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GENDERED & GENREFIED BODIES: HEROISM AS PRODUCTION AND PERFORMANCE IN SWORD & SORCERY FANTASY

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GENDERED & GENREFIED BODIES: HEROISM AS PRODUCTION
AND PERFORMANCE IN SWORD & SORCERY FANTASY

BY

ANTHONY CONRAD CHIEFFALO

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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OF
ANTHONY CONRAD CHIEFFALO

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Abstract

Works of sword-and-sorcery fantasy often have the reputation of reproducing “traditional masculinity” through figures of heroism that embody a stoic, self-reliant and self-righteous machismo. They are similarly regarded as presenting stereotypical femininity as emotional, dependent, and delicate. These assumptions prevent sword-and-sorcery fantasy works from receiving the critical examination that the genre warrants. This genre is critically underutilized despite its unique capacity and bountiful potential to channel and redirect cultural expectations of gender roles and social norms. Sword-and-sorcery texts often reflect the patriarchal structures of reality, but they can also challenge and subvert those same structures. Sword-and-sorcery can be a genre of possibilities. This study examines the unconfined sense of place and time found in specific sword-and-sorcery settings as well as the transgressive and transformative personae of specific sword-and-sorcery heroes regardless of their sexuality, gender, or race. While many sword-and-sorcery tales conform to gender categories, they also have the capacity to shatter stereotypes of the real world in the limitless potential of such fantasy worlds.

In order to investigate the ways in which some sword-and-sorcery works reflect white supremacist masculinism of reality while others challenge hegemonic patriarchy, this study examines the works of three prominent authors of the genre: Robert E. Howard, Catherine Lucille Moore, and Samuel R. Delany. Each author is responsible for episodic figures of sword-and-sorcery heroism in Howard’s Conan the Cimmerian, Moore’s Jirel of Joiry, and Delany’s Gorgik the Liberator. This study finds that specific sword-and-sorcery works gesture towards departures from merely perpetuating the exclusion and exploitation endemic of white supremacist masculinism. These works exemplify a capacity for messaging meaning beyond traditional gendered assumptions of the genre and advance transgressive figures of gendered and genre-fied heroism including expressions of male femininity and female masculinity.

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Introduction: Works of Sword-and-Sorcery

Yes, I have such memories. You have, too. We both return to them, now and again, to weave, unweave, and reweave the stories that make our lives comprehensible to us. But whatever fascination, or even partial truth, such memories hold, how useful can they be to someone who wishes to understand how his or her freedom works? – Gorgik the Liberator

Samuel Delany, The Game of Time and Pain

The categorization of cultural production into genres is a cipher through which authors encode meaning and readers decode meaning. Authors of literature capture reality and translate perceptions of meaning in this messaging to readers. Genres are not merely collections of story tropes, stereotypes, and archetypes that communicate to which category a story belongs. Genres are ciphers of intricate allegorical and symbolic messaging for the interpretation of their readers. This dissertation engages with American cultural productions that communicate messages of traditional masculinity and a specific genre rooted in assumptions of traditional, male masculinity: sword-and-sorcery fantasy literature.

The American Psychological Association defines “traditional masculinity” as a form of masculinity that is “marked by stoicism, competitiveness, dominance and aggression [and] on the whole, harmful. Men socialized in this way are less likely to engage in healthy behaviors” (Pappas 34). The American Psychological Association affirms that there are multiple masculinities and that traditional masculinity is only one form of masculine expression. Traditional masculinity is what has been culturally and socially relayed as the normative and expected performance of masculine behavior, particularly pertaining to males. Traditional masculinity encourages stoic machismo, self-reliance, and feats of brute physicality while discouraging empathy, affection, and mutualism (the belief that cooperation and mutual dependence is necessary for one’s welfare as social beings).¹

Despite the fact that sword-and-sorcery stories including those of Robert E. Howard reinforce traditional, essentialist ideas of gender, others like that of C.L. Moore and Samuel R. Delany challenge simplistic ways of imagining gender and the genre's treatment of gender roles and relations. While it is true that sword-and-sorcery has been constructed as preserving and reinforcing the dominance of traditional male masculinity organized by ideas of white supremacy and patriarchy in their respective historical context, it is also true that some women and people of color wrote stories within the field that resisted the ideas that organized the conventions of the genre. Therefore, the critical understanding of these texts is one of contested terrain. There is no essentialist, definitive meaning for these texts. Their meanings are shifting, at times progressive, at times regressive, and at times transgressive.

Scholars, academics, and critics leading the charge to demonstrate the “gender dynamism” of sword-and-sorcery works and authors must consider how specific examples of these texts transgress traditional gender classifications, definitions, and formulations as an ever complicated terrain. These analyses ought to consider the conventions of genre itself to constitute the cipher of decrypting meaning in the texts through which we conceptualize presentations and productions of neo-mythologized heroic construction. Navigating productions and performances of sword-and-sorcery heroism is not a matter of historicizing these texts so much as it is a matter of genrefying them.

Theodore Martin argues that the contemporary as an aesthetic or literary field is unknowable without enough critical distance to periodize and historicize it. Therefore, the way it can be known is through a literary theory fixating on genre to make knowable what is otherwise unknowable. It provides an “alternative historicism” for analyzing the paradox of historicizing the contemporary, which is made even more logical by the fact that contemporary studies already embrace genre unlike modernist studies with its antipathy for genre and

postmodernism with its “pastiche for multiple genres at once” (Martin 8). One of the most important implications of Martin’s work is the notion that historicizing a text is not the only means by which it can be understood, which I would argue applies to all texts and not simply those of contemporary studies. The deployment and utility of genre conventions serves as an invaluable asset in analyzing a text and deciphering its meaning. Just as Martin applies such genre conventions as the frontier environment and climate to critique contemporary Western fiction, this dissertation applies the genre conventions of “traditional” gender to critique sword-and-sorcery fantasy.

This dissertation applies a methodology of genre study to sword-and-sorcery fantasy spanning across the modernist/postmodernist divide through the works of Howard, Moore, and Delany.² It theorizes that while the sword-and-sorcery genre has long produced protagonist-heroes who perpetuate traditional ideas of masculinity, some sword-and-sorcery texts complicate what constitutes performances of heroism. While most sword-and-sorcery texts assume certain characterizations to be gendered (traits like self-reliance and brute physicality are assumed to be masculine, traits like empathy and mutualism are assumed to be feminine), some of these texts exploit those assumptions in order to build worlds and to characterize personae contrary to the gendered assumptions they appear to adhere.

While race remains tied both conceptually and practically to questions of gender in my overall assessment of sword-and-sorcery fiction, this project focuses primarily on matters of gender and sexuality rather than matters of race. This dissertation holds to an understanding of the central structural inequalities of American society between masculinity and femininity delineated by David Savran. Masculinity, like femininity, is a complex and unstable concept. Masculinity and femininity are articulated through visible and invisible categories that define human beings as subjects including race, class, and sexuality. Gender is always articulated

through race. Gender is historically contingent depending on changing material conditions, but it is also an imaginary identification. It is a historical and social construction as posited by Judith Butler's conceptions of gender performativity. Gender takes place or fails to take place through highly regulated practices (Savran 7-8). Performances of gender in sword-and-sorcery texts that are non-binary and transgressive have no inherent politics. The meaning and politics of any gender performance is only contingently produced and made to matter in particular times and places.

In the crucial study of fantasy genres *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson calls fantasy a literature of desire articulating with that which is experienced. In this capacity fantasy functions in two ways: to produce, shape, or channel desire and to limit or prohibit desire i.e., disturbing elements that threaten cultural order:

In many cases fantastic literature fulfils both functions at once, for desire can be 'expelled' through having been 'told of' and thus vicariously experienced by author and reader. In this way fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent' (Jackson 3-4).

Though Howard, Moore, and Delany's sword-and-sorcery are not a specific focus of Jackson's work, they align to this proposed paradigm. These texts display the desire to conform to gender norms of traditional masculine performance and traditional feminine performance, but they also display a desire to resist conformity to such gender norms. Fantasy as a genre of the fantastic, of unrealities, of subversion allows for what is culturally and socially forbidden or excluded, including transgressive gender expression and sexuality.

The American hero figure residing in the sword-and-sorcery tale of so-called popular fiction including the pulps of the early twentieth-century can manifest traditional masculinity and validate readings of sword-and-sorcery texts as a haven for white supremacist masculinism.³ This figure evolved in American mass market productions from dime novels of the nineteenth century to pulp magazines and comic books of the twentieth-century. The popular imagination of pulp and comic book superhero enthusiasts is now channeled through Hollywood blockbuster films, television, and streaming series that adapt these vigilante heroes.⁴ These popular fictions promote the hero in distinctly masculine terms as “stoic, competitive, dominant, and aggressive.” This figure is traceable through sword-and-sorcery as one particular fantasy genre that is also a precursor to the superhero fiction so dominant in contemporary American popular culture consciousness.⁵ This hero figure is a distinct formulation and manifestation of heroism that involves protagonists typified by capacities for violence, self-righteousness, and self-reliance. While the literary term “hero” broadly refers to a protagonist facing adversity, this project is concerned with a more attenuated notion of heroism calibrated with qualities of traditional masculinity. The assumption of the sword-and-sorcery hero is as an embodiment of traditional male masculinity: the sword-and-sorcery hero must necessarily be stoic, competitive, dominant, aggressive, and perhaps violent above all.

Sword-and-sorcery is a genre within pulp magazine fiction which can contribute to notions of heroism reflecting traditional masculinity, but sword-and-sorcery scarcely receives the critical attention of genres like the Western or the broader category of speculative fiction⁶ (all of science fiction and fantasy) in which it is typically categorized. To merely embrace these assumptions of the genre as a traditional male masculinity monolith would mean to ignore outliers evidencing the diverse perspectives and heroic performances of other sword-and-sorcery stories.

Some critics of speculative fiction genres including sword-and-sorcery have argued that such bodies of literature promote problematic representations of masculinity and femininity that are in service to hegemonic patriarchy and the edification of what can be defined as white supremacist masculinism.⁷ This dissertation argues that while such criticism speaks to a number of stories in the sword-and-sorcery genre, there are other sword-and-sorcery tales that offer opportunities for readers and authors to challenge gender ideas and open up spaces for women to perform the heroic masculinity indicative of the genre.

On what it means to be in the Sword-and-Sorcery Genre

The nuances that distinguish one fantasy genre from another are significant in this study where the notion of genre itself becomes an invaluable instrument of communicating meaning. The categorization of cultural production into genres is a cipher through which authors encode meaning and readers decode meaning. Authors of literature capture reality and translate perceptions of meaning in this messaging to readers. Genres are not merely collections of story tropes, stereotypes, and archetypes that communicate to which category a story belongs. Genres are ciphers of intricate allegorical and symbolic messaging for the interpretation of their readers.

The presence of *swords* and *sorcery* in a story do not necessarily make it a “sword-and-sorcery” story. Sword-and-sorcery is a distinct genre within the overarching fantasy genre. When one considers the fantasy genre, one typically thinks of stories challenging the dictates of reality with stories showcasing extravagant worldbuilding. Their heroes partake in epic quests. Their allies are elves or wizards and their enemies are goblins or dragons. *Swords* and *sorcery* feature in such works as any story indebted to the lineage of Arthurian legends and myths involve medieval melee weapons as well as the supernatural or magical beings or occurrences. Some examples include J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* published in 1937 and followed by *The*

Lord of the Rings in 1954. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the first of C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* series was published in 1950. One famous Arthurian adaptation is T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* published in 1958. *A Wizard of Earthsea* published in 1968 by Ursula Le Guin was the first of the *Books of Earthsea* series. These entries arguably enjoy more renown than the works of sword-and-sorcery pioneers like Robert E. Howard, C.L. Moore, and Samuel R. Delany, but they do not belong to the same fantasy category. The likes of Tolkien and Le Guin are better categorized as epic fantasy and are frequently viewed as children's literature, perhaps in part because they lack the mature-labelled content characteristic of sword-and-sorcery which often features explicit depictions of sex and violence. While these fantasy stories may include literal "swords" and "sorcerers," they should not necessarily be conflated with the sword-and-sorcery genre.

The alliterative moniker "sword-and-sorcery" was coined by American author Fritz Leiber. Robert E. Howard's "The Shadow Kingdom" published in 1929 is widely regarded as the first legitimate entry in sword-and-sorcery with its protagonist Kull of Atlantis. Howard rewrote one of his Kull of Atlantis stories titled "By This Axe, I Rule!" to produce the first Conan the Cimmerian story, "The Phoenix on the Sword" published in 1932. Conan remains the most recognizable sword-and-sorcery character.⁸

One fitting albeit far-reaching definition comes from author Morgan T. Holmes: "Sword-and-sorcery can be broadly defined as an action-adventure/hero story with supernatural elements in a setting that is generally preindustrial" (84-85). Holmes notes the importance of Edgar Rice Burroughs in shaping this genre by introducing the wild, near-superhuman protagonist of *Tarzan of the Apes*. With the exception of Tarzan, sword-and-sorcery is a largely neglected stepping stone in the evolution of the American superhero monomyth. However, the swashbuckling fantasy adventurer is an integral component to the lineage of American neo-

mythology. Drawing on the work of Richard Slotkin on the Western vigilante antihero figure, critics John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett propose that:

the great makers of myth in the past century perfected an American story formula that could be told and retold to audiences numbering in the hundreds of millions. The stuff of this distinctive American mythic creation came from experiences in rebelling against the English, oppressing slaves, conquering Indians, settling the ever-receding frontier, and finally grasping for imperial power at the end of the nineteenth century (19).

This type of American hero figure originates outside the community they are called to save as they are ever the loner. When they are threatened by violent adversaries, they find an answer in vigilantism to restore justice and to protect the community:

The superhero's aim is unerring, his fists irresistible, and his body incapable of suffering fatal injury...[but] the monomyth pictures a world in which no humans really live. It gives Americans a fantasy land without ambiguities to cloud the moral vision, where the evil empire of enemies is readily discernible and where they can vicariously (through identification with the superhero) smite evil before it overtakes them (48).

While there is great variety among the protagonists of American literature, this form of vigilante hero relying on social preconceptions of traditional masculinity as self-reliant, unemotional, physically dominant and violent while aggressively resisting feminizing logics lingers through the ancestry of the American superhero myth.

Pulp magazines existed on the fringes of modernist literature presaging the popularity of comic books and graphic novels.⁹ Sword-and-sorcery as a genre of speculative fiction emerged within pages of pulp periodicals like *Weird Tales* and *Unknown* inspired by adventure stories like those of author Edgar Rice Burroughs. Pulp magazines were a form of mass art literature popular in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. This form is characterized by the low

quality of paper on which the narratives were published, as well as its use of formulaic plots and stock characters (Hutchison 10). Pulp magazines consist of a broad range of genres for a variety of palates ranging from speculative fiction categories of science fiction and fantasy to hard-boiled detective stories and romance.

It is in this medium that sword-and-sorcery emerged as a distinct American literary form proliferating American superhero myth. Superficial elements of sword-and-sorcery include frequent fantasy tropes: settings ranging from prehistoric to medieval locales and characters typically including adventurers and helpless princesses often serving as plot devices to incite the adventurers to action on their quest. These stories are traditionally read as Eurocentric emulations of Arthurian romance and juvenile high fantasy.¹⁰ The name itself implies excessive violence of the penetrative, piercing armament of the “sword” and exoticized mystery compacted in the signification of supernatural powers and spellcasting within “sorcery.” Such preconceptions of the genre reduce the literary form to little more than sensationalized action adorned in elements of fantasy or myth; stories that appeal more to a child’s sensibilities than those of an adult. Critical analyses of sword-and-sorcery fiction have tended to be rather reductive in their analysis of gender. This paints the whole genre with a broader analytical brush and overlooks stories within the genre that attempt to use it to forward transgressive and resistive ideas and performances of gender through some of its stories. When one considers the sword-and-sorcery genre, one is tempted to conceive of a narrative space where women exist only as passive sexual objects (a patriarchally determined form of womanhood) won by the conquests of active, muscle-bound “hypermasculine” heroes (a patriarchally determined form of manhood).¹¹ Such interpretations disregard opportunities for sword-and-sorcery’s complex thematic messaging of an individual’s capacity to define their notion of selfhood in opposition to binary social constructions of gender and sexuality. This dissertation examines how some

sword-and-sorcery narratives concern themselves with preexisting social dictates of gender expression as well as the subversion and disruption of those dictates.

Literary Scholars' Treatment of Speculative Fiction Genre

There exists a wide range of feminist scholarship on speculative fiction constituting a diverse range of perspectives on the genre as a whole and on specific works within the genre. Some feminist critiques at times condemn speculative fiction's subjection of "the Other" and service to androcentric essentialism. Other feminist critiques celebrate speculative fiction as a progressive, transgressive contested terrain.

Sword-and-sorcery in particular has been viewed as a production of white supremacist capitalism privileging androcentric perspective while deliberately excluding or damaging women. In "American SF and the Other," author Ursula K. Le Guin argues against conceptions of the genre as fundamentally progressive by emphasizing the proclivity of its authors, publishers, and anthologists to alienate others based on their sexuality, social status, culture, or race:

The women's movement has made most of us conscious of the fact that SF has either totally ignored women, or presented them as squeaking dolls subject to instant rape by monsters—or old-maid scientists de-sexed by hypertrophy of the intellectual organs—or, at best, loyal little wives or mistresses of accomplished heroes. Male elitism has run rampant in SF. But is it only male elitism? Isn't the "subjection of women" in SF merely a symptom of a whole which is authoritarian, power-worshiping, and intensely parochial?

The question involved here is the question of The Other—the being who is different from yourself. This being can be different from you in its sex; or in its annual income; or in its way of speaking and dressing and doing things; or in the color of its skin, or the number of its legs and heads. In other words, there is the sexual Alien, and the social

Alien, and the cultural Alien, and finally the racial Alien (Le Guin 18-19).

Like Le Guin, Susan Gubar critiques the treatment of females in speculative fiction and the misogyny conveyed in its pages. In Susan Gubar's article on sword-and-sorcery author C.L. Moore, "C. L. Moore and the Conventions of Women's Science Fiction," Gubar claims Moore has a tendency towards narratives of "female secondariness" (Gubar 25). In *No Man's Land*, Gilbert and Gubar also describe "Shamblau" and the fact that "Moore...share(s) the 'socially induced dread of female sexuality and the intense misogyny that marked her historical moment'" (qtd. in Pearson 12). While Le Guin and Gubar make compelling arguments, they also neglect for the capacity for authors like Moore to convey female experience and perspective in favor of condemning the genre as a whole.

Pamela Sargent argues that there was an exclusion of women from writing speculative fiction. Those few who did so overcame obstacles including social prejudice against them: "When assessing the work of these early writers we should keep in mind that they were pioneers, with few examples and female mentors to inspire and guide them...To be a woman writing science fiction, and to succeed, was to overcome great odds" (Sargent 6). Because of this exclusion, Sargent argues that there were few early women science fiction writers and that they had to conceal their identities with pseudonyms. Some hold that these women either produced fiction exactly like that of men or fiction that was trivial, domestic, and not worth reading according to some critics and anthologists. Sara Lefanu argues that female authors like C.L. Moore needed to assume "male voices" to gain acceptance to sword-and-sorcery as a patriarchal mode of cultural production (Lefanu 16). Frederick Pohl argues that masculine sounding monikers and the use of initials as in the case of C.L. Moore allowed the safe passage of women through male instituted barriers prohibiting their entry because authors such as Moore "felt a need to tinker with or change their names to deceive an overwhelmingly male

audience” (Pohl 143). The resulting perception is that “science fiction was just as conservative and sexist – perhaps even more so – as the rest of society” (Davin 2).

Other critiques celebrate speculative fiction as a progressive, transgressive contested terrain. In *The School of Femininity* written by Margaret Lawrence in 1936, Lawrence states: “For the present we are in a period of commercial feminism [sic] which would have astonished Plato, who in the memory of the race was the first man to take up the cause of women to mind. And what it would do to John Stuart Mill, who in the nineteenth century championed women, is an idea for idle cogitation” (Lawrence 11). This “commercial feminism” was a reality of cultural production by women and for women with the rise of mass market publications that catered to social demographics as stereotyped consumers. However, a number of authors and readers explored material beyond their “type,” including women in the so-called “man’s domain” of speculative fiction.

Some feminist critics and theorists publishing in the 1970s explore those works of science fiction which they argue can serve as potential forums towards meaningful cultural discourse. Betty King argues in the introduction of *Women of the Future: The Female Main Character in Science Fiction* argues that speculative fiction is a unique site to empower women: “It is my belief that the potential freedom sf has from gender role myths is precisely the reason why sf is the ideal genre for women to explore new self-concepts, to expand their view in literature of women as ‘human’ first and ‘female’ second” (King xiv-xv). However, King also admits that speculative fiction occasionally presents women and men who are not whole but are stereotyped, fragmented depictions. King argues that an evolution is palpable in speculative fiction which progresses from a genre where men were most frequently presented as “logical, dependable, strong, serious, and protective” while women, when allowed in a story, “were the perfect foil: emotional, unreliable, weak, frivolous, and in need of protection” (King v).

Another critic interested in the intersection of science fiction and feminism named Natalie Rosinsky argues that there is a spectrum of comprehending gender in speculative fiction which reflects one of the following paradigms in regards to conveying meaning: a text can assume a perspective of androcentric essentialism (privileging masculine perspective), a text can assume a perspective of gynocentric essentialism (privileging feminine perspective), and a text can assume a perspective of what Rosinsky terms “feminist androgyny” which utilizes perspectives of gender that are more inclusive and encompassing rather than perceiving all experience along a false binary of the exclusively masculine versus the exclusively feminine.

In the study of women’s science fiction written by Eric Leif Davin titled *Partners in Wonder: Women and the Birth of Science Fiction 1926-1965*, Davin challenges the notion that there were no women writing science fiction prior to the late 1960s and early 1970s when “a group of feminist writers led by Joanna Russ and Ursula Le Guin stormed the barricades, and women began writing...science fiction” (Davin 2). As an extension of Davin’s argument to include more of fantastic fiction than merely its science fiction branch, this study investigates how some speculative fiction works, particularly examples of sword-and-sorcery, hold the capacity to serve as a “battleground where representatives of dominant groups and traditional values were jostled by ‘outsider’ groups contending on a basis of relative equality for recognition” (3).

Stuart Hall’s critical analysis of “the Popular” helped to establish the fact that popular culture is neither merely hierarchical social control towards the proliferation of ruling class values nor simply a form of lower-class reaction to the domination of the upper-class. The truth lies in between these extremes as “contested terrain” (Davin 14). Despite such work of cultural critics like Stuart Hall inspiring us to reconsider the contested terrain within popular culture, bias against popularized mass art forms including speculative fiction persists:

This misinterpretation sees popular culture solely as a form of monolithic dominance, oppression, hierarchy, and social control. Thus, as an aspect of popular culture, pulp science fiction was the province of white, male, Protestant 'ruling class' which was racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic to the core, expressing all the hierarchical values of the reactionary society in which it flourished (Davin 15-16).

This is not to attempt to discount or distract from the facts that there are examples of speculative fiction that blatantly advocate racism and sexism. It is rather an attempt to establish that the one-dimensional interpretation of speculative fiction:

prevents the close examination of the record which would refute the interpretation. Pulp science fiction is assumed to have been a manifestation of patriarchal cultural hegemony; therefore, there is no investment in uncovering countervailing evidence...This one-dimensional understanding of science fiction has, itself, come to exercise 'cultural hegemony' over the field (16).

Ignorance is cultivated by an unwillingness to engage in discourse and to challenge preexisting beliefs. Only in this way can we dispel misconceptions of speculative fiction authorship and readership that function in their own right to marginalize and discriminate against female authors in particular.

Popular culture regrettably reflects measures of its worldviews belonging to a largely racist and sexist society. However, our views on this field need not include sentiments of intolerance and prejudice in their own right:

our view of the early science fiction field must change quite radically. The presumed absence or marginal appearance of women gives us a distorted view of early science fiction. It encourages us to think of it as reactionary when it was, instead, quite progressive in its orientation toward 'outsider' groups like women...we now know it

was a field in which they found open doors (6).

While Davin isolates a real problem of the critical disavowal of speculative fiction for serving as a fount for racism and sexism that all-but excluded women until the 1970s, his argument also trivializes the very real marginalization and outright discrimination of “outsider groups” in the twentieth century.

Critic Jennifer Jodell complicates Davin’s argument that there was essentially a “counter-culture” of marginalized science fiction writing in the 1930s among women writers:

Thus, most disturbing is Davin’s claim that this counter-culture has been ‘lost,’ in the sense that it has not been anthologized, studied or in some cases even preserved. Based on his examination of what remains in SF magazines, he has tentatively characterized this sub-genre as more ‘empathetic,’ more ‘humane,’ and interested in ‘conflict resolution’...what is lost by their ‘invisibility’ are ‘feminist speculations’ regarding radically altered gender and economic relations (Jodell 47).

Jodell agrees that there is an erasure of women as participants in science fiction writing. Women authors were neglected in subsequently published anthologies in the decades since Moore and Leigh Brackett’s¹² pioneering efforts. However, Jodell struggles with the way Davin adheres to expectations of societal gender binary by characterizing women’s writing as stereotypically empathetic, humane, and invested in pacifism and “conflict resolution.”

Some of Davin’s claims about speculative fiction as a genre fraught with misconceptions are substantiated by Hope Nicholson’s investigation into the evolution of female characters bridging the gap from pulp magazine fiction industry of the early twentieth century to the comic book industry that is still active to this day. In a study of female representation and contributions to comic books over the last century, Hope Nicholson states that comic book characters:

started in the seedy underbelly of pulp anthologies. Action-adventure, science-fiction, Western, and crime comics all sprang from the pages of pulp magazines and later became staple genres of comic books produced by publishers like Marvel and DC...the 1930s saw the birth of the industry in a chaotic and varied form. And women as creators, fans, and characters were there right from the start (Nicholson 12-13).

Nicholson isolates the 1930s as the birth of the comic book industry citing characters like Superman from *Action Comics* published in 1938, but she also identifies the decade as the beginning of fan conventions that were, at that time, largely devoted to science fiction enthusiasts. Myrtle Douglas was one fanzine editor who also served as a designer and organizer for some of these first conventions (Nicholson 13). “Torchy Brown: From Dixie to Harlem” first published in 1937 in *The Pittsburgh Courier* followed Torchy’s adventures including dealing with racial attacks, rape threats, and environmental pollution. Torchy even joins a medical academy to train to become a nurse. Creator Jackie Ormes was a journalist frustrated by typical depictions of women in the medium (Nicholson 20-21). *Miss Fury*, the first female created superhero, appeared in a newspaper strip in 1941 and her own title in *Miss Fury* #1 published by Timely Comics in 1942. Miss Fury predated Wonder Woman by nearly a year and battled evildoers in a full-body catsuit. She was created by Tarpé Mills, a fashion designer turned author (Nicholson 37).

One concrete example of Davin’s argument is the pulp fiction magazine *Weird Tales*. Widely identified today for its publication of authors still in print like H.P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard, some scholars have reductively treated the entire history of the magazine and genre of sword-and-sorcery as monolithically sexist and racist because these two authors expressed racist and sexist worldviews both in their stories and social lives.¹³ However, *Weird Tales* welcomed women authors and readers. The very first issue published in 1923 had a story by

Meredith Davis. In its first year of publication, contributing credit was denoted on the covers of numerous issues to stories by Effie W. Fifield, Greye La Spina, Sophie Wenzel Ellis, and Katherine Metcalf Roof (Davin 66). Allison V. Harding was one of the magazine's most prolific contributors responsible for 36 stories, many of which were featured on the covers and attributed to Harding by name (68). For comparison, Lovecraft and Howard each published around 50 stories, though no author comes close to Seabury Quinn's 145 stories.

Of the 448 identifiable members of the magazine's "Weird Tales Club" members who submitted an envelope to receive an official membership card and as well as their names in future issues of the magazine, 118 were female (27%). This number fluctuated very little throughout the decade. In regards to its authors, at least 114 were female and many of these were highly rated in reader polls (Davin 66-67). Despite this fact, female contributions to the magazine were significantly less than that of males as only 365 (15%) of the total published works in *Weird Tales* magazine are attributed to females, who represented about 17% of the publication's authors (68).

There is some truth to the fact that women readers and authors were discouraged from participation by a culture favoring men as contributors, but this effect is compounded by the fact that anthologists marginalized women readers and authors of speculative fiction to an even greater extent. Anthologies claiming to represent the greatest of speculative fiction excised women authors from their selections. Two of the earliest of these anthologies were *Adventures in Time and Space* published by Random House in 1946 and *The Best of Science Fiction* published by Crown in 1946. These anthologies claimed to be representative of the best of the science fiction genre, but of their 73 collective stories, there were three stories by Lewis Padgett (a pseudonym for works coauthored by Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore) and one was published by Leslie F. Stone. These anthologies provided no indication that these contributors included

women. The notion that speculative fiction was men's only domain was starting to become solidified by the anthologies that revised the vision, not necessarily the publishers, authors, or readers of those original works.

A New Perspective on a Problematic Genre

The earliest popular criticism of sword-and-sorcery identified the genre as playing to the masculine fantasies of adolescents and adult men still caught up in such fantasies. Howard's contemporary critics argued that what small popularity he enjoyed while publishing was indebted to juvenile infatuation with provocative, easily consumable pulp fiction featuring violence and sex. One early critic stated in the *New York Times Book Review* published in 1943 that the tales featuring violence managed to "project the immature fantasy of a split mind and logically pave the way to schizophrenia" (Hays 34). The vigilante white male hero of some works of popular fiction including sword-and-sorcery reflected prejudiced worldviews including the objectification, humiliation, and exploitation of women and people of color.

Criticism of the genre over the decades since Howard's death seize upon the sword-and-sorcery superhero as an emblem of white male self-righteousness and freedom. One critic, Dr. John D. Clark, wrote in 1950 that "Conan, the hero of all Howard's heroes, is the armored swashbuckler, indestructible and irresistible, that we've all wanted to be at one time or another" (Clark 12). In 1976, L. Sprague de Camp wrote: "This is a romantic primitivist's view of barbarism. Conan is the barbarian hero to end all barbarian heroes; his later imitations seem pallid by comparison. In 'A Witch Shall Be Born,' Conan is captured and crucified. As he hangs on the cross, a vulture flies down to peck his eyes out. Conan bites the vulture's head off. You just can't have a hero tougher than that" (de Camp 159). These critics revel to some extent in sword-and-sorcery heroic figures as uninhibited, primitivistic embellishments of male masculine potency with an innate appeal for audiences viewing themselves consciously or

subconsciously as wounded children. Michael Moorcock writes in 1987: “It was the personality of Conan – moody, savage, boyish, in his loyalties and his treatment of girls – which bound all this stuff together and made the stories somehow credible. If Conan was a projection of Howard’s fantasy self, he was a very successfully realized one” (Moorcock 83). Howard borrowed from Edgar Rice Burroughs in the lineage of James Fenimore Cooper to make a serialized narrative about the notions of the gentlemen hero and the noble savage. Where the two were generally separate in Howard’s predecessors (Hawkeye’s Chingachgook from *The Last of the Mohicans*, John Carter’s Tars Tarkas from *A Princess of Mars*), Conan represented a marriage of both figures in one vessel as the first fantast to make a noble savage (or at least skeptical barbarian) his protagonist (Moorcock 82). This recipe for the sword-and-sorcery superhero is idolized by some readers who find a sort of fanatic devotion to such mythic representations.

Contributions by other sword-and-sorcery authors are unfortunately marginalized, despite assertions by critics that among those works exist beacons of superior literary merit with particular deference to Moore’s Jirel of Joiry series. L. Sprague de Camp notes that fantasy readers consider “bad Moore to be still better than many writers’ best “(de Camp 274). Moorcock argues that of the stories published in a similar vein to those of Howard’s Conan of Cimmeria, “Catherine L. Moore was probably the best of these. Her female protagonist Jirel of Joiry was an amazon driven to martial and occult practices in order to avenge her wrongs...The stories had all of Howard’s drive, were rather better written and certainly more consistent” (Moorcock 84).

The problematic nature of sword-and-sorcery’s critical reception continues into recent decades as critics and theorists challenge the genre’s overt imperialism and sexism as a cultural production influenced by and perpetuating white supremacist masculinism. The Conan

mythology speaks to a shared imaginary of what has been called “primitive masculinity,” an imperialistic ideal that seeks conflict-driven enthusiasm for conquest and an affinity for colonized people’s “otherwise-debased qualities” (Carrington 181). Imperialist appropriation of the “barbarian Other” is a literary tradition that precedes Robert E. Howard to the likes of celebrated author Rudyard Kipling. The notion of primitive masculinity in discourses of Orientalism have become inseparable from various popular media though perhaps most overtly in superhero fiction’s exoticized environments and caricatured personae. Conan the Barbarian explores the “Black Kingdoms” which serve as a proxy for Africa in Howard’s Hyborian Age world. Howard’s comrades in “Queen of the Black Coast” include the dutiful and subservient N’Yaga and N’Gora as harmful stereotypes of exploited black bodies in a narrative that glorifies white protagonists as intelligent, capable, and heroic.

Harmful stereotypes and exploitation of female bodies occurs in sword-and-sorcery as well. Critic Winter Elliott notes how women are frequently sexualized and objectified in Conan’s tales:

Even the two strongest women in any of the Conan tales, Bêlit of “Queen of the Black Coast,” and Valeria of “Red Nails,” are defined by their sexuality. Bêlit, notably described by a frightened ship-master as the “wildest she-devil unchanged,” reasonably goes about her pirate’s life wearing only a “broad silken girdle,” and Conan’s first reaction to sight of her...is sheer, unadulterated lust, which Howard poetically renders as “a beat of fierce passion.” He has the same reaction to Valeria, although he’s known her for a while. With Valeria in “Red Nails,” Howard goes to some lengths to substantiate her femininity, adamantly describing her as “all woman, in spite of her bearing and her garments” (Elliott 58-59).

Female allies and love interests of Conan are objectified in their physical descriptions as bodies

first and foremost. Many critics understandably find it difficult to accept for any feminist leanings in analyses of Howard's Conan stories. Elliott herself comments that the mere notion of a "feminist Conan" is comical. However, the space for possibilities in female representation is not closed by the sword-and-sorcery genre. On the contrary, Howard's tales inspired C.L. Moore's own stories about a female protagonist who is perhaps the earliest expression of female masculinity. Despite Elliott's dismissal of a "feminist Conan," Robert E. Howard critic Jamie Madden goes so far as to label Howard as having "feminist" and "pro-woman" ideals:

Howard demonstrates his feminist and pro-woman ideals using the literary techniques of metaphor, foreshadowing, and anecdotes in "Queen of the Black Coast," "Iron Shadows in the Moon," and "A Witch Shall be Born." The reader can interpret these pro-women ideals through the Romance Mythos conventions of quest, ultimate death struggle, and symbolism of the antagonist" (Madden 80).

The endeavor to find Howard or the Conan character as "feminist" and "pro-woman" is certainly a challenging one given the practical consensus among Howard scholars that he was a product of his time and reflected racist and sexist sentiments of where and when he lived. However, critics like Madden encourage critical engagement with texts generally denied feminist critiques due to the notion that the form itself prohibits any such thing.

Nicole Emmelhainz-Carney critically examines the journey of the first female sword-and-sorcery hero named Jirel of Joiry in "The Black God's Kiss" as an effort to reclaim her dignity from the invader who steals her castle, subjugates her people, and denies her female masculinity when he seizes her helmet and forces a kiss upon her lips. Emmelhainz-Carney argues that Moore de-reifies gender and reifies sexuality through the course of this tale: gender is exposed as performance and sexuality is emphasized and exposed as biology in a genre that is hypersexualized bodies at its core (124). This is so impactful for Emmelhainz-Carney who

views Moore's fiction as conducting this groundbreaking theoretical work nearly fifty years prior to Judith Butler's publication of *Gender Trouble*.

Other emerging yet prominent criticism on the value of revisiting C.L. Moore's sword-and-sorcery and the Jirel of Joiry character in particular includes Eileen Donaldson's studies of female action heroism and Judith (Jack) Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* to present Jirel's character as a performance of female masculinity. Donaldson argues that Jirel is the first female warrior to appear in speculative fiction and that her performance of masculinity is channeled through the warrior role she displays as well as the indirect and direct characterizations of Jirel as physically strong, violent, authoritative, and possessing her own sexual agency. This performance of masculinity is made even more significant, Donaldson argues, by virtue of the facts of the time when these tales were published and that the tales likely constitute the first appearance of female masculinity in speculative fiction. Donaldson argues that these works are a central contribution to feminist speculative fiction studies (Donaldson 48).

This study into sword-and-sorcery acknowledges how some of the most well-known stories of the genre privilege phallocentric male perspectives and notions of white male domination through pulp magazine hero fiction as an "ultra-masculine" cultural production. But it also aims to give more analytic space to certain sword-and-sorcery texts that have been overlooked and undertheorized. In particular, in this dissertation I aim to analyze a handful of sword-and-sorcery texts to show how they use the conventions of the genre to generate transgressive performances of gender including male femininity and female masculinity that may have the potential to disrupt the androcentric assumptions of the genre and to complicate traditionally gendered notions of sword-and-sorcery heroism. It is divided into three chapters that critically examine innovators of sword-and-sorcery storytelling. The result of each sword-and-sorcery text is a complex vision of heroic performance that is aware of the cultural

proclivity for erecting sexism, racism, and oppression; however, these texts also gesture towards a possibility of transgressing essentialist notions of gender.

Chapter 1 Summary: Robert E. Howard's He-Man Barbarians: Masculinity or Male Femininity?

The first chapter of this study explores the writings of the widely regarded founder of sword-and-sorcery as a distinct literary form: Robert E. Howard. Howard wrote numerous stories in speculative fiction in the 1920s and 1930s. Howard's most famous entries chronicle the adventures of Conan the Cimmerian. As previously indicated, the character is often critiqued as exemplifying androcentric essentialism. The Conan character is perceived as an exemplar of perfect though primitivist manliness in like manner to Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes*.¹⁴ Conan overcomes opponents with a moral code of sanctioned violence while conquering women with his putatively limitless charisma. However, this world is peopled by characters who may actually challenge assumptions of gender and sexuality as much as they appear to merely re-inscribe assumptions of traditional masculinity and traditional femininity.

"The Tower of the Elephant" published in 1933 presents an image of Conan as physically eroticized specimen of masculinity: "He had discarded his torn tunic, and walked through the night naked except for a loin-cloth and his high-strapped sandals. He moved with the supple ease of a great tiger, his steely muscles rippling under his brown skin" (83). This popularized conception of the character as nude or semi-nude, musclebound man is proposed as a primitivist ideal of manliness: "Conan's body is also displayed, also fetishized, and also subject to fantasy. Unfortunately for Conan, that fact puts him in a distinctly *female* position, for Western civilization, Howard, and the amorphous civilization of the Hyborian Age define femininity as vulnerability, as body on display" (Elliott 67). The sensual description of his

supple movement and steely, rippling muscles evokes similar figures of heroic manliness and the obsession with the physical perfection of idealized white male bodies found in Burrough's *Tarzan of the Apes* as forms of primal masculinity.¹⁵ However, such moments relegate Conan to submissive subject of fetishization and vulnerability that contradict preconceptions of the active, dominant male. The traditionally masculine subject refuses to be feminized. Conan enters a liminal space between socially feminine and socially masculine, between hero and love interest. The perception of Conan as merely embodying traditional masculinity is complicated by the situating of his character as both feminine and masculine.

Sexually charged language and symbols erect the Tower of the Elephant that Conan must scale to procure the treasure from within:

The shimmering shaft of the tower rose frostily in the stars. In the sunlight it shone so dazzlingly that few could bear its glare, and men said it was built of silver. It was round, a slim perfect cylinder, a hundred and fifty feet in height, and its rim glittered in the starlight with the great jewels which crusted it. The tower stood among the waving exotic trees of a garden raised high above the general level of the city (84).

Howard evokes undeniable phallic imagery with this shaft in the form of a round, slim, and perfect cylinder. Conan teams up with another thief, Taurus, who happens to be searching the tower for points of entry that same night. Once in the garden:

Taurus threw the line with a smooth, ripping motion of his mighty arm. The hook curved upward and inward in a peculiar manner, hard to describe, and vanished over the jeweled rim. It apparently caught firm, for cautious jerking and then hard pulling did not result in any slipping or giving (89).

The mighty arm of Conan's comrade jerking and hard pulling on the enormous phallic symbol signifies a masturbatory and homoerotic sexual act. Later, Conan finds the captive entity for

whom the building is named with “the body of a man, naked, and green in color; but the head was one of nightmare and madness. Too large for the human body, it had no attributes of humanity. Conan stared at the wide flaring ears, the curling proboscis, on either side of which stood white tusks tipped with golden balls. The eyes were closed, as if in sleep” (94-95). The phallic imagery of the creature’s curling proboscis further exemplifies the tale’s homoerotic interpretations, this time paired with two golden balls evoking a complete male sex organ with testicles.

Conan is positioned as “The Other” in the constant tension he experiences between his independent, barbarian nature and the desires of a society stressing conformity and heteronormativity. Scenes pitting Conan against other creatures of nature and frequent metaphors linking Conan to lions, tigers, and panthers establish the character as belonging more to nature than to humanity. Despite this fact, Conan is drawn to civilization in his quests for material wealth and status. His existence between worlds makes him at times “Other” to both:

To rehearse some of the well-known binary tropes of postcolonial discourse, opposed to the colonizer (white man, West, center of intellection, of control), the Other is cast as corporeal, carnal, un-tamed, instinctual, raw, and therefore also open to mastery, available for use, for husbandry, for numbering, branding, cataloging, description or possession. Images of the body of the Other are conflated with those of the land, unexplored land too being seen as amorphous, wild, seductive, dark, open to possession (Boehmer 269-270).

Conan is constantly depicted at odds between inclinations towards civilization and those towards barbarism. He at times assumes the role of fantasized “Other.” This parallel between Conan and Howard’s female characters complicates the stereotypical gender roles of pulp male hero and female supporting cast member. It also complicates readings of the Conan character

and sword-and-sorcery in its entirety as strictly promoting traditional masculinity. In truth Conan is capable of being both: perhaps an idealized figure of traditional male masculinity and perhaps a figure of male femininity navigating the spaces between mythologized, essentialized notions of gendered heroism.

Chapter 2 Summary: C.L. Moore's Jirel of Joiry: Femininity or Female Masculinity?

The second chapter is devoted to the works of Catherine Lucille Moore, better known by her penname C.L. Moore. Howard's contemporary sword-and-sorcery writer and fellow contributor to *Weird Tales*, C.L. Moore wrote stories of fantasy and adventure including the first appearance of a female sword-and-sorcery hero in "Black God's Kiss." These stories have been critiqued as exemplifying gynocentric essentialism, perpetuating the androcentric essentialism endemic of patriarchal society and hegemonic masculinity, and most recently as an early instance of female masculinity in American literature.¹⁶

A critical examination of Moore's Jirel of Joiry character aligned with Judith (Jack) Halberstam's notion of female masculinity may view the character as embodying a historical reality for women who do not fit into the conventional understanding of obligatory femininity. Halberstam states:

Some popular accounts of female masculinity suggest that the appearance of the virile woman is a relatively recent occurrence and that she is herself a product of feminist ideologies. Other accounts situate her as a sign of the relaxation of gender conformity and a harbinger of greater latitude for gender identification. Few popular renditions of female masculinity understand the masculine woman as a historical figure, a character who has challenged gender systems for at least two centuries (Halberstam 45).

Moore's predecessors in speculative fiction including Mary Shelley (often regarded as the originator of science fiction with *Frankenstein*) imagine "alternative modes of consciousness

and structures of social systems in worlds no longer patriarchal” (Gubar 16). These female authors wrote stories characterized as “feminine” and subjected to socio-cultural perceptions of femininity. The women in these stories were viewed as irrational and even monstrous. Many women in this medium attempted to recreate the conventions of the genre. Catherine Lucille Moore’s science fiction and fantasy stands out amongst these women writers. Renowned feminist theorist Susan Gubar notes Jirel of Joiry, the protagonist of “Black God’s Kiss,” as a recreation of the fantasy genre’s image of womanhood. Moore’s “masculinized” powerful woman warrior “always chooses armor over amour.” According to Gubar, although Jirel is “masculinized,” her identity is strictly feminine rather than a nexus of masculinity and femininity (Gubar 22).

Gubar refers to the character’s purity and virginal nature, despite Moore’s suggestions of Jirel’s uninhibited sexuality: “God knows I’m not innocent of the ways of light loving” (Moore “The Black God’s Kiss” 25-26). Jirel’s moral code is akin to those of her male counterparts across sword-and-sorcery. Their capacity for discretionary violence justifies their barbarism: “Her men were hers to bully and threaten and command, but they were hers to die for too, if need be” (Moore “Hellsgarde” 154). Moore’s creation of Jirel of Joiry represents a compelling convergence of traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine performances. The character is a fascinating figure of female masculinity.

There is an intermediate position between the apparent androcentric essentialism of Robert E. Howard’s Conan the Cimmerian and the apparent gynocentric essentialism of Catherine Lucille Moore’s (C.L. Moore’s) Jirel of Joiry.¹⁷ Some sword-and-sorcery narratives express concern for preexisting social dictates of gender binary before disrupting those same dictates. They edify traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine characterizations before subverting those figures or presenting alternatives that represent male femininity or female

masculinity.

Chapter 3 Summary: Samuel R. Delany's Gorgik: Gendered-and-Genrefied Liberation

The third chapter examines the contribution of Samuel R. Delany to the subgenre as a culmination of the evolution of sword-and-sorcery as a discursive progression into the end of the twentieth-century. Delany's warriors and heroes are arguably even more aggressive in their expressions of stereotypical, traditional masculinity while at times simultaneously expressing traditional femininity than C.L. Moore's. Delany's works of sword-and-sorcery feature far more explicit references to homosexuality than the arguably more subtle homosexual eroticism present in Howard's works. They are also invested in expressions of female masculinity through female characters that conjure archetypes of the amazon or Valkyrie.

In "The Tale of Gorgik," the hero, Gorgik the Liberator, is aroused by the collars worn by slaves as a symbol of sexual dichotomy of active and passive; dominator and dominated; penetrator and penetrated; masculine and feminine. The logics of this sexual dichotomy persist in *The Game of Time and Pain* with the continued symbolism of the slave collars. This fetish for the collar, the economy of its symbolism, shifts in meaning as Gorgik's self-awareness and comprehension of the institution of slavery evolves over time. This progression occurs as he witnesses relations between masters and slaves over the course of his life:

First, I happened to step behind one of the other wagons and saw Count Jeu-Forsi, sitting on an overturned chest, knee to knee with a miner called Namyuk, who'd been captured three years before by slavers on some back road in the south. The count was drinking from a cider jug and was already drunk. 'You must let me touch it. Let me. Let me, I say. There! No, no, you can't protest. If you do, I shall order it cut off. I can do that, you know. I just don't understand why all of you have such *big* ones – even those of you who weren't born to servitude. When the slavers go out on capturing raids,

is that the first thing they look for? Now tell me, doesn't that feel good? You must say yes. Say 'Yes' to me. It feels good enough when I do it to my own' (39).

In this instance, the slave is forced to satisfy the master's commands. The count orders Namyuk to allow him to participate in fondling. The count also orders Namyuk to agree to the act and threatens to physically maim him if he does not comply. Then he goes even further and orders Namyuk to enjoy the act: "Now tell me, doesn't that feel good? You must say yes. Say 'Yes' to me." This scene implies the literal possession of the slave as a reified sexual object that can be controlled and possessed with the fixation on the penis as a literal sexual object commodified in this exchange. The scene implies a complete domination of the slave in terms of their physical being and of their agency as autonomous entities with their own free will.

The meaning of the collar becomes the crux of the plot of *The Game of Time and Pain* which revolves around the stories shared between Gorgik and Udrog. It is the most meaningful lesson Gorgik attempts to teach Udrog in their time together. Gorgik recounts once witnessing a master standing naked in his tent and intentionally binding his own neck with an iron collar:

he raised the collar to his neck and closed the semicircle on it, without taking his hands away, as if afraid, once having donned it, he might not be able to doff it again. I recognized it as a sexual gesture with an intensity enough to stun me and make all my joints go weak. I have already told you, Udrog, my own sexual interest in the collar was as precocious, in its way, as yours; have I already spoken of the pause...? Which, I suppose, is all we can cite of desire (53).

Gorgik again becomes the voyeur and subjugates the subject of his gaze through the act of voyeurism. There occurs an exchange of the dominator and the dominated as the master turns to witness the slave witnessing his own symbolic transgression against his station. Gorgik confesses to Udrog: "We were both naked. We were both male" (53). This scenario challenges

Gorgik's fetish of the collar when the master removes it and places it upon Gorgik's neck: "The lock snapped to. And just as I had recognized the sexual in his placing of it about his own neck, I knew that, though lust still reeled in his body and still staggered in mine, this gesture was as empty of the sexual as it is possible for a human gesture to be. He was only a frightened man, recollaring a slave whom he had let, briefly and unwisely, pretend awhile to be free" (54).

Witnessing the master's ability to wear the collar and to remove the collar at will serves as an epiphany for Gorgik. He reflects on every aspect of his identity and the social categories imposed upon slaves and masters that determine their being. Gorgik then realizes that the power to remove the collar from the necks of the oppressed is one that he craves with his whole being. Gorgik the Liberator is truly born from this episode in his life.

Transgressive identity and experience beyond binary prejudice including heterosexism are attainable in such imagined spaces free from artificial constructs reflecting the sexism, discrimination, and oppression of patriarchally determined society. This is not to say that sexism and discrimination do not influence speculative fiction works in terms of their authorship and their reception. The pervasive nature of sexism in American society engenders greater contrast of oppositional structures that constitute these narratives. Some sword-and-sorcery works subvert the sexist prejudices of the society in which its authors and readers exist. Some sword-and-sorcery works rechannel those energies into fictions capable of undermining binary structures despite their evident progression from those same institutions.

Conclusion

The deployment of genre conventions, structures, and narrative elements by which meaning is encoded and decoded in a text should be viewed as discursive opportunities. For example, some sword-and-sorcery texts, particularly those of Catherine Lucille Moore and Samuel R. Delany, open up possibilities of gender expression that deviate from this overarching

pronouncement. These sword-and-sorcery texts can be an entry point for readers to critically examine hegemonic patriarchy and white supremacist masculinity as rigid institutions that ought to be challenged and resisted. This genre is critically underutilized despite its unique capacity and bountiful potential to channel and redirect cultural expectations of gender roles and social norms. Sword-and-sorcery texts can reflect the patriarchal structures of reality, but they can also challenge and subvert those same structures. The ciphering and deciphering of meaning in genres like that of sword-and-sorcery through presentations of complex and even problematic characters and settings ought to be viewed as loci for meaningful discourse rather than justifiers for their expurgation.

Chapter 1: Robert E. Howard's He-Man Barbarians: Masculinity or Male Femininity?

Introduction

In this chapter I propose a revision to decoding identity and representation in the sword-and-sorcery of Robert E. Howard and an alternative assessment of identity conceptualization through the literary elements of Howard's utility of setting and character. This chapter first surveys critical receptions¹⁸ in contributing to the comprehension of Robert E. Howard's sword-and-sorcery texts as conveying white supremacist masculinism. It culminates in a critical reading presenting an alternative interpretation of Robert E. Howard's tales of Conan the Cimmerian and examples of sword-and-sorcery as evolving allegories for social standing derived from Howard's deployment of gender, sexuality, and race that categorizes and enforces notions of identity across iterations of cultural production that may also function to subvert those same sociocultural expectations.

A literary analysis of the elements of narrative as they occur across Howard's sword-and-sorcery works reveals how Howard's setting of the Hyborian Age world presents the edifices of patriarchy as institutions of oppression functioning to deny and to regulate freedom. The channels of authority in the Hyborian Age setting are dictated by one's status which is inextricable from one's sexuality, gender, and race. However, Howard's works can also be read as subversions of these expectations by centering the plots of these sword-and-sorcery tales on the issue of institutional patriarchal edifices. The insider who manipulates society to their own advantage is the vilified embodiment of "civilization." The outsider who confronts injustice is the heroic revolutionary challenging and at times edifying those same forces and generally an embodiment of "barbarism."

Howard's fiction can be read as subverting these expectations by presenting characterizations which constitute performances of apparent masculinity and femininity that

actually overturn institutional patriarchal edifices. Many of Howard's male characters, including Conan himself, oscillate between socially instituted performances of masculinity and femininity. Many of Howard's female characters, including Dark Agnes¹⁹, Valeria, and Bêlit likewise oscillate between socially instituted performances of what messages feminine identity and what messages masculine identity. One's assigned sex is not their social destiny. Preconceptions of one's social destiny determined by their assigned sex still exist in the logics of the sword-and-sorcery setting, just as they exist in reality. The sword-and-sorcery narrative presents a fictional world where an individual oppressed by these expectations can successfully confront forces of oppression and overthrow the masters on their thrones of white supremacist masculinism. In some instances, these supposed revolutionaries are complacent or even willing participants in cycles of white supremacist masculinism in expressions that can clearly be interpreted as endorsements of white supremacist masculinist ideology. However, they also serve as discursive extrication of the patriarchal forces dictating our sociocultural fictions, mythologies, and realities. Through a literary analysis influenced by theoretical lenses of gender theory and queer theory, some sword-and-sorcery texts can become a profound space to engage concepts of identity, representation, and expression relevant to readers of any time.

20th Century Critical Reception of Howard's Sword-and-Sorcery

One metric for deciphering the reception of Robert E. Howard's sword-and-sorcery exists in the form of the reader response section of the periodicals in which they were published. *Weird Tales* featured one such section titled "The Eyrie" which encouraged readers to discuss their favorite stories from each issue and to provide comments about various facets of the magazine. In the January 1936 issue, Gertrude Hemken states: "just my femininity coming to the fore – yearning for romance – may sound like dribble, but that's a woman fer ye. Jes' as I set to wondering if Conan were still with us – up he pops again. Nice boy he is, of that burly

he-man type that I so admire. I lose myself entirely in his adventures. Three cheers for the author!” (124). Though the assumption is that Conan and similar sword-and-sorcery characters were popular for men to reiterate traditional masculinity, it is also false to assume that these characters were unpopular for women indulging in literary productions and presentations of traditional masculinity.

A dominant critical reading of Robert E. Howard’s Conan the Cimmerian since its inception in the 1930s is as a monolithic depiction of the supremacy of white, hypermasculine²⁰ superman mastering exotic settings occupied by gendered, sexed, and racialized others.²¹ Such readings present the primacy of a white, heterosexist male point of view. This criticism is derived in part from textual analysis of Howard’s sword-and-sorcery, but also from critics that psychoanalyzed the biographic details of Howard’s life. The character is a warrior barbarian who travels across the fictional world of the Hyborian continent and beyond in over two dozen episodic tales printed in pulp magazines like *Weird Tales* in the 1930s. The character is physically described in “The Scarlet Citadel” as bearing an intimidating visage:

Before the savage blue eyes blazing murderously from beneath the crested, dented helmet, the boldest shrank. Conan’s dark scarred face was darker yet with passion; his black armor was hacked to tatters and splashed with blood; his great sword red to the cross-piece. In this stress all the veneer of civilization had faded; it was a barbarian who faced his conquerors. Conan was a Cimmerian by birth, one of those fierce moody hillmen who dwelt in their gloomy, cloudy land in the north. His saga, which had led him to the throne of Aquilonia, was the basis for a whole cycle of hero-tales (Howard “The Scarlet Citadel” 46).

Published in 1932, “The Scarlet Citadel” was the second Conan story released in print after his debut in “The Phoenix on the Sword” that same year. This description evidences Howard’s

eagerness for the Conan character to spring to life with an entire saga of stories to constitute the spectacle of his heroism with all the trappings of traditional masculinity including a brooding disposition, fierce independence, shrugging off the supposed softness of civilization to adorn himself in the trappings of rugged barbarism. However, there is also passion beneath the scars on his face thinly veiling his emotional nature generally denied to the traditionally masculine as necessarily logical and stoic.

L. Sprague de Camp's analysis of Howard's sword-and-sorcery dwells largely on the biographic sketch he draws of the author's personal life. Howard was a prolific letter-writer who freely shared his philosophic, political, and personal opinions on a wide range of topics including his blunt sexism and racism.²² It is principally from these letters that de Camp creates a portrait of Howard as impetuous and involuntarily celibate: "At home he displayed, until his last few years, little overt interest in women, save to complain that, at social gatherings, they passed him up for more glamorous youths...Howard's personality was introverted, moody, and unconventional. He knew his own emotional instability, alluding to his fits of gloom and black moods" (de Camp 144-145). This vision of Howard as an unstable and irrational man with minimal education or lived experience pervades Howard studies and encourages psychoanalysis of the author beginning with assumptions of his sexual activity or lack thereof. Such criticism lingers on the psychoanalysis of Howard the author and has born a notable impact on critical receptions of his work.

For de Camp the dominant factor in Howard's life was his devotion to his ailing mother. He proceeds to diagnose Howard's Oedipus complex and abnormal sexuality: "In his late twenties, a decade after most youths do, Howard began at last to go with girls as a regular thing. While he had previously shown a normal heterosexual orientation, his actual approaches to women had been timid and tentative. For years he excused his misogyny by saying: 'Aw, what

woman would ever look at a big, ugly hulk like me?” (155). The characterization of Howard as an insecure white man is completed by descriptions of his paranoia: “Robert Howard began to display paranoid delusions of persecution. He took to carrying a pistol against ‘enemies,’ who were probably imaginary – or who at most had once bullied or otherwise offended Howard but had long forgotten all about it” (156). Howard is also known for his fanciful imagination and lofty estimation of the values of barbarism over civilization. This vision of certain white masculinities as angry, sensitive, wild and supreme is one of the forms analyzed by David Savran’s *Taking It Like a Man*, a “materialist history of the performance of white masculinities” (Savran 9). This narrative of Howard the author becomes a greater exemplification of Savran’s white male victimization and masochistic masculinity than the Conan character. Howard has been described as an example of “a man who walked alone but spoke for an element, not just of America, but of what it is to be white, male, Western, and free” (Bowden 80). This is a type of masculinity where its performer is ever the victim while serving as some type of noble emblem and reminder for what is supposedly the pinnacle of western civilization as white American manliness.

Howard committed suicide in 1936 not long after his mother entered an irreversible coma, an act long interpreted as a final validation for the critical pronouncement on the author’s life and worldviews:

This suicide has long been a subject of amateur psychological speculation. Suggestions include Oedipism, paranoid schizophrenia, and latent homosexuality. All are guesses. Still, when a healthy young man with versatile abilities, wide interests, a congenial occupation, excellent prospects, and a growing circle of friends and admirers kills himself over a family tragedy of a commonplace and inevitable kind, it is plain that he was not a well-balanced human being (de Camp 173).

Recent Howard scholarship challenges de Camp's conclusions. In Patrice Louinet's *The Robert E. Howard Guide*, a chapter on "Common Misconceptions about Howard" clarifies that it was indeed after his mother, Hester Howard, entered a coma that he took his own life and not after her death as long held by de Camp. Louinet also challenges de Camp's conclusion that Howard was tormented by bullies and was a self-imposed recluse. For example, where de Camp reconstructed such facts about Howard's early childhood suggesting he was too frightened to enter schooling before eight years of age, Louinet's research finds that schooling did not start in Howard's home of Bagwell, Texas until that age in 1915 (Louinet 27). Louinet similarly refutes whether Howard was a recluse with evidence of his travels throughout Texas, New Mexico, and Mexico. He refutes the claim that Howard was involuntarily celibate with evidence of his relationship with Novalyne Price, suspected encounters with prostitutes in Mexico, and acute interest and well-documented familiarity with "*Spicy Adventure*" magazines tantamount to pornography. Louinet also acknowledges Howard's racist attitudes with the caveat that "casual racism" was prevalent in the time when Howard lived (33). Regardless of such defenses of Howard's character, the dominant critical perception of Howard's life and works of fiction serves as a testament to white male victimization as a contingent of American men reacting against a culture allegedly failing them. Howard communicates extensively in his letters to H.P. Lovecraft about the "invasions of unsavory hordes of foreigners" to the United States of America (Lovecraft and Howard 83). Howard and Lovecraft frequently exchanged racist sentiments blaming immigrants for what they perceived to be the deterioration of America, including Lovecraft's views of the Italian immigrants to Providence, Rhode Island and Howard's views of Mexican immigrants to Texas.

A segment of the population represented by overwhelmingly white, heterosexual, working and lower-middle class men believe themselves to be the victims of diminishing

economic progress made in the United States over the past thirty years attributed to African Americans, women, and other racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities. They fashion themselves as the new persecuted majority. Narrative fiction including sword-and-sorcery is a site in which white masculinities are regulated, iterated, and performed (Savran 6). Savran's tenets of historicizing white masculinities illustrate the central inequality of United States society as the difference between masculinity and femininity. Masculinity and femininity are both complex and unstable concepts, visibly and invisibly categorized, and historically dependent on changing material conditions. Gender is itself an imaginary identification that is both historically and socially constructed. Gender occurs or fails to occur through the deployment of these highly regulated practices. The spectacularized masculine action hero evidences the deeply contradictory, eroticizing submission and victimization of the materialist notion of white masculinity that attempts to retain an aggressive and virile aspect while aggressively rebutting effeminacy.

White supremacist masculinist readings of sword-and-sorcery encourage segregation, tribalism, and violence. Some critical readings of sword-and-sorcery decode this same meaning while responding with condemnation rather than praise. It is imperative to understand how these pulp fiction narratives and performances of heroism serve to re-inscribe and to naturalize a set of racial and gender ideas that rationalize unequal power relations of white supremacist masculinism in the contemporary United States of America while situating critical readings in a dialogue with alternative interpretations of decoding meaning from what can be termed a romantic primitivist masculinity narrative.²³

A strong element in modern heroic fantasy²⁴ is that of what L. Sprague de Camp terms "romantic primitivism" attributed to the likes of Jack London, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Robert E. Howard. Romantic primitivism is the idea that a simpler, more egalitarian lifestyle is

thought to exist in mankind's past by being nearer to an existence in commune with the natural world rather than the civilized world. The Noble Savage stock character commonly associated with the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau evidences the exploitation of non-Europeans. The non-European foreigner is conceived as perhaps mystically connected to this simpler, egalitarian lifestyle by virtue of being "uncivilized." The addition of "masculinity" to this term stresses the fact that this belief stems from the fundamental sexism of patriarchy operating in addition to its fundamental racism. The term romantic primitivist masculinity combines L. Sprague de Camp's definition of "romantic primitivism" with Bradley Deane's definition of "primitive masculinity" to function as a more encompassing identifier.

This primitive barbarian figure and testament to romantic primitivist masculine heroism is the supposed superman standing apart and above the decadence of urban civilization. Civilized men cling to the illusions of romantic primitivism as displayed by the appeal of Tarzan stories to "a huge and largely male audience, to whose deepest emotions tales of 'righteous violence in primitive settings' appealed" (de Camp 21). The self-righteous, vigilante hero mastering primitive environments and peoples manifests in American fiction as a paradox of invulnerable vulnerability. "Civilized" masculinity is used to justify white male domination of "primitive" or "effeminate" others, while simultaneously "primitive" masculinity is used to justify male domination of "primitive" and "effeminate" others. David Savran traces white male victimization and masochistic masculinity through cinematic exemplars like Sylvester Stallone's Rambo character from the *First Blood* film series with roots in the same ethos as that of the Wilhelm Grimm Fairy Tale "Iron John" published in 1812 and famously analyzed by Robert Bly in *Iron John: A Book About Men* in 1991 stressing figures of primordial virility and the essence of "the Wild Man."

Robert E. Howard's Conan stories spring from a reservoir of tropes for civilization and

savagery that links them to the lineage of speculative fiction and American superhero myth forerunner Edgar Rice Burroughs, creator of Tarzan and John Carter of Mars among a pantheon of lesser-known pulp adventurers. Conan and Tarzan involve a shared imaginary invested in “primitive masculinity” (Deane 210). This concept overturns the supposedly valorized ideal of white “civilized” behavior in favor of the supposedly savage and combative qualities of “debased” colonized peoples and made synonymous with people of color in the works of Howard, Burroughs, and Rudyard Kipling to name a few authors capitalizing and exploiting perceptions of exoticized, so-called primitive masculinity in their literature. These were the first authors to feature the noble savage archetype as the central character to the story and not merely a sidekick, though a racialized, Eurocentric ancestry was an essential component of Howard’s Conan and Burroughs’s Lord Greystoke [Tarzan] (Moorcock 81). This imperialist ideal proposes human past as “a repository of repressed but desirable qualities that aid in superior civilizations’ triumph over their rivals” (Carrington 181). The subsequent appropriation of the “barbarian figure” otherwise treated as “Other” to white, Eurocentric civilization forms a justification for the violence of primitive masculinity narratives. This characterization for Howard’s protagonists coupled with his deployment of lost world settings speaks to his demonstrations of white supremacist masculinist narratives.

The traditional masculine logics of these paradoxically civilized yet barbaric figures of “perfect man” situate them at the top of a natural hierarchy where they must be free and unencumbered, alone and wild. Conan’s wildness is the basis of his virility, power, and authority. To civilize such a character is to emasculate them (Kasson 212). This explains why Howard vehemently aligns Conan to a white supremacist masculinist ideal of barbarism diametrically opposed to the feminizing logics that define civilization for Howard.

While the project of tracing the lineage of American vigilante heroism has been

undertaken by the likes of Richard Slotkin, there remains an untapped space to do so with respect to marginalized genres and perspectives.²⁵ Slotkin, for example, focuses on the frontier and Western narrative with fewer references to fantasy and sword-and-sorcery from his studies with the exception of treatments of Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes* and *John Carter of Mars* series. Sword-and-sorcery characters share a lineage as part of continuing discourse of romantic primitivist masculinity that has been received by readings of some modernist and contemporary critics. This discourse portrays American vigilante heroism as what Savran would call "white mythology" that is heterosexist and not inclusive of gay men, African-American men, or any of a wide range of masculinities outside this limited perspective.

Criticism of Howard's fiction by his contemporaries includes speculative fiction author and essayist L. Sprague de Camp's *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers* published in 1976. Howard told the tales of Conan as nonlinear, episodic entries from his life. The first published entry, "The Phoenix on the Sword," depicts King Conan nearing old age as he faces a threat that reignites his waning vigor as well as his memories of the adventures he experienced over the course of his life:

Howard envisaged the entire life of Conan, from birth to old age, and made him grow and develop as a real man does. At the start, Conan is merely a lawless, reckless, irresponsible predatory youth with few virtues save courage, loyalty to his few friends, and a rough-and-ready chivalry toward women. In time he learns caution, prudence, duty, and responsibility, until by middle age he has matured enough to make a reasonably good king. On the contrary, many heroes of heroic fantasy seem, like the characters of Homer...to have the enviable faculty of staying the same age for half a century at a stretch (de Camp 162).

L. Sprague de Camp also praises Howard's economic style as one that achieved a taut and

unobtrusive prose style utilizing short to medium sentences of simple construction as popularized by the modernist works of Hemingway in the 1930s.

Despite de Camp's praise for Howard as the most widely read and influential heroic fantasy author apart from J.R.R. Tolkien, de Camp critiques Howard's works as juvenile efforts of exaggerated vulgarity and unrefined juvenilia. This is the manner by which he characterizes pulp fiction of the time:

Critics have blamed Howard for his fictional violence and for his immaturity in human relationships. Conan swaggers about the Hyborian stage, bedding one willing wench after another; but he views women as mere toys. True, he at last takes a legitimate queen, but as an afterthought. Howard was evidently as uncomfortable with love as the small boy who, viewing a Western, is loudly disgusted when the hero kisses the heroine instead of his horse (164).

Howard's contemporary critics argued that what small popularity he enjoyed while publishing was indebted to juvenile infatuation with provocative, easily consumable pulp fiction featuring violence and sex. One critic stated that the tales managed to "project the immature fantasy of a split mind and logically pave the way to schizophrenia" (Hays 34). The trends in vogue at the time were concentrations on sex, the antihero figure, and prejudiced worldviews conforming to cultural standards of the moment. It is because of such trends argue de Camp, Hays, and others²⁶ that an increasing interest in Conan and similar sword-and-sorcery characters brought about the revival in the form of pastiche and adaptations of the character in the forms of the Marvel Comics series *Conan the Barbarian* in the early 1970s and the Schwarzenegger film of the same name in the early 1980s.

Michael Moorcock's twenty-first century perspective of sword-and-sorcery (what he terms epic fantasy) and the Conan character of Robert E. Howard similarly conforms to de

Camp's analysis of a predilection for romantic primitivism: "Howard seems to be the first fantast to make a noble savage (or at least a sceptical [sic] barbarian) the central character of an epic fantasy" (82). Moorcock views Conan as an impulsive, violent character prone to melancholy affectation with a deeply rooted mistrust of civilization while extolling barbarism. Channeling de Camp's implication of paranoia as a driving force for the character's motivation, Moorcock notes how Conan "forever detect[ed] plots to seduce him" (83). Moorcock implicates juvenile psychological affectation in his critique of the Conan character: "It was the personality of Conan – moody, savage, boyish in his loyalties and his treatment of girls – which bound all this stuff together and made the stories somehow credible. If Conan was a projection of Howard's fantasy self, he was a very successfully-realized one" (84). For Moorcock, all romantic heroes are wounded children and perhaps the reason why "juvenile fantasies" are enjoyed by fans of Tolkien and Howard. He cites the quasi-children of hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*, actual children like Ged in Ursula Le Guin's *Wizard of Earth-Sea*, and Howard's Conan as the means for fantasy readers to seek "permanent adolescent." (84). Moorcock's ultimate condemnation of sword-and-sorcery "juvenile fantasies" strikes home with the proclamation that "Savages and naïve barbarians often substitute for actual children in popular fiction. The pretend-adults like Conan might claim adult motives – simple greed, sexual lust, calculated vengeance – but emotionally they are pre-pubescent" (85). Moorcock's less ostensibly biographic criticisms of Howard echo those of de Camp and form a tradition for fantasy critics and authors to decode meaning from sword-and-sorcery for use by critics and authors less entrenched in the genre.²⁷

There is substantial debate as to whether speculative fiction can be a progressive genre at all when one considers the genre's history of exploitation and marginalization:

In general, American SF has assumed a permanent hierarchy of superiors and inferiors,

with rich, ambitious, aggressive males at the top, then a great gap, and then at the bottom the poor, the uneducated, the faceless masses, and all the women. The whole picture is, if I may say so, curiously "un-American." It is a perfect baboon patriarchy, with the Alpha Male on top, being respectfully groomed, from time to time, by his inferiors...I would like to see the Baboon Ideal replaced by a little human idealism, and some serious consideration of such deeply radical, futuristic concepts as Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. And remember that about 53% of the Brotherhood of Man is the Sisterhood of Woman (Le Guin 19).

Le Guin correctly points out the tendencies for a genre claiming to concern itself with potential and possibility are to treat marginalized "others" as faceless masses alien and separate from those at the top, specifically addressing "rich, ambitious, aggressive males" as superiors at the furthest end of the spectrum from "the poor, the uneducated, the faceless masses, and all the women."

Influential critic Susan Gubar and co-author of *The Madwoman in the Attic* assesses speculative fiction as an overtly masculinist genre. Writing in 1980, Gubar refers to speculative fiction of the 1930s and 1940s as "even more decidedly masculine domains than they are today" (Gubar 16). Gubar references Ursula Le Guin's notion that the separation of male speculative fiction from female speculative fiction is the hostility of the alien expressed through stereotypes of male representation in opposition to the female capacity for identifying with nationalized, racialized, and localized outsiders with genuine interiority.²⁸ Gubar and Le Guin share a interpretation of the genre as largely catering to white supremacist masculinism, though it goes without saying that Gubar and Le Guin denounce proponents of those meanings and their cultural "value" of edifying white men at the expense of women and people of color.

In the study of women's science fiction written by Eric Leif Davin titled *Partners in*

Wonder: Women and the Birth of Science Fiction 1926-1965, Davin challenges the myth that there were no women writing science fiction prior to the late 1960s and early 1970s when “a group of feminist writers led by Joanna Russ and Ursula Le Guin stormed the barricades, and women began writing (and sometimes editing) science fiction” (Davin 2). Davin asserts that science fiction has been viewed as a production of white supremacist capitalism privileging androcentric perspective to the deliberate exclusion of women. Davin’s thesis is that early years of speculative fiction are possibly more tolerant and progressive than generally believed. There are a number of studies that support Davin’s argument by exploring works of marginalized authors denied representation in anthologies of speculative fiction based on gender, race, and additional factors including ableism.²⁹

The dominant reading held by critics like Joanna Russ, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Susan Gubar suggests that sword-and-sorcery texts are written for the audience that they are decoded to empower: white men attracted to these fantasies. Conan the woodsman is on display in such tales as “Beyond the Black River” and “The Black Stranger” where his keen knowledge of the “brutal Savage Man” antagonists of the Picts helps the delicate civilized communities that dare to settle the perilous frontier in a literary parallel to James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*. Conan’s background links him to the Wildman figure with an eternal bond with nature and “unrefined masculinity” yet still contrasted with his “antithesis, the brutal Savage Man” (Wicks 72). Dominant readings of the Conan character decode the representation of vigilante heroism as a masculine figure in a liminal state between the natural world and the civilized world who manages to outwit and to survive threats from both: “Howard’s stories uphold patriarchal racial and gender conventions which, eventually, are the very basis of Western civilization. With this in mind, it is not so surprising that Conan moves every stone to regain his kingdom and subsequently attempts to cement his position by marrying and starting a

dynasty” (Bulgozdi 211). Howard’s trajectory for the Conan character is to climb from the hierarchal bottom of society to ascend to the throne of a kingdom in his later years of life. The dominant decoding of this chronicle is the perceived reflection of a white supremacist masculinist’s conception of self in a culture of patriarchal racial and gender conventions.

Howard was an exemplar of a genre preoccupied with adolescent glorification of juvenile fantasy. This dominant reading of sword-and-sorcery is as a genre of literature functioning as a means of attaining and inhabiting romantic primitivism or a return to the mythical abstraction of a savage, naturalist freedom to act upon basic impulses rejected by the tenants of civilized society: sexual lust, premeditated vengeance and entitled violence. The case for alternative readings of the genre was nonexistent until some twenty-first century critics finally found a means of advancing the discourse with their own reception of sword-and-sorcery as a site of transformative gender dynamics and discursive potential.³⁰ There is a growing reception of these texts as opportunities to critically examine how they communicate messages of power, identity, and perhaps matters of race and gender above all.

21st Century Critical Receptions of Howard’s Sword-and-Sorcery: A Feminist Conan?

Twenty-first century sword-and-sorcery critics display more interest in exploring the complications of gender performances in these texts. Critic Stephen Wall explores the traditional perceptions of Howard’s masculinity in figures like the Conan character. Wall seeks to:

understand the place of masculinity in Conan fandom, an effort to determine if the hypermasculine image of Conan the Barbarian prompted or halted discussions of the subject amongst readers. What it has become is an example of the pervasive presence of a dominant Western doxa of manliness that attempts to root itself in all things of which men are a part. This construction gives the impression of a monolithic tradition that

forbids any kind of dissent or dialogue (Wall 174).

Sword-and-sorcery male protagonists are often conceived as muscular, brooding hulks that know only combat and sexual conquest of the women they rescue (Emmelhainz-Carney “By This Pen” 7). Of course, these caricatures do not occur in every installment of the genre, but they are abundant enough to influence conceptions of sword-and-sorcery as a whole.

Contemporary critics are keenly aware of the necessity for genuine identification and representation for readers to relate to fictional characters and the literary worlds they populate. Readers from a contemporary perspective decode twenty-first century concerns for possessing “value in a society increasingly concerned with the variability of identity and inspiring representation” (Emmelhainz-Carney 8). This manifests as an oppositional reading to the view that Howard’s texts merely promote romantic primitivist masculinity and condone a white supremacist masculinist point of view.

According to Howard critic Jonathan Helland: “The masculinity presented in these stories is traditional and not in itself transgressive, but the urgency with which it must be proved and tested against others undermines the principles of essentialism with which patriarchy is justified” (Helland “Texas Fists” 55). Helland rightly emphasizes the fact that the hegemonic masculinity of Howard’s fiction is perpetually at odds with other paradigms of gender performance. This traditional masculinity distances itself from feminizing logics, including the presentation of civilization as decadently feminine while barbarism is presented as ruggedly masculine. Judith Butler explains that gender is a performed “act” that is susceptible to parody and exaggeration challenging the supposed nature of gender as a biological and sociological essence that is singular and absolute. Howard’s fiction calls attention to the ethereal nature of our gender structures and beliefs. An oppositional reading of the Conan character decodes masculinity that may not be positioned as the empowered subject of hierarchal dominance.

Helland's assertion that the masculinity presented in these narratives must always prove itself therefore exhibits no entitlement to power but an entitlement to seeking or questing for power not yet proven or attained. In other words, the dominant decoding of these stories as perpetually concerned with the worthiness of traditionally masculine modes for displaying or attaining power may be decoded as actually displaying the hollow nature of these pursuits: there is a perpetual unworthiness of traditionally masculine modes for displaying or attaining power. These texts may not simply glorify masculine entitlements to heroic performance as much as they underscore those apparent entitlements for their arbitrary and incompetent actuality.

Twenty-first century critic Nicole Emmelhainz-Carney has worked extensively with Howard's fiction and nonfiction in both critical and theoretical capacities. In "Strange Collaborations," she examines the collaborative nature of pulp magazine writing that contributed to a system of interdependent authors in the early twentieth century establishing and developing popular literary genres that are still relevant to today's cultural landscape, including sword-and-sorcery. For example, the letters that formed the basis of the communication between weird fiction³¹ authors that influenced their writing during the time of their correspondence. This collaboration resulted in a shared mythology and robust philosophical discourse amongst the contributors to *Weird Tales* magazine in the 1920s and 1930s that included sword-and-sorcery innovators Robert E. Howard and C.L. Moore.

Emmelhainz-Carney's work viewing sword-and-sorcery as a feminist genre cites Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* as an essential twenty-first century lens for critically engaging with Howard's sword-and-sorcery. Gender is not an unavoidable, biologically determined fact. It is a construction linked to one's status, behavior, and adornment. These narratives create worlds where men and women can liberate themselves from socially imposed constraints of gender

identity that men are expected to perform traditional masculinity and women are expected to perform traditional femininity.

Twenty-first century critics finding new decoded meanings in sword-and-sorcery are frequently cautious not to outright ignore the racism, sexism, and genderism of patriarchal society reflected in its cultural productions in the twentieth century and beyond. Winter Elliott argues for complex readings of the Conan character and his world separate to some extent from real-world biases:

Not all of his stories or characters, male or female, can be reduced to mere chauvinistic stereotypes. Nor should they. Conan and the women offer an interesting commentary upon gender set against this backdrop of barbarians and cities; as is so frequently the case, civilization and culture become associated with masculinity. By default, then,

Conan – and his women – occupy a surprisingly feminine role in the texts (Elliott 52).

By situating masculine and feminine as polar opposites, Elliott emphasizes the apparent dichotomy of power relationships in cultural production. Conan constantly oscillates within these power relationships as the dominator (traditionally masculine) and the dominated (traditionally feminine):

Perhaps surprisingly, women play a significant role in most of the Conan narratives. Although they're typically scantily clad, and indeed occasionally bereft of clothing altogether, these lovely ladies function as more than eye candy – although their not-so-subtle presence on the covers of *Weird Tales*...did nothing to harm sales figures. Of course, the women of the Conan tales are highly sexual and often objectified, vulnerable to rape and exploitation. But the Conan tales also include dangerous women, useful women, powerful women. Like Conan, these women and their softer sisters exist in an uneasy relationship with their societies. Conan's rejection of civilization and its cultural

mores fits his self-identification as a rugged individual, but he is also able to defend his individuality with brute strength. In contrast, Howard's world of free warriors, kings, and slaves seems to lack a clear place for the female characters that resist slavery, sexual or otherwise. Nonetheless, some of those women mirror Conan's desire for individual agency and power. Like Conan, they navigate a line between social conformity and powerful corruption, but, for them, that line is much more uncertain (Elliott 58).

Female objectification is an undeniable facet of the Conan narratives. There are few *traditional* figures of female empowerment and plenty of those that discourage female autonomy. No mothers. No grandmothers. Some queens and princesses. A sister or two. The occasional sorceress or witch. However, the number of *nontraditional* figures of female empowerment is staggering. There are numerous warriors, pirates, outlaws, and rebels. These characters are rivals turned allies to Conan as is the case with the pirate warrior leader Bêlit, Queen of the Black Coast, or the mercenary outlaw pirate Valeria of the Red Brotherhood. They are presented as love interests for Conan as the protagonist, but where this role is performed by Bêlit in "Queen of the Black Coast," Valeria is only ever Conan's equal and never romantically "conquered" by the barbarian hero. When she defeats the villain of "Red Nails," she arguably inhabits the primary performance of heroism in that narrative.

These are roles coded to be masculine performances in the reality of 1930's American society. In Howard's sword-and-sorcery, these roles can be masculine, feminine, or on a spectrum in between. They can be male-dominated or female-dominated. They are crafted in such a way as to acknowledge the socio-cultural norms and dictates that reify socio-cultural expectations of reality, but they are not necessarily limited to the mere re-inscription of those dictates. Howard critic Winter Elliott argues: "Male chauvinism; teenage sexism; even testosterone poisoning – all such flippant; dismissive comments could easily arise from a

superficial reading of Robert E. Howard's tales of Conan the Cimmerian" (Elliott 51). Such superficial readings present Howard's Conan character as an emblem of white supremacist masculinity constituted by cultural productions encouraging hegemonic masculinity³² and the toxic meanings endemic of patriarchy. Critics like Winter Elliott argue that Howard's presentations of gender are somewhat more complex than readings have previously allowed. Elliott's critique does not deny the fact that logics of sexism and gender binary that are particularly demeaning to women exist in Howard's fiction. However, Elliott also proposes that there are opportunities to read transgressive figurations of female characters

At times the critical approach of Winter Elliott comes across as conflicted. While advocating audacious interpretations of Howard's texts beyond the superficial readings of "male chauvinism; teenage sexism; even testosterone poisoning," Elliott also struggles to move beyond the romantic primitivist masculinism that previously defined the genre. Elliott notes how women are frequently sexualized and objectified in Howard's works:

Even the two strongest women in any of the Conan tales, Bêlit of "Queen of the Black Coast," and Valeria of "Red Nails," are defined by their sexuality. Bêlit, notably described by a frightened ship-master as the "wildest she-devil unhanged," reasonably goes about her pirate's life wearing only a "broad silken girdle," and Conan's first reaction to sight of her...is sheer, unadulterated lust, which Howard poetically renders as "a beat of fierce passion." He has the same reaction to Valeria, although he's known her for a while. With Valeria in "Red Nails," Howard goes to some lengths to substantiate her femininity, adamantly describing her as "all woman, in spite of her bearing and her garments" (58-59).

Elliott's arguments for Howard's Conan stories as a complex locus for dynamic representations of gender not limited to the reading that they advocate sexist and genderist oppression are

occasionally undermined by her admissions to the contrary as Howard's works also message meanings that substantiate white supremacist masculinism.

Additional oppositional interpretations of Howard's women read them as "Viking warrior" comrades rather than sexually objectified love interests to satiate the protagonist and his readers. Howard scholar Patrice Louinet rejects the romantic pairing of Conan and Bêlit in favor of positioning the characters as comrades-in-arms:

Bêlit is everything but the 'true love' of Conan, and their relationship is anything but romantic. She is first and foremost a greedy and power-hungry warrior, whose relationship with Conan is tinged with more than a hint of sadomasochism. The funerals Conan organizes for her in the last paragraphs are not those of a heartbroken lover, but those a Viking warrior would offer a fallen shield-brother or sword-sister. It is the fellow warrior Conan mourns the most, not the lost lover (Louinet 89).

It is of particular interest to note how this critical reading oscillates so freely from characteristic portrayals of Bêlit as both brother and sister to Conan while shying away from associating the character as a lover. This depiction of Bêlit is as a warrior heavily gendered as masculine rather than feminine.

Gender is not a fixed concept in these tales; it is dynamic across these examples of sword-and-sorcery. While Howard exploits racialized, sexualized, and gendered "others," Howard also exploits the patriarchal culture informing his encoding of meaning in his writing and the decoding of meaning by his readers. Howard undermines and subverts those same cultural assumptions and expectations through presentations of the dynamic performances of masculinity and femininity in the Hyborian world regardless of one's assigned sex. While the predominant criticism of these tales which could be viewed as emboldening white supremacist masculinism is completely valid, it is not the only possible critical interpretation. There is a

potential for interpretations of heroic performance that is embedded in our cultural preconceptions of identity be they based on gender, sexuality, or race while gesturing beyond those preconceptions.

Within some sword-and-sorcery works, gender is explored as performative in nature. Masculine and feminine do not necessarily need to conform to culturally constructed expectations although forces within culture are quick to ascribe such roles and mores of acceptable identification and gender performance to objectified bodies. In these works the possibilities available to men and women are sometimes closed, but they can also offer opportunities for these figures to liberate themselves from the constraints of sexism and oppression. Therefore, certain entries of the genre should be read as cultural productions evidencing preconceptions of permitted gender, sexuality, and racial performances, but also capable of gesturing towards undermining those same preconceptions and positing the notion of mythic American heroism as one of possibilities rather than limitations.

Rereading Howard's Setting: The Hyborian Age World

Real-world dichotomy with its many socio-cultural rifts resulting from hegemonic patriarchy are reflected in the fictional worlds of sword-and-sorcery. Some examples of sword-and-sorcery fiction are concerned with hyperbolic contrast between culturally constructed and imposed notions of privilege, entitlement, and ideological power structures that rely on such binary, oppositional logics.

Critic Sami Schalk identifies the unique ability of speculative fiction to defamiliarize real-world assumptions of identity in order truly establish a reflective lens on the effects and impacts of the social categories of privilege and oppression. Schalk discusses the capacity of speculative fiction to imagine current inequalities and injustices in alternative spaces where relations between empowered and disempowered groups are altered or improved. In Conan's

world, people of color are inarguably other to whites and often marginalized or trivialized as less capable, less intelligent, and more barbaric. There are few outliers, and even these are problematic. The crew of Conan's pirate vessel the *Tigress* in "Queen of the Black Coast" is black except for Bêlit and Conan. While the hierarchy of pirate warriors suggests that they are capable comrades to their respective "King and Queen," they are still presented as inferiors and subservient to the tale's protagonists.

Schalk defends her choice of analyzing speculative fiction by asserting how it brings aspects of reality into newly constructed worlds rather than attempting to reflect reality directly. These newly constructed worlds need not be restrained by patriarchal realities and better explore alternative gender identities, roles, and relations. This aids readers in thinking outside the accepted definitions of categories of race and gender, but nonnormative nature of representation in these texts requires nonnormative methods of reading and interpretation (Schalk 23). For example, works of speculative genre fiction foster their own internal logics that must be understood as informing entirely different though imagined cultures with their own value systems. The systems of oppression that exist in the Hyborian world inspire readers to reconsider the operation of those systems in the real world, though they are still germane to the Hyborian Age internalized logics. The fact that human trafficking and slavery for the purposes of sexual exploitation exist in the Hyborian world should not necessarily limit the discursive merits of critiquing narratives set in that world. On the contrary, the ability to read fiction that openly confronts such social evils that are otherwise obscured and disregarded by society demonstrates how Howard's fiction actually performs an important function by conveying real-world horrors they may otherwise not consider.

Just as Sami Schalk challenges the assumptions about (dis)ability, race, and gender and thereby changes the rules of how we read and interpret representations of these categories, I

seek to challenge the assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality that plague sword-and-sorcery in particular. Such assumptions prevent scholars and critics from engaging in critical evaluations of these texts and of speculative fiction as a whole. The nonrealism of such texts actually takes us outside the rules of our reality and focus our attention on how these rules which appear unquestionable, naturalized assumptions are truly worthy of being confronted and challenged. They are “mutable and contextual, rather than fixed” (Schalk 139). The interactions of these categories demonstrate how an intersectional analysis of race, gender, and sexuality can be executed on different sites of analysis within literature.

Conan is linked more to the natural world than to the civilized world. Critic Scott Sanders presents the following paradigm in his analysis of gender and science fiction:

In much of the genre, women and nature bear the same features: both are mysterious, irrational, instinctive; both are fertile and mindless; both inspire wonder and dread in the hero; both are objects of male conquest. Just as men in SF embody consciousness, the agency through which nature knows itself, so women embody fertility, the agency by which nature reproduces itself. Men belong to the realm of mind; women and nature to no-mind. Women are the bearers of life; men are life’s interpreters and masters. This series of contrasts might be charted as follows:

Science	Mental	Rational	Conscious	Deliberate	Male
Nature	Physical	Emotional	Unconscious	Instinctual	Female

(42).

This chart presents a dominant reading of masculinity in speculative fiction as intellectual, reserved, calculating, and firmly belonging to the realm of “the civilized.” However, even critics like de Camp and Moorcock would argue against these descriptors evidencing Howard’s sword-and-sorcery. Conan is a being of the natural world, purely physical, instinctual and given to fits of untamed emotion and melancholy affect prone to irrational paranoia as noted by de

Camp and Moorcock. According to the logic of these parameters presented by Scott Sanders, Conan is indicative of the feminine in Howard fiction more than the masculine.

Conan's body is his identity, which Howard fetishizes by fixating the reader's gaze upon it. In "The Tower of the Elephant," he is presented as "the hard, rangy lines of his powerful frame, the broad heavy shoulders, the massive chest, lean waist, and heavy arms. His skin was brown from outland suns, his eyes blue and smoldering; a shock of tussled brown hair crowned his broad forehead. From his girdle hung a sword in a worn leather scabbard" (80). Conan's physicality is his identity. Even Conan's hypermasculinity, the phallic symbol of the sword hanging from his waist as a representation of his gendering, is secondary to his fetishized body. Conan fits the mold of the "other" from postcolonial criticism:

the Other is cast as corporeal, carnal, un-tamed, instinctual, raw, and therefore open to mastery, available for use, for husbandry, for numbering, branding, cataloging, description or possession. Images of the body of the Other are conflated with those of the land, unexplored land too being seen as amorphous, wild, seductive, dark, open to possession (Boehmer 269-270).

Conan acts as the other for the civilized characters of the stories and for the readers decoding meaning from Howard's works. He is defined by his body as an instinctual, sexual being. While he is narratively opposed to being mastered, his fetishized being is a product for consumption by voracious readers devoted to the romantic primitivist masculinity myth as noted in dominant readings of speculative fiction illustrated by the sword-and-sorcery criticism of de Camp and Moorcock.

Some sword-and-sorcery texts critically engage matters of race, class, sexuality, and gender. Even literary assumptions of "high-brow" and "low-brow" art enter into these patterns of contrast. Lovecraft and Howard debated the relative merits of "realistic" literature concerned

with real motives for people's behavior with that of "fictitious" literature concerned with human nature through what Lovecraft termed "artificial convention and childish oversimplification" (532).³³ A similar exchange unfolds between these authors in their civilization versus barbarism debate. Lovecraft argued that civilization offered the most prosperity to the most people in terms of their health and wealth while Howard argued that it only provided a veneer of sophistication concealing the true corruption and cruelty between so-called civilized people. The essentialist notion that there are only two options for each of the many aspects of existence and that these polarities operate in diametric opposition to one another further evidences our cultural obsession with a binarism falsehood that there must always be a "superior" and an "inferior." As is the case with speculative fiction, the superior is automatically linked to masculinity, the stoic, barbaric, physically powerful. The inferior is automatically linked to femininity, the sensitive, civilized, physically vulnerable. Sword-and-sorcery cultural productions are indebted to these essentialist notions, but they can also uproot them and blatantly defy them as well.

Howard and his contemporaries exist conceivably as separate from literary "Modernism" as producers of "popular fiction" rather than "literary fiction." However, twenty-first century pulp fiction studies critic Jason Ray Carney argues that weird fiction authors existed in tandem with modernism through the expression of what he terms "shadow modernism." These shadow modernists like Howard "expose a fundamental, hidden quality of the cosmos and our relationship to it: the ordinary is ephemeral; the strange, though occasionally domesticated, conversely, is eternal" (Carney *Weird Tales of Modernity* 16-17). Carney isolates ekphrastic tendencies in the work of Robert E. Howard and two of his contemporaries (Clark Ashton Smith and H.P. Lovecraft). The ekphrasis being in this case not only the ephemerality of the ordinary as the locus of philosophical questions like the function of

art and the brevity of life, but also the ability for works of art or literature to establish an intertextual discourse concerning the ephemerality of the ordinary. This ordinary/extraordinary dichotomy (modernists/shadow modernists) is but the first of the allegories of contrasting forces at odds with one another that is illustrated in the production of speculative fiction narratives which express tendencies to bifurcate abstractions of reality: ordinary versus extraordinary; sword versus sorcery; order versus disorder; civilization versus barbarism; elitism versus populism; masculine versus feminine. In actuality, these forces are not in mere diametric opposition as superficially perceived. They are always interdependent and frequently transposable if not interchangeable.

Jason Ray Carney argues that the positioning of cultural elites who became the faces of Modernism (Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, etc.) and the Shadow Modernist producers of commodity or mass culture (Robert E. Howard, H.P. Lovecraft, Seabury Quinn, etc.) occupies an:

adversarial stance taken by populist writers like Howard who wrote thrillers for the pulps. Accordingly, [Howard and other writers] experienced this cultural alienation acutely and were even artistically nourished by it to the extent that they internalized it and thematized it in their fiction. In the case of Howard's sword and sorcery characters, the archetypical violent warrior or barbarian confronting the sorcerer or rogue spinning magic is nothing less than the pulp writer reaching to the alienation inherent in a confrontation between experimental art and the discursively uninitiated (117).

Robert E. Howard expresses concerns reflecting this adversarial stance towards his contemporary, Modernist authors in a December 1932 letter to H.P. Lovecraft where he describes such cornerstones to the nexus between realism and modernism as Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald as worth nothing more than "three ringing raspberries [razzes]" (*A Means to*

Freedom 510). Howard's sword-and-sorcery highlights the tense and antagonistic relationship between low art and high art in the twentieth century. The barbarian hero figure of these tales becomes an avatar for the pulp writer as nonintellectual proletarian like a naked barbarian bringing steel against magical elements of sorcerers as fiends of misrepresentation and distortion. The low art author manifests as an allegory for the blunt swordsman against the high art mysticism of the elitist modernists.

Carney seizes on the inherent theme of alienation in works of shadow modernism as indebted to apparent class conflict of high art versus low art or elitism versus populism. While this is certainly true in weird fiction including Lovecraft's "The Outsider," in sword-and-sorcery alienation is also due to the conforming of individuals to social structures expressing rigid representation and intolerance of anything other to the androcentric dominance endemic of patriarchy and white supremacist masculinity with its fundamental prejudices.

The Conan character is dynamically gendered, tapping into socio-cultural conceptions of both masculinity and femininity. Readings of the character exclusively as some form of hypermasculine, heterosexist he-man are reductive. For example, the character becomes a poet and an author seemingly in his later life when he reflects on his younger years as shown in "Queen of the Black Coast." Conan is not just a stoic, athletic, boisterous, adventurer. He also has the capacity to be contemplative, emotional, and expressive. Howard's writing of the character and of the world rely on preconceived notions of gender that operate through traditional assumptions of masculinity as stoic, powerful, and active and traditional assumptions of femininity as communicative, sentimental, and passive. The gender roles that he exhibits are more complicated than the romantic primitivist ideal to which the character is often associated. In this sense, he exhibits traditional femininity as easily as he exhibits traditional masculinity.

Howard's description of Hyborian Age kingdoms is not devoid of social critique and

satire. Conan describes his ascent to the throne of Aquilonia as an opportunity to free the people of that nation from the cruelty of its noble class. He explains while confronting the kings of neighboring kingdoms Ophir and Koth as they offer compensation for his abdication of the throne: “I found Aquilonia in the grip of a pig like you – one who traced his genealogy for a thousand years. The land was torn with the wars of the barons, and the people cried out under suppression and taxation. Today no Aquilonian noble dares maltreat the humblest of my subjects, and the taxes of the people are lighter than anywhere else in the world” (Howard “The Scarlet Citadel” 50). Conan expresses concern for social wellbeing and freedom of the proletariat. Vigilante Western heroism from which Howard’s Conan descends characteristically distrust societies that prioritize the rights of the bourgeoisie over the rights of the common people.

Howard’s Hyborian Age setting is not concerned with human rights or social justice. The black eunuch soldiers of “The Scarlet Citadel” watch over Conan’s cell when he is imprisoned there. One taunts Conan by asking him what compensation the king would offer for his freedom. However, this soldier’s brother was killed by Conan during one of his past adventures and he refuses each offer: “Aye, you white dog, you are like all your race; but to a black man gold can never pay for blood. The price I ask is – your head!” (55). While blacks are depicted as savage and inferior in the Hyborian Age, whites are depicted as avaricious and scheming. Racial inequity and intolerance are seeded into Howard’s fictional world and function to underscore inequity and intolerance of racism in reality. The ugliness of Howard’s world reflects the ugliness of the real world. While Howard implies that the Conan hero figure certainly tied to logics of white supremacist masculinism is a means of liberating masses from social evils, Howard also acknowledges that such evils are born from traditions of white supremacist masculinism including corruption, avarice, and materialism.

The enslavement of women is one such white supremacist masculinist evil in the Hyborian setting. In “The People of the Black Circle,” the governor of Peshkauri declares “women have been stolen and men stabbed between the fort and the city” (294). The economy of commodified bodies in this setting is officially one where men are entitled to freedom in a world of ceaseless power struggles and violence while women are the commodity to be possessed and exchanged by men. Further sexism is evidenced by moments of stereotyping and prejudice that diminish women. In this same tale the governor of Peshkauri, Chunder Shan, acquiesces to his princess’s command to enlist the aid of Conan “for part of his wisdom was the knowledge that a woman in such an emotional tempest is as perilous as a blind cobra to any about her” (295). The Hyborian setting is one of pronounced sexism, discrimination, and oppression, but beneath these surface observations exist a profundity to ostensibly simplistic Hyborian politics.

In the “People of the Black Circle,” scheming forces alter the power dynamics of the kingdom of Vendhya by assassinating its ruler and attempting to capture the princess Yasmina. Yasmina is a woman of action. As soon as her brother, the king, is assassinated, she moves swiftly with her retinue to secure Peshkauri and broker an alliance with Conan’s forces to stand against the enemy she suspects of murdering her brother. After rescuing her at the conclusion of the tale, Yasmina has an exchange with the barbarian demonstrating mutual respect:

“You are the Devi again,” he said, grinning fiercely at the gold-clasped gossamer robe she had donned over her hill-girl attire, and awed not at all by the imposing array of chivalry about him. “I have you to thank for the lives of some three hundred and fifty of my rogues, who are at least convinced that I didn’t betray them. You have put my hands on the reins of conquest again.”

“I still owe you my ransom,” she said, her dark eyes glowing as they swept over him.

“Ten thousand pieces of gold I will pay you-”

He made a savage, impatient gesture, shook the blood from his knife and thrust it back in its scabbard, wiping his hands on his mail.

“I will collect your ransom in my own way, at my own time,” he said. “I will collect it in your palace at Ayodhya, and I will come with fifty thousand men to see that the scales are fair.”

She laughed, gathering her reins into her hands. “And I will meet you on the shores of the Jhumda with a hundred thousand!”

His eyes shone with fierce appreciation and admiration, and stepping back, he lifted his hand with a gesture that was like the assumption of kingship, indicating that her road was clear before her (355).

By shifting from the damsel-in-distress plot device to a military commander posturing before a potential rival, Yasmina discards a genrefied feminine role for one that is distinctly masculine. While the final line amounts to Conan permitting Yasmina to leave and implies his approval before she can exercise her agency, this exchange depicts two separate commanders of armies honoring one another as rivals yet equals.

Yasmina’s handmaid, Gitara, who is secretly betraying Yasmina to her enemies, is also a woman of action who commands her lover, Khemsa, to satisfy her own motivations towards glory:

“Aid yourself!” she cried fiercely. “Shake off your yoke!”

“You mean – disobey my masters?” he gasped...

“Aye!” she shook him in the fury of her emotion. “You too are a magician! Why will you be a slave, using your powers only to elevate others? Use your arts for yourself!”...The treasure of the Vendhyan kings will be ours as ransom – and then when

we have it in our hands, we take Korbhul, oust the Turanians from the hills, and send our hosts southward; become king and queen of an empire!" (300).

While Khemsa has supernatural powers that can be used against his enemies, it is Gitara who is the driving force of these scenes and the orchestrator of the antagonist plot against Yasmina and Conan. Khemsa is submissive and dominated by the will of Gitara, who is described as masculine in a direct characterization of her athleticism: "She ran straight for the city, her garments tucked high. She did not follow the open road, but cut straight through fields and over slopes, avoiding fences and leaping irrigation ditches as surely as if it were broad daylight, and as easily as if she were a trained masculine runner" (299). For Howard, Gitara is literally female but performs masculine functions in the narrative in addition to explicit descriptors in the simile of her as "a trained masculine runner."

While escaping from the dungeons of the Scarlet Citadel, Conan crosses paths with an "anthropomorphic bulk" that makes him physically sick to look upon. This vague, shadowy horror laughs horribly as he flees from it with a sound that he identifies with one that emanates "from the fat lips of the salacious women of Shadizar, City of Wickedness, when captive girls were stripped naked on the public auction block...Conan felt vaguely that he had looked on blasphemy against the eternal laws of nature" ("The Scarlet Citadel" 57). This monstrous entity is unsettling for Conan because of its repugnant appearance and its conjuration of human trafficking to his mind. The literal loathsomeness of the creature reflects the metaphorical loathsomeness of society that encourages and rewards debased treatment of human beings as sexual objects and property. It is the loathsomeness of a symbolic representation of sexual slavery that repels Conan in this instance.

This does not exempt Conan from the social evils of sexual objectification and exploitation of women in particular. In "The People of the Black Circle," Conan commodifies

the princess Yasmina in a conversation with his allies:

“A rare prize, Conan; fit mate for a chief of the Afghulis.”

“Not for me,” came Conan’s answering rumble. “This wench will buy the lives of my seven headmen, blast their souls” (307).

Conan often belittles women as objects of physical attraction or commodities to be owned or bartered. Howard builds up antihero qualities of the character though he wavers in the extent to which he commits to those qualities. Traditional heroic qualities of valor and a twentieth century code of chivalry imposed upon a prehistoric character in a prehistoric setting always triumph. The paradigm is reflected in the infamous final scene of “Jewels of Gwahlur” when both a chest of jewels and another love interest, Muriela, are simultaneously falling into the distant depths of a precipice and Conan chooses to rescue Muriela and allow the treasure to be lost. Conan ultimately values the free will and choice of female characters in his world, though Howard’s lofty vision of the Conan character as one that is inevitably chosen by his female counterparts regardless of such allowances truly undermines any benevolence these scenes would otherwise evince.

Despite the Conan character’s arguably capable of gesturing towards more progressive conceptualization of the agency of women, he is still a product of a male chauvinist world encouraging male chauvinist institutions and perspectives. When Arpello seizes the capital city during the capture of Conan in “The Scarlet Citadel,” Arpello takes control of Conan’s “pleasure-palace.” “Conan’s girls” are seized by the usurper: “The people muttered at the sight of the royal beauties writhing in the brutal hands of the iron-clad retainers – dark-eyed damsels of Poitain, slim black-haired wenches from Zamora, Zingara, and Hyrkania, Brythunian girls with tousled yellow heads, all weeping with fright and shame, unused to brutality” (68). Here the narrator praises one white masculinist supremacist domination of women while condemning

the other. He denigrates women with identifiers of damsels, wenches, and girls. This effectively deprives them of dignity. The only caveat here is that the women of Conan's pleasure-palace are portrayed as being there willingly and enjoying their treatment in his supposedly magnanimous care. These women differ from the amorphous monstrosity reflecting sexual slavery by virtue of the fact that they still possess agency. This demonstration of the free will of "Conan's girls" may be a minor stipulation in parsing through the sexism of Howard's sword-and-sorcery that always edify white masculinist supremacism as much as they may be perceived to deconstruct such hegemonic patriarchal forces.

Rereading Howard's Direct and Indirect Characterizations of Femininity, Masculinity, and Beyond

Socio-cultural dichotomy of gender performance and identity occurs in several examples of sword-and-sorcery. This contrast resonates within sword-and-sorcery hero figures like Conan who are understood by their characterizations as remorseless, primal and capable of brute violence and power while subversively characterized as sensitive, contemplative, and capable of creativity and emotional depth. For example, Howard's Conan the Cimmerian is at times a warrior, a mercenary, and a thief, but he is at other times a poet, an orator, and a philosopher. The character has a reception-aesthetic essence of potentiality beyond the monolithic hypermasculine stereotype, though it is often ignored by dominant readings reducing the character to merely reflecting traditional masculine expressions of hegemonic patriarchal power.

The seemingly hypermasculine and traditionally masculine logics that inform sword-and-sorcery may not exist at all according to critics including Linda Barlow who describes the romance hero as a fundamental expression of femininity:

dark and brooding, writhing inside with all the residual anguish of his shadowed past,

world-weary and cynical, quick-tempered and prone to fits of guilt and depression. He is strong, virile, powerful, and lost. Adept at many things that carry with them the respect and admiration of the world (particularly the world of other males), he is not fully competent in the arena where women excel – the arena of his emotions, which are violently out of control...The romantic hero is *not* the feminine ideal of what a man should be. The romantic hero, in fact, is not a man at all. He is a split-off portion of the heroine's own psyche which will be integrated at the end of the book (Barlow 49).

Barlow's description, though intended for the male romance novel hero, is applicable to Howard's sword-and-sorcery archetype. Barlow's theory of "The Androgynous Writer" is that the romance genre functions as a reconciliation of both feminine and masculine aspects of the producers of a text's meaning on the part of its assumed female readership. Howard's sword-and-sorcery masculine archetype necessitates an equally dynamic reading as a dialectic reconciliation of the feminine and masculine aspects of its own heroic figuration and of its hegemonically categorized readership assumed to conform to culturally dictated formulations of personhood as essentialized notions of one's identity. The romance novel is perhaps representative of the myth of the archetypal coming-of-age journey towards psychological integration: "This may explain why male readers and reviewers have responded so negatively to the genre...What we are dealing with in romance novels is the inner material of feminine consciousness, passionately and defiantly expressed by women who have been oppressed and repressed by the forms and strictures of the patriarchy" (Barlow 52). The psychological integration achievable in Barlow's paradigm for the romance genre is not biologically gender specific nor genre specific. It operates within some works of sword-and-sorcery as well. Sword-and-sorcery stories can challenge gendered assumptions of heroes and even empower alternative figurations of heroism including male femininity and female masculinity.

The fact that Conan is also a wordsmith and an orator is easily overlooked. Evidence for Conan as poet rests primarily in the prologues of various Conan stories where the character inhabits the role. This refutes assumptions of the character representing little more than hypermasculine escapism or wish-fulfilment as easily anticipated figurations of traditional masculinity including Conan as warrior, pirate, mercenary, or aspiring king. However, the content of poems like *The Road of Kings* in particular serves as a reminder that he is a product of edified, systemic white supremacist masculinism and perpetuates the power structures and prejudices of patriarchy while simultaneously compromising those same notions. This is not to assume that the logics of reality necessitate that all poets are feminine or expressing femininity. However, it does assume that the logics of sword-and-sorcery worlds like those of Howard do depict poetry as an expression of feminine performance. In these instances, one could argue that Conan is feminine and performing male femininity.

In “Queen of the Black Coast,” verses from “The Song of Bêlit” introduce the five separate sections of the story that are clearly indicative of Conan’s grief for his lost lover murdered at the climax of the tale. The verses culminate in “The Funeral Pyre,” which reads:

Now we are done with roaming, evermore;
No more the oars, the windy harp’s refrain;
Nor crimson pennon frights the dusky shore;
Blue girdle of the world, receive again
Her whom thou gavest me.

The Song of Bêlit (Howard “Queen of the Black Coast” 32)

Conan expresses his heart’s lament as he mourns the loss of Bêlit in this final verse of “The Song of Bêlit.” What Conan values above all else as a prototypical sword-and-sorcery hero is freedom. Conan is the opportunistic wanderer who wants nothing more than to adventure freely

across the lands of the world. The loss of Bêlit equates to his loss of freedom: “Now we are done with roaming, evermore” (32). Howard’s fundamental signification of the Conan character is as an emblem for liberation and unadulterated freedom. This is evidenced by his thematic infatuation with romantic primitivist masculinity summated in his valuation of the merits of a life of “barbarism” rather than a life of “civilization.” Conan’s relationship with Bêlit is defining to his character’s being as losing her is akin to losing their “roaming,” or their freedom. Conan’s mourning for the symbol of his freedom complicates readings of Howard’s stories that women are merely objectified, sexualized ornamentations. Bêlit is still largely a plot device to advance Conan’s heroic narrative, but she symbolizes the freedom that is so integral to the character rather than the site of obligation assumed of sword-and-sorcery romantic companions.

Conan as poet is displayed in various Hyborian Age stories in the form of similar stanzas serving as introductory expressions that characterize the protagonist and set the mood for each tale. For example, in “The Phoenix on the Sword,” the second section of the story begins with:

When I was a fighting man, the kettle-drums they beat;
The people scattered gold-dust before my horse’s feet;
But now I am a great king, the people hound my track
With poison in my wine-cup, and daggers at my back.

The Road of Kings (Howard “The Phoenix on the Sword” 26).

The poem establishes the paranoid mindset of the protagonist, the assassination plot of the story, and perhaps less transparently that Conan is a sentimental character concerned with his waning popularity. It is a threat to the sovereignty of his status implying that there is greater adoration from the masses for those without power than those with power. A man at the bottom of the

hierarchal structures of society is welcomed and even adored while one at the pinnacle of such structures is targeted and “hounded.” The fifth and final section of this tale opens with another stanza from *The Road of Kings* suggesting Slotkin’s concepts of the vigilante hero figure:

What do I know of cultured ways, the guilt, the craft, and the lie?

I, who was born in a naked land and bred in the open sky.

The subtle tongue, the sophist guile, they fail when the broadswords sing;

Rush in and die, dogs – I was a man before I was a king.

The Road of Kings (Howard “The Phoenix on the Sword” 35).

Slotkin’s notion of “regeneration through violence” is manifested here as Conan equates violence with living in a more natural state. Glorified violence, here identified as sword-fighting, is the ultimate equalizing force for Conan and the sole means for self-valuation, particularly when coupled with the previous stanza alluding to Conan’s more honored and popular days in his youth as a “fighting man.” This desperate attempt to demonstrate one’s hypermasculinity and possession of their own supposedly manly essence: “I was a man before I was a king,” are perhaps expressions of impotence as words rather than the actions they valorize. This stanza also values Conan’s humanity over his social status, which bears an intriguing connection to another *The Road of Kings* stanza from another of Howard’s Hyborian Age stories called “The Scarlet Citadel.”

“The Scarlet Citadel” features a stanza from Conan’s *The Road of Kings* poem as well, though it complicates the previous portrayals of violence by conflating the violent life with the proletariat life. It presents a juxtaposition between a life of ease with a life of toil:

Gleaming shell of an outworn lie; Fable of Right divine –

You gained your crowns by heritage, but Blood was the price of mine.

The throne that I won by blood and sweat, by Crom, I will not sell

For promise of valleys filled with gold, or threat of the Halls of Hell!

The Road of Kings (Howard “The Scarlet Citadel” 49).

The implication here is class animosity stemming from the bifurcation between proletariat and bourgeoisie. Where the working class is merit-based: earning by virtue of “blood and sweat,” the upper-class is spoils-based: earning through heritage and commodification of value. Conan states that he will not exchange what he earns through the efforts of his labor for any promise of material wealth.

Howard’s construction of Conan’s identity is more nuanced than critical readings have previously allowed, but to what extent? Isn’t this boasting protagonist seeking regeneration through violence and displaying vigilante heroism (what some may call anti-heroism) still just another expression of romantic primitivist masculinity? Howard’s fiction, however, is not without humor and satire of such production. Despite painstaking efforts to build up Conan as a “flawless” physical and moral specimen of noble heroism, Howard does not shy away from opportunities to demonstrate the arrogance and ignorance implicit in glorifying such entities. In “The Scarlet Citadel” as Conan triumphantly arrives to literally cast the usurper of his throne from the great tower of his capital city, Howard presents a vision of spectacular lunacy:

In the streets the fighting milled and eddied, plumed helmets and steel caps tossed among the tousled heads and then vanished; swords hacked madly in a heaving forest of pikes, and over all rose the roar of the mob, shouts of acclaim mingling with screams of blood-lust and howls of agony. And high above all, the naked figure of the king rocked and swayed on the dizzy battlements, mighty arms brandished, roaring with gargantuan laughter that mocked all mobs and princes, even himself (70).

One cannot help but appreciate the dark humor of this scene as a naked man rocks and sways restlessly high above a city in revolt laughing uncontrollably at those in joy and in sorrow, at

nobles and at commoners, and most importantly at himself. Howard's work reads as self-aware as it ridicules its own indulgence in inflated spectacle through the Conan characters self-abasement of the same hypermasculinity and patriarchal notions to which the character and author appear to desperately cling.

Masculine characters need not perform hypermasculinity as the only means of attaining the genre's dominantly read estimable formulation of the romantic primitivism. Conan is not simply the impassioned, brutal yet noble savage seeking conquests both sexual and violent. Conan is also sentimental and deliberate. While he identifies as a man, Conan performs masculine and feminine functions in the texts and is arguably more feminine than masculine in many instances according to models presented by twenty-first century criticism proposing oppositional readings of speculative fiction.³⁴

Conan the Cimmerian is an adventurer of "gigantic melancholies and gigantic mirth, to tread the jeweled thrones of the Earth under his sandaled feet" ("The Phoenix on the Sword" 23). This infamous description of the character in Howard's first published Conan story, "Phoenix on the Sword," is rife with ambiguity. Surface readings of this prologue read it as evidence of the character's barbaric violence; the capacity for brutality destined to vanquish all opposition and plunder the "jeweled thrones" of the Hyborian world's kingdoms. However, the mention of Conan's melancholies connotes emotional distress. The detail that his feet are sandaled is also somewhat pedestrian, regardless of Howard's attempts to evoke Conan's tales as potential entries in a "sword-and-sandals" historical fiction genre foreshadowing the popularity of Biblical epics. Were Howard to describe Conan's feet as armored or booted, it would connote the character's warrior nature. The fact that his feet are sandaled connotes the character as a wanderer. The dominant reading of "to tread the jeweled thrones of the Earth under his sandaled feet" has long been interpreted as Conan's conquests. Alternative reading of

this line implies the character as a voyager or traveler. This alternative reading better contextualizes the body of Conan stories which follow this initial entry as each presents the character in a range of occupations including thief, pirate, mercenary, soldier, or king, but never technically as a conqueror. The character boasts of partaking in conquest and serving in invading armies, but no story illustrates such an event in the course of its plot. Conan sometimes finds himself standing in the aftermath of battles, but these scenes almost always display his survival amidst utter defeat. Conan is only ever narratively available to the reader in the somewhat more noble roles of defender and avenger, though it is important to note that he is frequently an opportunistic burglar as in “The Tower of the Elephant” or “The God in the Bowl,” which introduce some measure of anti-heroism to the vigilante figure.

Ever the hero, Conan’s battles are acts of defense or vengeance against corrupt or treacherous kings, malicious sorcerers, or rowdy savages threatening helpless victims in need of the barbarian’s intervention. For example, “The Scarlet Citadel” opens on the scene of a battlefield after then King Conan’s resounding yet valiant defeat. Conan’s Aquilonian forces are surrounded by those of an enemy (the king of Koth) and a traitorous ally (the king of Ophir). Conan is portrayed as morally superior through this victimhood to Ophir’s treachery. The defeat is valiant because it is presented as if it is some measure of victory, at least as far as it evidences the warrior’s superior martial prowess: “he had hurled his horsemen against the oncoming host, had seen the knights of his foes in their shining mail go down before his lances, had torn the opposing center to bits, driving the riven ranks headlong before him, only to find himself caught in a vise...His attackers drew back from his desperate savagery, panting and livid” (45). Conan loses the battle, but only because the terms of the engagement are unfairly massed against him. His innate superiority is on display, yet cursory readings disregard the fact that the language of triumph obscures utter ineptitude.

Conan himself, sword and all, appears extravagantly, exaggeratedly male, just as the women in all of their naked glory seem thoroughly female. But, as Judith Butler pointed out in the seminal *Gender Trouble*, drawing on the work of Foucault, among others, both sex and gender are socially constructed. Valeria and Conan are biologically female and male...But are they *socially* male and female? (Elliott 66)

The superficial tropes indicating an individual as masculine or feminine are strategically leveraged in Howard's fiction as the "extravagantly, exaggeratedly" masculine or feminine are displayed before the reader only to have those apparently obvious identifiers and expectations subverted. Conan as sword-and-sorcery hero icon is a sex symbol who transgresses heteronormative preconceptions of male sexuality as evidenced in numerous Conan tales. For example, "The Tower of the Elephant," is a story that "precisely mirrors the adventures of the adult Conan, only transformed from hetero-erotic to graphically homoerotic" (Dennis 59). This particular tale features erotic imagery that may be perceived from a gay male gaze including a thinly veiled sex act involving a phallic symbol of the tower.

"The Tower of the Elephant" published in 1933 is one of the few Hyborian Age stories featuring Conan in his youth. It commences in a carousing den in Zamora where a trafficker of women boasts of his trade: "I'll show them how to steal wenches; I'll have her over the Zamorian border before dawn, and there'll be a caravan waiting to receive her. Three hundred pieces of silver, a count of Ophir promised me for a sleek young Brythunian of the better class...And is she a pretty baggage!" (80). The narrator establishes the normalized objectification and commodification of women in this setting and that Conan is a foreigner to this land and to its customs. The den is a place filled with "rascals gathered in every stage of rags and tatters – furtive cut-purses, leering kidnappers, quick-fingered thieves, swaggering bravoos with their wenches, strident-voiced women clad in tawdry finery" (79). While rascals,

cut-purses, kidnappers, thieves, and bravoos need not necessitate gendering, women are labelled as “wenches” or described as “clad in tawdry finery” to communicate their salacious status associated with their sex:

Like Conan, almost all of the women in the stories find themselves poised between individual needs and social boundaries. Like Conan, these women seek freedom – sometimes literally, as many of the female characters in the stories are or have been slaves and harem members. Yet, while Conan’s relationship with civilization appears fairly clear-cut, the women in the stories experience a much more complicated rapport with a civilization that both permits their enslavement and abuse and sometimes offers qualified protection and support. (Elliott 58)

The boastful human trafficker embodies the narrative viewpoint of a world where women are naturally commodified. This character is questioned by a young Conan seeking to enter the Tower of the Elephant to steal its treasure. The two trade insults and enter a shoving match that ends with Conan dispatching the trafficker. Conan avenges the insult to the woman’s dignity, though Conan himself boasts about possessing women on countless occasions. The Conan character gestures towards evolving beyond white supremacist masculinity, though he ultimately fails by virtue of being complicit and invested in such systems of exploitation and objectification.

To further consider textual analysis of Howard’s “The Tower of the Elephant,” Howard presents an image of Conan that persists in the character’s various incarnations over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: “He had discarded his torn tunic, and walked through the night naked except for a loin-cloth and his high-strapped sandals. He moved with the supple ease of a great tiger, his steely muscles rippling under his brown skin” (83). This popularized conception of the character as nude or semi-nude, musclebound man is proposed as a primitivist

ideal of manliness: “Conan’s body is also displayed, also fetishized, and also subject to fantasy. Unfortunately for Conan, that fact puts him in a distinctly *female* position, for Western civilization, Howard, and the amorphous civilization of the Hyborian Age define femininity as vulnerability, as body on display” (Elliott 67). The sensual description of his supple movement and steely, rippling muscles evokes John F. Kasson’s work on the modernist obsession with physical perfection and white male bodies.

Sexually charged language and symbols erect the Tower of the Elephant that Conan must scale to procure the treasure from within:

The shimmering shaft of the tower rose frostily in the stars. In the sunlight it shone so dazzlingly that few could bear its glare, and men said it was built of silver. It was round, a slim perfect cylinder, a hundred and fifty feet in height, and its rim glittered in the starlight with the great jewels which crusted it. The tower stood among the waving exotic trees of a garden raised high above the general level of the city. (84)

Howard evokes undeniable phallic imagery with this shaft in the form of a round, slim, and perfect cylinder. Conan teams up with another thief, Taurus, who happens to be searching the tower for points of entry that same night. Once in the garden they scale the tower together, “Taurus threw the line with a smooth, ripping motion of his mighty arm. The hook curved upward and inward in a peculiar manner, hard to describe, and vanished over the jeweled rim. It apparently caught firm, for cautious jerking and then hard pulling did not result in any slipping or giving” (89). The “smooth, ripping” action of Taurus’s “mighty arm” coupled with the motions of curving, jerking, and pulling evoke erotic imagery of the masturbatory sexual act. The fact that they are unified in this endeavor implies that the act is less Taurus working alone than working in tandem with his companion.

Later, Conan finds the captive entity for whom the building is named. The elephantine

Yog-Kosha has “the body of a man, naked, and green in color; but the head was one of nightmare and madness. Too large for the human body, it had no attributes of humanity. Conan stared at the wide flaring ears, the curling proboscis, on either side of which stood white tusks tipped with golden balls. The eyes were closed, as if in sleep” (94-95). This naked, manly body with massive head dominated by a curling proboscis flanked by the prominent golden balls further accentuates the sexually provocative nature of this passage and “The Tower of the Elephant” as a whole. The plot devices, characters, and setting accompany layers of phallic symbol upon phallic symbol.

Howard’s sword-and-sorcery stories of Conan the Cimmerian have been aggressively labelled as “non-feminist” by certain white supremacist masculinist critics. Jonathan Bowden’s view of Conan is as a heroic outsider with a clear code of masculine barbarism; a brand of masculinity that he claims is “completely demonized and rerouted in contemporary liberal life” (Bowden 71). Conan’s moral code prevents him from completely exploiting an objectified sexual economy of women that exists in the Hyborian Age world. Winter Elliott cites the example from “The Vale of Lost Women” where Conan declines Livia’s offer of her body as payment for her rescue:

Conan’s refusal to completely participate in or accept the sexual economy of women bears noting...The idea of a feminist Conan should evoke a rueful grin, but it’s nonetheless true that Conan’s ethical code forces him to exclaim that ‘I never forced a woman against her consent’...the character is intelligent enough to see that accepting Livia’s price for her body would amount to rape, and he says as much: ‘I saw that to hold you to your bargain would be the same as if I had forced you’ (Elliott 63-64).

Rather than impose his will upon her, Conan encourages Livia to exert her own will. The Hyborian world setting is portrayed as one that advocates for the sexual objectification of

women. Women are often referred to as slaves, possessions to be exchanged, and trophies to be won. They are objects for the exploitation of their male superiors, yet Conan refuses to commit to such exploitation while simultaneously enshrouded in exploitative logics. He diminishes and objectifies women in his speech, but in his actions, he refuses to dishonor or to disgrace them. While there is evidence for contemporary interpretations of the “feminist Conan” among his damsels-in-distress, superior examples of this phenomenon are likely to be found amongst his female protagonists and antagonists.

Robert E. Howard was unlike many of his male counterparts in the weird fiction publishing scene where sword-and-sorcery was conceived and thrived. Notable authors including Seabury Quinn, H.P. Lovecraft, and Clark Ashton Smith wrote almost exclusively male protagonists. Lovecraft and Smith scarcely included female characters at all. When female characters were included as was frequently the case in Quinn’s works, they served as props or trophies reliant on male action to be used or won. Robert E. Howard peopled his fiction not only with abundant female characters, but female protagonists as well as antagonists across both fantasy and historical adventure stories. These included most notably Dark Agnes from “Sword Woman” and Red Sonya of Rogatino from “The Shadow of the Vulture,” in addition to those who shared the spotlight with Conan the Cimmerian in the Hyborian Age stories such as Valeria of the Red Brotherhood in “Red Nails” and the titular “Queen of the Black Coast,” Bêlit of the pirate vessel *The Tigress*. Howard features strong female characters as equals, complements, and supplements to Conan in demonstrations of how he was unafraid of having men share the spotlight with women.

Howard’s female antagonists are frequently represented as witches or sorceresses tapping into mystical abilities that confound and offend the sensibilities of his protagonists. In Howard’s “A Witch Shall Be Born,” the antagonist Salome surreptitiously deposes her identical

twin sister and seizes the crown of Khauran from Taramis. The exposition of Salome's origin story details her tragic upbringing as an infant discarded by the roadside but rescued by a caravan leader:

they passed close by, and their leader saw me, and recognized the scarlet crescent on my bosom. He took me up and gave me life...Well, this world contains all I desire – power, and pomp, and glittering pageantry, handsome men and soft women for my paramours and my slaves...Now it is mine by right of possession. (73)

The anecdote legitimizes her character by explaining the realistic circumstances of her identity and creating an air of respect for a character otherwise serving as a force of evil attempting to seize the power she was denied by her birthright (Madden 84). There is a profound rationale to her desire for power and to her possessive avarice.

The exchange between Taramis and Salome in the beginning of the tale reflects empowered women wielding agency perhaps uncharacteristic of popular perceptions of sword-and-sorcery. When Salome questions her sister's refusal of the mercenary warlord, Constantius, Taramis affirms: "Certainly I refused!...Do you, an Askhaurian princess yourself, suppose that the queen of Khauran could treat such a proposal with anything but disdain? Wed a bloody-handed adventurer, a man exiled from his own kingdom because of his crimes, and the leader of organized plunderers and hired murderers?" (Howard "A Witch Shall be Born" 74). Salome, on the other hand, elects to ally with Constantius and his army to seize the kingdom and to condemn Taramis to the dungeon. As ruler of the kingdom, Salome masquerades as her twin sister and wields her agency ruthlessly:

Her private life is a scandal – or perhaps 'private' is not the correct term, since the queen makes no attempt to conceal the debauchery of her court. She constantly indulges in the most infamous revelries, in which the unfortunate ladies of the court are forced to join,

young married women as well as virgins. She herself has not bothered to marry her paramour, Constantius, who sits on the throne beside her and reigns as her royal consort...The wretched kingdom groans under exorbitant taxation, the farms are stripped to the bone, and the merchants go in rags which are all that is left them by the tax-gatherers (88).

Salome is not controlled by Constantius; she wields him like a tool or a weapon. Where Taramis views rule in terms dependent upon patriarchy, Salome represents a liberated vision of female leadership. Salome's control of Constantius is best evidenced in the scene of the rape of Taramis:

Constantius smiled with a glint of strong white teeth under his thin mustache. "Very good; but you would not deny me a little – ah – amusement first?"

"Not I! Tame the scornful hussy as you will." With a wicked laugh Salome flung her sister into the Kothian's arms, and turned away through the door that opened into the outer corridor. Fright widened Taramis' lovely eyes, her supple figure rigid and straining against Constantius' embrace...Salome, hurrying along the corridor outside, smiled spitefully as a scream of despair and agony rang shuddering through the place (76-77).

Salome is the focal point of this scene directing the fates of each of the principal characters. This distribution of power begins when Constantius asks for permission to "amuse" himself with the captive Taramis. Salome authorizes the transgression: "Tame the scornful hussy as you will." The will of Constantius depends upon that of Salome. As the "supple" Taramis is overpowered by him, the final scene of this section returns to Salome's spiteful smile over the sound of her sister's scream. Rather than fixating on the physical subdual of Taramis, the implied rape is redirected in this moment to emphasize Salome's role as the true perpetrator of

this contravention. Various combinations of crone and temptress archetypes are not necessarily novel creations for the sword-and-sorcery genre. However, Howard's characters surpass mere gendered typifying by virtue of complicating assumed or predicted socio-cultural expectations of their expression or performance of gender.

Dark Agnes first appears in "Sword Woman," as Agnes de Chastillon. Through this character Howard critiques gendered identity roles assigned by socio-cultural expectations of those she encounters in her travels. Set in an exaggerated vision of Medieval France, Agnes escapes her arranged marriage in the village where she was raised by an abusive father to become a swashbuckling renegade and mercenary.

Agnes is treated like a trapped animal to be tamed through marriage to Francois in accordance with the wishes of her father. The backstory of Agnes's father as a controlling force of her life reflects her greater conflict with the expectations of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Her life had been defined by these expectations. Her father drags her through the forest to the village where she is later dragged to her wedding ceremony: "Be silent!...He will be a prop to my old age I can not much longer guide the plough handles. My old wounds pain me. Your sister Ysabel's husband is a dog; he will give me no aid. Francois will be different. He will tame you, I warrant me. He will not humor you, as have I. You will eat stick from his hand, my fine lady" (Howard 332). Brute, physical violence is the conveyor of masculine authority in "Sword Woman." It is the means by which women are exchanged between men and reformed into patriarchal expectations of submissive femininity.

The sister, Ysabel, becomes a tragic figure in this tale without the ability to inflict brute, physical violence. Ysabel slips Agnes a dagger in hopes that she will choose the only other option that she believes available for her sister and for women in general: suicide. In this moment, Agnes fully realizes her options are to either marry and submit to the expectations of

her sexed and gendered identity or to end her own life. When the blade touches her hand, a third choice opens to empower her means of escape in the sword-and-sorcery tradition of swashbuckling hero seizing her own means to freedom (Emmelhainz-Carney “By This Pen” 11). If the ability to inflict brute, physical violence is the only means by which one commands respect and authority in the world, then Agnes commits to mastering the nuances of this potential by using the language and currency of masculine power.

Dark Agnes’s escape from these men is also an escape from hegemonic patriarchy. The dagger that she receives becomes a symbol empowering her ability to sever those dictates and achieve freedom:

with the dagger...she is able to act in surprising ways that allow her to take control of the situation...Agnes is able to allow her innate sensibilities to direct her actions and life, she is not only able to get the better of men who would try to force her back into a prescribed gender performance she does not want, but she can then assert her desires to live her life through a certain kind of performance that enacts her true self (Emmelhainz-Carney “By This Pen” 16).

By killing the husband who would possess her and fleeing from the father who would exchange her as property, Agnes is reborn with the agency to determine her own existence. She seeks an existence no longer susceptible to patriarchal structures and expectations which function to disable her capacity for skill, proficiency, or knowledge which she associates as masculine traits. She seeks an existence beyond the dictates of women as objects, birthers, or beings that are necessarily domestic or sentimental. Her expression of traditionally masculine characteristics results in expectations of the privileges afforded to men. However, Agnes continues to experience social interactions that confine her identity based upon gender expectations of her assigned sex. Only by participating in the signs and symbols of a patriarchy

privileging traditional masculinity can she achieve the fulfillment Agnes believes she is owed. When she dons a man's garments to complete a disguise while evading capture by her father, Agnes describes how "The garments felt strange to me, but gave me a freedom I had never experienced in petticoats" (338). In hegemonic patriarchal society, a masculine appearance is empowering. Performing masculinity codifies one's status and contains a sense of independence and self-determination denied to those who express femininity.

One key passage isolated by Emmelhainz-Carney gestures towards readings of female masculinity in "Sword Woman" to achieve self-determination and actualization despite living in a world dictated by expectations of one's gender performance. When she speaks with Guiscard de Clisson and declares that she is weary of being a woman, he scoffs at her. He views her as a woman assuming the guise of a man. Agnes argues that she is more than her physical appearance:

Ever the man in men! Let a woman know her proper place: let her milk and spin and sew and bake and bear children, nor look beyond her threshold or the command of her lord and master! Bah! I spit on you all! There is no man alive who can face me with weapons and live, and before I die, I'll prove it to the world...You deny me a place among men? By God, I'll live as I please and die as God wills, but if I'm not fit to be a man's comrade, at least I'll be no man's mistress ("Sword Woman" 350).

Agnes asserts an identity that transgresses socio-cultural expectations of women. She claims no man can best her in combat, but no man will consider her their equal. Denied any privileges afforded by the traditionally masculine performance of her sword woman persona, she refuses to be reduced to a woman's identity in patriarchal terms as a "man's mistress." Discouraged from being a comrade and defiant of being a mistress, Agnes identifies as a persona that is neither:

She asserts her gender performance as something beyond the common identifiers of man and woman, something of a third gender. Moving beyond the expectations of both men and women allows the character of Agnes to finally experience her life the way she knew it should always be (Emmelhainz-Carney “By This Pen” 18).

While Emmelhainz-Carney astutely points out the dynamic nature of gender performance in the Dark Agnes stories of “Sword Woman,” “Blades for France,” and the incomplete “Mistress of Death,” the characterization of this protagonist is not necessarily a third gender as it is the exemplification of a state traversing and transgressing socio-culturally defined gender expression. Dark Agnes is a female who recognizes a world that privileges and empowers masculine performance over feminine performance. She is a female who indulges and embraces her masculinity: she is a living embodiment of female masculinity.

Agnes is betrayed by her first male companion named Etienne who encourages her to wear man’s clothing to elude her pursuers. When she tracks him down, he asks her why she spared his life. She answers: “Because of the woman in me...that I can not bear to hear a helpless thing beg for life” (Howard 350). Howard clearly embraces stereotypical formulations of gender by suggesting that a woman has more capacity for sympathy or empathy than a man, but this is also an acknowledgement that individuals are neither entirely masculine nor feminine but exist on a spectrum of gender performance that at times accentuates what is traditionally perceived as masculine or feminine and at other times de-emphasize what is traditionally perceived as masculine or feminine.

At the conclusion of the tale, Agnes reunites with Etienne as he appeals for her to forgive him and to embrace him as a comrade:

“Will you not let me ride to the wars with you?”

“As comrade, no more,” I said, “Remember, I am a woman no longer.”

“As brothers-in-arms,” he agreed.

I thrust forth my hand, and he his, and our fingers locked briefly (Howard 363).

This final scene demonstrates the culmination of Agnes’s quest for self-discovery and affirmation as she not only recognizes her own female masculinity, but she is capable of gaining the acceptance of others to embrace Agnes’s female masculinity.

While few critics have discussed sword-and-sorcery female protagonists in terms of female masculinity, a growing number have defined sword-and-sorcery protagonists as representing feminist beliefs and concerns. Robert E. Howard critic Jamie Madden goes so far as to label Howard as having “feminist” and “pro-woman” ideals:

Howard demonstrates his feminist and pro-woman ideals using the literary techniques of metaphor, foreshadowing, and anecdotes in “Queen of the Black Coast,” “Iron Shadows in the Moon,” and “A Witch Shall be Born.” The reader can interpret these pro-women ideals through the Romance Mythos conventions of quest, ultimate death struggle, and symbolism of the antagonist” (Madden 80).

The conventions of this Romance Mythos are similar to those of Arthurian romance from which modernist fantasy and sword-and-sorcery are thematically indebted: the formulaic quest plot culminating in an ultimate death struggle with an allegorical antagonist embodying the flaws of the protagonist or of a perceived defunct society as a whole.

Madden examines the empowerment of female characters to dictate aspects of the quest convention in tales like “Queen of the Black Coast” as Bêlit takes the lead and determines the frontier for the adventurers to explore: “This is the river, which is Death...I believe there is a city somewhere on that river, I have heard tales of giant towers and walls glimpsed afar off by sailors who dared go part-way up the river. We fear nothing: Conan, let us go and sack that city!” (12). Bêlit’s use of metaphor relating the river to death serves as a testament to the

character's fearlessness. As she takes command in their romantic relationship and aboard The Tigress, Bêlit strays far from Howard's otherwise typical damsel-in-distress archetype (Madden 81). The power relations between these characters shift and position Bêlit above her male comrade as she is his superior and the ultimate authority aboard the vessel where she is practically worshipped by the crew and by Conan himself. This relationship ends when she is hanged by the winged ape creature guarding the treasure of the ancient city on the river of Death.

The climactic death struggle occurs at the apex of the action of "Queen of the Black Coast" as the apparent spirit of the deceased Bêlit comes to Conan's rescue by intercepting his foe:

In one mad instant she was there – a tense white shape, vibrant with love fierce as a she-panther's. The dazed Cimmerian saw between him and the onrushing death, her lithe figure, shimmering like ivory beneath the moon; he saw the blaze of her dark eyes, the thick cluster of her burnished hair; her bosom heaved, her red lips were parted, she cried out sharp and ringing as the ring of steel as she thrust at the winged monster's breast (30).

Howard foreshadowed this scene in a previous dialogue between Bêlit and Conan when she prophesizes her return from death to aid him during his mortal struggle. Where a number of the Conan stories conclude with the damsel-in-distress owing her life to Conan for his daring last-minute rescue (Examples include "The Slithering Shadow," "Jewels of Gwahlur," and "The Devil in Iron"), in this instance Conan owes the spirit of Bêlit for saving his life. For Madden, this moment makes Bêlit the true hero of the story. This debt serves as a quintessential moment of empowerment for a female character that subverts expectations of a genre perceived as exclusively serving the androcentric essentialism of building confidence through heroic

representation for those benefiting from status as males that conform to traditional masculinity.

Critics of sword-and-sorcery often struggle to rationalize the overt sexuality of characters like Bêlit as anything but representative of sexist exploitation and oppression. Elliott views Bêlit's sexuality as emblematic of the objectification and marginalization of women who are constantly positioned as sexually vulnerable. Elliott cites the passage from "Queen of the Black Coast" where Bêlit is "defined by her sexuality...notably described by a frightened ship-master as the 'wildest she-devil unhanged,' [and] goes about her life wearing only a 'broad silken girdle'...Conan's first reaction to sight of her – and her breasts – is sheer, unadulterated lust, which Howard poetically renders as 'a beat of fierce passion'" (Elliott 59). The dominant reading of female sexuality in sword-and-sorcery is preoccupied with female bodies and female agency as ciphers of coercion, exploitation, and utility through a cipher of decoding meaning shared by proponents of white supremacist masculinism. An alternative cipher provided by Linda Barlow's notion of "The Androgynous Writer" suggests female sexuality can operate independent of this functioning as a display of domination and objectification:

If the heroine's primary role in the myth serves to encourage us to cope with our fears, the hero's is to provide us with the means of facing and accepting the angry, aggressive, sexually charged components of our personality that we have been taught to associate with masculinity. From childhood, males have more outlets for their aggressions...They also have more outlets for their sexuality, the expression of which is not only tolerated but encouraged. Females, on the other hand, are instructed from childhood to control, repress, or even split off their aggressive and erotic drives. Where does all that energy go? (Barlow 49-50).

Barlow suggests that the romance novel functions as an outlet for women's aggressive sexuality and erotic drives. The sword-and-sorcery narrative is generally understood to be an outlet for

the aggressive sexual and erotic drives for men. Both of these views presume biologically gendered types amidst their respective readers. Perhaps both genres can retain this function of serving as an outlet for sexual and erotic energies regardless of the gendered assumptions of their readers. Perhaps romance novels and sword-and-sorcery equally capitalize on sensuality, scenes and situations that exploit reductive, objectifying and even pornographic visions of bodies in order to achieve titillation and sexual arousal.

Perhaps presumptions of female sexuality based on the repression and divestment of sexual drives ought to be challenged. Bêlit functions as a foil for Conan. The characters punctuate one another through the perceived contrast that they present; both powerful and independent when separate at the beginning of the narrative. Conan is wildly fleeing a city from which he has murdered a judge attempting to wrongfully convict him of a crime. Bêlit is the proclaimed pirate queen who is practically worshipped by her shipmates. They raid up and down the coast indiscriminately when they chance upon the ship upon which Conan serves. It is at this point that they become fiercely codependent and risk losing the untamed freedom so fundamental to their individual personae:

In the best romances, we are just as emotionally engaged with the hero as we are with the heroine. We feel his anger and understand his pain. And we sense that the reason the heroine is so powerfully attracted to him, despite his many faults, is that he is her shadow – the dark side of herself that she denies and projects outwards. It has been argued that psychological integration depends on encountering the shadow and accepting it. If the romance novel teaches a woman to love anybody, the person she must learn to love is herself’ (Barlow 49).

The feminine and masculine consciousnesses messaged by readings of both genres (romance and sword-and-sorcery) are passionately and defiantly craving realization of taboo desires

seemingly only attainable through the consumption of sensational, escapist fiction.

Howard's female heroes are captivating in part because of their ability to transgress masculine and feminine expectations of heroic typecasting. One of the most prominent of sword-and-sorcery female heroes is Valeria, introduced in the final Conan story published in the year of Howard's death in 1936. This character represents a last evolution of female rescue objects transitioning into fully realized exemplars of sword-and-sorcery heroism. Published like the majority of Howard's Conan stories in the serialized pages of *Weird Tales* magazine, "Red Nails" tells of two equally capable and daring adventurers that meet in the jungle and join forces to survive the threats of a pursuing dragon and of a lost civilization degrading from centuries of dissolution and infighting: Conan the Cimmerian and Valeria of the Red Brotherhood. The city of Xuchotl is the setting for this conflict as warring tribes of the same people fracture into the Xotalanc and Tecuhltli to battle eternally within its deteriorating walls.

Valeria is not another swooning princess destined to succumb to Conan's charismatic wiles. Where Conan typically boasts of his physical prowess or cunning to the women he encounters, he approaches Valeria with caution and respect: "No living man could disarm Valeria of the Brotherhood with his bare hands. He scowled, his sensations a tangle of conflicting emotions...He knew if he came any nearer her sword would be sheathed in his heart. He had seen Valeria kill too many men in border forays and tavern brawls to have any illusions about her. He knew she was quick and ferocious as a tigress" (Howard "Red Nails" 510-511). While Valeria depends on Conan to rescue her at the conclusion of the tale, she is the one who slays her captor, the witch Tascela. Conan admits that Valeria is as fluent in the language of violence as that which typically defines the sword-and-sorcery hero. Their representation as equals solidifies "Red Nails" as a tale of gender dynamism where the characters embody transgressive gendered identities. Valeria is herself an expression of female masculinity who

wields traditionally masculine capacities for demonstrating her warrior and mercenary capabilities that rival even Conan's.

Valeria decries, "Why won't men let me live a man's life" (509). Valeria is gendered feminine by her civilization and therefore is denied the privileges of masculinity which she performs and inhabits in her true persona. Conan similarly yearns for inclusion in the world of civilized men that he is consistently denied by being labelled as barbarian and outsider. He simultaneously desires civilization while he is repelled by his perception of civilization. He seeks a crown and a kingdom of his own while aggressively demonstrating that he wants to maintain his own moral code as the codes of civilization are intrinsically corrupt. This reading of Howard's tale suggests that the women of the Conan stories reflect his status back at him in their mutual definition as other (Elliott 63). Just as Valeria is capable of expressing transgressive gender performance of female masculinity, Conan is capable of expressing transgressive gender performance of male femininity.

"Red Nails" is further complicated by Valeria's interactions with other female characters. Valeria strips a woman naked for attempting to drug her. She dominates the victim in terms both physically and sexually: "The girl-on-girl beating reflects the usual social function of women in the tales to fulfill male desires...Ironically, at the end of the story, Valeria finds herself in the opposite position, no longer the torturer, but the tortured" (Elliott 65). Valeria symbolically regains her freedom and agency by seizing a dagger and killing the woman who stripped her naked and whipped her. This creates a stark juxtaposition between Valeria the victimizer and Valeria the victimized. Valeria truly represents a negotiation between the possibilities of agency and an identity gendered or defined by others. Her identity is structured by her society and by Conan himself who points out that she is definitively feminine despite the fact that she asserts her own masculine identity. Like Dark Agnes, Valeria simply desires a

male-dominated world that no longer obstructs one's ability to live regardless of the policing and categorization of gender expression. Specifically, she pleads for the freedom of a woman to live a "man's life"; a freedom entitled by masculine performance of gender but only enjoyed by those biologically categorized as men.

Conclusion

The cultural logics of the Hyborian world setting establish that to be female is to be subjected to humiliation and domination. Females are presented as vulnerable and powerless. Conan inhabits this role multiple times across the chronicle of his adventures when he is apprehended or ridiculed. He is also subjected to the gaze of the reader and displayed like a commodity with its own sexual economy for the exploitation of others. Like Valeria, he can get revenge after the fact to reclaim his masculinity, but he can't undo the objectification of his body: "He may be *written* male, but he doesn't *perform* a male role" (Elliott 67). Conan and the women of Howard's stories present opportunities for readers to decode meaning of gender constructions and performances within the patriarchal framework of the fictional Hyborian world that reflects like a mirror the oppression of patriarchal, white supremacist masculinist reality.

Chapter 2: C.L. Moore's Jirel of Joiry: Femininity or Female Masculinity?

Introduction

In this chapter I propose a revision to decoding identity and representation in the sword-and-sorcery of Catherine Lucille (C.L.) Moore and a more flexible or receptive notion of identity conceptualization through the literary elements of Moore's utility of setting and character. This chapter first surveys critical receptions contributing to the comprehension of C.L. Moore's sword-and-sorcery texts as conveying either androcentric essentialism (privileging the primacy/authority of masculine perspective) or gynocentric essentialism (privileging the primacy/authority of feminine perspective). It culminates in a reception theory³⁵ critical reading presenting an alternative interpretation of C.L. Moore's tales of Jirel of Joiry and of the sword-and-sorcery genre as a whole as capable of presenting evolving allegories for social standing derived from Moore's deployment of gender, sexuality, and race that categorizes and enforces notions of identity across iterations of cultural production with the capacity to subvert those same sociocultural instituted assumptions.

A literary analysis of the elements of narrative as they occur across Moore's sword-and-sorcery works reveals that there is an intermediary between the apparent androcentric essentialism of dominant criticism of Robert E. Howard's Conan the Cimmerian and the apparent gynocentric essentialism of dominant criticism of Catherine Lucille Moore's (C.L. Moore's) Jirel of Joiry.³⁶ Some sword-and-sorcery narratives express concerns for preexisting social dictates of gender expression and the possibility of disrupting those dictates. These select works of sword-and-sorcery may be interpreted as advocating non-binary gender performance expressing masculine perspective and feminine perspective as equally valid loci of manifesting a form of popular fiction heroism. Non-binary, transgressive presentations of heroism are attainable in this imagined space free from institutionalized constructs reflecting the sexism,

discrimination, and oppression of patriarchally determined society. This is not to say that sexism and discrimination do not influence these works in terms of their authorship and their reception. The pervasive nature of intolerance in American society exposes the fact that white supremacist masculinism informs our reality and our myths. The sword-and-sorcery of C.L. Moore has the potential to transmit the sexist prejudices of the society in which its authors and readers exist while also rechanneling those energies into fictions capable of subverting such institutions and structures.

Catherine Lucille Moore was born in 1911 in Indianapolis, Indiana. As a child she had an appetite for Greek mythology and the fiction of Edgar Rice Burroughs, but it was not until 1931 that she purchased a copy of the pulp magazine *Amazing Stories* and found herself drawn to the allure of consumable adventure fiction and speculative fiction. Her choice to sign her stories as “C.L. Moore” concealed her identity as a woman writer for years (de Camp 270). Editor Farnsworth Wright of *Weird Tales* made the information public in the October 1934 issue when its readers learned that who they assumed to be a man writing of the space cowboy Northwest Smith in such celebrated works as “Shambleau” was in fact a woman (Helland 210).

Wright’s decision was a strategic one as outrage over the nudity and perceived vulgarity of the cover artwork for *Weird Tales* issues became impossible to ignore. Wright decided that in order to placate unruly critics while preserving his “sex sells” business model, he could continue to publish covers featuring female nudity if the knowledge were made public that some of the magazine’s most beloved contributors including author C.L. Moore and cover artist Margaret Brundage were women.³⁷ Wright’s deflection of the publication’s perceived inherent sexism was confronted with a thinly veiled sexist rebuke: If women are the producers of material judged too offensive or too risqué in regards to their presentations of women’s bodies

and sexuality, perhaps audiences will not readily condemn the entire magazine and keep *Weird Tales* in business and safe from censors.

C.L. Moore was a reader and contributor of *Weird Tales*, one of the pulp magazines that featured Robert E. Howard's works of sword-and-sorcery. She wrote to fellow author H.P. Lovecraft praising his talents and those of Howard:

The best weird story I ever read was, I think, your "The Outsider"...And close to that, for me anyhow, runs Robert E. Howard's "Worms of the Earth." Perhaps it was because that was the first of his stories I had read, and brought home to me very vividly the possibilities of that type of fiction, even when it appears in the pulps. I am a tremendous admirer of Mr. Howard's work. At his best he is very near perfection, it seems to me, and even at his goriest and blood-and-thunderiest there's a lusty vitality about everything he writes that makes the story engulf one in the vividest, most living sort of way... Exquisite and fantastic enough to lift one clear out of the present (C. L. Moore to H. P. Lovecraft *Letters* 31).

Moore describes Howard's prose as transportive perhaps due to its primitivist appeals to one's sense of life as struggle for survival and the drama of sword-and-sorcery as an expression of "lusty vitality" to achieve its vivid capacity for readerly immersion and escapism.

Moore's sword-and-sorcery fiction is capable of navigating this space between serving as "mere entertainment" and serving as a platform for meaningful social discourse. These tales involve swashbuckling adventure and supernatural characters or events like any work of heroic or epic fantasy, as well as previously indicated setting, character, and plot tropes. However, sword-and-sorcery is also capable of presenting multifaceted representations of socially erected forms of gender expression. The drama of sword-and-sorcery extends beyond the superficial adventure plot to challenge underlying social constructs of ideological apparatuses evidencing

conventional expectations of masculinity or femininity. Conflicts of gender performance are a trope arguably as integral to the sword-and-sorcery genre as the perceived elements of macho, musclebound male heroes or plots of adventure across exoticized continents.

The damsel-in-distress archetype is an integral component to the fantasy genre and sword-and-sorcery, but it is perpetually rivaled by the Valkyrie/Amazon archetype of women performing masculine roles and functions in these texts. The damsel-in-distress reflects cultural notions of traditional femininity that females should be passive, submissive, and dependent upon the direction of males. The cover artwork for pulp magazines like *Weird Tales* communicated this message to prospective consumers by frequently illustrating full or partially nude women in precarious scenarios threatened by caricatured villains or creatures. The most notorious artist for *Weird Tales* in the 1930s was Margaret Brundage. Artist Rowena explains:

It is an easy assumption that *Weird Tales*' audience was primarily men. I have often wondered why the theme of threatened ladies is so popular amongst men in particular. Perhaps they like the idea of domination...Or perhaps they see themselves, heroically, saving the damsel in distress. This theme may be tantalizing because of power and perhaps because of perversity (Rowena 9).

Despite perspectives of this fiction as primarily man's domain communicating messages that humiliate or dominate women, it is also important to consider the complex nexus of meaning created by perspectives contrary to this dominant critical reading and reception. Some of these perspectives are traced to the contemporary readers of Moore's sword-and-sorcery during the years of its initial publication. For example, one reader named Violet L. Davis wrote in the letters section of the December 1935 issue:

"I am a sincere fan for your *Weird Tales*. I always read every story, and while there are some I don't care for, also there are some I like immensely...I do like Conan the

barbarian and Northwest Smith. However, most of my admiration goes to Brundage, your artist. Even her horror pictures are beautiful. I have a scrapbook of her pictures. Why not have some stories on the order of *Dracula*?...I like horrible stories. They can't be too horrible for me" (783).

The allure of topics like domination, "horrible" situations, and Brundage's "lewd" covers are not exclusive to male audiences. In numerous instances readers suggest that there should be male nudity featured in *Weird Tales* in addition to female nudity. In the January 1936 issue a reader identifying as O.B.W. suggests that editor Farnsworth Wright "Take Mary Ashely's advice and have a few nude men as you do women. Why not give the male sex a chance for once?" (126). Sexually provocative and titillating material thematically interwoven with weird fiction and the sword-and-sorcery genre should not be construed as gender specific. Brundage's covers articulated the desires and the fetishes of 1930s pulp readers.

There is more to pulp magazine fiction than scenes of dominated or threatened women. The Valkyrie/Amazon archetype, for example, reflects cultural notions of masculinity applied to or possessed by females. Sword-and-sorcery can be a mode of fiction situating gendered figures of heroism in worlds of hyperbolic contrast that disrupt rigid notions of identity and representation. Judith Butler takes up the argument that only men are considered persons in society. The category of the "masculine" is not a gender but a universal subject. To destroy "sex" (the artificial binary relations between the sexes), we must view masculine and feminine persons and the diverse spectrum between and inclusive of all as universal subjects. Butler also invokes Foucault in stating that the binary regulation of sexuality suppresses the "subversive multiplicity" of femininity that disrupts phallogocentrism (Butler 26). Sword-and-sorcery characters at times engage in dynamic transitions from one state to another in expressions of the

flexible nature of the hero as a universal subject. No character better reflects the vast range of possibilities available to the sword-and-sorcery universal subject as Moore's Jirel of Joiry.

Some sword-and-sorcery narratives create worlds where men and women liberate themselves from social constraints of identity imposed by sexist, oppressive, and hegemonic systems like the white supremacist masculinism of patriarchy's traditional masculinity. These worlds become spaces where those living in the social world realize their existence as legitimate beings despite being "illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* viii). This empowers C.L. Moore's Jirel to become leader of Joiry and to defend her realm and herself from persecution. Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* critiques the origination and causation of the enforcement and policing of identity categories by the institutions of phallogocentrism and obligatory heterosexuality. Halberstam invokes Foucault in references to "perverse presentism" with myths privileging the ownership of masculinity as man's domain: "the very existence of masculine women urges us to reconsider our most basic assumptions about the functions, forms, and representations of masculinity and forces us to ask why the bond between men and masculinity has remained relatively secure despite the continuous assaults made by feminists, gays, lesbians, and gender-queers on the naturalness of gender" (Halberstam 45). C.L. Moore's sword-and-sorcery tales navigate these spaces in narrative form; their heroes can oppose institutions of oppression and fully realize the intersectionality of heroic identity and expression.

Critical Receptions of C.L. Moore's Sword-and-Sorcery

Readers of Moore's stories in the 1930's expressed a wide range of opinions concerning their relative merits. *Weird Tales* featured one such section titled "The Eyrie" which encouraged readers to discuss their favorite stories from each issue and to provide comments about various facets of the magazine. In this reader response section, Fred Anger writes in the

December 1934 issue: “*The Black God's Kiss* was by far the poorest C. L. Moore story yet. The first three of C. L. Moore's tales were excellent” (778). That same issue, Mary Conklin expresses: “I (and I'm sure many others) want to hear a great deal more of Jirel. She's the kind of person I'd like to be myself. A sort of feminine version of Conan the Cimmerian. He, too, is one of my favorites” (782). Since the inception of the subgenre readers have responded specifically to its dynamism.

One other subject of great interest for fans of *Weird Tales* addressed in various installments of “The Eyrie” was the cover artwork and reactions against censoring artist Margaret Brundage's covers in particular. Reader Alvin Earle Perry wrote in the October 1934 issue: “Brundage is the most finished author now painting for any fantastic fiction magazine” (523). In the same issue, Alicia and Ellington Curtis convey:

Brundage's covers are all right and if he [sic] wishes to use some nudism in his [sic] symbols he [sic] should be given full scope rather than be hampered by a few ‘aginnners’ who reflect no more than a passing fad of censoring which will soon be forgotten.

Pleasing the many rather than a few chronic ‘antis’ would be much the stronger and saner policy for *Weird Tales* (523-524).

Moore's work is also typically praised in the reader response section of *Weird Tales*, along with her fellow authors including Robert E. Howard, H.P. Lovecraft, and Clark Ashton Smith to name only a few of its contributors.

Science fiction historian Sam Moskowitz calls Moore the most important female writer of imaginative fiction since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* published in 1818. In an interview with Moskowitz, Moore confessed “As soon as I could talk, I began telling long, obscure tales to everyone I could corner. When I learned to write, I wrote them and have been at it ever since. I was reared on a diet of Greek mythology, Oz books, an Edgar Rice Burroughs...I wrote

about cowboys and kings, Robin Hoods and Lancelots and Tarzans thinly disguised under other names” (Moskowitz 305). While she does not merit her own chapter in L. Sprague de Camp’s *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers*, she is featured as the first of the “Conan’s Compeers” chapter. Moore’s craft is isolated by numerous sword-and-sorcery authors, anthologists, and critics including de Camp and Moorcock as perhaps sword-and-sorcery’s finest author.

Moore was neither the first woman writer of speculative fiction nor the most prolific, but she was arguably the most popular and the most lasting (Helland 209). There is an assumption of male readership and authorship amongst sword-and-sorcery pulps. In its dedicated section to reader submissions titled “The Eyrie,” letters from women were frequently featured. This implies that the editors of *Weird Tales* in particular did not view their magazine’s contents including the blossoming genre of sword-and-sorcery as a strictly “male space” (212-213). A portion of the magazine’s readers (27%) were women (Davin 65). During the entirety of the magazine’s run from 1923-1954, 17% of its fiction writers were women (68).

As the legacy of sword-and-sorcery manifestations endure through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, discourse surrounding the genre’s merits to cultural studies and gender studies has evolved. Some feminists argue that taking on male behaviors and roles does not advance female agendas or perspectives. Sarah Lefanu suggests that Jirel of Joiry fails to challenge sexist conventions in “Jirel Meets Magic,” which features a stereotypical “wicked witch” or “sorceress” archetype as its antagonist. (Lefanu 16). While a female protagonist is not in itself reason to justify a work’s standing as “feminist,” critics like Lefanu are quick to disregard the transgressive nature of Moore’s writing and the Jirel character in particular (Helland 219-220).

Critic and theorist Brian Atteberry applies genre and specifically the speculative fiction genre as an analytical tool for deciphering meaning-making in cultural production. Atteberry

treats gender and science fiction as sign systems where gender is a way of assigning social and psychological meaning to perceived sexual difference in texts. Science fiction is a system for generating and interpreting narratives that reflect insights derived from attitudes toward science:

“SF is not so different from the storytelling engaged in by sociobiologists and anthropologists, save for the fact that it tends to focus not on origins but on ends, not on where we came from but on where we are going. And because where we are going depends partly on where we are willing and able to imagine ourselves going, SF can offer important insights into the limits of the imaginable and the ways those limits are changing, from housewives in space to gender-free utopias, and beyond...In other areas of literature and life, gender rarely operates as an independent sign system. It is constrained by habits of thought and speech, economics, power, desire, and the stubborn physicality of bodies. But there are no bodies in fiction, only words that call bodies to mind. SF encourages us to play with those words, changing their forms and applications, literalizing old metaphors and generating new ones, and generally treating gender as if it were simply and completely a code. By doing so, it opens up new ways of talking about gender: new things to say and new ways to say them (Atteberry 15-16).

Speculative fiction, and for the purposes of this project, sword-and-sorcery in specific, is a genre that can challenge assumptions of reality by positing alternative realities in fictional spaces. It presents realms where gender is not limited to two diametrical opposites. In sword-and-sorcery, non-binary formulations or expressions of gender become normative. Authors like C.L. Moore “disrupt the binary gender code with such concepts as a literal third sex, a society without sexual division, gender as a matter of individual choice, involuntary metamorphosis from one sex to another, gender as prosthesis, and all manner of unorthodox manifestations of sexual desire. Readers are asked to accept these features as literal truths about the imaginary

universe of the fiction, but at the same time they are invited to map the new fictional (dis) order onto the world of experience” (Atteberry 8).

Moore’s first story, “Shambleau,” appeared in *Weird Tales* in January 1933 – the month after Conan’s first published tale. Moore wrote several such stories set in her interplanetary setting before beginning to alternate stories about a male spaceman, Northwest Smith, with stories about a female swordswoman, Jirel of Joiry, who lived in a version of Medieval France. The Northwest Smith stories, particularly “Shambleau,” are important because they present an early disassembling of the damsel-in-distress assumptions of the speculative fiction genre. Smith believes that the woman he rescues from her tormentor is fragile and dependent on rescue by a strong and moral man, but she is in fact a Medusa-type figure that can assume the disguise of vulnerable, desirable femininity: “By the time Smith realizes the truth, he has been ensnared in an addictive relationship with the vampiric alien. And so Moore inverts the conventions of pulp fiction: the apparent damsel-in-distress is actually la belle dame sans merci, and Smith is in her thrall” (Wilson 98). The Medusa-type figure is intriguing from a modern feminist perspective as it signals to Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa,” which argues for women and for the Medusa character in particular to be viewed as a confident and powerful figure rather than a vilified monster. A critical perspective that could be termed anti-Freudian, Cixous invokes woman as a universal subject with unique erotic potential lacking from male experience. Critics including de Beauvoir disagree with Cixous’s essentializing notion of female bodies and a single female nature, but Cixous captures the proclivity for sword-and-sorcery fiction to exoticize so-called “savage” spaces and to encourage white supremacist masculinist paradigms for heroic production:

Men still have everything to say about their sexuality, and everything to write. For what they have said so far...stems from the opposition activity/passivity, from the power

relation between a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to colonize, and the consequential phantasm of woman as a “dark continent” to penetrate and to “pacify”...One can understand how man, confusing himself with his penis and rushing in for the attack, might feel resentment and fear of being “taken” by the woman, of being lost in her, absorbed, or alone (Cixous 321).

While Moore arguably exploits the sword-and-sorcery structures of these traditionally masculine modes, both the Northwest Smith and the Jirel of Joiry series are equally compelling and creative examples of Moore’s talent from this particularly fruitful moment in Moore’s career that gesture towards profound renuncements of such institutionalized and conventional modes of heroism.

Jirel is a character that exists parallel to Conan rather than as Conan’s offspring: “Much of later S&S owes a great deal to Moore” (Drake 9). As a critic of science fiction, Scott Sanders discusses the adversarial essence to tales of speculative fiction. These stories at times relay the dichotomic worldview of a society determined by its adversarial pairings. They can present women as inferior, blending into the scenery or setting, while they can also present men as superior, central to the action. When women are featured prominently, it can be accompanied by a fixation on their procreative power as they are presented as something “other” that instills both fear and mystery to the typically rational male observers:

In much of the genre, women and nature bear the same features: both are mysterious, irrational, instinctive; both are fertile and mindless; both inspire wonder and dread in the hero; both are objects of male conquest. Just as men in SF embody consciousness, the agency through which nature knows itself, so women embody fertility, the agency by which nature reproduces itself. Men belong to the realm of mind; women and nature to no-mind. Women are the bearers of life; men are life’s interpreters and masters. This

series of contrasts might be charted as follows:

Science	Mental	Rational	Conscious	Deliberate	Male
Nature	Physical	Emotional	Unconscious	Instinctual	Female

(Sanders 42)

This inherent contrast forms a thematic cornerstone to the sword-and-sorcery works of C.L. Moore as male and female are posited in an oppositional relationship in every Jirel of Joiry tale, as is the symbolic contrast between light and dark. However, the paradigm presented by Sanders does not adequately reflect the dichotomy of Moore's sword-and-sorcery. Where Sanders identifies what is "male" as "the knower" in speculative fiction and what is "female" as "that which is known," in the tales of Jirel of Joiry, the masculine are the transgressors and the feminine are the transgressed. The masculine is the assailant and the feminine is the victim. The masculine is the corruptor and the feminine is the redeemer. The series of contrasts in Moore's fiction may be more precisely charted as follows:

Darkness	Villain	Corruptor	Assailant	Transgressor	Masculine
Brightness	Hero	Redeemer	Victim	Transgressed	Feminine

While Moore utilizes this oppositional structure, she also disrupts it. Jirel frequently assumes the role of the assailant by taking up her sword and defending herself from the entities that would overwhelm her, but she is also the victim in her dominated relationship to the antagonist displayed at the beginning of "Black God's Kiss." She transgresses the laws of nature by entering and traversing underworlds or realms beyond the laws of reality, and she navigates and performs both feminine and masculine roles.

Jirel is also not defined by her procreative power. She is never literally or figuratively exploited as a referent for a maternal body. Jirel is not a pre-Symbolic emblem of nonpaternal causality or some teleological conception of maternal instinct. Theorist Julia Kristeva assumes a maternal essentialism in her examinations of cultural production, which in some ways reflects

Cixous's biological essentialism of the female body in "The Laugh of the Medusa." Judith Butler challenges these assumptions by invoking Foucault in *Gender Trouble*:

We can understand Kristeva's assertion of a 'prepaternal causality' as fundamentally inverted. Whereas Kristeva posits a maternal body prior to discourse that exerts its own causal force in the structure of drives, Foucault would doubtless argue that the discursive production of the maternal body as prediscursive is a tactic in the self-amplification and concealment of those specific power relations by which the trope of the maternal body is produced. In these terms, the maternal body would no longer be understood as the hidden ground of all signification, the tacit cause of all culture. It would be understood, rather, as an effect or consequence of a system of sexuality in which the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of its self and the law of its desire (Butler 125).

Jirel transgresses semiotic maternal assumptions of "female" and "woman." She is simultaneously the assailant and the victim, the corruptor and the redeemer, masculine and feminine. This is evidenced in "The Black God's Kiss" when she ingests the androgynous energies of the Black God to avenge the transgression against Guillaume. The same act that poisons, defeats, and kills her tormentor becomes an act of redemption as she mourns for him finds love for her tormentor.

Author Betty King argues that sword-and-sorcery has a singularly powerful impact on speculative fiction readers. The female hero figure conflated with that of the amazon archetype is one of King's examples expressing the antithetical perception of "real heroism" as opposed to "female heroism." In truth, the amazon archetype represents a female masculinity and the notion that descriptors of masculine and feminine should be divested from preconceived notions of one's biology:

For example, the sword-and-sorcery sf [speculative fiction] of C.L. Moore, who was one of the first writers to introduce readers to amazon-type female main characters (Jirel of Joiry), preceded the introduction of the bulk of other adventure-seeking women main characters in sf. Though the amazons cannot usually be considered the average woman dealing with average problems, the popularity of the use of the female main character in sword-and-sorcery sf continues today. Some feel that the amazons are the antithesis of real heroes and that they are just women trying to be men in strength, in their ability to coldly kill and fight skillfully, and in their adventuresome approach to life. This can be disputed, however, by reading about the amazons in all their variety” (King xviii-xix).

The reduction of the amazon-type female main character to that of a mere pretender or a woman trying to be a man is a frequent trope of white supremacist masculinist sword-and-sorcery criticism.³⁸ Masculinity ought to be divested from assumptions of the male sex and “manliness” so that such amazon characters can exist without such judgment based upon society’s gendered preconceptions.

The notion of white supremacist masculinism is addressed by critic Sarah Banet-Weiser, though Banet-Weiser focuses specifically on what is termed “popular misogyny.” Banet-Weiser seeks to demonstrate how popular misogyny functions to support hegemonic masculinity while creating new ways in which to objectify and devalue women. As popular feminism has increased, so too has popular misogyny as the one intensifies the other. Confidence for women manifests in popular feminism as economic confidence for those who are capable of being successful in a capitalist context. Confidence manifests in popular misogyny as a dwindling commodity blamed upon the perceived growth of economically successful women that supposedly leads to men losing economic and sexual confidence.

The economy of visibility discourages awareness of the diversity of women in literature

that are contrary to traditional femininity. The dominant understanding of the forms and functions of gender in sword-and-sorcery are that what is visible, promoted, and sustained publicly is the engendered masculine associated with man as omnipotent hero and the engendered feminine associated with woman as objectified damsel-in-distress without agency. This is evidenced by the continued mass publication of Robert E. Howard's Conan stories with its dominant critical assumptions of aggressively traditional masculinity in comparison to the marginalized Jirel stories of C.L. Moore. While popular feminism may be opportunistic, artificial, and a product of white supremacist capitalism, Banet-Weiser asserts that there are many feminisms circulating in popular culture. Some manifestations of feminism are easily glorified, others easily vilified, and some do not fit effortlessly into either category. C.L. Moore's Jirel of Joiry character expressing qualities both traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine is one such form of a critical gender opportunity: less glorified, easily vilified, and arguably to some extent ineffable to a culture conditioned on white supremacist masculinism endemic of patriarchy. Be it glorified or vilified, the sword-and-sorcery female masculinity hero is both complex and compelling, as evidenced by close reading of C.L. Moore's prototype first appearing in "Black God's Kiss."

Moore is widely regarded in the field of sword-and-sorcery as a pillar to the development of this particular fantasy genre. Moore's tales of Jirel of Joiry combat exploitation and oppression while envisioning a form of heroism that functions regardless of one's biological sex. Her fiction constructs a poignant critique of traditional notions of masculinity and femininity predating cultural critic and theorist Judith Butler and her seminal work *Gender Trouble* in 1990. The Jirel of Joiry series stemming from "The Black God's Kiss" challenges rigid notions of representation and identity while positing gender as both socially constructed and performative in nature. C.L. Moore's sword-and-sorcery forms a critique of heroism as a

presumably gendered construct and an evolution of the genre into one disrupting such social prerogatives. Rather than phallogentric heroism or even gynocentric heroism, Moore's Jirel of Joiry can even be perceived as a manifestation of non-binary heroism born from literature with a potential to challenge systemically imposed and policed gender expression.

"The Black God's Kiss" made the cover of the October 1934 issue illustrated by the prolific and popular Margaret Brundage: "it was in this issue that editor Farnsworth Wright revealed Brundage's first name, and therefore her gender, to the world, thereby stirring the pot of an ongoing controversy about her erotically charged work" (Helland 210). Editor Farnsworth Wright and manager William Sprenger suggested that Brundage illustrate scenes that feature nude or scantily clad women because they outsold those that did not. Some authors like Seabury Quinn intentionally included scenes of women shedding their clothes in order to increase his chances of selection for the cover. There have been frequent assumptions that the producers and consumers of *Weird Tales* content were males. Pulp magazine competitors like *Black Mask: The He-Man's Magazine* favored a male demographic. *Weird Tales* made no attempt to identify the magazine as an exclusively "male space" or emphasize portrayals of "manliness." One study identifies 114 women's stories appeared before Moore's first published tale in 1933, none of whom felt a need to assume masculine aliases (Davin 65). C.L. Moore preserved the ambiguity of her gendered identity though there is still disagreement as to whether this was an intentional or incidental outcome of using initials for her penname. The fact that Moore's tales often showcased female protagonists in periodicals rife with male protagonists resulted in inquiries as to Moore's actual gender, which was largely assumed to be male. The Jirel of Joiry series is a unique contribution to the landscape of sword-and-sorcery pulp hero fiction.

Critic Jennifer Jodell takes issue with Davin's claims that there was essentially a

“counter-culture” of marginalized science fiction writing in the 1930s among women writers:

Thus, most disturbing is Davin’s claim that this counter-culture has been ‘lost,’ in the sense that it has not been anthologized, studied or in some cases even preserved. Based on his examination of what remains in SF magazines, he has tentatively characterized this sub-genre as more ‘empathetic,’ more ‘humane,’ and interested in ‘conflict resolution’...what is lost by their ‘invisibility’ are ‘feminist speculations’ regarding radically altered gender and economic relations (Jodell 47).

While Jodell agrees that there is certainly an erasure of women as participants in science fiction writing were neglected in subsequently published anthologies in the decades since Moore and Leigh Brackett’s³⁹ pioneering efforts, Jodell also struggles with the way Davin adheres to expectations of societal gender binary by characterizing women’s writing as stereotypically empathetic, humane, and invested in pacifism and “conflict resolution.” While Jodell makes a valid argument about Davin’s culturally gendered presumptions, as indicated by Joanna Russ:

it is true that although people are responsible for their actions, they are not responsible for the social context in which they must act or the social resources available to them. All of us must perforce accept large chunks of our culture readymade; there is not enough energy and time to do otherwise. To act in a way that is both sexist and racist, to maintain one’s class privilege, it is only necessary to act in the customary, ordinary, usual, even polite manner. Nonetheless I doubt that any of us who does so is totally without the knowledge that something is wrong (Russ 21).

With a satiric and irreverent tone, Joanna Russ’s *How to Suppress Women’s Writing* originally published in 1983 admits that these cultural productions are created in social contexts that include sexism, racism, and oppression. Therefore, they reflect the sexism, racism, and oppression of the worlds in which they were created. However, this does not mean that these

works cannot also complicate or even outright refute those assumptions.

Critics including Susan Gubar have viewed Moore as a feminist icon challenging patriarchal assumptions, particularly through tales like “Shamblau” published in 1933 and “No Woman Born”⁴⁰ published in 1944. Gubar ultimately asserts that Jirel evidences Moore’s ascription to speculative fiction as a typically masculinist manifestation of hegemonic patriarchal power structures:

Jirel is also savage in her passion – her ferocity even – for independence. When Jirel finds herself appropriated by men or daemonic male gods who violate her physically, usually with a kiss or an embrace experienced as a kind of rape, she goes ‘outside God’s domain’...to find a weapon suitable for her revenge and she finds it, in one story at least, in a poisonous kiss she brings back to impress on the mouth of the man who has demeaned her with his desire. This annihilating embrace demonstrates the link between the female monster, the siren, and the woman warrior in Moore’s fantasies. All are fatally contaminating for men (Gubar 22).

Gubar’s emphasis on Jirel’s journey “outside God’s domain” supports the claim that these are in some sense anti-patriarchy stories, though Gubar’s assertion that the female must necessarily be “the monster” and “the siren” partly undermines potential claims for Moore’s work as transgressive. The female hero journeys both beyond and in spite of the authority of this ultimate figure of patriarchal power and domination. C.L. Moore also subverts the female sword-and-sorcery archetypes of the female monster (the witch/the sorceress), the siren luring the hero to his doom (the damsel in distress), or the woman warrior (the amazon/the Valkyrie). Jirel of Joiry inhabits all three roles simultaneously in “The Black God’s Kiss” as the temptress for Guillaume, his woman warrior equivalent (if not superior), and ultimately the female monster channeling the destructive essence of “blackness” into the kiss that ends his life. She

embodies a convergence of gendered identity rather than a fissure within perceived psychosocial dichotomy. Not a contamination of manliness but a conjunction of masculinity and femininity. An evolution or progression towards inclusion rather than exclusion: an expression of female masculinity.

Author and critic Suzy McKee Charnas praises Moore's erotic energy "so markedly absent from most of this type of writing by her fellow male authors...evident here, in Jirel's fierce, unthinking rejection whenever dominant males attempt to impose themselves on her" (McKee Charnas 17). Suzy McKee Charnas relates how she found herself as a young woman seeking tales of conflict, honor, impetuosity, leadership, and courage – all qualities exclusive to males according to her culture. She was overjoyed to discover C.L. Moore's saga of Jirel of Joiry. Now the continuing reception of these tales and of sword-and-sorcery empowers present day readers to discover a transcendent and transformative manifestation of heroism messaging readers of the possibilities of representation regardless of their gender, race, or sexuality.

Recent criticism of C.L. Moore's fiction and of the sword-and-sorcery genre as a whole held by Nicole Emmelhainz-Carney is that "works written in a pulp fiction style that feature central action and combat with supernatural entities in a pre-modern setting – has the potential to be understood as a feminist genre, or, put another way, a genre that demonstrates acute awareness of the social construction of gender and its expectations" (118). Emmelhainz-Carney convincingly argues that the imaginary worlds of the best sword-and-sorcery illustrate the strategic performance of gender rather than an essential fount of identity. While the characters of these spaces, both male and female, may be sexually objectified, they are also portrayed as individuals who exercise deliberate and determinate freedom of their will regardless of their sex or gender:

Such a genre fictionalizes worlds that represent gender not as an undeniable essence or

biological inescapability but as a constructed identity linked to costume, strategic behavioral displays, and socially derived status positioning. Moreover, genres that expose the performative nature of gender also have the tendency to emphasize the biological aspects of sex, bodies marked by anatomical difference (120).

For the sword-and-sorcery genre to be considered feminist for Emmelhainz-Carney, it must provide the possibility for women to liberate themselves from the constraints of their gender while also exposing the fact that gender is a social construction and a set of social, political, and cultural performances and gestures both symbolic and concrete (120). Emmelhainz-Carney critically examines the journey of Jirel in “The Black God’s Kiss” as an effort to reclaim her dignity. Emmelhainz-Carney argues that Moore de-reifies gender and reifies sexuality: gender is treated as performance and sex is emphasized (124). This is so meaningful for Emmelhainz-Carney because she views Moore’s fiction as conducting this groundbreaking theoretical work nearly fifty years prior to Judith Butler’s publication of *Gender Trouble*.

Other emerging yet prominent criticism on the value of revisiting C.L. Moore’s sword-and-sorcery and the Jirel of Joiry character in particular includes Eileen Donaldson’s studies of female action heroism and Judith (Jack) Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* to present Jirel’s character as a performance of female masculinity. Donaldson argues that Jirel is the first female warrior to appear in speculative fiction and that her performance of masculinity is channeled through the warrior role she displays as well as the indirect and direct characterizations of Jirel as physically strong, violent, authoritative, and possessing her own sexual agency. This performance of masculinity is made even more significant, Donaldson argues, by virtue of the facts of the time when these tales were published and that the tales likely constitute the first appearance of female masculinity in speculative fiction. Donaldson argues that these works are a central contribution to feminist speculative fiction (Donaldson 48).

Rereading C.L. Moore's Setting: Joiry and Beyond

The plots of Moore's sword-and-sorcery narratives generally follow a predictable formula and are bound to the potent symbolism of their respective settings. Jirel journeys through an uncanny environment that is alien but, in some sense, familiar to her. This setting is defined by a motif of hyperbolic contrast as features of the environment and its denizens that are masculine are described by their blackness/darkness while those that are feminine are described by their whiteness/brightness. Jirel quests in defiance of a mysterious male figure positioned as her villain, though this antagonist receives Jirel's sympathy as well as her antipathy. The narrative climaxes in a moment of Jirel's transcendence as she achieves a power hitherto unknown to herself or to her rivals that is attributable to the innermost qualities of her personhood. Every tale involves some innate quality within Jirel, something unexplainable, supernatural, and perhaps *sorcerous* that aids in her triumph. In some ways Jirel unifies both the *sword* (assumptions of warrior woman as masculine entity) and the *sorcery* (assumptions of woman as feminine mystique) of sword-and-sorcery

The exaggerated contrast of dark masculinity versus bright femininity constitutes Moore's extended metaphor across the Jirel of Joiry series for twentieth century gender expression as perpetual conflict. This perpetual conflict evidenced in reality manifests in the surreal dreamscapes she traverses. Moore presents worlds of incessant conflict reflecting conventional conceptions of gendered identity and binary. Moore's sword-and-sorcery inscribes a figure of heroism upon the consciousness of her readers to acknowledge phallogocentric precedents of the genre while constructing novel figures of perhaps non-binary and female masculinity heroism.

A key line of dialogue foreshadows Jirel's journey through a hellscape in "The Black God's Kiss" to procure a weapon capable of utterly defeating Guillaume when she refers to his

“black heart” after he has stormed her castle and taken her people captive. Imagery of blackness is associated with literal and figurative depictions of masculinity throughout the text. Jirel escapes her imprisonment in the castle dungeon and descends through passages beneath the castle to arrive in a bizarre landscape with a sky of strange stars above hills and valleys. She does not ascend from the dungeons to the world above. Her journey is inward, spiraling into the depths of a world below in which she is only vaguely familiar.

Jirel experiences several encounters in her journey across the nameless hellscape or underworld of “Black God’s Kiss.” In one instance she reaches a black swamp scattered with white beings. She manages to get close enough to one of them to identify it: “It was a woman – a beautiful woman whose white bare body had the curves and loveliness of some marble statue” (34). The entities of feminine, “marble statue” beauty crouch like frogs and leap away at the slightest provocation. Jirel weeps for them and laments whatever circumstances led to their despair in this hellscape. The aggressors are synonymous with the darkness in this realm of contrast while the oppressed are synonymous with brightness.

Jirel is a complex character; both sexless and sexual. It is easy to read her from a contemporary perspective as a hero before her time and as a testament to perspectives of gender that separate biological determination of one’s sex from performative determination of one’s gender expression. She exists between these extremes. She defeats the dark masculine creatures attempting to overwhelm her with violent resolve, but also laments the timid and statuesque feminine creatures with emotional sensitivity. She represents liminal, non-binary heroism that hybridizes fantasy genre preconceptions of masculine performance and feminine performance based on preconceived notions of traditional masculinity and traditional femininity, though Jirel exhibits both performances simultaneously and is perhaps never solely masculine nor feminine.

The symbolic contrast between white and black at the heart of this gender expression metaphor is complicated when Jirel discovers the temple wherein lies the weapon she seeks to defeat Guillaume:

She stared at it in silence, feeling a curious compulsion growing within her, like a vague command from something outside herself. The image was of some substance of nameless black, unlike the material which composed the building, for even in the dark she could see it clearly. It was a semi-human figure, crouching forward with outthrust head, sexless and strange. Its one central eye was closed as if in rapture, and its mouth was pursed for a kiss. (42)

By intuition, Jirel knows that a kiss upon the lips of the figure, the titular “The Black God’s Kiss,” will bestow the power to defeat her enemy. The Black God is passive yet active. Despite its motionless, statuesque nature, the Black God resonates with a fatal presence. Even though it is associated with an aggressive vision of masculinity aligned to the symbolic use of blackness, it is also removed from such descriptors. The Black God is made of a “nameless black” substance, but it is also “sexless and strange.” The Black God exists between gender definitions while capitalizing on perceptions of erotic symbolism; the phallic suggestion of the crouching figure with outthrust head and “one central eye...closed as if in rapture.” Its mouth “pursed for a kiss” evokes gynocentric symbolism. The Black God is ambiguous and androgynous. Feminine and masculine; sexual and sexless.

By pressing her lips to those of the androgynous figure, Jirel regains agency over her own identity no longer dominated by the emasculating and effeminizing acts of Guillaume. She also absorbs an invisible force capable of inflicting mortal harm upon its victim, though Jirel is immune to its effects. It is a transcending power personifying her existence between gender expression rather than dictated and policed by social or biological determinism. She returns to

Guillaume, drops her sword, and greets him with a kiss upon his lips:

It was a long kiss. She felt him stiffen in her arms. She felt a coldness in the lips upon hers, and slowly the dark weight of what she bore lightened, lifted, cleared away from her cloudy mind. Strength flowed back through her richly. The whole world came alive to her once more. Presently she loosed his slack arms and stepped away, looking up into his face with a keen and dreadful triumph upon her own...she saw something cold and alien seeping through him, permeating him slowly with some unnamable emotion which no man could ever have experienced before. She could not name it, but she saw it in his eyes – some dreadful emotion never made for flesh and blood to know, some iron despair such as only an unguessable being from the gray, formless void could ever have felt before – too hideously alien for any human creature to endure. (49)

Although she kills her tormentor, Jirel has an unexpected reaction to retribution. She weeps for him: “She knew that there was no light anywhere in the world, now that Guillaume was gone” (50). It is paradoxical for Guillaume to represent a source of light when he was previously considered a black-hearted conqueror. In the moment of her victory over Guillaume, Jirel appears defeated by losing him. This has been interpreted as a failure to attain her long-sought freedom from normative gender identity as she reverts to a masculinist archetype of female character determined by traditional conceptions of male masculinity contrasting female femininity (the tragic lover mourning her gallant suitor). Critics like Andrew J. Wilson have viewed the conclusion of “The Black God’s Kiss” as an affirmation of C.L. Moore’s androcentrism:

The final revelation of Jirel’s journey to her own personal hell and back is that she has killed the only man she could love. Was this the unpalatable truth she feared seeing illuminated in the cold light of the netherworld’s day? The paradox central to her

character is that she is drawn to men who are as ruthless as she is, that she must kill the things she loves” (Wilson 102).

Jirel’s ability to be both aggressor and sympathizer simultaneously establishes her embodiment of heroism as one transgressing the otherwise formulaic archetypes attributed to sword-and-sorcery. The fact that she masters Guillaume not with physical violence but with a gesture of affection also illuminates Moore’s revolutionary conception of heroism embodied in her sword-and-sorcery protagonist. In this tale, Jirel wields both traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine forms and functions, but both the warrior’s sword and the woman’s kiss are on display as paths to power and authority.

Rereading C.L. Moore’s Direct and Indirect Characterizations of Femininity, Masculinity, and Beyond

While C.L. Moore’s Jirel of Joiry is biologically female, her performance is at times distinctly masculine. In these instances she is a hero that embodies female masculinity. Critic and theorist Judith (Jack) Halberstam states how women have made their own unique contributions to what is called modern masculinity and that female masculinity actually refers to a multiplicity of masculinities. According to Halberstam, “heroic masculinity” is a gender expression that we culturally trust and enjoy in entertainment, yet that position is inhabited by males and discouraged in females. Tomboyism, for example, involves the acceptance of gender deviation of women to a certain age when it is no longer tolerated. Halberstam applies Eve Sedgwick’s notion of “nonce taxonomies” as categories that work so well in the world that they may go without even being noticed. Halberstam seeks to bring nonce taxonomies of female masculinity into view:

Female masculinity is a particularly fruitful site of investigation because it has been vilified by heterosexist and feminist/womanist programs alike; unlike male femininity,

which fulfills a kind of ritual function in male homosocial cultures, female masculinity is generally received by hetero-and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach (9).

Sword-and-sorcery presents spaces where the power afforded to traditionally masculine males is no longer out of reach for those of transgressive gender identity. Jirel is a powerful, independent female who freely expresses the depths of her own femininity and masculinity, perhaps even exemplifying one of the earliest twentieth-century manifestations of Halberstam's female masculinity in American literature.

Halberstam argues that there must be renewed endeavors to philosophically inquire into the nature of female masculinity and make masculinity safe for women and girls. Despite decades of "sustained feminist and queer attacks on the notion of natural gender, we still believe that masculinity in girls and women is abhorrent and pathological...there is something so obvious about female masculinity and yet something so rigid about our refusal to recognize it, celebrate it, and accept it" (268). It is my contention that revisiting sword-and-sorcery texts without strictly adhering to rigid dominant critical pronouncements on the meaning of those texts opens up possibilities to discover female masculinity and nonbinary heroism functioning invisibly in American literary culture for decades across the twentieth-century and beyond. The chronicle of this literary and cultural legacy may truly commence with the tales of Jirel of Joiry.

Set in medieval France, "The Black God's Kiss" begins with a conqueror named Guillaume who has seized the kingdom of Joiry. He stands victorious in its fortress to receive the defiant commander of Joiry's army. Moore delays this reveal in order to build the anticipation of the reader towards the same epiphany as Guillaume:

"Unshell me this lobster," said Guillaume in his deep, lazy voice. "We'll see what sort

of face the fellow has who gave us such a battle. Off with his helmet, you.”

But a third man had to come up and slash the straps which held the iron helmet on, for the struggles of Joiry’s commander were too fierce, even with bound arms, for either of the guards to release their hold. There was a moment of sharp struggle; then the straps parted and helmet rolled loudly across the flagstones...“God curse you!” snarled the lady of Joiry between clenched teeth. “God blast your black heart!”

Guillaume scarcely heard her. He was still staring, as most men stared when they first set eyes upon Jirel of Joiry. (Moore 21)

Moore indulges in the formulas and conventions of pulp hero fiction by subverting presumed expectations of her audience. The defiant hero who must fight for freedom is unmasked to reveal a woman rather than a man. Guillaume’s expression functions like a mirror reflecting the reader’s disbelief. The “fellow” who battles incessantly, overpowers his guards to necessitate additional restraint, and refuses subdual in all of its forms is in fact “the lady of Joiry.”

Through Jirel of Joiry, C.L. Moore presents a sword-and-sorcery hero that subverts gender norms: “The face above her mail might not have been fair in a woman’s head-dress, but in the steel setting of her armor it had a biting, sword-edge beauty as keen as the flash of blades. The red hair was short upon her high, defiant head, and the yellow blaze of her eyes held fury as a crucible holds fire” (22). Jirel transcends social conventions of feminine beauty. Jirel’s attractiveness is due to her transgressive, masculine-coded adornment. Jirel inhabits the space of the “sword-edge” and the “flash of blades,” assuming the phallic symbolism of a weapon of penetrative power. Jirel’s identity as “sword-edge beauty” is a living symbol melding femininity and masculinity. Through Jirel, Moore empowers a unique vision of sword-and-sorcery heroism that invokes socio-cultural codes like Freud’s psychosexual fixation on phallic monism. From this critical perspective, it is precisely because of Jirel’s masculinity that she is

physically attractive and possesses a “sword-edge beauty.”

Jirel’s struggle is intensified when the guard attempts to remove her helmet. It is the threat to her identity that incites her rage. In seizing her helmet, Guillaume figuratively seizes the ambiguity of her gender. The offense suffered by Jirel inspiring her literal journey to hell and back for retribution is a transgression against the intersectionality of her gendered identity that is dynamically masculine and feminine. Guillaume forces a kiss upon Jirel’s lips and declares: “By Heaven, that’s like kissing a sword-blade” (22). Jirel responds by sinking her teeth into his neck “like a serpent striking” (23). The serpent is yet another potent phallic symbol. She is provoked not for a slight against her dignity, but one against her intersectionality. In each attempt to reduce Jirel to his social construct of femininity, she retorts with gestures reflecting masculine identity and empowerment. By admitting her metaphorical existence as the “sword-blade,” Guillaume acknowledges the multifaceted nature of her identity as one challenging social gender norms. His need to impede Jirel’s realization of this identity indicates the oppressive structures of white supremacist masculinism critiqued by Moore’s extended metaphor. Her agency is threatened by Guillaume’s attempts to police her gender through comments on proper womanly behavior and appearance as well as her sexuality by his domination. It is the affront to her individuality and identity conception rather than to her sense of propriety that provokes Jirel’s quest for vengeance.

Jirel encounters various denizens of the hellish realm during the course of her quest. These include “a wild cyclone of the dark that buffeted her mercilessly...and raved in her ears with the myriad voices of all lost things crying in the night” (30) as well as small, blind creatures that leap at Jirel’s legs. “They were obscene and hard to distinguish against the darkness of the hillside” (32). The sexual overtones of these encounters further establish Jirel as an erotic being. She slays them with her sword: “They died squashily, splattering her bare

thighs with unpleasantness, and after a few had gone silent under the blade the rest fled into the dark” (32). The violent eroticism of this scene is a typical trope of the sword-and-sorcery fantasy genre where symbols of sexuality or sexual acts are thinly veiled. In this case, the splattering of Jirel’s bare thighs is suggestive of ejaculation. However, it is Jirel who wields the sword, not the creatures that are dying around her. Moore positions Jirel as the wielder of a traditionally masculine form of power and surrounds her character with unabashed sexual symbolism. The resulting evocation is a masculine female character that exists as a sexual being without necessarily becoming sexually objectified, though the reduction of sword-and-sorcery characters to sexed bodies is certainly a recurring attribute of the genre. As Halberstam argues, female masculinity is its own gender with its own history rather than a derivative of male masculinity. The female with the sword need not be linked to man as a symbolic referent as Halberstam argues that the ability of a woman to take the role of penetrator links to the sex act of tribadism, which is itself linked to a history of masculinization of certain female sexual practices (Halberstam 61).

In the direct sequel to “The Black God’s Kiss” titled “Black God’s Shadow,” Jirel laments the death of Guillaume and the conflation of emotions rising within her at the thought of him:

Even now anger swept like a flame across her memory in answer to the arrogance and scorn of that conqueror’s kiss. Yet was it anger? – was it hatred?...For she had been the commander of the strongest fortress in the kingdom, and called no man master, and it was her proudest boast that Joiry would never fall and that no lover dared lay hands upon her save in answer to her smile (53).

Jirel is in command of her own sexuality. Guillaume’s sin of attempting to dominate her without her consent resulted in her quest to destroy him. No man was her superior; no romantic

advance tolerated unless in response to her invitation. Moore situates Jirel's agency as the paramount attribute to the character, which is a common trait of the sword-and-sorcery hero archetype. For comparison, one need only consider the likes of Robert E. Howard's Conan the Cimmerian who is independence incarnate. Every action he takes is by his willful self-determination. Whenever an outside force disrupts Conan's agency, the character's vengeance becomes justified by codes of sword-and-sorcery heroism. Likewise, Jirel's free will is paramount to her characterization.

Jirel ventures back into the same hell through the passages in the foundations of the fortress. In the same land where she once found the Black God, Jirel seeks the specter of Guillaume. She discovers a vague reflection of him with a sunken head and raised shoulders; an "ugly hulk" parody of his former self. In this moment the presence of the Black God surrounds Jirel:

For the Black God was all death and nothingness, and the powers he drew upon were without limit – and all she had to fight him with was the flicker within her called life...And something in Jirel knew warmly that the image of life as a tiny spark flickering out in limitless black was a false one – that without light there can be no darkness – that death and life are interdependent, one upon the other. And that she, armored in the warmth of her aliveness, was the black god's equal, and a worthy foe. It was an even struggle. She called up the forces of life within her, feeling them hurled against the darkness, beating strongly upon the cold and silence of oblivion. Strength flowed through her, and she knew herself immortal in the power of life. (67-68)

The use of black and white through the setting and characters of both "The Black God's Kiss" and "Black God's Shadow" establishes a symbolic connection between gender and tonal contrast. The interdependence of death and life is represented by the interdependence of

blackness (masculinity) and whiteness (femininity). Jirel is both spark of light and bearer of darkness inhabiting both worlds. The implication is that harmony of identity is not achieved through polarizing forces of gender expression, rather through the intersection of the multiple categories determining social existence including ostensibly feminine and masculine aspects of self. C.L. Moore utilizes this social dynamic of gendered bodies to construct a narrative in the tales of Jirel of Joiry that subverts socio-cultural expectations. Jirel's moment of transcendent power occurs in the realization of her own life force; the actualization of her non-binary identity outside the confines of gender binary dictates.

Where Jirel once sought the violent annihilation of Guillaume in the beginning of "The Black God's Kiss," by the conclusion of "Black God's Shadow" her rage is tempered by sympathy. In her return from the netherworld:

She began the climb passionlessly, with no triumph in the victory she knew was hers at last. For she had driven Guillaume out of the image and into the shadow, and out of the shadow into the voice, and out of the voice into – clean death, perhaps. She did not know. But he had found peace, for his insistences no longer beat upon her consciousness. And she was content...with a peace beyond all understanding (81).

This sublime serenity that Jirel achieves is after laying memory of Guillaume to rest. Her quest severs Guillaume from the darkness of his shadow existence and dispels the controlling influence of the Black God as an embodiment of patriarchal determinacy. By divesting herself from an existence determined by a relationship with Guillaume, Jirel realizes a sense of self that is no longer patriarchally defined but no less masculine. The journey for Jirel is to quest for a space where she may freely express female masculinity and perhaps also a nuanced and complex femininity.

Jirel's male antagonists exhibit what could be termed traditional masculinity. In "The

Dark Land,” Jirel is severely wounded in battle and taken to her deathbed. She is abducted from her castle in Joiry and brought before Pav, King of Romne. He magically heals her wounds and has her dressed in literal vestments of constructed femininity:

Jirel in blank surprise looked down at her own long, lovely body sheathed in the most exquisite velvet she had ever dreamed of. It was black as a starless night, softer than down, rich and lustrous as it molded her shining curves into sculptured beauty. There was a sensuous delight in the soft swirl of it around her feet as she moved, in the dark caress of it upon her flesh when motion stirred in the silken surfaces against her skin.

For an instant she was lost in pure feminine ecstasy. (127)

The “dark caress” of the garment is emblematic of masculinity; Moore’s coded sword-and-sorcery motif traceable through each Jirel of Joiry tale as an extended metaphor of contrast representing the perceived dichotomy of binary assumptions of gender and heteronormative expectations of sexuality. The “exquisite velvet...molded her shining curves into sculptured beauty.” This shaping of Jirel’s appearance signifies how the notion of “feminine ecstasy” is patriarchally determined. Moore’s implied feminist imperative is to escape this determinism to actualize women’s free will despite the dominion of patriarchal establishment.

Patriarchal dominion is embodied in Pav’s black eyes: “They were black with so deep a blackness that they seemed two holes of fathomless space” (131). The narrator describes his gaze as a source of his immense power: “There was something frightening in the unpupiled blackness of it, and blazing, unbearable strength that beat out from it in heavy command. It was a command all out of proportion to his moveless silence, a command that wrenched at her intolerably. She must obey” (129). When Pav acknowledges the power radiating from Jirel, he admits “to have never known before a mortal creature so compounded that my will could not conquer his” (130). The male pronoun here is key as it elevates the complexities of female

perspective and being beyond those of the male. Pav literally affirms Jirel's masculinity by stating "my will could not conquer his" while referring to the indomitable power of Jirel.

Pav agrees to let her seek a means to defeat him in the dark land of Romne defined by its "color-swallowing darkness" (134). Among the dark trees she notices the figure of the white witch:

It was a woman – or could it be? White as leprosy against the blackness of the trees, with a whiteness that no shadows touched, so that she seemed like some creature out of another world reflecting in dazzling pallor upon the background of the dark, she paced slowly forward. She was thin – deathly thin, and wrapped in a white robe like a winding-sheet. The black hair lay upon her shoulders as snakes might lie.

But it was her face that caught Jirel's eyes and sent a chill of sheer terror down her back.

It was the face of Death itself, a skull across which the white, white flesh was tightly drawn. And yet it was not without a certain stark beauty of its own, the beauty of bone so finely formed that even in its death's-head nakedness it was lovely. (135)

The white witch was Pav's queen prior to his abduction of Jirel. This character perpetuates the metaphor of whiteness (femininity) and blackness (masculinity) in contrasting, polarizing bifurcation. Her only means of attaining power is to kill Jirel to once again become Pav's queen. She confesses to Jirel: "Surely Pav must be wise enough in the ways of women – even such as I – to know what happens when rivals meet. No, Pav shall not see his bride again, and the white witch will be queen once more. Are you ready for death, Jirel of Joiry?" (137). When Jirel offers to kill Pav so the white witch may rule all of Romne alone, the white witch appears to accept the proposal, though Jirel eventually learns that her foil refuses to shed her loyalty from the master. The white witch embodies traditional visions of femininity as condemned by Gubar including the monster, the siren, the sorceress, and the warrior. While Gubar argues that

there is no difference between these figures of femininity, Jirel's womanhood is juxtaposed with that of the witch.

Jirel is able to use the light of her own essence to vanquish the darkness that is Pav by channeling it into fire that radiates from her body. His body vanishes from the dark land, but the white witch confronts Jirel one final time:

No – in your little human brain how could you have known that all the Romne you saw was an illusion, that Pav's human body was no real thing? Blind, hot, earthly woman, with your little hates and vengeance, how could you have reigned queen over Romne that is Darkness itself...Pav is Romne, and Romne is Pav – one terrible whole out of which all you saw was wrought (148).

The figure of masculinity in "The Dark Land" is perfectly synonymous with darkness as he is inseparable from the environment as absolute, all-encompassing void. The figure of femininity of the white witch betrays Jirel at the tale's conclusion. She attempts to seize the hero and exclaims: "But before you die I would have you look upon what you sought to slay. I would have you see the Darkness that is Pav and Romne, clearly and visibly, so that you might understand what manner of lover I had. And you thought to rival me!" (149). The white witch is subservient to Pav and seemingly evokes the patriarchal determination of women. It cannot be overstated how Moore posits Jirel as a figure of multifaceted, idealized heroism converging between binary extremes. She threatens the integrity of the institutions of patriarchal dominion where white supremacist masculinist psyche defines reality. The environment where women and men are forced to exist springs entirely from the mental constitution of the authoritarian male mind.

In "The Black God's Kiss," Jirel expresses female sexuality not generally associated with sword-and-sorcery literature of the 1930's. Far from the damsel-in-distress archetype

typically defined by chastity and helpless victimhood, Jirel admits to Father Gervase: “God knows I’m not innocent of the ways of light loving – but to be any man’s fancy, for a night or two, before he snaps my neck or sells me into slavery – and above all, if that man were Guillaume!” (25-26). Jirel is as much a multifaceted gendered being as she is a multifaceted sexual being. In admitting her familiarity in the ways of “light loving,” Jirel represents a female hero who is sexually active in a sense that is at times exploitative but at others self-affirming. Author Betty King notes that the proliferation of speculative fiction in the twentieth century allowed for “greater numbers of female authors being published (as well as some male authors)...fearlessly providing readers with heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual female heroes, presented in a non-pornographic, non-exploitative fashion and with dignity” (King xiii – xiv).

The description of Jirel in “Jirel Meets Magic” reiterates descriptions of the hero as a multifaceted individual exceeding the female fantasy archetype: “She was the creature of the wildest paradox, this warrior lady of Joiry, hot as a red coal, chill as steel, satiny of body and iron of soul. The set of her chin was firm, but her mouth betrayed a tenderness she would have died before admitting. But she was raging now” (84). At times Jirel marks a nexus between socially coded masculine and feminine traits. She is steely yet satiny, her features firm yet tender. Though the narrator assigns female pronouns and labels like “warrior lady” to identify Jirel, she is ever “the wildest paradox” and seemingly beyond sweeping characterizations.

Jirel exhibits attributes of the antihero much like her male sword-and-sorcery peers. The sorceress Jarisme threatens a terrible punishment upon her: “Jirel knew much of the ways of torture – her dungeons were as blood-stained as any of her neighbors’ – but she knew too that Jarisme had not meant only the pain of the flesh. There was a subtler menace in her words. It would be a feminine vengeance, and more terrible than anything iron and fire could inflict”

(“Jirel Meets Magic” 102). Jirel’s knowledge of menace both subtle and otherwise challenges trivializing stereotypes of the figure as yet another pure damsel of virginal virtue. The notion of “feminine vengeance” as more terrible than physical forms of violence elevates the capabilities of the feminine beyond those of the masculine. It implies that men have limits which women can surpass, challenging patriarchally determined social preconceptions of gendered inferiority and superiority.

The form of this feminine vengeance inflicted upon Jirel is described by Jarisme at the climax of “Jirel Meets Magic”:

It is our purpose to attempt a reversal of [Jirel’s] physical and mental self in such a way as to cause her body to become rigidly motionless while her mind – her soul – looks eternally backward along the path it has traveled. You who are human, or have known humanity, will understand what deadly torture that can be. For no human creature, but the laws that govern it, can have led a life whose intimate reviews is anything but pain. To be frozen into eternal reflections, reviewing all the futility and pain of life, all the spreading consequences of every act – that, to a human being, would be the most dreadful of all torments. (112)

Feminine vengeance is then to feel more deeply the repercussions of one’s choices. This reflection both intellectual and emotional is tantamount to measures of empathy for those impacted by Jirel’s “spreading consequences of every act.” The narrator describes Jirel’s journey on this backwards path and the dread of returning to a defining moment of her past where one of her male victims lay beneath her, conceivably Guillaume from “The Black God’s Kiss.” Within her inner-most consciousness, Jirel experiences “Rage at life for permitting such pain to be. Rage at Jarisme for forcing her into memory. Such rage that everything shook before it, and melted and ran together in a heat of rebellion” (114). The feminine power that

exceeds masculine capacities of comprehension is an intimate understanding of one's own pain and the pain of others: it is empathy.

Jirel's empathy is coded as a feminine characteristic despite the fact that she is frequently depicted in terms emphasizing her masculinity. Though Jirel is ever the masculine warrior woman, she also possesses a feminine superpower in the form of this empathy. Even when forced to inflict pain upon others, Jirel intimately experiences agony. Jirel's empathy after travelling to the underworld in order to condemn Guillaume to that same fate is the tragedy elevating "The Black God's Kiss" to dramatic heights at the climax of Moore's arguable masterpiece. It is the force that drives the redemption of Guillaume in "Black God's Shadow." Jarisme becomes a foil for Jirel in this tale by compelling the protagonist to this revelation. It is Jirel's overwhelming rage that breaks Jarisme's spell and results in the destruction of the source of her power as well as the tower in which their confrontation takes place. This extraordinary aggression surging through Jirel and resulting in the defeat of her antagonist marks a capacity for interwoven feminine and masculine qualities. It is fitting that a "strip of darkest midnight...[a] streak of starry night cleaving the daylit sky" (116) falls upon Jarisme at the end of the tale to mark her ultimate defeat as she is transported away by her "no-god of the void" (118). Moore's contrast of light (femininity) and darkness (masculinity) carries through as her extended metaphor of perceived dichotomy of binary assumptions of gender and sexuality as inherent conflict. Jarisme's absolute femininity is overcome by a force of masculinity. Though this defeat comes at the hands of the ostensibly female character of the hero, Jirel transcends perceived dichotomy of binary assumptions of gender and sexuality as an incarnation of both masculinity and femininity. The implication is that Jarisme, too, may achieve such transcendence as she is rescued from oblivion by the summoned entity from an alternate realm of existence. The wizard Giraud is not so fortunate as he enacts a spell to become invisible

while taunting Jirel, only to die upon her outthrust dagger.

The final Jirel of Joiry story accredited solely to C.L. Moore is “Hellsgarde.” The tale begins with Jirel arriving by horseback to the castle of Hellsgarde at the behest of Guy of Garlot through which the metaphor of dark masculinity continues:

Guy of Garlot – Guy of Garlot! The hoofbeats thumped out the refrain all the way downhill. Black Guy with his thinly smiling lips and his slanted dark eyes and his unnatural comeliness – unnatural because Guy, within, was ugly as sin itself. It seemed no design of the good God that such sinfulness should wear Guy’s dark beauty for a fleshly garment. (153)

Guy holds Jirel’s men captive in Garlot Castle and proposes a trade with Jirel: her men in exchange for the coveted yet unknown prize within Andred’s casket located in Hellsgarde.

She finds the castle guarded by corpses propped on spears upon the battlements. In a scene of blatant sexual objectification, a servant with “the face of a cripple” welcomes her through the castle gate: “his eyes slid very quickly, yet very comprehensively, from her tanned and red-lipped face downward over the lifting curves of her under the molding chainmail, over the bare brown keens under slim, steel-greaved legs. There was a deeper unctuousness in his voice as he said: ‘My master will make you very welcome, lady’” (159-160). The servant bears her separate body parts within his gaze from face to curves to legs. The narrator implies that this act diminishes her personhood and that his greeting on behalf of his master veils sinister intent. Another suggestion narration occurs when Jirel first encounters Alaric, master of Hellsgarde: “Striding smoothly in her thigh-length hauberk, she knew she was a figure on which a man’s eyes must linger. Her supple height, the pleasant smooth curves of her under mail, the long, shapely legs beneath the linked metal of her hauberk, the swinging of the long sword whose weight upon its belt pulled in her waist to tigerish slimness – Alaric’s eyes missed

nothing of all these” (161). The imagery of supple height, pleasant smooth curves, long, shapely legs, and slim, tigerish waist all easily signify the female form. However, the description’s shift to the “swinging of the long sword” from her belt is a potent phallic symbol of traditionally masculine sexuality seamlessly inserted within a stream of traditionally feminine sexuality. Moore shrewdly crafts both into a single expression of being, emphasizing the transgressive gender expression of Jirel’s character.

Jirel experiences a violent attack when lured to the bloody spot of Andred’s death that is a sexual violation described as if it were rape:

In the instant of that blackness, while the whole great hall was black and vocal and bewildering with storm-wind, as if he had been waiting avidly for this moment all evening a man’s arm seized Jirel in a grip like death and a mouth came down upon hers in a more savagely violent and intimate kiss than she had ever known before. It all burst upon her so quickly that her impressions confused and ran together into one gust of terrible anger against Alaric as she struggled helplessly against that iron darkness. She was conscious of nothing but the arm, the mouth, the insolent hand. She was pressed against a man’s body, but the strength of the arm was like steel about her...It was as if the kiss, the crush of the arm, the violence of the hand, the howl of the wind and the drag across the room were all but manifestations of a single vortex of violence. (170)

This violation against Jirel terminates as abruptly as it began: “It was gone now as if it had never been. Walls did not enclose here; there was no wind, there was no sound in the great hall” (171). It is of particular interest how the description of this sexual attack is through the isolated limbs of the male force: a mouth’s kiss, a man’s crushing arm, the violence of the hand. The isolation of these body parts echoes the objectification of Jirel’s body by the Hellsgarde denizens: “The look of abnormality upon their faces did not lie – it was a sure sign of deformity

of the soul” (165). In terms of the literal plot of “Hellsgarde,” the former master of the castle, Andred, was dismembered before being interred in the quicksand beneath the castle. Thus the “sorcery” or supernatural element of this tale is that he haunts Jirel as ghostly body parts. In a figurative sense the fixation on the objectified body reflects upon the psychological essentializing of male and female other as erogenous fragments rather than autonomous, whole selves. Even in this instance, the rape of Jirel is not necessarily objectifying her character. It is grave, violent, and abusive. This is not a moment for titillating audiences. This is a moment for developing Jirel’s character through the trauma that she experiences.

The climax of the tale involves one more encounter with the dismembered ghost of Andred as Jirel ultimately learns that she was the bait to draw out the spirit for the delight of Alaric’s retinue. He explains that they are hunters of undeath who “lust after that dark force” (187). Alaric allows her to keep the casket and depart from Hellsgarde. She ponders its contents and his final plea for it to remain closed. Convinced that it holds something akin to Andred’s ghost, Jirel decides not to exact physical violence upon Guy of Garlot: “No...she would have a better vengeance...She would hand him a little iron-bound leather box” (189). This perpetuates Moore’s clever characterization of Jirel as one who is capable of inflicting mortal violence but prefers clever guile to defeat her opponents. Her brand of heroism represents a marriage of traditionally feminine-coded intellect and traditionally masculine-coded brute physicality.

“Quest of the Starstone” was collaboratively authored by C.L. Moore and her future husband, Henry Kuttner. The story commences with a daring attack on the warlock Franga by Jirel and her “mail-clad men” (192). It represents a continuation of tonal contrast to illuminate the thematic role of perceived binary assumptions of gender and sexuality to Moore’s poignant metaphor of heroism in spite of cultural assumptions of gender normativity: “Her men had

shrunk back in a huddle beyond the broken door, their magic-dazzled eyes following her in fascinated dread. ‘You womanish knaves...Womanish, did I say? Ha! You don’t deserve the flattery! Must I go the whole way alone?’” (194). While Jirel’s heroic effort separates her from her men, Moore and Kuttner employ femininity as an insult by implying that women are typically less capable than men. This contradiction somewhat undermines Moore’s earlier efforts in the Jirel of Joiry series emphasizing the hero’s agency and capabilities.

Franga secures the aid of Northwest Smith living on Mars in the far future to return with him to France in the year 1500 to confront Jirel and seize the Starstone. Smith agrees and is set in conflict against Jirel. Upon meeting her, however, Smith has a sudden change of heart and refuses to betray Jirel to Franga. They attempt to escape through hordes of crawling monsters but Smith is eventually captured and tortured by Franga. In this moment Jirel has her own change of heart: “she who had looked hardily on torture many times before now felt a queer, hot weakness rising in her as the stars become brushing flames and she saw the sweat beading Smith’s forehead and his fists clench...And a sudden fury of sympathy and hot emotion rushed over her, a sudden gust of pain in his pain” (218-219). In order to save Smith from torment, she gives up the Starstone to Franga. Smith is able to kick the jewel from her hands. As it shatters upon the mountainside like broken glass, entities like living fire escapes from the remnants in blazing light. They thank Smith and Jirel for rescuing them from their imprisonment and are returned to their proper times and places. Smith reminisces of the woman he met in the past with the melancholy understanding that they would never cross paths again.

In fixating on Northwest Smith as the protagonist of this tale, Jirel becomes ancillary to the plot. It is truly more of a Northwest Smith story than a Jirel of Joiry story. “Quest of the Starstone” succeeds in providing further evidence of Jirel’s non-binary heroism in the extended metaphor of gender conflict. While Smith occupies the focus of principal protagonist, Jirel is

never damsel-in-distress requiring Smith's rescue. One could argue that their alternating moments of empathy for one another's plight while subjected to the whims of Franga helps to build mutual respect between the heroes.

In each of these tales, Jirel attains not only an existence of equality, but an existence of self-determined worth rather than patriarchally determined worth. To apply the words of Judith Butler, she represents "the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed" (*Gender Trouble* 19). Jirel transcends normative notions of heroism; she embodies a form of transgressive or even intersectional heroism. While Conan is largely viewed as a he-man barbarian hero, Jirel is perceived as a woman opposite channeling masculine capacities for power and dominance. On the contrary, Jirel is an exemplar of dynamic heroism and a universal subject that cannot be neatly reduced to one gender performance or another. C.L. Moore's Jirel is perhaps a third gender entirely as proposed by Judith (Jack) Halberstam: female masculinity.

Conclusion

This study into C.L. Moore's sword-and-sorcery is a critical examination of this primary innovator of the genre as one concerned with gendered representations of identity and undermining socially restrictive notions of identity and sexuality. The result of each of Moore's sword-and-sorcery texts is a complex vision of heroic performance transgressing binary notions of identity and sexuality that presents fantasy heroism as a thoroughly socially gendered and perhaps truthfully and ultimately genderless construct. Sword-and-sorcery heroism is itself a fluid commodity in these narratives as that which can be adorned, performed, exchanged, and discarded. Superlative examples of the sword-and-sorcery genre propose transformative and progressive depictions of heroic identity.

Jirel is a dynamic being weaving in and out of archetypes. She is at times a construction

of traditional, vulnerable femininity and at others a construction of traditional, belligerent masculinity, playing on tropes of conventional manhood and womanhood. C.L. Moore's pulp hero is not a sexually objectified Valkyrie woman mimicking ultra-masculinity, nor is she a romanticized damsel of feminine sentimentality. She inhabits a super-heroic intersection of socially coded femininity and masculinity that is confined by neither and inclusive of both: transgressive heroism.

Chapter 3: Samuel R. Delany's Gorgik: Gendered-and-Genrefied Liberation

Introduction

In this chapter I present the sword-and-sorcery of Samuel R. Delany as the ultimate twentieth century manifestation of a genre with the capacity to navigate the white supremacist masculinism informing cultural production. Delany's fiction presents the capacity for sword-and-sorcery to transgress what may be termed normative performance by positing fictional spaces towards representation and gender performance free from the dictates of white supremacist masculinism. This chapter first surveys critical receptions of Delany's sword-and-sorcery before culminating in a reading of Delany's fiction as capable of undermining preconceptions of the genre as merely emboldening "traditional masculinity" through Delany's deployment of setting and characters that deviate from such supposedly normative gender performance.

The need to dismantle the white supremacist masculinist ethos nourishing systemic racism throughout this nation's history has never been more urgent.⁴¹ Systemic racism informs both America's literal history and its literary antiquity. As has been stated in previous chapters, sword-and-sorcery as a genre has been critically relegated to the status of a paraliterary form that derives from white supremacist masculinism and continues to inform the perpetual white supremacist masculinist ethos that dominates in this country. This white supremacist masculinist ideology is conveyed through American popularized fiction and manifests literally in police brutality, voter disenfranchisement, and numerous forms of institutionalized discrimination and intolerance. In order to dismantle white supremacist masculinism we must take this system of unilateral power apart in favor of non-prejudiced cultural and political structures. We must *dis-mantel* white supremacist masculinism, which is to say that hegemonic masculinity in this country has been based on gender, sexuality, and racial hierarchy positioning

white heteronormative men at the pinnacle of the mythical American edifice that connects the literal history of this country to the literary perpetuations of American beliefs and ideology. On display as the hegemonic vainglorious in American myths, it is imperative that we critically engage texts that edify the hegemonic vainglorious that is white supremacist masculinism as well as those that challenge this same phenomenon. While Robert E. Howard's Conan the Cimmerian is easily viewed as the reinforcement of sword-and-sorcery as a testament to white supremacist masculinism, C.L. Moore's Jirel of Joiry and Samuel R. Delany's Gorgik the Liberator stand as challengers to the notion of sword-and-sorcery as merely a testament to white supremacist masculinism.

Systemic racism tarnishes the history of American literature⁴², which includes the history of speculative fiction. *The Norton Book of Science Fiction* published in 1993 includes only two black writers: Octavia E. Butler and Samuel R. Delany. This fact does little to deviate from the "consistent image of the Whiteness of science fiction" (Carrington 19). Delany's status as a contributor to the American sword-and-sorcery legacy is marginalized by the fact that he is a black man writing in what is dominantly perceived to be a white genre. Delany identifies his work and his experience as outside of dominant discourse as a man identifying as black and gay: "My life has always tended to have a large element of marginality to it, at least if you accept a certain range of experience that overlaps those of an ideal white, middle-class, heterosexual male as the definition of centrality" (*Motion* 55). Delany is not mentioned in de Camp's sweeping evaluation of literary swordsmen and sorcerers and is little more than a footnote in Moorcock's twenty-first century update to the annals of wizards and wild romance. Despite this neglect, Delany's sword-and-sorcery is credited as that which "thoroughly expands, deepens, questions, and undercuts the premises of genre" (McCaffery 73).

Samuel R. Delany is an American author, literary critic, and professor born in 1942 in

Harlem, New York. He is best known for his award winning science fiction including *Babel-17* published in 1966 and *The Einstein Intersection* published in 1967. He is also a renowned essayist and nonfiction author for his work on sexuality and urban cityscape in *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue* published in 1999. His groundbreaking work also includes being the first to publish a novel about the AIDS epidemic from a major publisher in the United States in *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*.

Delany merges issues of race, class, sex, sexuality, culture, and identity to make sense of the changing world throughout the twentieth century and beyond. By the age of twenty-six he had written eight science fiction books and won three Nebula Awards, which is a prestigious annual recognition for works in speculative fiction. His later books feature increasing focus on sexuality and Delany himself has called them pornographic (Womack 126). Critic Georgia Johnston investigates Samuel Delany's invocation of Derrida and the theoretical framework that is founded on the notion of representation and the colonization of one discourse by another, particularly of the marginalized discourse by dominant discourse. According to Derrida, the language of the dominant discourse may make any other discourse from a position of exteriority or alterity impossible. Derrida's main concern here is that alterity cannot be understood from the perspective of the first, dominant discourse. This concept harkens back to the assertion that dominant readings of these narratives and of the paraliterary or subliterate sword-and-sorcery genre as a whole function to obfuscate the discursive potential of marginalized authors with otherwise impactful contributions to literary studies and to cultural production. Critic Georgia Johnston identifies the autobiographic work of Samuel Delany interrogates the space of the margin to make discourse about sexuality and race visible where it would be otherwise impossible due to the dominant discourse. Johnston also implies the capacity of Delany's fiction to fulfill this same capacity, though Johnston's critique returns always to the discursive

capacity of even these works of fiction to substantiate Delany's autobiography rather than allowing the works of fiction to stand on their own as loci of what may be termed authentic discourse of the margins. One tactic by which Delany accomplishes this goal is by writing about sexual acts publicly where they are expected to occur in private, pornographic, or taboo spaces.

Delany notoriously wrote about gay public sex as a social good in a work published in 1999 titled *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*. Delany seeks to transform ideas about public spaces as Times Square has famously served as a hub of sexual expression, which was changed with New York City's Times Square revitalization project that significantly reduced the number of pornographic theaters and adult businesses through zoning laws. Delany argues that this stifling of sexuality plagued both homosexuality and heterosexuality alike in what may be termed the world's capital for urban living at the turn of the twenty-first century:

The redevelopment of Times Square from dicey to Disneyfied cost the city one of its vital circulatory organs: the pornographic movie house, an institution that brought men from all walks of life together in the mutual pursuit of pleasure. By identifying a sex-friendly zone as healthful and a family-friendly zone as afflicted, Delany makes a case for the social benefits of interclass intimacy (Hubbs 352).

For Delany, the capitalist motives of Disney's acquisition of Times Square exemplifies a regime of unbridled consumerism that decimated genuine community through gentrification. The bridge between classes for the mutual pursuit of pleasure that was the old Times Square served a common good as a nexus for interclass intimacy. On the other hand, Delany does admit that the old Times Square proved to be dangerous for women with its objectifying images presenting women as commodities. Despite this repugnant development, Delany suggests an intriguing interplay between heterosexuality and homosexuality in old Times Square as homosexuality

was encouraged in audiences while heterosexuality was on visible display on the screens of pornographic cinemas (Hubbs 356). Women became conduits for the connections made possible in the culture of old Times Square as they were “paradoxically essential to yet absent from movie-house intercourse” (357). Delany’s nonfiction essays and autobiographic writing present social transformation. Delany suggests that people benefit from a society that encourages connections between different classes of people. The memories that Delany conveys in his nonfiction challenge the sexual and socioeconomic strictures of normativity while maintaining a focus on bodies as the site of unhealthy restraint and potential liberation. Delany’s fiction takes on this same struggle to convey alternative spaces beyond the restraints of reality.

Samuel R. Delany admits that childhood readings of Robert E. Howard as well as a familiarity with the works of C.L. Moore, Leiber, and Moorcock influenced the creation of his Nevèrÿon sword-and-sorcery series (*Return to Nevèrÿon* 278). The word “*Nevèrÿon*” possess vast signifying potential: “The words themselves, *Nevèrÿon* and *Nevèrÿona*, signify alternative graphical possibilities depending upon how they are read or written. *Nevèrÿon* could mean (n)every-one, or never-one, or everyone, or simply *never*, simultaneously” (Battis 478). The implication of these signifying possibilities is that freedom to express and to act on sexuality are both possible and impossible.

The protagonist in the first tale of Delany’s Nevèrÿon series, Gorgik, is defined relative to the institutions of the society in which he exists. The culminating description provided at the conclusion of the tale details a man shaped by the rigidity of these institutions to which he conformed and yet found himself eternally conflicted in a subtle dance of belonging and estrangement:

Gorgik, at thirty-six, was tall and great-muscled, with rough, thinning hair and a face

(with its great scar) that looked no more than half a dozen years older than it had at twenty-one, a man comfortable with horse and sword, at home with slaves, thieves, soldiers, prostitutes, merchants, counts, and princesses; a man who was – in his way and for his epoch – the optimum product of his civilization. The slave mine, the Court, the army, the great ports and mountain holds, desert, field, and forest: each of his civilization’s institutions had contributed to creating this scar-faced giant (“The Tale of Gorgik” 268).

Unlike Howard and Moore, Samuel R. Delany is a professor and an academic in addition to his status as an author of fiction. This fact is palpable in Delany’s works as the narrative voice clearly articulates critical examinations of institutions of culture and civilization while such analytical efforts are left entirely to the subjective reception of the sword-and-sorcery readership of the likes of Howard and Moore.

Delany stands out as a producer of sword-and-sorcery fiction as an ultimate twentieth-century progression for the genre. No longer restricted by the need to reflect normative perceptions of gender performance, Delany’s works unapologetically display the furthest and least confined representative capacities for this genre. While the previous chapters presented arguments for Howard and Moore that stressed the subversive capacities of these authors to challenge preconceptions of a genre that they simultaneously reified and legitimized, Delany’s socio-cultural critiques bound within the living allegories of the fantasy realms of Aptor and Nevèrÿon are overt. Challenges to the discursive potential of this genre are perhaps nowhere clearer than in the sword-and-sorcery fiction of Samuel R. Delany.

Rereading Samuel R. Delany’s Settings: From Aptor to Nevèrÿon

Samuel R. Delany’s settings are ornately conceived examples of worldbuilding. Crafted in the unrestricted and unconfined modes of science fiction, fantasy, and particularly sword-

and-sorcery, Delany imagines alternate spaces that “juxtapose two different types of knowledge, showing that one story is not the only story, that one ideology, one discourse, has surrounding it other perspectives, other systems of knowledge, and other bodies, which he makes visible” (Johnston “Discourses” 49). These worlds are knowledge and discourse systems alternative to those of heterosexual patriarchal culture. They defy reality’s coercive normative discourse systems that label any sexuality or gender performance as deviant, criminal, or perverse if they are not heterosexual. Critic Georgia Johnston argues that the autobiographic work of Samuel Delany:

represents desire as what underlies economics, politics, culture – subjects of discourse that are usually representable – while desire traditionally remains unrepresentable in discourse. By bringing desire to the forefront, Delany crosses the margin, sometimes through narration of sexual acts, sometimes through exposition, sometimes through physical signs...a language system appropriate to this world which cannot be spoken (“From the Margins” 235).

I argue that the greater focus should be on the capacity for Delany’s fiction to stand as its own testament to the capacity for representation of the marginalized subject. This discourse of the margins manifests in fiction while reflecting real-world economics, politics, and culture in the space of an expanding American neo-myth that evolves throughout American literary antiquity with the rise of sword-and-sorcery as a realized genre informing successive realized genres including popular culture manifestations of the superhero.

Originally published in 1962, *The Jewels of Aptor* is a heroic quest into an unknown irradiated land called Aptor in a post-apocalyptic setting. The characters are members of a society that has regressed to the likes of an Arthurian mythical epoch. This is a world of the dichotomy characteristic of sword-and-sorcery where two separate deities are worshipped: the

Dark God Hama and the White Goddess Argo. While the protagonists Urson and Geo prepare to set forth on their journey, they exchange rumors about the land of Aptor: “They talk about cannibals, women who drink blood, things neither man nor animal, and cities inhabited only by death. I’m fairly sure it’s not what you’d call a friendly place, the way sailors avoid it, save to curse by; still, most of what they say is silly” (36). Aptor is conceptualized in a similar vein of savagery and wilderness as the exoticized locales of Howard’s Hyborian Age. After surviving the dangerous radiation of Aptor, the travelers recover with the aid of the priestesses of Argo who live in a matriarchal sanctuary. The protagonist, Geo, has his arm amputated at this time and becomes a figurative embodiment of the emasculated or effeminized. This is a symbolic manifestation of an androgynous ideal frequently realized in works of sword-and-sorcery fiction. Geo’s evolving character and the circumstances of his transformation foreshadow the climactic exchange with the beings called Old Ones at the conclusion of the tale.

The setting is one of binary sexual fragmentation and metamorphosis as the men become man-wolves while the women are blind priestesses who banish men to live outside of their convent but also change in the light of the moon into winged creatures:

“It’s beginning to make sense...I think most creatures on this Island undergo some sort of metamorphosis...We have probably just been guests of the female of the species...”

“You mean those others could have changed into men, too, if they wanted?” Urson asked.

“If they wanted,” answered Geo. “But it was probably more convenient to stay as they were since the women had banished them to live outside the convent. They only come together for mating, more than likely” (125).

Here the fragmentation and apparent dichotomy of sexed and gendered identities is presented as integral to the cultural logics of economy of Delany’s fictional world. There are essentialized

differences between female and male. Feminine and masculine forces are at odds with one another as indicators of the proffered facets of community fundamentally integrated and segregated along the determinism of constructs of gender and sexuality.

The objective of the quest at the heart of Delany's plot is to recover the items known as *The Jewels of Aptor*, which are revealed to be instruments capable of influencing the minds of others. This description is given with an awareness of the oppression and subjugation of marginalized groups throughout American history:

Dictators during the entire history of this planet have used similar techniques. By not letting the people of their country know what conditions existed outside their boundaries, they could get the people to fight to stay in those conditions. It was the old adage: Convince a slave that he's free, and he will fight to maintain his slavery. Why does a poet sing? Because he likes music; and because silence frightens him. Why does a thief steal? To get the goods from his victim; also to prove that his victim cannot get him..." (158).

The jewels coveted by men and women seeking to dominate others through the respective institutions of a religion of male dominance opposed to one of female dominance. It is after discovering the true nature of these artifacts that the Old Ones reveal themselves to the heroes. They introduce themselves as the eldest intelligence on the planet watching mankind throughout history. These entities describe themselves in contrast to and in extension of the gender dichotomy of Delany's myth-scape: "We have never aligned ourselves with either Argo or Hama, but rise in the sexless swell of the ocean...Whether you use them to control minds, or to make fire, all carriers of the jewels are maimed. As before, some will listen, some will not. Your minds are your own, that I pledge you. Now I warn you: cast the jewels into the sea" (171). Geo and Urson fail to heed this warning as they remain skeptical of the motives of yet

another strange force possibly manipulating the naïve outlanders unfamiliar with Aptor's horrors and wonders.

As intriguing as Delany's first major work, *The Jewels of Aptor*, is to the landscape of sword-and-sorcery fiction, Delany creates an even more expansive universe in the various works that constitute his Nevèrÿon series. Published decades after *The Jewels of Aptor*, Delany's Nevèrÿon series chronicles the events in a time before civilization with a former slave turned revolutionary as the heroic protagonist named Gorgik. Delany's construction of the Nevèrÿon mythology is similar to Howard's construction of the Hyborian Mythology. The stories were not written or published in chronological order and span the entirety of the protagonist's life ranging from their youth to their elder years.

The first chronological story in the Nevèrÿon series explores Gorgik's young life as a slave. It opens with a description of the port of Kolhari. The port is peopled with soldiers, sailors, travelers, tradesmen:

and among them all slipped the male and female slaves, those of aristocratic masters dressed more elegantly than many merchants, while others were so ragged and dirty their sex was indistinguishable, yet all with the hinged iron collars above fine or frayed shirt necks or bony shoulders, loose or tight around stringy or fleshy necks, and sometimes even hidden under jeweled pieces of damasked cloth set with beryls and tourmalines. Frequently this double memory returned to Gorgik (217).

The cultural core of Nevèrÿon, and the sign-system that encloses all things within its borders – including Gorgik, Noyeed, the city, the world – is the Market: “Everything happens within the Old and New Markets of Kolhari, and they become the symbolic ground upon which all human interaction – financial and erotic, gay and straight – emerges” (Battis 481). Delany is keenly aware of the materialist implications of sword-and-sorcery cultural production reflecting the

commodification of bodies in the real world through fictional spaces that reiterate commodifying human beings as dispensable and consumable objects.

Simultaneously embedded within the description of the market is the description of slaves as enslaved bodies. Delany begins the tale with disassembling preconceptions of slavery as a gendered, classed, or racialized construct. The slaves of the Nevèrÿon world are categorized as male and female, but also as beyond sex or gender as the “indistinguishable.” The stringy and the fleshy; the fine and the frayed; the enslaved encompasses a broad range of people in terms of the dichotomous language characteristic of sword-and-sorcery. This symbolism conforming to societal expectations and disrupting societal expectations functions as the assembling of oppositional relationships and disassembling of oppositional relationships as the setting of sword-and-sorcery in spaces of contrast.

Nevèrÿon is first introduced as a matriarchal society. It is ruled by the Child Empress Ynelgo who comes to power at the time that Gorgik is taken to labor in the mines. In his youth Gorgik is “tall, strong, big-boned, friendly, and clever.” At twenty-one he enters into service with the Vizerine Myrgot as a “towering, black-haired gorilla of a youth, eyes permanently reddened from rockdust” and a prominent pickax scar upon his face (227). This description is profoundly preoccupied with Gorgik’s physical being and the materiality of his supposedly essential nature inextricable from his identity. His personhood as a slave dominated by female masters in a matriarchal world marks him as a fundamentally objectified entity. Delany is interested in structures that both include and exclude. While critic Georgia Johnston argues that Delany focuses on power structures of cultures that do not wish to allow the marginalized to represent themselves, I would argue that the matriarchal institutions of the Nevèrÿon world present females in positions of social authority. Masculinity and femininity are concepts that share a transitive correlation. Women freely have access to patriarchal modes of “masculine

power” and men are able to assume the stereotypically feminine role of the dominated or the subservient.

In later Nevèryon tales after Gorgik the Liberator ends slavery across the land, the constructed world becomes one of social mutability:

Economic upheavals in Nevèryon, of which the abolition of slavery by proclamation of the Child Empress Ynelgo half a dozen years before was only the most recent, had commenced much movement in the land. Once fear of slavers was gone from the highways and backroads of Nevèryon, more and more folk from the southern forests and the northern mountains and the western deserts had begun to make their way to the cities. And those in the cities with money, imagination, and industry had begun to take their primitive industrial knowledge out into the country to see what profit and speculation were to be had. Motion from margin to center, from center to margin was constant – till, in a handful of years, it had altered Nevèryon’s whole notion of margin and center (21).

The Nevèryon setting serves as a palpable allegory for the real world as it addresses the marginalization of minorities relegated and diminished in status by a society catering to its privileged denizens by imposed social category or stratification. However, while the real world is reflected in the fictional world of Nevèryon, there is also a sense that characters of the fictional space may be more sexually liberated than their real-world counterparts in the readers of Delany’s sword-and-sorcery. The narrator directly addresses this fact in numerous instances of the Nevèryon tales. For example, in *The Game of Time and Pain* the narrator criticizes the sexuality of the barbarian Udrog: “Udrog had already followed his sexual whims through many situations that would have been more than strange enough to deter, with our greater age and wisdom, you and me” (30). Such critical declarations appear to exist for the benefit of the

reader in satisfying the real-world prejudices against so-called “sexual deviance” including sadism, masochism, and heteronormative discriminations against homosexuality.

The setting of the *Neveryon* books holds a startling relevance for marginalized readers in particular. Delany’s work addresses racial, gendered, and sexual oppression while also engaging with the complexities of intertextual identities. The fixation on bodies, the visions of sexuality at times privately reserved and at times publicly displayed, and the fluctuations between the role of the master and the role of the slave. Each of these positions can be taken up by readers seeking representation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered experience, just as they could for those who identify as heterosexual. However, the ability to be represented as an authentic and realized persona despite public categorization as deviant or abnormal pertains to those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered. In fictional spaces, identities that would be labelled as deviant in reality are provided an opportunity to be freely realized.

Rereading Samuel R. Delany’s Direct and Indirect Characterizations of Femininity, Masculinity, and Beyond

The Gorgik character of the *Neveryon* series has the capacity to be read as an autobiographical character that epitomizes real, lived experience rather than fantastic and fictitious fabrication. Like Delany, Gorgik is a black and gay male. He does not communicate to or from the central concerns of literature which are predominately white and heterosexual. Delany’s narratives sheathed in the marginalized framework of science fiction demonstrate how the “margin undermines mastery, control, and coherence, even when, concomitantly, realizing an ‘I’ from the margins who has the ability to represent those margins” (Johnston “Discourses” 48). Delany presents sophisticated matters of representation that include the irony and paradox of the subject created by a multiplicity of forces in concert and conflict. Gorgik the slave becomes a military leader and a legend. He is both master and slave and the nuances of this

paradigm in public and private spaces are not lost on Delany or his critics. A homosexual man can be dominated and/or the dominator. Gay men are not relegated to the margins of possibility – waiting for authorization. They become the authority to which others must answer or seek approval.

A survey of masculine personae in Delany's sword-and-sorcery reveals an intriguing contrast between the cultural assumptions of masculine identity in Delany's constructed fictional spaces versus the actual spaces occupied by Delany's readership. In a novella from Delany's Nevèrÿon series titled *The Game of Time and Pain*, Gorgik shares stories of his exploits across the Nevèrÿon world with a barbarian boy named Udrog.

The Game of Time and Pain takes place years after Gorgik lived as a slave and entered military service for the Child Empress Ynelgo. He introduces himself to Udrog: "You look like you've heard my name...? Many have, especially among the barbarians: because many barbarians have been slaves. And I lead the council on the Child Empress Ynelgo...to end slavery in Nevèrÿon...Some even consider me a hero for it. In parts of the land, I am known as Gorgik the Liberator" (17). Gorgik's description of himself illustrates his ascension to a position of elevated status in his world while maintaining his humble origin and camaraderie with Udrog.

The blossoming relationship between Gorgik and Udrog is overtly sexual and romantic. Where homosexual eroticism is not uncommon in sword-and-sorcery, it is perhaps more frequently embedded in the subtext of sword-and-sorcery tales. Delany unabashedly presents homosexual eroticism in the principle text of *The Game of Time and Pain*:

'Nothing has hurt us yet. If someone wanted to harm us, it would have been easier when we both slept alone than now, when we're both awake together.'

There was a long, long silence. Some might have called it embarrassed. During it, the

man watched the boy; and the boy began to watch the way in which the man watched him. (The man saw him see.)...

‘Do you like to watch me...when I sleep, maybe?’

Gorgik pursed his lips a moment. ‘Yes.

The boy blinked. Then, with the smallest smile, he said: “You like to do anything besides watch, now I’m awake?”...

Gorgik snorted. ‘Perhaps.’

‘And you’re not *that* old. I like to do it with strong men, big men. You ever fuck real rough?’

‘I have...’ Gorgik paused. Then he said: ‘Sometimes I do it so rough most men and women wouldn’t think of it as fucking.’ He smiled; and the smile became a laugh. ‘Is that what you want?’ (19).

The voyeurism of Gorgik’s initial interaction with Udrog as a form of subtle sensuality gives way to an overt and aggressive sexuality in the posturing of practically challenging one another to engage in rough “fucking.” Gendered assumptions of this expression of sexuality are undermined by Gorgik’s equating of sexuality regardless of gender. When he declares “most men and women wouldn’t think of it as fucking,” Gorgik erodes heteronormative presumptions of sexuality while positing Nevèryon, or at least the Nevèryon known by its slaves/barbarians, as a reality transgressing such rigid notions of gender or sexuality. Delany’s works of science fiction and cultural criticism move sexuality from private to public and break down the barriers of binary through the intensely social and psychological interrelations of Gorgik and Udrog:

This story, too, is one of Gorgik’s life, but it is an oral autobiography within the tale told by Gorgik himself to the barbarian Udrog, with the nuanced sophisticated understanding coming not from an omniscient narrative voice observing from another discourse

system, but from the man himself. Autobiography is used orally and perspectively.

Gorgik tells the young male barbarian the story of his desire, a story of his first understanding within himself of homosexual and fetishistic desire for someone who could put on and take off the slave collar, and how that desire gave him the subjectivity that he needed in order to keep himself alive in the mines psychologically, later to be freed from slavery physically (Johnston “Discourses” 55).

The Game of Time and Pain becomes a compelling exploration of the capacities for companions to define themselves through defining their relationship with one another. It is deeply romantic while also what Delany may unabashedly term pornographic. This is in itself a powerful transgression for sword-and-sorcery literary spaces as homosexual romance that is casually implied in various works by Howard or Moore become directly involved in the works of Delany. Gorgik ultimately realizes that his subjectivity is inextricable from his desire for men who are able to put on the slave collar and to take it off. It is a story about Gorgik’s realization of “self.” Gorgik as “liberator” adopts a more profound meaning as he represents a literal liberator for the slaves of the fictional spaces of Nevèrÿon and beyond as well as a liberator for genuine queer representation in the real-world spaces of sword-and-sorcery readership otherwise denied such open representation.

One Nevèrÿon story in particular succeeds in blurring the lines between fictional and nonfictional spaces of identity and representation. In *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* published in 1984, a fatal sexually transmitted disease ravages the world of Nevèrÿon. The parallels between Delany’s fictional space and the AIDS epidemic plaguing the real world becomes clear to the reader as the narrative shifts back and forth from Nevèrÿon to the streets of New York City during the epidemic. Delany includes stories about people who are homeless or drug addicts in this entry to the Nevèrÿon mythos.

Even today the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community has cause to distrust the healthcare establishment which was so critical of “deviant sexuality” during the AIDS epidemic in particular. Delany rejects the binarism of sexuality labelled as that which is “safe” and that which is “unsafe.” Delany engaged in cultural dissent by challenging suggestions of safer sex guidelines that vilified “deviant sexuality” and widespread public misconceptions and disinformation about sexuality (Long 213). Delany’s works of sword-and-sorcery feature far more explicit references to homosexuality than the more subtle homosexual eroticism present in Howard’s works. These references challenge preconceptions of masculine performance as a necessarily heteronormative manifestation.

In the “Tale of Gorgik,” the titular protagonist forms strong relationships with the comrades in his unit after entering military service, but these relationships are reprimanded when they become amorous:

He knew all his men...But only a very few did he ever consider friends, and then not for long. A frequent occurrence: some young recruit would take the easiness of some late-night campfire talk, or the revelations that occurred on a foggy morning hike, as a sign of lasting intimacy, only to find himself reprimanded – and in three cases over the two years, struck to the ground for the presumption: for these were basic and brutal times – in a manner that recalled nothing so much (at least to Gorgik, eternally frustrated by having to give out these reprimands) as the snubs he had received in the halls of the High Court of Eagles the mornings after some particularly revelatory exchange with some count or princess (265).

Intimacy between the soldiers is not only frowned upon but reprimanded through physical punishment dealt by Gorgik himself. While heterosexuality is acknowledged in this narrative and clearly exists in the Nevèryon world, it is the subject of taboo. This condemnation is

clearly reflective of real-world prejudices manifesting in the fictional spaces of Delany's sword-and-sorcery.

Gorgik's conception of relating to his comrades as a slave contrast with his conception of relating to his fellow soldiers:

He had experienced leading of a sort before, and he led well. But the personalities of his men – both their blustering camaraderie (which seemed a pale and farcical shadow of the brutal and destructive mayhem that, from time to time, had broken out in the slave quarters at the mines, always leaving one or two dead) and the constant resignation to danger and death (that any sane slave would have been trying his utmost to avoid) – confused him (and confusion he had traditionally dealt with by silence) and depressed him (and depression, frankly, he had never really had time to deal with, nor did he really here, so that its effects, finally, were basically just more anecdotes for later years on the stupidity of the military mind) (264).

The military mind of which he ponders is confusing and depressing while that of the slaves is rational. The slaves are oriented towards sensible matters like survival rather than irrational preoccupations with danger and death lauded by soldiers.

This is not to say that Delany portrays the lives of slaves as preferable to the lives of soldiers. The lives of slaves in the Nevèryon world are fraught with criminality, violence, and rape. The teenage boy Noyeed who is discarded by the Vizerine as an undesirable sex slave. He is replaced with the preferred Gorgik to satisfy her sexual appetites while serving at the court of the empress. Gorgik recognizes Noyeed when he sees him, however, because he was the target of a gang-rape by seven men in the mines who abused him cruelly and repeatedly. Despite the harsh realities of enslavement, Delany depicts a world where interactions amongst the ostracized and the outcast from the privileged echelons of society are liberated from

society's constraints. For example, while the "sexual deviance" of homosexuality is punishable in the military, it is normalized amongst so-called barbarians and slaves. Gorgik and Udrog form a relationship in *The Game of Time and Pain* of fierce passion and aggressive sexuality without hesitation or apprehension.

In "The Tale of Gorgik," Gorgik is aroused by the collars worn by slaves as a symbol of perceived sexual dichotomy of active and passive; dominator and dominated; penetrator and penetrated; masculine and feminine. The logics of this perceived sexual dichotomy persist in *The Game of Time and Pain* with the continued symbolism of the slave collars. This fetish for the collar, the economy of its symbolism, shifts in meaning as Gorgik's self-awareness and comprehension of the institution of slavery evolves over time. This progression occurs as he witnesses relations between masters and slaves over the course of his life:

First, I happened to step behind one of the other wagons and saw Count Jeu-Forsi, sitting on an overturned chest, knee to knee with a miner called Namyuk, who'd been captured three years before by slavers on some back road in the south. The count was drinking from a cider jug and was already drunk. 'You must let me touch it. Let me. Let me, I say. There! No, no, you can't protest. If you do, I shall order it cut off. I can do that, you know. I just don't understand why all of you have such *big* ones – even those of you who weren't born to servitude. When the slavers go out on capturing raids, is that the first thing they look for? Now tell me, doesn't that feel good? You must say yes. Say 'Yes' to me. It feels good enough when I do it to my own' (39).

In this instance, the slave is forced to satisfy the master's commands. The count orders Namyuk to allow him to participate in fondling. The count also orders Namyuk to agree to the act and threatens to physically maim him if he does not comply. Then he goes even further and orders Namyuk to enjoy the act: "Now tell me, doesn't that feel good? You must say yes. Say

‘Yes’ to me.” This scene implies the literal possession of the slave as a reified sexual object that can be controlled and possessed with the fixation on the penis as a literal sexual object commodified in this exchange. The scene implies a complete domination of the slave in terms of their physical being and of their agency as autonomous entities with their own free will.

The meaning of the collar becomes the crux of the plot of *The Game of Time and Pain* which revolves around the stories shared between Gorgik and Udrog. It is the most meaningful lesson Gorgik attempts to teach Udrog in their time together. Gorgik recounts once witnessing a master standing naked in his tent and intentionally binding his own neck with an iron collar:

he raised the collar to his neck and closed the semicircle on it, without taking his hands away, as if afraid, once having donned it, he might not be able to doff it again. I recognized it as a sexual gesture with an intensity enough to stun me and make all my joints go weak. I have already told you, Udrog, my own sexual interest in the collar was as precocious, in its way, as yours; have I already spoken of the pause...? Which, I suppose, is all we can cite of desire (53).

Gorgik again becomes the voyeur and subjugates the subject of his gaze through the act of voyeurism. There occurs an exchange of the dominator and the dominated as the master turns to witness the slave witnessing his own symbolic transgression against his station. Gorgik confesses to Udrog: “We were both naked. We were both male” (53). This scenario challenges Gorgik’s fetish of the collar when the master removes it and places it upon Gorgik’s neck: “The lock snapped to. And just as I had recognized the sexual in his placing of it about his own neck, I knew that, though lust still reeled in his body and still staggered in mine, this gesture was as empty of the sexual as it is possible for a human gesture to be. He was only a frightened man, recollaring a slave whom he had let, briefly and unwisely, pretend awhile to be free” (54).

Witnessing the master’s ability to wear the collar and remove the collar at will serves as an

epiphany for Gorgik. He reflects on every aspect of his identity and the social categories imposed upon slaves and masters that determine their being. Gorgik then realizes that the power to remove the collar from the necks of the oppressed is one that he craves with his whole being. Gorgik the Liberator is truly born from this episode in his life.

The link between the collar and sex, and also slavery to sex, is a distinct marker for Gorgik's sexuality. Even after he has obtained his freedom, he continues to wear the collar and to bear a double signification as a sign of solidarity with slaves and an insignia of his sexuality expressed with other men through master-slave fantasies (Jackson 114). The collar is a sexual fetish of sadomasochism representing the pleasures of taking the dominant and submissive positions reinforced by his own freedom from slavery. Gorgik transforms symbols of humiliation and oppression into sources of pleasure and even agency (Burnett 260).

The Game of Time and Pain also features overt instances of masochistic masculinity, which is a recurring element of sword-and-sorcery. The narration from Udrog's perspective evidences his proclivity for expression through masochistic masculinity:

When men asked to abuse him, he still said no – sometimes. But when he met some man who, to his sexual interest, projected a certain calm and ease, a certain reassurance, a certain solidity and common sense, it was Udrog who now asked, more and more frequently, more and more quickly, to be bound and beaten. Often they said yes. Often Udrog enjoyed it...it was the only game that gave him intense, if inconstant, pleasure, one which, by asking, he had at least *some* power (23-24).

Udrog's participation in exchanges of masochistic masculinity are explicated as a means to partake in social forms or institutions with their preoccupations of power relations. The participation in even the simplest form of these institutions becomes an exercise in engaging, challenging, and perhaps evading marginalization.

Patriarchal knowledge systems fail to represent women's experiences. While there are power structures reflective of real-world patriarchy in the Nevèrÿon series, these structures are often inhabited and executed by women. The Tale of Gorgik," the protagonist of the Nevèrÿon series is introduced as a slave exploited for the amusement of Vizerine Myrgot at the High Court of Eagles. Though he is objectified through this relation to the Vizerine: "Gorgik did not find the social strictures on his relations with the Vizerine demeaning. The Vizerine worked – the sort of work only those in art or government can know, where the hours were seldom defined and real tasks were seldom put in simple terms (while false tasks *always* were). Conferences and consultations made up her day" (238). Women are the literal figures of power in this world and in their relations to Gorgik, though it is through stereotyping of feminine power as intellectual rather than physical. Vizerine Myrgot keeps males like Gorgik as sex slaves. Gorgik is in fact a replacement for Noyeed as Myrgot loses her taste for the teenager.

Never truly accustomed to the world of the High Court, Gorgik seeks to transition from his service there. He presents the request to the Vizerine:

"I *asked* to come and speak to you. Because I cannot stay here at Court any longer.

What can I do to help you in the outside world? Can I be a messenger for you? Can I work some bit of your land? Within the castle here there is nothing for me."

The Vizerine was silent long enough for Gorgik to suspect she disapproved of his request. "Of course you're right," she said at last, so that he was surprised and relieved.

"No, you can't stay on here...I suppose I could always return you to the mines...no, that is a tasteless joke. Forgive me" (256).

Myrgot exerts complete control over their interactions in this display of feminine power. She is the master and Gorgik is the slave to be placed and replaced by her whims as evidenced by the flippant joke that she might return him to the mines. This exchange underscores Gorgik's

objectification as he exists to satisfy the Vizerine's sexual desires. Now he is as a commodity to be relegated to a new posting that could well seal his fate. She ultimately decides to send him for military training and a position at the fringes of the empire where his service can lead to freedom, but this too is a matter of her machinations and manipulations. It is narrated to the reader and unbeknownst to Gorgik that Myrgot receives the military commission as intended for the gold-haired and blue-eyed barbarian teenager who has come into her service. It is this same commission that she hands to Gorgik while she retains the presence of the barbarian teenager.

Gorgik is then trained by Narbu who is himself a former slave. The narrator describes Narbu's ascension over the years:

Two of Narbu's earliest instructors had been daughters of the mysterious Western Crevasse, and much of his early finesse had been gained from these masked women with their strange and strangley sinister blades. Twice he had fought with such women; and once against them...Still, he had always suspected that Nevèryon, with its strictly male armies, was over-compensating for something (261).

The narrator establishes the stereotypical patriarchal paradigm of the warrior and the soldier as masculine domains while undermining those prejudiced assertions with the introduction of the notoriously talented Western Crevasse women.

The warrior woman archetype is realized in Nevèryon tales including the novella *The Tale of Fog and Granite*. The plot of this story involves a smuggler who idolizes Gorgik the Liberator with whom he is familiar from the hero's notoriety across Nevèryon, though a number of imposters masquerade as the legendary figure and it becomes difficult for anyone to substantiate the validity of one claim from another. The unnamed smuggler meets a woman from the Western Crevasse named Raven. This character wears a mask and are "bare-breasted, hearty creatures" (95). Though nudity is a feature of their description, these women are not

reduced to their sexuality nor are they necessarily objectified beyond the descriptors of their bare breasts. Like Gorgik and similar barbarian characters of the Nevèryon world, this is a realm where one's existence as a sexual being is ever present and on display. This should perhaps be interpreted more as a fact of the fictional world with its own cultural logics than a gratuitous gesture towards hollow titillation. Regardless of the superficial sexuality that sword-and-sorcery must necessarily display as a defining facet to so many entries in this genre, these female characters express a gender reality beyond assumed binary in the form of female masculinity.

These women come from a land where women are renowned to be superior warriors to men. In this regard she is somewhat out of place in Nevèryon with its presumptions towards gender roles reminiscent of real-world prejudices, though she harbors prejudices of her own based on the matriarchal society from which she travels:

Oh, he is a *very* clever man. But...I grow uneasy with your Liberator. Certainly he's a moral and meritorious man. And his cause is reasonable and right. But I do not like fighting for a man among men...No man can wield a blade; no man can be as strong, as agile, as honest, or as brave as a woman...I say, if a man can fight like a woman, respect him as a woman (71).

Delany underscores our cultural assumptions of gender by featuring characters from a realm where such assumptions are not only nonexistent, but diametrically opposed to those of their own culture and institutions.

Raven displays these contrasting assumptions primarily through her dialogue with the smuggler as they converse on their journey together. She exhibits her patronizing attitudes in degrading comments about men and their capabilities: "So serious, all you pretty men! So serious!...It's the plump and pretty ones who always want to contradict an honest woman at any

and every turn. Well, they say in my country, the wiles of wise men are an asset to their beauty” (77). The commonplace objectification and diminishment of women and their capabilities by the white supremacist masculinist slant is reversed in the character of Raven and the fictional establishment of Western Crevasse culture that counters yet complements the Nevèrÿon world.

Raven’s prowess and that of her fellow female warriors is put to the test when she comes to the young smuggler’s rescue from an imposter masquerading as Gorgik. She describes with sadistic delight her threats upon the criminal’s life:

Let me see. First I’m going to slip your balls between the tines and whack them off – snick, snick! – first one, then the other. Then I’ll cut your nose off with an upward swipe; perhaps after that an ear. And while you’re listening for it to fall, I’ll take your penis in my hand, slip my blade around it, and hack it loose below the hair. Then I’ll pinch your tiny nipples, tug them forward, and bring my forked blade up around them and cut them free (95).

Raven’s threats capitalize on fears of castration as both literal and figurative emasculation of her male opponent. The reduction of his physicality to isolated body parts is also a pseudosexual objectification of masculine identity representing a perverse possession of his person through the individual ownership of his body as separate fragments.

When the young smuggler asks why Raven and her warriors did not kill the criminal, they express a viewpoint devoid of the senseless violence endemic of the perspective of white supremacist masculinism. In essence, the detailed descriptors of the violence Raven threatened to perpetrate were only to strike fear into the heart of her opponent and ensure that he would not return. The result is a clever ruse that avoids actual violence: “Why didn’t we kill him?...Do you think women can go around killing just any and all men, like that? What monsters would do such a thing?...Though truly, in this strange and terrible land where men aspire to woman’s

place, sometimes you must make a pretense of knowing how it's done by those spiders, mantises, and other vermin who, from time to time, do" (99). The young smuggler presses for the reason why Raven returned at all to come to his aid and she asserts that she boasted of his beauty to her comrades and desired for them to witness the subject of her attraction. This is a bold reversal and subversion of the treatment of women in sword-and-sorcery as subjects of sexual arousal. Raven treats the young smuggler in a manner not unlike one of "Conan's women" from any of a number of Howard's Hyborian Age tales.

Conclusion

Delany's warriors and heroes are arguably even more aggressive in their expressions of stereotypical, traditional masculinity while at times simultaneously expressing traditional femininity than C.L. Moore's. Delany's works of sword-and-sorcery feature far more explicit references to homosexuality than the arguably more subtle homosexual eroticism present in Howard's works. They are also invested in expressions of female masculinity through female characters that conjure archetypes of the amazon or Valkyrie.

Conclusion: The Future of Sword-and-Sorcery

The traditional masculinity that American culture communicates in fiction and reality as normal is in actuality psychologically and socially harmful. The presentation of certain male protagonists and masculinity in some sword-and-sorcery stories message an idealized formulation of masculinity that is stoic, self-reliant, and paradoxically civilized yet barbaric. This is one valid reading of Robert E. Howard's Conan the Cimmerian character and Hyborian Age world, but it is not the only critical approach to these texts. While Howard's Conan character exemplifies traditional masculine performance and representation in apparent opposition to traditional feminine performance and representation, twenty-first century critics in particular explore the discursive range of these works.

The oppositional binary of female versus male in speculative fiction representation and authorship is articulated as Julia Kristeva's "eternal war of the sexes" (196). Critic Mary Kenny Badami argues in her "Feminist Critique of Science Fiction":

There is little to discuss about 'the role of women in science fiction' because – Jirel of Joiry...not withstanding – until very recently women have had almost no role in science fiction. But it may be instructive to demonstrate that fact and to explore the various ways in which female sex roles in sf generally add up to The Invisible Woman. I propose to illustrate three theses about the non-role of women in science fiction:

Women have *not* been important as characters in sf;

Women have *not* been important as fans of sf;

Women have *not* been important as writers of sf (Badami 6).

I argue that women have been important characters in sf, but they have not been sufficiently published and critically examined. I argue that women have been important writers, readers, and fans of speculative fiction, but the narrative of a genre against women contributors perhaps

obscures the reality of a patriarchal society that obfuscates the very real and very impressive participation of women in the field. As argued by Justine Larbalestier, the issues are representation, consumption, and production. Women have been recognized as producers of speculative fiction in Pamela Sargent's *Women of Wonder* and Eric Leif Davin's *Partners in Wonder*, but adequate representation and consumption of these productions has been stifled by inadequate publication in anthologies prioritizing men as speculative fiction characters, fans, and writers.

While these assumptions are certainly valid to an extent, they are also complicated by an investigation of the specific speculative fiction genres, particularly the sword-and-sorcery works of Robert E. Howard but to a far greater extent those of C.L. Moore, and Samuel R. Delany, which possess a capacity for nuanced messaging of the ways in which bodies are gendered and genrefied in our cultural reality and in cultures of speculative fiction spaces:

Gender is not merely a theme in SF; I hope to show that it is an integral part of the genre's intellectual and aesthetic structure. A focus on gender brings out certain transitional moments and counter-movements that have not figured prominently in most histories of the genre. What I originally imagined as a structural study of selected works has become, in effect, an alternative history of SF...such histories can open up new viewpoints on actual events: standard history may be written by the winners, but alternative history can be written by forgotten allies or losers or innocent bystanders (Atteberry 10).

Gender is more than a theme in these literary works. It is structurally integral, inextricable from the works themselves which record historical perspectives on gender, but they also propose their own perspectives on gender. I argue this is the case for sword-and-sorcery productions and presentations of heroism which are rooted in the sexism and imperialism informing

characters like Conan the Cimmerian while redirecting those sentiments through characters like Jirel of Joiry or Gorgik the Liberator. Likewise, genre is not just a means of categorizing literature based upon its motifs. Genre is a series of social activities channeling existing worldview and rechanneling through imagined yet no less realized worlds-view.⁴³ Sword-and-sorcery heroes speak to deep levels of the conscious and subconscious desires of men and women to be powerful and dauntless while ignoring the social niceties of decorum or etiquette.

Dismissive interpretations of sword-and-sorcery as cultural production merely perpetuating traditional masculinity and hegemonic patriarchy result in restrictive readings of these texts. They restrict the meaning of gender in these texts as well as the fact that the deployment of gendered bodies is purposeful and meaningful on the part of their authors.

Judith Butler asserts in the preface to *Gender Trouble* accompanying its republication in 1999:

It was and remains my view that any feminist theory that restricts the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism...It seemed to me, and continues to seem, that feminism ought to be careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion. In particular, I opposed those regimes of truth that stipulated that certain kinds of gendered expressions were found to be false or derivative, and others, true and original. (*Gender Trouble* viii)

Speculative fiction works including those of sword-and-sorcery written by C.L. Moore and others can and should be read in the lens of Butler's proposal of "opening up possibilities." The inclination to cite Marx and Engels and a need to close any possibility for these texts as sources of genuine expression beyond hegemonic masculinity or in critical discourse with the forces that uphold hegemonic masculinity is in itself a form of exclusionary gender bias.

C.L. Moore's tales of Jirel of Joiry are substantive examples of this fact. They express

what it is to be female in a male-dominated society and capable of both the compassion relegated to our socialized conceptions of femininity as well as the violence relegated to our socialized conceptions of masculinity. Moore's hero exemplifies the capacity for sword-and-sorcery to construct heroes who traverse and transgress societal constraints on representation and identity:

Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time. An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purpose at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure (Butler 22).

Neither Conan nor Jirel is wholly male or wholly female as the socially gendered traits they exhibit are superficial adornments rather than biology-defining attributes. Their genders are often deferred depending on whether they are victims or vanquishers, courageous or cowardly, aggressor or transgressed. These descriptors themselves are socially conventionalized, but even they are not wholly masculine or feminine. The truth exists in convergences and divergences of meaning in these texts as contested terrain which complicate the view of popularized, mass market cultural produced and consumed literature as trivial or simplistic.

Efforts to "denaturalize" gender are in no way exclusive to speculative fiction or its subgenres. However, genres like that of sword-and-sorcery stand out as focal points for Butler's notion of the "normative violence implied by the ideal morphologies of sex and the pervasive assumptions about natural or presumptive heterosexuality" (*Gender Trouble* xxi). The categories of "men" and "women" are manipulated to appear standardized and exclusionary by power structures and ideological state apparatuses of a reality determined by white supremacist capitalism. In speculative fiction, this manipulation occurs in nuanced forms where

characters are designed in a context of standardization and exclusion to establish diametric opposition to standardization and exclusion. Matriarchal societies, armor-clad female warriors, homoerotic “he-man” adventurers and many more “impossibilities” dictated by masculinist, androcentric society become normal in some of the fantasy worlds of sword-and-sorcery.

The insistence upon such essentialist gender categories “has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of ‘women’ [and ‘men’] are constructed” (*Gender Trouble* 19). These categories exist in sword-and-sorcery in order to be uprooted, challenged, and subverted into new formulations of possibilities for representation and identification outside of the restrictive policing of what may be referred to as acceptable or tolerable gendered personae in an oppositional, binary gender system that is too often manipulated to re-inscribe sexism and oppression.

In the conclusion of *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity*, John F. Kasson argues that fictional promotion of characters like Tarzan as a “perfect man” appeal to “the dream of masculine metamorphosis, the possibilities for bodily transformation and, by implication, for a transformation of self and of social standing. The challenge that remains is to conceive of transformations in which freedom, wholeness, and heroism are available to all” (Kasson 223). In truth, such narratives exist that capture the transformations of self and social standing as performances of society’s glorified ideals of heroism that feature women and people of color. However, these narratives have been excluded from anthologies favoring traditionally male-masculine manifestations of heroism as an American ideal. These narratives have also been excluded from critical examination for descending from this same white supremacist masculinist lineage of cultural production.

A speaker and writer associated with the Alternative Right movement named Jonathan Bowden argues for the character of Conan and the biography of Robert E. Howard as Conan’s

author as embodiments of the plight of white supremacist masculinists. Bowden and his Alternative Right sympathizers perceive themselves as victims of a society disenfranchising white men as it fixates on enfranchising women and people of color. An endorsement by Richard Spencer (a white supremacist who coined the term “Alt-Right”) appears on the back cover of *Pulp Fascism*, calling it “Bowden’s ‘unfinished symphony’ – his attempt...to reveal the radical, ambivalent, and in some cases shockingly traditionalist undercurrents in pop culture...Bowden brings new life to those characters and comic-book worlds we too often dismiss as child’s play.” In *Pulp Fascism*, Bowden critiques the so-called “disprivilege” of the white male heroic by pacifism, liberalism of the “Left,” feminism and social and cultural revolutions as he decodes white supremacist masculinist messaging in popular fiction that form a supposed chronicle of the fears, desires, and anxieties of “average” white men expressed through literary forms designed for mass consumption, specifically the sword-and-sorcery genre and other superhero manifestations of pulp hero fiction including comic book characters Batman, the Hulk, and Conan the Barbarian.

White supremacists decode pulp hero fiction as white supremacist meta-narrative. While this is clearly ahistorical reading that subjects authors and cultural productions nearly a century removed from the circumstances that influenced their creation to present-day thoughts and opinions, meanings are not fixed in time or place. They are articulated and rearticulated to take on new meanings in particular moments of history. In this way, pulp fiction heroes nearly a century removed from the conditions that inspired their creation become symbols of contemporary identity politics. Defenders of white supremacy who attempt to adopt the ostensibly more palatable “identitarianism,” revere both author and creation as populist brands of pulp heroism. Howard is idolized perhaps more than Conan. He does not merely inhabit the identity of the supposed white male heroic; he communicates that ideal to a readership eager to

imagine itself as capable and powerful rather than as “Forgotten Men.” Conan the Cimmerian is re-contextualized to embody the plight of white men in the contemporary United States and all of “Western Civilization.” Robert E. Howard’s original Conan stories are read in terms of a meaning claimed by white supremacists, but the trend is perhaps most evident in how the character and similar archetypes are articulated and rearticulated across time and various adaptations including comic books, videogames, films, and Alternative Right propaganda.

White supremacists like Jonathan Bowden wholeheartedly embrace pulp fiction symbols of this heroism as a rallying cry to avenge the injuries suffered by their race. The result of the perceived decline of white male dominance among white supremacists vilifies racialized and gendered others and romanticizes a “besieged white male identity.” This chronicle of the fears, desires, and anxieties of “average” white men is expressed through literary forms designed for mass consumption, specifically the sword-and-sorcery genre amongst numerous mythologized manifestations of American superheroism including the pulps and comic books.

There are real consequences to these interpretations of pulp and comic book fiction. Such readings encourage segregation, tribalism, and violence. It is imperative to understand how these pulp fiction narratives and the performances of white male heroism in them serve to re-inscribe and naturalize a set of racial and gender ideas that rationalize unequal power relations in the twenty-first century. It is also imperative to challenge the assumptions of dichotomy and binarism that reinforce damaging assumptions manifesting in our fiction and our reality and perhaps even function to perpetuate the toxicity of traditional masculinity.

Some works of the sword-and-sorcery genre are capable of transgressing institutional binary and heteronormative preconceptions of heroic identity. Such transgressions are attainable in a fictional yet allegorical space free from social constructs reflecting sexism, discrimination, and oppression in patriarchal society. Specific sword-and-sorcery texts,

particularly those by C.L. Moore and Samuel R. Delany, posit worlds free to focus a critical lens on the exploitative forces endemic of patriarchy that perpetuate white supremacist masculinism through literary cultural production.⁴⁴

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Endnotes

¹ In 2019, the American Psychological Association published revised guidelines for psychologists to work with men and boys. This may seem unnecessary as our society has focused on men's perspectives in numerous fields not limited to psychology for decades (particularly those pertaining to white men). American society is still very much a "man's world" as 80 percent of high-ranking executives are male and the 115th congress that began in 2017 was 81 percent male (Pappas 34). However, the American Psychological Association recognized a need to publish guidelines for working with men and boys in 2019 because "traditional masculinity – marked by stoicism, competitiveness, dominance and aggression – is, on the whole, harmful" (34).

² While the sword-and-sorcery works of Howard and Moore were published in the 1930s and are perhaps categorized as modernist literature, those of Delany were published in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s and lean more towards postmodernist literature.

³ White supremacist masculinism – Hegemonic masculinity that stratifies an individual's worth of identity and/or perspective based on their race (prioritizing Whiteness), their gender (prioritizing a common perception or type of masculinity [See hypermasculine]), and gesturing towards valuations of one's sexual identity (this includes heterosexism, heterosexual privilege, and phobias of various "non-normative" sexual orientations). Where masculinism or masculism is a concern for the needs and rights of men and boys, white supremacist masculinism is the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity endemic of patriarchy that engenders toxic and divisive rhetoric. It also fuels the dominant reading or decoded meaning of sword-and-sorcery narratives. The term is derived from bell hooks's concept of "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." For more on sexual orientation related terms see Ohio University's Office of LGBTQ Programs.

⁴ For an extensive treatment of the evolution of the American vigilante hero, see Richard Slotkin's trilogy *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600 – 1860*, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890* and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*.

⁵ This dissertation applies a lens of reception theory to sword-and-sorcery as a cultural production that expands discourse surrounding the reception of these texts messaging ideas that are not stagnant or fixed in time and place but cumulative contributions to our evolving understanding of the meaning-making function of the reception-history and reception-aesthetic of specific sword-and-sorcery works with particular regard for those by Robert E. Howard, Catherine Lucille Moore, and Samuel R. Delany. As opposed to the cultural studies definition of reception studies, reception theory as discussed by Hans Robert Jauss in *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* published in 1982 posits how the reception of a text's meaning is not fixed in time but is ever evolving and changing with each subsequent reading that contributes to a continuing reception history as a concern for hermeneutic studies.

⁶ Speculative Fiction – All works of fiction that include sensationalized, often supernatural elements such as characters, plots, and settings that do not exist in the real world. Speculative fiction is an umbrella term that includes all science fiction and fantasy genres and subgenres.

⁷ See Susan Gubar's article on sword-and-sorcery author C.L. Moore, "C. L. Moore and the Conventions of Women's Science Fiction," Ursula K. Le Guin's "American SF and the Other," Frederick Pohl's Introduction to "The Halfling," Sarah Lefanu's *Feminism and Science Fiction*, Pamela Sargent's *Women of Wonder: The Classic Years, Science Fiction by Women from the 1940s to the 1970s*, and Mary Kenny Badmi's "Feminist Critique of Science Fiction."

⁸ Sword-and-sorcery critics credit Robert E. Howard and C.L. Moore as the genre's founders. See David Drake's introduction to *The Sword & Sorcery Anthology*: "The editors of this

anthology have chosen to start S&S with Robert E. Howard and C.L. Moore in the early '30s and to go on from there with works which share kinship with Howard and Moore. I consider this a perfectly reasonable structure...I won't try to explain the phenomenon, but I will state that to the best of my knowledge and belief, Conan created S&S as a publishing category as surely as Stephen King created horror as a publishing category. There have been Conan knockoffs and Conan pastiches (which are generally worse than the knockoffs) and Anti-Conans, but virtually all of the S&S which appeared after December 1932 was written in some degree with reference to Conan" (8).

See also David Drake's notes on C.L. Moore: "C.L. Moore, the second starting point for the present anthology. Catherine Moore's first story, "Shambleau," appeared in *Weird Tales* in January 1933 – the month after Conan. It was every bit as remarkable as 'The Phoenix on the Sword,' but it was a space opera. Moore wrote several stories in her interplanetary milieu before beginning to alternate stories about a male spaceman, Northwest Smith, with stories about a female swordswoman, Jirel of Joiry, who lived in a version of Medieval France as fantastic as the Mars of 'Shambleau.' The two series are identical in tone and were intermingled in the volumes of their initial book publication. Smith and Jirel are a development parallel to Conan rather than Conan's direct offspring. Much of later S&S owes a great deal to Moore" (9).

⁹ Examples of significant modernist authors in the United States range from the canonized Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner, to the marginalized Djuna Barnes and Chester Himes, to the post-modernized Ralph Ellison and Flannery O'Connor. Hemingway poses both literal and figurative emasculation as threats to manliness in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). He is notorious for crafting female characters whose personhood can only be realized through association with a male counterpart.

Prominent modernist authors including Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes authored works concerned with homosexuality and self-disclosure narratives. In modernist literature, perspectives of supposed he-man virility threatened by effeminizing forces of civilization and modernization exist simultaneously with affirming narratives of nonconformity to gender binary like Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) or Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936).

¹⁰ See Michael Moorcock's *Wizardry & Wild Romance* and L. Sprague de Camp's *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers* for a more or less comprehensive history of the "epic" and "heroic" in transatlantic fantasy and the ensuing position of the sword-and-sorcery subgenre to this larger body of work within speculative fiction.

¹¹ See Stephen Wall's "Fandom and the Nostalgia of Masculinity" where he "endeavors to understand the place of masculinity in Conan fandom, an effort to determine if the hypermasculine image of Conan the Barbarian prompted or halted discussions of the subject amongst readers. What it has become is an example of the pervasive presence of a dominant Western doxa of manliness that attempts to root itself in all things of which men are a part. This construction gives the impression of a monolithic tradition that forbids any kind of dissent or dialogue" (174).

¹² Leigh Brackett's published numerous science fiction stories in the mid-twentieth century. *The Sword of Rhiannon* published in 1953 is a sword-and-sorcery epic that is well-regarded though not as critically acclaimed as the works by C.L. Moore. Brackett, "The Queen of Space Opera," was also a screen writer of *The Big Sleep* (1946) with William Faulkner, as well as *Rio Bravo* (1959) and *The Long Goodbye* (1973).

¹³ See the collection of letters exchanged between H.P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard from 1930-1936 in two volumes titled *A Means to Freedom*.

¹⁴ See John F. Kasson's *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity* for more on Tarzan's enduring popularity as a cultural fantasy of "manly freedom and wildness" (7).

¹⁵ Ibid., (207).

¹⁶ See Eileen Donaldson's "'A Hot and Savage Strength': The Female Masculinity of C.L. Moore's Jirel of Joiry." *English Academy Review*. 35.1. 48-60.

¹⁷ See Suzy McKee Charnas's introduction to C.L. Moore's Jirel of Joiry collection *Black God's Kiss* titled "Where No Man Had Gone Before" where she states: "Conan speaks at deep levels to the desires of men (and, yes, women too, especially adolescent women) to not be weedy and uncertain but invincibly powerful and brave: stronger than anyone, tougher and meaner (and faster to heal), slicing your way through obstacles and perils without having to worry about the niceties of psychology, law, etiquette, or the later consequences of your actions (and certainly without worrying about the uncertain and slippery complexities of sex)" (13-14).

¹⁸ Reception theory as discussed by Hans Robert Jauss in *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* published in 1982. Jauss's reception theory posits how the reception of a text's meaning is not fixed in time but is ever evolving and changing with each subsequent reading that contributes to a continuing reception history as a concern for hermeneutic studies. From the sociological theoretical viewpoint, Stuart Hall's reception theory includes three primary claims about the reception of a text: that it can be received in the form of a dominant reading, an oppositional reading, and a negotiated reading.

Dominant Reading – The common or widely accepted interpretation of a text and prevalent beliefs and values of a culture encourage readers to decode that meaning.

Oppositional Reading – A reader can willfully reject the common or widely accepted interpretation of a text to decode meanings other than those perceived to align with its dominant reading.

Negotiated Reading – A reader may accept only part of the dominant reading while they are also able to construct additional or alternative meaning to the dominant reading.

¹⁹ Dark Agnes is the protagonist of “Sword Woman.” This tale and the subsequent “Blades for France” are more properly categorized as historical fiction than sword-and-sorcery, though they evidence Howard’s inclination for introducing female masculinity in his works. Howard also corresponded with C.L. Moore after reading “Black God’s Kiss” to share his praise for the tale and to send her a copy of “Sword Woman.”

²⁰ Hypermasculine – A gender expression of exaggerated characteristics commonly associated with masculinity. These common assumptions include being active rather than passive, aggressive rather than submissive, assertive rather than reserved, strong rather than weak. Figures of hypermasculinity are opposed to feminizing logics; “the effeminate,” “the emasculated,” etc. For more on gender expression related terms see Ohio University’s Office of LGBTQ Programs.

²¹ The earliest, prominent publication of this critical perspective occurs in L. Sprague de Camp’s *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy*.

²² See the complete correspondence of H.P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard in *A Means to Freedom: The Letters of H.P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard*.

²³ Romantic primitivist masculinity – Romantic primitivism is the idea that a simpler, more egalitarian lifestyle is thought to exist in mankind’s past by being nearer to an existence in commune with the natural world rather than the civilized world.

²⁴ L. Sprague de Camp prefers the high-brow “heroic fantasy” to the low-brow “sword-and-sorcery” as labels for this branch of fantasy, though his definition for this genre is extremely broad as it includes authors known for a distinct lack of what may be termed traditional heroism such as H.P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith.

²⁵ See Richard Slotkin’s trilogy *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600 – 1860*, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890* and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*.

²⁶ Everett, Justin. “Eugenic thought in the works of Robert E. Howard.” *The Unique Legacy of Weird Tales: The Evolution of Modern Fantasy and Horror*.

²⁷ Both de Camp and Moorcock authored their own heroic fantasy and epic fantasy respectively. See L. Sprague de Camp’s *Lest Darkness Fall* published in 1939 or *The Tritonian Ring and Other Pusadian Tales* published in 1953. See also Moorcock’s *The Dreaming City* published in 1961.

²⁸ See Ursula Le Guin’s “American SF and the Other.”

²⁹ See Andre Carrington’s *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*, Ytasha Womack’s *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, and Sami Schalk’s *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction*.

³⁰ Nicole Emmelhainz-Carney argues for sword-and-sorcery as a feminist genre in “A Sword-Edge Beauty as Keen as Blades: C.L. Moore and the Gender Dynamics of Sword-and-Sorcery” and also in “By This Pen I Rule: Robert E. Howard as Gatekeeper in the Development of Weird Fiction.” Winter Elliott’s implication for the genre and for Howard in particular as having a capacity for feminist reading is far more subdued but still relevant in Winter Elliott’s “Life,

Liberty and the Pursuit of Women: Gender Dynamics in the Hyborian World.” Jamie Madden boldly argues that Howard’s Conan stories empower women and possess “pro-women ideals.”

³¹ Weird Fiction – A category of speculative fiction so-named because of the prominence of the *Weird Tales* pulp magazine published from 1922 to 1954 that included science fiction, fantasy, and horror of many authors including Robert E. Howard and C.L. Moore (Catherine Lucille Moore).

³² Sociologist R.W. Connell refers to the phenomenon of institutionalized traditional masculinity as “hegemonic masculinity,” which is an idealized means of masculine self-conception that may not accurately reflect masculine personages in society: “What in earlier views of the problem passed for the ‘male sex role’ is best seen as hegemonic masculinity, the culturally idealized form of masculine character (in a given historical setting), which may not be the usual form of masculinity at all” (Connell 69). Connell’s notion of hegemonic masculinity is an integral factor to productions of fantasy and to the sword-and-sorcery subgenre within fantasy as promotions of a traditionally glorified manifestation of masculine behavior expected of biological males in our society.

³³ For more on this exchange between Lovecraft and Howard and the place of *Weird Tales* and weird fiction authors in modernism, see Jason Ray Carney’s *Weird Tales of Modernity: The Ephemerality of the Ordinary in the Stories of Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, and H.P. Lovecraft*.

³⁴ See Scott Sanders’s “Women as Nature,” Winter Elliott’s “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Women: Gender Dynamics in the Hyborian World,” and Nicole Emmelhainz-Carney’s “A Sword-Edge Beauty as Keen as Blades: C.L. Moore and the Gender Dynamics of Sword-and-Sorcery.”

³⁵ Reception theory as discussed by Hans Robert Jauss in *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* published in 1982. Jauss's reception theory posits how the reception of a text's meaning is not fixed in time but is ever evolving and changing with each subsequent reading that contributes to a continuing reception history as a concern for hermeneutic studies. From the sociological theoretical viewpoint, Stuart Hall's reception theory includes three primary claims about the reception of a text: that it can be received in the form of a dominant reading, an oppositional reading, and a negotiated reading.

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³⁶ See Suzy McKee Charnas's introduction to C.L. Moore's Jirel of Joiry collection *Black God's Kiss* titled "Where No Man Had Gone Before" where she states: "Conan speaks at deep levels to the desires of men (and, yes, women too, especially adolescent women) to not be weedy and uncertain but invincibly powerful and brave: stronger than anyone, tougher and meaner (and faster to heal), slicing your way through obstacles and perils without having to worry about the niceties of psychology, law, etiquette, or the later consequences of your actions (and certainly without worrying about the uncertain and slippery complexities of sex)" (13-14).

³⁷ In the same issue Farnsworth Wright revealed that the "M" in the signature of M. Brundage was short for Margaret (Spurlock 125).

³⁸ Right-wing extremist author Jonathan Bowden trivializes the capacity for heroic femininity or non-binary heroism in popular consciousness: “That’s the sort of dissident archetype in these American pulps going back a long way. It’s just the feminization of heroic masculinity” (Bowden 19). For Bowden, there is no heroic femininity. Bowden argues that the illusion of heroic femininity is only an imitation of heroic masculinity. Bowden fixates on the superficial; the exploited, objectified female hero akin to chainmail-bikini wearing pin-up centerfolds. Bowden’s explicit biases and expressions of white supremacist masculinism aside, there is a transcendent quality of C.L. Moore’s sword-and-sorcery where heroism incorporates and surpasses traditionally masculine and feminine social prerogatives. By subverting masculine and feminine social expectations, Moore fashions a hero who unifies the apparent brute physicality of stereotypical masculinity with the interiority and compassionate depth of stereotypical femininity.

³⁹ Leigh Brackett’s published numerous science fiction stories in the mid-twentieth century. *The Sword of Rhiannon* published in 1953 is a sword-and-sorcery epic that is well-regarded though not as critically acclaimed as the works by C.L. Moore.

⁴⁰ “Shambleau” is a Northwest Smith story featuring a space cowboy who is attempting to rescue a helpless damsel-in-distress, only to realize that she is a vampire-like alien feeding on her male victims, including Smith himself. The physical description of the Shambleau is reminiscent of the Medusa from Greek mythology. “No Woman Born” tells the story of Deirdre, the most beautiful woman in the world who also happens to be an accomplished singer and actress. When her body is lost in a fire, her brain is preserved in an automaton body and Deirdre struggles to recover and to realize what makes a person human and what defines womanhood.

⁴¹ 2020 will go down in history as a year of mourning and tragedy. The COVID-19 pandemic forced mass social distress as the economy ground to a halt and businesses were closed. Of the 16 million people who were unemployed in July of this year, nearly 10 million were unable to work due to their employer's closure or lost business. Part-time workers were twice as likely to lose their jobs due to the pandemic as full-time workers. In this climate of unrest and global despair, our nation's systemic racism rose to public awareness in magnitudes not seen since the civil rights movement. The killings of Breonna Taylor on March 13th and of George Floyd on May 25th with the subsequent failure of the justice system to bring charges against the police officers involved in these incidents invigorated the Black Lives Matter movement. Peaceful demonstrators took to the streets in vast numbers. There have been well over ten thousand peaceful protests in 2020, which is more than double the number of demonstrations across the United States in a typical year.

⁴² F.O. Matthiessen published *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* in 1941. In this text he argues for the years between 1850 and 1855 as a period of blossoming American literary culture with its greatest contributors being Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Nathaniel Hawthorne as its key figures each producing masterpieces of American literature. This is only one instance of the systemic marginalization and obfuscation of people of color and women as producers of American literature throughout American history. This *American Renaissance* ignored the works of Frederick Douglass published during this same period as well as the contributions of female authors including that of Margaret Fuller.

⁴³ Justine Larbalestier argues in *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* published in 2002 that science fiction is social activity, or rather a series of social activities (16).

⁴⁴ See Betty King's introduction to *Women of the Future: The Female Main Character in Science Fiction* where she states "Science fiction, more than any other medium, points out by its sheer vastness of diversity, that women have as many choices, as many possibilities of personal success, as many directions of interest as there are women" (v-vi).