories, the fate of the early twentieth century novelist Corra Harris is especially galling. Harris is the author of over a dozen works of prose fiction of sharply varying quality, though four of her first five novels—*A Circuit Rider's Wife* (1910), *Eve's Second Husband* (1911), *The Recording Angel* (1912), and *The Co-Citizens* (1915)—are satires very worthy of rediscovery by a twenty-first-century audience. Popular enough in her day to be a featured contributor of serialized novels to *The Saturday Evening Post*, Corra Harris's current identity, such as it is, rests on her first novel, *A Circuit Rider's Wife*, the only work of hers returned to print. Harris's fate is all

the more distressing because she is Southern, a region of the country whose sense of humor in fiction has not exactly gone unnoticed.<sup>1</sup>

Harris's third novel, *The Recording Angel*, is in the judgment of the majority of her few readers her deepest and most audacious. In fact, a good case can be made that *The Recording Angel* is the best comic novel published in the United States between Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930). Its one real rival is probably Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925). I make no claim that Corra Harris is a novelist of Twain's or Faulkner's stature. And her comedy hardly remains as sharp and relevant as Loos's satire of sex, social climbing, and celebrity. If we seek important predecessors in fiction for the later flowering of Southern comic geniuses such as Faulkner, Welty, and O'Connor, we must turn not only to Twain, Brer Rabbit's antics, E. D. E. N. Southworth, and the rowdy "Southwest humor" shenanigans of writers such as George Washington Harris. Any rethinking of the traditions of Southern humor in prose should also make a place for Corra Harris.

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<sup>1</sup> Corra Harris's key novels are *The Circuit Rider's Wife* (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus Company, 1910; repr., Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); *The Recording Angel* (New York: Doubleday Page, 1912); and *The Co-Citizens* (New York: Doubleday Page/Grosset & Dunlap, 1915). For other commentary on Harris, see Catherine O. Badura, "Gender Identity and Social Consciousness in the Works of Corra White Harris" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1996); Karen Coffing, "Corra Harris and *The Saturday Evening Post*: Southern Domesticity Conveyed to a National Audience, 1900–1930," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 79 (Summer 1995): 367–93; Grace Toney Edwards, foreword to *A Circuit Rider's Wife*, by Corra Harris (Athens: Georgia University Press, 1998) ix–xxix; Stephen Enniss, "The Circuit Rider's Wife and the 'Hobo Novelist': The Corra Harris/Jack London Correspondence," *Resources for American Literary Study* 15.2 (Autumn 1985): 197–204; Wayne Mixon, "Traditionalist and Iconoclast: Corra Harris and Southern Writing, 1900–1920," in *Developing Dixie: Modernization in a Traditional Society*, ed. Winfred B. Moore, Jr., Joseph F. Tripp, and Lyon G. Tyler, Jr. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 235–44.

L. Moody Simms, Jr., has published a host of valuable short articles on Harris over the years: "Corra Harris on Southern and Northern Fiction," *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Culture* 27 (1974): 475–81; "Corra Harris on the Declining Influence of Thomas Nelson Page," *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Culture* 28 (1975): 505–509; "Corra Harris on 'Literalism' in Fiction," *Resources for American Literary Study* 9 (1979): 213–17; "Corra Harris on the Decline of Southern Writing," *Southern Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the South* 18 (1979): 247–50; and "Corra Harris, William Peterfield Trent, and Southern Writing," *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Culture* 32 (1979): 641–50.

In much of her prose (both non-fiction and fiction), Corra Harris appears to be very conservative and moralistic, though with a witty bite to her judgments that always makes her work enjoyable to read on any subject regardless of whether you agree with her or not (rather like Evelyn Waugh, in this regard, or Dorothy Parker). The element of Corra Harris's fiction that has aged best is not her use of the "education in submission" motifs that mark one aspect of nineteenth-century romance novel conventions. Rather, it is her rebelliousness, at those times in her work when she claims the role of odd and witty outsider free to comment on anything and everything (somewhat like the Recording Angel in her best novel, as we shall see). Congenitally, Harris was closer to the "dark" heroine featured in the second plot in much popular woman's fiction, as opposed to the primary heroine who eventually overcomes her oppressors through virtuous passivity rather than action and mockery.

Harris was a bright and rebellious child from a middle-class white Georgia family with a history of eccentricity on both sides, especially her father's. Her biographer, John Talmadge, tells us that as a young girl Corra Harris showed a precocious skepticism toward the "good" models of female behavior touted by her mother and other authority figures.<sup>2</sup> In her early career as a circuit-rider Methodist minister's wife, Harris "derived more amusement than irritation from the carping of church stewards and the gossip their big-bosomed wives shared with her. Also, she was rebellious enough to take pleasure in the local sinners so roundly criticized by the self-appointed saints."<sup>3</sup> My favorite anecdote from her early career involves Bishop Atticus Haygood, whose liberal, even radical views on race relations and education placed him to the left of many others who rose to power as part of the New South. Corra Harris's husband was temporarily teaching at Haygood's Emory University in Oxford, Georgia. His wife "immediately set about becoming a member of the community and college," but was also clearly bored with the

<sup>2</sup> John E. Talmadge, *Corra Harris: Lady of Purpose* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1968) 5.

<sup>3</sup> Talmadge, *Corra Harris: Lady of Purpose*, 10–11.

highly circumscribed social role faculty wives were expected to play.<sup>4</sup> One night when her husband was away, Harris put on a pair of her husband's trousers, blacked on a moustache, and borrowed a cigar. She strolled over to the good Reverend Haygood's home and rang the bell. Legend has it that this famous liberal was "horrified"—not just at the sight of cross-dressing on his threshold but also that the perpetrator was a faculty spouse.<sup>5</sup>

Harris's satiric novels contain much of the same sense of irreverence, shrewd psychology, and impeccable comic timing. They also come near the beginning of her career and brim over with the heady excitement of a smart and feisty young writer who is just starting out. *The Recording Angel* in particular effervesces with confidence and ambition. The comic conceit of the novel is clever indeed. As Talmadge tells us, Harris's correspondence with *Saturday Evening Post* editor George Horace Lorimer "reveals that in the fall of 1910 she hit upon the idea of the blind secretary of a woman's club who 'jots down mentally all the members' doings and failings.' Later she enlarged her plot to include the ladies' trifling husbands."<sup>6</sup>

The story is set in the small Georgia town of Ruckersville in the late nineteenth century. A unrepentant prodigal son, Jim Bone, returns rich after many years away and resolves not just to change both the town's economy and its culture but also to give "the citizens of Ruckersville the opportunity of seeing themselves as others saw them."<sup>7</sup> He teams up with an older woman, Amy White, who has been anonymously publishing newspaper columns that portray the townspeople to themselves in ways that force them to confront all the lies they tell themselves about why they behave as they do. These columns become enormously popular in Ruckersville but have one unintended effect—everyone reads them

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<sup>4</sup> Talmadge, *Corra Harris: Lady of Purpose*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Talmadge, *Corra Harris: Lady of Purpose*, 14, 153n15.

<sup>6</sup> Talmadge, *Corra Harris: Lady of Purpose*, 107.

<sup>7</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 295.

but refuses to admit doing so, and though readers recognize the follies of others, each reader tends to refuse to see his or her own. To change this, Bone and White get together with a playwright in New York to surprise the townspeople with a publicly performed play based on the newspaper columns. The townspeople are tricked into attending the performance because it is billed as an innocuous charitable entertainment. The three troublemakers hope that at last Ruckersvillians will be forced to see each other's provincialisms and delusions onstage; they envision not so much a theater of catharsis as of public embarrassment. They hope to stage an event that will at last create an opening for social change and self-knowledge—in short, for real New South reforms.

I would like to discuss *The Recording Angel* further by emphasizing several interlinked themes. The first is the novel's sheer brio of language and incident—for no claims about the novel's importance can hold up if it cannot be shown that the author knows how to shape a sentence and a scene. Second is the novel's affectionate satire of gender—both Harris's portrayal of particular characters' behavior and her larger analysis of the rituals and narratives, including those derived from "literature"—that encode stereotypes of male and female identity with social authority. Third is the novel's satiric take on the ideology of the New South, for toward this end the novel crafts some of its wittiest sallies and takes some of its greatest risks. Finally, I look closely at the deeply mysterious and unconventional portraits of artists and works of art that the novel presents. On the one hand, Harris portrays art as something miraculous—as something able to make its audience see its blindness and delusion. On the other hand, art is shown to exist in a way society cannot see or understand—a form marginalized rather than dominant, composite rather than pure, thoroughly misrecognized and misunderstood rather than easily legible.

*The Recording Angel* displays in abundance Corra Harris's way with words. She has a perfect ear for parodying popular romance conventions. Consider these sentences from a passage describing a thirty-five-year-old woman's joy at finally accepting a proposal of marriage: "No magnetism

is physical. It is always spiritual, either good or bad. Her heart hovered over him like a dove with sweetly folded wings.”<sup>8</sup> This and other details of the scene might be interpreted as utterly conventional, except for a number of other sentences Harris has intermixed with the kind of sentences quoted above. The woman’s lover, for instance, is named Tony and is described as “enjoying probably for the first time in his life that peculiar and most nearly divine inspiration a man ever has, that of lying to a woman in the rhetorical vocabulary of love, and especially of confessing his sins to her in a manner to wring and tie her heart to him forever.”<sup>9</sup> Harris here deftly skewers one of the dominant plot conventions of sentimental romance fiction, such as Augusta Evans’s hugely popular *St. Elmo* (1867), where the steadfast heroine must reform the novel’s male protagonist, a rogue and a roué so dangerous only French words can describe him. Unlike Evans, however, who chronicles her heroine’s virtues with mind-numbing earnestness, Harris’s description of her scene’s heroine (whose name, by the way, is Mildred) is delightfully tongue-in-cheek: “she experienced a singular ease which extended through all of her members to the last pinfeather of her immortal spirit.”<sup>10</sup>

Harris’s ear is no less sure when she focuses on social rituals other than marriage proposals. Readers of *The Recording Angel* will be pleased to discover that Twain’s Emmeline Grangerford in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* now has a companion—in fact, a whole set of companions, for Harris’s indefatigable Emmelines have gathered together a “Woman’s Club” that meets regularly in Mrs. Fanning-Rucker’s elegant parlor to plan projects of social and cultural uplift and commiserate over each other’s rejection letters for their literary endeavors. As the narrator wryly puts it, “Ruckersville was a literary centre. Most of the inhabitants over the age of sixteen were orphaned authors—that is to say, authors

<sup>8</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 255.

<sup>9</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 254.

<sup>10</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 255.

without publishers... The South is the only section of the country which still produces this kind of serenely uncommercial genius.”<sup>11</sup> Mildred Percy (the Mildred of the proposal scene) has a poem that eloquently expresses the uses of adversity in love; it would have made proud the ghost of Miss Grangerford:

The Heart Bowed Down  
I sit and weep the whole day long.  
Unhappy is my lot;  
No balm can heal my bleeding heart,  
For, oh! he loves me not.<sup>12</sup>

The narrator adds that this poem “was written in a languishing chirography, with supine l’s and t’s, and little i’s that gaped at the bottom with tearless griefs”—and, lest Harris’s allusions to Twain (and Poe) be missed, “There is nothing a woman may enjoy more than her own broken heart, especially when it inspires the tintinabulation of funeral-bell rhymes.”<sup>13</sup>

Amy White’s play and Corra Harris’s novel convey the belief in equal rights, for men’s behavior is no less intriguing and comic to the Recording Angel. Many of the all-male scenes take place in Ruckersville’s watering hole, the Bilfire Saloon, or in Daddisman’s Hotel lobby, or around the counters of the town’s short row of stores, such as Magnis & Luster’s, where “purchases were never made till the late afternoon, and only then when every ingenuity to cheat the other had failed between merchant and farmer.”<sup>14</sup> In the novel’s male-marked territory, Harris also adeptly uses animal references to mock buffoonery, as in the saloon scene below, which concerns a Southern gentleman who never lets anyone forget that he once was in a duel and fought in the War:

<sup>11</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 249.

<sup>13</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 249.

<sup>14</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 127.



This happened long ago, but upon the reputation accruing to him from the incident he had walked the streets of Ruckersville for nearly forty years, dragging first one wing and then the other, so to speak, and thrashing his gamecock spurs.... He had an amiable thirst for blood glory. This fate being denied him, he refused to give up his ghost peacefully in bed...[spending time instead] in Bilfire's saloon explaining how he came to be shot in the back instead of in front, where every gentleman is entitled to receive his bullets.<sup>15</sup>

In *The Recording Angel*, Harris insistently places her comic analysis of gender and culture in an even broader context: the romance of the Lost Cause and the New South. This novel was first called to my attention because it was quoted and praised by Edward L. Ayers in his history *The Promise of the New South*, where he cited Harris's satiric response to cemetery-decoration and statue-raising ceremonies honoring the Confederate soldiers that suddenly flourished in towns and cities throughout the South beginning in the 1890s.<sup>16</sup> Harris's irreverence in the face of such pieties involved taking quite a few risks with her audience, even though Harris stressed that what she mocked was not the veterans but the sentimental pieties in which heroic men dead and living were enshrouded. Her hero Jim Bone treats all the South's pieties about itself, not just its Confederate statues, with irreverence, and he embodies Harris's portrait of what a genuinely New South might be, not what it has deluded itself that it is. Despite *The Recording Angel's* affinities with a novel such as Mark Twain's and Charles Dudley Warner's *The Gilded Age*, Bone is not a charlatan, just a practical idealist. Bone does nothing less than shake the town of Ruckersville—both its Old South

<sup>15</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 25–26.

<sup>16</sup> Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 335.

and its New South delusions—to its foundations. He begins by tearing down the decrepit old mansion of the Ruckers, the town's founding family:

The whole town was in a state of hysteria. When you have been in a Rip Van Winkle trance for forty years, you are apt to awaken with a start at the sound of hammer and saw and incessant clinking of stonemasons in your very midst. It was as if Bone had poked a long stick into an old hornets' nest and ruthlessly wagged it to and fro...It was as if Bone had broken into the underground mausoleum of Ruckersville and was dragging up the very foundation of traditions.<sup>17</sup>

If Jim Bone's demolition and building projects for the town cause trouble, this is even truer of the cultural work of the novel's heroine, Amy White. At first glance, Harris's narrator stresses the verisimilitude of the sketches and the play in *The Recording Angel* in that they present Ruckersvilleans with a "mirror drama of their own existence."<sup>18</sup> Harris notes the salutary effects on people when they suddenly see themselves through another's eyes: "an uneasy sensation went through the house and settled into the conviction that this 'entertainment' was a satire upon the languor and shiftlessness of a people who lived too much to brag of a noble ancestry and too little in imitation of the said ancestors."<sup>19</sup> Harris may have hoped the effect of her art would be quite like that of the hooded Angel who appears in Amy White's play. The description below should lay to rest any doubts a reader might have that this novel is merely a witty comedy of manners holding up a funhouse mirror to social conventions:

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<sup>17</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 156.

<sup>18</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 232.

<sup>19</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 293.

In the background, lined against an extremely clear, starlit sky, was the figure of an immense angel, clad with six splendid wings after the manner of the seraph described in Isaiah's dream. The head and lower part of the face were hooded in some misty whiteness. A very strong blue light concentrated upon it and supplied the pallor with which we are accustomed to think of these strange beings. But the thrilling circumstance connected with the apparition was the fact that he was not writing in any absent-minded way in the enormous book which lay open and mysteriously supported before him; but with eyes of magnetic intensity his gaze traveled from one face to another in the audience, remaining fixed for a hurriedly disconcerting moment each time before he made his note.<sup>20</sup>

Such a vision of the writer as recorder and angel of change well fulfills Harris's early criticism of American fiction in her 1903 essay "Fiction, North and South," in which she complained of the excessive amount of "movement, incident, and wit to keep the desperate reader amused."<sup>21</sup> *The Recording Angel* contains plenty of all these qualities, but the novel is balanced with an inward gaze. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the novel's heroine, the playwright Amy White, has such an acute ear for the town's foibles: she is blind, from cataracts.

Once Harris allows for this view of the artist as a Recording Angel to sink in, she adds a further twist. Rather than promoting a simple view of an all-powerful Author of a work of art, Harris's novel at its deepest level suggests that works of art are fundamentally collaborative and dialogical, cobbled together with the voices and viewpoints of many. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the novel gives us two competing

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<sup>20</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 291–92.

<sup>21</sup> Corra Harris, "Fiction, North and South," *The Critic* 43 (September 1903): 273–75.

views of Authorship: as single authority (the Angel onstage), and as a decentered and heterogeneous “whole.” For the text that is performed onstage is actually shaped by a variety of different hands and viewpoints, not just Amy White’s. The secondary authors who add what the narrator calls “interpolations” include Jim Bone, an anonymous New York City playwright, and Amy White’s husband Elbert.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, Amy White contrasts her record of her town’s doings with that of the Angel himself. She is humorous about it, but there is an edge of critique to her wit; she faults the Angel’s record for being too much like a spiritual accountant’s ledger, too concerned with debits (sin) or assets (good deeds). Amy White resolves to make her record different:

I am thinking of writing a little Book of Life myself, not of competing, you understand, with *Him*, the original multifarious biographer, but just a meager one of the men and women in this town that I know. It would be in the nature of supplementary footnotes on the humans we are in spite of divine grace. And they might help to soften the angelic exaggerations of our faults and frailties. And they would count, for the Angel would be obliged to set them down as one of my deeds.<sup>23</sup>

Amy White here uses figures of speech often favored by nineteenth-century women writers to describe their work—tropes that stress humility, smallness, and subordinate status (that is, not having primary authority, but being merely secondary, an afterword or footnote). She will record all the “minor” things not mentioned in the major chronicles or histories. Yet encoded into this description is a kind of hidden revisionary agenda, in which this supposedly minor “supplement” which the Angel

<sup>22</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 102.

<sup>23</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 71.

is obliged to include alters the meaning of the “whole,” so that any clear hierarchical distinction between footnotes and primary text is undone.

A similar mix of deference and revisionary energy can be found in Corra Harris’s descriptions of the “historical method” in traditional historical and fictional (or dramatic) narrative—methods she says she will abjure. In the above quotation, White wittily italicizes how male-centered and idealistic are accepted historical narratives, even the ones that occasionally include a dynamic woman or two. “I am obliged to employ the historical method in this chapter,” Harris mentions at another point—at the start of a chapter focusing on the self-appointed male leaders of Ruckersville, who with comically florid rhetoric debate whether or not Jim Bone’s construction projects have disturbed the honorable rest of the Confederate dead.<sup>24</sup> Further: “by historical I mean that method by which the greater and most important portion of the people concerned are left out of the narrative, and a few men and women become the lay figures in it, clothes horses upon which the writer hangs only those deeds that reflect the high light of achievement.”<sup>25</sup> Here Corra Harris signals that she employs strategies very similar to her heroine Amy White—skepticism, supplement and revision. Like Jim Bone’s digging, Amy White’s and Corra Harris’s respective *Recording Angels* are art made of undermining the foundations of accepted meanings. It is this revisionary power in *The Recording Angel*—as well as its generosity and wit—that allows us to speak of it in the same breath as comic works by Twain, Faulkner, Welty.

In praising Corra Harris’s novel so highly I do not mean to suggest it is without flaws. Harris’s central plot device may be criticized: why did she believe that no townspeople would take offence at Amy White’s play, rather than take their medicine happily? Plus, for a work whose ironic spirit makes it often feel somewhat contemporary, some of the narrator’s other ambitious generalizations on the subjects of gender, ethnicity, and

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<sup>24</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 154.

<sup>25</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 154.

race have dated badly. The town's one Jewish merchant is described in a racist way, and blacks have a seemingly marginalized and stereotypical presence in the novel, from the "happy, disreputable-looking negro cabins" that appear on the novel's first page, to Bone's generic memories of black mammies,<sup>26</sup> to the white-turbaned "ancient negress" who serves as a clothes-check "waitress" in the lobby of Bone's new theatre on opening night.<sup>27</sup> In *The Recording Angel* play, there is no involvement of Ruckersville's black community either on stage or in the audience, despite Bone's reserving seats in the theatre for the "poorest" of Ruckersville.<sup>28</sup> (Did his theatre have a Jim Crow balcony? Not mentioned.) *The Recording Angel*, sadly, does not rise to Harris's 1903 call for Southern fiction to depict "a white man or a black man adequate in mind and character to sustain a really ethical relation to both races"—and neither does the rest of her fiction.<sup>29</sup>

Yet there is one scene in *The Recording Angel* that suggests a different way of approaching the novel's representation of Ruckersville's African American residents. The crew taking Jim Bone's directions during the demolition of the Rucker mansion is black, and, like Jim Bone himself, they are a source of unstoppable energy and irony:

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<sup>26</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 77.

<sup>27</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 285.

<sup>28</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 285.

<sup>29</sup> See especially Corra Harris' essays "Fiction, North and South," *The Critic* 43 (September 1903): 273–75; and "Heroes and Heroines in Recent Fiction," *Independent* 55 (September 3, 1903): 2111–15. Other Harris essays of interest are: "Neurotic Symptoms in Recent Fiction," *Independent* 55 (November 19, 1903): 2725–28; "Patriotic Criticism in the South," *The Critic* 44 (June 1904): 548–50; "Our Novelists," *Independent* 59 (November 16, 1905): 1171–75; "The Waning Influence of Thomas Nelson Page," *Current Literature* 43 (August 1907): 171–72; "Literature, Literatiritis, and Literalism," *Independent* 64 (January 23, 1908): 182–84; and "The Advance of Civilization in Fiction," *Independent* 65 (November 19, 1908): 1166–72. Several of these intriguing essays were reprinted to accompany L. Moody Simms, Jr.'s essay, "Corra Harris on Patriotic Literary Criticism in the Post-Civil War South," *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Culture* 25 (Fall 1972): 459–66.

a dozen negro men, barefooted, ragged, carrying picks on their shoulders, jostling one another and laughing loudly after the manner of negro workmen...The negroes with picks fell to widening and deepening the furrow, every stroke of every pick being accompanied by a humorous grunt, and the rhythm of a song which ran something like this:

“Dig my grave wid er silver spoon,  
Lemme down wid er golden chain.”<sup>30</sup>

Are the workmen signifying with this song about how Ruckersville’s aristocratic whites, those born with a silver spoon in their mouth, are digging their own graves? More than anything else it is the sound of these blacks’ pickaxes that causes the white folks of Ruckersville to come running so comically in panic.

It would be absurd to read too much into this one scene—especially given Harris’s documented white supremacist views in her everyday life.<sup>31</sup> Yet perhaps it is not too much to claim that this satiric novel opens a small but powerful space—a “furrow”—for a new or different representation of race relations, including a critique of the “underground mausoleum” of racial stereotypes and false history on which the white South sought to ground Jim Crow race relations.<sup>32</sup>

Only in *The Recording Angel* was Harris somewhat able to keep in tension the forces that animate her satiric sensibility. Harris’s next novel, for instance, *The Co-Citizens*, is a pleasurable, acerbic spoof imagining what would happen if the suffragist movement stopped demonstrating in the streets and got control of the money supply. In the final two chapters of the latter novel, however, Harris tries to use romance conventions

<sup>30</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 133–34.

<sup>31</sup> Talmadge’s biography is replete with anecdotes displaying Harris’s racism, which was thoroughly conventional in its expression.

<sup>32</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 156.

to contain all the energy for social change released in her earlier scenes. In *The Co-Citizens* Harris tries to strike a precarious balance between supporting a woman's right to vote and arguing against a women's right or desire to run for political office because such public ambition will harm proper male/female relations. It must be added, however, that recent historians of the women's suffrage movement in the US, such as Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, have shown that the movement itself fractured along similar lines.<sup>33</sup>

We can see intimations of the preposterous and contradictory conclusion to *Co-Citizens* in *The Recording Angel*, for in the latter novel's stage play some comic commentaries on self-delusion are followed by cliché-ridden tableaux of lovers in each other's arms, as if the play's drive for change were suddenly converted, via a kind of authorial sleight of hand, into a demand for no social change at all, just new marriages. But Harris's characterization of the major and minor characters in *The Recording Angel* is rich and various enough to be a counterbalance; the ending of that novel's play may be wholly inadequate, but the ending of Harris's novel, while not perfect, is an honorable attempt to reconcile Amy White's prophetic vision with her determination to forgive her husband his faults.

*The Recording Angel* ends with Amy White's recovering her sight (she has a successful operation removing her cataracts) and achieving new status as the conscience of her community. In contrast, *The Co-Citizens* (and, unfortunately, most of Corra Harris's other published fiction) ends in *covered* sight—Harris's willful repression of her own ability to combine satire and social change, mimesis and prophesy. Some of Harris'

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<sup>33</sup> See Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). A full listing of interpretations of Southern women's writing helpful for an appreciation of Harris is impossible to undertake here, but readers who want to learn more should consult Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–1870* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); Jane F. Tomkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and Nancy Walker and Zita Dresner, eds., *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humor from Colonial Times to the 1980s* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988).



writings should perhaps remain so, covered and forgotten, but that is not a fair fate for her best novel.

So why is Corra Harris's *The Recording Angel* out of print? In the words of one of the novel's (drunken) characters, "Damfi know."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Harris, *The Recording Angel*, 137.