Take Me to Your Lady Leader

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Contact, Carl Sagan’s best-selling 1985 science-fiction novel, tells of alien shape-shifters, wormhole-traveling spacecraft, and—perhaps the most fantastical element of the bunch—a female president. Yet Contact’s protagonist, Eleanor “Ellie” Arroway, compares President Lasker to her predecessors with no acknowledgment of their gender difference, noting that Ms. President demonstrates an appreciation for science seen in “few previous American leaders since James Madison and John Quincy Adams.” Despite her tie to the presidential establishment—and regardless of Sagan’s attempt to make her gender unremarkable—President Lasker still fulfills the function particular to women world leaders in literature. Whether she erodes or extends existing gender stereotypes, the female president operates as a sign of the apocalypse or, at least, a harbinger of the unfamiliar, a reminder to readers that they have entered a world drastically different from their own.

The fictional female commander-in-chief, as she appears in texts such as Brian K. Vaughan’s Y: The Last Man (2002-2008) and Harold Coyle’s The Ten Thousand (1993), figures as both progressive and absurd: She points to future possibilities while highlighting our stunning lack of progress. Since literary representations both shape and are shaped by real-world situations, it may come as no surprise that Hillary Clinton’s own presidential run has had few fictional precursors and that reactions to it have followed their patterns of possibility and putrescence. Let’s look at some of the extreme responses that Clinton’s campaign has brought about. For every “I’m with Her” T-shirt and tweet, we see misogynistic pins mocking the “otherness” of her body and hear public calls for her imprisonment or execution. Tens of thousands have “liked” or retweeted the claim that “corruption and devastation follows [sic] her wherever she goes,” a statement her opponent released the night Clinton accepted the Democratic Party’s nomination. The range of reactions indicates that a Clinton presidency marks an apocalypse of sorts for some, one that is widening as the election unfolds.

While Clinton may be the first competitive female contender for the presidency—a
path made possible because of her political precursors, including Shirley Chisholm—science fiction gives us a long history of complex women leaders, including the formidable Laura Rosin of Battlestar Galactica (2004-2009) and the calculating Alma Coin of The Hunger Games (books 2008-2010, films 2012-2015). In her story “Greater than Gods” (1939), C. L. Moore pens an early—if not the first—tale of a woman president, establishing the female leader as a marker of an uncharted and threatening future. In the time-travel story, Moore’s protagonist, Dr. Bill Cory, weighs his marriage options by previewing two antithetical futures populated by his descendants. If he chooses to marry Sallie Carlsile, the future will feature President Alice Wiliston, the latest in a line of women elected to the highest office. President Wiliston governs an Edenic matriarchal United States free from violence but marred by indolence, especially in terms of technological advancement. “Of course, some things suffered under the matriarchy,” the narrator notes. “Women as a sex are not scientists, not inventors, not mechanics or engineers or architects.” Wiliston’s rule—a nightmare for women-in-STEM proponents—contrasts with Cory’s alternative future; if he marries Dr. Marta Mayhew, the result will be a bellicose patriarchal society composed of his technologically savvy but unhappy progeny. Either way, the future depends on a traditional marriage, on a man’s choice of partner.

Certainly, Moore draws upon 1930s gender stereotypes for each diverging storyworld, yet she dismisses the idea that either possibility could actually exist. Instead, the worlds function as “two halves of a whole” or “two halves of [a] soul” that reside together in Cory. By the conclusion of the story, Moore’s narrator rejects both prospective futures, and the female leader is banished into oblivion—but, then again, so is her male counterpart. The story lands in a place of possibility where the marriage of cool reason—represented by Miss Brown, Dr. Cory’s heretofore unassuming lab assistant—and passionate ambition, embodied by Cory himself, promises something new, a type of moderation that would have seemed welcome on the eve of World War Two.

The new or as-yet-unrealized future is a fitting place to begin when considering the figure of the woman president, especially as she emerges in the genre of science fiction. In The Science of Science-Fiction Writing, James Gunn notes that the “broad area of fantastic literature” to which science fiction belongs “is characterized by situations in which a significant element is different from the everyday.” Any text that features a female president of the United States immediately differs from the everyday, of course, but all too often, depictions of women presidents reproduce offensive stereotypes. The new or unrealized becomes painfully commonplace.

Consider, for example, Josephine Vanbruuker-Brown, “Acting Chief Executive of the United States,” in Pat Frank’s Alas, Babylon (1959). While Frank’s apocalyptic novel of nuclear war offers a science-fiction plotline, his female
president belongs to the realm of conventional 1950s gender roles. Frank feminizes everything about his fictional leader, from her title—she’s exclusively called “Mrs. Vanbruuker-Brown”—to the fact that she does not desire the presidency. During an emergency radio broadcast, Vanbruuker-Brown sobs while explaining in “her Radcliffe-Boston voice” that she was “forced” to assume the presidency after a nuclear attack killed the president, all of his cabinet members, and the leaders of the House and Senate. Prior to her unexpected promotion, she held the position of Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare—“the most junior of government departments,” according to Vanbruuker-Brown, as well as a stereotypically feminine or even maternal post. Unlike C. L. Moore, who reproduced stereotypes in order to satirize them, Frank paints his president as the perfect—and perfectly contemptible—mid-century female politician. His novel may broach the unknown in plot, but it follows convention in character.

Many authors further attempt to mark their texts as “different from the everyday” through the presence of a female president of color. Protagonist Eleanor Richmond moves from the trailer park to the White House as the first black and first woman U.S. president in Interface (1994), a novel by Stephen Bury (a pseudonym for writers Neal Stephenson and George Jewsbury). We also encounter the first black and first woman president in K. A. Applegate’s young adult science-fiction series Remnants (2001-2003) through the character of President Janice Castleman, who emerges only briefly via the memories of her son. Women of color take the presidency in many other science-fiction texts: S. M. Stirling puts forward the second Hispanic and first female president in The Stone Dogs (1990), while Arthur C. Clarke and Stephen Baxter depict female presidents in two of their novels: In The Light of Other Days (2000), they introduce Commander-in-Chief Maria Juarez, the first female (and presumably Hispanic) president, while in Sunstorm (2005), Juanita Alvarez—explicitly identified as the first Hispanic woman president—occupies the office of chief executive. Additionally, the writer Joe Haldeman offers female President Nguyen (given name unknown, last name suggesting she may be of Vietnamese descent) in the novel Old Twentieth (2005). These occurrences of women of color occupying the presidency, especially when taken together, provide a damning commentary on the bias inherent in the American political system. Sure, putting women of color in leadership roles represents a potentially progressive authorial choice. However, we as a reading culture should feel embarrassed about the fact that an African American, Hispanic American, or Vietnamese American woman holding the highest office is so inconceivable in our present that the character most often operates as a signifier of an alternative reality.

Perhaps, though, we can read these women in another way. While science fiction offers characters, settings, or plots beyond the “everyday,” these elements of change cannot be contained within the text. Instead, Gunn argues that the
revolutionary features of science fiction “produce continuing change not only in the way people live but the way they think about themselves and their relationship to the universe.” Even the most stereotypical fictional woman president—that is, even the lovely lady leader Mrs. Vanbruuker-Brown—compels readers to reconsider what the office of the president stands for and what we require from those who occupy it. What does it mean, for example, that so many of the fictional women listed here rise to power after disasters—natural or otherwise—remove the men above them from office? What do we do with the knowledge that almost all of these women are the “first” female president, that even in our science fiction a legacy of women leaders seems far-fetched?

HBO’s television series *Veep* might not have answers to these questions, but the show can help us understand why female presidents are so limited even in our fictions. *Veep* satirizes the American political system by holding up Vice President and, as of season four, President Selina Meyer, played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus, as a shining example of what we do wrong. In one episode, Meyer’s campaign manager, Amy Brookheimer, played by Anna Chlumsky, criticizes her boss, stating, “The fact that you are a woman means we will have no more women presidents because we tried one, and she fucking sucked.” Brookheimer’s reproach speaks to what’s at stake for women if Clinton’s campaign is victorious. The inadequate representation of women in American politics and, specifically, in the position of the president means that any woman occupying the Oval Office will face intense scrutiny.

While *Veep*’s Meyer parodies female and male politicians alike, Brookheimer puts forward a painful truth that extends beyond the small screen: A woman politician’s legacy, even her fitness for the job, is wrapped up in her gender; each step by a woman president may seem wrong to many observers, unorthodox. Still, as the checkered history of women presidents in science-fiction stories suggests, those steps may also seem novel, even vital, a giant leap into a changed world. It’s high time for this particular apocalypse.