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Women in Space: Feminist Pulp Science Fiction from 1927-1948

by Matthew Martin

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May 7, 2012

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts of the  
City College of the City University of New York

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### A Note on Terms

Science fiction is known by many names, I use two in the thesis. "SF," has become the standard term used in both casual reference to the genre as well as in both popular and scholarly criticism. I use "SF" to denote the genre as a whole, but I employ "PSF," which stands for pulp-science fiction, specifically to denote that science fiction which was written in the pulp era, defined by Mike Ashley in his three volume history, *The History of Science Fiction Magazines* (2000), as occurring between the years 1926-1954.

### Introduction: Subversive Women

Science fiction (SF) writer and critic, Brian Attebery, identified the genre's particular genius when he wrote:

SF is a collaborative art. Together, the pulp magazine writers and editors of the 1920s through the 1940s created not only a genre but also a consensus about what sort of settings, objects, stories, and characters belonged in that genre. Writers still make use of that collective future, though sometimes the use they make is to contradict or critique it." (53)

SF is, as Attebery notes, not a generative genre. The spaceships, ray guns, aliens, and galaxies that populated the adventure stories of pulp-era SF are still in use today. But SF is not a stagnant genre, either. That the tropes of SF have not become hoary clichés is largely due to the willingness of SF writers and editors to "contradict and critique" them. Subversion and deconstruction are the essential elements of SF that enable writers to respond to the previous generation's conception of SF, to undermine that conception, and to imbue it with the values, concerns, and spirit of a new generation--all of which helps to perpetuate the genre.

However, the above passage is somewhat misleading in that it implies that this undermining of SF as a means to periodically revive it, is a contemporary outgrowth of the genre. In fact, SF writers had been evincing this tendency to deconstruct and subvert since the genre's pulp years of the 1920s through the early 1950s--which Attebery identifies as the genre's formative years. This subversive tendency was especially prominent among women writers of those pulp years. The methods of subversion

employed by these female authors varied from publishing under male or gender neutral pseudonyms in order to fool editors and readers, to employing subversion as a form of activism by using genre conventions and story types as a means to reveal and challenge the sexism and prejudice inherent in both the genre and society. These women writers also contributed to the collaborative nature of SF in that they presented readers with an alternative means by which to explore notions of womanhood, feminism, and otherness through the vehicle of science fiction.

This thesis is about four of those subversive women: Clare Winger Harris, Leslie F. Stone, C.L. Moore, and Judith Merril. These women writers were chosen in part because their works span the full breadth of the pulp era (1926-1954), but also because each of the stories represented here reflects a feminist response to both the genre conventions (space opera, the female-alien) of that era and larger societal concerns of the time in which these women were writing (eugenics, racism, post-war domesticity, nuclear war, etc). The following chapters examine a signal work from each author, detailing the ways by which these writers not only helped to build the material world of SF, but also that they were among the first SF writers to demonstrate the method by which that world could be undermined, re-imagined, and used as a form of advocacy by which they could assert the equality of their sex.

### *Women in Space: An Overview*

Chapter one, "Feminist PSF in a Historical Context," provides a brief history of women PSF writers, including details of the sexism and misogyny which emanated from the editorial offices of the pulp magazines in the 1930s, how these women writers

circumvented that sexism, the increase of women PSF writers in the 1940s, and how they responded. via their fiction, to the societal perceptions of womanhood and domesticity following the end of the Second World War.

In chapter two, "A Model of Imitation," I examine Clare Winger Harris', "The Fate of the Poseidonia." (1927). The story is neither explicitly feminist in content nor presentation. In fact the story contains a great deal of execrable material--racism, eugenics, sexism--in what can be perceived as a positive light. (Although, as I demonstrate in my reading of the story, it is difficult to determine the extent to which Harris subscribed to these political attitudes; there is evidence that she merely included these themes as an expedient to being published.) But Harris' story is important to the history of women's PSF--in particular her use of a male narrator and her reflection of the political attitudes of the period--because it provides a model of imitation that other women writers employed, built upon, and then used as a means not only to reflect male attitudes in the genre, but to subvert them as well. But Harris' story is not only important as a template: in "The Fate of the Poseidonia," one can also observe the beginnings of what, in the 1970s, would be termed "soft SF" that is, science fiction less concerned with science than with examining social concerns.

In chapter three, "When Women Rule," I consider Leslie F. Stone's, "The Conquest of Gola." (1931). "Gola," is notable both as a rebuke to the sexist, imperialist sub-genre of PSF, planetary romance, and as a depiction of a matriarchal society written by a woman--something of a rarity in the PSF of the 1930s. Stone's depiction of matriarchy runs counter to that commonly found in male-written PSF, which often center

on a society of sexually available women, dominated by a group of virile males. The matriarchy depicted in "Gola," however, is a self-sufficient society of technologically advanced females who rebuff the advances of a contingent of Earth men. Stone's story subverts the traditional roles for female characters in PSF, depicting them as something other than a focal point for male sexual desire. Here, Stone's matriarchs are capable and possess agency.

In chapter four, "The Female-Alien," C.L. Moore's, "Shambleau," (1933), C.L. Moore builds upon the work of Stone, but her story is more subtle in its depiction of feminist themes. Moore's story employs a common trope of space opera: an encounter with a female-alien. Moore, at first seems a more conventional writer of PSF than her peer, Stone. She uses a male narrator; her female-alien is exotic, physically attractive, and amenable to the sexual advances of Moore's male hero. But Moore's use of genre conventions masks her real intent, which is to depict a female character in a PSF story that runs counter to the typical depiction of women as, in Moore's words, "helpless fugitives, helpless hostages, or helpless slaves." Moore's female-alien is an uncanny and powerful character, who unsettles the male protagonist, and undermines his authority in the story so gradually that he is eventually reduced to the subservient role typically occupied by female characters in PSF. But Moore's female-alien serves a greater purpose than simply inverting gender roles within the story. Moore uses the character to examine sexism itself, revealing that the root cause of sexism and misogyny is a fear of female sexuality and empowerment.

In chapter five, "PSF as Advocacy," I end this examination of women's pulp



science fiction with, Judith Merrill's, "That Only a Mother," (1948). Merrill's story signifies a change in the intent of PSF written by women. Whereas Harris' PSF provides the model which women writers could emulate in order to publish, and Stone and Moore's PSF responds to the sexism prevalent in the genre in the 1930s, Merrill's story indicates a move towards advocacy in PSF. But, like Harris' story, "That Only a Mother," is also indicative of the conservatism in the United States in the years immediately following the Second World War. Merrill's PSF is housebound and domestic. Her protagonist is a fretful first time mother. But even if the setting of Merrill's story is small, its themes are not. The story is an anti-war statement, a humanist meditation on difference, and an indictment on the dehumanizing effects of war technology. The story also provides PSF with a new type of hero: the mother. Merrill's story positions the mother figure as a rational, technologically advanced, capable character. Rather than being an impediment, her connection to her home and her domestic life enables her to retain her humanity in a future world of perpetual war.

I conclude by writing of the influence of feminist PSF on the SF "new wave" of the 1960s and 1970s and beyond.

## Chapter One

### Feminist PSF in a Historical Context

#### 1. Amazing stories

The first science fiction story written by a woman to appear in the pulps, Clare Winger Harris', "The Fate of the Poseidonia," (1927), appropriately appeared in the first pulp magazine devoted to the genre: Hugo Gernsback's, *Amazing Stories*. Gernsback, an amateur scientist and inventor, writer, editor, publisher, and immigrant who had arrived in New York from Luxembourg in 1904 as Hugo Gernsbacher, and who, as he liked to tell it, with only a suitcase full of radios and his ambition to his name, ended up presiding over a miniature media empire that included some five dozen magazines and a radio station that broadcast from the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City, became the first great patron of women PSF writers (Clute, Langford, and Nicholls, "Hugo Gernsback").

Gernsback had been publishing PSF in his magazines dating back to 1911, when he serialized his PSF novel, *Ralph 124C 41+*, in the pages of his *Modern Electrics*, but it was not until 1926, when Gernsback began *Amazing* that he devoted himself to writing, editing, and publishing PSF full-time. *Amazing* was launched in part as a corrective to what Gernsback saw as the misrepresentation of science in PSF (Ashley 45). For Gernsback, PSF novels such as Edgar Rice Burroughs', *A Princess of Mars* (1917) and the occasional PSF story that appeared in the fantasy and horror pulps, *All-Story*, *The Thrill Book*, and *Weird Tales*, with their insistence on a fantastical application of scientific principles as a means to propel the action of the story, or else their treatment of science as some occult practice inaccessible to mere mortals, did a disservice to both science and

those who had devoted themselves to using science as a means to better mankind (46-47). Gernsback's *Amazing*, therefore, would be dedicated to publishing what the editor dubbed "scientifiction," a blend of fantastical storytelling and technically accurate science (49-50). Gernsback's hope was that the stories he published in *Amazing* serve as miniature lectures for his readers, presenting them with lessons on the technology and scientific principles of the day with an overlay of fiction to make the instruction palatable (50), but Gernsback had misjudged his audience's patience for such didactic stories and the magazine struggled in its initial year of publication.

*Amazing's* fortunes changed in the summer of 1927 with the publication of the June issue featuring the winning entries in a writing contest sponsored by Gernsback in order to increase readership were published. The third prize winner was a woman, Clare Winger Harris. In his prefatory note, Gernsback is condescending even as he lauds the writer:

That the third prize winner should prove to be a woman was one of the surprises of the contest, for, as a rule, women do not make good scientifiction writers, because their education and general tendencies on scientific matters are usually limited. But the exception, as usual, has proven the rule, the exception in this case being extraordinarily impressive. ["The Fate of the Poseidonia"] has a great deal of charm, chiefly because it is not overburdened with science, but whatever science is contained therein is not only palatable, but highly desirable, due to its plausibility. Not only this, but you will find that the author is a facile writer who keeps

your interest unto [sic] the last line. (1)

Beneath Gernsback's pompousness, one can detect a wonder at Harris' story for having such a pleasing affect on him as a reader. The publication of Harris represents a change for Gernsback as an editor and promoter of scientifiction: no longer would he discount stories that focused less on science in favor of social matters; nor would he insist that the stories contained in *Amazing* adhere to the didactic principles on which the magazine was founded (Frank, Stine, and Ackerman viii). Harris' publication in Gernsback's magazine ushered in a new era of so-called "soft SF" that is, SF in which science, rather than being the focus, is instead employed as the entry point to character-driven fiction which examines or reflects the social climate/issues of the day (viii). The formula of "soft SF" proved successful for Gernsback and helped to increase both his circulation and esteem among readers of PSF.

But the effect of Harris' story was not limited to the introduction of a new brand of PSF, her appearance in *Amazing* also caused Gernsback to seek out other female PSF writers to publish. He found them. During his brief tenure at *Amazing*, Gernsback selected and developed a group of women PSF writers whom he published and encouraged, among them were: L. Taylor Hansen, Hazel Heald, Mina Irving, Lilith Lorraine, and Leslie F. Stone (viii). But Gernsback did not only offer encouragement and a by-line, he also welcomed his female writers challenging of the inherent sexism in the genre. Gernsback published a number of stories by women writers that questioned the depiction of gender roles and revealed the misogyny that underlay so much of PSF. On the letters page, he challenged those male readers of *Amazing* who wrote the editor

asking for redress for what they perceived as slights to both their masculinity and to the genre from these women writers who had been so arrogant as to believe that they could write PSF and then attack it (viii). Gernsback grew to enjoy his new role as steward of female PSF. The most popular woman PSF writer among those that Gernsback published, Leslie F. Stone, noted for all his former prejudices against women writers, Gernsback "liked the idea of a woman invading the field he had opened," ("Day of the Pulps" 101).

But Gernsback's influence, and his permissive attitude towards women PSF writers, did not last. In 1930, Gernsback was deposed as editor of *Amazing*, (he also lost control of the dozens of other magazines he published) by Bernarr Macfadden.

Macfadden, a publisher of many successful men's adventure pulps, once in control of Gernsback's magazines, re-imagined the ethos of PSF, steering the genre away from its character-driven stories and new-found social consciousness towards more adventure-based stories featuring square-jawed men, Doc Savage and Lamont Cranston, The Shadow, for whom science meant impossible ray guns, rocket ships, green-skinned damsels in distress, and Asian celestial cults. PSF would, under Macfadden's guidance, err on the side of pulp rather than science fiction (Frank, Stine, and Ackerman ix). And if science no longer had a place in PSF, neither did women. Macfadden was opposed to accepting fiction from women writers on the grounds that it would drive away male readers (ix). He issued an editorial edict across the wide expanse of his numerous magazines to actively discourage women writers from submitting to his pulps (ix). As a result the number of women writers published from 1930 to 1940 diminished. Gernsback attempted to regain his position in the world of PSF in 1930 with his new pulp endeavor,

*Wonder Stories*, and although the magazine did serve as a home to many of the women he'd previously published in *Amazing*, the magazine never gained either the circulation or reputation of his former pulp. *Wonder Stories* folded in 1936 (ix).

Even as the prospects for women PSF writers grew narrower and narrower in the 1930s, this did not mean that women were shut out from the pulps entirely. Nor did the new focus on adventure over science and social critique mean an end to socially conscious PSF. Women continued to publish in the pulps and they continued to write PSF that challenged the genre, but in order to do so, they were forced to rely on subterfuge and subversion to gain entry into the male-dominated pulps.

## 2. Adventures Underground

Editors at Macfadden's TEC Publications had been mandated to discourage women writers (many other editors at PSF pulps not affiliated with Macfadden adopted this policy, apparently hoping that aping Macfadden's formula would translate into wider circulation) and to focus on more adventure-based PSF to appease male readers, but once these changes had been enacted circulation for Macfadden's PSF pulps decreased (ix). It seemed that, in most cases, readers of PSF weren't concerned about the sex of the writers that appeared in the magazines, so much as they were concerned about the quality of the writing. Still, Macfadden's mandate held. Thus editors began to engage in an open act of subterfuge, buying stories that ran counter, at least on a sub-textual level, to the prescribed intergalactic shoot-'em-ups that had become the standard--stories like E.E. Smith's space opera, *Triplanetary* (*Amazing* 1934), which possesses all the superficial trappings of an adventure pulp--rocket ships, ray guns, damsels in distress--but which

also adheres strictly to the Gernsbackian notion of a plausible depiction of science as well as containing a sharp speculative satire on the future of warfare.

This subterfuge also extended to the publication of women writers. Just as editors discovered that they could publish meaningful PSF, so long as they disguised it as mediocre pulp, they discovered that they could publish women writers again--so long as those women masked their identities behind masculine or gender-neutral pseudonyms (x). Thus Catherine Lucille Moore became C.L. Moore. Alice Mary Norton became Andre Norton. Amelia Reynolds Long became A. R. Long. Eona Mayne Hull became E. Mayne Hull.

The gender-swapping that these women writers engaged in did not stop with their adoption of a pseudonym, they also understood that a mere name change would not be all that was required of them. Many of them also adopted the prescribed conventions of the period, writing tales of planetary romance, space opera, and strange tales of encounters with pliable, sexually available female-aliens, all of which was filtered through the perspectives of hard-boiled male protagonists. But their use of these conventions often carried with them a subversive edge. This is especially true of the work of C.L. Moore, whose stories of Northwest Smith, intergalactic smuggler, aped the style of space opera, including laser battles and strange aliens. But Smith is a rather thin character compared to those strange aliens he encounters, who, themselves, are most often female, possessed of their own agency and agenda, self-possessed and capable. Often, in a Northwest Smith story, Moore places her hero in the subaltern position typically reserved for the female-alien in space opera. It is he who becomes the object of the female-alien's sexual desires

and it is he who, very often, must be delivered from her by means of rescue. Moore's subversion of gender roles was evident from her first published story "Shambleau" (*Weird Tales* 1933) and rather than turning away readers with her weak male protagonist and her self-possessed female-alien, the story was a great success and enabled Moore to establish herself as one of the premier writers, male or female, in the pulps.

Other women writers refused to hide their identities. Leslie F. Stone, one of Gernsback's former proteges and one of the best-selling female PSF writers of the 1920s, continued to use her real name. She paid a price for it. Stone continued to publish in the 1930s, but she could not find a home for her stories outside of the Gernsback published *Wonder Stories*. Once that magazine folded in 1936, her writing career foundered. Stone only managed to publish three stories after 1936 and in 1940, frustrated by the lack of opportunity for women PSF writers, and unwilling to hide her sex behind a pseudonym, she stopped writing (ix).

### 3. The Astounding and The Unknown

The fortunes of women PSF writers began to change once more with the ascension of John W. Campbell to the editorship of *Astounding Stories*. Campbell, a graduate of MIT and an acolyte of Gernsback, had been writing and publishing PSF since 1930 with the appearance of "When the Atoms Failed," in *Amazing*, which was still edited by Gernsback at the time. Campbell continued to publish following Gernsback's ouster at *Amazing*, but he refused to give into editorial edicts and produce the execrable PSF that the market supposedly demanded. Campbell published less frequently because of his dogged refusal to compromise his work, but the work that was published was



marked by a masterful apprehension and application of both science and style. Campbell worked almost exclusively in the sub-genre of space opera, but whereas his colleagues in the field produced stories about gleaming rocket ships zooming across the galaxy to encounter scantily clad female-aliens, Campbell's ships and stories had weight. His attention to quality raised him to the editorship of *Astounding* in 1937 and ushered in what is considered the "golden age" of PSF (Clute, Langford, Nicholls, "John W. Campbell").

Even as Campbell abjured the male-driven, adventure-focused PSF of the day, he did cling to one notion from that period: he would not hire women writers. In fact, a brusque conversation between him and Leslie F. Stone was the deciding factor in her leaving the writing profession for good (Stone, "Day of the Pulps"101). For all the respectability that Campbell brought to the genre, he also brought with it a raft of prejudices. Campbell was of the opinion that women and minorities, especially African-Americans, were incapable of writing science fiction and he refused to publish any fiction from writers that were not white or male (Green 13-15). But something changed in 1939 when Campbell published "Greater Than Gods," by C.L. Moore. The reasons for Campbell's sudden change has been a matter of much speculation, but one theory holds that Moore's appearance in *Astounding* was due in part to the intervention of her then-fiance Henry Kuttner, a friend of Campbell's, who appealed to the editor to help Moore gain entry to the more respectable pulps of the period (Frank, Stine, and Ackerman xi).

Whatever the reason, with the publication of "Greater Than Gods," Campbell began to publish more women PSF writers, both in *Astounding* and in his new magazine

*Unknown*. Both of these pulps were widely considered the top tier of PSF, and an appearance in their pages carried with it a great deal of validation in the PSF community (Knight, 34-47). Moore and other women PSF writers of the period like Leigh Brackett, Andre Norton, and later Judith Merril, were published alongside male peers like Isaac Asimov, L. Sprague DeCamp, Robert Heinlein, and Frank Herbert. Campbell was slow to accept women PSF writers into his magazine, but once he did he placed them alongside the best male writers of the period, thereby signifying that the work of these women writers was equal to that of anything written by a man.

But even as the women published in Campbell's magazines gained validation in the PSF community, their challenging of that community did not end. Leigh Brackett's tales which re-imagined space opera and planetary romance as forms of neo-colonialism appeared in *Astounding*, while C.L. Moore began to publish, alongside her husband, Henry Kuttner, stories about artificial intelligence that challenged the notions of humanity.

Both *Astounding* and *Unknown* continued to be important venues for women PSF writers in the early 1940s. But *Unknown* was forced to fold in October of 1943 due to war time paper shortages and the supremacy of *Astounding*, once the premier place for serious PSF, was challenged by upstart pulps like *Thrilling Wonder* and *Startling Stories* as venues where women writers could publish mature speculative fiction sans the pulp trappings of rocket ships and bug-eyed monsters. (*Startling Stories* in particular became an important venue for women PSF writers in the early 1950s, especially those women writers who were using their fiction as a form of either feminist, anti-imperialist, or anti-war advocacy; both Leigh Brackett and Judith Merril published extensively in *Startling*

helping to establish its anti-establishment tone.)

As the 1930s gave way to the 1940s, women PSF writers, helped in part by the United States' involvement in the Second World War, which saw many of their male contemporaries drafted into military service and unable to publish, found themselves in an unknown position: they had more opportunities to publish, more venues in which to publish, and thanks in part to Campbell, who ended the practice at *Astounding* (Frank, Stine, and Ackerman xii), were now able to publish under their own names if they wished (although many writers who established themselves in the pulps of the 1930s, like Moore and Andre Norton, continued to publish under their pseudonyms). By the time the war ended, there were more women PSF writers publishing in the pulps than in the two previous decades combined; roughly 300 women were writing and publishing speculative fiction in the United States between 1946 and 1954 (Yaszek 3).

### 3. Post-War

But even as women PSF writers were gaining more opportunities to publish, they soon found themselves combating the notions of what they were expected to publish. As the Second World War ended, the United States experienced a surge in economic growth, the abundance of material goods, employment, and disposable income. The nation also experienced a distinctly conservative shift in its self-image in response to its new position as an international superpower. This new national self-image was informed by a desire to cultivate a new form of domesticity in which women, a vital component in the male-depleted workforce of the war years, would return to the home--a home outfitted in the signifiers of material abundance--to care for their families. This self-image was also

informed by the advent of atomic, and later nuclear, weapons in the national arsenal. The terrible destructive power of these new weapons, and the knowledge that United States' enemies possessed them, ushered in a new sense of paranoia into the national consciousness.

This new self-image is reflected in the PSF of the post-war years which became both earthbound, focused on home and hearth, and pessimistic about the role of science in the world. The adventurous spirit and ebullience of the 1920s and 1930s PSF is replaced in the post-war years with a dourness and a creeping belief that science, rather than uplifting humanity, will destroy it. Stories set in dystopian, technophobic communities or in blighted landscapes scarred by atomic and nuclear warfare became the norm. Even optimistic PSF pioneers like Ray Bradbury were affected by this malaise. His *Martian Chronicles* (1950) which begins with the best of humanity hopefully journeying to Mars to colonize and populate the red planet, ends with those Earthlings that remain behind destroying themselves in a nuclear holocaust. Meanwhile, women PSF writers received a new mandate: they were expected to counter this unease by crafting tales of happy homemakers, dutifully carrying out their wifely chores in the kitchens and parlors of the future (Yaszek 3).

But even as women PSF writers were expected to craft tales of what SF writer, Joanna Russ dubbed, "galactic suburbia," their subversive spirit still shone through these stories. Women writers were still able to fashion stories from the stuff of domesticity into works that depicted feminist concerns. What's more, the intent and scope of their fictions grew. No longer were the women writers only responding to the sexism of editors and

readers of PSF, now they were responding to the society at large. Nor was their fiction only informed by feminism, there is a broader humanist concern to be found in the PSF written by women in the years following the Second World War. PSF written by women took on a new urgency in the post-war years; PSF became a vehicle for advocacy used by women to protest a host of concerns. Writers like Judith Merrill and Leigh Brackett combined both the new domesticity and the fear of the atomic age into tales in which mothers and children become heroic figures protesting against warfare and nuclear armament; Carol Emswiller wrote stories that examined women's disappointment with domesticity, and explored female sexuality; Helen Reid Chase wrote stories that advocated for making science and technology, beyond that which could be found on the showroom floor of an appliance store, available to women. Just as the women PSF writers of a previous decade had found a means by which both to circumvent and subvert the restrictions imposed upon them, these post-war women writers developed ways to use editorial and societal expectations to their advantage, and in doing so these women, and their antecedents, cultivated a subversive and socially conscious mindset which continues to inform the work of contemporary SF.

## Chapter Two

### A Model of Imitation: Clare Winger Harris, "The Fate of the Poseidonia" (1927)

Clare Winger Harris (1891-1968) is the first woman to have a story published in the pulps with, "The Fate of the Poseidonia," which won third prize in a writing competition sponsored by the Hugo Gernsback edited *Amazing Stories* in June of 1927 (Clute, Langford, Nicholls, "Clare Winger Harris"). Harris' participation in the contest, and winning entry were regarded with wonder by Gernsback who, in a prefatory note, wrote, "as a rule, women do not make good scientifiction [*sic*] writers, because their education and general tendencies on scientific matters are usually limited"(1). The manifest condescension of the introduction is in keeping with the views of the period, but there is also in Gernsback's preface a note of surprise and respect for Harris' work:

The story has a great deal of charm, chiefly because it is not overburdened with science, but whatever science is contained therein is not only quite palatable, but highly desirable, due to its plausibility. Not only this, but you will find that the author is a facile writer who keeps your interest unto the last line. (1)

Gernsback's apparent astonishment seems to indicate that, upon reading Harris' story, he had only just become aware that included among the readership of his many magazines, as well as among the countless submissions by would-be authors of "scientifiction" were women.

The editor ends his introduction with, "we hope to see more of Mrs. Harris's scientifiction in *Amazing Stories*." Gernsback was not merely paying lip-service to Harris

with this final statement: he not only became her most frequent publisher, but a supporter of her work as well. Harris' entry into the male-dominated world of PSF produced something of a change within the genre. Certainly that was the case with Gernsback, who began to actively seek out writing from female authors and, once found, to foster their talent (Attebery 50). Following Harris' entrance on the scene, were Gernsback proteges Leslie F. Stone and Hazel Heald, along with many others, who, enjoyed the somewhat permissive attitude of the decade spanning the years between 1927-1930.

However, even as Harris' annunciation by Gernsback is important in a historical sense, in that it enabled the female writers who followed her to be published, the story with which Gernsback was so taken is not marked by the same subversive spirit of her antecedents. Whereas the female writers that followed Harris often employed genre cliches and types, in particular the ways in which female characters were represented in the stories, as a means to comment on the gender biases and sexism inherent in the genre, Harris' story is devoid of commentary or even of curiosity. Rather, "The Fate of the Poseidonia," is a conventional PSF story, bearing all the hallmarks of the period: a dashing male narrator, a fiendish alien adversary, fantastical conceptions of future technology, a strong dose of male chauvinism, and, ultimately, an affirmation of male heroism. Reading the story, one suspects that the reason it was so well-received was not because it is especially daring, or even well-written, but because it reads like a clever, assured pastiche of themes, conventions, and characters from other stories written by male writers. Women writers following Harris often masked their sex behind gender-neutral pseudonyms or a collection of initials, but Harris, here, seems to be masking her

own gender by taking on the persona of a male writer of PSF, filling her story with those qualities with which male writers and readers were familiar.

This is not meant as an indictment of Harris. It is very likely that her use of these genre tropes as well as her refusal to comment upon them were born out of exigency. That is Harris understood that in order to publish successfully in the male-dominated pulps, her work would necessarily need to reflect a male PSF writer's worldview. What is interesting in the story is the presentation of that worldview. For even as Harris' story seems assembled from the spare parts of other PSF stories, so too does it contain some of the less-than-tolerant politics of the era, particularly racial fears (and especially a revulsion towards miscegenation), a contempt for women, and even a fear of technology. In taking on the role of a male writer of PSF, Harris inadvertently revealed an ugly truth about the genre: that for all its supposed tolerance, ebullience, and utopian ideals, the genre is rooted in an instinctual conservatism that derives from a fear of difference.

Jane Donawerth in, "Illicit Reproduction: Clare Winger Harris' 'The Fate of the Poseidonia,'" contextualizes the racial anxieties present in Harris' story, noting that the United States of the 1920s and 1930s saw the externalizing of racial prejudice in three public areas: one, the re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan as an institution meant to affirm so-called "white pride" and supremacy; two, the acceptance of the pseudo-science eugenics as a means to validate "white male privilege"; three, the Emergency Quota Acts of 1921 and 1924 which sought to curb the influx of immigrants seeking residency in the United States. Donawerth further argues that the same anxiety that enabled these external manifestations to exist, also found expression in PSF (28-29). While Donawerth is careful



to note that a majority of PSF represents the alien figure in a positive light, there is still a goodly amount that employs the alien as a figure of foreign inscrutability, rapacity, and menace (28-29).

Certainly, Harris' story reflects this latter characterization. From the opening line, Harris' narrator Dr. George Gregory indicates his distrust of the alien figure, Martell, noting, "The first moment I laid eyes on Martell I took a great dislike to the man,"(1). Although, Gregory attempts to pass off his aversion as an instinctive animus, his latter description of Martell's physical features points to something more insidious:

I noticed that he did not appear exactly normally physically and yet I could not ascertain in what way he was deficient [...] I was fully aware of his bodily peculiarities. Perhaps the most striking characteristic was the swarthy, coppery hue of his flesh that was not unlike that of an American Indian. His chest and shoulders seemed abnormally developed, his limbs and features extremely slender in proportion. Another peculiar individuality was the wearing of a skull-cap pulled well down over his forehead. (2)

The above description of Martell reinforces the character's alien aspect, but it also carries with it a great deal of prejudicial language. There is the intimation early in the passage that Martell is abnormal, "deficient," which is exacerbated later with the description of his spindly limbs. Here one can observe Gregory regarding the alien creature, not with wonder, but with the cold reasoning of a eugenicist, cataloging Martell's undesirable attributes, while implying a comparison to his, Gregory's, more desirable, features. There

is even a hint of anti-Semitism, as Gregory notes Martell's skull-cap with suspicion--that it is meant to conceal the feather-like protrusions on Martell's scalp, and therefore is meant to hide his alien-ness, only contributes further to the sinister tone of the passage. Most troubling about the passage, however, is that its central, racist thesis that skin tone indicates an inscrutable, untrustworthy quality. Martell becomes a caricature of racial fears: his foreignness is regarded as an unwelcome intrusion; his physical features serve as an indication of his inferiority; his skin color has the ability to evoke unease and seems to mask a hidden agenda/unnatural desires.

This prejudicial coding continues as Harris follows the description of the sinister Martell, with a long passage of Gregory and his fellow academics glorying in their own superiority. As Gregory's colleague, Professor Stearns, ends his discourse on the vagaries of the Martian water system, he concludes, "We may conclude that the telescopic eye, when turned on Mars, sees a waning world; the habitat of a people struggling desperately and vainly for existence" (3). Here, again, the reader can observe that the alien figure within the story is used to affirm the superiority of the (white) intellectual elites. Just as Martell's skin color marks him as furtive and cunning and thus inferior to the straightforward (white) Gregory, so to does the Martians' inability to solve their environmental crisis, as well as their seeming unwillingness to exploit their natural resources, as is the norm on Earth, marks them as beings of limited intelligence. An impression that Martell, who is, himself, Martian, seems to indicate when he plaintively asks Stearns, "Just suppose, that the Martians were the possessors of the an intelligence equal to that of terrestrials, what might they do to save themselves from total extinction?"

(4). Martell, here, is placed in the role of foreign supplicant seeking help from his white betters. But Stearns' imperious reply that, "There has always been a way out, and let us hope our brave planetary neighbors will succeed in solving their problems" (4), points towards a sense of the isolationism and wariness regarding immigration in the United States during the 1920s. While Stearns' response is not as overtly racist as Gregory's narration, its seemingly laudatory message does carry with it a tone of reproach as Stearns indicates that Earth (here serving as the synecdochic form of the United States) cannot be expected to always provide aid or asylum for the troubles of its neighbors.

This racial fear, as well as the anxiety over immigration and its attendant strain on national resources, finds its greatest expression in the story in the theme of anti-miscegenation. As the story progresses, Gregory discovers that Martell has not only insinuated himself into the doctor's professional life, but also his romantic life, as it soon becomes apparent that the outsider has become a rival for the affections of Gregory's companion, Margaret Landon. Margaret, at first glance, appears to serve as a counter to the typical PSF female: she is worldly, opinionated, and unafraid to chastise Gregory for his narrow-mindedness. Her defense of Martell is a welcome counter to Gregory's sinister depiction of him: "Aside from personal appearance, Mr. Martell is a forceful and interesting character, and I refuse to allow you to dictate to me who my associates are to be," (5). Gregory's initial distress over Margaret's obvious affection is compounded when it is intimated that her relationship with Martell has become a sexual one. A wounded Gregory leaves a meeting with Margaret stunned by her rejection, refusing to help his rival, but as he takes pleasure in asserting himself, there is a note of revulsion in his

imaginings of their lovemaking, "I rather enjoyed a consciousness of righteous indignation, but disturbing visions of Margaret gave me an uncomfortable feeling that there was much about the affair that was incomprehensible to me," (8). But just as Gregory's hurt is transformed into revulsion, so too is the reader's sympathy toward Margaret meant to be transformed. Margaret's love for Martell has gone beyond mere tolerance and has changed into something unseemly. This becomes especially apparent once it is revealed that Gregory was correct in his suspicions of the alien and his sinister agenda (Martell has been siphoning Earth's ocean water to replenish the Martian water system) at which point Margaret's tolerance for otherness becomes indicative of a naive intransigence that enables the sinister outside to appeal to her native empathy and take advantage of her. It is Margaret's intellect and sensitivity that makes her susceptible to deception. In attempting to assert her agency, Margaret has inadvertently undermined it.

The spirited nature that marks her as antithetical to the typical depiction of women in PSF is ultimately undermined by her trust of Martell. By story's end, Margaret divests herself of her willfulness and fierce individualism, taking on the role of the subservient PSF female, as she makes an appeal to her former lover:

"George," came the sweet, far-away voice, "I loved you, but you were so suspicious and jealous that I accepted the companionship of Martell, hoping to bring you to your senses. I did not know what an agency for evil he had established upon the earth. Forgive me, dear." (19)

Margaret's sexual contact with Martell is ultimately her undoing, but it also provides a means for her redemption/punishment within the story as, now a captive on Mars, she

relates that she will take responsibility for ensuring that Martell and his fellows no longer trouble Earth, "I only want to say," she added hastily, "that Terra need fear Mars no more...I will prevent any--"(19) Margaret's willingness in giving herself over to be used as a sexual object by these "deficient," "swarthy" Martians, here, lends to the story's notion of miscegenation as repulsive, incomprehensible act of debasement.

The story ultimately affirms Gregory's (white) conception of right and wrong, his suspicious regard for the other, his anxiety towards immigration, and the subservient role of women. The reader is, rightly, left wondering about both the politics of its author, as well as how it ultimately contributes to the history of feminist PSF. To begin with the former, in her reading of the story, Donawerth, relates that in Harris' subsequent stories, the writer populated her works with a number of capable women and in, at least two cases--"The Menace from Mars" (October 1928) and "The Fifth Dimension (December 1928)--employed as narrators, female scientists. Harris' racial politics were also less reactionary and more tolerant in the stories that followed, "The Fate of the Poseidonia,"(24). Donawerth does not comment on Harris' sudden change in political attitude, but she does hypothesize that the publication of the above stories, coming so close to that of "Poseidonia" (a little over a year) would indicate either a radical shift in thinking in a very short space of time, or that the execrable politics of her first published story were included not necessarily because Harris believed them, but because they were the accepted politics of the day, had appeared in a number of other works by male authors in the genre, and, therefore, Harris grafted them onto her own story as an expedient to being published (24).

Harris never revealed the details of her writing process, so her politics and the reasoning behind her work remains hidden. But, as indicated above, she is the first in a tradition of female PSF writers who masked themselves and their beliefs in order to publish their work. Harris set a precedent for the female writers who followed her in that she aped the tropes of male-written PSF in order to gain entry into the exclusive domain of the pulps. Once she had, she divested herself of those tropes, to a degree, and was able to express a worldview different from that of the male-written PSF of the era. "The Fate of the Poseidonia," then can be read as the initial imitative act of a female PSF writer, but it can also be read as an instructive act as it supplied those women that followed Harris with the practical means of gaining entry into the pulps.

But Harris' story also demonstrates the limits of imitation. Her story offers no comment on its unthinkable politics, rather it affirms them and in doing so ultimately reveals the conservatism of PSF. For the women who followed Harris mere imitation was not enough. The stories of writers such as Leslie F. Stone, C.L. Moore, and Judith Merrill, adhered to Harris' imitative model only in part. Each of the above writers crafted stories that, like Harris' first story, conformed to the tropes of PSF--at least on the surface. Moore employed square-jawed male adventurers, and featured furtive and erotic female-aliens as foils, while Stone and Merrill's stories featured women safely placed in a subaltern position, in keeping with the tenor of the period. But on a sub-textual level their stories challenged the sexism endemic to the genre, challenged the perception of women within PSF, and were imbued with a subversive spirit that enabled PSF to advance and fulfill its promise as a genre that promoted tolerance. Harris' imitative model provided a template

that enabled women writers to publish in the pulps, but those writers that followed Harris understood that, like perceptions that they were combating from editors, readers, and their fellow writers, that model must also be subverted so that women writers might progress beyond merely parroting the views of their male peers. Harris provided entry, and those women that came in her wake provided a means to declare a distinct point of view for themselves.

## Chapter Three

## When Women Rule: Leslie F. Stone's, "The Conquest of Gola" (1931)

Leslie F. Stone--the pseudonym of Leslie F. Silverberg--(1905-1991) was one of the most popular writers of the Pulp Science Fiction (PSF) era. Stone, a protege of magazine publisher Hugo Gernsback, had published two successful serialized novels in the late 1920s--*Men With Wings* (1927) and *Out of the Void* (1929)--in *Air Wonder Stories* and *Amazing Stories*, respectively, along with a number of other short stories in other Gernsback publications, and seemed poised to enter the 1930s among the top selling writers of the pulps. Stone's career flourished under Gernsback's editorship; he published 15 of Stone's stories and serialized novels to a wide audience, garnering her acclaim from readers as well as peers, like Jack Williamson, Clifford Simak, and Murray Leinster (Frank, Stine, Ackerman, "Introduction to 'The Conquest of Gola'" 29). But Stone's career was curtailed by fans of PSF who rebelled against the notion of female writers appearing in their favorite magazines and was finally undone by a brush with John W. Campbell, editor of the influential *Astounding Stories* and *Unknown*, and who supplanted Gernsback as the preeminent publisher of PSF following his ascension from writer to editor in 1937 (Clute, Langford, Nicholls "Leslie F. Stone").

Stone, although dismayed by the reaction of male readers to her and other women writers, was, at least, accustomed to sparring with readers in the pages of Gernsback's publications, often responding to the vitriolic and sexist attacks against her work under the pseudonym "L. Silberberg"--a play on her given name (Attebery 59). But her dismissal by the dictatorial Campbell proved an insurmountable impediment to her career.



Stone later remembered the encounter thus: having had a story rejected and returned without comment by Campbell, Stone revised and re-submitted the piece again only to have it returned, when Stone requested a meeting with the editor to discuss possible changes and publication, the request was granted, but once in Campbell's office, the editor immediately confronted her with his brusque assessment of her abilities: "I do not believe that women are capable of writing science fiction--nor do I approve of it!" ("Day of the Pulps" 100). Following this encounter, Stone only published three more stories before abandoning her writing career in 1940 (Frank, Stine, Ackerman 29).

Early in her career, Stone gave expression to her frustration with the misogyny she encountered from readers of PSF in the story, "The Conquest of Gola," (published in the April 1931 issue of the Gernsback edited *Wonder Stories*), which imagines a matriarchy on Venus (the titular Gola, in the language of the natives of that planet) invaded by men from Detaxal (Earth) and the extent to which the Golans will go to repulse the invaders. It is not difficult to imagine that Stone's story is meant as a response to readers' anxieties about allowing women into the exclusive domain they had created for themselves in their position as fans of PSF. Just as these fans had created a figurative fastness for themselves, wherein they could admit whomever they chose--provided they were male--Stone imagined a world in which the inverse occurs. But Stone's story is not solely concerned with lampooning sexism among PSF readers, rather the story is a sophisticated feminist critique in which masculine behaviors are inverted and turned against the male invaders. In the story, Stone inverts the male gaze, male conceptions of female beauty and body image, male aggression, and male estimations of female

intelligence and agency and uses this inversion to point toward the inherent absurdity (as well as the violent aspects) of sexism.

More than this, however, Stone's story also serves as a re-imagining of the Matriarchy Story in science fiction. In previous incarnations, the Matriarchy Story-- typically involving a remote place, an island or planet, inhabited solely by women, which is either visited or invaded by men--had been told from the perspective of male protagonists. (Even Matriarchy Stories of the period written by women like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's, *Herland* (1915)), are often written from the perspective of men.) When told from this perspective, Matriarchy Stories, tend to carry with them, at best, hints of male wish fulfillment as the male invaders find themselves inducting a series of nubile waifs into the realm of human sexuality, and at worst misogyny. A typical example of the latter, can be observed in Edmund Cooper's "The Priestess Who Rebelled," (1939), which follows Stone's story and seems to have been written partly in response to it. "Priestess," also has a female narrator, an intergalactic matriarchy, and an invasion of Earth men. But in Cooper's imagining, the sympathy is with the male invaders, who ultimately achieve their conquest of the planet, by converting (through seduction) the titular priestess to their side.

But here the story is told from the point of view of the female inhabitants of Gola. Stone's genius in the story is to subvert the reader's expectations by taking away the conqueror's discourse and transferring it to the harassed Golans. Thus, Stone's story makes the reader sympathize with and understand the female perspective.

As the title implies, Stone's, "The Conquest of Gola," is not strictly a Matriarchy Story, rather it is also an example of an "invasion narrative." In PSF the invasion narrative takes two representative forms: an invading alien force arrives on Earth and, following a protracted battle, the invaders are expelled. The second invasion narrative, also known in PSF as "planetary romance," (as can be seen in Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tales of Barsoom*, which find southern gentleman and soldier, John Carter, civilizing the wild outposts of Mars) involves earthlings traveling to distant planets where they are taken for aggressors by inhospitable locals, trouble ensues, but the earthlings ultimately subdue the belligerent races and are accepted as their new masters. In both of these types of stories, the sympathy is with the Earthlings, whose cause, even when acting as the aggressor, is invariably depicted as just. In the latter stories, there is even a sense of Manifest Destiny at work, as the earthlings venture forth in an effort to gain territory and expand man's sphere of influence beyond the confines of Earth. Rarely are the motives or concerns of the alien races depicted. Stone's story, however, is one such work that does provide a voice for an oppressed race. But Stone's use of the invasion narrative carries with it a double meaning as she uses her invaded characters as a means to explore sexually aggressive nature of conquest, the use of abusive, demeaning language to deny agency, and to lampoon the conventions and inherent sexism of the genre.

As noted by critic, Batya Weinbaum, the story begins with a nod to H.G. Wells (472). The narrator, revealed in a fleeting parenthesis as The Matriarch, like the narrator of Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898), begins with a description of the desirability of the planet to alien observers. Whereas the Martians of Wells' novel jealously regarded Earth's

store of natural resources, however, the motives of the would-be conquerors of Gola are unknown, but Stone does imply that their invasion is informed by erotic desire to conquer (472). In describing Gola's atmosphere, the Matriarch notes that it is "enwrapped by her cloud mists that keep from us the terrific glare of the great star that glows like a malignant spirit," (Stone, "The Conquest of Gola" 97). The hidden, feminine quality of the planet seems to serve as a goad to the invading army from Detaxal (Earth). (The Matriarch also notes that the Detaxalans have come to Gola out of a desire "to end their days out of reach of the blistering warmth that had come to be their lot on their own world," ("Gola" 98) but this unknown catastrophe is neither explained nor referred to again; later the Detaxalans state that their purpose in visiting the planet is to force Gola to become a member of an intergalactic federation of planets, but this scheme is not explained either.) The scene of the first invasion also takes on a sexual tone as the phallic ships of the Detaxalans "[push] cautiously through the cloud mists. seeking that which lay beneath," ("Gola" 98). The ships cruise above the cities of the planet probing for weaknesses in the Golan's defenses.

This early scene of invasion serves three purposes. First, the scene subverts the invasion narrative. Stone writes of acts of exploration and conquest as distinctly masculine enterprises in which male conquerors venture forth, "to lay waste, to struggle and fight as the animals do over a morsel of worthless territory," ("Gola" 98). This is contrasted with, what the Matriarch regards as the more feminine quality of intellectualism found on Gola. As the Matriarch explains, the Golan's have advanced, both technologically and intellectually, beyond the desire for claiming territory:

Are we not content with life as it is, with our lovely cities, our homes, our daughters, our gentle consorts? Why spend physical energy in combative strife for something we do not wish, when our mental processes carry us further and beyond the conquest of mere terrestrial exploitation? ("Gola" 98)

In the above passage Stone not only demarcates the ethical imperatives of both civilizations, but also undermines the very notion of exploration. Exploration, here, is not viewed as heroic but rather clumsy, destructive, and brutish. In fact, it is not exploration, rather, it is exploitation. In Stone's story the notion of first contact between alien species does not carry with it images of fumbling attempts to transcend difference. Instead, in Stone's conception, first contact is an invasive act in which one party attempts to gain control over the other through force.

The second function of the invasion scene establishes a theme that runs throughout the story: the persistent refusal to acknowledge female agency. At this early point in the story the Golans do not know that the ships hovering above the planet carry only males, just as the Detaxalans do not yet know that Gola is governed by a matriarchy. The invaders' obliviousness, however, also extends to the belief that the Golan's are defenseless: "Not grasping the meaning of our beam stations, the commanders of the ships considered the city below them entirely lacking in means of defense," ("Gola" 99). The Detaxalans' initial ignorance of Golan technology does not carry, on its surface, any sexist meaning, but once the invaders wish to parley with the Golan leaders, and discover that the rulers are female, their patronizing, sexist tone seems of a piece with the

disbelieving mindset in the above passage, "Come now, allow us to discuss this with your ruler--king, or whatever you call him. Women are all right in their place, but it takes the men to see the profit of a thing like this," ("Gola" 104). In both instances, the Detaxalans' impressions are informed by gender biases: they possess an inflated masculine sense of their own prowess as both warriors and statesmen that suggests to them the Golans' apparent lack of defenses and their female government implies an inherent weakness and pliability that can be exploited. Once the parley devolves into threats, the Detaxalans assume a supercilious, threatening tone: "[We] have given you your chance to accept our terms without force, but since you refuse [...] I will have to take you forcibly," ("Gola" 105). The tone of sexual aggression, again, surfaces. Stone, once more, links the act of conquest to an act of sexual violation, but she is also, cannily, pointing to the ways such implicit threats undermine female agency. The invaders' use of demeaning and abusive language allows them to maintain control of the invasion narrative. Through their bullying and willful ignorance they are able to assert their superiority over the Golans, while their seeming exasperation at dealing with female recalcitrance validates their threatened violence and rationalizes their belligerence.

Stone does, however, provide a counter to the Dextalan's chauvinism in the form of the Golan's response to learning that the invaders are male. When one Golan leader reasons that, "it must have taken intelligence to build those ships," another, Geble, sniffs, "None aboard them did that. I don't question that their mothers built the ships for them as playthings, even as we give toys to our "little ones" you know. I recall that the ancients of our world perfected several types of space-flyers many ages ago!" ("Gola" 102). By

inverting the dismissive language of the invaders, Stone affects a reversal of the aggressively sexist dismissal depicted above. The Golans apply a similar imperious, sexist standard to the Detaxalans (although it must be noted that the threat of sexual violence is absent from the Golans' appraisal) the effect of which is to reduce their imperialist ambitions to a childish, acquisitive quest for power.

The dialog of the Detaxalans in this passage points to the third use of the invasion theme :a lampoon of the stilted, ebullient, aggressively masculine language typical of planetary romances. The Detaxalans speak in a cheerfully forceful tone, assured of the rightness of their actions, their superiority over the female government, and with more than a hint of incredulity over the Golans resistance to their plans:

"Listen here," he laughed, " I don't get the hang of you people at all. We came to Gola with the express purpose of exploration and exploitation. We come as friends. Already we are in alliance with Damin established commerce and trade, and now we are ready to offer you the chance to join our Federation peaceably." ("Gola" 103)

A comparison can be made between the above passage and a passage typical of the genre, written by Stone's contemporary Edmond Hamilton, and published shortly before her own, "Monsters of Mars," (1931):

Lanier and I are actually going to flash out over the gulf to the planet Mars tonight. Nelson must stay here, and since we wanted three to go I wired you as the most likely of my friends to make the venture.

Stone's passage is imbued with the same assured tone and call to adventure as Hamilton's.

In neither passage do the speakers express any incredulity about their schemes, or express any concerns about the implausibility of encountering an alien race or hurtling towards Mars. Both passages represent the curious faith of PSF that nothing is unlikely. But Stone's Detaxalans embody an extreme version of that attitude in which the impulse for adventure is stripped of its sense of wonder and is instead imbued with a business-like efficiency and dismissive tone. In Stone's rendering, the adventurers do not embody the faith in the impossible, rather they are agents of a darker desire to conquer, calling into question the innocent impulses behind these stories.

2.

"Gola" was first anthologized in the 1946 collection, *The Best of Science Fiction*, by the editor, Groff Conklin. Stone was the only female writer to appear in the pages. Her inclusion, however, was inadvertent: Conklin didn't know she was a woman. Despite his ignorance of her sex, Conklin praised Stone's writing, especially her ability to produce stories that abjured the typical PSF female body type, which Conklin described as:

luxuriantly-fleshed females scantily clad in either a leopard's skin or a two-piece female Buck Rogers outfit with a bare twelve inches of midriff, struggling (always valiantly struggling!) with an octopus-like monster or an other-world hellion with horns and a leer. (xxvi)

Conklin's description, while in many ways an accurate appraisal of the portrayal of the female form on the covers PSF-era magazines, also carries with it a distinct tone of unease, even revulsion, that speaks less of a desire to undermine the impossible ideal of PSF beauty, as it seems to want to wholly eradicate the female form from the genre



altogether. His praise for Stone's skills also misses one of her story's most subversive elements. Stone's story also expresses an unease with PSF body types, but rather than seeking an absolute erasure, Stone uses her story to lampoon the PSF conception of masculinity and undermine the genre's ideals of beauty.

Within the scene of the abortive parley, Stone inserts yet another inversion of male behavior. Once the Detaxalans reveal themselves to be males, the Golans matriarchs are unable to conceal their disgust for the human male form:

Imagine a short almost flat body set high upon two slender legs, the body tapering in the middle, several times as broad across as it is through the center, with two arms almost as long as the legs attached to the upper part of the torso. A small column-like neck of only a few inches divides the head of oval shape from the body, and in this head only are set the organs of sight, hearing and scent. Their bodies were like a patchwork of a misguided nature. ("Gola" 99)

In the above passage, Stone's physical description of the Detaxalans serves as a playful upending of PSF conceptions of masculinity. Conklin refers to the "luxuriantly-fleshed" female forms to be found in the pages of the pulps, but the pages of pulp magazines were equally clotted with square-jawed males zooming about in skin-tight costumes with laser pistols attached to their hips. Beneath the gaze of female Golan's that typically heroic form becomes ridiculous.

More seriously, the reader can also observe an inversion of the male gaze. Here the matriarchy's leaders regard the hard planes and angles of the human male invaders

and offer a critique of their form. Conklin's above description of the female cover models struggling "valiantly," but never prevailing against their "leering" aggressors, is itself a critique of the female form as it implies both weakness and pliability. Stone turns that critique back on itself, by having her capable females wonder how these male invaders ever made their way across the cosmos on such an obviously inferior form.

The passage also reinforces the strangeness of an alien encounter. Stone, here, undermines a common PSF trope which finds humans from Earth traveling vast distances across time and space only to land on some strange planet and encounter individuals that resemble themselves. Here the Golans are truly alien, with:

fine circular bodies, rounded at the top, our short beautiful lower limbs with the circular foot pads, and our short round arms and hand pads, flexible and muscular, like rubber... [O]ur beautiful golden coats, our movable eyes, our power to scent, hear and touch with any part of the body, to absorb food and drink through any part of the body. ("Gola" 100-101)

The animal-like bodies of the Golans underscore their femininity with their rounded curves, but the alienness of their forms prevents them from becoming the sexualized female figures so common of the PSF-era. But the reader can also observe Stone's empathy for the civilization that she has created in her recognition that an "alien" culture would necessarily have different standards of beauty than those of Earth. Stone's insistence on this difference is at once a sophisticated acknowledgment of the "alienness" by both parties of an initial contact between two cultures, an acknowledgment that, surely, the cosmos must contain more body types than humanoid, and an inversion of PSF

descriptions of those first contacts, in which the invaders are allowed to apply their own prejudices to their descriptions.

But Stone's insistence on difference also speaks to a frustration with the homogeneity found in PSF. Stone's descriptions of the strange form of the Golans is very nearly a plea to the imaginations of her fellow writers of PSF, to write of aliens that do not resemble humans, to write of civilizations with social mores and standards that do not resemble those found on Earth, to create fantastical worlds that cannot be encountered on any street corner of an Earth city, but that are truly fantastic.

3.

One aspect of "Gola" that both Weinbaum and critic Michael Attebery ignore is that the Golans of Stone's story keep the males of their species as chattel. Although Weinbaum addresses the Golan males long enough to note that they do exhibit stereotypical female attributes: they are described as "fun-loving and flighty, always seeking 'new diversions'," (471). That this supposedly more advanced race keeps slaves is troubling and may be read as a petty attempt to carry the themes of gender-reversal in the story to its most extreme end. But Stone's use of this theme of can also be read as yet another clever inversion, as she places the males of her fictional planet (as well as the male readers) in a subservient position to the power structure of their world. It is the male Golans who carry the stereotypes of weakness (both physical and emotional) and low intellect. It is the male Golan who are tasked with menial jobs. It is the male Golans who are subjected to unreasonable standards of beauty, prized mostly for their bodies, and are kept in hand to service the sexual whims of the Golan matriarchy. In effect, the reader

realizes, Stone has made the Golan males subject to the same sexism directed towards Earth women. That the sexism Stone portrays here is so absurd in its condescension and aggression only serves to underscore the absurdity of those attitudes directed at women.

It should also be noted that Stone also employs a common PSF trope in her depiction of the Golan males: the native who is converted by the invaders. Just as the matriarchal worlds of PSF are typically undermined by male invaders who induce females into servility, here, Stone's Golan males are persuaded to help the male Detaxalans overthrow their female masters. Unlike a typical story of imperial overthrow, however, the Golan males' insurrection fails and is put down violently by the female rulers.

Stone's inversion of sexist attitudes no doubt contributed to the backlash against the story that followed its publication. But in inverting these sexist attitudes, Stone was performing the necessary function of the PSF writer: she was asking her readers to expand the limits of their empathy.

4.

Even as the initial insurrection and invasion is put down, Stone's story does not end happily. The aged Matriarch narrating the tale (the sole surviving Golan who remembers that early incursion by the Detaxalans) notes that there was a second invasion and a third and even now, "we are always in readiness for them..." (Stone, "Gola" 109). There is a tangible sense of fatalism in this final scene as the Matriarch acknowledges that the literal war between the sexes is only in a brief moment of detente. Again the Matriarch echoes the narrator of *The War of the Worlds*, waiting for yet another invasion,

but even the final flippant dismissal of males as "the same ineffectual weaklings" cannot leaven the cynicism of this final moment. Stone's story does not, ultimately offer a solution for male aggression, sexism, or violence towards women, nor does it seem to indicate that there is one.

Science, the great hope and panacea of PSF, has failed here. In fact, science has become perverted in that it has transformed an otherwise peaceful race of beings into a clannish defensive one. Stone subverts the optimism of PSF by showing that hopefulness of technological and scientific advancement cannot erase the most closely held prejudices.

5.

Brian Attebery, notes in "The Conquest of Gernsback: Leslie F. Stone and the Subversion of SF Tropes," (2005), that Stone was not only battling genre stereotypes, but also the narrow conceptions and expectations of the genre by the readers of PSF. Attebery points to the debate played out in the letters page of *Wonder Stories* following the publication of Stone's story. Many (male) readers were incensed by Stone's feminism, but more were put off by what they perceived as her emotionalism. Romance was anathema to many readers of PSF, who wanted their stories to, yes, be exciting, but to be much more focused on the science behind the adventure, (59).

But Stone, herself, noted the contradiction behind this logic: If fans of PSF wanted their stories to be divorced from emotion, romance, and femininity, then why were so many of the stories that they favored invested not in the science that they so vocally championed, but rather in violence, conquest, and in demonizing the other, ("Day of the Pulps" 101)?

In "The Conquest of Gola," Stone, in her depiction of the matriarchal Golans, has created characters that embody the PSF ideal: they are a race that has transcended both the petty emotions that compel the Detaxalans to violence and they have constructed a society based wholly on science and technology that serves the betterment of their race. The final victory of the Golans, is a victory for those ideals that fans and readers of PSF held dear. And in a smaller way, the expulsion of the Detaxalans can be read as an expulsion of those marauding relics of early PSF that threatened to keep the genre from achieving a measure of respect. More than most writers of PSF, Stone's story reflects the demands of the readers of the period and yet (male) readers rejected it as "light-weight," "silly," and as a story about, "nothing but a bunch of swooning dames," (Attebery 59) largely because of its feminist message. (It should be noted that Stone's story was not wholly rejected by fans, several female readers wrote in their support of the story as well as a few sympathetic male PSF writers, like Jack Williamson.)

Stone summed up reaction to "The Conquest of Gola," several years after its publication and her untimely retirement from writing, "I [got] a berating from readers for putting females in the driver's seat, females that dared to regard their gentle consorts as playthings! Male chauvinism couldn't take that!" ("Day of the Pulps" 101). More than revealing the sexism of many of her readers, however, the reaction to Stone's story revealed the urgent necessity for her story and her work as a writer. Even an optimistic, farseeing genre like PSF was beholden to the prejudices and resentments of its readers and writers, for the genre to fulfill its promise and inherent progressivism, it must necessarily produce fiction that challenges those prejudices and upends them.

## Chapter Four

## The Female-Alien: C.L. Moore, "Shambleau"

Catherine Lucille Moore (1911-1987) was a rarity among women writers of the pulp era, in that she achieved something many of her peers did not: a lengthy career.

Moore, who as a writer employed the gender-neutral pseudonym, C.L. Moore (later she would write as "Lewis Padgett") published her first story, "Shambleau" in *Weird Tales* in 1933 and continued publishing well into the 1950s (Evans 110-111).

Moore's longevity was at least partly due to her willingness to abide by the assumption of many PSF readers and editors that most PSF writers were male. In an era when many women writers were shortening their first names to mere initials or otherwise adopting androgynous pseudonyms, Moore was especially secretive. She would not allow magazines to publish an "author caricature"--a brief sketch of a writer's face--alongside her stories, nor did she respond to the numerous pieces of fan-mail she received out of fear that her responses might somehow indicate that she was a woman (Del Rey ix). In one rare instance of the latter, Henry Kuttner, a fellow PSF writer, exchanged admiring letters with Moore for a period of two years always addressing her as "Mr. Moore" until the authoress at last felt compelled to drop the disguise--Kuttner and Moore married in 1940 (Attebery 51). This gender masking also extended to her writing. Moore understood that to appease the male readership of PSF her stories would necessarily need to contain a "strong backbone: a strong, tall, romantically steely-eyed male," (Moore, "Footnote to 'Shambleau and Others'" 367).

Beyond her willingness to play to the expectations of her audience and editors,

however, Moore's success derived from her talent and the care with which she crafted her stories. Publisher, Lester Del Rey cited Moore as a transitional figure in the history of the genre, noting that stories from the early years of the pulps were, "mechanistic and unemotional stories of other worlds," but Moore's stories were imbued with an emotionality and level of craft to which PSF readers were unaccustomed,

Here, for the first time in the field, we find mood, feeling, color. Here were aliens who were truly alien--far different from the crude monsters and slightly-altered humans found in other stories. Here are rounded and well-developed characters--who were neither good guys nor bad guys--maybe slightly larger than life, but displaying all the aspects of humanity. (ix-x).

Del Rey further credited Moore with imbuing PSF with a "romantic, escapist vigor" that transcended male readers' oft-stated revulsion for anything resembling human emotion (xii). Moore gave her readers the square-jawed heroes that they craved, but more than other writers of PSF, she made her readers care about them.

For all her popularity, however, once Moore's identity, and gender, were revealed following her marriage to Kuttner, there was a tendency among early critics of the genre to undervalue Moore's contributions to PSF. Damon Knight, writing in 1956, compared Moore's stories to those of her husband in his essay, "Genius to Order: Kuttner and Moore" and found her stories, "clever, but superficial; moody and meaningful, but thin." Although, Knight does undermine this summation with his reading of Moore's, "No Woman Born," which he praised as "hypnotically deft, an ingenious improvisation that results in a series of brilliant penetrating images,"(144-145) with his essay, Knight



established the prevailing opinion on Moore as a slight, if entertaining writer of PSF. This depiction stuck and was exacerbated somewhat by Moore's abandonment of the genre in 1957 to write for film and television. And it was only reversed by the intervention of Del Rey, who published the first career-spanning collection of Moore's stories, *The Best of C.L. Moore* in 1975 (Clute, Langford, Nicholls, "Catherine Lucille Moore").

Del Rey's assessment, however, only partly addresses Moore's skill. What the publisher overlooks is that while Moore's stories were revelatory in terms of their craft and emotional weightiness, and while she was mindful to populate her stories with the (seemingly) stock characters and situations of PSF, there is also in Moore's work a subtle subversion that occurs in Moore's handling of the genre's conventions. Even as Moore saw the need for an assured male protagonist, she also understood that in order for those protagonists to transcend the flat, nearly featureless heroes typical of PSF it was necessary for them to display vulnerability. In order to bring this vulnerability to the fore, Moore often set against her male heroes a host of female antagonists, who used their male adversaries' sexism, arrogance, and fear against them. Moore later explained that she often used females as villains in her work because of the low expectations readers had for female characters, as Moore noted, women in PSF were either, "helpless fugitives, helpless hostages, or helpless slaves," ("Footnote..." 365).

This subversion of male sexism and gender roles, however, was hardly a new trope of PSF by the time Moore began publishing in 1933, other women writers like Leigh Brackett, Leslie F. Stone, Hazel Heald, and Francis Weinbaum, among others, had employed this convention in their writings. But Moore differs from her peers in that she

uses this inversion to demonstrate the ways in which male sexism and misogyny are rooted in males' fear of female sexuality and empowerment. To depict this fearfulness, Moore imbues her female antagonists with exaggerated feminine characteristics to the degree that they become monstrous. In "Shamblau," the title character's sexuality is so predatory and extroverted that it threatens to literally consume the male protagonist. Just as the female antagonists exhibit amplified male behaviors, the male protagonists are placed in a subaltern position, occupying the role typically reserved in PSF for female characters, becoming the hopeless, fugitives, hostages and slaves. This inversion enabled Moore not only to explore the sexism inherent in the genre, but turning that sexism against her male characters enables Moore to demonstrate the dramatic limitations of those characters, advocate on behalf of female characters, and provide a means for the genre to evolve.

1.

In *Frankenstein's Daughters: Women Writing Science Fiction*, Jane Donawerth avers that the figure of the alien in PSF "possesses a metaphorical dimension," that invariably speaks to some cultural, racial, or gender-based fear,

Traditional science fiction has frequently displayed racial fear of difference under the guise of BEMS--bug-eyed monsters--so traditional science fiction has also displayed fear of women under the guise of BAMs--beautiful alien monster-women.(42)

Donawerth further notes the difference in the depiction of alien women in PSF written by male and female writers,

In science fiction written by men, the woman as alien has generally symbolized the erotic victim of masculine dominance who is a threat to reason and order. In science fiction by women, female-alien often represent the experience of woman-as-other. Women writers have developed a whole taxonomy of women aliens that must be read differently from the women characters as alien that male science fiction writers construct. (42-43)

In Donawerth's reading of these characters, the women science fiction writers achieve the above effect by means of what she refers to as "decentralization," which is the subtle process of undermining the male characters' subjectivity, and conceptions of his own strength and dominance and placing the focus of the story on that of the female-alien, so that the female point of view becomes dominant, acquires its own subjectivity, and to a degree, enables the female-alien to become if not the story's protagonist, then at least something greater than the mere signifier of male anxieties (46).

Moore, herself, understood the possibilities of this "decentralized" dynamic as she began writing her first published work, "Shambleau." The story is ostensibly about Moore's prickly, morally ambiguous hero, Northwest Smith, a smuggler and gunslinger who travels the backwaters of the solar system, who rescues the secretive, feline title character from a mob and takes her into his home. Moore intimates that Smith, though honorable to a degree, is not above regarding his new ward as a sexual object. But very quickly the story takes a turn and soon it is the heroic, self-assured Smith, who becomes a thrall to his guest. Writing later about the story, Moore noted the dramatic possibilities of

this turn, "I realized that after [Smith's] use as a defender was over [Shambleau] might just possibly spring her trap and destroy him. So Smith himself was going to need help," ("Footnote..." 367). By inverting the power dynamic in her characters' relationship, Moore turns her protagonist's masculinity against himself, making him the target of sexual aggression. Once Smith's role within the story has been undermined, Moore is then able to use Shambleau to explore the ways in which female empowerment--in this case, Shambleau's sexual empowerment--is perceived as a threat in PSF.

### 3.

Even as the story begins, Moore works to decentralize the male characters. Moore prefaces her story with a passage that begins, "Man has conquered space before." Moore, here, is parroting the imperialist overtones of many PSF stories, in particular "space opera," which find interstellar travelers acting upon their manifest destiny to conquer, and colonize the cosmos. She continues, writing of this tendency to explore as a historical inevitability, linking ancient explorers with the future ones of her story. But even as this prefatory passage seems to be paying service to PSF tropes of the dominance of the masculine explorer/conqueror, Moore undermines this perception with the mention of an even older, feminine, presence in cosmos than the male explorers she seems to extol, "The myth of the Medusa, for instance, can never have had its roots in the soil of Earth. That tale of the snake-haired Gorgon whose gaze turned the gazer to stone never originated about any creature that Earth nourished," ("Shambleau" 1). This preface, on its surface level, provides the reader some context for the story, and its monster, to follow, but it also serves three other, more subtle functions within the story: first, it introduces the

notion of the female as other, Moore's use of the gorgons plays upon the reader's knowledge of the myth of the deformed female creature who turns men to stone with a look, by using the gorgon as the basis for her female-alien, Moore emphasizes the otherworldly and monstrous nature of her character, but in aligning her character with these monsters, she also indicates that what makes the female character so mysterious and uncanny is their femininity; second, rather than the pliable female monster of male-driven PSF, here, Moore's monstrous female-aliens are depicted as fearsome and empowered, the "alien-ness" does not immediately signify eroticism, but rather danger; and third, even as Moore indicates the monstrous and dangerous nature of her female characters in the preface, what she does not do is indicate that the gorgons mentioned, or Shambleau, herself, as antagonists, this lack of judgment about the female-aliens introduces a note of ambiguity to the preface, and by extension the story that follows, as Moore leaves it to the reader to determine who among these types is the transgressor and who is the transgressed upon. One can see in this passage, that Moore is subtly alerting her readers to the fact that the conflict between her male and female characters will not follow the conventions of PSF.

"Shambleau" is set on Mars (or Lakkdarol), but it owes much of its tone and scenery to Westerns stories: the dusty town, the distant gunslinger, the outcast or fallen woman, and the provincial townfolk attempting to maintain order through mob rule. The reader's introduction to Shambleau comes as she is being pursued by a group of men howling for her destruction. Here the reader first glimpses Shambleau: "dodging like a hunted hare from shelter to shelter...[i]t was a girl--a berry brown girl in a single tattered

garment whose scarlet burnt the eyes with its brilliance," ("Shambleau" 2). Moore does not deviate from the paradigm of this type of rescue story: she introduces a weak, but sexual, female character, and the man who subdues her and the advancing crowd by means of his overpowering virility. Moore's description of her character adheres to PSF convention in its emphasis of the female-alien's exoticism/eroticism, vulnerability, and youth.

But where Moore does deviate in this description is in her focus on her character's fear of her pursuers. The desperation of Shambleau's flight is palpable as she glances "wildly for shelter." The voices of her pursuers shouting "Shambleau! Shambleau!" are rendered as, "the bay of the mob," making them seem neither human nor Martian but animalistic in their hunting of the girl. Here Moore subtly draws the reader's attention to the violence underlying PSF stories. In Moore's story, Shambleau's pursuit is not merely a story crux meant to set the plot into motion, rather it is an instance of terrifying, hateful violence directed at a figure representing difference within the story--the language used to describe the mob, as well as their action, resemble that of a lynching. The scene calls attention to the violence common to PSF--especially violence directed toward characters representing "otherness," in this instance a female figure--rendering it not as adventure but rather as something that derives from fear, prejudice, and a desire to expel that which is different.

If Moore's description of Shambleau is somewhat atypical, her description of her protagonist, Northwest Smith, is in keeping with the tropes of the PSF male adventurer. The reader is told, that Smith "is known and respected in every dive and wild outpost on

a dozen wild planets," that "he had not the reputation of a chivalrous man," but that he does possess, "that chord of sympathy for the underdog that stirs in every Earthman," ("Shambleau" 2). Smith is part rogue, part knight errant, sardonic and standoffish, concealing hidden depths, and although he has the reputation of a gunman, he puts off Shambleau's pursuers, not with force but by daring the mob to a test of manliness,

"Come and get her!" Recklessly Smith grinned into [the face of the mob leader]. He saw danger there, but his defiance was not the foolhardy gesture it seemed. An expert psychologist of mobs from long experience, he sensed no murder here. Not a gun had appeared in any hand in the crowd...He grinned in the man's angry face and leaned lazily against the wall. ("Shambleau" 3)

But even as Smith is able to avoid physical confrontation, Moore is careful to emphasize that the scene carries with it a more subtle violence, as Shambleau is reduced from being a living entity in the eyes of both her would-be captors and her rescuer to that of an object to be haggled over. Moore fills the scene with transactional language as Smith and the leader of the mob negotiate over who will take possession of the girl. Ultimately Smith wins out with a fiercely shouted, "She's mine!" and "I'm keeping her!" The mob's leader responds with a petulant, "Keep her, then," ("Shambleau" 4-5). Moore depicts the two men and their virile posturing, as children arguing over a game--which calls further attention to the juvenile nature of PSF adventure stories.

But Moore is also calling to attention the fact that even as Shambleau constitutes a threat, she does not possess agency. In this opening scene, Moore's monster inhabits the

role of other female-aliens in PSF: she is pliable, lacks will, is eroticized by the males around her, and does not have much to say. Moore's characterization of Shambleau serves in part as a critique of the female-alien in PSF, demonstrating both the dramatic limitations of the character--how does Shambleau represent a threat if she seemingly possesses no dangerous qualities, or qualities of any sort other than physical beauty?--as well as the treatment of women in PSF. But, one can also see that Moore is using those limitations to her advantage. Here the decentralization of Smith within the story begins. Moore has established her characters as embodiments of PSF types, but Shambleau's tractability and Smith's masculine insouciance actually serve a different purpose. Moore has lead her character's, and her readers, into a trap. By depicting Shambleau as non-threatening and Smith as a masculine ideal, the reader does not expect the inversion that is coming--one which finds Smith's sexual aggression and possessiveness turned against him, rendering him vulnerable to the mysterious Shambleau.

#### 4.

A signal strength of Moore's capabilities as a writer is her facility with establishing mood. Just as she subtly conveys the ugliness of the violence pursuing Shambleau, so to is she able to convey the sense of dread that follows Smith's claiming of her. Smith, remembering the disgust of the mob toward Shambleau and their desire to destroy her, becomes immediately apprehensive of his new charge. He begins to connect the girl with superstition, even going so far as to recall that she reminds him of a biblical phrase, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." This feeling is exacerbated by her eerie movements and features,



She had risen soundlessly. He...stared at first with curiosity and then in entirely frank openness with which men regard that which is not wholly human. For she was not [...] [T]he brown, sweet body was shaped like a woman's and she wore the garment of scarlet...with an ease that few unhuman [*sic*] beings achieve toward clothing. [Her eyes] were frankly green as young grass, with slit-like, feline pupils that pulsed unceasingly, and there was a look of dark, animal wisdom in their depths--that look of the beast which sees more than man. ("Shambleau" 5-6)

In many ways this passage lends credence to the mob's (and Smith's) fear of Shambleau. Moore depicts her as an uncanny creature. Her femininity is at once familiar and animalistic. And, most troubling, she seems to possess some penetrating insight that goes beyond mere knowledge, and is greater than that of her male pursuers/rescuer. Moore, here, employs the tropes of a horror story, describing her female character in esoteric terms that suggests that Smith is correct in assuming that Shambleau is perhaps a witch. But even as the passage seems to confirm the apprehensions of the men in the story, it is not condemnatory. Aside from Smith's lingering sense of dread, Moore has not, yet, given the reader cause to mistrust Shambleau. Rather, this passage with its emphasis on Shambleau's apparent frankness, and the ease with which she carries herself, suggests a liberated spirit. This further suggests that the dread that Smith is experiencing, does not derive from any overt monstrous qualities, but rather from the fact that Shambleau behaves in a self-actualized manner. Shambleau's uncanny quality does not derive from any external feature (save for her feline eyes), rather it comes from her apparent self-

possession. Moore, here, is suggesting that Shambleau is a threat simply because she is not subservient.

The passage serves as a commentary on PSF tropes: first, Moore uses Smith's fear, as well as that of the mob, to demonstrate that that fear and aggression, which manifests in Smith's case as sexism, and in the case of the mob as a violent misogyny, is really based on a dread of female empowerment; second, by extension Moore uses her hero to indict the types of stories from which his character was derived as sexist power fantasies, that deny female characters agency.

However, the passage also serves as the initial instance in which the traditional power structure of this story begins to be inverted. Even as Shambleau's openness unsettles him, the female-alien is careful not to press her advantage too quickly. In the scenes that follow the above passage, Moore emphasizes the coquettish eroticism of her character, describing her soft speech, her demur personality, her broken speech, her seeming desire to be taken in to Smith's home and bed, her "slit-like" pupils, which, in the story's first sexually overt image, are often described as "pulsing." But Moore is also careful to demonstrate that this overt eroticism should not mark Shambleau as the pliable female-alien typical of the genre. Rather, Shambleau's behavior carries with it a mercenary aspect. By playing to Smith's conception of her as essentially helpless, Shambleau is able to manipulate the hero for her own ends. Even as Smith becomes increasingly apprehensive about his new charge and attempts to deposit her somewhere safe, Shambleau appeals to his sense of heroism and is able to gain entry into his home.

It should be noted that Moore, here, is not only playing with genre types, but she

is also playing with the genre itself. Her story is not strictly PSF, rather it is a *mélange* of tropes taken from various genres. As Shambleau gains entry into Smith's apartment, the reader can observe that Moore has very pointedly employed tropes common to vampire stories in her own. Just as the vampire must seduce its victim in order to gain entry, so too has Shambleau seduced Smith. But, unlike the vampire, which possess the ability to deceive and confuse its victim by magical means, Shambleau's seduction is based wholly on Smith's stereotypical conception of her. Moore further decentralizes Smith's role as protagonist within the narrative, here, by demonstrating that his masculinity, rather than enabling him to overcome his foe, here makes him as pliable and susceptible to manipulation as any female character in PSF.

This inversion is emphasized as Moore returns to her use of the vampire trope as Smith asks Shambleau if the alien has eaten. Shambleau's ominous reply, "I shall--need no--food for--awhile," ("Shambleau" 8). The passage is meant as a moment of foreshadowing, but in a more subtle way, it shows the shift in the power dynamic between these two characters. It is Smith, the male, who here takes on the subservient role of the supplicant, while Shambleau is the one who possesses the agency. The veil of coquettishness has dropped, and her self-actualized personality once more reveals itself. It is she who will decide when she eats, and on whom she will feed.

##### 5.

Once Shambleau is ensconced within Smith's apartment, the decentralizing effect becomes more apparent. Smith becomes marginalized within his own story. Earlier, Moore established Smith's anti-hero status with his stand against the mob, but as the story

progresses, and as Smith spends more and more time away from his apartment and Shambleau, his behaviors become more generic. The reader is told that he is awaiting his friend and partner, and that the pair of them are engaged in some sort of smuggling concern; Smith spends his evenings trawling the Martian bars, and that is the extent of his activities. It is only when he returns home and is confronted by the disconcerting presence of Shambleau that Moore seems to take much interest in him as a character. In addition to undermining Smith's role within the story, Moore also effects a sly commentary, here, on the PSF hero type by demonstrating that the hero, once separated from conflict reveals himself to be formless, imbued with generic motivations and drives. Conversely, Moore demonstrates that rather than serving as a plot device or a repository for the hero's sexual desires, the female-alien provides the essential element for a PSF story: she is the impetus that compels the hero to act, thus it is the female-alien who invests the PSF hero with dynamism and agency and not the reverse.

## 6.

Batya Weinbaum, in "Gender Reversal in the Thirties," suggests that many female PSF writers seem to have been influenced by Sigmund Freud's writings on human sexuality and its attendant fears. Weinbaum cites the number of female writers who created aliens that seem to represent male castration fears--in particular those relating to *vagina dentata*--by giving their female-alien any number of all-consuming orifices that threaten to devour the male heroes in their stories as proof of her supposition (474). Whether or not Moore was familiar with Freud--she makes no mention of Freud in her notes on "Shambleau" included in the Del Rey edition, although she does mention that

the figure of Shambleau was influenced by Keats' whose "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," features a lamia, it is possible that the sexual terror she meant to invoke in "Shambleau" derives from an older source than Freud--the author certainly created a character, in Shambleau, whose anatomy and physicality evokes unease in her protagonist ("Footnote..." 365-366). But even as Moore seems to fulfill Weinbaum's thesis by rooting Shambleau's monstrousness in an all-consuming femininity, she also gives her character a hermaphroditic quality that causes his unease and furthers his decentralization within the story.

The first intimation of Shambleau's hermaphroditic anatomy comes as she is being objectified by Smith:

[A] lock of scarlet hair fell below the binding leather, hair as scarlet as her garment, as unhumanly [*sic*] red as her eyes were unhumanly green. He stared, and shook his head dizzily and stared again, for it seemed to him that the thick lock of crimson had moved, squirmed of itself against her cheek. ("Shambleau" 11)

Shambleau's hair, its color and uncanny quality, are initially eroticized by Smith, but once the hair takes on a phallic quality, he is repulsed by that eroticism. Smith's dizzy disgust seems to derive both from being confronted by something that is too alien even for him, and the fact that by fetishizing this phallic symbol, Smith, the embodiment of heteronormative tendencies, is expressing a latent homosexual desire. But Moore is far more clever and subtle in this scene: Smith's revulsion comes once he observes the hair move of its own accord, that is, when it exhibits agency. That Shambleau exhibits an

agency, in particular that she seems to be responding to Smith's sexual advances, indicating that she possesses a sexuality that is beholden to her own desires separate from the submissive role that Smith places her in, is further evidence of her empowerment and the threat that that empowerment poses to Smith's masculinity.

But it is not merely Shambleau's sudden agency that Smith fears. Shambleau's phallic hair is also a sexual organ, which she uses to subdue Smith, in a scene rife with homo-erotic imagery:

some nameless, unthinkable thing was coiled about his throat, something like a soft snake, wet and warm. It lay loose and light about his neck, and it was moving gently, very gently, with a soft caressive pressure that sent little thrills of delight through every nerve and fiber of him, a perilous delight. ("Shambleau" 12)

Even as Smith experiences this "perilous delight" he is, again, repulsed by it, "a horror broke upon him, turning the pleasure into a rapture of revulsion, hateful, horrible--but still most foully sweet," ("Shambleau" 12). Again, Moore, places her protagonist in a position in which his heteronormative conception of himself is being undermined by a homosexual longing. But in the above passage, Moore can once again be observed challenging and subverting PSF tropes. Moore continues to decentralize Smith by inverting the gender roles within the story, rather than Smith subduing his female charge and transforming her into the recipient of his sexual advances, it is Shambleau who performs this action. In doing so, Shambleau assumes the typically male role of the hero who gains mastery over an alien by sexual means. Smith, then, is at last relegated to the

stereotypical "female" role within the story: a "hopeless" thrall to the impulses of her rescuer/captor.

Once this initial sexual contact has taken place, Moore returns to the theme of vampirism--Shambleau once more cryptically notes, following questioning by Smith about whether or not she has eaten, that, "The food--I eat is--better," ("Shambleau" 16)--as her female-alien's phallic hair extends to form:

a long, alive cloak [...] hiding her in a wave of dreadful, wet, writhing life. She put up her hands and like a swimmer she parted the waterfall of it, tossing the masses back over her shoulders to reveal her own brown body, sweetly curved. ("Shambleau" 20)

This vaginal image seems to confirm Weinbaum's thesis as here the reader can observe that Shambleau has transformed her whole self into an enormous orifice by which she means to consume Smith. The above scene can almost be read as a satire of female-alien types as well as the fears of male heroes, writers, and readers, with Shambleau representing the extreme form of that anxiety. Certainly all that follows the above passage bears out this reading, as Moore pushes her story to operatic heights of absurdity with descriptions of body parts sliding under "cloaks, wet, wet and warm and hideously alive," and a "nauseous, smothering odor as the wetness shut around him," ("Shambleau" 21). But it also indicates Smith's total displacement within his own story. Shambleau had previously used Smith's prosaic notions of gender roles to ingratiate herself to him. But here she has inverted Smith's virility and sexual desire to such a degree that it is Smith who has become the inert object, the hopeless slave to Shambleau's exaggerated feminine

image.

And even as Shambleau is ultimately expelled and Smith is rescued--note that in being rescued he fulfills Moore's ultimate aim for him in taking on the stereotypical female role--he is not restored to his former assured and virile personality. Rather, he is haunted by her. So complete is her hold over him, he can only offer up a wavering, unconvincing, "I'll--try," when he is adjured against thinking about her.

7.

Weinbaum's thesis is also in keeping with Donawerth's as it demonstrates that the anxiety that Smith manifests is not only a fear of being consumed bodily, but also of being displaced. And in many ways, Moore's story does embody that fear. But rather than employ these Freudian concerns as means affirm the anxieties of writers, readers and characters, Moore uses them to explore the tropes of PSF and offer a means for the genre to advance. Much of PSF written by males reads has very little to do with science fiction, rather stories from the era often read as broad adventure narratives that ultimately validate gender roles, as male characters travel the cosmos only to encounter and dominate the alien avatars of Earth-women. By using the symbol of Smith's sexuality against him, by assuming the dominant role within the story, and by externalizing that dominance by consuming the purported protagonist, Moore is not merely displacing Smith within the story, but decentralizing the male hero figure within the wider context of the genre.

Moore's story reveals the inherent limitations of the PSF hero: Smith is less a character than a collection of stock poses and violent reactions. But when in contact with



Shambleau, his character is deepened, made pathetic and pitiable to a degree. Moore further demonstrates that the female-alien, rather than merely being a repository for the hero's sexual advances is a vital component of PSF stories and is equal in importance to the male protagonist.

## Chapter Five

## PSF as Advocacy: Judith Merril, "That Only a Mother" (1948)

Judith Merril (1923-1997) occupied a privileged position among women PSF writers. Unlike many of her peers, who often masked their identities to gain entry into the pulps, Merril never employed a gender-neutral pseudonym, never shied away from publicity that would reveal her to be a woman, and was, in fact, something of an insider. She was a charter member, and one of only two women in the group (the other, was editor and anthologist Virginia Kidd), of The Futurians, a club founded, in part, by Isaac Asimov, and widely considered the first science fiction fan club in the United States. Among the members of the group were many writers who changed the course of science fiction, including, Asimov, James Blish, C.M. Kornbluth, Richard Wilson, Damon Knight, and Frederick Pohl--whom Merril later married (Clute, Langford, Nicholls, "Judith Merril"). But even as Merril's association with these writers accorded her insider status, she was discouraged by her fellow Futurians from publishing her work. It was only after she broke from the group in 1945 that she began to actively seek publication for her stories and it was not until three years later, in 1948, that she succeeded (Evans 211).

That story, "That Only a Mother," (*Astounding Stories* June 1948) signals a shift in tone in PSF, particularly in PSF written by women, in the years following World War II. PSF of the 1920s and '30s is marked by an ebullience and a desire to explore. Writers of the period had the entire, infinite universe at their disposal to create the stuff of their stories. But the Second World War had provided an array of heroes, villains, and machinery to rival any that had appeared between the pages of *Amazing* or *Astounding*,

misery and degradation beyond that found in *Weird Tales*, and ultimately had produced a weapon of such terrifying destructive power that the threat of world-wide annihilation was no longer an inky abstraction on a page. As a result, PSF became more pessimistic in its regard of technology and the future. A new sub-genre of the field began to flower in the months and years following the atomic blasts over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, one that imagined conflict without end and a world polluted by radiation and the bodies of the fallen, this new story type was known among writers and readers as, Future War.

Merril's story is a product of this emerging reality. "That Only a Mother," is a Future War story that embodies a Cold War anxiety, which even at this early date expresses a weariness with being caught within a perpetual state of emergency and perpetual state of war. But it also speaks to a burgeoning mistrust with technology. There is an abiding fear in the story over the use atomic and nuclear technologies and the attendant human cost of both. Technology as imagined within the context of a Future War story, is different from its depiction in the early pulp era, it is no longer a panacea for suffering, it does not advance or ennoble humankind. Rather technology is an enabler of man's destructive impulses.

The story also embodies another new reality of the period. In the post-war years, PSF had turned insular. Whereas, previously the margins of PSF were defined by the boundless cosmos, those margins, following the end of World War II, had been reduced to the size of a suburban tract house. A new domesticity had emerged in PSF that coincided with American post-war abundance, upward mobility, and economic growth. The spacemen and Martian princesses of the early pulp era, had settled down. This

domesticity bothered the stalwarts of the previous era, who derided this new focus on home and hearth as detrimental to the development of the genre. Merrill's fellow Futurian, Asimov, dismissed "That Only a Mother" as a "mere diaper story," (Evans 211). But this new focus on domesticity afforded new opportunities to women writers of PSF that had not previously been available since the late 1930s (Yaszek, *Galactic Suburbia* 3). There was an influx of women writers to the genre, many of them hired by editors to draw women readers back to the foundering pulps with tales of what SF writer Joanna Russ, called, "galactic suburbia," (*Galactic Suburbia* 18). There were expectations for these women writers, however:

editors assumed [female] readers might be interested in service stories about how to have a baby in a bomb shelter; at worst, they expected women's eyes to drift away from such articles in search of more amusing tales about mischievous children and perfect party frocks. Either way, [female] staff writers were expected to meet the supposed needs of readers by focusing on domestic issues at the expense of everything else. (*Galactic Suburbia* 3)

Discussion of the bomb that necessitated that bomb shelter and the political maneuverings that brought the bomb into being, however, were almost always forbidden by editors. Instead, women writers were expected to write thin, insubstantial stories of happy domestic life in the far-flung future.

Women PSF writers of the 1920s and '30s, engaged in subtle acts of concealment in order to circumvent this sort of sexism. In previous chapters of this thesis, I

demonstrated how two representative female pulp writers from the 1930s--Leslie F. Stone and C.L. Moore--employed the conventions of PSF (male narrators, monstrous female-alien, matriarchal societies, planetary romance, etc.) as a means of response and subversion. This concealment is also present in the PSF published following World War II, but with significant differences in both its presentation and intent. Several women PSF writers complied with the restrictions imposed upon them, filling their stories with the required homemakers and womanly touches. However, as Lisa Yaszek writes in her survey of American post-war female-written PSF, *Galactic Suburbia*, even as women writers were often relegated to a handful of domestic subjects and scenes in their work, their protagonist, the housewife, provided these writers an even subtler means by which to subvert editorial codes. Yaszek argues that the housewife of post-war America was accorded a place of privilege that previous generations of women were not:

The Cold War profoundly influence popular representations of women's work as a kind of domestic patriotism, especially since housewives, as family managers and consumers, were perceived to be the first lines of defense against communist encroachment onto American soil. (*Galactic Suburbia* 13)

Thus the mother, housewife, the domestic servant becomes, like the female-alien and the Amazon before them, a symbol of latent power and an agent by which to engage with the genre and subvert its conceptions of femininity.

However, just as the means by which to subvert the conventions of PSF had changed, so too did the political concerns that informed that subversion. Whereas Stone

and Moore was largely responding to the sexism that they experienced as readers and writers in the insular world of PSF pulp fiction, the women pulp writers of the 1940s and early '50s were focused on broader, humanist concerns. The landscape of the pulps had narrowed, but the conscience of its writers had widened. The stories produced in the post-war period were informed by a desire for activism, were more allegorical, more strident in their politics, and more willing to question the wisdom of American foreign policy and nuclear armament. Judith Merrill, in her auto-biography, *Better to Have Loved* (2002), wrote of her initial attraction to PSF as a child was informed by the notion that "things could be different." She went on to write of the purpose of the genre as she saw it:

Some people, and I am one, also believe that art is by nature revolutionary: that a vital function of the artist is to produce and publish 'virtual realities' of social change. Certainly the inverse is true: no radical change can ever occur until a believable and seductive new vision is made public. (42)

The ethical imperative of PSF for Merrill, and women writers of post-war PSF like her, had changed: it was no longer enough for women writers to use the genre to change attitudes among readers and writers, it meant employing the conventions of PSF to create a world-changing vision. Merrill's story, "That Only a Mother," attempts this feat by grounding her story in the fears of a young mother, Margaret Marvell, about the impending birth of her child, her loneliness, and the details of her habitual life, which also serve as an anti-war statement and an allegory on the distancing affect of technology on humanity.

The first subversion that occurs in "That Only a Mother," is Merrill's choice of landscape for her Future War story. Other writers of the Future War sub-genre, notably Robert Heinlein and Ray Bradbury, set their narratives among corpse-strewn battlefields or else cityscapes blighted by nuclear fallout. Here, Merrill creates a domestic setting for her protagonist, Margaret, a place of "bright napkins and cheerful colored dishes on the table," one which adheres to the prescribed editorial notions of a womanly space. But there is a second space that Merrill cultivates for her protagonist, Margaret, one that is also womanly, but is free of superficial trappings. From the story's opening lines, Merrill places the reader within a distinctly feminine context:

Margaret reached over to the other side of the bed where Hank should have been. Her hand patted the empty pillow, and then she came altogether awake, wondering that the old habit should remain after so many months. She tried to curl up, cat-style to hoard her own warmth, found she couldn't do it any more, and climbed out of bed with a pleased awareness of her increasingly clumsy bulkiness. ("That Only a Mother" 212)

This Future War story is set largely in the inner space of Margaret's thoughts. By focusing on her character's interiority, Merrill allows Margaret to express her loneliness, her anxieties about her impending motherhood, and enables her to process her emotional response to the strange and frightening world of war, nuclear armament, and the destruction that those bring. More importantly, however, is that the passage privileges a female perspective and in doing so her story presents to the reader the non-combatant's view of war. Here, the reader can observe the first instance of advocacy within the story:

by stripping away the masculine components of a war story, and in cultivating a female, domestic perspective, Merrill undermines the traditional male view of war as heroic, rather by removing the action from the battlefield, the story is able to focus on the emotional and human toll of living with war.

2.

Even as Margaret's perspective informs the story, however, Merrill shows that the character is, to a degree, still susceptible to male authority. As Margaret worries over the morning news, she repeatedly chastises herself for her doubts, admonishing herself to "[t]ake the newspaper's word for it," ("That Only a Mother" 212). Later in the same scene she defers once more to male authority, when she remembers, "[t]he radiologist said Hank's job couldn't have exposed him," ("That Only a Mother" 213). Finally, Margaret recalls the assurances of the cheerful radiologist, who spouts a scientific line, noting that genetic mutations in newborns are minor and, in most cases, preventable, and, in a burst of optimism, further notes, that "it [is] possible to tell with absolute certainty, as five months, whether the child would be normal, or at least whether the mutation was likely to produce anything freakish" ("That Only a Mother" 213). Merrill does not explicitly state the gender of these sources, and in one instance--the newspaper--there is no applicable gender, but Merrill, here, is playing on the PSF reader's preconceptions of gender roles within the genre. In the majority of PSF, male characters assume authoritarian roles, dispensing assured wisdom, and expressing an absolute faith in science and technology to their subordinates--very often these subaltern roles are filled by women. Margaret, is at this early point in the story, fulfilling that latter role, denying her own native intelligence



and doubt, and allowing herself to be manipulated, by experts. Her admonishment to herself that she should, "[r]ead the social notes or the recipes," ("That Only a Mother" 213) rather than continuing to fret, aligns her with the image of the PSF female as frivolous, ignorant, and easily distractible. (Also, note that Merrill is perhaps lampooning the editorial dictum of the period by having Margaret attempt to distract herself with homely items in the newspaper.)

But even as Margaret seems to accept this received wisdom from her male superiors, she cannot totally suppress her doubts. That skepticism is expressed by another female discourse within the scene, Margaret's mother, who, in her brief, worried note to her daughter, counters the ebullience of the male authorities with practical concerns about the effects of the poisoned environment on her son-in-law and her grandchild: "Hank's been around all that uranium or thorium or whatever it is all these years, and I know you say he's a designer, not a technician, and he doesn't get near anything that might be dangerous, but you know he used to..." ("That Only a Mother" 213). The tone of this note seems to be the good-natured hectoring of a mother to a child, but the concern present within the note serves as a counter to the male authority within the scene, which negates Margaret's concerns with the empirical tone that it assumes. Instead, her mother's concerns validate Margaret's own apprehension. One can also observe the effect of decentralization, (about which I wrote in relation to author, C.L. Moore in the second chapter of this thesis) at work in this story. In creating this female space, and by allowing her female characters to think, process, express, and support each other in their doubts, Merrill accords the female discourse within the story a respect not typical of PSF. The

character's concerns are not treated as hysterical or unreasonable, but, rather, are treated as an authentic response to the dangers that they perceive.

This decentralization is also present in Merrill's treatment of technology in this opening scene. As Yaszek notes, American housewives were significant beneficiaries of technological advancements following the Second World War resulting in what Yaszek terms the creation of a generation of "high-tech domestic citizens," engaged in "industrialized domestic labor," (9). Positioned within her feminine space, engaging with numerous technological amenities, Margaret, a member of this high-tech citizenry, is positioned as an extremely trustworthy critic--equal to that of the male authorities to whom she initially defers--of post-war technology.

But it is not only Margaret's engagement with technology that lends her credibility, it is her emotional response to that technology that ultimately displaces the dominant male authority in the opening scene. Margaret's apprehension of technology manifests in a palpable wariness of its destructive possibilities and a weariness with living under the perpetual threat of annihilation. This circumspection places her in the position of reader surrogate. The traditional PSF figures of scientists, technologists, and adventurers aided by the products of those two groups, are relegated to supporting roles within the story. As the central character, Margaret speaks for the lay-person, expressing a sense of bewilderment and foreboding about the prevalence of technology in post-war life.

It should be noted that Merrill's story is not engaged in anti-intellectualism. It is not a wholesale indictment of science and technology, nor is it a sentimental appeal to return to a bygone era. Rather it is a response to the sudden ubiquity of military

technology and, in particular, that technology such as bombs and other weaponized materiel that is not intended to ameliorate contemporary existence, but rather destroy it. Margaret's jaundiced reaction to the lack of news about any recent atomic bomb strikes-- "No accidents. No direct hits. At least none that had been officially released for publication," ("That Only a Mother" 212)--as well as her wonder at living in a world ruined by perpetual war, speaks to a mistrust of both the technology and those in positions of power that wield that technology. By contrast, the representations of male authority seem too willing to express an ebullient, uncritical faith in technology, to the extent that that faith seems distant and unfeeling when compared to the very human anxiety that Margaret manifests in this scene. The malaise that she feels could be that of the reader.

### 3.

A more significant point of identification than Margaret's mistrust, however, is her pregnancy. Motherhood becomes an agent through which the story express fears of the atomic age, as Merrill connects her protagonist's apprehension over giving birth to her fear of nuclear war. That apprehension manifests specifically in the fear of the effects of radiation on the body. Throughout the story, Merrill references "genetic mutations" especially those found in newborns that result in the births of monstrous children. This fear of the monstrous alien figure is the most traditional PSF trope that appears in the story, but even this is transformed to suit the fears of the atomic age as the fearsome alien is not the product of some distant planet, or strange culture, rather this alien is the product of humanity, just as its otherness is the byproduct of a human invention: the nuclear bomb.

In this new atomic age, the human body is no longer sacrosanct. It can be penetrated by radiation, and mutated into multifarious nightmarish forms. It is the body that becomes the new, unknowable alien landscape.

Even more startling than the body anxiety, that the story manifests, is the moral disconnect that this new era of warfare brings. In her autobiography, Merrill states that her inspiration for this story came from, "a tiny article in the *New York Herald Tribune* announcing that the U.S. Army of Occupation in Japan had definitely established that 'rumors' of widespread infanticide due to mutations in the areas of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were unfounded," (*Better to Have Loved* 155). For Merrill, the article seemed a moral screed meant exculpate the United States for its decision to deploy atomic weapons as a means to end the Second World War and for the attendant misery that that decision wrought on Japan. But the author was also struck by the "backwards logic" of the article which focused on a moral justification for the use of atomic weapons while diminishing the plight of those who had been directly affected by their use (*Better to Have Loved* 155). This moral disconnect can be observed in the story when Margaret, in a letter to her husband, Hank, references that the number of infanticides has risen in conjunction with the number of mutated children being born: "More infanticides all the time, and they can't seem to get a jury to convict any of them. It's the fathers who do it. Lucky thing you're not around, in case--," ("That Only a Mother" 214). Margaret passes off this last remark as a bit of gallows' humor, but there is in that statement an implicit relief that Hank is not present for the birth of their child. The emphasis that Margaret places on the fact that fathers are the culprits of infanticide indicates a further denigration on the value of human

life in this nuclear era. There is also the implication that in this future world, the rule of law has been supplanted, and that these infanticides are justified by what purports to be a humanitarian code, "in which men are implicitly encouraged to kill their deformed children to protect the workings of the war machine responsible for those deformities in the first place," (Yaszek "Stories" 82).

But Merrill does not introduce the topic of these infanticides as a means to demonstrate the moral decay of this future society in the face of unceasing war. She also employs this theme to demonstrate the disconnect in perception between the sexes in her story. Merrill implies that the fathers who kill their children are proceeding from the same sort of assumed authority and empirical outlook exhibited by the male authorities earlier in the story: these fathers observe that their children are deformed, therefore they are an aberration; their murder of the child is a means to eradicate that aberration and maintain order within this new society. The infanticide that these fathers commit is depicted as rational, even mechanical. These men have become so ensconced within the military industrial complex that they have merely become mechanical extensions of it. As a counter to that cold reasoning, Merrill's offers her depiction of Margaret as a mother. Once Margaret has given birth to her child, a daughter, her previous anxiety at producing a hideous mutation is replaced by magical thinking, as she repeats, "ours is all right," as a ward against disaster. That optimism flowers into love once Margaret at last meets her child and assures her absent husband that the child is physically normal, cataloging her features for him: "it's all there, darling, eyes, ears, and noses--no, only one!--all in the right places. We're so lucky, Hank," (Merril, "That Only a Mother" 215). The reader will

note, however, that Margaret has relegated her account to only the facial features of her child. In fact, throughout these scene, it is intimated that the child does manifest signs of mutation: Margaret's doctor's are reticent about letting her see the infant; in a passage dated shortly after Margaret arrives home, she writes Hank, admonishing him for taking a nurse's word over her own about something pertaining to their daughter: "Well the nurse was wrong if she told you that. She's an idiot anyhow. It's a girl," ("That Only a Mother" 216); and, at last, there is the revelation that this newborn is a prodigy, able to talk and form full sentences at seven months. Throughout these scenes, Margaret is transformed from anxious to an assertive young woman, both proud and protective of her daughter. The reader is invited to believe that Margaret's enthusiasm for her child, her fierce desire to cling to the notion that "ours is all right," her insistence that the child, rather than exhibiting signs of mutation, is "precocious, but normal," ("That Only a Mother" 218), is a delusion. But, it is also likely that Merrill wants to make a distinction between the male and female perception of deformity in this future world. As noted above, for males in this future society, deformity is regarded the prism of monstrosity and their reaction to that monstrosity is based on a moral imperative to eliminate it. But for women, in particular mothers, (at least as represented, here, by Margaret), deformity is observed through the prism of motherhood and love. Whatever revulsion that Margaret ought to feel is undermined by her emotional bond that she feels for her daughter. If Margaret's love for her daughter is, in fact, the product of her delusion, then it is a far more innocent and hopeful one than that which allows infanticide to be perceived as an act of mercy.

This conflict between emotionalism and the unfeeling logic of warfare comes to a

head during the story's conclusion, with Hank's return to the household. Hank's arrival signals a change in perspective within the story. Previously, the character had been relegated to a pair of perfunctory telegrams, but here the male character reasserts his dominance within what had formerly been an exclusively feminine space. Accordingly, his discourse becomes the dominant one and the final scenes of the story are filtered through his perspective. Merrill toys with the reader's expectations as Hank initially regards his infant daughter with the same warmth and wonder as his wife. But that feeling changes when Hank discovers that the child has no limbs. Instead her body is worm-like and wriggling. Hank's agitation mounts as he begins to regard his child with alarm. All the while, Margaret appears blithely unconcerned by her husband's unease, leading Hank to assume: "She didn't know," ("That Only a Mother" 220). The reader is once more invited to question Margaret's sanity. Certainly Hank believes her to have suffered some form of a psychotic break as he repeats one final time, "Oh God, she didn't know." It is important to note, however, that this implication about Margaret's sanity derives directly from a male perspective. As Hank reasserts himself as the dominant figure in the home, and the story, his perception comes to color that of the reader. Just as earlier, Margaret had deferred to male authority figures, so too does the reader, taking Hank's intimation about Margaret's supposed madness as the ultimate truth of the matter.

But within this closing scene, Merrill offers a counter to Hank's interpretation of Margaret's emotional state. Hank, himself, becomes the figure of irrationality and insanity within the scene as he comes to realize that his daughter is deformed:

His hands, beyond control, ran up and down the soft-skinned baby body;

the sinuous, limbless body. *Oh God, dear God*--his head shook and his muscles contracted in a bitter spasm of hysteria. His fingers tightened on his child. ("That Only a Mother" 220).

It is interesting that Merrill depicts Hank's emotional response as "hysteria" in the scene. Hysteria, in its classical definition, is a female illness that connects a woman's disturbed emotional state with disruptions to her uterus (King 3). Through his hysteria Hank takes on the traditionally female PSF role in the scene, reacting emotionally, rather than rationally to his daughter's deformity. Margaret's acceptance, then, can be interpreted as her taking on the role of the male PSF figure as she regards her child, not with horror, but rather with a measured response that looks beyond her physical deformity. By imbuing her male character with a "womanly" response to the horror of finding his daughter deformed, Merrill is signaling to her readers, that it is Hank who is insane.

But there is a more important inversion that occurs in the final scene. As Hank holds his daughter and his anxiety mounts, his decision to strangle her is depicted as "beyond [his] control," that is to say, automatic. In this moment, Hank becomes an automaton, his actions programmed by a confused moral sense that his daughter somehow constitutes a threat. And perhaps she does, in that her deformities threaten to undermine the moral imperative which Hank serves, the one which enables the United States military to engage in an unending war, using nuclear weapons as means to facilitate its goals. Hank's murder of the child, then, becomes an act that serves to uphold that moral imperative by eliminating evidence of its immorality. Hank's depiction as an American soldier, especially in the years following World War II, ought to mark him as



the story's hero, instead, Merrill treats him as a man so entrenched within a system that reduces human life to mere statistics and abstractions, that he has lost sight of his own humanity. Hank is not a hero, he is a symbol of a military industrial complex that has become dedicated to creating the means to devastate humanity, rather than protect it.

As Hank loses his humanity, he also loses his authority within the story. Hank's murderous actions run counter to the purported beliefs of PSF. The genre is meant to celebrate curiosity and otherness, but Hank's strangling of his child negates both that curiosity and that otherness. Margaret, then, takes on the role of the traditional PSF hero--albeit a tragic one--in the story. The bond that she forms with her child, the excitement she evinces over her daughter's difference hews to ethical principles of the genre. Her insistence that her daughter is "precocious, but normal," becomes not an example of a mother's delusion, rather it is an instance of Margaret asserting a heroic authority, defining "normalcy" and "difference" according to her own terms, without deferring to another (male) perspective. And it is the strength that she gains from becoming a mother that enables this authority.

This inversion of authority lends the story its greatest strength as a piece of advocacy. Hank's proximity to war and its effects undermines his sense of humanity, while Margaret's distance from those same things makes her more sensitive to their dangers, more empathetic to suffering, and, ultimately, more appreciative and protective of life than her husband. In Merrill's story, domesticity, rather than limiting female experience, actually enables women to develop a greater sense of humanism. The story's title comes from the hoary phrase, "a face that only a mother could love," and that cliché

is brought to bear in the story's relationship between Margaret and her daughter. But Merrill's truncating of that phrase to the insistent, "That Only a Mother," also speaks to a belief on the author's part that the greatest hope for peace, protest, and disarmament lays with that symbol of domesticity, the mother. The housewife, the domestic, the mother, in Merrill's conception, becomes the new heroes of PSF. They are not limited by their roles as helpmates, rather those roles allow them to become the guardians of the future.

## Conclusion

Brian Aldiss', *Billion Year Spree* (1973), is among the first serious histories of SF. It spans 150 years, from the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818, to SF's new wave of the 1960s. But as comprehensive as Aldiss history is, it ignores that SF published between 1905 and 1938, only picking up the historical thread with appearance of John Campbell's *Unknown* in 1939. The exclusion of the pulp magazines that preceded *Unknown* was deliberate; Aldiss had no use for pulp, he snobbishly derided it as "kids' stuff." He was not alone. Kingsley Amis, in his influential survey of SF, *New Maps of Hell* (1955), dismissed all of PSF as "immature space opera." Even Isaac Asimov, arguably the most famous writer to have been published in the pulps, in the anthology, *Before the Golden Age* (1974) derided PSF as "clumsy, primitive, naive." PSF had its defenders, Damon Knight, SF's first serious critic, confessed in his *In Search of Wonder* (1956), to possessing a "sneaking appreciation" for even the silliest PSF stories. But the knock against the genre remained.

Aldiss, Amis, and Asimov dismissed the pulps, in doing so they ignored some of the most vital and formative fiction the genre has ever produced, but they also ignored, from their position of privilege, how PSF written by women provided a model of expression for those marginalized by society, not only women, but people of color, the LGBT community, and the disenfranchised. Robin Roberts in her survey of feminist SF, *A New Species* (1993), wrote of the impact of feminist PSF and the way in which the stories of that period codified the feminist response to SF during and after the genre's "new wave" period of the 1960s and '70s:

Women pulp writers showed that feminist science fiction repeats what is implicit in the founding concepts of patriarchal society, the dichotomy between masculine and feminine that traditionally oppresses women but which feminist science fiction uses to empower itself. Feminist science fiction looks at the dualities of masculine and feminine, traditional science and feminist science, and shifts the terms of the pairing to privilege the marginal over what is usually central. And in the process it deconstructs the binarisms of the patriarchy. (90)

Chief among the new wave writers who applied this lesson of deconstruction, was feminist/new wave SF writer, James Tiptree, Jr., who paid homage to women PSF writers by assuming a male pseudonym. In reality, "Tiptree" was Alice Sheldon, who employed the masculine name in part to honor those "nameless women" of the pulp era, but also because she believed that the "cross-gender concealment" employed by women PSF writers was, in fact, a means to "un-gender" SF. By masking her own sex, like her PSF antecedents, Sheldon believed that she would be able to destabilize a reader's prejudices towards exclusively reading either male or female SF. If the reader was unsure of the sex of the writer, then he or she could not dismiss a story simply based upon gender bias. The content of the story would then take precedence over all other prejudice (Pearson 168-186).

Other writers like Lisa Tuttle and Pat Murphy in the 1970s and, later, Karen Joy Fowler echo the heroic domesticity found in Judith Merril's, "That Only a Mother." While writers like Octavia Butler, an African-American, used SF tropes like time travel,

dystopia, and future war, to examine the ways in which women of color have been historically marginalized.

The lessons of feminist PSF were not only internalized and perpetuated by women writers. Writers like Samuel Delany employed methods similar to C.L. Moore in her story "Shamblau," casting counter-culture figures like hippies, yogis, homosexuals, and even African-Americans as aliens and monsters to explore the genre's fear of otherness. Delany also used his fiction, in particularly his novel *Dhlagren* (1975), a circuitous meditation on narratology, SF, sexuality, racism, and a host of other themes, to attack what he saw as an entrenched patriarchal system in SF, that promoted racism, misogyny, and homophobia.

Contemporary SF writers like William Gibson, Cory Doctorow, China Mieville, and Cherie Priest, while not working in an explicitly feminist mode, have used the methods of PSF feminist writers, especially the fictions of Judith Merril, to create new sub-genres of SF--Cyberpunk, Steampunk, and The New Weird--that, like Merril's work, challenge "emergency state" politics and examine the ways that technology can be used to uplift humanity rather than denigrate it.

Despite the dismissive attitudes of these men, and others like them, the lessons found in the fictions of women PSF writers, persist and have helped to shape and re-shape the genre, producing new and startling visions that challenge the genre to become something better than it is, and more importantly, to fulfill its utopian promise of inclusiveness.

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