

Queen and games mistress

Science fiction is still not usually associated with women, but the first western science fiction novelist was female: Margaret Cavendish, whose SF novel *The Blazing World* was published in 1666. Similarly, while the word “utopia” may bring to mind Thomas More, who coined the term, the first western literary utopia is by a woman: Christine de Pizan wrote *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) more than a century before More wrote his book.

As time passed, men managed to claim both SF and utopian fiction for themselves. There were exceptions – Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915) is the best-known – but until recently they seemed to be few. Now MIT Press and the newer Manderley Press are challenging this impression, the former offering Irene Clyde’s *Beatrice the Sixteenth*, the latter Susan Ertz’s *Woman Alive* – two very different feminist utopian novels of the twentieth century – in thoughtfully edited editions.

Beatrice the Sixteenth is the earlier of the books, first published in 1909, and much the more unusual. Its atypicality begins with its author. Irene Clyde (1869–1954) was, in fact, one side of the (biologically male) gender-fluid person whose other half was Thomas Baty. In professional life, Clyde became Baty, a specialist in international law and eventual senior adviser to the Japanese government; in private life, Baty was Clyde, who founded the Aëthnic Union, devoted to challenging binary gender, and founded, edited and wrote for *Urania*, a journal that explored and supported what we would now call “queerness” in all its facets.

In a posthumous declaration distributed to friends, Baty explained that, from an early age, “I saw that ladies, while admittedly more graceful and sweet than men, were also just as determined and noble”. Every aspect of this simultaneously classist, sexist and feminist statement is reflected in *Beatrice the Sixteenth*. The novel tells the story of the explorer Dr Mary Hatherley, who, after being kicked in the head from a camel, finds herself transported from early-twentieth-century Arabia to Armeria, a country on a different “plane of

existence” (as a resident astrologer eventually suggests), inhabited exclusively by women. The leisured class of this world are absolutely “ladies”, cultured and immersed in an existence of beautified leisure. Indeed, the book spends an inordinate amount of time detailing interior decor, lingering over descriptions of gilding, graceful stonework and richly wrought carvings that make plain its roots in decadence.

In Armeria’s exquisite spaces, its ladies form attachments, puzzle over Mary’s descriptions of English law and mores, and intrigue and gossip, just like people everywhere. What they do not do is stray far from conservative structures. The society is ruled by a queen (the titular Beatrice); the women form couples and marry (no ethical non-monogamy here). That they also acquire children by bartering for them with “the barbarians”, who receive “carpets and woven tissues of the commonest kind” in exchange, is briefly frowned over, then brushed away.

Similarly, the fact that Armeria runs on slave labour is confronted, but no more than that. The slaves seem to find their enslavement just. When Mary asks one of them if they have the possibility of freedom, the slave responds: “If we are as good as them [their mistresses] – as fine ... and as dignified – we have a right ... But how are we to get to be like that?” This answer doesn’t quite satisfy Mary, but she doesn’t do anything about the situation. Perhaps slavery is too large a problem to tackle in a novel that Lucy Sante, in the excellent introduction, describes as a combination of an “inventory of the material culture of an unknown society, and fluttering Victorian comedy of manners”; but then why put it in? Clyde could easily have made the slaves paid servants. That she didn’t creates the uneasy sense that she believes that, even in a utopia, “ladies” belong at the top, with the less fine and dignified their natural slaves. The book’s cover, for its part, suggests that MIT Press has some odd ideas of its own: whoever decided that the best cover art for a feminist novel is a drawing of a statue with massive naked breasts may want to reconsider.

Fortunately, Susan Ertz’s *Woman Alive*, first published twenty-seven years after *Beatrice the Sixteenth*, has no truck with any artistic or social nonsense. As far as

this novel by a fairly prolific Anglo-American author (1887–1985) is concerned, the world ought to be run by a sensible, middle-class, “Very English ... Very Saxon” games mistress. Soon enough, it is. *Woman Alive* begins with one Dr Selwyn being transported from London in the mid-1930s to 1985, by means of a telepathic mind meld. In this future London, women are dying from a disease that is the byproduct of a war started by men. Only women are susceptible, and before we are even a quarter of the way through this slim novel, they are all dead. Or are they? It transpires that one woman has secretly remained alive, rendered impervious by a quack who covered her in dye that, when absorbed by means of “a powerful ray”, made her immune to all diseases. (She volunteered for this treatment because, having been jilted, she no longer cared if the experiment would kill her or not.) This woman, Stella Morrow, a former games mistress of sound farming stock, now becomes Queen of England.

This premiss sounds ridiculous when laid out in a couple of paragraphs, but in the novel, it works. In part, this is because Ertz’s future England sounds pretty great: there’s sexual freedom and tolerance; the elderly can take a potion that eases many age-related aches and pains; soundless air-powered cars have done away with pollution; and those who have lost their jobs to technological advancement have been re-employed in beautifying the cities and countryside, which are, as a result, green and clean. (Take note, future governments.)

The novel also works because it is in many ways psychologically shrewd. Once the men left behind realize that there is no future, they live “dully and half-heartedly, merely existing” – the realization that in order to function happily, humans must have some sense that there is a future, even a future they may not live to see, is an acute one. Stella herself is refreshingly clear-eyed about how society builds a bad world and how it might build a better one – “Look at your history books. Has there ever been one that began ... Here is the sad, mad, bad old past ... Learn from it but one thing – to be different”.

If this all makes *Woman Alive* sound gloomy or didactic, that gives the wrong impression. It doesn’t spoil anything to reveal that the plot involves the intrigue (a foiled kidnapping), romance (broken-hearted Stella gets a second chance at

love) and happy ending required of any successful novel. If the book gives space to the old canard that, if women ran the world, there'd be no war, it's a small price to pay for the rediscovery of a novel once lost to history that, with its republication, proves that history, as Graham Norton puts it in his charmingly perspicacious introduction, "was an old fool".

Emily A. Bernhard Jackson is an academic and a novelist writing under the name E. A. Jackson. Her suspense thriller Missing will be published next year.

