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► **To cite this version:**

Alice Michel. Hidden Fortunes of Colonial Australian Popular Fiction: Women in Mary Fortune's "Dora Carleton". Journal of the European Association for Studies of Australia, 2016. halshs-01406419

**HAL Id: halshs-01406419**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01406419>**

Submitted on 1 Dec 2016

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## **Hidden Fortunes of Colonial Australian Popular Fiction: Women in Mary Fortune’s “Dora Carleton”**

Alice Michel

**Abstract:** The Australian fictional archives contain a wealth of fictions from the colonial period, most of them serially published in journals, and often neglected in Australian literary history. However, fiction by colonial women writers reveals much about women’s social status at the time and early feminist claims. Among them can be found Mary Fortune’s (“Waif Wander”) serial novel “Dora Carleton,” published in *The Australian Journal* in 1866. The aim of this paper is to reflect on Australia’s neglected wealth of colonial women’s fictions and their potential re-evaluation as more than examples of the minor genres they seem to belong to, through the instance of the recovery of Fortune’s neglected text. This paper shows that the serial, anchored as it is in the historical context of the colony of Victoria, uses the conventions of the popular genre of the sensation novel to question gender differences, and that furthermore it can be read as an early New Woman novel.

**Keywords:** Mary Fortune, Waif Wander, Dora Carleton, colonial, Australia, New Woman, sensation novel

“I decided upon leaving for Australia, where I expected to be able to turn my accomplishments to good account, by opening a school, or in some other way, and avoid at the same time any likelihood of an encounter with my husband,” claims Dora Carleton, the heroine of Mary Fortune’s novel (“Dora Carleton” 790). As illustrated in this statement, the Australian colonies are envisioned in the serial novel “Dora Carleton: A Tale of Australia” as a place offering professional and personal opportunities for women and emigration is seen as a way of breaking away from marriage constraints.

In the nineteenth century, colonial Australia was not only a space onto which British gender and literary conventions could be projected, but also a place where women could redefine their codes of behaviour and morality, as testified in the numerous colonial women’s fictions of the time. However, despite the huge number of fictions written by women in the Australian colonies, and their considerable popularity at the time, few of them have been paid scholarly attention. Since the 1980s, critical works have paved the way for a recognition of Australian colonial women writers. Dale Spender defines them as a “‘submerged’ heritage” which “produced a very different view of the world from that encoded by men” (*Writing a New World* xiv – xv), while Debra Adelaide invites “to re-read the history of Australian literature” from the point of view of women writers (1). Susan Sheridan also reconsiders neglected women’s fiction and journalism, focusing on the period from the 1880s to the 1930s. She argues that women writers of nineteenth-century Australia “were never the silenced outsiders that later historians and critics rendered them,” demonstrating that the emphasis on realism

has had a marginalising effect on women's fiction and calling for a reappraisal of romance as a form used by women to address social and gender issues (viii). Margaret Bradstock and Louise Wakeling's as well as Susan Lever's studies also focus on texts previously dismissed as conventional romances. Moreover, Debra Adelaide underlines one ought not to dismiss early authors, despite the focus usually put upon the 1880-1890s as a period "reflect[ing] strongly the development of nationalist thinking" (7). Finally, the bias of format in the selection of works that are remembered as part of the Australian literary history has also been criticised. Scholarly works such as Elizabeth Morrison's or Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver's have contributed to reassess colonial Australia's serial publication.

In this light, the wealth of Australia's fictional archive is immense, containing thousands of serial novels written by women in the nineteenth-century journals. As a consequence, a whole range of forgotten texts can indeed be re-evaluated and potentially validated as having a place in the Australian literary history. Among them can be found literary treasures such as Mary Fortune's novel "Dora Carleton," serialised in *The Australian Journal* in July and August 1866. The then-famous author writing under the pen-name "Waif Wander" is now barely remembered, although she was a keen observer of the colonial society in Victoria and of women's place therein. Her serial "Dora Carleton," left unmentioned in most analyses of the colonial period, and unpublished in book form, nonetheless offers a ground-breaking commentary on the gender issues at stake in nineteenth-century Victoria. From marriage and bigamy to women's financial dependence, it draws on the genre of the sensation novel to explore to what extent the new colonial society allowed women to challenge Victorian gender roles, tackling themes that also relate the serial to the emerging New Woman fiction. Finally, Mary Fortune's serial confirms that a forgotten text such as this one should not be dismissed as an instance of a minor genre such as the sensation novel, as it questions women's social position and material dependence upon marriage.

This paper aims to reflect on the wealth of the Australian colonial fictional archives through the instance of the recovery of a text from the 1860s, Mary Fortune's "Dora Carleton," the study of which interrogates the conventions of the sensation novel and the New Woman in the Australian colonial context. Mary Fortune's literary reputation has been fluctuating, from popularity to neglect, even though this serial shows the extent of this author's appropriation of the conventions of the sensation novel in the Australian colonial context to discuss social and gender issues, in a manner that, as early as the 1860s, develops an early type of New Woman character.

### **Mary Fortune's Fluctuating Literary Reputation**

Mary Fortune, a regular contributor to *The Australian Journal*, is now best remembered for her detective stories. She was indeed one of the first women to write crime stories of which she wrote more than 500, published from 1865 to 1908 in "The Detective Album" series (Sussex and Burrows 78; Sussex, "Shrouded in Mystery" 118), which is "the longest running series in the early history of crime fiction" (Sussex, "A Woman of Mystery"). They are notable for the use of the detective's point of view, an innovative feature at the time. Some of them had the privilege of being reprinted in book form in 1871, in *The Detective Album: Tales of the Australian Police*, the first detective book published in Australia (Sussex, "A Woman of Mystery"). In addition to this accomplishment, Mary Fortune also wrote serial novels, poetry and journalism. However, despite the popularity of her texts during her lifetime, after her death Fortune fell into oblivion, so that her professional and personal lives

have long remained mysteries. This is partly explained by the fact that she was only known by her pen names “W.W.” and “Waif Wander,” respectively used to sign her crime stories and romances. Her identity was rediscovered in the 1950s by the book collector John Kinmont Moir, who discovered the real name behind the pseudonym. In the 1980s, Lucy Sussex cast light on Waif Wander’s main biographical information. With hindsight, her pseudonym can be interpreted as hinting at several aspects of both her life and work: her geographical mobility, her non-conformism, and her literary experience. Indeed, born in 1833 in Belfast as Mary Wilson, she left Ireland with her father to go to Canada when she was a child. She married twice, first in Canada to Joseph Fortune, before leaving with their son for Australia in 1855, joining her father on the goldfields of Victoria. She had a second son a year later, stating that Joseph Fortune was the father. Evidence has shown since that Joseph had never been to Australia, raising doubts about the child’s legitimacy. In 1858, Mary Fortune, stating she was a widow, married Percy Brett – a story of re-marriage which seems to have influenced “Dora Carleton.” Further biographical research was to reveal that Joseph Fortune died in 1861 in Canada, without being divorced from Mary Fortune (Sussex, “Shrouded in Mystery” 121). This unclear marriage status and the potential illegitimacy of her second child are part of the “secrets that could threaten her reputation and her livelihood as a female author” and may explain why she wrote anonymously (Sussex, “A Woman of Mystery”). However, despite the success of her stories, Mary Fortune lived in poverty, eventually homeless and developing an addiction to alcohol. As she aged, her eye-sight deteriorated, preventing her from maintaining her writing, consequently forcing her to ask *The Australian Journal* for an annuity. It is now known that she died in 1909, yet the exact date and place remain unknown (Sussex, “A Woman of Mystery”).

Her eccentric way of life, in itself a provocation to Victorian family and religious ideals, could have raised criticism from her contemporaries. However, she was protected by her anonymity and her fictions were greatly appreciated by the Australian readership. In fact, the public *persona* constructed around her via her fiction was far from reflecting the extent of her non-conformism. The journalist Henry W. Mitchell for instance described her as “beyond all doubt one of the most talented, versatile and interesting writers of fiction that we have, or ever had, in the Australian colonies” (487). Some of her peers may have been cognizant of her identity, but they kept her secret, only at times dropping hints in their reviews, as did Henry W. Mitchell who “congratulate[d] the proprietors of *The Australian Journal* on their good fortune in having so gifted a writer on their staff” (487). The Melbourne magazine *Table Talk* also promoted the author as “probably the only truly Bohemian lady writer who has ever earned a living by her pen in Australia,” (3) which again hints at the peculiarity of her non-conformist but self-supporting way of life.

However, her impact is not acknowledged in most literary analyses of the period. For instance, she is not mentioned by her contemporaries Henry Gyles Turner and Alexander Sutherland in their 1898 overview of Australian literature, otherwise an interesting and detailed nineteenth-century account of the period. She does not appear either in Henry Mackenzie Green’s 1961 work of reference *A History of Australian Literature*, except for a passing allusion to her story “Dare-Devil Bob; or, the Australian Hunters” (293). However, Green does not acknowledge the author, despite the fact that the short story was signed “Waif Wander” when it was published. Instead, he suggests that the story might have been the work of a better known Australian writer, Marcus Clarke.<sup>1</sup> Mary Fortune’s absence from the more

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<sup>1</sup> It may have been because Mary Fortune’s and Marcus Clarke’s texts, especially their journalism, tackled themes that were sometimes similar. Both writers were indeed acute observers of the colonial society they lived

recent literary surveys may be explained by her work's specific form of publication in newspapers. Nevertheless, as this was a common feature among nineteenth-century writers, especially in Australia, where the majority of novels appeared in serial form in local periodicals,<sup>2</sup> it is only a partial explanation. As some feminist studies have emphasised, the texts of colonial women writers often present "alternative 'truths'" (Bradstock and Wakeling vii) to the dominant male attitude and perhaps this is a further reason for the relative lack of interest this writer has suffered from. Consequently, most of her texts are very hard to get nowadays.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the serial novel "Dora Carleton" demonstrates Mary Fortune's skills as a writer who re-appropriates the conventions of the popular genres of her time to promote an early type of feminist colonial heroine.

### **"Dora Carleton" and the Sensation Novel**

Published in 1866, when the sensation novel was in full bloom both in Britain and in Australia, "Dora Carleton" shares a number of characteristics with the conventions of the popular genre, as one "overlap[ing] with Gothic fiction, crime fiction and melodrama" (Purchase 188). The novel opens with a murder: in the first chapter, a young woman is murdered in her sleep by a digger called Gart. The second plotline, focusing on him being hunted down, ends with his death:

"Gart, as you hope for mercy, did you murder Bessie Bandal?"

"I did!" cried Gart, wildly, attempting to rise, but the blood burst from his mouth in a continuous bubbling stream, and the bushranger was dead!" (826)

Here, as often in sensation novels, "virtue is rewarded and vice apparently punished at the end" (Brantlinger 4). The sensationalism of the theme is reinforced by the gory detail of the blood bursting from the bushranger's mouth, while the /b/ alliteration saturates the scene. Violent or thrilling actions are characteristic of sensation novels (Brantlinger 4), but in Mary Fortune's serial novel they are adapted to the context of 1860s Victoria, notably through the characters of the bushranger and the diggers, as well as gold rush scenes. The quest for the resolution of the initial crime constitutes the heart of a plotline, while the other, being centred on Dora's two marriages, brings the theme of bigamy into the novel – another widespread feature of sensation novels. Incredible coincidences – yet unsurprising in a sensation novel – are resorted to in order to link the two plotlines, such as the fact that the digger Charlie, who tries to discover the murderer's identity, is also the suitor of Dora's friend Mabel, as well as turning out to be Dora's cousin, facilitating a happy ending.

However, a closer look reveals that the novel is more than an instance of a "bigamy novel" riding the crest of the success of stories tackling this particular theme. Bigamy was at its core

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in, possibly explaining why Green may have attributed this story to Clarke instead. It was not the first time a story by Mary Fortune was attributed to another writer, as some of Mary Fortune's detective stories were attributed to James Skipp Borlase. See on this point Sussex and Burrows.

<sup>2</sup> "Half of all Australian novels published in these decades [1860s to 1880s] were serialised (52% in the 1860s [...]) and an increasingly majority of these appeared only in serial form (57% in 1860s [...]). Most serialised Australian novels first appeared in local periodicals (84% in 1860s [...])" (Bode 57).

<sup>3</sup> With the exception of a few works reproduced in the 1980s-1990s or digitised, the vast majority of her texts can only be found in the libraries owning copies of *The Australian Journal*, which reduces the possibility of this material's availability to the present-day readership at a global level. At the same time, it confirms the importance of scholarly works consisting in unearthing as yet unknown or long neglected material, as part of the reconstruction of the early literary history of antipodean writing in English. For anthologies including some of Mary Fortune's work, see for instance Ackland; Giles; Spender *The Penguin Anthology*; Sussex *The Fortunes of Mary Fortune*.

a provocative theme in Victorian culture in so far as it could be used to represent “the secret activities of women – fantasized or feared by mid-Victorian novelists and their extensive readership – [and] seen as posing a potentially devastating threat to the middle- or upper-class home and hearth” (Hughes 263). Challenging Victorian ideals of family and home is at the heart of “Dora Carleton,” in which the heroine decides to leave her English homeland for the Australian colonies in order to escape the hold of her husband, Annesly De Vesey. Shortly before her departure, she receives “the announcement of his death” (791), and once in Australia, assuming the status of a widow, she marries George Banforth. However, Annesly’s death turns out to be a simple disappearance, “an oft-practised ruse to get rid of his debts” (791). This consequently places Dora in the delicate position of bigamy, whose narrative possibilities are used to question women’s social position. Rather than being linked to adultery *per se*, it is presented as the result of the difficulty for women to find a way out of – and support without – wedlock. Revealingly, it is Dora’s husband who labels her a bigamist:

“Wife! How can that be? My God, are you, then, a bigamist, madam!”

“In the eyes of the law, I suppose so; in the eyes of God – no!” replied Dora, drawing herself up to her full height proudly. (790)

The word is out, and Dora is explicitly condemned and rejected by her second husband. If she accepts potential legal condemnation, she nevertheless refuses to be morally blamed, neither for her flight, nor for her deviation from traditional marriage, the anaphora reinforcing this refusal. Mingling realism and sensationalism, the serial depicts here a social reality of its time, i.e. the flight of one’s spouse, which implies that in order to understand this work, we need to understand its historical context. In her reevaluation of American sensation novels of the same period, Jane Tompkins argues that history is “the only way of accounting for the enormous impact of works whose force escapes the modern reader.” In order to understand the importance and the meaning of these neglected novels, we need to “have a grasp of the cultural realities that made these novels meaningful” (xiii). In Britain as well as in colonial Australia, when a couple wished to divorce, the common practice was to secure “a people’s divorce,” in other words, a separation or the simple disappearance of one of the spouses. As shown by Henry Finlay, this widespread method, also known as “a poor man’s divorce,” kept on being commonly used in Australia even after the introduction of the Divorce Acts from 1858 onwards (*To Have but Not to Hold* 1).<sup>4</sup> In the Victorian period then, it was easy to disappear, particularly when going overseas (“Divorce and the Status of Women”). Moreover, disappearance could often “be coupled with a bigamous marriage, particularly where the absconding spouse [...] moved to another locality where he was not known” (*To Have but Not to Hold* 12). Historically, this was quite a common process, as early as the convict period, when for some convicts “the possibility of using transportation as a release from their obligations of the past was often a welcome way out” (*To Have but Not to Hold* 27). As shown by Leslie Lloyd Robson, there were often “such statements of suspiciously recent and convenient deaths of partners as ‘my husband died six months since,’ [or] ‘I have heard that my husband is dead’” (65). Put in perspective with this historical context, Mary Fortune’s story alludes to this often used expedient to get rid of a partner and presents Australia as a place where women could go to and disappear in order to start life anew: “I decided upon leaving for Australia, where I expected to be able to turn my accomplishments to good account [...] and avoid at the same time any likelihood of an encounter with my husband,” Dora declares (790).

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<sup>4</sup> Divorce Acts were implemented at different times in the Australian colonies: Matrimonial Causes Act 1858 (SA), The Matrimonial Causes Act 1860 (Tasmania), Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act 1861 (Victoria), Administration of Justice (Divorce and matrimonial Causes) Ordinance 1863 (WA), The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1864 (Queensland), Matrimonial Causes Act 1873 (NSW).

However, in the final lines of the novel, Dora returns to her first husband, after a long absence of six chapters. The ending, seemingly conventional, confirms that marriage is not altogether rejected; it is rather women's social dependence on marriage that is criticised. Furthermore, the relation which is foregrounded throughout the novel is not so much Dora and her husbands' but rather the friendship between Dora and Mabel, her "confidential companion" (723). They are depicted as independent women, Dora rebelliously proclaiming that "the woman who can live and tamely endure it is no woman" (742), and Mabel having decidedly left her father to come to Melbourne to try and "procure a situation" (722). Interestingly, the dialogues between the two women are used to present two opposite points of view, but as the plot unfolds the characters' views begin to converge,<sup>5</sup> offering in the end a balanced compromise between the faithful, dedicated Mabel and the strong-willed Dora, revolted against patriarchal attitudes. For these reasons, the heart of the novel lies in fact in this portrayal of strong-willed, outspoken female characters at odds with the gender roles of their society, so that there is no "subordination of character to plot" (Brantlinger 13) as often in sensation novels. On the contrary, characterisation prevails over plot, to the point that the plotline centred on the bushranger's chase, lacking depth compared to the intrigue focusing on Dora and Mabel, seems to be a pretence for the incorporation of sensational elements in the story. It may have served to suit the tastes of the 1860s readership, in order to make good copy so that Fortune maintained her place as a contributor to the newly-created *Australian Journal*. Indeed, the journal began production in Melbourne in 1865, that is only a year before "Dora Carleton" was published, and Fortune herself was at the beginning of her literary career. A few years later, she would provocatively write that not being considered "sensational enough" did not matter to her ("A Woman's Revenge" 333),<sup>6</sup> thereby confirming the market's taste for sensational stories, so that the sensational elements of the "murder" plotline in her second serial "Dora Carleton" may reflect an initial attempt at satisfying the demand. However, the "Dora/Mabel" plotline, deviating from the conventions of the sensation novel, suggests a woman's identity outside normative gender roles, and as shown below also relates the story to the emerging genre of New Woman fiction.

### **An Early Australian New Woman Novel**

The genealogy of the "New Woman," a term first used by Sarah Grand in 1894, is still a source of debate. Sarah Grand's initial meaning, that of a woman who "solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's-sphere, and prescribed the remedy" (142), was soon generalised to a woman demanding emancipation as well as the same opportunities as men. Ann Heilmann attempts to record such a genealogy by recalling the different definitions that the notion encompassed:

Who or what was the New Woman? A literary construct, a press fabrication and discursive marker of rebellion, or a 'real woman?' A writer, social reformer, or feminist activist? A middle-class daughter eager to study for a

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance Dora and Mabel's passionate debate over suicide: "'Would you never do that?' [...] 'Commit suicide? Never!' 'Not if your hopes were to die out, my dear? Not if your hopes were to prove a false hope, my girl?'" (723). See Mabel's later awakening of passionate feelings and provocation in the face of Dora's second husband: "'I have remained [...] at the request of Mrs De Vesey [...] Mabel seemed to have changed her nature for the time being [...] it was like braving him to his face'" (791).

<sup>6</sup> "I have been told by some that I tell horrible stories, and by others that I am not sensational enough; and I have personally come to the conclusion that I shall tell just such stories as I please, and that those who do not like them need not read them" (Fortune, "A Woman's Revenge" 333).

career, a married woman chafing against legal inequality, a woman-loving spinster, a reluctant mother, a sexual libertarian? (*New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism 2*)

One certainty is that the figure of the New Woman, a complex historical and literary phenomenon, was under regular attack because she was perceived as a threat to the Victorian family as well as the status quo. More recently, the significance of the New Woman has been widened through her link with the contemporary social change brought forward by and in the British Empire.<sup>7</sup> Sharon Crozier-De Rosa notably argues that the Australian New Woman “signified the emergence of a modern, new racial and cultural identity, that of Australianness, one distinct from (though still partially related to) Britishness,” gender perceptions in colonial Australia having contributed to this construction (249). She also recalls that “the New Woman was, and still is, commonly used to signify the extent of the shifts that turn-of-the-century society was experiencing regarding notions of femininity,” and that the New Woman of the 1890s takes its roots in the earlier “so-called ‘new’ women – women striving for greater emancipation for their sex” (239), a context in which Mary Fortune’s 1866 serial is inscribed.

A definition for New Woman fiction proposed by Ann Heilmann has the merit of encompassing the biographical aspects of the writer’s life and the themes explored in her literary works: “New Woman fiction is feminist fiction written by women, and deals with middle-class heroines who in some way re-enact autobiographical dilemmas faced by the writers themselves” (“New Woman’s Fiction and *Fin de Siècle* Feminism” 205). The autobiographical influence is perceptible in “Dora Carleton,” through the focus on a heroine who leaves for Australia and remarries, while still legally tied to her first husband, which clearly echoes the author’s own situation. The serial also tackles the difficulties of female employment and self-support, which particularly resonate with the hardships that its author herself experienced. The novel indeed portrays a protagonist who chooses to leave her husband and “earn by [her] own exertions what addition to [her] little income might be necessary to [her] support” (791). She reiterates the same determination when she leaves her second husband without taking any belongings, as her friend Mabel explains to the bewildered Mr. Banforth: “It is most likely she consulted her own feelings [...]. Probably she did not feel like owning anything belonging to you, or carrying away anything that had been purchased with your money” (791). This view strongly resembles the rejection of what Mona Caird would call a “mercenary” marriage in 1888, in an essay where she makes a claim for the “ideal marriage,” which, “despite all dangers and difficulties, should be *free*. [...] The economical [sic.] independence of woman is the first condition of free marriage. She ought not to be tempted to marry, or to remain married, for the sake of bread and butter” (197-198). Women’s self-support was also a prime concern of Mary Fortune’s, who prided herself upon her financial independence: “God bless ye all, my dear friends, and grant me continued independence!” (“How I Spent Christmas” 362). On this point, Lucy Sussex notes that “freely admit[ing] to being self-supporting, without the benefit of spouse, [was] almost unheard-of for a woman writing in the colonies” (“The Only Truly Bohemian Lady Writer” 54). Furthermore, in the 1860s, employment opportunities for women in Australia were limited. Settler women could do charity work, and others assisted their husbands, either in religious work or in managing runs. The Land Acts of the 1860s and the advent of free selectors were accompanied by increasing numbers over the years of farmers’ wives working in the outback, but women from the lower classes could also enter domestic service, the most common employment for women in the 1860s. However, the social status of domestic

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<sup>7</sup> See for instance Jusová; Hallum; Ledger.



servants was low and the housework and relationships in the household often difficult (Teale 239). Among other disadvantages ranked competition among girls and the dependence on labour offices, as depicted in “Dora Carleton.” Chapter XI, taking place at “a labour office” (774), concentrates on the difficulties women faced when trying to earn a living on their own, outside of the financial protection marriage could offer. The labour office, ruled by a certain Mrs Overdon, is crowded with women waiting for employment as servants or governesses. The scene in fact gives way to a blatant criticism of this workplace, supposed to put in relation employers and job-seekers, but which rather uses its privileged position to increase its own wealth, as an intrusion from the narrator reveals:

“Ah! But we have forgotten the principle article in Mrs Overdon’s labour office, which stood close to her elbow and which was locked by a key on a bunch which was in very frequent requisition; and that article was a cash-box” (774).

The emphasis is on the term “cash box,” placed at the very end of the sentence, after a long description picturing it and evoking a precious object that needs to be protected and yet which is constantly in use, and reinforces the impression of greed conveyed by Mrs Overdon. Moreover, even her name, homonymous to the word “overdone,” points to the idea of excess and abuse. The job-seeking women mostly go back home without having found a position, but Mrs Overdon makes a profit nonetheless. The social competition leading some women to be exploited by others is thus denounced, again resonating with Mona Caird’s later statement that the difficulty for women to secure their economic independence is reinforced by the “competitive system” (196), as well as resonating with other later New Woman texts.<sup>8</sup> Fortune herself would come back to the theme of women’s paid work in her 1870 satire, “The Spider and the Fly,” elaborating on the difficulties faced by women looking for work:

“Wanted, Housekeeper: Position of trust.”

That’s the advertisement that set so many female hearts in a flutter in and around Melbourne [...]. I may be mistaken, as you know we are all liable to be, but I am more than suspicious that a good many of these advertisements are simply hoaxes (145).

Mary Fortune uses Mary Howitt’s 1829 fable, extending the metaphor of the spider and the fly in order to denounce the fact that women looking for work were likely to be taken advantage of. In the satire, the spider is a gentleman officially looking for a housekeeper while he is unofficially looking for a mistress. In “Dora Carleton,” Mrs Overdon herself is the spider to the unemployed maids who are flies.

If the serial focuses on women’s self-support, it also calls into questions other gender differences:

I wish I could say I have no husband. But the world would call me liar, and that dear, kind “world” loves the rich Mr. Banforth so well that it cannot perceive a single fault in him; so, of course, I must be a fool, for I see many. [...] Horrible, is it not, to hear a *wife* speak thus? (“Dora Carleton” 723)

The emphasis on the word “wife” reinforces the criticism of a double standard allowing men to speak freely whereas women were confined to the roles of loving wives, dedicated to the happiness of their families. Beverley Kingston recalls that in nineteenth-century Australia, “the role of women was [...] first, to reproduce and to recreate order and stability through marriage and family” (90). However, Dora, being thankful of having no child, voices her refusal to endure a “miserable existence” (“Dora Carleton” 791) brought down on her by her

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of Modern Woman* (1894), Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labour* (1911).

husband's – both husbands' – actions: "determined to break the tie between [them]," she "came out here under [her] maiden name, Dora Carleton" (791). The serial, revealingly entitled after Dora's maiden name, presents a female character who claims the right to act and speak as men did, and willing to disrupt the familial order rather than compromising on these claims.

In addition, most of the scenes which include Dora take place outside the home, in urban Melbourne. The tendency towards representing women characters in public, urban spaces is a common feature of New Woman novels, in which women are increasingly included in city life, rather than confined to the private sphere, a tendency influenced by social change: "far from being imprisoned by the private sphere of suburban domesticity, women of all classes at the *fin-de-siècle* were pouring into the public spaces of the modern city in ever-increasing numbers" (Ledger 155). Historically, by 1850 "forty per cent of white Australians were already 'urban,'" and Melbourne's population was pushed from 23,000 in 1850 to 125,000 by 1861 by the gold rush (Denoon, Mein-Smith and Wyndham 88). Denoon et al. point out that "by the international definition of urban place (over 2,500 people), 49 per cent of white Australians were urban in 1891, more than any other New World country. [...] Urbanization became a distinctive trait of Australian identity" (89). This is echoed in "Dora Carleton," taking place in Melbourne, "that Austral city of golden commerce" where "in the early morning hours [...] shops are opened, cabs are plying, and busy people are bustling in numbers to their various places of employment" (722). The importance of urban setting on women's lives is also prevalent and associated in the serial with the public sphere. Indeed, out of eight chapters including Dora and Mabel, four take place in public places in the city: on the bank of the Yarra (chapter II), at the theatre (chapters IV and XII), and at the labour office (chapter XI). The remaining chapters take place at home, but Dora is represented as refusing to endorse a domestic role (chapter V) – Mr Banforth informs Mabel that "[he] should not advise [her] to disturb Mrs. Banforth. She generally makes up for the dissipation of the night by staying in bed half the day" (742). Dora is represented as doing nothing but crying until she eventually leaves home (chapters VI and XIV), and chapter XIII is dedicated to the revelation of her bigamy, leading to Dora's flight from this second home. Therefore, the positive importance of public locations is reinforced by the fact that home is negatively associated with domestic conflicts, loneliness and distress. Therefore, as early as the 1860s, the serial presents heroines who feel at ease in urban Melbourne, leaving their home to enjoy city life unchaperoned and challenges the traditional association of women and domesticity. Finally, in the line of New Woman fiction, Fortune's serial also questions the necessity for women to resort to marriage in order to have material protection, through a subtle depiction of women's precarious status and the hardships they faced in colonial Victoria.

## **Conclusion**

Anchored in the historical context of the colony of Victoria, Mary Fortune's serial novel "Dora Carleton" focuses on the difficulties faced by women in the fields of financial and marital dependence. It uses the conventions of the popular genre of the sensation novel, adapting them to the context of colonial Victoria. Mary Fortune's story, a serial novel published in a newly-created journal, needed to suit the tastes of the 1860s readership, which partly explains the inclusion of sensational elements. However, the serial avoids any sensational treatment of the bigamous main character Dora and tackles gender issues such as women's independence through its treatment of marriage, women's paid work and the inclusion of women in urban space. The serial novel in fact questions gender differences in a

way that also defines it as an early New Woman novel, written by a non-conformist writer who also was a New Woman in her own right.

Therefore, although “Dora Carleton” remains unpublished in book form, the serial gives a glimpse of the wealth that under-read fictions represent, still sheltered in archives and buried in the pages of colonial journals. The serial novel can help us reassess the status of women writers in colonial Australia, the difficulties and double binds they had to deal with, as well as broaden our knowledge of the genealogy of literary subgenres such as the New Woman novel.

To recall a final quote from Henry W. Mitchell in 1880:

had she [Mary Fortune] lived in England or America, where literary talent is properly appreciated, she would have, years ago, been regarded as a leading novelist, and have occupied the proud position that merit demands (487).

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### **Acknowledgements**

This work could not have been done without the staff of the British Library, the State Library of Victoria and the State Library of New South Wales, always helpful, and I am obviously grateful for the way they make available the wealth of the collections.

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