

# The Mystery of Romance in the Life and Poetics of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper



That *Forest Leaves* had been discovered was very exciting news. The first book of poetry by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper provides a critical piece to the puzzle in the reconstruction of her bibliography and, perhaps, a bit of insight into her life. As the author of a bio-critical study of her life's work, *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper, 1825-1911*, I made assumptions based on existing documents, which included Harper's poetry, novels, essays, speeches, newspaper clippings, and library facsimiles, as well as from comments by her contemporaries, such as William Still, William Lloyd Garrison, Anna Dickinson, and Frederick Douglass.

I knew *Forest Leaves* existed because William Still referenced it in his review of her second book, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854) in *The Provincial Freeman*, September 2, 1854. Indeed, it is important to recognize and incorporate such verifications of works by legitimate witnesses to a subject's experiences and production. One reviewer of my manuscript stated that I should not even reference the title because I had not actually seen it, and therefore I had no material evidence of its existence. I ignored this preposterous stance and snide dismissal of the book. As a scholar of African American culture, I was ever hopeful that another researcher might one day uncover *Forest Leaves*, like the recovery of *Our Nig*. During my research for *Discarded Legacy*, I

visited the Library of Congress. Certain titles of Harper's books were listed, but were absent. A librarian explained that the disappearance of early African American literature was an unfortunate reality. He then directed me to Howard University's Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, which contained a far more extensive collection of Harper's writings.

In *Discarded Legacy* I propose that the genus of Harper's oeuvre was represented in her second poetry book, whereby recurring thematic patterns appear in subsequent poetry books, as well as in her essays, short stories, and novels. For the most part, Harper's writings focused on abolitionism, woman's rights, temperance, and Christianity. These topics more often than not intersected, such as in "The Slave Mother: A Tale of the Ohio," written from the perspective of fugitive slave Margaret Garner; or in her serialized novel, *Minnie's Sacrifice*, a portrayal of a free black woman who protested slavery and advocated for women's suffrage.

Religious and morality poetry dominate *Forest Leaves*. There is only one antislavery poem, "Bible Defense of Slavery," which, as is the case for half of the poetry in this first collection, is reprinted in her second book. Though Harper's second book contains religious verse, it also ventures into broader social topics that she engages as a lecturer as she toured the northern United States and Canada.

But during my research for *Discarded Legacy*, I never found any love poems or love letters—missing elements that I found most curious. References to romantic love in Harper's poetry were ambivalent at best. Indeed, in *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, "The Contrast" portrays a failed romance that ends in suicide. Another poem found in that same volume, "Advice to the Girls," hints that Harper did engage romance, as she urges caution and discretion; however, the poem is written in the third person. Her first published short story, "Two Offers," which appears in the *Anglo-African Magazine*, in 1859, contains a dialogue between two young women: Laura, who feels she must marry or become an old maid; and Jane, who pronounces her independence and seeks financial security as a writer. The latter appears to represent Harper's own life's direction, and this character warns against marrying for financial gain.

"The Mission of the Flowers," which appears in her book *Moses: A Story of the Nile* in 1869, deploys flowers as metaphors for women in order to critique the oppressive objectification of woman's sexuality. As I wrote in *Discarded Legacy*, a "most interesting feature of the story is Harper's symbolic manipulation of the rose's sexuality. The intoxicating allure of the rose—which throughout Western literature has been symbolic of woman's sexual power—entices, seduces, and even rapes some of the flowers until they all agree to become roses."

Protagonists in Harper's novels marry, but these unions are political, and sexual attraction is presented as less important than admiration, respect, and friendship. No gushing or swooning appears in the plots, and certainly there

are no allusions to sex or sexual metaphors, except in the novel *Iola Leroy*, when the protagonist repels disrespectful advances during her enslavement.

Harper's later writings about romance contrast significantly to the two love poems, "Farewell, My Heart Is Beating" and "Let Me Love Thee," found in *Forest Leaves*. These poems are very emotional and proclaim undying love for the object of her affection, which is in form and content consistent with nineteenth-century romantic verse. There is a mournful tone to both love poems, which configures a sense of sadness. "Farewell, My Heart Is Beating" is about loving and leaving: "And now when almost bursting,/ And 'mid my tears to smile." Tantalizingly, the opening stanza in "Let Me Love Thee" suggests romantic disappointment in Harper's past:

Let me love thee I have known  
The agony deception brings,  
And tho' my driven heart is lone  
It fondly clasps and firmly clings.

Judging from photos and written descriptions, Harper was certainly an attractive woman, and one can speculate that she probably had admirers, even suitors. Conversely, she was an intellectual and an artist, a combination that deflects male attention even today. Two hundred years ago, such characteristics would have intimidated most men. Because of her stature as an antislavery lecturer, rallying audiences to oppose the inhumane institution of slavery, while exposing the sexual exploitation of enslaved women and advocating equal rights for all women, Frances Harper had to maintain an uncompromised posture. It was the nineteenth century, the Victorian era, and she was a black woman representing her race before integrated audiences composed of men and women. As a public figure, it might have been impolitic to reveal romantic interests in her writings. She was, after all, considered "the bronze muse" of the abolitionist movement, and had to maintain a posture that would not jeopardize her stature or her activism.

Until Frances Ellen Watkins becomes Frances E. W. Harper in 1861, when she married the widower Fenton Harper, she was probably considered a spinster. She was thirty-six years old. In *Discarded Legacy*, I speculate that she met Fenton Harper when she was teaching at the Union Seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio, when he was possibly still married to his first wife. But this is pure conjecture based on Frances Harper's residence there, because I have not discovered any evidence of their meeting to substantiate this. Moreover, no love poems appear in any of her subsequent publications about this short marriage, only a poem written about the birth of their daughter, Mary.

*Forest Leaves* was published when Frances was only twenty-one years of age, which suggests she was infatuated with someone(s) before the book was published, before she ventured away from Baltimore to teach in Ohio and Pennsylvania, and long before she became a popular writer and lecturer. The absence of romance in her later writings or in her correspondence was a missing

link in her life until now. In any case, I was delighted to find romantic verse in her first collection of poems because it supplies a human dimension to her persona that until now was a mystery.

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