

## The Roles of Women in Murray Leinster's *Med Ship* Stories

### Introduction

The role of women in literature has been a source of constant debate since the early twentieth century. Feminist critics have made a massive contribution to challenging the notion of a received literary canon inscribed by male authors. Simone de Beauvoir proposed a radical approach to the canon, arguing in *The Second Sex* (1949) that women's roles have been socially constructed wholly in relation to men: men are depicted as "the Absolute" while women are "the Other." French critic Hélène Cixous proclaims the possibility of a feminine writing—*écriture féminine*—which would break down the barriers excluding women from public speech. Cixous's argument converges with Jean-Paul Sartre's point of departure when he claims that "the committed writer knows that words are action." From this point of view, we may conclude that the writer has chosen to reveal the world so that the reader "may assume full responsibility before the object which has been laid bare" (12).

### Gender in speculative fiction

This leads to the question: What is the role of women in a forward-looking genre such as science fiction? Gender has been an important theme that has been widely explored in speculative fiction. The genres that make up speculative fiction—science fiction, fantasy, supernatural horror, alternate history, and so forth—have always offered the *opportunity* for writers to explore social conventions, including gender, gender roles, and beliefs about gender. Many writers have chosen to write with little or no questioning of gender roles, instead effectively projecting their own cultural gender roles onto their fictional world. Like all literary forms, the science fiction genre reflects the contemporary ideas and conventions that individual authors were writing, thus grounding those authors' responses in contemporary gender stereotypes and gender roles.

Science fiction has traditionally been viewed as a male-oriented genre and originally had a reputation of being created by men for men (cf. Tuttle). Most of the "stereotypical tropes of science fiction, such as aliens, robots, or superpowers can be employed in such a way as to be metaphors for gender" (Attebery 1). Moreover, many male protagonists of science fiction are reflections of a single, heroic archetype, often having scientific vocations or interests and being "cool, rational, competent," remarkably sexless, "interchangeable and bland" (Kuhn) as long as they serve the role of Joseph Campbell's archetypal hero. On the other hand, the common perception of the role of women in sf has long been dominated by one of two stereotypes: a woman who is evil (villainess) or one who is helpless (damsel in distress).

### The minimal role of women in *Med Ship*

These statements provide an analytic framework for the discussion of the role of women in a specific work. We have chosen to examine Murray Leinster's *Med Ship*. Murray Leinster (1890–1975) was a *nom de plume* of William Fitzgerald Jenkins, an award-winning American writer of science fiction and alternative history, sometimes called "the dean of science fiction." *Med Ship* is a collection of stories written from 1957 to 1966. They are the continuing adventures of Calhoun, a physician with the "Interstellar Medical Service." He travels the galaxy in his own small spaceship with his pet and companion Murgatroyd, visiting planets to try to solve public health issues. Each story is self-contained and tells Calhoun's adventures on a new planet that has a health crisis. Similar to *Medicins Sans Frontières International* (aka Doctors without Borders), IMS volunteers are doctors who travel from world to world with no actual enforcement powers but who are so respected that their advice is never questioned (Grech 6).

All eight stories involve male-dominated worlds and focus exclusively on men. As it was written in the middle of the twentieth century before the rise of second-wave feminism and the Women's Liberation movement, we can fairly safely assume that *Med Ship's* target audience was predominantly male.

All the stories in *Med Ship* rely on a substantial amount of descriptive technical information, which might have driven away contemporary female readers, who had been societally conditioned to be uninterested in science and engineering. This emphasis is shown, for example, in Calhoun's choice for help in disabling a ground-induction field in "Med Ship Man" (1963): He called on a troop of men, "able-bodied and grim-faced men. Two were electronic engineers, as he'd specified.... There were two mechanics and a doctor ..." (Leinster 41).

Women are largely or completely absent from the earliest stories. On "Tallien III" (1963), the reader encounters a mass population of men who are either normal or "paras." While it gives the impression of a heavily populated city with a structural framework of a civilized society, there is no mention of either women or children.

The first female is introduced half way through the third story, "The Mutant Weapon" (1959), and is an emaciated girl: "A girl emerged from the thicket. She was gaunt and thin, yet her garments had once been of admirable quality" (147). The hunger-stricken girl immediately evokes the lingering Victorian image of the sickly girl. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that diseases of maladjustment to the physical and social environment such as anorexia and agoraphobia strike a disproportionate number of women, caused in several ways by patriarchal socialization. This led to an ideal of feminine beauty that was weak and frail.

This image of fragile beauty is perpetuated later in same story as well. The omniscient narrator claims, "There are

people who, because they are physically unattractive, become personalities. All too many girls—and men, too—do not bother to become anything but good to look at” (Leinster 204). It is worth noting here the hesitant claim “—and men, too” which provides a weak and uncertain affirmation of the inclusion of men to be held as objects of desire by society at large.

The girl’s first action—attempting to kill Calhoun from ambush—is the kind of resistance associated with the fight against submissiveness to male dominance and patriarchy. However, only a secondary position is allowed to her, that of an assistant to her medical boyfriend; her boyfriend, in turn, is relegated to help Calhoun, putting her two levels removed from the agency of the hero. Regardless of their intelligence or capabilities, women in *Med Ship* are given inferior positions and scorned for their weaknesses by explicit remarks, innuendos, or worst, by complete omission.

Where women are mentioned in *Med Ship*’s short stories, they are always have a lover and a love story. They never stand alone. In “Ribbon in the Sky” (1957), Leinster portrays three cities that constantly battle each other. They forbid association among cities due to an irrational fear of contagion by a plague. The story revolves around a young girl and a young man dangerously in love in the manner of Romeo and Juliet. “Some young girl must have loved terribly, and some young man been no less impassioned to accept expulsion from society on a world where there was no food except in hydroponic gardens and artificially warmed pastures. It was no less suicide for those who loved” (Leinster 260). These young peoples’ breach of the law condemned them to abandonment by their families and death in the “hotlands.” Only after the girl’s father accepted Calhoun’s rational explanation with regard to the absence of any plague did he allow the marriage and the ensuing intermingling of the cities. The resolution of the situation in marriage echoes the denouement in fairytales and would have been perhaps too tidy for realist novels. But the happy ending of most science fiction books of the era makes the ending of “Ribbon in the Sky”(1957) more welcome and acceptable.

The nurturing role of women predominates in “Grandfather’s Wars” (1957) where girls as a collective group tend to younger children on Canis III, sent from their planet of origin Phaedra because of danger from the instability of the planet’s sun. The girls’ lack of know-how in raising their younger generation is apparent. But what is even more obvious is the naturalization of gender roles assumed in young adults. For the young men, “the instinct of their age group directed them as specifically as successive generations of social insects are directed. They moved about in gangs.... the warrior age group would be capable of immense and admirable skill in handling anything which interested them....” For the young women, “Deep-rooted instincts still worked. Women—young women—and girls appeared still to feel concern for young children which were not even their own” (Leinster 464). The stereotypic, primordial roles of both the girls and the young men occur

again toward the end of the story where the young men “have taken to the woods. They swear they will “never give in!””, while the girls are “fluttering about and beginning to talk about clothes.” When older women arrive, “there’ll be dress making” (Leinster 500).

“Quarantine World” (1966) and “Pariah Planet” (1961) are the only two stories in *Med Ship* which allow women any sort of significant role. The girl in “Quarantine World” (1966) is brought by the narrator into action in a nurturing role. “He saw, with clearing eyes that a figure bent over him. It was a girl with dark brown eyes. She lifted his head and gave him a drink from a cup” (Leinster 387). But she soon turns into a good source of information for Calhoun, describing the situation on her planet in great detail and answering all of his queries. It is the first female role given credence and status thus far in the book. The girl, Elna, provides information to Calhoun regarding the fraught situation between her planet Delhi and Lanke and the predominant and irrational fear of contagion of a plague which exists solely on Delhi, to which the natives seem to be immune. The fact that the girl is even given a name in this story shows her importance.

Elna’s autonomy is, however, sabotaged by Rob, who by physical aggressiveness demonstrates patriarchal domination. “Rob said in icy fury, ‘You’re a woman and I’d have had to hurt you to keep you from interfering. It’s because you’ve been listening to him!’” (Leinster 404). The reader thus witnesses the two competing men, rivals in the bigger picture—the situation on Delhi and Calhoun’s determination to resolve it. Calhoun here mirrors the single heroic archetype—cool, rational, competent, and victorious. “He drew the pocket-blaster from under his robe” (Leinster 405).

The last story, “Pariah Planet” (1961), is only the second to give women any recognition, and it provides a welcome exception from the stereotypic role of nurturing and love. Maril is intelligent, quick to learn, and a good assistant to Calhoun. But Maril is still regarded as any man’s inferior, even by Calhoun himself. Given his instance on being in control in every situation, Calhoun will not relinquish control here. His patronizing streak may even go unnoticed by his audience. “Good girl!” he said approvingly. “I’ll give this back to you when we land” (Leinster 536), he declared when she tried to steal his blaster from him.

Maril’s resilience and refusal to talk makes her antithetical to the stereotypical chattering woman. Calhoun has to reach his own conclusions regarding the girl’s past. Her continuing resistance against Calhoun’s subordination leads her to escape once they land on Dara—an idiotic move which almost leads to her death. Once again, the reader recognizes the archetypal hero in Calhoun, who saves his conquest from an animal stampede out of sheer luck. Moments later, he rescued her again when three Dara men open fire on them. “He jerked the girl Maril to her feet and rushed her toward the *Med Ship*. Smoke from the flung bomb upwind barely swirled around him and missed Maril altogether” (553). The innuendos about the inferiority of women reach their climax with a derogatory comment from the narrator: “He was a professional man. In his profession he was not incompetent.

But there is no profession in which a really competent man tries to understand woman" (564).

The inferiority to which the book assigns women is further pronounced when Calhoun decides to train two groups of pilots to steal spaceships filled with provisions floating in orbit and navigate them back to their home planet. Maril hovers in servitude on *Med Ship*, a menial role relegated to the inferior gender—the “Other.” The heroic role is appropriated by the “Absolute” males. When Maril expresses her wish to pilot a ship, Calhoun answers, “You wouldn’t want to be a heroine. No normal girl does.” Calhoun goes further, saying her boyfriend “wouldn’t feel comfortable with a girl who’d helped make starving unnecessary. He’d admire you politely, but he’d never marry you. And you know it” (594).

### Discussion

The study of women in science fiction in the last decades of the twentieth century has been driven in part by the feminist and gay liberation movements and has included strands of the variously related movements such as gender studies and queer theory. The portrayal of women, or, more broadly, the portrayal of gender in science fiction, has fluctuated throughout the genre’s history. Some writers and artists have challenged their society’s gender norms in their work. Others have not. Written before the second wave of the feminist movement, *Med Ship* does not challenge role expectations. It affirms Garber and Paleo’s statement that “female characters were only occasionally included in science fiction pulp stories” (viii). Their inclusion only reinforces their status quo of submissiveness, deemed as the “Other” by the male “Absolute” who subscribe to it, in this case the hero Calhoun and even the omniscient narrator.

Murray Leinster was a pioneer in this genre and successfully established the subgenre of the “science fiction doctor story” (Flint and Gordon). However, through his treatment of women’s roles, he followed contemporary, conventional ideas. The common tropes of love and nurture are predominant in the few instances where women appear. There is an implicit consensus throughout *Med Ship*’s narrative of a male supremacy across various planets, while women are repeatedly cast as weaklings to be ignored. The patriarchal stronghold was still unshakeable until the late twentieth century, and men both in literature and in society were still enjoying the patriarchal domination and the inherent advantages which such rule brings along. The Victorian image of the female role as wife, mother, and housekeeper, although challenged, was perpetuated into modernism and other related genres.

After the 1970s, science fiction saw a dramatic change. The field started to pay more attention to women as fans, as professional writers, and as sf characters. In 1974, Pamela Sargent published an influential anthology, *Women of Wonder: Science Fiction Stories by Women, about Women*, the first of many anthologies that

focused on women or gender roles. Additionally, writers concerned with feminism and gender roles sprang up, leading to a genre of feminist science fiction including notably Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (1978), Samuel R. Delany’s *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976), and Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). These authors began to explore science fiction as an alternative to the realism and realist conventions espoused by many feminists. Since the 1970s feminist writers and critics such as Russ and Ursula K. Le Guin have commented on Western patriarchal capitalism through science fiction. At the same time feminist critics such as Donna Haraway hailed feminist science fiction as one of the most productive sites for imagining better “social arrangements and theorizing our way out of a constructing humanism” (Jessert). Russ cautiously embraces science and technology as a place for feminist interventions in patriarchal capitalism.

Reading through this collection, it becomes clear that feminism was unwelcome in the center of the science fiction field, and that any advances had to occur around the margins of patriarchal rule before it could gain entrance and legitimacy. Such entry from a marginalized position parallels other attempts by women writers into male-dominated genres and has come full circle. Leinster’s collection, for all its virtues as science fiction, shows both the difficulty of the task await feminist writers and the necessity of their work. ▲

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