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Women in the Golden Age of Science Fiction

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Women writers flourished during the Golden Age of science fiction. In "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write" (1972), Joanna Russ, herself a writer of SF, argues that mainstream fiction before the 1970s limited female authors to stories about romance and marriage, or about tragic madwomen, while SF freed women writers because as a genre it is dedicated to "myths of human intelligence and human adaptability . . . exploring a new world conceptually . . . assessing the consequences of technological or other changes."[1] Indeed, women writers of the Golden Age explored utopian future worlds and technologies, imagined alternative modes of reproduction, and critiqued the value of weapons technology.

Each scholar defines the Golden Age differently. I use the term to refer to the decades when short stories were the primary venue for SF, from the 1920s advent of the genre of "scientifiction"[2] through a good part of the 1950s, when paperback novels began to outnumber short stories in the magazines. This time period is often termed the era of pulp fiction, since during the 1920s and 1930s most SF magazines were printed on paper made from wood pulp. I stretch the term "Golden Age" to include the "digest" magazines that became popular in the 1940s and 1950s and were half the size of the folio-size pulp magazines. I briefly discuss the conventions of SF and the portrayal of women in men's Golden Age SF, but I focus here on women in women's fiction, emphasizing the writers' use of SF conventions, their devising of narrative strategies to resist the conventional masculine point of view, and their construction (and deconstruction) of gender.

[1] Joanna Russ, "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write," in Susan Koppelman Cornillon, ed., *Images of Women in Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972), pp. 17–18.

[2] "Scientifiction" was the term used by Hugo Gernsback for the scientific romances he published in the 1920s; see Chapter 8 of this volume.

None of the women of this period might be said to be canonical SF writers in the way that Isaac Asimov or Robert Heinlein were viewed. Some well-known women SF writers – Anne McCaffrey, Judith Merril, and Kate Wilhelm, for example – got their start in the magazines, but are best known for their later paperback novels and collections. While there were many women writers in the magazines, there was still widespread gender bias: a woman did not win the novella and short story Hugos (the Science Fiction Achievement Award voted on by fans and established in 1953) until Anne McCaffrey in 1968 and Ursula K. Le Guin in 1974, and no woman won the novella, novelette, or short story Nebula SF Awards (voted on by members of the Science Fiction Writers of America and established in 1965) until Anne McCaffrey in 1968, Vonda McIntyre in 1974, and Kate Wilhelm in 1969. Of the writers discussed later in this essay, who began their publishing in the SF magazines, the following have won major SF awards:

- Leigh Brackett won a Jules Verne Award, was a Guest of Honor at the World SF Convention, and was one of two credited writers for the film *The Empire Strikes Back*, which won a Hugo
- Marion Zimmer Bradley was given the World Fantasy Award for lifetime achievement
- Clare Winger Harris's first story was published because she won third place in a contest sponsored by Hugo Gernsback
- Lilith Lorraine, who pioneered the genre of SF poetry, won an Arizona State Poetry Prize and the Old South Award from the Poetry Society of Texas
- Katherine MacLean won a Nebula Award, was a Guest of Honor for WisCon, was named Author Emeritus by the Science Fiction Writers of America, and has received a Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery Award
- Anne McCaffrey, the first woman to win a Hugo and the first to win a Nebula, also won a Gandalf Award, an American Library Association Award for teen novels, a Robert A. Heinlein Award for her work in SF, was named a Grand Master by the Science Fiction Writers of America, and was inducted into the Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame
- Judith Merril was named Author Emeritus by the Science Fiction Writers of America, was inducted into the Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame, and her autobiography posthumously won a Hugo
- C. L. Moore was awarded a Forry Award, a Count Dracula Society Award for Literature, a World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement, a Gandalf Lifetime Achievement Award, was inducted into the Science

Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame, and received a Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery Award
- Kate Wilhelm has won three Nebula Awards, two Hugo Awards, and a Locus Award, has been a Worldcon Guest of Honor, and has been inducted into the Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame.[3]

Gender and Men's SF in the Magazines

SF by men in the Golden Age magazines evolved into an adventure genre employing a point of view decidedly masculine and enthusiastically scientific: stories were usually told by a young scientist or a bold male explorer.[4] Men who wrote SF developed coded conventions that expressed hopes for the benefits of science and American culture: the power and speed of rocket ships, the defeat of aliens (often as a code for American or white superiority), the exploring of a new planet (a re-telling of the pioneer history of the United States), the advances of genetics, and the opportunities and dangers of smart technology (especially robots). Edmund Hamilton's "The Sargasso of Space," published in *Astounding Stories* in September 1931, is perhaps exemplary: a rocket ship is pulled off course when its engine fails from leaking fuel tanks, and is drawn into the "dead zone," a graveyard of rocket ships. The crew hunt through the abandoned ships, finding one with enough fuel to get them to Neptune, but also finding pirates who try to seize theirs. With the help of a brave girl held captive by the pirates, they fend off the pirates and continue their journey. The story epitomizes the adventure of space, the glamor of rocket travel, and the problem-solving science that allows them to pump fuel through a quarter mile of hoses back to their ship.

But brave girls are not always rewarded in men's SF: in Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations," published in *Astounding Stories* in August 1954, a girl who bravely stows away in a cargo ship to visit her brother must be jettisoned into space because her extra weight would mean the whole ship with a life-saving cargo of medicines would miss its planetary rendezvous.

In the stories by men of the Golden Age, women are often portrayed in one of three ways: domestic rewards for the hero, alien monsters, or heroes

[3] For awards to these writers, see the websites for the various awards, and the biographies in Lisa Yaszek and Patrick B. Sharp, eds., *Sisters of Tomorrow: The First Women of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016).

[4] See Thomas D. Clareson, *Some Kind of Paradise: The Emergence of American Science Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 81–102 and 157–224.

themselves who occupy roles very like those of Terran men.[5] For instance, in Nat Schachner's "Pirates of Gorm," published in May 1932 in *Astounding Stories*, spaceman Grant Pemberton is on a rocketship passenger liner captured by Ganymedan pirates, but foils their plans, despite their deployment of hordes of surgically induced zombie troops – and his reward is the lovely passenger he has rescued, Nona. In 1940s and 1950s illustrations and short stories in the pulps, Robin Roberts has pointed out, "The female alien's size and reproductive powers separate her from humanity and isolate her from the male hero, often symbolizing the powers of nature that men cannot control." As an example, Roberts cites Robert Gibson Jones's cover for *Fantastic Adventures* in May 1951 and the story it illustrates, Paul Fairman's "Invasion from the Deep": Llanni, an alien who lives deep in the ocean, in the illustration looms over men on a submarine deck; and in the story represents the powerful ocean that threatens but sustains the life of the protagonist Nick.[6] At times in men's pulp SF, women are heroic, in much the same manner as the men of the story, as in Philip Francis Nowlan's "Armageddon – 2419 AD," published in *Amazing Stories* in August 1928: in this tale, the scientist-narrator, Anthony "Buck" Rogers, succumbs to stasis from radioactive gases in an abandoned coal mine and wakes in a future where Chinese hordes have overrun the world – but Americans, who are fighting as guerillas, have established sexual equality, and his heroic partner is his brave wife Wilma.

These early stories, generally narrated by young male scientist-adventurers, celebrate the power of science and American culture through familiar SF codes (the rocket ship, the robot, etc.), and imagine a deeply patriarchal future. Nevertheless, there are exceptions. In "The Defenders," published in *Galaxy Science Fiction* in January 1953, Philip K. Dick satirizes the imperialist male point of view of SF through a naive scientist-soldier who learns too late that the robots designed to fight the next world war between the United States and Russia have instead made peace, and are beginning to solve the problem of feeding all humans. In Stanley G. Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey," instead of hostile aliens, spacemen discover many intelligent nonhumans on Mars – ostrich-like beings and crawling plant-

[5] In *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), esp. pp. 43–5, Brian Attebery examines the gender stereotypes in pulp SF mainly by men: male characters are usually athletic heroes (students or adventurers) or professors (older scientists), while female characters play the roles of assistants (daughters, housewives, victims to be rescued, or romantic rewards for the hero).

[6] Robin Roberts, "The Female Alien: Pulp Science Fiction's Legacy to Feminists," *Journal of Popular Culture* 21 (1987), pp. 36.

animals termed "biopods" – and a civilization equal to that of Earth. Subverting the convention of the daughter of the old scientist as reward for the young hero, Raymond Z. Gallun's "Old Faithful," published in *Astounding Science Fiction* in December 1934, pictures young scientist Jack Cantrill working with Yvonne, the daughter of his mentor, to communicate with a Martian who arrives on Earth, and, though fatally injured, leaves his spaceship as a model for human exploration. Here patriarchy is undermined by a sympathetic alien and by men and women represented as equal partners.

Decoding Genre Conventions in SF by Women: Rockets, Aliens, Genetics, Cyborgs

Women writers of the Golden Age often employ the codes of men's SF with irony or with a twist that critiques the ideology that generated such codes. These women are "resisting readers" of men's SF conventions.[7] For example, while the rocket signified masculinity in men's SF, it is used to ironic effect in Leslie F. Stone's "Out of the Void," published in 1929 in *Amazing Stories*. In this story, a young explorer, Dana Gleason, Jr., raised to hate women by a misogynous father, volunteers to pilot Professor Rollins' experimental rocket to Mars. Like Jules Verne's rocket in *From the Earth to the Moon* (1864), the ship is catapulted into space, and is propelled by a series of explosions. Ironically, however, the pilot who "mans" this first spaceflight (albeit with a last-minute partner, Richard Dorr), is a woman, raised by her father as his son. The power of the rocket, which ordinarily signals heroic masculinity, is presented with tongue-in-cheek hyperbole: "There was a deafening explosion, the force of which sent large pieces of machinery flying through the air, killing two mechanics . . . and all but killing the Professor."[8] As they begin their trip together, Dorr tells Dana, "I know all your courageous deeds, your researches, your science, your war experiences . . . but . . . you *are* a woman . . . You *are* at a disadvantage."[9] Surely this rocket, with its explosive launch that throws both astronauts off their feet, debunks the phallic symbol that is the tradition of men's SF. Moreover, the alien spaceship that returns to Earth with Dana's story, instead of the phallic spire of SF magazine covers, is a glass cylinder that seems suspended in space as it moves, rather than pulsing with engines.

[7] Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), esp. p. xxii.
[8] Leslie F. Stone, "Out of the Void, Part I," *Amazing Stories* (August 1929), p. 450.
[9] Ibid., pp. 453–4.

The rocket Professor Rollins designs is the conventional penetrator of space, but the ship that returns is a container, holding aliens and humans together.[10]

And so it goes with many of the traditional SF codes in women's SF of the Golden Age. In Zenna Henderson's "The Substitute," published in August 1953 in *Imagination*, the alien who makes first contact with Earth is not the monster of many male writers, but an elementary school teacher's star pupil. In Rosel George Brown's "Car Pool," published in February 1959 in *If: Worlds of Science Fiction*, a Terran mom suffers not only the difficulties of temper tantrums and the flu season when it is her turn to drive children to school, but also the future tensions of interactions between xenophobic human children and vulnerable alien offspring. In these two stories, the significance of the code of alien is reversed, from danger to opportunity, and the stories explore co-existence.

Reversing the basic template of Golden Age SF often amounts to political critique. In Margaret St. Clair's "Quis Custodiet," published in July 1948 in *Startling Stories*, instead of pioneer spacemen conquering the problems of an alien world, Mirna, a future botanist, works to find extinct species on Earth or to hybridize them from mutated offspring, thus resisting those humans who continue to destroy Earth's vegetation in a post-nuclear-holocaust environment. The symbolic importance of human evolution in SF promoting the ideology of American progress is severely questioned in Alice Eleanor Jones's "Created He Them," published in the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in June 1955. In this near-future dystopia, because pollution of the Earth has reached such proportions that many humans are sterile, a woman stays in her oppressive marriage because she can have children, even though the state takes them away at the age of three to protect and educate them. Jones's story does not celebrate human progress, but instead laments society's errors and government's incompetence.

In men's SF, robots represent both the progress of (masculine) science in replacing work with leisure for humans, and also, as Amardeep Singh points out, "potential threats to the idea of humanness itself."[11] In "No Woman Born," first published in December 1944 in *Astounding*, C. L. Moore upends this SF code to call into question the reliability of the masculine point of view in SF and the male characters' definition of what it means to be human.

[10] On the story as container in women's fiction, see Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" (1986), in *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 165–70.

[11] Amardeep Singh, "Robots," in Leigh Ronald Grossman, ed., *Sense of Wonder: A Century of Science Fiction* (Rockville, MD: Wildside Press, 2011), pp. 344.

Moore's story recounts the rehabilitation of Deirdre, a world-famous star in the future medium of television, after a theater fire has destroyed her body. Under the leadership of Dr. Maltzer, a team of scientists, sculptors, and engineers design and build a metal body for Deirdre that is worthy of her former grace, and after a year of therapy, she can again walk, talk, sing, and dance as a cyborg. Maltzer takes the view of traditional SF: to him, Deirdre is "a terrible mistake," "isn't female anymore," and he himself is a "Frankenstein" who brought "life into the world unlawfully."[12] But Deirdre has realized what Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* later theorized, that "gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real,"[13] in Moore's words, an "Illusion"[14] – indeed, that humanness is an impersonation. When Maltzer tries to commit suicide by jumping from his apartment window, Deirdre rescues him by her speed and strength. Both Maltzer and Deirdre's agent John Harris view Deirdre as stereotypically inferior, lacking the strength to withstand the dehumanization they fear her mechanical body will cause. Moore reverses the symbolism: the robotic body of Deirdre does not relieve her of work but enables it, and she is again a world-famous entertainer; her body is not a threat to her humanity but an elaboration of it. As Deirdre claims, "I'm not sub-human . . . I'm – superhuman."[15] The story thus critiques the ideology of the superiority of patriarchal science by reversing the gender of the traditional robot.

Narrative Strategies: Cross-Dressing as a Male Narrator

Women writers of Golden Age SF generally accept the convention of the male narrator as adventurer or scientist: they cross-dress as male narrators.[16] But they also deploy the convention in hyperbolic, parodic, ironic ways so

[12] C. L. Moore, "No Woman Born," *Astounding Science Fiction* 34, 4 (December 1944), pp. 152, 165–6.
[13] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. viii.
[14] Moore, "No Woman Born," p. 139.
[15] Ibid., p. 176.
[16] In *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 6 and 141, Marjorie Garber argues that cross-dressing offers women the power of "blurred gender" and signals women's break with patriarchal social and erotic expectations. On the cross-dressing of women writers as male narrators in modern SF, see Jane Donawerth, *Daughters of Frankenstein* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), pp. 109–76.

that the ideology that has generated the convention is resisted and questioned.

Frequently women writers parody the masculinity of the scientists of men's SF. Judith Butler has explained that such hyperbolic enactment of gender is one way to resist the idea of gender as a "natural" category.[17] In Miriam Allen deFord's "Featherbed on Chlyntha," published in 1957 in *Venture Science Fiction*, for example, the young male anthropologist, Duncan Keith, who narrates the story, is depicted as hyperbolically masculine, his comments suggesting extreme arousal as he views the female alien scientists who hold him captive. When alien Iri explains that she has been testing him for his "sexual equipment," as well as intelligence, he replies in Terran, which she does not understand, "Well, how about a practical demonstration, baby?"[18] While Iri explains the aliens' quest for a solution to their culture's growing sterility, he admires her breasts.[19] Duncan's exaggerated masculinity is amplified by his homophobia. When he learns that Chlynthans, like oysters on Earth, change from female to male during their lives, he explains, "I'd lost my appetite for Chlynthan girls now that I'd become aware of their future."[20] At first, Duncan's exaggerated heterosexual masculinity seems to provide a solution to Chlyntha's problems, and so to offer him release. He suggests that the Chlynthans solve their reproductive problems by changing from female-centered to male-centered sexuality. Chlynthan women traditionally have sex with as many mates as possible, to capitalize on their brief period of fertility (although the sexual equality and general happiness of Chlynthan women suggest other benefits to this social arrangement). Duncan tells his captors that he will aid them in cross-species fertilization if in a year his alternative plan hasn't worked: he misogynistically suggests that sterility is the fault of females, and so men should have sex with as many women as possible, rather than the current arrangement. In return, he asks to be released. His plan does work, and Chlynthan births double. However, deFord makes her narrator naive, undercutting his masculine confidence: the story ends not with Duncan returned to Terra, having placed males in the dominant position on Chlyntha, but with a museum tour that shows young Chlynthans viewing a stuffed alien – Duncan.

A second way in which women's Golden Age SF resists the male scientist point of view is the creation of a hypermasculine protagonist who is

[17] See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 31.
[18] Miriam Allen deFord, "Featherbed on Chlyntha," *Venture Science Fiction* 1, 6 (November 1957), p. 54.
[19] Ibid., p. 56.
[20] Ibid., p. 63.

converted through the influence of a strong woman. In Leigh Bracket's "Retreat to the Stars," published in 1941 in *Astonishing Stories*, Arno, the coldly masculine alien through whose point of view the story is told, is planted as a spy inside the humans' renegade camp to prevent them from escaping genocide. Arno's dedication to serving the alien State, which exacts total obedience from him and even assigns him sexual partners, recalls American views of Nazis for this story written during the Second World War. Arno reports to his government when humans send out ships to garner food or metal for their secret plan, and finally tips off his government when humans complete the project. Rather than a secret weapon, though, the humans are building a giant escape vehicle that will take them to the stars, out of reach of oppression. However, while Arno has collected the information, he is increasingly impressed by their young leader, Ralph, and his partner, Marika. Arno at first finds Marika repulsive, with her "clear, authoritative eyes,"[21] but gradually comes to admire her loyalty and her "unwomanly strength"[22] – he falls in love, not only with Marika, but also with the grand sense of human community. Arno is converted, at the cost of his own death betraying the State's plan to attack, so that humans board their ship and leave the alien State far behind. Arno's is a certain kind of masculinity that misogynistically isolates itself, and Marika's strength mirrors that of American women who took over industrial production during The Second World War.

In an extremely grim short story, "Experiment," published in February 1953 in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, Kay Rogers similarly sketches an alien male, Cobr, who buys a Terran female slave to ascertain what their culture means by "love," and is converted to an understanding of loyalty by the love songs the Terran woman plays. His conversion, however, does the Terran, who dies in captivity, no good, because his response to love is aesthetic appreciation of the arts of song and femininity rather than compassionate understanding of a fellow creature.

Women writers of the Golden Age also use multiple narrators to question the authority of the male scientist point of view. In Kathleen Ludwick's "Dr. Immortelle," published in Fall 1930 in *Amazing Stories Quarterly*, there are three points of view, one within the other (as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the ur-SF novel published in 1818). The story begins and ends with an engineer who loved Linnie, the nurse who exposes the terrible actions of Dr. Immortelle, a mad scientist who steals blood from young children for transfusion so he can

[21] Leigh Brackett, "Retreat to the Stars," *Astonishing Stories* 3, 2 (November 1941), pp. 36.
[22] Ibid., p. 40.

remain young. The body of the story is told by Dr. Immortelle's former slave, who also loves Linnie, and has been the subject of Dr. Immortelle's experiments, in the process transformed from black slave to white assistant by transfusions from white children. And within his story, Linnie has a voice, although only an intermittent one. The multiple narrators, however, resist the pull of the single scientist narrator (Dr. Immortelle's point of view does not shape the story), and the nurse's voice also resists the picture of her we derive from the male narrators. The engineer, who in the traditional SF plot would have gained Linnie as his prize, sees Linnie as "the ideal nurse" full of "beauty and womanly grace."[23] Victor, the black man who idealizes her white beauty, says, "I reverenced Linnie . . . I intuitively sensed the incorruptible purity of her soul."[24] Linnie, however, is the voice of moral strength, castigating Dr. Immortelle for leaving the scene of a car accident, and accosting him when she recognizes him as the murderer of her little brother years before. Neither prize nor ideal, she dies in a Red Cross tent on a battlefield in World War I, a woman who has escaped the usual role of women in SF stories of the period.

Marion Zimmer Bradley's "The Wind People," published in February 1959 in *If: Worlds of Science Fiction*, similarly uses multiple narrators to undercut the authority of the scientific male narrator of traditional SF. The story is framed by Captain Merrihew's point of view, who sees the birth of Robin and the scandal of unmarried Dr. Helen Murray's pregnancy during shore leave as a problem because infants don't survive the rigors of space travel, and his ship is due to leave. The point of view is taken up by Helen, who stays, alone with her son Robin, since no shipmate claims partnership. Her point of view alternates with Robin's, who hears the voices in the wind of the secretive alien people of the world. As Robin reaches maturity, he reaches out sexually to his mother, who rejects him, and runs into the woods. There, Helen, too, hears the voices and sees the alien inhabitants, but fears miscegenation and views them as signs of her own madness. Robin is taken up by his alien father's people, and years later Captain Merrihew returns to discover only an absence. Thus the authority, compassion, and knowledge of the male explorer-scientist as framing narrator are undercut by the voices of Helen's resistance and Robin's desertion of humanity.

When women writers do shift to more frequent use of a female point of view in the late 1940s and 1950s, it is to underline the affordances of the

[23] Kathleen Ludwick, "Dr. Immortelle," *Amazing Stories Quarterly* 3, 4 (Fall 1930), pp. 562.
[24] Ibid., p. 567.

popular genre of the near-future dystopia. In Judith Merril's "That Only a Mother," published in *Astounding* in June 1948, a young woman, pregnant during a future world war, works in a factory and worries about the deformities suffered by many newborns because of military radiation.[25] Through the daily news, she also hears of infanticides carried out worldwide by fathers of such infants. But when her baby is born, she reports to everyone how delighted she is that her lovely Henrietta is not only healthy, but even superior, learning to speak before she can crawl and singing at eight months. The point of view shifts at the end to that of the father, on leave from the military, who realizes that his daughter has no limbs, and that his wife fails to recognize this. He deems his wife mad, and "his fingers tightened on his child,"[26] the implication being that he has killed the brilliant but disabled daughter named for him. Written just after the Second World War, this near-future dystopia asks, through its use of a female point of view on warfare, if it is not rather the fathers who release the toxins and kill their children, than the mothers who love their disabled children, who are mad.[27] Kate Wilhelm's "Android, Kill for Me," published in *Future Science Fiction* in May 1959, similarly switches viewpoints. On a future Earth where reproduction is regulated by eugenics, women are divided into intellectuals, who stay at home to create but are tied to male artists and expected to produce offspring continuously, and women who do not bear children but have affairs of their choice. The story is told from the point of view of Helen, a writer of romances for women, who despises her husband because he insults her and refuses intimacy except when it is time for another baby. Because of the couple's productivity, they are served by the advanced, Z-class android. "He" helps Helen with research for her novels and records her dictation. Eventually, Helen hints to him to kill her husband, devising a way that he can do so

[25] In "Hoping for the Best, Imagining the Worst: Dystopian Anxieties in Women's SF Pulp Stories in the 1930s," *Extrapolation* 50, 1 (Spring 2009), pp. 61–79, Alice Waters argues that dystopian stories by women in the 1930s reflect anxieties about women's lives in the United States, reading Leslie F. Stone's "The Great Ones" (1930) as focusing on anxiety about eugenics, an "intrusion of science into reproduction and family life," and C. L. Moore's "Greater Than Gods" (1939), as contrasting "a patriarchy characterized by military conquest" and "a matriarchy with resolute dedication to peace and community" (p. 64).

[26] Judith Merril, "That Only a Mother," *Astounding Science Fiction* 41, 4 (June 1948), p. 95.

[27] See Lisa Yaszek, *Galactic Suburbia: Recovering Women's Science Fiction* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2008), who argues that in their science fiction after the Second World War, in general narrated from the point of view of wives and mothers, women were mainly concerned with the impact of science on women and their families, rethinking women's agency, imagining new kinds of families and domesticity, and protesting technological warfare.

without actually disobeying robotic laws. She hopes to then be free to have an affair with a pilot she has been secretly meeting. At the end, the story changes to the "male" robot's viewpoint, who has heard too many of Helen's romances – he kills not only the husband, but also the pilot. As victor, he expects her "to melt into his arms."[28] In this story, Wilhelm cleverly reverses expectations for the characters whose points of view she employs: the woman is not tender-hearted, and the robot, assuming the masculine role, is not obedient.

Reversing Gender

In the 1970s and 1980s, women SF novelists frequently created reverse-gender alien worlds where women are in charge and hierarchical matriarchies are very like patriarchies.[29] The women writers of Golden Age short stories sometimes portray women in these traditionally masculine, reversed-gender ways, but often instead leverage the plot device of gender reversal to complicate how we think about women's roles, reimagining traditional female gender traits not as weak or inferior, but as heroic and world-saving. These women reverse gender and recast women's roles by writing into our futures heroic wives and mothers whose domestic skills are life-saving, scientific reproduction at cell level or in laboratories, sympathetic negotiators who save the world from aliens by their abilities to communicate, and female sexualities that transform the stereotype of the seductive woman into a practicing therapist.

Certainly there are simple gender reversals in many stories by women in the SF magazines. In Leslie Stone's "Men with Wings," published in *Air Wonder Stories* in July 1929, Lois is a flying warrior, and in Clare Winger Harris's "The Ape Cycle," published in *Science Wonder Quarterly* in Spring 1930, Sylvia is an airplane mechanic. Additionally, in Miriam Allen deFord's "Featherbed on Chlyntha," which we have already discussed, the standard plot of Earth woman captured by male aliens for reproductive use is reversed to Terran man captured by female aliens, but for the same reason. In a more sophisticated reversal, Judith Merril, writing under the pseudonym Rose Sharon in "The Lady was a Tramp," published in *Venture Science Fiction* in March 1957, reverses and so critiques the double standard. In Merril's story, Terry Carnahan, on his first assignment after training and in charge

[28] Kate Wilhelm, "Android, Kill for Me!," *Future Science Fiction* 10, 2 (May 1959), p. 48.
[29] See, for example, Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Ruins of Isis* (1978); C. J. Cherry, *The Pride of Chanur* (1981); and Cynthia Felice, *Double Nocturne* (1986).

of the mathematical computations and complex machinery that allow jumps between stars, is assigned to a tramp merchant rocket. The story elaborates a parallel in its imagery between the *Lady Jane*, the once-lovely ship, and the medical officer, Anita Filmord, who saw to the five-man crew's physical, psychological, and, it turns out, sexual health: both are tramps, but together they transform the priggish lieutenant from territorial and scandalized, to understanding and willing to share. Through the gender reversal of monogamous men and polygamous woman, the story debunks the double standard that served as the rule of SF at the time.

More frequently, however, SF stories by women in the magazines twist women's traditional roles into new visions of power: because of women's role as caretaker, they are better at science or governing than men.[30] In Clare Winger Harris's "The Fifth Dimension" (1928), for example, Ellen, the protagonist, recounts a déjà vu feeling that her husband dismisses, but the result is a neighbor's death. Later, when Ellen has a second such feeling, she forbids her husband to take a train that is then involved in an accident, killing many people. She theorizes that time is cyclical, and so subject to intervention: Ellen has a premonition because she has lived this time before, but time evolves, so she can prevent tragedy. Ellen explains why she is the one to envision this philosophically scientific answer: her husband John was "forced out . . . in the business world," so no longer has the time for contemplation that she has.[31] In Harris's story, the role of middle-class wife allows Ellen to develop her intellectual powers.

Similarly, in "Into the 28th Century," Lilith Lorraine creates a future utopia where a youth revolution not only establishes a democratic, socialist state, but also is a catalyst for a women's movement that creates true equality between the sexes. As women grow into their new roles, new scientific discoveries allow near immortality and alternatives to the dangers of natural childbirth. Because of women's "finer sensibilities," they "have found . . . compensation for [the loss of] motherhood" in becoming "mother of the World-State . . . supreme in the realm of government." Lorraine has

[30] In "Science Fiction by Women in the Early Pulps, 1926–1930," I argued that women writers of the early pulp magazines drew on nineteenth-century women's technological utopias to infuse the new genre of SF with visions of technological transformations of domestic space, revisions of gender roles and societies based on sexual equality, and resistance to the SF tradition of the male-scientist narrative voice. See Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerten, *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994), pp. 137–52.

[31] Clare Winger Harris, "The Fifth Dimension," *Amazing Stories* 3, 9 (December 1928), p. 824.

reinvented the role of mother so that women oversee "the spiritual and intellectual guidance of our planet, the home of the human race."[32] Moreover, in Anne McCaffrey's "Freedom of the Race," published in *Science Fiction Plus* in October 1953, women defeat aliens who attempt to conquer humans to use Terran women as incubators. The women expose themselves to German measles early in their pregnancies, thus ensuring that alien offspring are born deformed or dead. They transform the traditional roles of women as nurses and child-bearers into heroic – but destructive – defenders of humanity.

In a stunning reimagination of women's role as reproducer of humanity, Katherine MacLean, in "And Be Merry . . ." published in *Astounding Science Fiction* in February 1950, imagines that Helen Berent, an endocrinologist who is also a conventional wife who has sacrificed her career as a scientist to follow her husband's travels as an archaeologist, decides this time to stay home to experiment on herself. Drawing on the early-twentieth-century discovery that some cells are "immortal" – that they can live on indefinitely outside the body, as long as proper environment and food are provided – MacLean has Helen turn her kitchen into a laboratory to use enzymes to break down and rebuild her own body at cellular level, with the unexpected consequence that she also is rejuvenated, thus opening the possibility of immortality for humans. The future of never dying so frightens her that she goes mad, to be rescued by her husband with the promise that, because cells mutate, she will eventually succumb to cancer. The story is a clever scientific extrapolation from cytological and endocrinological discoveries – but, more to our point, it is also a surprising reimagining of the role of woman, from biological mechanism for reproducing humans to female scientist who reproduces herself cell by cell.

Conclusion

Men who write about women in the Golden Age often resist the stereotypes to imagine a future that includes progress toward equality between the sexes. Nevertheless, the basic template depends on a male scientist as point of view, an adventure story centered on science that usually excludes women, and coded elements that signal future but stand in for patriarchal American values (the rocket ship for exploration and virility, the alien Other, the robot for

[32] Lillith Lorraine (pseudonym for Mary M. Dunn Wright), "Into the 28th Century," *Science Wonder Quarterly* 1, 2 (Winter 1930), p. 257.

technological progress). SF by women in the Golden Age also depends on this basic template, but more often than not resists or reverses its constituents. Women writers mock the phallic rocket through hyperbole, sympathize with the alien Other, and reverse the gender of the robot to make it stand for art rather than science. These female writers resist the masculine narrative voice by converting or multiplying the narrator, and eventually by giving women the point of view. Rather than outright reversing gender roles, women writers reimagine the meanings of feminine qualities, making wives and mothers and grandmothers the ones who save their loved ones or even the world. And women writers co-opt the science our culture attributes to men, making women scientists who invent new ways of reproduction and who nurture instead of destroy life.