Women, Science and Technology: the Genealogy of Women Writing Utopian Science Fiction

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Michelle Parslow
Abstract

For centuries utopian and science fiction has allowed women to engage with dominant discourses, especially those which have been defined as the "domain" of men. Feminist scholars have often characterized this genealogy as one which begins with the destabilization of Enlightenment ideals of the rational subject in the Romantic Revolution, with the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) in particular. This thesis demonstrates that there has in fact been an enduring history of women's cognitive and rational attempts to explore key discourses such as science, technology and architecture through Reason, as opposed to rage. This is a genealogy of women writing utopian science fiction that is best illuminated through Darko Suvin's of the novum. Chapter One reveals how the innovative utopian visions of Margaret Cavendish (1626-1673) proffer a highly rational and feminist critique of seventeenth-century experimental science. Chapter Two demonstrates how Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762) explored the socio-political significance of the monstrous-looking "human" body some fifty years before Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Following this, Chapter Three re-reads *Frankenstein* in light of the early nineteenth century zeitgeist of *laissez-faire* economics, technological advancement and global imperialism and argues that these were also the concerns of other utopian science fiction works by women, such as Jane Loudon's *The Mummy* (1827). Chapter Four analyses how the function of the novum is integral to L.T. Meade's (1854-1915)
depictions of male/female interaction in the scientific field. Chapter Five considers how important it is to acknowledge the materialist concern with popular science that informs texts such as Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975) and Pat Cadigan’s cyberpunk novel *Synners* (1991). This is the history of how women have used the form of utopian science fiction as a means with which to present a rational female voice. In addition to the historical works by women, it employs a range of utopian and science fiction theory from Suvin and Fredric Jameson to historical and contemporary feminism.
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