Women, Science and Fiction Revisited, by Debra Benita Shaw

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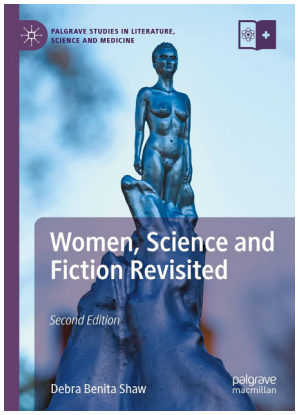

Debra Benita Shaw's *Women, Science and Fiction Revisited* is an updated version of the author's 2000 work, *Women, Science, and Fiction: The Frankenstein Inheritance*. Key differences between the volumes include the removal of some chapters focused on short stories that are now out of print, the reworking and addition of new commentary to others, and the addition of chapters on texts which were released since the original publication. Each chapter focuses on a main text or textual pairing; Shaw examines Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937), C. L. Moore's "No Woman Born" (1944), James Tiptree, Jr.'s "Your Haploid Heart" (1969) and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985 novel and still-running 2017 TV show), Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2015), and finally, N. K. Jemisin's *The City We Became* (2020). These texts, Shaw argues, showcase representative critiques that American, British, and Canadian female authors made of popular feminist ideas and contemporary trends in thinking around technology—hence the title, *Women, Science and Fiction*, rather than women *in* Science Fiction.

Shaw's most radical claim is that "the time of sf is over" (9). She writes, "the criteria that distinguished the genre and which governed the mode in which extrapolation functioned are now no longer sustainable" (9). In this assertion, Shaw is following a critical pathway to its extreme; while many have claimed that, in our age of technological intensification, the boundaries between the speculative and the real are breaking down, Shaw takes this contention to its logical end. Though she does not imagine SF to be dead, she does claim that the forms of SF which we're most familiar with are no longer viable, and that the most productive speculative works are now those that trouble a traditional view of how SF operates; in other words, works that push at the boundaries of genre in a self-referential fashion. Further, Shaw sees the need to define SF in opposition to other, less logically ordered genres as the hanger-on of colonialism, and "the taxonomic ordering of the world which structured scientific imperialism" (9). This contention is most clear in Shaw's discussions of *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Shaw

argues that in our contemporary moment, both have taken on new resonances that change their narratives from extrapolations into allegories for our current crises of climate and bodily legislation, respectively.

As with genre, Shaw challenges her reader to forgo the distracting exercise of erecting rigid gendered definitions and boundaries. In her introduction, Shaw writes, "The question of who or what is a 'woman' and who is authorised to speak for and to women seems to be overwhelming the more important work of challenging the patriarchal social structures which, fundamentally, have defined these terms in the first place" (1). The more pressing mission, then, is avoiding definition in opposition to masculine ideals in general, which can lead to unintentional collusion in patriarchal projects of ideological, legal, and physical control. Shaw is careful to challenge ideas of essentialism that align the female figure with "Nature." In chapter four, Shaw discusses Donna Haraway's "The Cyborg Manifesto" as a response to a branch of feminism which equates women with nature—a dangerous conflation, Shaw states, because it gives patriarchy a powerful tool to align women with reproduction and commodify the female body. This formula is best articulated in a line Shaw uses to describe *Swastika Night*: "Hence the text extrapolates the appropriation of separatist consciousness and ecofeminist mythology by a patriarchal regime happy to collude with the idea that the future of the planet and the future of women are inherently linked" (117). Throughout, Shaw denies the proposal that a world made of women would be one without problems, or that a society built on unequal power dynamics could lead to equality.

Shaw's work makes a strong case for the contemporary relevance of each text discussed, and for the ways that political and environmental changes have altered the way we read and understand several older texts. In marking this shift, Shaw turns to N. K. Jemisin's *The City We Became*, which she sees as part of the "rise of the new weird," a less "hopeful" and "naïve" turn which recognizes and challenges "the limitations of genre fiction" (172). Given that *The City We Became* is a fantastical, surrealist novel, which does not seem to engage with more traditional science fiction elements, its purported role as sign of development or shift in generic boundaries is somewhat questionable. In other words, I remain unconvinced that Jemisin's novel is the best example for Shaw's argument. The contention, however, that the execution and goal of extrapolation has been fundamentally altered does offer conceptual tools for examining fiction in a post-Trump, post-Covid-19, rise-of-AI era, in which future shock has taken on a whole new meaning. Shaw's proposed shift in SF raises important questions as to how SF has served or challenged feminist ideologies in the past, and how these ideologies and their fictional outgrowths can remain critically relevant in an age when science fiction seems to be morphing into science fact with terrifying speed.

Sarah Nolan-Brueck is a PhD candidate at the University of Southern California, where she studies how science fiction interrogates gender. In particular, she examines the many ways SF authors question the medicolegal control of marginalized gendered groups in the United States, and how SF can support activism that refutes this control. Sarah is a graduate editorial assistant for *Western American Literature*. She has been previously published in *Femspec*, *Huffpost*, and has an article forthcoming in *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*.