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gender is a problem that
can be solved

women's science fiction and feminist theory

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In much science fiction (SF) by women, gender is depicted as a problem that needs to be solved. We live in a country where more women live in poverty than men, where 95 percent of the engineers and physicists are male, and where women, who have had the vote for eighty years, still do not have equal representation in government. It is not surprising, then, that authors might see gender as a problem.

We can see one way that gender is a problem in a short story by James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon), "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" (1973). Tiptree sets her story in a near-future world, where consumer culture has created a class of young people whose job it is to model consumption, touring vacation spots, wearing the latest fashions, promoting the most recent products—all followed by a TV camera. Companies pay these beautiful people to shop in order to sell products. In this future, an "ugly" girl is offered the chance to "be" one of this elite, though it means lying in a laboratory while her brain operates an artificial body elsewhere. Nevertheless, she gladly accepts, soon forgetting that she is not who she plays, and falling in love with one of the young men. When she rises from her laboratory nest, freeing herself from the wires to pursue her love, she destroys herself. Tiptree's story makes vivid for us the dangers for women of the social pressure of consumer images: gender is a problem that can kill you.

SF by women, however, imagines solutions to the problem of gender in inventive ways. Suzette Haden Elgin sets her novel *Native Tongue* (1984) in a dystopia in which the United States celebrates Reagan's birthday as a national holiday and women have been deprived of the rights to vote

or own property. Some of the women of this horrific future, however, resist patriarchy by creating a women-only language. Following the theory that a language not only reflects but also constructs reality, the women make a language that constructs a liberating reality, thus escaping from their oppressive world. Margaret Atwood sets her novel, *A Handmaid's Tale* (1985), in a future in which a neo-conservative government returns women to the religion-mandated role of reproductive slavery. But her novel also relates how feminists resist this future and how one woman survives her years in captivity as a surrogate mother to escape to Canada.

As you can see from these examples, SF by women extrapolates and elaborates the problems that women face in our current culture, but also represents gender itself as a problem that needs to be solved. In this essay I review SF criticism and relevant feminist theory on gender, surveying the answers to the problem of gender that women writers present in SF.

Joanna Russ, herself a writer, was the first critic to represent SF as a problem-solving genre that is especially appropriate for women. In "What Can a Heroine Do?" (1972), Russ argues that women of her generation experience special problems as writers, since narrative plots are gendered; men may write action adventure, romance, or any other plot, but women are stuck with two: the marriage plot or the mad-woman plot. Russ illustrates her point by regendering a few famous plots: "A young girl in Minnesota finds her womanhood by killing a bear," or "Alexandra the Great" (3). Women writers can give up plot entirely, and write lyricism, like Virginia Woolf, advises Russ. But if they want to write a structured story, they can choose only a few genres: SF is one of them: "The myths of science fiction run along the lines of exploring a new world conceptually ... creating needed physical or social machinery, assessing the consequences of technological or other changes ... These are not stories about men *qua* Man and women *qua* Woman; they are myths of human intelligence and adaptability" (18). Thus SF provides women writers not with plots that focus on the old "problems of success, competition, castration, education, love, or even personal identity" but new problems that "ignore gender roles ... [and] are not culture-bound" (18).

In her novel, *The Female Man* (1975), Russ "solves" the problem of gender by imagining alternatives for women to the marriage and madness plots. In her inventive narrative, the same woman lives four different futures. Although one of her four narrators, Jeannine, lives the marriage plot, arranging her life around the goal of finding a man, Russ's

other narrators live in worlds where they can construct different roles for themselves. In a future where the battle of the sexes is literal, Jaelle is a warrior-assassin who kills off men who would return women to reproductive oppression; and on a distant planet Janet helps to build a lesbian utopia. Even Joanna, in a world very like our own, resists "the vanity training, the obedience training, the self-effacement training, the deference training, the dependency training, the passivity training" (151).

In an essay titled "American SF and the Other" (1975), Ursula K. Le Guin, a prolific writer, sees SF itself as the problem: "From a social point of view most SF has been incredibly regressive and unimaginative" (98). Le Guin does a brief survey of the slow climb of SF out of racism and sexism, from a genre where women were ravished by alien monsters to a genre where more human heroes could deal with aliens with understanding (99). But she calls for a more "radical" revision of the genre, one that adds to SF writing "a little human idealism, and some serious consideration of such deeply radical, futuristic concepts as Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity"—even "Sisterhood" (100). In *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Le Guin experiments with this kind of novel, telling the story of a male ambassador on a foreign planet who is forced into a long journey across a barren, icy landscape with an alien who is biologically bisexual, transforming sometimes into a male, sometimes into a female in a monthly sexual cycle. The novel details the gradual growth from the discomfort of disapproving racism to sympathy between the two beings, Genly-Ai and Estraven.

In a later essay, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" (1986), Le Guin argues that writers should throw out men's SF plots—the "Techno-Heroic" (170) stories about men with "long, hard objects for sticking, bashing, and killing" (167), stories like that of the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where the bone used by the Ape Man to commit the first murder is "flung up into the sky" to become "a space ship thrusting its way into the cosmos to fertilize it" (Le Guin, "Carrier Bag" 167). Instead, Le Guin wants stories that tell a more feminine and humane tale, stories that are "carrier bags" holding the details of life that provide advice on surviving the problems of gender.

Le Guin constructs such a story in her novella, *The Eye of the Heron* (1978). On a far-distant, future planet where humans have escaped the destruction of earth, a hierarchical, tyrannical society comes into conflict with a group of anarchists. Le Guin's novel first gives us the "Techno-Heroic" version of events from the viewpoint of a man: Lev organizes protests to confront the violence of the other community, but finds, under pressure, that his "pacifist" army resorts to violence—Lev himself perishes along

with his hopes. Le Guin's novel then gives us the "Carrier Bag" version of events from the viewpoint of the woman who loved Lev: Luz helps to organize the community to pack and sneak away into the wilderness, far from tyrannical neighbors.

Between the 1970s and the present, many critics have joined the discussion on gender in SF. Natalie Rosinsky explored the new myths that revised the battle of the sexes in contemporary SF by women; in *Feminist Futures* (1984), she argues that speculative fiction estranges the audience "from conventional reality" so that readers may "question biases inherent in any dominant world-view" (114). In *Alien to Femininity* (1987), Marleen S. Barr urged that SF by women overturns the constraints of patriarchal social reality, offering women "presently impossible possibilities" (xi). In *Feminist Fabulation* (1992), Barr redefines SF by women as part of postmodern narrative, as "feminist fabulation" that "rewrites patriarchal myth" through "revisionary power fantasies for women" (xxvii and 3). In *World Machine* (1988), Sarah Lefanu examines the "subversive," "iconoclastic" strategies of women writers of SF and suggests that this anti-realism offers an opportunity to explore "the myriad ways in which we are constructed as women" (5).

In *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women* (1994), Jane Donawerth and Carol Kolmerten argue that a tradition of women's utopian vision developed in the eighteenth century and migrated to SF in the pulp magazines of the twentieth century. In *Frankenstein's Daughters* (1997), Donawerth further suggests that, because of gender constraints, twentieth-century SF by women takes certain forms—women writers construct a utopian science that includes women and revises scientific processes; they represent women as aliens; and they exploit the pleasures of cross-dressing as male narrators. Robin Roberts, in *A New Species* (1993), has argued that SF "can teach us to rethink traditional, patriarchal notions about science, reproduction, and gender" (2). In *Aliens and Others* (1994), Jenny Wolmark places SF in the category of postmodern literature because it displays the contradictions of institutional discourses—especially gender discourses—opening them to renegotiation (3). In *Decoding Gender* (2002) Brian Attebery explains that SF is a code that intersects with gender as a code, demonstrated, for example, in the popular Golden Age SF story of a young man's initiation into science as an initiation into masculinity (43). In her exploration of *The Battle of the Sexes* (2002), Justine Larbalestier unsettles definitions of sex and gender, using the term "sex" to refer to the whole area of "differences between male and female" that merge to form the sex/gender system in our culture and that are at issue in much SF (9). And in her essays, Veronica

Hollinger has asked if the representation of women as agents is enough, or if feminist SF is most resistant when it imagines the break-down of traditional gender entirely.

Before we continue this discussion of gender as a problem to be solved, we need to turn to recent feminist theorists who consider exactly what gender is. In "Interpreting *Gender*" (1994), Linda Nicholson takes up the vexed issue of the relationship of sex and gender. She suggests that most contemporary feminists adhere to "the coatrack theory of gender": the biological body of woman (sex) is the coatrack on which is hung the socially constructed conception of gender (81-83). Nicholson rejects this theory and argues that sex and the body are just as socially constructed as gender—nothing is known without mediation through culture. As a consequence, what it means to be a woman is different in different cultures (83).

In SF women also explore the vexed relationship between sex and gender. In Lois McMaster Bujold's *Shards of Honor* (1986), for example, Cordelia Naismith from Beta Colony falls in love with Aral Vorkosigan from Barrayar. Their romance places in conflict two different conceptions of sex-gender. On Barrayar, a woman is biologically responsible for reproduction and socially constructed to run the domestic side of life, taking care of family, while men are trained to farm, fight, and govern. On Beta Colony, where Cordelia was raised, children are grown in replicators, and both men and women are socially constructed to become scientists, warriors, and commanders—although negotiation skills are more highly valued than military abilities. In this novel, not only conceptions of gender, but also conceptions of biological sex vary from culture to culture. In the Vorkosigan series, Bujold thus juxtaposes one answer to the problem of gender—an equal-rights society with acceptance of most forms of sexuality—with a society where gender is a problem in ways similar to ours.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler similarly argues that gender is a performance, "a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real" (viii). Butler suggests that gender is not an inherent attribute of an individual but instead, a relationship between persons within a specific historical context (10). Butler argues that both parody—the stylization of gender (31)—and also getting gender "wrong"—through failing to repeat and promote the characteristics of gender (140-141)—disrupt and resist the damaging constraints of gender.

In an early story from the pulp SF magazines, C. L. Moore depicts such gender impersonation as solving the problem of gender. In "No Woman Born" (1944), Deirdre, a famous performer, is nearly killed in

a fire, and a surgeon rescues her by rebuilding her body from metal—she is reconstructed as a cyborg. While the men in her life imagine she will be a monster, unable ever to be her former self, Deirdre indomitably re-trains herself so that she can perform her old self through her new metal body. The men find Deirdre's lack of femininity even more monstrous than failure to succeed in her new body: "She hasn't any sex. She isn't female anymore" (258). But Deirdre sees herself not as "vulnerable and helpless... not sub-human" but as "superhuman" (287).

Writing against the essentialism of the 1970s women's movement, Donna Haraway, in "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985), urges women to reconstruct gender roles, modeling themselves on cyborgs, part human, part technology. Indeed, Haraway imagines a "post-gender world" (67), where humans possess "permanently partial identities" (72), and identity can be constructed as utopian and pleurably unnatural (67-68). In this post-gender world, Haraway calls for "Cyborg writing... about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence [a return to nature], but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as others" (94). SF, for Haraway, would depict the possibilities for action and pleasure available to "cyborg monsters," not the retelling of the "mundane fiction of Man and Woman" (99).

Haraway's conception of the feminist cyborg, gender as artificial and culturally inflected, might well apply to C. L. Moore's Deirdre, the automaton impersonating herself. A similar conception of gender animates Eileen Gunn's (1988) short story, "Stable Strategies for Middle Management," which wittily parodies corporate culture, exposes the effects of gender limitations on businesswomen, and offers a subversion of gene technology as a solution to the problem of gender. In this future where young adults compete for the next rung on the corporate ladder, bioengineering offers a means to splice desirable animal and insect traits into humans intent on gaining coveted management positions by molding themselves "into a more useful corporate organism" (709). When one young woman hits the glass ceiling, she competes by using the insect capabilities she has had spliced into her genes: mosquito-like, she bites her male competitor, Harry, when he irritates her; bee-like, she waxes over her male partner when he offers condescension rather than sympathy; and praying mantis-like, she decapitates her boss when he says that he has given the manager's position to Harry. "It goes without saying that I was surprised by my own actions," she explains; "I mean, irritable is one thing, but biting people's heads off is quite another. But I have to admit that my second thought was, well, this certainly is a useful strategy, and should make a considerable difference in my ability to

advance myself" (715). Poking fun at fears that women's emotions make them unsuitable in the workplace, Gunn's narrative imagines bioengineering cut-throat business urges into women in order to boost them through the glass ceiling. Gunn thus offers a "cyborg monster" vision of women, as Haraway recommended, telling a story radically different from the "mundane fiction of Man and Woman."

In mainstream SF, science is represented as a solution to many crises of human culture. In SF by women, gender itself is often represented as the crisis to which science provides a solution. From the early pulp magazines until recent feminist utopias, women writers have imagined technological reforms of women's reproductive role—especially pregnancies in a jar, rather than a woman's body. Besides the replicator in the Vorkosigan novels by Bujold, Lilith Lorraine's "Into the 28th Century" (1930) presents women who no longer face "the horror" of childbirth, and offspring who are brought "to perfect maturity in an incubator" (258). In Marge Piercy's utopian future in *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), fetuses are grown in an artificial womb; with hormonal treatments so that men may nurse, men and women share equally in all reproductive tasks.

In many second-wave feminist SF novels, especially those from the 1970s to the 1990s, the solution to the problem of gender is the disappearance of men. In Joanna Russ's "When It Changed" (1972), women on the planet Whileaway have developed sophisticated ova-splicing technologies in order to reproduce without men, who died from a virus. Faced with the return of "real men" from earth, the women mourn the return of the problems of gender: "I do not like to think of myself as mocked, ... deferred to ... made to feel unimportant or silly" (238). Similarly, in Eleanor Arnason's *Woman of the Iron People* (1991), lesbian relationships are envisioned as the biological norm. In Joan Slonczewski's *A Door Into Ocean* (1986), the capitalist, imperialist, heterosexual society on Valedon is beginning to trade with the communal, pacifist, and lesbian society of Shora, a neighboring planet. Juxtaposing a world modeled on equal-rights feminism (where women may command troops in battle), with a world derived from the tradition of the lesbian utopia, Slonczewski urges the constructedness of sexuality as an answer to the problem of gender. A boy from Valedon, Spinel, is adopted by a Shoran community, and learns to become a lesbian man. Slonczewski sees neither equal-rights feminism nor lesbian separatism as an answer to the problem of gender; rather, she imagines the human ability to adapt to new circumstances—even sexual practices—as the solution.

The lesbian utopia, a genre central to 1970s feminist fiction, provoked a rich conversation among women SF writers on the best way to solve the problem of gender. Some novels, like Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Ruins of Isis* (1978) and Pamela Sargent's *The Shore of Women* (1986), critiqued both the heterosexual hierarchy and the lesbian utopia: in both these novels women are on top—men are used as sexual toys and servants on Bradley's *Isis*, while sons are thrown out of the walled cities of Sargent's world and return only for mating visits. In contrast, Octavia Butler's stories often make men and women equal by introducing an alien presence into the heterosexual binary. In "Blood Child" (1984), the alien T'lic raise human immigrants on preserves, as reproductive cattle: human males carry the eggs of the aliens to a painful birth where the nymphs eat their way out of their hosts, just as human females reproduce humans. In *Dawn* (1987) Butler imagines aliens who save some humans from the nuclear destruction of earth, but require in exchange DNA acquired through a three-way sexual partnership among human males and females and third-sex aliens. In a terrible parity, in Butler's worlds, both men and women may be raped and sexually abused as part of "normal" sexual culture.

Women SF writers further imagine worlds where gender is complicated beyond simple dominance and submission. In Melissa Scott's *Shadow Man* (1995), space travel has triggered biological mutations, and humans of the Concord Federation have elaborated the binary sexual code into a system of nine legally recognized sexes. In Scott's *The Kindly Ones* (1987), bisexuality is the norm, and the universe, in this space opera, is saved by two lesbian pilots, a fifteen-year-old male prince of Hara, a transvestite resistance leader, and a bisexual Mediator with unnamed gender. In Scott's futures, women can do all men can do because the gender categories "woman" and "man" have been transmuted, no longer constraining future humans in the same ways.

Women writers of SF further explore the changes to identity in futures where humans can change bodies and sexualities. In Tanith Lee's *Drinking Sapphire Wine* (1977), robotic servants have perfected medical care, and humans are virtually immortal—if they die, a robot dispatches them to a hospital where they are given a new body. Consequently, young people fashionably suicide whenever they have romantic problems, and all people keep extra bodies chosen from templates or designed themselves, ready to occupy at their next death. "I wonder what sex Danor is going to be for the homecoming" (12), someone casually asks. The narrator of the novel is a male to begin with, a female at the end. Thus, while all the couples in this future

are heterosexual in desire, and sex occurs between a male and female body, humans are bisexual in experience—sometimes male, sometimes female. Emma Bull's *Bone Dance* (1991) suggests a different answer to the problem of gender—constructing an identity through the stories one tells about oneself. The protagonist of the novel, Sparrow, is gradually revealed as an androgyne, a body, created to be “ridden” by a scientist seeking immortality, that somehow generated its own identity. In this dystopia, where scientists have detonated an atomic bomb and destroyed civilization, Sparrow first must discover his/her history, and then create a story that explains the identity s/he claims: “life is not a finished story” (277), someone tells her/him. Through the androgynous narrator, Bull thus offers a fantasy of freedom from the constraints of male or female roles.

During the twentieth century, when women won the right to vote and mounted feminist campaigns for equal rights in the workforce, SF offered women writers a place to contest the constraints of traditional views and to try out solutions to the problem of gender. In the SF we have surveyed, women writers emphasize sex and gender as constructed not natural, performed not inherent, in constant negotiation.

suggestions for further reading

- Barr, Marleen S. *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992.
- Donawerth, Jane. *Frankenstein's Daughters: Women Writing Science Fiction*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*. New York: Harper and Row, 1989.
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- Russ, Joanna. *To Write Like A Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995.