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WINTER 1978-79

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THE MAGAZINE ABOUT SCIENCE FICTION

WOMEN AND SF by SUSAN WOOD

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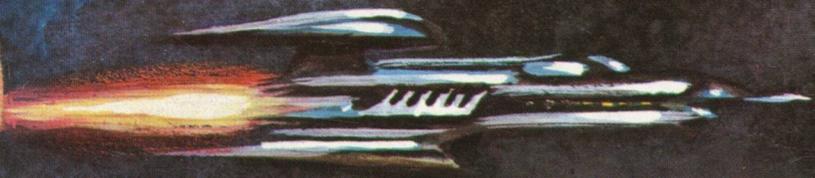
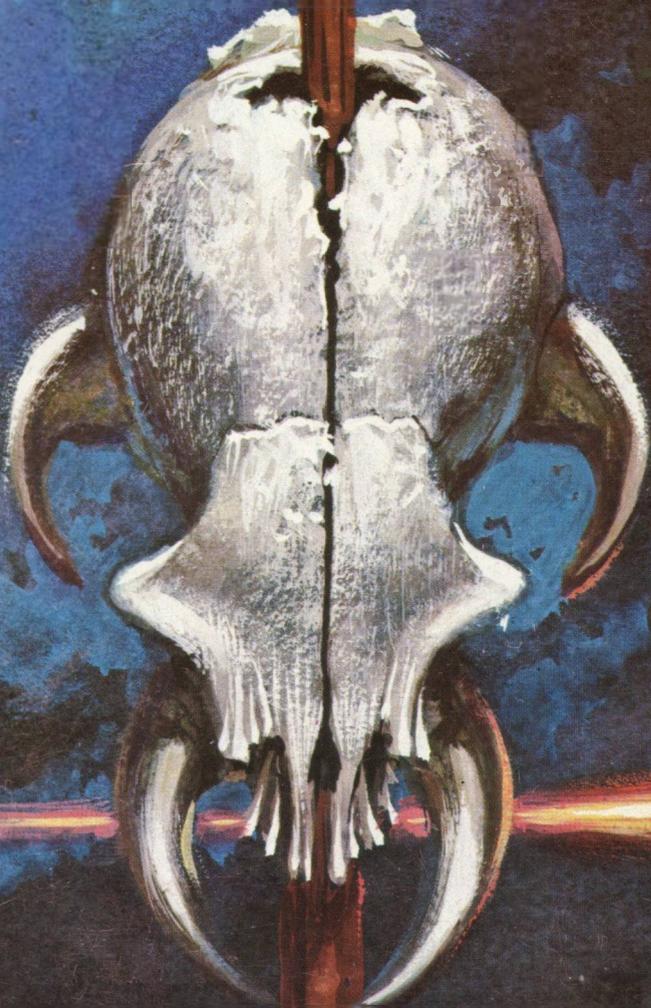
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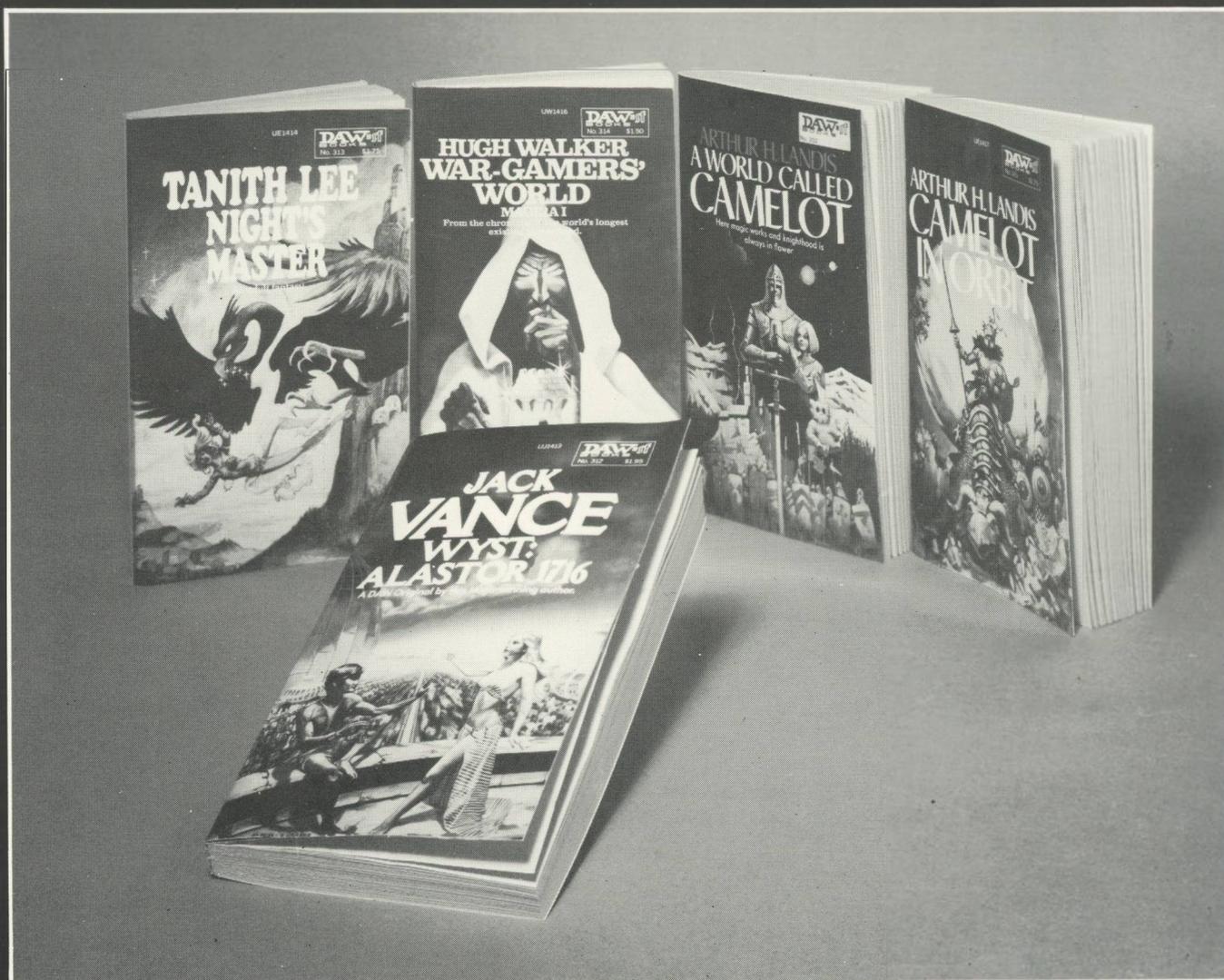
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Canadian Orders to:
81 Mack Avenue
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*Canadian prices slightly higher



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**ALGOL/STARSHIP: THE MAGAZINE
ABOUT SCIENCE FICTION. Vol. 16
No. 1, Whole No. 33, Winter 1978-79.**

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Advertising: For display advertising rates and information, write the publisher. Classified ads cost 15 cents per word, minimum 20 words. Payment must accompany copy. Deadlines December 15 for Spring issue, March 15 for Summer issue, June 15 for Fall issue, September 15 for Winter issue.

Retail Sales: ALGOL is distributed by the F&SF Book Co., Box 415, Staten Island NY 10302. For full information, write the publisher.

Subscriptions: USA: 1 year \$8, 2 years \$14. Libraries: 1 year \$8.60, 2 years \$16. FOREIGN: 1 year \$8.60, 2 years \$16. Foreign Libraries: 1 year \$9, 2 years \$17.20. Billing charge 50 cents. All subscriptions must be in US Funds. Mail to ALGOL Magazine, P.O. Box 4175, New York NY 10017.

European Subscriptions: 1 year 18 DM, 2 years 33 DM. Checks payable and mail to: Waldemar Kummering
Herzogspitalstr. 5
D-8000 Munchen 2, W. GERMANY
[Postscheckkonto Munchen 1478 14-802]

British Subscriptions: 1 year 4.75 Pounds, 2 years 9 Pounds. Checks payable and mail to: Ethel Lindsay
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Angus DD7 7QQ

ALGOL

THE MAGAZINE ABOUT
SCIENCE FICTION

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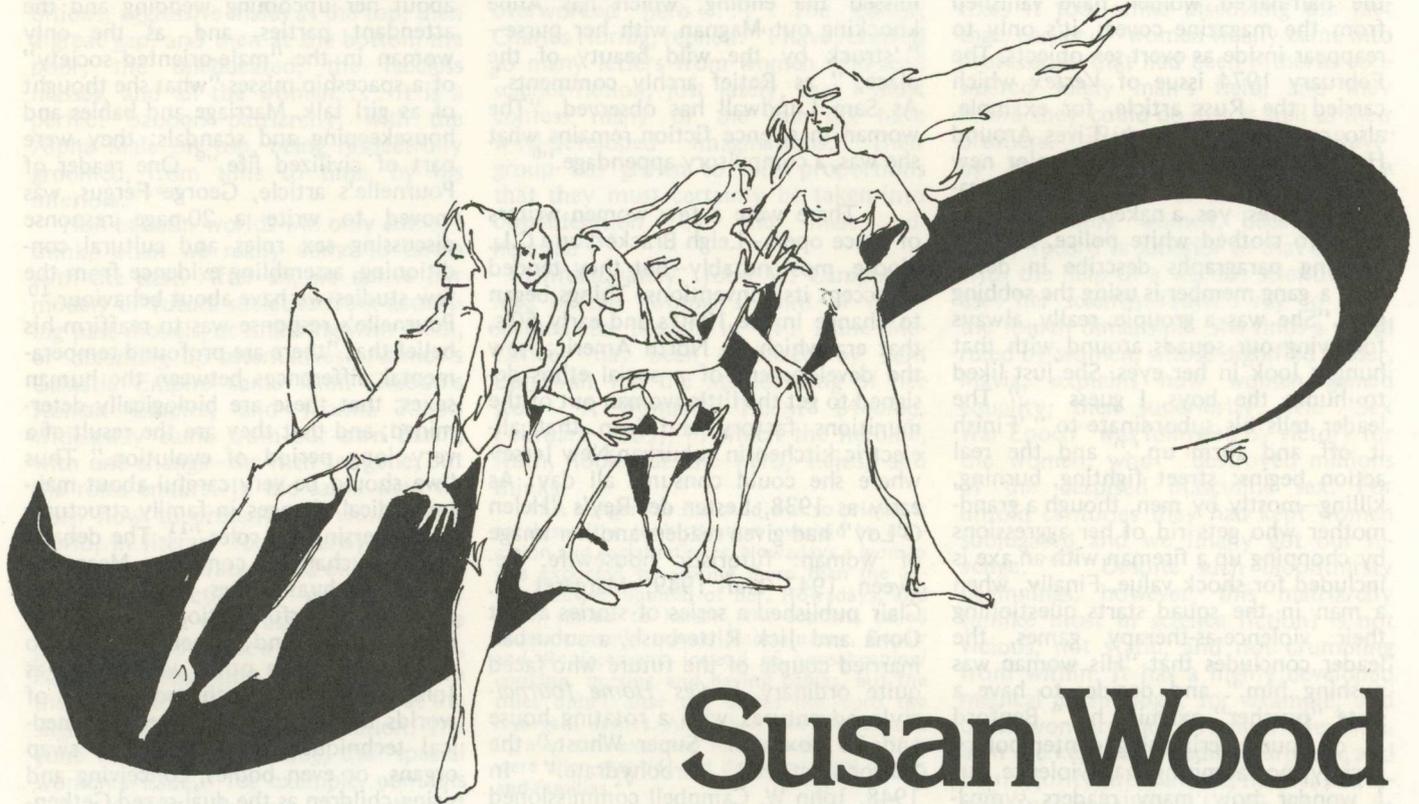
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Color separations by Sun Graphics
Typesetting by LUNA Publications
Printed by Science Press, Ephrata, Pennsylvania

WOMEN and SCIENCE FICTION



Susan Wood

"Women have their great and proper place, even in a man's universe," conceded the crusty old spaceship captain who narrated "Priestess of the Flame" by Sewell Peaslee Wright (*Astounding*, June 1932).

"Women, when handled in moderation and with extreme decency, fit nicely into scientification *at times*," wrote Isaac Asimov in the lettercolumn of the November 1939 issue of *Startling Stories*. He was nineteen.

"There are plenty of images of women in science fiction.

"There are almost no women," observed Joanna Russ in "The Image of Women in Science Fiction,"¹ an article first published in 1971, which stimulated much discussion when it was reprinted in *Vertex* in 1974. Russ was criticizing SF on what are, by now, familiar grounds: its failure to develop characterization, and its failure to provide genuine social extrapolation, notably of changes in human relationships and sex roles. Russ and other critics

have, in turn, been attacked on everything from their examples to their premises that men and women should not only be legally equal, but should have equivalent roles in society. Nevertheless, people are starting to question the stereotypes of a popular literature which has always been male-oriented and male-dominated. As a result, there are more stories about real women, and real men, emerging in the SF field. And there are plenty of articles about their absence.

Most of these articles follow a pattern typified by Russ's discussion, and by Pamela Sargent's excellent long introduction to *Women of Wonder* (Vintage, 1975), a landmark collection of SF stories by women, about women, and the place to start looking for those elusive creatures.² The typical article begins by identifying SF as a man's universe, or an adolescent male universe, in which woman's great and proper place was on the cover of a pulp magazine, dressed in as little as possible

and being menaced by a bug-eyed monster. Inside, the lovely woman was much less visible for, as Anne McCaffrey so succinctly puts it, "Science fiction . . . is more cerebral than gonadal."³ In the pulp era (roughly from the birth of *Amazing Stories* in 1926 through to the mid-'40's), gadget stories of pseudoscience sometimes featured a rare female, usually a scientist's daughter to whom scientific principles could be explained in simple terms, and with whom the steely-jawed young hero could exchange a closing kiss if "love interest" were deemed necessary to liven up the jargon. Hugo Gernsback's novel *Ralph 124C41+* contains interminable examples of woman-as-recipient-of-expository-lump, a technique brought to its highest pitch, of course, by Heinlein. More numerous, however, and rather more fun (if only for the horrible examples) were the science fiction adventures, or "space operas." Women in these got to fill two roles. They could either be blonde Victims, shrieking

"eek" at monsters and being rescued by the hero; or they could be dark, sultry Temptresses, eternally trying to seduce the hero away from his rescue mission. The latter had rather more fun, but ended up heartbroken when the hero abandoned them—and usually dead, as well. It is tempting to feel superior to such formula fiction, only until we realize that the stereotypes haven't changed since the Priestess of the Flame vamped around over forty years ago. If the half-naked women have vanished from the magazine covers, it's only to reappear inside as overt sex objects. The February 1974 issue of *Vertex* which carried the Russ article, for example, also contained "Nobody Lives Around Here," a minor effort by a major new author, Gregory Benford. The illustration features, yes, a naked black woman and two clothed white police, and the opening paragraphs describe in detail how a gang member is using the sobbing girl: "She was a groupie, really, always following our squads around with that hungry look in her eyes. She just liked to hump the boys, I guess . . ." The leader tells his subordinate to "'Finish it off and form up,'" and the real action begins: street fighting, burning, killing—mostly by men, though a grandmother who gets rid of her aggressions by chopping up a fireman with an axe is included for shock value. Finally, when a man in the squad starts questioning their violence-as-therapy games, the leader concludes that "His woman was pushing him," and decides to have a state "psycher" examine her.⁴ Benford is, of course, criticising contemporary society, not admiring male violence, but I wonder how many readers sympathized with his satisfied narrator? And those stereotypes of young victim/sex object, nagging wife and death-dealing old lady are remarkably persistent.

In fact, SF continually confronts us with evidence that it has advanced very little in characterization and social extrapolation, as evident in the portrayal of women, in the 51 years since Gernsback founded *Amazing Stories*. My own *click* of consciousness came in 1972, after I had been reading what the library clerk coldly informed me were "boys' books" for some 15 years, happily substituting my female self for their male protagonists. In the December 1972 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, I read "The Garbage Invasion," a Retief novelette by Keith Laumer. This one, unusually enough, featured a woman, "Anne Taylor, who was tall and beautiful and held the title: Field Curator of Flora and Fauna, assigned to the unpopulated world, Delicia." She is *in charge* of the world; Retief is assisting her as "Acting Wildlife Officer" during a crisis. So what happens? She spends all her time calling the crisis "perfectly horrid," and worry-

ing that an arriving shuttlecraft may "tear up the lawn and mash my flowerbeds." When Retief's superior arrives, this woman, who is described by Retief himself as filling "a position . . . of considerable responsibility" with "commendable efficiency" is summarily dismissed with an order to "mix us a couple of tall cool ones and . . . punch in a nice dinner to celebrate Mr. Magnan's visit.'" At this point, I threw the magazine across the room, and so missed the ending, which has Anne knocking out Magnan with her purse—"struck by the wild beauty of the place," as Retief archly comments.⁵ As Sam Lundwall has observed, "The woman in science fiction remains what she was, a compulsory appendage."⁶

There were a few women writers of space opera—Leigh Brackett and C.L. Moore, most notably—but they tended to accept its conventions. Things began to change in the 1940's and early 50's, that era which, in North America, saw the development of a social ethos designed to get the little woman out of the munitions factory and into that all-electric kitchen in suburban New Jersey where she could consume all day. As early as 1938, Lester del Rey's "Helen O'Loy" had given readers another image of woman: futuristic housewife. Between 1947 and 1949, Margaret St. Clair published a series of stories about Oona and Jick Ritterbush, a suburban married couple of the future who faced quite ordinary *Ladies' Home Journal*-style adventures with a rotating house and 30 boxes of "Super Whost," the "chronometrized carbohydrate." In 1948, John W. Campbell commissioned Judith Merrill's first science fiction story, asking her to provide "the woman's point of view" on scientific developments. The story, "That Only a Mother," deals with the effects of radiation in terms of a mother's blind love for her mutant daughter. The galactic housewives of 2050, happily dusting the robochef in the living unit while hubby tends the yeast farms, might represent a failure of social extrapolation, but they were, perhaps, a little more believable as human beings than all the princesses and priestesses. Perhaps.

A number of women writers entered the field during the 1950's and early '60's. Joanna Russ notes, however, that while they tended to place more emphasis on character development than had the earlier, mostly male writers, they still tended to "see the relations between the sexes as those of present-day, white, middle-class suburbia," a world which might be satirized but which was rarely questioned.⁷ But how can we know the future? How can we make guesses about it, except on the basis of our life today? Thus, for example, Jerry Pournelle assumes "that there is a na-

ture of man, that part of that nature consists of innate differences between the sexes, and that social orders which conform with that nature and those assumptions survive better than those that do not."⁸ On these assumptions, and on the basis of his observations of women, he defends such portraits as that of Lady Sally in *The Mote in God's Eye*, a blonde doctoral student in anthropology who doesn't understand the alien Moties, is concerned mostly about her upcoming wedding and the attendant parties, and, as the only woman in the "male-oriented society" of a spaceship misses "what she thought of as girl talk. Marriage and babies and housekeeping and scandals: they were part of civilized life."⁹ One reader of Pournelle's article, George Fergus, was moved to write a 20-page response discussing sex roles and cultural conditioning, assembling evidence from the few studies we have about behaviour.¹⁰ Pournelle's response was to reaffirm his belief that "there are profound temperamental differences between the human sexes; that these are biologically determined; and that they are the result of a very long period of evolution." Thus "we should be very careful about making radical changes in family structures and reversing sex roles."¹¹ The debate, and the changes, continue. Meantime writers such as James Tiptree, Jr. are creating powerful fictions out of the idea that men and women are aliens to each other, while other writers such as John Varley explore the possibilities of worlds in which highly-developed medical techniques allow people to swap organs, or even bodies, conceiving and siring children as the dual-sexed Gethenians of *The Left Hand of Darkness* can do. In the meantime, too, women such as Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Kate Wilhelm, Vonda McIntyre, Pamela Sargent and Suzy McKee Charnas, to name a few, are creating a few new imaginative roles for the woman who rebels against being told, like the brilliant engineer in *Podkayne of Mars*, that she's failing in her duty if she doesn't stay home with the children: "building bridges and space stations and such gadgets is all very well . . . but . . . a woman has more important work to do."¹² In the process, they're creating a few new roles for men, too.

Thus any criticism of science fiction's failure to depict believable woman characters really brings up two points. One is primarily literary: the need for science fiction to replace all the cardboard characters, he-men as well as she-devils, with functioning people. (It is interesting to note that Gordon R. Dickson, in an essay on "Plausibility in SF," deals with how to establish setting, background and scientific facts but never mentions the development of plausible characters.)¹³ The other is

primarily social: the need for SF to actually do what it pretends to do, that is, envision genuinely new cultures and societies. This need is explicit in Russ's appeal for SF which will at least show men and women participating in everyday work life (as they do now) with some suggestion of sexual equality. We find it, especially, in Ursula Le Guin's criticism that: "In general, American SF has assumed a permanent hierarchy of superiors and inferiors, with rich, ambitious, aggressive males at the top, then a great gap, and then at the bottom the poor, the uneducated, the faceless masses, and all the women. . . . It is a perfect baboon patriarchy, with the Alpha Male on top, being respectfully groomed, from time to time, by his inferiors."¹⁴

Non-baboon worlds will only come, I think, when we really come to terms with the past. After all, we derive our models of future societies from accepting past models, or tinkering with them, or dreaming up alternatives: Asimov's Galactic Empire came from Gibbon's Roman Empire, and Joanna Russ's *Whiteaway* came from our own Earth, with one change—the men are gone, but the roles endure. In the same way, we learn how to present our view of the world, in literary form, partly through reading past literature and either assimilating or rejecting it. We should be aware of what we're assimilating. Those princesses and housewives, for example, have a disconcerting way of lurking in the typewriter, ready to leap out at the slightest failure of the imagination. The June 1977 issue of *Analog*, the "special women's issue," for example, contains "The Ax" by Jaygee Carr, whom I assume from context to be female. The story concerns a futuristic murder trial, and contains various lawyers, scientists and witnesses. A woman is reported to have found the victim's body and sounded an alarm, "screaming at the top of her lungs." There is only one other woman in the story, a lie-detector operator, "a slender, willowy woman" that the central character "would have liked to have met socially." Are we to assume that in this future North America, all the women judges, lawyers, clerks and laboratory workers have gone on strike?¹⁵

We should also be aware of the positive images that the past offers us. The view of science fiction as a male preserve is a stereotype fostered by people such as John W. Campbell, who tended to address his readers as "Gentlemen" and his authors as "the guys." Women have always read SF—like Naomi D. Slimmer of Russell, Kansas, who responded to the first issue of *Science Fiction* in 1939 with a letter saying she, and her four sisters, "read *Science Fiction* to help us picture what the world will be in years to come, or to

get someone's idea of life in a different world. We know what present-day life is like on this earth. (It's a mess! And *Science Fiction* is about the only way we can forget that fact for a few minutes.)" She went on to say: "If you have to have a female in the picture, make her sensible. Let her know a few things about space-ships, heat-guns and such. Phooey on the huzzies who are always getting their clothes torn off and walling an amorous eye at the poor overworked hero . . ." The editor, Charles Hornig, replied: "I have received so many letters from women who read science-fiction, just lately, that I must confess many of the fair sex have well-developed imaginations. Their group has grown to such proportions that they must certainly be taken into consideration by the male adherents."¹⁶

Unfortunately, John W. Campbell's idea of the "woman's point of view" seemed to prevail in SF. Anne McCaffrey has been criticized by Sam Lundwall for the stereotyping of her story "A Womanly Talent" (*Analog*, February 1969), in which the heroine, Ruth, looks at the hero, Lajos, and thinks:

This hunger for his child was so primal, it paralysed the sophistication overlaid by education and social reflexes. Nowadays a woman was expected to assume more than the ancient duties required of her. Nowadays, and Ruth smiled to herself, the sophists called those womanly talents Maintenance, Repair and Replacement, instead of housekeeping/cooking, nursing and having babies, but the titles didn't alter the duties nor curb the resurgent desires. And when you got down to it, men still explored new ground, even if it were alien ground, and defended their homes and families.¹⁷

McCaffrey, however, in her essay "Romance and Glamour in Science Fiction," the only entry under the index heading "women" in Reginald Bretnor's *Science Fiction Today and Tomorrow*, explains that she wanted Ruth to be a "liberated woman" (her quotation marks). However, "John Campbell asked me to define Ruth in terms of a customary womanly role to cater to his readership. Essentially, he told me, man still explores new territory and guards the hearth; woman minds that hearth whether or not she programs a computer to dust, cook, and rock the cradle."¹⁸ The July 1941 *Astounding* had published "Brown" by Frank Belknap Long, in which an explorer stated: "The urge to reach out, to cross new frontiers, is a biological constant." His fiancée replied: "It isn't in me A woman seeks new frontiers in a man's arms. . . ." ¹⁹ Campbell was, at least, consistent in his views, and McCaffrey argues that she played on this, treating the stereotype facetiously and allowing Ruth to succeed in the story where the men fail, while acting in the "traditional" mother-mistress-healer role.

Back in the pulp era, Hugo Gernsback's magazines tended to print sedater stories than the competing pulps; and the liberated women within society found some place within their pages. *Science Wonder Quarterly* for Spring 1930 contains two stories by women, featuring competent women. In "The Ape Cycle" by Clare Winger Harris, a well-known SF writer, Sylvia Danforth helps her fiancé to destroy the rule of intelligent apes. She flies his plane, and fixes it too, while discussing the fact that, earlier, "women finally came into professions that had been hitherto considered solely man's field, and they found they could do just as well as their brothers."²⁰ In "Via the Hewitt Ray," by M.F. Rupert, Lucile Harris is a commercial pilot for an airline which employs only women, because their safety record is superior to that of men. With the help of a woman scientist, she uses her scientist-father's ray to enter the fourth dimension. She finds a world ruled by women, whose dignified leader, Mavia, explains how women gained equality, then superiority. The "Sex War Epoch" was followed by victory for the women, who "destroyed millions of the despised masculine sex. For untold centuries they had kept women subjugated and we finally got our revenge."²¹ Despite such bloodthirsty beginnings, however, this matriarchy (unlike most in science fiction) is not vicious, not static, and not crumbling from within. It has a highly developed medical technology, for example, and other wonders such as colour television. Men are kept for breeding purposes, and the majority are content, neither effeminate nor rebellious. Lucile returns to her own world with one rebellious male, whom she names John. He remains cowed until she scolds him: "Why, don't you know that you are in every way superior to a woman?" Then she adds, in an aside, "May my sisters in feminism forgive the lies. I had to be drastic" (p.420). "Dad," the scientist who has to be rescued by Lucile and the women rulers, makes various jocularly derogatory remarks about "a group of pretty ladies playing at politics," (p.381), but these are contrasted with the women's real competence, to underscore the fact that women deserve equality. Or, as Lucile tells Mavia, "For a long time we, too, were held back, but now we stand shoulder to shoulder with the men. I hope we won't have any sex war. That would be horrible" (p.377).

Science fiction's past certainly offers us more Ruths than Luciles. Nevertheless, we need to consider the nature of stereotypes and archetypes before blithely setting out to create anew. Social stereotypes are, or were, "true" in some sense; there really were housewives like Oona trying to impress the

other "girls" in 1949. More generally, there were, are and will continue to be women whose primary concern is the family—women like the heroine of Zenna Henderson's "Subcommittee" (*F&SF*, July 1962). In this story, male delegates from a hostile alien race are conferring with male military leaders from earth. War seems inevitable. However, through two children, an Earth woman and a pink-furred alien woman become friends. They exchange knitting patterns and conversation; then, over a picnic lunch, the Earth woman learns the aliens' real purpose. They don't want war; they just want to borrow some salt. The heroine is desperate enough to forget her place as a mere woman, a spectator of power games. She breaks in on the men's conference, flourishing her pink slip to prove to the alien leader that she really is a friend of his wife. Galactic harmony is restored, and everyone plays with the children's marbles. "Subcommittee" is a silly, sentimental story, but it makes an important point. The men are automatically suspicious and hostile, thinking only of gaining power over each other. The women, with their shared concern for the nurture of life, quickly establish communication and trust. Beyond the social stereotypes of the army general and housewife are the archetypes of the warrior and the Mother Goddess, too powerful and too rich in their implications to ignore.

Many of the images of women in science fiction, as in any Western popular artform, seem to be distortions of archetypes we have barely begun to understand, much less reject. Robert Graves and others, for example, have traced three main aspects of the woman in mythology: the Triple Goddess who is Diana/Venus/Hecate, virgin/matron/hag, mistress of birth, sexuality and death, and the Muse whose presence inspires "mixed exultation and horror."²² Samuel Delany's story "We, in Some Strange Power's Employ, Move on a Rigid Line" (*F&SF*, May 1968) derives its power from the manipulation of resonant symbols and archetypes, notably the three aspects of women: Sue, the young silverclad power "demon" who is almost raped by a monstrous "Angel"; the ironically-named Fidessa, the beautiful woman who belongs to the man with power, and who flies "like ageless Mab, like an airborne Witch of Endor";²³ and Mabel, the old woman whose hand deals the final death to a man and a culture. Poul Anderson's "The Queen of Air and Darkness" (*F&SF*, April 1971) also makes memorable use of these images as found in folklore.

Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* and Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch* both discuss the degeneration of these im-

ages, in Western popular culture, into the stereotypes of the pale, sexless Good Woman, often associated with virtue and otherworldly salvation, and the dark, voluptuous Bad Woman, associated with original sin and death through sexuality. The former became, in science fiction, the vapid blonde princess or scientist's daughter, the passive virgin whose love can be won only through pain and trial. She is woman as ideal, always in danger of assault by evil forces, but always rescued; and woman as precious possession, rewarding the rescuer with a story-closing kiss. Randall Garrett's "The Man Who Collected Women" (*Amazing*, April 1957) offers an excellent example of this theme. Beautiful women are being plucked into the sky by blue-skinned aliens, who intend to use them for breeding purposes. They are fooled by a he-man who just happens to be a female impersonator; the aliens have assumed that the women are simply animals, without the intelligence to revolt, and are thus overpowered when a man arrives to lead the women to freedom. The story can easily be seen as a comment on the social stereotypes of women in 1957.

At the opposite extreme in temperament, though not in supernatural beauty, is the dark woman, often an alien, sexually arousing and deadly. C.L. Moore's famous "Shambleau" (*Weird Tales*, Nov. 1933) in which rugged adventurer Northwest Smith thinks he is rescuing a lovely girl from a mob, only to fall under the spell of a Medusa, shows the power of the original archetype. Leigh Brackett's "The Halfling" (*Astonishing Stories*, Feb. 1943), also contains a cynical he-man who quickly succumbs to the lures of the exotic Laura with her tilted purple eyes. It's not until she kills three of his carnival crew, destroys his business and tries to kill him that he finally recognizes her for what she is: a cat-creature from Callisto, seeking vengeance on the humans who have degraded her people. She confesses she loves the hero, then sets his own wild cats on him; he kills them, and her, before succumbing to a romantic hero's despair. The theme of the woman as seductress, often threatened in her mission of revenge by her love for the hero, is well-developed, as is the presentation of woman as alien and as cat-creature. Graves traces this association back to early worship of the White Goddess; certainly it features prominently in medieval lore of witches and their familiars. It is common in pulp SF, often with an added racial threat as the woman's exotic feline eyes are associated with the stereotype of the evil slant-eyed Chinese. The evil priestess Nirvor in Henry Kuttner's "The Time Trap" has black hair and "a cold, cruel, distant something" in her feline eyes.²⁴ She wanders about in a revealing black

robe, accompanied by a black leopard and a white leopard, uttering such smouldering lines as "'You fear my eyes. . . . But you do not fear my body'" to the cleancut hero (p.117). (*Marvel Science Stories*, later *Marvel Tales*, in which the story appeared, tried for three issues to offer the fans sex and sadomasochism with their SF, but this proved unpopular back in 1938.) Nirvor turns out to be a leopard herself. Here she is, torturing the Princess Alasa: "In her jet eyes was torture-lust; on her face was stamped the cruelty of the beast. Her heritage, the leopard stigmata, was ruling now" (p.118). Naturally, the hero shoots her and her leopard-sisters, then takes the Princess back to the United States, where, one assumes, she'll become a housewife.

My favorite early example of the dark woman, however, is Liane, Mother of Life, Giver of Death, Priestess of the Flame in Sewell Peaslee Wright's story, whose great and proper place is as a vamp in the man's universe of the Space Navy. Her aim, as ruler of the degenerate Lakonians, is to gain a seat on the Council which rules the Universe.

"'She is mad,' I said."

"'Crazy,' grunted Correy. 'Plain crazy. A woman—in the Council!'"²⁵ She tries to stir the Lakonians to revolt against their real masters, the earthmen for whom they toil in their planets' mines; then she tries to seduce a member of the Navy crew sent to subdue the populace. At this point, the story starts to sound like an African tribal adventure, and one's sympathies are all with Liane and the Lakonian liberation front. We next see her in her temple, "a goddess, terrifyingly beautiful" in her robe of "thin, shimmering stuff," (p.414) callously threatening people with death in *The Flame*. But she is also a woman in love, and at last she releases officer Hendrix, and dies by her own hand when the people rise up against her. Liane can expiate her sensuality by returning her lover to his crew and his duty; she cannot, however, go unpunished for the sin of wanting power.

The other aspect of the Triple Goddess, the Mother, has already been examined in her stereotype as suburban housewife. The prototype in many respects is the robot heroine of Lester del Rey's "Helen O'Loy." Described as "One part beauty, one part dream and one part science," she is a cook-appliance, adapted by two young men in their basement lab to have emotions and consciousness of self. Unfortunately, her "programming" accidentally includes a soap opera, so she becomes a "normal girl" who giggles while she tries on hats. She also falls madly in love with her creator, Dave, and pursues him with kisses and roast duck with spice stuffing, since she has "all the good points of a woman and a mech com-

bined.”²⁶ When Phil, the other scientist, tells her that Dave wants a real woman, not a creation of “metal and rubber,” she counters: “I can’t think of myself that way; to me, I’m a woman. And you know how perfectly I’m made to imitate a real woman . . . in all ways. I couldn’t give him sons, but in every other way. . . . I’d try so hard, I know I’d make him a good wife” (pp.123-24). And she does.

The Science Fiction Writers of America chose “Helen” as one of the 26 short stories included in *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame* (a volume, incidentally, which contains one story by “Lewis Padgett” the pseudonym of C.L. Moore and Henry Kuttner, and only one other story by a woman, Judith Merrill’s “That Only a Mother.” It is thus as good an index as any of the absence of women, as writers and characters, in North American SF between 1926 and 1964). It also continues to be anthologized. Del Rey recently described it as “probably the most chauvinistic story ever written,” but said its popularity arises because it is “a perfect example of every young man’s wish-dream of the kind of woman he could get,” and a “dream woman” for women as well.²⁷ “Helen” also suggests, though it doesn’t begin to answer, important questions about the nature of the social role we call “woman”—is it all just programming of “the glands, secretions, hormones, and miscellanies that are the physical causes of emotions”? (p.119). Do scientists such as Phil, who cheerfully deprogrammes a wealthy young man who’s fallen in love with a servant girl, but doesn’t deprogramme Dave who’s fallen in love with a servant machine, have the right to tinker with emotions and create artificial life? I’d like to know more about Helen, too, who gains her role-models from soap operas but soon proves clever enough to convince the two men she is what she believes herself to be: a real woman, who gives up potential immortality to die with her husband. I’d like to see someone rewrite “Helen O’Loy”—from Helen’s point of view.

The pulp stories dealing with princesses and priestesses, and the somewhat later ones dealing with galactic suburbia, all present woman as heroine. As Joanna Russ comments, such stories offer several common themes. The women tend to be supernaturally beautiful. Usually they are weak. Often, they are kept offstage; thus the hero of Heinlein’s “The Roads Must Roll” occasionally calls his wife to let her know he’s still tied up at the office with a revolution, while the hero of “Space Jockey” longs to tell his estranged wife that:

I have to work to support us. You’ve got a job, too. It’s an old, old job that women have been doing for a long time—crossing the plains

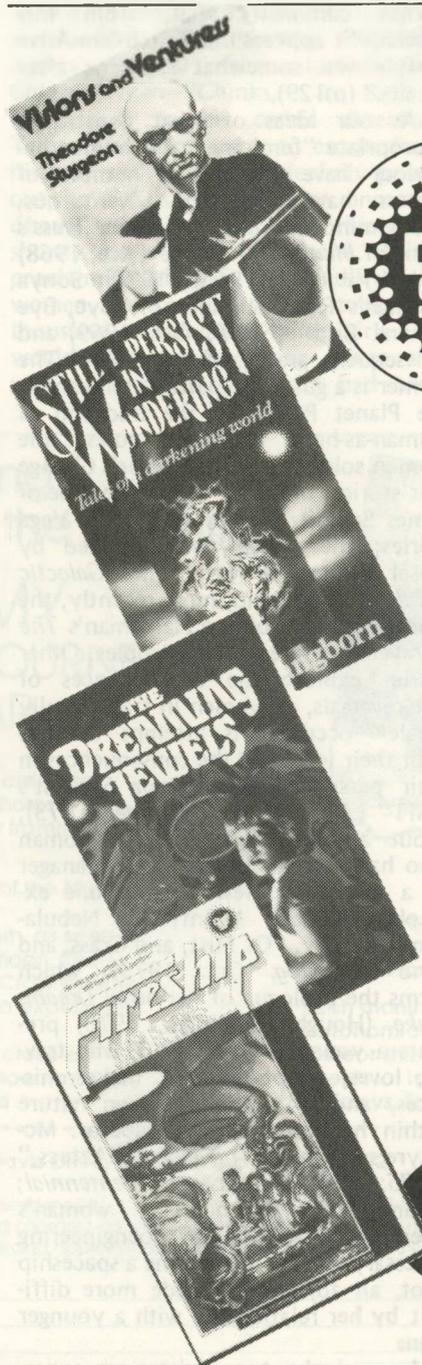
in covered wagons, waiting for ships to come back from China, or waiting around a mine head after an explosion—kiss him goodbye with a smile, take care of him at home.²⁸ If the women do have powers, they tend to be the passive or involuntary ones of Judith Merrill’s telepathic heroines, Zenna Henderson’s empathetic teachers, all of fantasy’s witches and sorceresses. Russ comments that: “The power is somehow *in* the woman, but she does not really possess it.”²⁹

Another important group of stories, however, shows the woman as hero, either in a traditional male role, or as Amazon or rebel, rejecting male rule. In the pulps at least, the first group could only live their independent lives by sacrificing what their creators assumed was some of their femininity. The best

example of this ambiguous portrayal is Arthur Barnes’ treatment of Gerry Carlyle, in a series of stories originally published between 1937 and 1946, and later collected as *Interplanetary Hunter*. Gerry is a wealthy, successful business-woman and adventurer, who roams the galaxy with a crew of highly disciplined male helpers, collecting extraterrestrial life forms for the London Zoo. Her main prize, though, is Tommy Strike, a he-man whose initial reaction is admiration:

No synthetic blonde baby-doll here but a natural beauty untouched by the surgeon’s knife—spun-gold hair, intelligence lighting dark eyes, a hint of passion and temper in the curve of mouth and arch of nostrils. In short, a woman.³⁰

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temper manifest themselves in a crisp reproof for his poor manners, though, he immediately resents her as an "arrogant female . . . wilful, selfish" (p.13). Surprised by a hint of emotion, he later comes to pity her:

She was a woman walking in a man's world, speaking man's language, using man's tools.

As a constant companion of men she had to train herself to live their life, meet them on their own terms. To command their respect she felt she had no right to use the natural endowments—her charm and beauty—that nature intended her to use for that purpose.

Indeed, she dared not use them, for fear of the consequences. To give way to feminine emotion would be, she feared, to lose her domination over her male subordinates. She was, in short, that most pathetic of beings—a woman who dared not be a woman (p.26). Like the stereotyped "career women"

of the era, Gerry fails in her job for the first time, and thereby gets her man and her closing kiss. In later stories, Tommy as her partner and fiancé rescues her from various perils while Gerry watches with shining eyes, experiencing "that strange emotion—a compound of awe, fright and admiration—that every woman knows when she sees the man she loves in two-fisted action" (p.239). Every time she acts independently and achieves success, Barnes seems to undercut her. Either Tommy will make a remark like "How can anyone so lovely have such a bad temper?" (p.82) while "taking a perverse delight in seeing her humbled by the opposite sex" (p.83); or Gerry herself, "trim and dapper" in jodphers, will sigh with longing for "a dress—organdy—blue." Barnes comments that, from this speech, "it appears that Catch-em-Alive Carlyle was somewhat feminine after all. . . ." (p.129).

As our ideas of what constitutes appropriate "feminine" and human behaviour have changed, a number of writers have presented adventurous, strong-minded women: Joanna Russ's Alyx of *Picnic on Paradise* (Ace, 1968) and *Alyx* (Gregg Press, 1976); Sonya Dorman's Roxy Rimidon of "Bye, Bye Banana Bird" (*F&SF*, Dec. 1969) and its sequels are good examples. The former is a guide, the latter a sergeant in the Planet Patrol, in the tradition of woman-as-hero in male roles: the women soldiers in Fritz Leiber's *Change War* stories; the alien woman heroine of James Schmitz's *Lanni*, Agent of Vega stories; the policewoman created by Rosel George Brown in her *Galactic Sybil Sue Blue*; and, most recently, the women soldiers of Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War*, are other examples. Other stories explore the consequences of role-reversals, as women in traditionally "male" occupations attempt to deal with their jobs, and the consequences in their personal lives. Pamela Sargent's "IMT" (*Two Views of Wonder*, 1973), about a young Puerto Rican woman who has risen to become city manager of a crumbling New York is one example. Vonda McIntyre's Nebula-winning story, "Of Mist, and Grass, and Sand" (*Analog*, Oct. 1973), which forms the prologue of her novel *Dreamsnake* (Houghton Mifflin, 1978) presents a young woman healer who travels, loves, adopts a child, makes mistakes, and discovers her own nature within her vocation as a doctor. McIntyre's recent novella, "Aztecs," (2076: *The American Tricentennial*; Pyramid, 1977) shows a woman's attempt to adjust to the bioengineering necessary for her to become a spaceship pilot, an adjustment made more difficult by her relationship with a younger man.

Increasingly, too, writers are exper-

imenting with the separation of social role from gender, so that, in Marta Randall's *A City in the North* (Warner, 1976) or Vonda McIntyre's "Screwtop" (*The Crystal Ship*; Thomas Nelson, 1976) for example, the person who drives the truck or tries to kill the protagonist will just happen to be a woman. (It's not common to find that the person changing the diapers just happens to be a man, however.) Role-exchanges seem to be especially common in Utopian novels, such as Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (Harper and Row, 1974) and the future-world sections of Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (Knopf, 1976), which show societies which have made real attempts to eliminate sex stereotypes. A good early example is Heinlein's "—We Also Walk Dogs" (*Astounding*, 1941), about a trouble-shooting agency with a top woman operative. As a contrast, of course, we have Heinlein's Wyoming Knott, girl revolutionary in *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (Putnam Berkley, 1966), who is supposed to be tough, smart and competent, but whose function seems to be to be stupid, so Prof can explain things to her; to be helpless, so Manny can rescue her; to be cutesy-feminine, so Mike the computer can become Michelle, and talk "girl talk" with her, thus providing comic relief; and to be sexy, so Heinlein can make remarks about breasts bouncing in low gravity. Once the real action begins, she virtually disappears, except to show her faith in the revolution by having her tubal ligation reversed.

The traditional role-reversal story, however, goes back to ancient history and the stories of the Amazons, warrior women who formed their own societies. Sam Moskowitz's collection, *When Women Rule* (Walker, 1972) provides background on this theme, some less-than-objective commentary by the editor, and a number of stories frightening in their implications. In the "traditional" Amazon romance, typified here by the sixteenth-century story "The Queen of California," the Amazon leader is eventually overcome by force. The prince who is the champion of the opposing forces initially scorns her; it is "dishonourable" that a woman, commanded by God to "be in subjection to a man," should try to rule men by force of arms. Besides, she is an infidel.³¹ However, when she is defeated, and agrees to give up her arms and change her religion, he rewards her with the hand of a handsome knight. In science fiction's early variations on this theme, most written by men, the basic assumption seems to be that women who gain power will not want equality, but will, rather, destroy men as revenge for thousands of years of male oppression. Typical is "World Without Sex" by "Richard Wentworth," identified by

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Moskowitz as a pseudonym for Edmond Hamilton, (*Marvel*, May 1940), which depicts a woman-ruled world in which most men have been exterminated, and children are produced in laboratories. Eight surviving men escape, taking four female guards with them. The story's illustration shows this scene, and features the caption: "Rann wrestled the atom-pistol from the girl's hand and clouted her with it." The men rape and beat the women, who gradually submit. When Ala bears a female child to Rann, he rejects it, but eventually all learn to love the traditional "animal" method of reproduction. Meantime, the matriarchy is crumbling, and the story ends with more women choosing to join the male-run society. Since this story appeared in *Marvel Tales*, it contains rather more overt sadistic sexuality than most woman-ruler stories; nevertheless, it is typical in its premises that male-dominated heterosexual societies are the only acceptable norm. The strong woman leader of Nelson S. Bond's "The Priestess Who Rebelled" (*Amazing*, October 1939) abandons her apparently-viable matriarchy when a man teaches her how to kiss, and the sight of Mt. Rushmore convinces her that the ancient gods were, indeed, men. The premise that any change in the male-dominance pattern will produce either a vicious and destructive matriarchy, or a

totally static one in which no progress takes place, is remarkably persistent. For example, in Alfred Coppel's "For Sacred San Francisco," (*If*, Nov. 1969), a woman fighter calmly kills the man who rapes her, while prophesying the day when men will end the wars caused by the "crazy dames"; but her society is shown as self-destructive. The underlying current of fear and hatred in most Amazon stories, however, is best illustrated by David Keller's "The Feminine Metamorphosis," (*Science Wonder Stories*, Aug. 1929), a story which is viciously racist as well as sexist. Women's legitimate grievances at being excluded from the business world are the trigger for a melodrama in which an international underground organization of women surgically alters superior women to pass as men and take over the world. They have, however, used hormones derived from unsuspecting Chinese men—"Chinks," in Keller's terms—and, as his comic detective, Taine (who takes cases to escape from his wife and daughters) gleefully points out, have thus contracted an unnamed disease, obviously syphilis, which will shortly drive them all insane. Taine, proclaiming himself "ashamed" of the women, announces: "You took five thousand of our best women, girls who would have made loving wives and wonderful mothers if they had been

well advised—you took the best that we have bred, and through your desire to rule, you have changed them into five thousand insane women."³² Women who want power must, it seems, be punished for such "unnatural" presumption.

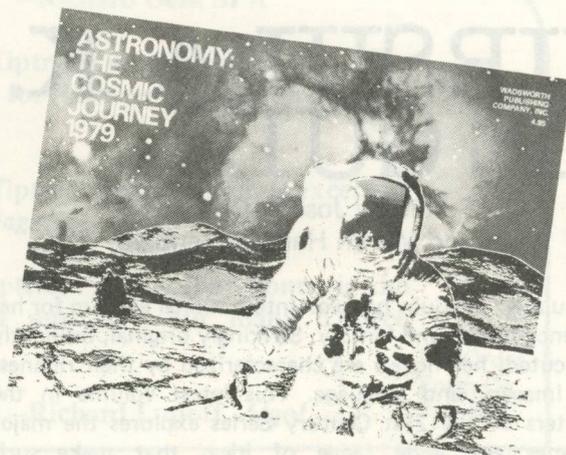
Again, contemporary women writers have sought to free the Amazon, the independent woman, from the Amazon stereotype. Jacinth, a young girl in Suzette Haden Elgin's "For the Sake of Grace" (*F&SF*, May 1969), rebels against her world's disdain for women in the only way possible—she becomes a poet, hence a ruler in her society. Alldera, an enslaved "fem" in Suzy McKee Charnas' *Walk to the End of the World* (Ballantine, 1974), gradually learns humanity and dignity in the free society of its sequel, *Motherlines* (Berkeley/Putnam, 1978). Marion Zimmer Bradley's Free Amazons of Darkover in *The Shattered Chain* (DAW, 1976) live independent lives outside the institutions of the planet's male-dominated society. The women of Joanna Russ's *Whiteaway*, the setting of "When It Changed" (*Again, Dangerous Visions*, 1972) have developed a complex, functional and ecologically stable society; they simply don't need the men who arrive to "rescue" them, unlike, for example, the women of Poul Anderson's "Virgin Planet" (*Venture*, Jan. 1957)

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who have longed for the day when the legendary men will arrive to fulfil them. Whileaway is also the home of Janet, the "female man" of Russ's novel of that name. Through her, Russ examines the traditional male role; her rite of passage into adulthood was the killing of a wolf; she has born a child and "sired" another; she has a wife, Vittoria; she works as a police officer; and she has killed four people in duels. When asked by a modern earth man, "'Don't you want men to return to Whileaway?'" she answers, simply, "'Why?'"³³

Whileaway is, of course, a future and alternate Earth. An extrapolation closer to our own time is Kit Reed's "Songs of War," (*Nova* 4, 1974), which follows a number of women who, for different reasons, take part in a small armed uprising. Some are changed; some seek a new society; some reject men entirely; some return to their families. Reed treats lesbian relationships contemptuously, and chooses as her central character Sally, a successful artist with a loving husband, who "had negotiated her own peace" with the world, and who blames the women's dissatisfaction on "the human condition," which, she feels, will never change.³⁴ Whether one agrees with this conclusion or not, though, Reed's characters (except for the caricatured lesbians and super-

mothers) and her situations are convincing. Certainly, too, one of the central points which the story makes is that the women in their guerilla camp can't seem to find genuine alternatives to the Alpha-male-dominated society they have rejected; the movement falls apart in leadership struggles, while in the brave new world, no one wants to tend the cook fires. Genuine extrapolations of non-patriarchal societies might provide such alternatives.

Sam Moskowitz, in his introduction to *When Women Rule*, conjectures that women's demands for equality have influenced the development of the Amazon theme in the twentieth century, and that these stories in turn reflect fear, on the part of women as well as men, that "this 'equality' . . . will end in domination" by the women. He continues: "The implication is almost that a male and a female are two completely different species instead of two indispensable sexes of the same animal" (p.26). Unwittingly, he identifies another of the major roles women can play in SF: that of aliens. In James Gunn's "The Misogynist," (*Galaxy*, Nov. 1952), the premise that women really are evil aliens is developed as a joke, though like many sexual jokes the stance fails to hide a strong undercurrent of fear and hostility; those women with their cold feet in bed are

really out to kill men! In Philip José Farmer's "The Lovers," (*Startling Stories*, Aug. 1952), the story credited with first introducing mature sexuality as a theme in SF, the woman is literally an alien, an extraterrestrial insect who dies when her human lover tricks her into becoming pregnant. In "When I Was Miss Dow" by Sonya Dorman (*Galaxy*, June 1966), the "woman" is also an alien, shape-changed to spy on a Terran scientist; trapped in a female body, she learns human emotions, but also the limitations of the female role. The most powerful examination of this theme, of course, is "The Women Men Don't See" by James Tiptree, Jr. (*F&SF*, Dec. 1973). A woman and her daughter choose to leave earth with an unknown alien, rather than live as aliens in male society. As Ruth Parsons explains to the protesting liberal-male narrator: "Women have no rights, Don, except what men allow us. . . . What women do is survive. We live by ones and twos in the chinks of your world-machine," not even hoping for changes.³⁵ Tiptree, who originally thought of the women as aliens, later commented in the *Khatru* symposium that "Of course it is not women who are aliens. Men are."³⁶ As is common in much contemporary SF, the fictional situation serves as a metaphor for the author's vision of contemporary society,

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in which the cultural differences between men and women seem insurmountable. Tiptree is a pseudonym for Alice B. Sheldon, a psychologist who also writes under the name Raccoona Sheldon. Her story "The Screwfly Solution" (*Analog*, June 1977) is a powerful examination of men's alienation from and fear of women, and the ugly cultural myths of woman's inferiority that underly civilized societies.

Woman as heroine, woman as hero, woman as alien: we do have plenty of images of women in SF. Many of them, however, are degrading to all people, and most of them are one-dimensional, the lowest common denominator of social stereotypes that are already passé. There are some real women, some real people who move convincingly off the page—my two current favorites are Odo of Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Day Before the Revolution" (*Galaxy*, Aug. 1974), and Zoe Breedlove of Michael Bishop's "Old Folks at Home" in *Universe* 8,

who enters into an unusual, and unusually happy, group marriage between seven elderly survivors in a joyless future city. But while it's easy enough for readers to demand that SF show real people in a convincing future, it's rather harder for writers to find ways to escape the compelling stereotypes.

It might even be valuable to re-examine the stereotypes, if only to really understand their limitations. Then push the limitations. Aldera of Charnas' *Walk to the End of the World* is literally woman-as-object, totally degraded by her society; the novel, and its sequel, *Motherlines* tell the story of her physical escape, and her gradual growth as a person beyond the limitations of her slave mentality. Unfortunately, stereotyped characters and situations are not only easier to write, they are also easier to get accepted by editors in commercial publishing houses. Charnas reports that one woman editor rejected *Motherlines*, which has an all-woman cast of

characters, in the following terms: "You know, if this story were all about men it would be a terrific story. I'm worried about my market. *The Female Man* had male characters in it, so men would pick it up and at least open it. But men get very angry . . ." Charnas adds, "You finish it, it's not hard: 'to be left out.'"³⁷

It would be even more valuable to examine the archetypes behind the stereotypes. The aspects of the Triple Goddess, still offer marvelously rich material for the imagination. The woman-as-nurturer image, in particular, is extremely powerful; for example, in the majority of stories in *Women of Wonder*, the female protagonist functions in some sort of nurturing role, either directly as a mother or indirectly as a space doctor, an empath, the person who takes care of others. But why not depict a nurturing male? There are examples in our society, but the only ones I can think of in science fiction, offhand, are Jason, the

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teacher in Terry Carr's *Cirque* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1977), and Coyote in Paul Novitski's "Nuclear Fission," forthcoming in *Universe 9*. A similar test of the power and validity of archetypes is found in Elizabeth Lynn's fantasy novella, "The Northern Girl," part of her forthcoming fantasy trilogy, *Chronicles of Tornovi*. Lynn has taken a number of archetypal figures (the warrior, the wise elder, the young person setting out on a quest) and a number of social roles (the politician, the teacher) and embodied them all as women. The result is not only a powerful story, but a good deal of stimulus to actually think about social roles, sex roles, and cultural archetypes.

Are the archetypes familiar to North Americans valid for people of other cultures? Many SF and fantasy writers are turning for inspiration to such "alien" cultures as those of North American Indians. Richard Lupoff went to Japanese culture for Kishimo, the woman warrior of *Sword of the Demon* (Harper and Row, 1977). If the first generation of SF writers were primarily adventure-story hacks, and the second generation were the science-trained men like Asimov, Heinlein and Clarke, then perhaps the third generation, women and men, can be cultural anthropologists and sociologists, genuinely examining new forms of social organizations in the only fiction that allows us to play god. Between observing people on buses and in the supermarket, and drawing on all the cultural resources available as alternates to North American society here-and-now, surely a good writer ought to be able to stimulate her imagination beyond the Princess, the Priestess and the Galactic Kitchen Sink. As to how, that's summed up by a speaker in Monique Wittig's Amazon novel, *Les Guérillères* (1969; Viking, 1971):

There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. You walked alone, full of laughter, you bathed bare-bellied. You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember. The wild roses flower in the woods. Your hand is torn on the bushes gathering the mulberries and strawberries you refresh yourself with. You run to catch the young hares that you flay with stones from the rocks to cut them up and eat them all hot and bleeding. . . . You say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent. ■

NOTES

1. Joanna Russ, "The Image of Women in Science Fiction," *Vertex*, Feb. 1974, p.57.
2. Pamela Sargent, ed., *Women of Wonder* (New York: Vintage, 1975).
3. Anne McCaffrey, "Romance and Glamour in Science Fiction," in Reginald Bretnor, ed., *Science Fiction, Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Penguin, 1975), p.279.
4. Gregory Benford, "Nobody Lives Around There," *Vertex*, Feb. 1974, pp.72-75, 94.
5. Keith Laumer, "The Garbage Invasion," *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*,

Dec. 1972, pp.121-150.

6. Sam Lundwall, *Science Fiction: What It's All About* (New York: Ace, 1971), p.143.
7. Russ, p.54.
8. Jerry Pournelle, "By What Standard?" *Mythologies 11* (Feb. 1977), p.14.
9. Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, *The Mote in God's Eye* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), p.245.
10. George Fergus, "Sex Roles, Biology, and Science Fiction," *Mythologies 11*, pp.16-34.
11. Jerry Pournelle, "Afterwords," *Mythologies 11*, pp.35-37.
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