



Worldcon 75 Academic Track  
**Session 10: SF Genders**

**Friday 12:00-13:30**  
**Room 209**

Chair: **Aino-Kaisa Koistinen**

Abstract 1:

**Nick Hubble** (Brunel University, UK):

**‘There is no myth of Oedipus on Winter’: Gender and the Crisis of Representation in Leckie, Le Guin and Roberts**

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This paper analyses the representation of gender in relation to the Oedipus myth and the patriarchal order in Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Ann Leckie’s *Ancillary Justice* (2013) and Adam Roberts’s *Bête* (2014).

If Heinlein’s line ‘the door dilated’ is often presented as an example of the cognitive estrangement of 1940s Golden Age SF, Le Guin’s ‘The king was pregnant’ is representative of late 1960s countercultural and feminist SF. More recently, Ann Leckie’s ‘She was probably male’ is emblematic of the contemporary multi-gendered world. In descriptive terms, there is a structural parallel between these novels, in that where Le Guin uses universal male pronouns to denote a society without a permanent sexual divide and therefore without a gender division, Leckie uses female pronouns to depict a society in which the people are not physiologically different to current Earth society but are nevertheless without a gender division. Both of these approaches have led to criticism. Joanna Russ criticised *The Left Hand of Darkness* for only containing men in practice; while Alex Dally Macfarlane has criticised Leckie for not using an alternative pronoun to ‘she’ and so reducing the nonbinary potential of the culture she depicts. In the first half of this paper, I will argue that both of these novels are more formally complex than has always been acknowledged. I will use textual examples to suggest that their use of universal pronouns is a form of literary experiment that functions to destabilise, radically question and estrange language so that it is prevented from carrying out one of its fundamental effects: the construction of the gender binary.

Criticisms of Le Guin’s novel are well-known and much discussed – including by the author herself (‘Is Gender Necessary? Redux’ [1976/1987]) – but I focus in particular on Sarah Lefanu’s claim that the admission in the novel that ‘there is no myth of Oedipus on Winter’ shows it to be ‘a retreat from the symbolic order’; and Adam Roberts’s subsequent argument that because of this retreat there is ‘little narrative tension’ in the novel. Similarly, (male) reviewers of *Ancillary Justice* have suggested that the plot is defective and the use of female pronouns a gimmick. In the second half of the paper, I will argue that these apparent narrative deficiencies are actually a deliberate estrangement of conventional plotting and three-act stories, which works to destabilise the symbolic order itself. It can be difficult for (male) critics to appreciate or see the need for such destabilisation, and therefore I include a brief reading of the alternative version of the Oedipus myth in Roberts’ *Bête*, which shows a man recognising and coming to terms with the fact that once the symbolic separation into binary genders is invalidated, then the meaning of being a ‘man’ is forever stripped of its claim to symbolic primacy. I conclude by suggesting that all three novels exemplify how SFF

is introducing us to a strange, alternative form of consciousness not rooted in binary divisions or the primacy of man's separation from the World.

Dr **Nick Hubble** is Reader in English at Brunel University, London, UK. They are the author of *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory* (Palgrave Macmillan 2006; second edition 2010), co-author of *Ageing, Narrative and Identity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), and co-editor of *The Science Fiction of Iain M. Banks* (Gylphi, 2017) and five books from Bloomsbury Academic: *The Science Fiction Handbook* (2013), *The 1970s* (2014), *The 1990s* (2015), *The 2000s* (2015) and *London in Contemporary British Fiction* (2016). Nick has also published articles on SFF in *Vector*, *Foundation* and *Extrapolation* and reviews in *Strange Horizons*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Foundation* and *Vector*.

Abstract 2:

**Anna Merikallio** (University of Helsinki, Finland):

**“The King was pregnant”: Estranging Gender in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* and its Finnish Translation**

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In this paper, I examine Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and its Finnish translation *Pimeyden vasen käsi* (1976) by Kalevi Nyytäjä. I will concentrate on gender representation, examining the foregrounded use of gendered discourse. Following Butler’s performance theory, the novel can be read as subverting normative views of gender by working within the framework of binary language. The novel reproduces normative discourses of femininity and masculinity by describing them through opposite pairs, for example assigning nature, sexuality, and feelings to femininity, and culture, abstinence, and intellect to masculinity. It also conceptualises the characters as mainly male, pushing their feminine traits further from their identities. This is emphasized by the use of the masculine personal pronoun *he* to describe androgynous characters. However, the feminine and masculine discourses are juxtaposed in descriptions of alien characters, which produces a view of gender fluidity using the language of binary gender. Thus, the novel manages to break the restraints of conventional gender discourses.

I also consider translation as a site for either reinforcing or subverting gender stereotyping, or indeed, glossing over gender issues altogether. The Finnish translation of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *Pimeyden vasen käsi* (1976), seems to downplay Le Guin’s gender juxtaposing. The use of the Finnish generic personal pronoun *hän* could be expected to offer more open and varied interpretations of gender, as it reduces the strong masculine perspective present in the source text. However, the target text suggests quite the opposite. Rather than remove gendered meanings, the generic pronoun hides them, making it harder to deconstruct the normative discourses of masculinity and femininity. Thus, the target text transfers the unconventional gender representations found in source text only to a limited degree.

I demonstrate how gender representation can be constructed with discursive choices in a text, and how the discursive choices about gender affect the readings the text offers in profound ways. It shows that even within the restrictions of patriarchal language, there is room for subversive interpretations and language uses. As the discourses available to us affect how we see the world, or in this case, how we see gender, gender representation in literature can either obscure or promote gender diversity. Subversive discourses which science fiction can offer may give visibility to identities that are not fully recognized by contemporary society. The translation choices present in *Pimeyden vasen käsi* affect the readings of gendered discourses deeply, which suggests that the overall gender representation

can be transformed by rather small changes in the target text. It seems that gender representations offered by translations can affect the access to subversive discourses in the target culture, thereby contributing to the visibility or invisibility of marginalized identities

Abstract 3:

**Tiffani Angus** (Anglia Ruskin University, UK):

**Where Are the Tampons? The Estrangement of Women's Bodies in Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Fiction**

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While there is no lack of fiction speculating on humankind's survival during and after an apocalyptic event—be it environmental, nuclear, or at the hands of zombie hordes—what there does seem to be a lack of is fiction that is gritty enough to deal with women's bodies. From novels to comics to films, the story of the end of the world as we know it does not shy away from violence, blood, gore, and unrelenting horror, yet while “women's work” is the stuff of survival—those necessary skills that can keep a civilization, no matter how small, together—the reality of women's bodies are often glossed over. In current post-apocalyptic fiction, from P.D. James's *The Children of Men* to Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* to *Mad Max: Fury Road*, women's bodies are reproductive beings (or expected to be), yet as readers we rarely, no matter how visceral the descriptions of violence, etc., get “up close and personal” with the female characters themselves and their new existence as bodies that require certain amounts of care and attention in regards to menstruation, contraception, and reproduction in a world that now cannot or will not cater to their needs. As a result, the female characters become a means of keeping civilization, and keeping memory, rather than keeping themselves. This paper will investigate this estrangement, both on the page (or screen) and between the text and reader, as well as differences in how this subject is dealt with by male and female writers.

Dr. **Tiffani Angus** is a Lecturer in Publishing at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, and holds a PhD in Creative Writing. She has published short fiction in a variety of genres (science fiction, fantasy, historical fantasy, horror and erotica) in anthologies and at *Strange Horizons*. A graduate of Clarion 2009, she is currently drafting a novel about women at the end of the world.