“Fault”

Love, sex and women in science fiction

In this chapter I trace a recurring debate within the letters and articles of science fiction magazines about whether women, love and sex have a place in science fiction. The letters I discuss in this chapter were published between the 1920s and the early 1950s. The articles I examine were published between 1955 and 1975. The battle of the sexes was played out in the debates in these letters and articles as explicitly as it was in the stories I examined in the last two chapters.

One set of arguments that is articulated within these debates clearly demarcates a division between public and private, where the public becomes the masculine space of science fiction from which women are excluded. In this division, intelligence (the mind) is located within the field of science fiction and is thus associated with men, and sex (the body) is relegated to the private sphere of women outside science fiction. This imaginary masculine space of science fiction is conjured up within the pages of science fiction magazines. John W. Campbell, the extremely influential editor of Astounding:

wrote long chatty editorials...that had the style of an after-dinner speaker at the Elks Club. When he previewed van Vogt’s Sial, he wrote, “Gentlemen, it’s a hulu!” (Carr 1975: 5).

To keep this imaginary space masculine and populated only by ‘real’ men the borders of the field have to be policed and women have to be excluded.

As I outlined in chapter two, the idea of the science fiction reader and fan as a superior kind of being, a slan, whose intelligence and knowledge puts him (I use the pronoun deliberately) head and shoulders ahead of the general public, had considerable currency. This scientifically interested, mostly young male should not be thinking about sex. Sex and the libidinal body are outside the
realm of science and therefore of science fiction. If he is not thinking about sex, then he is not thinking about women. This idea that sex is contaminating, even draining of a man’s masculinity is very similar to the highly influential classical idea that when a man ejaculates he loses some of his strength and virility:

[the most virile man was the man who had kept most of his vital spirit - the one, that is, who lost little or no seed (Brown 1988: 19).]

These ideas about virility, masculinity and celibacy are borne out in Thomas S. Gardner’s “The Last Woman” (1932) which I discussed in chapter three. In this story the notion that sex is outside the realm of science is pushed to its logical conclusion. Without women and sex the new scientific empire is dominated by virile strong men proving Soranus’ claim of many centuries earlier, that “[m]en who remain chaste are stronger and better than others and pass their lives in better health” (qtd. in Brown 1988: 19).

The slide from ‘sex’ to ‘women’ also occurs in the debates in letters and articles in prozines. These debates shift from being about whether there is a place for sex and love in science fiction, to whether there is any place for women in science fiction. In the battle of the sexes stories which I discussed in the previous chapter there is a definite place for women because the stories are about the relationship between men and women. In other science fiction the presence of women becomes tenuous. A woman can only signify within science fiction when she is the ‘love interest’ and thus part of the heterosexual economy.

This conflation of woman, sex and/or love is vividly illustrated by the entry for ‘sex’ in The Fancyclopedia which appears on the next page. Women here are synonymous with sex, existing momentarily as independent ‘fannes’ before becoming secondary fans, part of fandom only as sweetheart, wife, daughter and so forth of some male fan, some “Joe Fann”.

2 In 1952 the letter writers to Thrilling Wonder Stories take it for granted that there are many more than 20 female fans but the notion that these female fans are only there for the pleasure and convenience of
sex. The great majority of fans are males. It has been asserted that a female cannot be the psychological type of the S.F. fan, but there are several dyed-in-the-wool fans to refute this. In addition, there are a lot of sweethearts, wives, daughters, sisters, etc., of the ex-fans, who tag along at fan gatherings, make some appearance in the fanzines, and assist in dirty work such as mimeographing.

It is generally believed that Joel Sann is considerably later than average in associating with girls; at any rate, it was some two years after 1938 (when the average fan was 18) before any affair received any great notice in fan discussions. The same had been some isolated criticism earlier, especially among the Futurians and the Skiffleiners. Since 1940, both generalizations and particulars on fan-meets have appeared frequently in conversation and writing, and among the more "mature" Britshers have sometimes reached shocking depths. In America, a minority has been vociferously loud, and some shady events have resulted from infidelity of married scientifictionists.

The entry on sex from the Fancyclopedia 1944, p. 78.
rather girls, become something that "Joe Fann" does or does not associate with as he discovers the wonderful world of heterosexuality. The Fancyclopedia entry on sex sets up two different meanings for sex. In the first meaning, sex is the category of sex, but it is only women which have a sex. Men are the unmarked sex, they are human, the norm, the standard. In the second sense, women are sex in that they are the embodiment of the libidinal body. This is why the second paragraph of the definition of sex is about heterosexual sexuality and about fan meeting femme. The unmarked fan is always male. It is also why more than twenty years later, Robin White can ask "Are Femme-Fans Human?" (White 1968: 51). This conflation between the category of sex, and sex in the sense of sexuality, occurs frequently in the debates about women as love interest within science fiction.

The longstanding idea that women are inimical to science fiction did not go unchallenged. For example, Peggy Kaye of Dorchester, Massachusetts writes:

What gives with these characters who don't want to have any female interest or illus [sic] in the stories they read? Are they trying to convince themselves that men are the only beings really important in this existence? Or do they take that reference to MAN as the only intelligent species on earth literally - meaning MAN and not WOMAN too?

If that is the case, no wonder it shakes them down to their poor misguided little souls when they read a story in which the hero finds himself romantically inclined towards a desirable (horrors!) heroine. Maybe they'd like it better if the guy were a eunuch, h'mm? 3 (Startling Stories July 1952: 130).

---

male fans is still current and is made explicit in a debate about whether there are any beautiful femme fans? Earl T. Parris of Seattle, Washington responds to earlier letters:

I've been patiently reading of this argument concerning beautiful girls in fandom but my patience is at an end. Mr. Vick, can you give a clear, concise definition of beauty? Be rather hard to do since beauty is largely a matter of opinion. And you must really get around because obviously you've met all of the lady fans to know there are no beautiful ones (Thrilling Wonder Stories October 1952: 139).

Another letter from Joe Gibson of Jersey City, New Jersey lists, by name, femme fans who are beautiful (Thrilling Wonder Stories April 1953: 144). This debate nicely shows an example of the kind of attitude to women in fandom which Jeanne Gomoll mentions in her "Open Letter to Joanna Russ":

...I sat in the audience at all-male "fandom of the 70s" panels (and so far, that was the way the panels I've witnessed have been filled, by men only) and don't hear anything of the politics, the changes, the roles that women played in that decade (except sometimes, a little chortling aside about how it is easier now to get a date with a female fan) (Gomoll 1986:87-89).

3 Her reference to eunuchs is particularly apt as during the classical period:

[The full-grown man who made himself a eunuch by carefully tying his testicles, became an asperos, a man who wasted no vital fire on others (Brown 1988: 19).

And was therefore more masculine and purer than other men.]
During the 1950s more letters, editorials and articles in favour of the presence of sex, and therefore of women, within science fiction began to appear. Often this is couched in terms of the need for science fiction to grow up, to mature. Desire for sex and for women is a sign of adulthood and once science fiction has grown it will move beyond the childish need to repudiate sex. Women in this argument become a kind of angel of the house who is responsible for supporting and nurturing the field and allowing it to grow.

**Girl Germs: Love and Sex as Pollution**

One of the reasons most frequently given for a lack of female characters in early science fiction is that there was rarely any need for a love interest. Sam Moskowitz explains:

> [w]hile love interest is a standard ingredient in most fiction, the same editors who give lip service to the need for more natural dialogue and clear-cut characterisation fail even to note the omission of romance when evaluating the acceptability of science fiction. Stories in which female characters appear at all [his emphasis] are in the minority in the magazines of prophetic literature (Moskowitz 1972: 1).

Notice the slide here from “love interest” to “romance” to “female characters.” Moskowitz is implying that female characters can only appear in science fiction where ‘love interest’ and ‘romance’ are present. The romance narrative is, in this argument, one of the few narratives in which ‘woman’ can signify and be a meaningful subject.

This equation between women and the love interest is regularly played out in the letters that were published in the pulps. A typical example is by Edwin Todd of Parkville, Missouri. He writes of Don A. Stuart’s “The Cloak of Aesir”:

> [a]nother point in this story was the treatment of the love interest. It was never forced artificially into the scene. Too many stories throw a girl into the picture whether she has any logical reason for being there or not (Astounding Science Fiction May 1939: 159).

---

4 Don A. Stuart was the pseudonym of John Campbell, the editor of Astounding. “The Cloak of Aesir” was a battle of the sexes story.
As in the quotation from Sam Moskowitz, the slide from "love interest" to "girl" is unremarked and the only "logical reason" for a girl being in a story is to function as "love interest". The girl does not find her own way into the story. She is "thrown" in. This is a similar structure to the one I discussed in chapter three where the heroine is the Medium of her transformation by a man into a woman. The figure of a woman (more often a girl) being thrown or dragged into the narrative recurs in many of these letters.

This anxiety to keep the whole discourse of romance out of science fiction (talk about the impossible dream!) is a long-running one in science fiction. The idea of romance, and therefore women, polluting science fiction begins almost immediately in the pulps. Love was not what Gernsback had in mind for the pages of Amazing Stories. Not all readers of Gernsback’s magazines were happy with this separation between science and sex and love. Thomas Coffin of Whittier, California, writes:

Why do authors not make a love plot more evident and important? It seems that such a plot could very easily be woven into nearly all the stories, and, instead of distracting the reader from the real plot, it would only heighten his interest and make him feel the stories were more true to life. True, many stories have love plots, but they seem so lifeless, and all have such an abrupt ending that it takes away all romance from the story (Amazing Stories July 1928: 373).

Love, here, is a mark of realism and will add to the "real" plot which is that generated by the discourse of science. Gernsback responds:

Writing stories based on science does seem to have the tendency to cause the authors to put aside the love feature as an element therein. We presume that if our stories are to be scientific, this love element will be missing in most of them. The scientific features to a certain extent operate to exclude every day romance (Amazing Stories July 1928: 373).

Although he modifies his statement with "seem", "presume" and "to a certain extent" the inference is clear: the hard, virile space of science operates to expel romance and thus women.

Another reader who was not averse to a love interest was Mrs. Helen Ammons of Chicago, Illinois:

You know, Mr. Editor, that you have quite a number of woman readers and, although I cannot speak for all of them, still I can and do speak for a large group of them in Chicago. We eagerly read science fiction stories, but we like our stories to be flavored with the sugar of a good love element. Not too much sugar - you understand. We don’t want
them gooey; just enough to give them interest (Science Wonder Stories November 1929: 567).

She understands that “a good love element” is bad for her, rots the teeth, and so will settle for just a little. However, in the same issue C. R. Paratico of Brazil makes four suggestions for improving the magazine. The last one is that there be no sugar at all:

(a) Refrain as much as possible, from reprinting stories by popular authors, who are widely known.
(b) Avoid the more glaring improbabilities.
(c) Read the stories yourself, and cut out such parts as would tend to give your readers false knowledge of scientific facts.
(d) Remember that love interest can only enter these stories if it is dragged in by the hair (Science Wonder Stories November 1929: 669).

Once again the love interest is “dragged in” this time “by the hair”. However, “love interest” is dragged into science fiction stories by an unnamed agent. The violence is actually being done to the love interest/woman and yet the implication is that it is she who is corrupting science fiction. This is reminiscent of Nina Puren’s arguments about the grammar of the rape trial where the woman who is raped is made responsible for that rape, “Her beauty made him go crazy” (Puren 1995: 18). In this case her presence in the science fiction field is destroying that field.

Not only was romance inimical to science fiction but so also was “sex-type literature”. In his editorial, “Fiction Versus Facts”, Gernsback quotes one of his authors, Mr G Peyton Wertenbaker:

Amazing Stories should appeal, however to quite a different public (referring to the sex-type of literature). Scientifiction is a branch of literature which requires more intelligence and even more aesthetic sense than is possessed by the sex-type reading public (Gernsback July 1926: 291).

Sex is nasty and brutish and anyone with an aesthetic sense would choose not to read “sex-type” literature. These superior types are drawn to science fiction. In fact, Wertenbaker defines “scientifiction” as a branch of literature in opposition to the “sex-type literature”. Gernsback was more direct about this in his editorial for the first issue of Science Wonder Stories:

The past decade has seen the ascendancy of “sexy” literature, of the self-confession type as well as the avalanche of modern detective stories (Gernsback June 1929: 5).
The June 1940 cover of Spicy Mystery.
This literature will not contaminate Gernsback’s new magazine:

**SCIENCE WONDER STORIES** are clean, CLEAN from beginning to end. They stimulate only one thing - the IMAGINATION (Gernsback June 1929: 5).

Science Wonder Stories frees the mind from the body, stimulating the one while leaving the other alone. By the 1930s the “spicies”, pulp magazines which emphasised stimulating the libido, had emerged. They had names like *Spicy Mystery, Spicy Western Stories* and *Spicy Detective Stories* and lurid covers to match, as the example opposite demonstrates. Many at the time worried about the effect the spicies would have on science fiction. In 1938, the publisher, Martin Goodman, and the editor, Robert Ersiman, decided that their new magazine, *Marvel Science Stories* would give sf “a new direction” by making it “more spicy” (Ashley 1975: 36).

Goodman and Ersiman asked sf writer Henry Kuttner to add some spicy scenes to his stories. In the first issue he had three stories - one under his own name, Henry Kuttner, and two under the pen names, James Hall and Robert O. Kenyon. All three stories were strongly criticised (Ashley 1975: 36). According to Susan Wood the first three issues which “offered the fans sex and sadomasochism with their SF....proved unpopular” (Wood 1978-79: 12). Lester del Rey writes that

*Marvel got off to a wrong foot with readers by featuring a lead story by Henry Kuttner which was considered somewhat sexy in its time. The publishers had decided that sex should increase its interest, but they soon found that it turned the readers off...The magazine never quite lived down that feeling* (del Rey 1979: 122)

Many letter writers in *Marvel* advocate that the magazine abandon its ‘spiciness’. Any change they detected in that direction was applauded. Bill Brudy of Wolverine, Michigan writes:

*It is gratifying to see the magazine sticking to good taste. The first issue tottered dangerously. Sex can only ruin science fiction. No class of pulp publications has higher standards than fantasy fiction and the reading public will keep them that way* (*Marvel Science Stories* August 1939: 108).

In the same issue George Aylesworth of Mackinaw City, Michigan agrees with Bill Brudy:
Four issues of *Marvel* now repose in my files and on reading through them I note the rapid improvement "our" mag has made. At first, it is true the mag had a spicy atmosphere but now it seems to have thrown that off (*Marvel Science Stories* August 1939: 119).

An example of the kind of spicy material *Marvel* published is "Lust Rides the Roller Coaster" by Ray King,⁵ from the December 1939 issue. "Lust" is about a young man whose ex-mistress vows to destroy him. This is one of the 'spicy' passages:

> Those long evenings - they had seemed so exciting when she danced for him, stripped to almost the last tiny transparent garment, and he had snatched her to him hungrily, devouring her with his hot lips and breathless passion (King 1939: 72).

After some supernatural occurrences involving a roller coaster, the hero discovers that he is better off with a nice girl than his evil ex-mistress. The story was not popular with fans.

**Prozine covers**

Much of the debate about sex in science fiction was focussed on the covers of the magazines. Sex was located in representations of women on the front covers of the sf magazines but not, on the whole, in representations of men. Indeed, this was the most obvious way in which women were present in science fiction during the period from 1926 to the late 1950s. Initially the covers of most science fiction magazines were not dominated by naked or scantily clad women. Although the covers of *Amazing Stories* during the 1920s did include representations of women, and some of them wore considerably less clothing than men on the covers, the women were not the focus of attention. An example appears on the opposite page. However by the 1930s the representation of women on the covers was becoming increasingly genitaly focussed and particularly obsessed with breasts. On many covers the women were the overwhelming focus of attention.⁶ These women were always white. The cover opposite is a typical example.

---

⁵ He wrote more prolifically under the name Ray Cummings. His full name was Raymond King Cummings.

⁶ It is easy to dismiss these covers as exploitative of women but more complex readings are available. See for instance Robin Roberts (*Roberts 1993: 40-65*).
The cover of the October 1939 issue of Astounding Science Fiction illustrating E. E. “Doc” Smith’s “Grey Lensman”. The cover is by Rogers.
In the debates about these covers, sex comes to stand for women’s bodies and vice versa. When covers focus on female physical embodiment there are complaints about the cover being too sexy or spicy. The following letter from G. E. Rennison of Blackburn, England illustrates:

[though well drawn, they [the covers] represent what is the drags of sfn.-sex appeal. Why must you plaster the covers with half nude women? Though easy on the eyes, they do not suit sfn....Sure a Nice woman will do NOW AND AGAIN, but put some clothes on ’em. Don’t get me wrong, I like pictures of half (?) nude women but not in sfn. mags (Planet Stories Spring 1942: 121).

However, when the cover features a muscular male figure there are no such comments. For instance, the cover of the October 1939 Astounding by Rogers, reproduced opposite, features the hero Kimball Kinnison of the immensely popular Lensmen series. He looks like the epitome of fascist chic in silver grey uniform with well-defined muscles, grim expression, and chiselled jaw. This cover generated an overwhelmingly enthusiastic response. Ray Bradbury wrote in to Astounding to say that:

[i]f you could have been at the Thursday meeting of the Los Angeles Science-Fiction League you would have heard a chorus of excited oh’s and ah’s echo far into the night as Forrest J. Ackerman produced the October issue of Astounding. It is, undoubtedly the best cover of the year...Kimball Kinnison as coverized is enough to make Atlas melt away into his original ninety-seven pounds (Astounding December 1939: 101).

Covers which emphasised a woman’s physicality in this way rarely generated that kind of adulation. Magazines with scantily clad women on the cover were discussed in terms of whether their ‘sexiness’ was a good or a bad thing. Robert ‘Buck’ Coulson of Wabash, Indiana, writes that “your covers all look alike, and they are all definitely second-rate” (Future August 1958: 126). Future’s covers in the 1950s frequently featured representations of women. The cover reproduced at the beginning of this chapter is typical. Robert Ebert of Urbana, Illinois, writes:

Buck Coulson has a lot of truth in his statement about your covers; you seem to be in a sort of rut. You’ve had a girl on the cover of the last five issues -this may have been ok for TWS [Thrilling Wonder Stories], but not for good ol’ Future.
Don’t feel too badly - Infinity has had girls on all but one of its seventeen covers! Astounding has had one girl in the last twenty-seven issues, and she was a scientist with a turtle-neck sweater and a jacket on (Future December 1958: 115).
The cover of the February 1957 issue of Astounding Science Fiction illustrating H Beam Piper's "Omnilingual". The cover is by Freas.
Astounding was the leading science fiction magazine at the time. That Astounding has had so few 'girls' grace its cover is an indication of the magazine's superiority. The one girl who was represented on the cover was not just a girl, but a scientist, and a fully clothed one at that. This cover by Freas for the February 1957 issue is shown on the opposite page. It illustrates the story "Omnilingual" by H. Beam Piper. The story's protagonist is a linguist, Martha Dane, and it is she who is illustrated on the cover: forehead creased in concentration pouring over various texts, pen in one hand and her other hand held to her temple as though thinking. She is not stereotypically beautiful and her breasts are not noticeable. It is an unusual cover for the time as is the story.

The turtle-neck sweater and the status of scientist mean that she has ceased to signify sex. Her presence on the cover does not sully science fiction. In a sense she is no longer a girl in the same way that the girls who grace the covers of Future and Infinity magazine are. This is an image of a woman who has not been incorporated into the heterosexual order in the same way that the heroines of the stories I examined in chapter three were. Oddly enough, in the imaginary pure sphere of masculine science fiction, there is a small space for the woman who can exist outside heterosexuality as a not-real woman of a particular kind - the honorary man.

I discovered some letters by women demanding more men as sex object. Evelyn Catoe of Brunswick, New Jersey wanted to have covers where men signified 'sex':

I will say that I liked the cover on the December issue. It is nice to pick up one of my regular mags and find no girls, just lots of good looking men. Something for my sex at last. I am going to start campaigning for more men on more covers (Thrilling Wonder Stories April 1952: 132).

As well as debating the appropriateness of sex, that is 'desirable' women to the covers, and therefore to science fiction, the unscientific nature of these covers was also discussed. Most particularly images of women in space without the need for any breathing apparatus. The illustration on the next page is a typical example. Marian Cox writes:
The cover of the August 1951 issue of Thrilling Wonder Stories by Earle Borgan.
I suppose we gals should be flattered by the obvious fact that men regard us as such indestructible creatures. According to them, we don’t feel heat or cold and so don’t need space suits. We must manufacture our own oxygen, or else we can exist without breathing at all. (Which is it, fellows?) They still call us the weaker sex, but I’m beginning to wonder (Thrilling Wonder Stories August 1952: 127).

In the same letter Marian Cox agrees with Evelyn Catoe that there should be more sexy men on the covers. This would result in the Kinnison body being acknowledged as an object of sexual desire, rather than simply a projection of what the male fans desired to be. I would argue that the scarcity of male fans expressing approval of representations of male bodies on the covers during the 1950s can be directly attributed to the production of knowledges about, and thus fear of, homosexuality.

The debate about covers did not often conclude that women should be kept off the covers altogether. This, though, was implicit in the argument that sex should be kept off the covers. This conflation is explicit in a letter from B. W. Williams. He is referring to representations of women on the covers as well as in inside illustrations in the magazine: “What’s wrong with sex inside or outside as long as the gal shows expression in her eyes?” (Startling Stories January 1953: 136). This inadvertently funny comment is revealing. 7 Sex is a gal.

The Love Interest Controversy 8

In this section I read closely a thread of letters which appeared in “Brass Tacks”, the letter column of Astounding Science Fiction, in 1938-39. In these letters readers debated whether there was any place for women in science fiction. The readers’ letters illustrate the terms of the debate; namely that science fiction is a masculine space whose borders must be carefully patrolled to keep the pollution of women out.

---

7 The editor, Sam Mines, was unable to keep a straight face:
We’d like to make with the snappy answers to this missive, but we are helpless, having been broken up by one line above, to wit: “What’s wrong with sex inside or outside as long as the gal shows expression in her eyes?” If this doesn’t go down as a classic in the annals of sf we will make a pilgrimage to Mecca (Startling Stories January 1953: 136).

8 The title of this section comes from a letter by L. M. Jensen of Cowley, Wyoming (Astounding Science Fiction January 1939: 162). I discuss this letter later in this section.
Astounding at the time had a reputation for being a technology based magazine with a predominantly, and proudly, male readership. Buck Coulson claims in a letter to Aurora that women have never been suppressed in science fiction and refers to Astounding for evidence of this claim:

in the Good Old Days, Astounding was presumed to be for men only, but the other STF mags used women writers. And even ASF had MacLean, without a male pseudonym (Aurora Winter 1986-87: 5).

Science fiction writer Margaret St. Clair, who began publishing in the 1940s, writes that Astounding “wanted hard-core science only, and the editor there was reputed never to accept a story by a woman if he were aware of her sex” (St Clair 1981: 151).

In the letters concerned with love and science fiction to Astounding’s readers’ column “Brass Tacks”, the term ‘the love interest’ frequently functions doubly. Firstly, it functions as a synonym for ‘women’. Secondly it functions as a space in which the romance discourse can operate within the field of science fiction. If the love interest can be kept out of science fiction, then so too can the discourse of romance. The fear of the love interest in both these senses is part of the delineation of the science fiction field as masculine public space. This is why, in many accounts of the relationship of women to science fiction, the growing presence of women within the field is figured as an invasion. I discuss these accounts in the next chapter.

The main protagonist in this debate is Isaac Asimov of Brooklyn, New York who had three long letters published in contrast to the one or two letters published by the other participants. Asimov was born in January 1920, so at the time of writing he was in his late teens. The only other correspondent for whom I have an age is David McIlwain9 who was exactly a year younger than Asimov. I

---

9 David McIlwain wrote science fiction under the name of Charles Eric Maine. He published his first short story under this pseudonym in his own fanzine in 1938 and began publishing novels in 1955 (Moskowitz 1972: 24-5; Clute & Nicholls 1993: 708). In 1958 he published a battle of the sexes text, World Without Men (a revised version, Alph, was published in 1972).
suspect that most of these misogynist letters are from boys of eighteen or younger.

The role of the love interest and of women in science fiction was a topic dear to Asimov’s heart, and I found letters from him on this subject in Startling Stories and Planet Stories as well as the letters in Astounding. The presence or absence of the love interest was one of his criteria for a good story: he typically condemns a story for having “no plot outside of one that would fit it for some future ‘sci-ent-ii-love magazine’” (Astounding Science Fiction July 1938: 158). Such a genre formed from the cross-pollination of science fiction and romance is for Asimov a patent absurdity.\textsuperscript{10} Asimov writes almost all his letters with tongue planted firmly in cheek. He argues for the sheer pleasure of argument and takes delight in being outrageous and provoking a response, contradicting himself whenever it suits him.

The first letter in the thread comes not from Isaac Asimov, but from a fellow traveller, Donald G. Turnbull of Toronto, Canada. The editor places the letter within the context of the battle of the sexes by giving it the heading, “Misogynist! Bet you hear from Miss Evans!”. Patricia Evans of New York City had had a few letters published in Astounding; none of her letters raised any questions about representation of women. Her name is simply being used as a sign of women in science fiction. Turnbull writes:

In the last six or seven publications females have been dragged into the narratives and as a result the stories have become those of love which have no place in science-fiction. Those who read this magazine do so for the science in it or for the good wholesome free-from women stories which stretch their imaginations.

A woman’s place is not in anything scientific. Of course the odd female now and then invents something useful in the way that every now and then amongst the millions of black crows a white one is found.

I believe, and I think many others are with me, that sentimentality and sex should be disregarded in scientific stories. Yours for more science and less females (Astounding Science Fiction July 1938: 162).

\textsuperscript{10} Such a genre now exists with titles like Anne Avery’s Hidden Heart (1996). The back cover reads: “Heir to the Controllership of the planet Diloran, Tarl is saved by a ravishing stranger with plans to save her people”.


This letter features the, by now familiar, equation of “females” and “love” and “sex” and adds another, “sentimentality”. According to Turnbull, women taint science fiction and only stories which are “free from women” are “good” and “wholesome”. His imaginary space of science fiction is one populated by the asporos - the men who become eunuchs once fully grown - who keep their sacred sperm to themselves. When he is immersed in the field he wants to leave the world of women behind. He is furious when this is not possible and his imaginary space is violated. For although science fiction is located in the public sphere, it is also frequently imagined by Turnbull and others as a private male sphere, much like a men’s club where a fellow can smoke his cigars and drink his port in the company of like-minded men. However, for all their malign influence, these females have no agency. They are dragged into the text by some unknown agent and they are part of the nominalisation “good wholesome free-from women stories”. The only exception is the “odd female [who]...invents something useful”.

Added to Turnbull’s dismissal of women is the implicit racism of his “white crow/ black crow” analogy. Although white women were by no means central in science fiction of the 1920s and 30s, women and men who were not white and middle class were even less visible.

Asimov was one of the “many others [who] are with [Turnbull]” on the question of love in science fiction:

Three rousing cheers for Donald G. Turnbull of Toronto for his valiant attack on those favoring mush. When we want science-fiction, we don’t want swooning dames, and that goes double. You needn’t worry about Miss Evans, Donald, us he-men are for you and if she tries to slap you down, you’ve got an able (I hope) confederate and tried auxiliary right here in the person of yours truly. Come on, men, make yourself heard in favor of less love mixed with our science! (Astounding Science Fiction September 1938: 161).

Turnbull’s depiction of women as unwholesome and having no place in “anything scientific” becomes in Asimov’s text a “valiant attack on those favoring mush”. The list of equivalences for women expands to include, “mush” and “swooning

---

11 This is the same outrage, the same ‘rape’ which Charles Platt discusses in his article, “The Rape of Science Fiction” (1989) which I consider in the next chapter.
12 In the American context there is the added resonance that Jim Crow was a derogatory term for African-American men (Wentworth & Floxner 1960: 291-292).
Down with Love!

Dear Editor:

I just wish to amplify certain vague remarks by Don Q. Turnbull which appeared in the July
Erza Taxel.

"Love interest" has no place in serious science-
fiction—and it should not be necessary to in-
clude it. A good story, by which I mean a well-
written piece of science-fiction based on a sound,
tangential plot, should be in itself sufficient to
grip the reader's attention, without necessitating
the introduction of the sex bogey.

Science-fiction (especially Astounding!) does
not cater to sentimental old maids who like a
bit of "slap" in their literature. Neither does
it cater to love-nick nymphs who attempt to
gain the Elysium of their frustrated desires via
the doorway of books.

Your male readers greatly outnumber your
female fans, so why not cut out the aged-
love idea, and give us newer themes?

The only kind of love in which love interest
is (perhaps) permissible is the humorous one.
When the "mighty emotion" is stripped of its
banality and dressed in the ludicrous garments
of frivolity—it becomes bearable. If you don't
believe me, refer back to the works of S. T. Welkmann—particularly his Van Blandford
series—and laugh.

There are few writers today who can handle
E. I. so effectively.

Congratulations on Brown's wonderful cover,
the best I've seen in years. I liked E. E. Hoa
Hubbard's "Dangerous Dimension" too! Quite
amusing—David McIlwain, 14 Cotswold St.,
Liverpool, England.
dames”. He takes Turnbull’s cry for undiluted, wholesome science which is not “mixed with” love.

Asimov also transforms Turnbull the “misogynist”, with his attack on unwholesome women polluting science fiction, into someone in need of protection, offering to protect him from regular Astounding correspondent Miss Evans. However, it was the editor who invoked Miss Evans’ name and the charge of misogyny against Turnbull. Patricia Evans herself, was silent in the debate and made no attack on Turnbull. Patricia Evans did not join the fray. In a letter in a later issue Evans writes as an aside, “being, after all just a dumb dame”, which could be an ironic response to Turnbull and Asimov (Astounding Science Fiction November 1938: 157). If that is the case, it is the only response she made to the debate about the role of women in science fiction. Or the only one that was published.

In the same November 1938 issue, directly following Evans’ letter is one headed “Down with Love!”, from David McIlwain (who wrote as Charles Eric Maine) of Liverpool, England which is reproduced opposite. McIlwain is not saying there should be no women in science fiction stories but rather that there should be no “love interest” which is likely to attract female readership to science fiction. The binary opposition is still in place: female readers want love, men do not.

The first letter I found which opposed the views of Turnbull and Asimov is by Mary Byers of Springfield. The letter is reproduced over the page. Here Byers tries to counter the equation of the ‘feminine’ and ‘sex’. Women are not sex and therefore they do have a place in science fiction. She implicitly accepts, however, that sex is not good and does not belong in science fiction. She observes that

[un]doubtedly it has never occurred to him [Asimov] to wonder whether the girl fans like the incredible adventures of an almost-ridiculous hero any better than he likes the impossible romance of an equally impossible heroine. He probably still cherishes the outdated theory that a girl’s brain is used expressly to fill up what would otherwise be a vacuum in the cranium (Astounding Science Fiction December 1938: 160).

Byers wants the understanding of the audience to be expanded to account for the fact that there are girl fans as well as boy fans. Byers’ science fiction is not a
In other words, it isn’t what you say, it’s the way you say it.

Dear Editor:

After reading Isaac Asimov’s letter in the September Brain Tacks, I feel the necessity of taking the issue of “wooing dames” up with him.

To begin, he has made the grave error of confusing the feminine interest with the sex theme—for proof of this turn back to the time-honored Shakespeare stories and note well the fact that the presence of Dorothy detracted from the general worth of the story not one bit, then compare one of Kuttner’s pieces of hokum with it, and the distinction will be evident to even the most unobservant reader.

Continuing this biased line of thought, he goes on to express himself as regards much in SF. Undoubtedly it has never occurred to him to wonder whether the girl fans like the incredible adventures of an almost-ridiculous hero any better than he likes the impossible romance of an equally impossible heroine. He probably still cherishes the outdated theory that a girl’s brain is used expressly to fill up what would otherwise be a vacuum in the cranium.

To his plea for less hooey I give my whole-hearted support, but less hooey does not mean less women—it means a difference in the way they are introduced into the story and the part they play. Let Mr. Asimov turn the pages of a good history book and see how many times mankind has held progress back; let him also take note that any changes wrought by women have been more or less permanent, and that these changes were usually made against the prejudice and linguistic arguments of men, and feel himself chastened.

Also, the fact that the female sphere of existence carries over in Donald Trowbell is shows by the inference that he reads H.G. Wells aside from an authority that didn’t exist, Mr. Trowbell is wrong. All famous people are white, accordings to that which reasons that to have invented or done something useful makes a “white crow” of the person. Here is a larger percent of famous men than of famous women—sure, but remember that women haven’t been actually included in the sciences except for the past hundred years or so. Note the number of successful women today, though.

Yours for more like “Who Goes There” and “The Terrestrial Man” and two like “The Legion of Time”—Mary Byers, Chasney Farm, R. V. D. 5, Springfield, Ohio.
masculine space. Mcilwain above has already rejected this argument on the
grounds that there are many fewer girl fans. She also argues that the
representation of males in sf is as absurd as that of women. She could be referring
to the overblown representation of Kimball Kinnison on the cover of the October
1939 Astounding which was so avidly received by male fans.

Byers continues:

To his [Asimov's] plea for less hooey I give my whole-hearted support, but less hooey does
not mean less women; it means a difference in the way they are introduced into the story
and the part they play (Astounding Science Fiction December 1938: 160).

Byers' argument here is almost identical to some of those of Russ (1971), Badami
(1976) and Wood (1978-79) more than thirty years later which I consider in the
next chapter. In the 1970s they argued for more exploration of 'gender roles' and
for more fiction which abandoned stereotyped representations of women.
However these women still have to be "introduced" into the story by someone
else. They still have limited agency.

Byers then switches the argument to changing attitudes to women
generally. Although Byers' challenges Turnbull and Asimov, she accepts one part
of their argument - she agrees that "sex" and "hooey" have no place in science
fiction. She does not, however, read them as synonymous with women.

Another letter by a woman which appeared around the same time makes a
similar argument. Naomi Slimmer of Russell, Kansas wants less 'sex' and
associates it with women but at the same time she wants better representations
of women:

As to the plots of science stories; keep 'em clean. If we wanted to read about "curving
pearl-pink flesh, blushing dimpled cheeks and passionate pulsing buzzems" we could get
a copy of one of the "Spicies." If you have to have a female in the picture, make her
sensible. Let her know a few things about space-ships, heat-guns and such. Phooey on
the huzzies who are always getting their clothes torn off and wailing an amorous eye at
the poor overworked hero. If she's fitten to be in the story, she's gotta be a pard to the
poor guy and give him a hand.

You'd be surprised how many women read magazines of this type. Even the pussy-cats
who go for sticky romances makes a grab for a copy when I'm dealing out magazines to
the patients at our hospital. The nurses read them too, as I said, to keep awake and
think of something besides a cranky patient. So how about giving us females a thought
when you are picking tales for futures issues? We like our men to be nice guys, maybe a
bit bigger and handsomer than our real boy-friends, and our women we want to be nice
guys too, good-looking but not soft. Sensible and good sports. (As we all imagine WE
are) (Science Fiction June 1939: 119-120).
And Simak's got a woman this time!  
Anyway, 1000 years ought to be old enough!

Dear Mr. Campbell,

Having barely survived the bludgeonings of Miss Byars in the December issue, I return un-damaged to the fray.

First, I wish to point out that she herself considers the "sex theme" as unsalted "sublime." She tries to get out of it, though, by bringing in the idea of "feminine interest" and saying that it's not women in themselves, but the way they are handled that causes the whole trouble.

Very well granted! Women are pretty handy creatures! (What would we do without them, snif, snif?) But, how in taxation are you going to enforce a rule that the "feminine interest" must be introduced in an insensitive manner?

There are certain authors (very few) that can handle women with the greatest of ease. The great Weinbaum simply permeated his stories with women and yet I never read a story of his that I didn't enjoy (may his soul rest in peace). E. E. Smith's women are swell, and I find I get along with them. Jack Williamson is pretty good, even when he brings in his godesses. However, that about exhausts the list.

The rest of the authors, while all very good in their way, can't bring the "feminine interest" into a story without getting sloppy. There is an occasional good one ("Blacks O'Leary" is a beautiful case in point) but for every exceptional one there are 5,000 terrible cases. Stories in which the love interest drowns out everything, in which "weeping damsels" are thrown at us willingly.

Noble, too, that many top-notch, grade-A, wonderful, marvelous, etc., authors get along quite well without any women at all. John W. Campbell Jr. himself is the most perfect case in all. At Schaffner, he has very few losses. Clifford D. Simak has none. Ross Rocklynne has none. The list can be extended much further.

The point is whether we can make every author (Smith and Weinbaum or whether we cannot. What do you think? Therefore, let Smith and Williamson keep their women, but for Heaven's sake, let the rest forget about them, party anyway. I am quite after science-fiction.

Of course, we could have women-scientists. Weinbaum wrote of them, so are many others. Unfortunately, instead of having a properly aged, experienced, and scientific woman as a weapon, what do we have? When there is a woman-scientist in the story, the first in fiction, believe me, she is about eighteen and very beautiful and so helpless in the face of danger (Gosh).

Which is another complaint I have against women. They're always getting into trouble and having to be rescued. It's very boring indeed for us men. I should think the women themselves (proud creatures) would be the first to object.

In the third paragraph, Miss Byars wants to know whether I think girls-fans are interested in the adventures of an "almost ridiculous hero." Oh, don't! How about Robert Taylor and Clark Gable? I'll bet all the females were just reading their names in Brass Tacks. Believe me, if they don't go for heroes, what are they doing reading science-fiction? Let them go back to love stories (which never turn up a woman) and they'll find even slap-hapier heroes there.

Furthermore, Miss Byars is very ill-advised in her attempt to bring up the greater influence of women as against men in the course of history. Let me point out that women never affected the world directly. They always grabbed hold of some poor, innocent man, worked their insinuations with him (poor unsophisticated, unsuspecting person that he was) and then affected history through him. Cleopatra, for instance. It was Mark Antony that did the real affecting; Cleopatra, herself, affected only Mark Antony. Same with Pompadour, Catherine de Medici, Theodora and practically all other famous women of history.

But I'll quit now before I create a national vendetta against myself on the part of all female science-fictioners in the United States. (There must be at least twenty of them.)

This answer may be taken as a defense of Donald Turbiold's courageous stand against the accusers of science-fiction as well as a defense of my own stand. I say this because Donald may not find time to answer, and I have promised to defend him against attack with all the power of my good right arm—Isaac Asimov, 174 Winder, Place, Brooklyn, N. Y.
Charles Hornig, the editor of *Science Fiction* responds:

You seem to know your science-fiction as well as most fellows do, and your suggestions are helpful. I'm trying to keep the science in the stories from becoming too heavy, and will not let love interest dominate the tales (*Science Fiction* June 1939: 118-121).

Hornig's patronising reply demonstrates the same surprise at women's interest in science fiction that Gernsback evinced ten years earlier. However he modifies Naomi Slimmer's knowledge of science fiction, she only "seems" to know it well. He also fails to respond to Slimmer's desire to see sensible women who "know a few things about space-ships". Hornig does acknowledge Slimmer's call for less gratuitous romance: it is a call with which he was very familiar.

In the January 1939 issue of *Astounding* L. M. Jensen of Cowley, Wyoming responds to the earlier letters by Asimov, Turnbull, Mcilwain and Byers. He or she also names the debate:

Now, maybe I'm sticking my neck out, but I'm going to put my two cents worth into the Love Interest controversy in Brass Tacks. I won't comment on the subject in general, because I'm not qualified to do so, but I will say that I enjoyed the hearty and wholesome man-and-wife companionship of Dick Seaton and Dorothy -the elfin, half-impudent, half-sacred courtship of Larry and Lakia - the restrained love interest-in "Triplanetary" and "Space-hounds" (*Astounding Science Fiction* January 1939: 162).

Jensen here takes Turnbull's word "wholesome" and reappplies it to refer to the relationship of a man and his wife. Wholesomeness is dependent then on the presence of women not on their absence.

These reversed terms are not acknowledged in Asimov's next letter in the thread which is reproduced on the facing page. He responds to Mary Byers' letter with a very long letter using violent metaphors which firmly situate him within the battle of the sexes. Asimov continues to take up the position of the male under attack, when in fact the debate began with Turnbull's attack on women in science fiction. He begins by saying that although he has "barely survived the bludgeonings of Miss Byers in the December issue, I return undaunted to the fray" (*Astounding Science Fiction* February 1939: 159). The debate itself is a battle and Byers has been attacking him. Asimov's first response to these "bludgeonings" is that Byers' actually agrees with him, "she herself considers the
"HELEN O'LOY"

"Oh," she said. Then: "You're Phil, aren't you? Dave told me about you—that you helped make me."

by Lester del Rey

Title page illustration of Lester del Rey's "Helen O' Loy" by Charles Schneeman, Astounding Science Fiction, December 1938, p. 118.
'sex theme' as unadulterated 'hokum'" (Astounding Science Fiction February 1939: 159).

In his arguments about representation it is the women only whose representation is a site of trouble. They are like radioactive material which has to be "handled" carefully. Byers' attempt to separate that which is represented from the manner of their representation is to Asimov absurd and impossible to enforce. However, "[t]here are certain authors (very few) that can handle women with the greatest of ease." (Astounding Science Fiction February 1939: 159).

The expertise of these writers protects them from contamination from women. Unfortunately, most writers are unable to write about women without having it turn their writing into "slop". The act of bringing in the "feminine interest" is what ruins the stories. Presumably it was the writer who brought the love interest in but this contradiction is not explored. Once again the "swooning damsels" appear in the text against their own volition and are then held responsible for their presence in the text.

Asimov's example of a successful use of a love interest in science fiction is a story in which the love interest is not a woman but a robot. "Helen O'Loy" by Lester del Rey appeared in the December 1938 issue of Astounding. The heroine of the title is a robot created by the hero and his best friend as their version of the perfect woman. Both men fall in love with her. An illustration from the story appears opposite.

The story was very popular with readers and has been reprinted frequently. However the letter immediately following Asimov's, by Charles Johnson of Drexel Hill, Pa, is not full of praise for the story. He refers to the character Helen O'Loy as a "walking, talking, cooking, loving robot" and says that the story is a "bit of drivel" (Astounding Science Fiction February 1939: 160). More than thirty-three years later, Beverley Friend in her article "Virgin Territory: Women and Sex in Science Fiction" writes of the final line of the story, "there was only one Helen O'Loy", that one Helen O'Loy is "[f]rankly, one....too many....- a
walking, talking doll performs better as an android than she could possibly do as a human" (Friend 1972: 49).

Throughout his letter Asimov uses the pronoun ‘we’ to refer to the inhabitants of the space of science fiction. It is self explanatory that this is a space within which women are entirely marginal and that this “we” is masculine.

Asimov also refers to the place of women outside science fiction and how this has not translated to science fiction:

Of course, we could have women-scientists. Madame Curie is immortal, so are many others. Unfortunately, instead of a properly aged resourceful, and scientific woman as a savant, what do we have? When there is a woman-scientist (which is very rare in fiction, believe me) she is about eighteen and very beautiful and oh, so helpless in the face of danger (gr-r-r-r) (Astounding Science Fiction February 1939: 160).

The woman scientist in “the turtle-neck sweater and jacket” on the cover of Astounding is taken out of the realms of the ‘spicy’ by being clothed. Another method of allowing a woman to operate within science fiction without being love interest is for her to be “properly aged” (unlike the young Asimov) and presumably asexual.

Asimov conflates women with the way they are represented in science fiction and then makes them responsible for that representation. There are actually many parallels between Asimov’s criticisms and later feminist critiques of representations of women in science fiction. He is clearly saying that the representations of women in science fiction at the time were, with a few rare exceptions, appalling. However Asimov’s complaint is “against women” rather than against the ways in which they had been represented in science fiction.

Asimov continues his rebuttal of Byers:

In the third paragraph, Miss Byers wants to know whether I think girl-fans are interested in the adventures of an “almost-ridiculous hero.” Oh, don’t I? How about Robert Taylor and Clark Gable? I’ll bet all the females swoon just reading their names in Brass Tacks. Besides, if they don’t go for heroes, what are they doing reading science-fiction?? Let them go back to love stories (which are written by women for women) and they’ll find even slapp-happier heroes there (Astounding Science Fiction February 1939: 160).

Men, “heroes”, no matter how illogical or unbelievable, belong in science fiction. A woman cannot be a hero and therefore does not belong. However, these heroes are also functioning in the space of the love interest. They are a locus for
heterosexual female desire in the same way that the female love interest is a locus for male heterosexual desire. These are desires which Asimov is keen to keep outside science fiction.

Asimov also refutes Byers claim that women have had any affect on history:

Furthermore, Miss Byers is very ill-advised in her attempt to bring up the greater influence of women as against men in the course of history. Let me point out that women never affected the world directly. They always grabbed hold of some poor, innocent man, worked their insidious wiles on him (poor unsophisticated, unsuspecting person that he was) and then affected history through him. Cleopatra, for instance. It was Mark Antony that did the real affecting; Cleopatra, herself, affected only Mark Antony. Same with Pompadour, Catherine de Medici, Theodora and practically all other famous women of history (Astounding Science Fiction February 1939: 160).

Asimov finishes his letter where he began by placing the debate in the sphere of violence between men and women, which is arguably also where romance is located. He talks of a ‘national vendetta against myself on the part of all female science-fictioneers in the United States. (There must be at least twenty of them!)” and terms his actions as “a defence of Donald Turnbull’s courageous stand against the ace menace to science-fiction as well as a defence of my own stand” (Astounding Science Fiction February 1939: 160). The warfare metaphors are back to the fore, this debate is war. Asimov valiantly defends himself against women and all the trappings of romance they bring with them.

In the April 1939 Astounding there are three responses to Asimov’s letter. James Michael Rogers II of Muskogee Oklahoma objects to Asimov’s version of women in history:

Mr. Asimov thinks women of no account in history. Points out that men are the famed leaders. But history is a record of wars and sad oppression. Women are not famous for such things as this. Let men have all credit as rulers in history. But wait - wasn’t there a certain Maid of Orleans? Women are great in other things, too. I am reading what I believe to be the best novel in my experience: “Kristin Lavransdatter” by Sigrid Undset. Don’t give man too much credit for the better things of our world. There are women Dostoeievskys [sic] and Einsteins, but I hope never a woman Napoleon or Hitler! (Astounding Science Fiction April 1939: 159-160).

The second response comes from Mary Evelyn Rogers of the same address in Muskogee Oklahoma who is obviously some relation to James Michael (I suspect they are siblings). Her letter appears over the page. Continuing Asimov’s
We'll say this: the elimination of women would certainly have eliminated history!

Dear Mr. Campbell:

After I read your magazine it was your misfortune that my eye happened to light on the good old typewriter. And once fixed upon that organ of torture, I could not tear it away. It became my obsession, irrevocably to write my reaction of the current Astounding so that all (yes, all!) might read. I must admit that you might not want my comment, that you could probably get along just as well without it, but well, maybe I wanted to see my name in print again. I am, perhaps, I just got mad at Mr. Isaac Asimov's letter.

Any way, I will take into Mr. Asimov first. He says he is against women in science-fiction because the authors do not handle them properly. Mr. Asimov! Is that wise? It would be equally just for the women readers of science-fiction to campaign for the elimination of men in science-fiction because of a few idiotic, imbecile males in science-fiction stories. We do not judge the men or the value of the men in science-fiction by a few blunders, so—why should you? Then, too, pictures of the future would not be complete without women. Or don't you agree that there will be women in the future? I agree with you that the women should be convincing, human creatures. Not goddesses, or silly, stammering fools of sweet sixteen, but honest-to-goodness human creatures. However, that should not put a ban on the entire sex. Nor do I agree that all authors, except Smith and Campbell, give up writing about women. Practice makes perfect, you know, and how are the other writers ever going to learn the right way to write if none of them have the opportunity to experiment. Another fault I find is your contention that women only affected the men who made history. Isn't that the same?

All well, to leave Mr. Asimov for a space—until he answers, at least. I wish to say that I like the new artist, Rogers. No, he isn't related to me (he would probably be the first to deny it), I am not pulling for the family name. It is my sincere opinion that he is good. I think my favorite illustration of the issue was the one illustration, "The Shadow Of The Veil." Jack Williamson's story was good, one of his best stories, I think. The "Lening Round" was excellent. Oh, well, why go on? "Tis sufficient that I didn't find a single story in the magazine to make me disgusted or even mildly resentful. The forecast promises great things, too. I'll be sitting around waiting for the next Astounding to appear on the newstands with feverish impatience—Mary Evelyn Rogers, 2008 Court Street, Muskogee, Oklahoma.

Letter from Mary Evelyn Rogers, Astounding Science Fiction, April 1939, p. 160.
tongue in cheek tone she unpacks Asimov’s conflation of representation with that which is represented and shifts responsibility on to the author:

I agree with you that the women should be convincing, human creatures. Not goddesses or silly, simpering saints of sweet sixteen, but honest-to-goodness human creatures. However that should not put a ban on the entire sex. Nor do I agree that all authors, except Smith and Campbell, give up writing about women. Practice makes perfect, you know, and how are the other writers ever going to learn the right way to handle the female characters if they don’t experiment? (Astounding Science Fiction April 1939: 160).

Her call, like that of Byers, is for better representation of women which allows them to be included in the category of human beings rather then to exist merely as the “love interest”.

Another letter in the April edition to engage with this debate is from Charles M. Jarvis of St Paul, Minnesota. He thinks that “Don Turnbull and Isaac Asimov are creating an issue where one doesn’t exist when they take the stand they do on the ‘female’ subject” (Astounding Science Fiction April 1939: 160-61). Although Jarvis agrees that there is too much mush in science fiction, he believes that as the writing improves “such situations will be handled with more expertness and understanding” (Astounding Science Fiction April 1939: 160-61). He then conflates love with humanity and the love interest becomes the “human interest”:

After all, science-fiction needs “human interest” as much as any other kind of fiction, and the high class of authors that are frequenting the pages of our magazine have the ability to handle their stories wisely and to the best advantage. Love is no more foreign to us than eating, and if a plot needs love to send the hero into the yawning cavity of space...by all means give the poor fellow love and send him out on his adventure (Astounding Science Fiction April 1939: 160-61).

This is a shift in the argument. Byers and Mary Rogers argued that women do belong in science fiction although “hooey” does not and that the two are not the one and the same. Jarvis is arguing that women and love in science fiction are a sign of the maturity of the genre. A grown up man needs a woman and having her is sign of his maturity. Heterosexuality makes the presence of women ubiquitous. Indeed the presence of women is an indication that males in science fiction have matured from their homosocial/sexual adoration of Kimball Kinnison.
Conspiracy!

Dear Mr. Campbell:

It's unfair! It's terribly unfair! It must be a conspiracy!

Do you mean to say you have received no letters upholding my courageous stand against slop? If not, why not? Are the malefish married and afraid to breathe a word lest the little wife lift the rolling pin? Bah! A fine state of affairs! They've beheaded all of them!

To take up the Rogers combination first: To wit, James Michael and Mary Evelyn. I state emphatically that this business of two against one is unsportsmanlike. However, right is on my side, and right always triumphs.

Who says that only men are responsible for war and repression? Yes, I mean you, James Michael. How about Catherine II of Russia? How about Catherine de Medici of France? How about Semiramis of Assyria? How about Queen Elizabeth of England? A sweet let-out. The very Joan of Arc you mention, while an inspired national heroine, was chiefly remarkable in the fact that she led men to slaughter and be slaughtered.

On the other hand, the great philosophers and the great religious leaders of the world—the ones who taught truth and virtue, kindness and justice—were all, all men.

Mary Evelyn talks of a "few blunders" and "practice makes perfect." There have been too many blunders, and the most consistent offenders are those who have had the most practice and who, indeed, make literary (?) capital out of descriptions of lovely damsels and melting slope scenes under the impression that that is what the readers want. I refrain from mentioning names, but no doubt certain ones spring to the mind.

Here I must admit that the months pass by. Astounding offends less and less, though there have been several lapses. The editor, I must say, does not seem to be very fond of slop himself judging from the stories he's written—except "Escape"—and the magazine he's edited.

Charles W. Jarvis says I am creating an issue. That is wrong. The issue exists and is vital. You have but to cast a look toward the outer darkness and see certain magazines which make their living out of purveying slop. This system has invaded art. Itself before this, and symptoms of such an invasion are appearing again. Not serious as yet, but to the keen eye one the less alarming. I have the best interests of art, at heart—believe me—and I assure you that slop is put out merely to cater to a lower class of readers. There is an attempt to increase circulation by attracting certain groups. Very well! They want to make money, so they can have those groups, but they lose other groups far superior in intelligence. In emotional maturity, and sensibility.

Let me state my position clearly. I want no more love interest for the sake of love interest alone. I want love interest, written capable, written clearly, written logically, written indifferently. I want it written by those who can write it. Lastly, since my criticism makes long speeches about realism, let's have realistic love interest and not slop.

Is there anyone who disagrees with the last paragraph? If so, let him speak now or forever hold his peace, and let this be the last word—Isaac Asimov, 174 Windsor Place, Brooklyn, N. Y.
Fred Hurter of Red Rock, Ontario, Canada agrees with Asimov on that “much-battered love-interest question: In a well-written story, love interest is not necessary”, however, “if it is well written and not overdone” then “it is not objectionable”. He also agrees with Asimov about women’s secondary role in history: “I am not saying that many men were not encouraged by their wives, but then again many were hindered” (Astounding Science Fiction June 1939: 118).

In the next issue the ever active and ready pugilist Asimov returns to the fray. The issue also marks his first professional appearance in Astounding with the story “Trends”.

The tenor of this even longer letter is consistent with the earlier letters and demonstrates Asimov’s obvious pleasure in the fight. His letter, headed “Conspiracy!”, is reproduced on the facing page.

In it Asimov is consistent in figuring himself as the one under attack. He is not so consistent, however, in the arguments he makes. His delight in combat and turning out pithy amusing phrases means that consistency is of no consequence. In his previous letter he had argued that women had never “affected the world directly” (Astounding Science Fiction February 1939: 160). In this letter he argues that women have affected the world directly in all number of nefarious ways, citing Catherine II of Russia and Elizabeth I of England as examples.

When Asimov switches back to discussing science fiction. He argues it is in grave danger from the “outer darkness”. This darkness is, presumably the ‘spcies’ and similar magazines. Science fiction is being “invaded” by some kind of disease which exhibits terrible “symptoms”. As I demonstrate in the next chapter, the appearance of women in the field of science fiction is frequently characterised as being an invasion which corrupts the field and drives out those best suited to science fiction, such as the super-intelligent Slan type of sf.

---

5 His first published story, “Marooned off Vesta”, appeared in the March 1939 issue of Amazing.
Of course, there are Lucretia Borgia as well as Nero.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

The Rogers combination desires to answer Mr. Asimov. To begin with, we are not married! And second, he is mistaken when he says that all philosophers and religious leaders were men. Will he condescend to tell us the sex of the following? Mary Baker Eddy (founded the Christian Science Church), Clara Barton (founded the Red Cross), Florence Nightingale (nursing), George Elliot (author), Evangelina Booth (founded Salvation Army). Men who have advanced ideas of the strong over the weak are too numerous to mention, but I will give you a few of the names. Nietzsche formulated the doctrine used to justify then there was Napoleon, Mussolini, and Alexander the Great, whom I am sure the Mr. Asimov admires.

All in all, we find the score about evenly balanced, with women in the majority because of suppression by men. In ancient Rome it was seriously debated as to whether women had souls. In the time of Shakespeare it was considered unpardonable for women to have an education. Witness the fact that women's part on the stage was played by men. Many universities today are closed to women. If men had progressed against such odds—

We thought the current Astounding very good and congratulate the editor on the capture of Plain for next month. The best interior illustrations were Schueman's for "Greater than God. All of the stories were up to their usual high standard and we were perfectly satisfied. And don't you dare give us rough edges!"

—James Michael Rogers II and Mary Evelyn Rogers, 2000 Court Street, Muskogee, Okla.

Letter from Mary Evelyn Rogers and James Michael Rogers II, Astounding Science Fiction, September 1939, p. 97.
enthusiast like Asimov himself who are “far superior in intelligence”. The fascist implications of such an utterance in 1939 are hard to escape.

Asimov demonstrate his own “emotional maturity” in the last two paragraphs of his letter by shifting his position from a complete ban on “love interest” to a demand that the love interest be more “realistic”.

James Michael Rogers II and Mary Evelyn Rogers of Muskogee, Oklahoma write a combined response demonstrating that they are better read but just as capable of making sweeping generalisations. Their letter is reproduced opposite. The Rogers argue that it would have been amazing “if men had progressed against such odds” (Astounding Science Fiction September 1939: 97). These arguments are familiar libertarian feminist arguments of the time. The debate at this point has left behind the issue of women and science fiction for the issue of women and the world. These were issues that were discussed in some fanzines of the period. Six years later the following article appeared in one of the Futurian fanzines:14

FREE AND UNEQUAL

Somewhere in almost any blue print for a more reasonable social and economic order, the proposition of sexual equality is bound to occur. And perhaps rightly so; consideration of human females as inferior beings per se derives from the same emotional and socio-economic base as consideration of the foreigner, or member of an other than the “white” race, or “Christian” faith as inferior per se.

[Where women permitted to develop naturally without the false conditioning of a society which not only regards them as inferior, but refuses to accept them any other way (except under extreme circumstances, and for limited periods of time; already we see hints of the problem of “how to get women out of the war-plants back into the home” arising), the symptoms of inequality and/or “inferiority” would not be forthcoming (Agenbrite of Inwit March 1945: 3-4).

The article equates women’s oppression with other axes of oppression and continues in the same vein.15

Asimov continued to extol the virtues of science fiction without women in other magazines. One of his letters to Startling Stories was published with the heading “Feminine-Less Issue”. I quoted part of this letter in chapter three. Sam

---

14 Asimov was a Futurian though by 1945 he was a much less active member of the group.
15 No author is given. However at the beginning of the fanzine, various Futurians are named as having different responsibilities and J. Bristol Speer is listed as being responsible for sociology.
FEMININE-LESS ISSUE

By Isaac Asimov

There is a great deal of significance, I think, in the fact that the four stories of the September issue of Startling Stories did not contain a single female character. Of course, I would be the last to claim that all females be abolished. Women, when handled in moderation and with extreme delicacy, fit nicely in sentimentation of fiction. However, the September issue goes to prove that good stories can be written even with the total absence of the weaker sex.

There are some fans that claim “human interest” is necessary in SF, since otherwise stories degenerate into uninteresting scientific or semi-scientific potboilers. That is a very correct stand, or would be if it were not that these one-track-minded fans know no other form of human interest than the love interest.

Well, let them read “Bridge to Earth” and tell me what it lacks in possessing a heroine. Where would the story have been improved in having a heroine get caught by the microscope creatures and having the hero rescue her, getting her caught again, having the hero rescue her again, then the hero getting caught and the heroine rescuing him? That always happens when a heroine is brought in (usually by the hero), and if that’s human interest (on any other kind of interest) than I’m a pickled herring.

Three cheers for R. M. Williams for refraining from falling into this morass of hack.

However, Mr. Williams falls into a different error of purely scientific nature, which, since it has been indulged in by various authors ever since the beginnings of SF, it is high time to correct once and for all.

In reducing a man to microscopic size by compressing the spaces between the atoms, you reduce his size all right but you don’t reduce his mass—since all the atoms originally in his body remain unchanged in mass or number. In short, the microscopic hero weighs his full quota of 180 pounds though no bigger than the dot of an i on this page. In such a condition, his density approaches pretty near neutronium, and normal human beings and normal matter (the Earth itself, even) are to him only a rather thick vacuum. When coiled up onto the carpet, for instance, he would stick to the very center of the earth, because nothing on earth can hold up 180 pounds compressed into a microscopic gradation. Of course, a small array of men, all weighing 180 pounds plus a military tank as well, all inside one poor suffering human is just too ridiculous.

It is not to say that I did not enjoy the year. I did, but sometimes I do wish that authors when shrinking or expanding their characters either remember that mass remains unchanged or choose some method other than changing the amount of space between atoms.

—114 Windsor Place, Brooklyn, N. Y.
J. Lundwall in his chapter on "Women, Robots and Peculiarities," quotes this letter as an example of male science fiction writers' attitudes to women (Lundwall 1971: 148). Susan Wood also quotes one sentence from this letter at the beginning of "Women and Science Fiction" (Wood 1978-79: 9). The letter is reproduced on the facing page. Ironically, the issue was not, in fact "feminine-less" at all as the cover reproduced over the page demonstrates. The cover is not based on one of the feminine-less stories Asimov praises but is instead the centrepiece of a competition. Readers are invited to send in stories based on this illustration of women in glass coffins being carried by robots. There is also a letter from Katherine Marcusson of Detroit, Michigan to pollute Asimov's men's only space (Startling Stories November 1939: 109).

**Women on Mars?**

A science fiction controversy in 1955 brought the conflation of woman and love interest, women and sex, and the positioning of all these within the private sphere, to the fore. Joanna Russ refers to this controversy in "The Image of Women in Science Fiction", writing that

> within the memory of living adolescents, John Campbell Jr. proposed that “nice girls” be sent on spaceships as prostitutes because married women would only clutter everything up with washing and babies (Russ [1971] 1974: 55).

It was the astronomer Dr R. S. Richardson⁵ rather than John Campbell who proposed this. In the December 1955 issue of Fantasy and Science Fiction an expanded version of Richardson's article "The Day After We Land on Mars" appeared.⁶ Dr Richardson presents himself as being very forward thinking and permissive about sex. He has considered what would be involved in sending an exploratory party to Mars and his conclusion is that

> space travel may force us to adopt a more realistic attitude toward sex than that which prevails at present. I feel that the men stationed on a planet should be openly

---

⁵ Richardson published science fiction under the name Philip Latham. He wrote popularisations of science under his own name.

⁶ The original version had been published in the Saturday Review on 28 May 1955.
The September 1939 cover of Startling Stories.
accompanied by women to relieve the sexual tensions that develop among healthy normal
males. These women would be of the type which we are accustomed to call “nice girls.”
They would be nice girls before they went to live on Mars. They would be nice girls while
they lived on Mars. And they would be nice girls after they had lived on Mars.
Many will be outraged at the mention of such an idea. They will object that it is
shockingly immoral. But it is “immoral” only when viewed from the standpoint of our
present social reference system (Richardson 1955: 52).

Dr. Richardson’s underlying assumption about women is very similar to those of
Asimov, Turnbull and others who argued that women are not necessary in
science fiction. Women are not human beings, they are not part of Richardson’s
mankind which will colonise Mars.

In the May 1956 issue of Fantasy and Science Fiction, two rebuttals to
Richardson’s article were published.18 The first, “Nice Girls on Mars”, by
Anderson does not question the terms of Richardson’s argument. He just does not
think it will work. Anderson’s objections are as follows:

These nice girls would cost a lot more than their wages....Probably they could also do
housekeeping chores and secretarial work, but the fact remains that every additional
human being you send raises the cost by an astronomical figure.
Quite apart from the expense, though, the nice girls would generate tension and
discord merely by being there....If the idea is to work at all, the girls would have to be
accepted as full-caste members of the expedition; but that acceptance would remove any
psychological barrier to the men’s falling in love with them. Probably several men would
come to love one girl and resent the attention she paid to everyone else (Anderson 1956:
49).

Anderson then considers some alternatives. The first is homosexuality which he
rejects because “we....are so powerfully conditioned against it that it is a quite
impossible ‘answer’”. Next he rejects “husband-and-wife teams” because,

few men show enough forethought to marry women whose own talents and training
fit ideally into the complex jigsaw pattern of organization that will be required. Of these,
many will already have children and thus be kept at home (Anderson 1956: 49-50).

18 In January 1956 The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction published a short story “Ministering
Angels”, by C. S. Lewis in response to Dr. Richardson’s article. In it an exploratory mission has been
sent to Mars, all-male of course. After six months two women arrive on a space ship which the
exploratory party had thought was the next crew sent early to relieve them. The women are volunteers
for “the first unit of the Woman’s Higher Aphrodisio-Therapeutic Humane Organisation (abbreviated
WHAT-HO)” which was set up to relieve the sexual tension that the men on Mars must be experiencing
(Lewis [1953] 1966: 111). One of the women is a prostitute who hasn’t got “the slightest chance of being
picked up in the cheapest quarter of Liverpool or Los Angeles” and the other is a “crank who believes all
that blath about the new ethically” (Lewis [1953] 1966: 112). The poem reproduced over the page was
printed at the end of the Lewis story.

In another story, “Cold Equations” by Paul A. Carter, published in the January 1956 issue of F &
SF but written before Dr. Richardson’s article appeared, the colony on Mars is the last remaining
group of humans when the earth is destroyed. Sexual tension builds up but is eventually resolved by
most of the unattached young women voluntarily becoming prostitutes who call themselves the Free
Companions.
Another solution is to send a “group of, say, 50 men and 50 women, all suitable for the work to be done, and let them figure out their own sleeping arrangements.” Of course, this would cause trouble, as, “some of the girls will be more attractive than other, and the results are obvious” and “[d]isappointed lovers will have small chance to drown their sorrows” (Anderson 1956: 50).

Obviously the only real solution is to send a team of men who can “forego sex, along with numerous other modern conveniences” (Anderson 1956: 50). He concludes that

[i]the question of how we will reach Mars in the first place is a tough one; the matter of feminine companionship and other recreations is relatively minor (Anderson 1956: 52).

The editorial blurb which follows observes that Anderson’s response is

as strictly a male viewpoint as Dr. Richardson himself. But most of the objections from correspondents stemmed from a different attitude - an immediate rejection of the basic male-centred assumptions. And, as is perhaps not surprising in such an audience, this rejection came as frequently from men as from women. The perfect writer to express this - no, not feminist, but merely human point of view is Miriam Allen deFord, who feels, with tart eloquence, that she has “News for Dr. Richardson” (The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction May 1956: 52-3).

Miriam Allen deFord begins her response thus:

I am going to tell Dr. Robert S. Richardson a secret.
Women are not walking sex organs.
They are human beings. They are people, just like men.
“I feel that the men stationed on a planet,” says Dr. Richardson, “should be openly accompanied by women to relieve the sexual tensions that develop among healthy normal males.”

I couldn’t agree with him more - if he would end that sentence at the word “women” (deFord 1956: 53).

Using Simone de Beauvoir as an authority deFord proceeds to point out that all Richardson’s assumptions are based on his notion that woman are not actually people. She finishes by reversing Dr. Richardson’s proposals:

Let us suppose that he had suggested that several hundred young women scientists be sent to Mars, and that “to relieve their sexual tensions” shiploads of “nice boys” be sent to serve them.
The mere thought of such a reversal would undoubtedly horrify him.
Well, that’s the way both women and men emancipated from his atavistic prejudices feel about his extraterrestrial bordello (deFord 1956: 57).

There are many connections between this debate and the earlier one taking place on the pages of “Brass Tacks” in Astounding Science Fiction. They serve to demonstrate just how deeply ingrained the notion of women as “walking sex
The LOVERS

A novel by PHILIP JOSE FARMER

organs” has been in science fiction. These debates also demonstrate that feminism was a part of the debate around the ‘woman question’ in science fiction long before the publication of articles like Joanna Russ’ “The Image of Women in Science Fiction” (1971). Despite the claim in the editorial blurb that deFord’s positioning is a humanist one rather than a feminist one, it seems to me that her response is explicitly feminist. As I have demonstrated, arguments about woman’s place and their representation in science fiction have a long history in the field.

**Women, Sex and Science Fiction 1960-1975**

The idea that science fiction had always ignored sex and that this had retarded its growth, dominates the texts I examine in this section. In 1960, Kingsley Amis published *New Maps of Hell* which was billed on its cover as the “book that made science fiction grow up”. In it he criticises the lack of speculation about sex:

> science fiction is a literature in which specific sexual interest of the kind familiar to us from other literatures, manifested in terms of interplay between individual characters, is rare, conventional, and thin (Amis 1960: 74).

Philip Jose Farmer’s first story, “The Lovers” (1952), is often claimed as one of those “rare” examples. The title page illustration appears on the facing page. The story concerns a sexual relationship between a human and a *lalitha*. *Lalithas* are parasitic insectoids who are more perfect than human woman because they devote themselves to men and have perky breasts:

> He suspected that she either had an extra set of pectoral muscles or else an extraordinarily well-developed normal set. Her large and cone-shaped breasts did not sag. They were high and firm and pointed slightly upwards: the ideal of feminine beauty so often portrayed through the ages by male sculptors and painters and so seldom existing in nature (Farmer 1952: 49).

The *lalithas’* only flaw is that they die if they get pregnant because their young eat their way out of their mother’s body. Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin write that Philip Jose Farmer was “a pioneer in changing” science fiction. They argue that in “The Lovers” Farmer uses his “great skill” to make “this
potentially repulsive story... a moving study of the development of love" (Scholes & Rabkin 1977: 185-186).

"The Lovers" notwithstanding, the charge that sf avoided sex was made frequently during this period. P. Schuyler Miller responds to this charge in his book review column in the April 1961 issue of Analog (formerly Astounding). He writes that:

[one of the principal accusations made by intellectuals in general and high-literary critics in particular is that science fiction has an unrealistic attitude toward sex, and in most cases, no attitude at all. In judging this criticism, I think that we can assume that what our detractors would like to see is something like Tennessee Williams' ever-so-adult probing into psychopathology, and not a science fictional equivalent of the current school sex-and-bloodshed private-eye mysteries, so beautifully self-parodied in Henry Kane's Pyramid paperback, "Private Eyeful".

... Before dissecting a few of the current crop, let's take one more look at the science-fiction field in general, and ask ourselves: "should the best science fiction be sex-centered?"

... Overt sex is simply out of place in a large part of science fiction, and its absence is realism (Miller 1961: 167).

Here again is the notion that the intellectualty of science fiction perforce keeps sex and the body out of the picture. However, Miller is not so rigid in his proscription; there is a place where sex belongs in science fiction:

But mankind is by no means sexless, or he wouldn't be here, nor will he be in the future, unless certain science fiction becomes reality. So where does sex belong in science fiction:

In the first place, it can be treated maturely, casually, and incidentally to a story of the problems of real people in a real science-fictional situation, without "lookit me" exhibitionism or slavering. The best of this kind that we've had in the last year was in two Pyramid books of Judith Merril's Out of Bounds and The Tomorrow People. This is what I'm thinking of when I agree with the critics that sex isn't properly treated in science fiction - but I suspect some of the most outspoken critics are thinking more in terms of Tennessee Williams than Judith Merrill (Miller 1961: 167-68).

In many of these discussions sex is a code word. However it is not entirely clear what it is a code word for. Is Miller talking about the act of sex? About sex roles? One of the books Miller goes on to discuss is Theodore Sturgeon's Venus Plus X which I examined in detail in chapter four, "Painwise".

When Joanna Russ' article "The Image of Women in Science Fiction" was reprinted in Vertex in 1974 it occasioned a great deal of hostility. One of the offended voices was that of science fiction writer Poul Anderson. 19 The nearly

19 I briefly discussed Poul Anderson's Amazon Planet (1957) in chapter four.
twenty years separating his participation in the "Nice Girls on Mars" debate from his response to Russ show that his world view had shifted very little. In his article entitled "Reply to a Lady", also published in Vertex, Anderson tries to refute Russ' charge that there are no real women in science fiction by listing examples from science fiction of "formidable" women and of women "hold[ing] down difficult, responsible, sometimes dangerous jobs" and being their "husband's able partner", and also by agreeing with her charge and explaining that, as Isaac Asimov did in the late thirties,

in what is probably the bulk of cases, women have not been relevant.

No insult whatever is meant. I simply point out that the stories have not been concerned with the relationship of the sexes. They've treated subjects like expeditions to distant planets, oceanographic engineering, the politics of civilisation on a galactic scale. One can only get so much into a given wordage; and in the early days, book-length science fiction was not common. Besides, even in a novel, it isn't practical to play Dostoyevsky. That's better done in the 'mainstream' format.

Why should Hal Clement's Mission of Gravity, say, bring in a love interest? Its fascination lies in the depiction of an alien world and alien beings thereon...

Granted for the purposes of that tale they could as well have been women as men; or both sexes might have been present, casually mingling. But it didn't happen that way, and to suppose that it didn't happen because of prejudice on the author's part is nonsensical, especially since women play active roles in other works of his.

It should be remarked in fairness that I don't know if Ms. Russ has ever cited this particular book. But Mission of Gravity does go to show that the frequent absence of women characters has no great significance, perhaps none whatsoever.

Certain writers, Isaac Asimov and Arthur Clarke doubtless the most distinguished, seldom pick themes which inherently call for women to take a lead role. This merely shows they prefer cerebral plots, not that they are anti-feminist (Anderson 1974: 8 & 99).

Anderson's response to Russ would have been equally at home in "Brass Tacks" in 1938 writing in support of Don Turnbull or Isaac Asimov.

Philip K. Dick also responds to Russ' article in a later issue of Vertex. His response is quite different from Anderson's "An Open Letter from Philip K. Dick" begins by claiming that "Ms. Russ" has "shrilled at [him] in print" and accusing her of using "the tactics of bitter fanatics". He then switches to calling her "Joanna" and saying that he thinks she is right as Anderson does, but unlike Anderson, Dick does not see the absence of women as something natural and inevitable. Dick writes that Russ has delivered a needed message:

We are too sure of ourselves, as witness Poul's article-in-response. His article was lovely. Literate and reasonable and moderate and respectable, and worthy in all respects except that it was meaningless, by virtue of the fact that it was just so much space gas. It was like telling the blacks that they only "imagined" that somehow things in the world were different for them, that they only somehow "imagined" that their needs, its articulations in our writing, were being ignored. It is a conspiracy of silence, and Joanna, despite the fact that she seemed to feel the need of attacking us on a personal level, shattered that silence, for the good of us all (Dick 1974: 99).
Dick talks about how he has “long said” that

science fiction may touch the sky but it fails to touch the ground. If by ‘ground’ we
substitute the time-sanctioned symbol and reality of woman, then maybe science fiction
will begin to turn out stories related to reality...if your attack serves to make us aware of
you and your previously-considered second-class group as our equals, our peers, our
friends - then I’ll take it. Like a man (Dick 1974: 99).

Dick has transformed Russ into a nurse administering badly needed medicine.

Dick writes that

Joanna is right - in what she believes not how she puts it forth. Lady militants are
always like Joanna, hitting you with their umbrella, smashing your bottle of whisky -
they are angry because if they are not, WE WILL NOT LISTEN (Dick 1974: 99).

The pronouns reveal a science fiction belonging to men graciously welcoming the
new women to become “our equals, our peers, our friends” (Dick 1974: 99).
Women are not there because they are part of the field of science fiction, but
because Dick and Anderson have allowed them in.

Poul Anderson tried to clarify his arguments in Vertex in a letter to the
Canadian feminist fanzine The Witch and the Chameleon:

I never said that women should be in a science fiction story only if there is reason to have
a love interest. Rather, what I said - or tried to say - was that in many science fiction
stories there has been no reason for a love interest; therefore it was simplest to have all
the human characters be of the same sex; and, because most writers happen to be men, it
was easiest for them to use males. Thus no systematic discrimination is implied (The
Witch and the Chameleon September 1975: 29).

Joanna Russ responds to “poor” Poul’s letter thus:

Can we omit such stuff in the future? He’s a nice man in a personal way but it’s hopeless;
I feel like a rock climber at the 14,000-foot pass in the Rockies looking back through a
telescope at some enthusiastic amateur in the Flatirons (foothills outside my study
window) who’s proceeding Eastward, yelling “Hey! You’re in the wrong place! The
mountains are this way!” It’s a sheer waste of time to argue with him; we’d better just let
him go until he and his crampons and bolts (or whatever) hit Chicago (The Witch and
the Chameleon 1976: 13).

This debate about women’s place in science fiction was continued in the other
general fanzines of the period. In the November 1974 issue of Notes from the
Chemistry Department, Loren MacGregor wrote a response to Anderson titled
“A Reply to a Chauvinist”. He concludes that:

---

20 Without the internet, and the networks of fans who use it, I would not have been able to get access to Notes. I would like to thank Bruce Pelz for sending me copies from the United States.
[dealing with "love interests" may indeed be the duty of "the mainstream," as Mr. Anderson suggest, but dealing with speculation, in all its forms and variations, is a function of science fiction, and that has been neglected far too long (MacGregor 1974: 5).]

There was an article response from Jerry Pournelle in *Notes from the Chemistry Department* which was more concerned with proving there are many sex linked differences between men and women than discussing science fiction, as well as further replies in a similar vein.

In the November 1975 issue of *Amazing* a guest editorial by Terry Carr appeared. In it Carr argued that the position of women in science fiction had changed dramatically for the better since the 1940s. He quotes examples from various 1940s pulp stories and compares them with contemporary stories by Russ, Dick and Tiptree. His editorial is built around the contemporary advertising campaign for Virginia Slims cigarettes which used the slogan, "You've Come A Long Way, Baby". He describes the ads:

They always start with a faked photo from about 1910...showing Mrs Elspeth Suffragette sneaking a cigarette in the wings after the premiere performance of *Rite of Spring*, only to be discovered by her husband, who turns her over his knee and spanks her. Then they go on to show us how much improved women's position is today...

Well I don't know about you, but I find these ads extremely funny, in a black-humor way. What they're really saying is that we've progressed so far in the last 65 years that we now allow women the right to kill themselves however they see fit to do it (Carr 1975: 4).

Women have no agency - men allow them to kill themselves. Throughout the editorial Carr keeps returning to a scene which he says has "archetypal relevance to men" (Carr 1975: 5). A man's wife is threatened by a

slimy monster emerging from the coal cellar, obviously come to rape his wife, and he breaks into a cold sweat, because who knows, maybe this monster has better technique in bed than he does (Carr 1975: 5).

This is a scene of white heterosexual male insecurity. At the end of his comparison of stories from the forties and early seventies Carr reimagines this scenario as his

idea for a science fictional variation on those Virginia Slims ads. It would start with a reproduction of an old pulp magazine done in sepia tone, showing Gerry Carlyle [a pulp heroin] from the 1940s] sneaking a smoke beneath a Venusian tobacco bush while a slimy
tentacled monster roars down on her intent on God-knows-what. And it would end with Gerry going calmly off into the bushes with the alien beastie - because who knows, maybe he does have better technique than we do (Carr 1975: 125).

Carr identified this scene as one of "archetypal relevance to men". The anxiety about the "better technique" of the alien beastie which Carr is mocking is identical to white male panic about miscegenation and the allure of the black buck for their white women. This scene, which Carr uses to demonstrate the extent of women's journey within science fiction in those thirty years, still figures Gerry Carlyle as synonymous with sex. Once again women in science fiction are sex. The only difference is that the male interested in her body has shifted from being a white American male to being an "alien beastie" male.

Of course all these debates about science fiction and women were also conducted in the two feminist fanzines of the period, The Witch and the Chameleon and Janus/Aurora. Another site was the November 1975 double issue of Khattru. The double issue was devoted to a symposium on women in science fiction. The participants were Suzy McKeef Charnas, Samuel R. Delany, Virginia Kidd, Ursula K. Le Guin, Vonda N. McIntyre, Kaylyn Moore, Joanna Russ, James Tiptree, Jr., Luise White, Kate Wilhelm and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro. It was edited by Jeffrey D. Smith who also took part. The exchange of letters that make up the symposium took place over seven months. In 1993 the Symposium was reprinted, with comments from most of the participants looking back on the changes that had taken place over the near twenty years since it originally appeared. The reprint also included comments from others who had not been part of the original symposium: Mog Decarnin, Karen Joy Fowler, Jeanne Gomoll, Jane Hawkins, Gwyneth Jones and Pat Murphy. The inclusion of comments by Karen Fowler and Pat Murphy, the founders of the James Tiptree, Jr. Memorial Award, makes explicit the connections between the prize and this repository of feminist debate from mid-970s. I look at the debates in these feminist locations in detail in the next chapter.

These various stories and debates about women and science fiction between 1926 and 1975 show that feminist issues have always been a part of the history of
science fiction. In the 1970s, feminist science fiction emerges from these debates within science fiction, as well as from wider cultural debates about feminism. In the next chapter I explore feminist and other stories that have been told about 'women' and 'science fiction'.