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# Is *Clementa* science fiction?

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We must fight to come to exist, to remain in existence, to be the future that happens.

—Marge Piercy (197–98)

While *Clementa* evokes genres ranging from classical Greek and Roman epics to chivalric romances, well-read science fiction readers will certainly recognize it as an example of a kind of critical, feminist, dystopian/utopian speculative fiction typified by Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and, in boundary-pushing ways, Ursula Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, and Suzee McKee Charnas's *Walk to the End of the World*. Such novels ask not only how patriarchy works and where it will lead, but also how it might be resisted and what it might take to destroy it. Perhaps even more importantly, they sometimes ask what more liberatory patterns of social organization might be imagined.

Feminist writers have fought the good fight with manifestas and memoirs, canon-busting essays, counterhistories, critical theories—and novels not least. Feminist writing is more than an essential ideological tactic for feminist politics. It is a means of consciousness raising, community making, institution building—in short, of life making. That science fiction, seemingly the paradigmatic example of a masculinist popular fiction genre, has been the (not always hospitable) popular literary home of such productive feminist literary work since even before the 1970s seems counterintuitive. After all, in the 1930s, science fiction fan Arnold Wolf begged *Amazing Stories* for “good stories” on “the disappearance of women from the earth,” and fan-just-turned-writer Isaac Asimov, among others, called for the elimination of female characters from science fiction stories.

Not surprisingly, science fiction writers and fans gleefully wrote copy that delivered on these antiwomen fantasies in spirit and in plotlines. Thomas Gardner's 1932 story “The Last Woman” eliminates women from the future so that society might recover from the terrible “feminizing” it had undergone. With women gone, scientific progress accelerates and men become real men, both strong and intelligent, for the first time in human history. In Miles J. Breuer's 1930 “The Driving Power,” a scientific inventor beset by a shrewish and acquisitive wife learns to manipulate subatomic particles to create a pleasing and attentive young woman

whom he can literally shut off each night as he leaves his laboratory to return to his hectoring wife. And in story after story, women's wombs become collective property to be managed in the interest of (male) humankind by eugenic boards of male experts. Typical of this is "Eando" Binder's 1934 "Enslaved Brains," where romantic and familial love provides the requisite antidote.

Other classic science fiction stories championed a kind of "scientific" rationality that science fiction scholar John Huntington describes as explicitly masculinist, technophilic, and technocratic. This rationality, exemplified already in Gardner's story, plays a significant role in Lester del Rey's classic Pygmalion/Galatea story "Helen O'Loy." Its most brutal instantiation comes in Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations," where the amorality of scientific laws of nature dictates the jettisoning of a young girl into space.<sup>1</sup>

Some early science fiction stories did portray women in what at the time might have been understood as forward-looking roles. Edna Graves, the charming, intelligent young wife of an independent inventor, is the lead in George Frederick Stratton's "Sam Graves' Gravity Nullifier." She outwits the president of a transnational corporation in a business deal, only to turn down a job offer and return to her hammock and bonbons. In William F. Temple's "The Four-Sided Triangle," Lena is smart, sassy, and a science enthusiast. But she's also the apex of a love triangle that is ultimately resolved by mechanically reproducing her, transforming her literally into a commodity. Beryl Angelo, the "air-minded woman" of Dr. David H. Keller's "Air Lines," is the star inventor for a global company with little time for domestic chores. She does what any smart homemaker would do and creates machines that perform all her wifely and motherly duties. But by the end of the story, having nearly lost her daughter to miscalculation, she's taking a sabbatical from her job to become "Mrs. William Dills"—which is to say, to learn how properly to be a wife and mother. In these stories, even the smartest science fiction heroines are portrayed as overly emotional, befuddled, and destined for domestic contentment. With beginnings like these, it's a wonder that any women found fertile ground in science fiction.

But as Eric Davin has argued recently, the role and number of women in the founding generations of science fiction have been seriously underestimated. And as Justine Larbalestier has found, sex-war stories present a far more complicated vision of gender relations than can be dismissed with the term *sexist*. What's more, as my own research ("Business Girls") indicates, the battle over women's place in science fiction in the 1930s was part of fervent societal debates over changing roles for women in clerical work and in companionate marriages.

Indeed, from very nearly its beginning, science fiction's pioneer profeminists challenged the pulp patriarchal fantasy of a world (and a science fiction) without women. Such women as Mary Byers (a young fan who took Asimov to task

for his sexism in *Astounding's* letters column), Miriam Allen de Ford, Katherine MacLean, "James Tiptree, Jr." (Alice Sheldon), Sonya Dorman Hess, Cele Goldsmith, Judith Merrill, and others set out to unravel the genre's sexist conventions and institutions.<sup>2</sup> In stories, letters columns, anthologies, and critical essays they not only blazed a path for Russ, Le Guin, Charnas, Butler, Gwyneth Jones, and Pamela Sargeant. They also pushed the narrative and institutional boundaries of genre science fiction and made it available for what feminist science fiction scholar Marleen Barr famously called "feminist fabulation," the politicized practice of storytelling meant to challenge the cultural narratives of patriarchy.

Despite its complicated gender history, science fiction appealed to highly literate, theoretically sophisticated, feminist writers in part because of its flagrant differences from mimetic fiction, as feminist literary historian Lisa Marie Hogeland explains:

While realist fiction can easily encompass . . . individual change, representing substantive political change presents more of a problem. Realist fiction, as Marilyn Hacker pointed out in an essay on Joanna Russ, demands "the individual solution, or, failing that, the individual defeat." But, Hacker argued, a feminist solution "is, by definition, not individual," and since the demands of realist fiction make "a denouement of growing political awareness and subsequent activity" difficult, "the writer is left with a pessimistic conclusion." (67–68)

Since one of the key insights of feminist politics is that the unraveling of the collectively maintained, multilayered, overdetermined, millennia-old systems of patriarchy demands more than individual effort, more than even a single generations' lifespan, the Aristotelian unities (time, space, character, and causality) of the twentieth-century realist novel suggest wrongly that the work to be done is merely individual and psychological. Feminist writing must disrupt the authority of such logic to make possible the imagination of societal change.

For Russ as for other feminist writers, the antipatriarchal frisson necessary for change can only be created with defamiliarizing narratives, ones that are

explicit about economics and politics, sexually permissive, demystifying about biology, emphatic about the necessity for female bonding, concerned with children . . . non-urban, classless, communal, relatively peaceful while allowing room for female rage and female self-defense, and serious about the emotional and physical consequences of violence. (15)

Science fiction seems custom built for such considerations. Its diachronic—and hence comparative—perspective (codified variously in motifs of time travel, the relativistic and cultural-geographic effects of space travel, and long-lived protagonists), its interest in the societal effects of scientific and technological change (often but not always dramatized in characters and plots enmeshed in systemic crisis), its considerable investment in world building, and its irreducible, estranging difference from the present make it, as Pamela Annas argues,

more useful [to feminists] than “mainstream” fiction for exploring possibilities for social change. [This is so] Precisely because it allows ideas to become flesh, abstraction to become concrete, imaginative extrapolation to become aesthetic reality. It allows the writer to create and the reader to experience and recreate a new or transformed world based on a set of assumptions different from those we usually accept. It allows the reader, for a while, to be reborn in a reborn world. And, through working out in concrete terms philosophical and political assumptions, it allows the reader to take back into her or his own life new possibilities. There is a dialectical relationship between the world and its imaginative and ideational reconstructions in the creations of the mind. The artist says for us what we almost knew and defamiliarizes what we thought we knew. (145)

Thus, despite misgivings about the sexist tropes of what Joanna Russ calls “the clichés from outer space,” feminist science fiction writers brilliantly refashion the formal features and reading protocols of mid-twentieth-century science fiction. Science fiction writer and critic L. Timmell Duchamp, in an analytical précis of Russ’s *We Who Are About To . . .*, explains how it not only challenges the cultural commonsense surrounding reproduction and ownership of women’s bodies but also deconstructs an important gendered convention of midcentury space opera:

The novel opens with a starship crash on a planet that might well be a “thousand million” light years from Earth, stranding the survivors with only a six-month supply of freeze-dried food, a chemical toilet and simple tools, and a water distiller with a sealed power pack. As in most conventional stories of starship crashes, the survivors of the crash set out to play a version of Robinson-Crusoe-does-Adam-and-Eve. Russ, however, declines to posit the “impossibly generous universe” (as Kurt Vonnegut has characterized the trope) necessary for transforming a starship crash into a heroic opportunity for forging a new human world. She chooses, instead,

to tell a story in which one of the women in the party refuses to assume the role of Eve, and turns every assumption implicit in stories of accidental colonization on its head.

Such gender/genre-bending work, combined with science fiction readers' adeptness at reading for something other than character development and plot, is what makes science fiction available for the material and cultural work of feminist writing.

Whatever its proponents say, science fiction is *not* a form of prediction. It's a performance of the worldviews of a group of people who use narratives about the future (and the past) to think and feel their relationship to the present. Constructing our present as the constitutive past on which their futures depend, science fiction's critical feminist dys/utopias inevitably return us to the "present moment," which, as Fredric Jameson explains, is

unavailable to us for contemplation in its own right because the sheer quantitative immensity of objects and individual lives it comprises is untotalizable and hence unimaginable, and also because it is occluded by the density of our private fantasies as well as of the proliferating stereotypes of a media culture that penetrates every remote zone of our existence. (245–46)

Such a present—inconceivable and rife with totalizing, intimating myths—needs narratives that defamiliarize constitutive binaries and so clear space for new ways of thinking, seeing, feeling, and being. As Tom Moylan argues, the critical dys/utopias of feminist speculative fiction do this work by "offering a disruptive, multiplex utopian practice that resists strict linear, systematic, totalized closure on a single alternative" (56). Resisting narrative closure, disrupting cherished conventions, feminist science fiction writers refunction the genre's famous "sense of wonder," holding open and extending the possibility of seeing ourselves anew, critically, with fresh, wiser eyes. Perhaps more importantly, this open, critical perspective can help us not only to imagine real feminist futures but, as Lisa Marie Hogeland hopes, to "commit ourselves to the struggle to bring it about" (117).

*Clementa* clearly shares the desire to rework science fiction in support of this utopian political project. With its emphasis on the mutability of gender roles and gendered relationships, its emplotment of radical, cultural, and even violent acts of societal transformation, and its performative intertextual relations with a variety of academic literary, cultural, linguistic, and political theory, it's close kin to the subgenre I've been sketching.

Like Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*, *Clementa* is first a dramatized critique of the destructive, deforming force of the rationalistic, technophilic patriar-

chy that Huntington found at the ideological heart of the classic science fiction story. It's the story of a visit to a far-future post-European land where the sky-gazing men of Malaastro fetishize a technology that they can neither understand nor make work. The Malastrans enforce a stifling societal hierarchy premised equally on a perverted chivalric code and the command-control scheme of 1980s-era corporations, and divide women into economically productive Drudges and sexually reproductive Dolls. Within this setting, the novel clearly shows that patriarchy devalues and degrades both sexes, distorts economic, political, and cultural relationships between and within sexes, and depends on cultural and material acts of violence to sustain it. If that were all there were to it, *Clementa* would be just another angry denunciation of patriarchal capitalism.

What's new about *Clementa* is that this critique is focalized largely through the eyes of an enlightened, postcapitalist, multicultural *male* observer committed to scholarly, nonviolent noninterference. For me, this difference suggests that *Clementa* means to take as its contribution to the project of utopian feminism the problem of integrating well-meaning but unreconstructed men into the movement. And more, to theorize a kind of feminist postpatriarchal society to which such men might be willing to contribute.

In other words, *Clementa* hopes to work on men who, thinking of themselves as male feminists, nevertheless need further work to see both the ways they continue to buttress patriarchy and the ways they continue to be impoverished by it (especially in terms of heterosexual male-male relationships). Such men would need to understand that the quest for a livable—truly human—performance of gender is one that men must not only support with words and ideals but also fight for. Well-meaning men must not only change their minds and their personal behavior, they must also help change the societal structures and identity categories within which (or in spite of which) we all live. The vision of *Clementa* is one where men can change, become more fully human, and earn clemency for their sins by accepting and developing new ways of thinking, speaking, acting, and being, by working with women to establish a better world where men and women both can become resolutely self-centered, and in so doing, create the foundations for an authentic community.

While *Clementa* is focused on reworking the gender expectations and performances of heterosexual couples and envisioning a way for heterosexual men to better relate to one another, it shares with Samuel Delany's heterotopian novel *Trouble on Triton* an interest in the sites where individuals and social systems meet, in the matrices of discourses, the nodes of which produce the subject positions familiarly called identity, community, and nation (to name just a few). In this context, *Clementa* dramatizes the performative power of theatrical ritual and the transformative power of self-conscious sociolinguistic, cultural, and historical



work. *Clementa* not only emplots the process of changing, shedding, and acquiring subject positions, it also seeks to create heterotopian ones for men to take up in the interest of doing feminist work.

The constitutive act of writing in producing a functional mythical origin for postpatriarchal subject positions is figured in the novel's quasi-historiographic, transpersonal, memoirlike form. Like Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Clementa* presents itself as a manuscript produced well after the events it narrates—in this case, as written by Ernest, the enlightened observer of Malastran society, for his own daughter and the other children of the just warriors who produce *Clementa*, the society. Thematizing acts of writing as productive, the narrative literally and figuratively writes the imagined society into being for us *and* for the children who live in it, thus sharing feminists' insight into the necessary relations among consciousness, institution building, and material life. As Raffaella Baccolini argues in her recent study of feminist dystopias,

The recovery of history and literacy, together with the recovery of individual and collective memory, becomes an instrumental tool of resistance for their protagonists. Because it is authoritarian, hegemonic discourse shapes the narrative about the past and collective memory to the point that individual memory has been erased; individual recollection therefore becomes the first, necessary step for a collective action. (520–21)

Becoming literate in discourses (and all of us forge our multiple identities in intersecting webs of dozens of discourses) means tacitly subscribing to particular organizing assumptions about the world and our selves. This doesn't mean that we are determined by them but that, as Michel Foucault argued, we operate within fields of micropolitical power, fields that shape how we enact our selves in relation to others, to organizations, and to institutions. In such a matrix, developing self-aware strategies for coming to power/knowledge means developing heterotopian histories and literacies—ones situated in places and subject positions other than those privileged in the hegemonic social structure; ones that even as they contest extant ways of knowing, contain and refunction them; ones that refuse and refigure hegemonic power and invite permanent heterogeneity as a condition of being/knowing.

Ultimately, *Clementa*, like the dys/utopias of feminist SF, sits uneasily in the discursive field of science fiction. Even as it makes use of the genre's defamiliarizing ability, it also works unceasingly to dismember the genre's masculinist conceits. We have already seen how classic mid-twentieth-century American science fiction depends, in part, on a gendered dream of technological transcendence and unmitigated scientific rationalism, both of which *Clementa* rightly identifies



as having devastating consequences for social relations. Indeed, *Clementa*'s most important contribution to the utopian project of feminist science fiction is to undermine the authority of science fiction's rationalistic ideology of mastery. In science fiction, and to some degree in society, science (and its technological manifestation) claims for itself the uncontested status of a master discourse—one which, by claiming a superior ability to produce reliable knowledge, insists that all questions of importance must be considered from within its field.<sup>3</sup> *Clementa* rejects this claim, seeing value in ritual, affect, and local knowledge. For the men of Malastro, science is powerfully authorizing, even when (perhaps especially because) they don't know any and can't use any. All that's left of science in Malastro is its authority, which is *ritually* invoked. In casting scientific authority (if not scientific knowledge) as a form of ritual authority buttressing claims of male superiority, *Clementa* reduces science to a kind of local knowledge, one that's useful and revealing in certain situations. In so doing, it deauthorizes all master discourses, preferring instead a society built on the confluences of permanently heterotopian ways of knowing.

## Notes

1. Read Huntington's excellent deconstruction of Godwin's conceit (79–85).
2. On this oft-forgotten history, read Larbalestier, Davin, Sarah Lefanu, Jane Donawerth, and Robin Roberts.
3. Read Carl Sagan for one sophisticated argument in support of science as a master discourse.

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