

**Crafting Positions: Representations of Intimacy and Gender in
*The Sentients of Orion***

by

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Crafting Positions: Representations of Intimacy and Gender in *The Sentients of Orion*

I declare that the above dissertation/thesis is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



SIGNATURE

28 March 2017

DATE

DEDICATION

To the most beloved of parents

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Summary:

This study comprises a close reading and textual analysis of *The Sentients of Orion*, a space opera series by Australian author Marianne de Pierres, with a view to investigating the representations of gender in modern, popular science fiction by women authors. I hypothesise that de Pierres will pose a fictional enquiry into gender, based on the richness of science fiction by women, but that a closer examination of physical and emotional intimacy (both positive and negative) in these ‘less literary works’ will prove de Pierres’ gender enquiry to be superficial and inconsistent in nature. My main approach is a qualitative exploration of selected incidents through the theoretical lenses of feminist literary criticism, gender theory and, where applicable, queer theory. While I draw eclectically on these interpretive paradigms, my approach is most closely aligned with poststructuralist feminism. Proving the first part of my hypothesis, my findings show that de Pierres does pose an enquiry into gender through her portrayal of plot and character. The particular focus on the intimacies involving the heroine, women, men, and alien characters, proves the second part of my hypothesis incorrect as it reveals how de Pierres not only deeply and consistently challenges the heteronormative status quo, questioning dynamics in relationships, gender roles, ageism, sexism and societal stereotypes, but also provides possible alternatives.

Key Terms:

Intimacy, science fiction, gender, sexual intercourse, feminist science fiction, space opera, poststructuralist feminism, *The Sentients of Orion*, Marianne de Pierres, gender fluidity

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Introduction: Crafting Positions

Crafting a sexual position, or reciting a sexual position, always involves becoming haunted by what's excluded. And the more rigid the position, the greater the ghost, and the more threatening it is in some way.

(Judith Butler)¹

Introduction

Science fiction has long been a genre of inclusion in terms of gender and sexuality, addressing the ghosts and thereby lessening the haunting of exclusion that Butler refers to (Butler, Osborne and Segal, 1994:34).² This study is an investigation into whether current science fiction written by women contributes in any way toward breaking down the rigidity and silencing the ghosts.

Along with providing a detailed background to the research problem, this introductory chapter serves to discuss the research questions and hypotheses of the study and to clarify the use of key terms. The introduction will further provide a review of the literature and discuss the contribution of this thesis to current research on gender and science fiction. Working from the general to the specific, I conclude with a breakdown of the chapters, explaining how the thesis unfolds.

Background

The history of science fiction, particularly the role of women and women writers in science fiction, serves as a starting point. Science fiction as we read it today has its origins mainly in the pulpwood magazines of the early to mid-twentieth century. While the pulps, and therefore the genre, were disregarded by most readers and critics of 'serious'

¹ From an interview with Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal (Butler et al, 1994:34).

² Ibid.

literature, Hugo Gernsback's *Astounding Stories*, particularly under the editorship of first F. Orlin Tremaine and then John Wood Campbell, stood out for attracting and publishing respected authors such as Sturgeon, del Rey, Simak, Asimov, Hubbard and Heinlein – all of whom were men (Bowers, 2009:24; Yaszek, 2006:78).

Some claim a dearth of women authors of science fiction in these early years (Bowers, 2009:8; Smith, 1986:viii; Ashley, 2005:46; Clute, 1995:39, 84-85). Ursula Le Guin, for example, refers to female authors of science fiction as 'very rare' creatures 'at first believed to be mythological' (1993:228). More recently, though, enough anthologies of the works of these 'non-existent' women authors have been published to put paid to that claim (Larbalestier, 2002; 2006). Clare Winger Harris was the first woman author of science fiction to be published in the pulp magazines when 'The Fate of the Poseidonia' appeared in *Amazing Stories* in 1927 (Donawerth, 2006:20) and she was soon followed by others, such as Leslie F. Stone, A. R. Long and C. L. Moore (Attebery, 2006:50).

It was early critics of science fiction, such as Kingsley Amis and Darko Suvin, who provided not only a working definition for science fiction, but also illuminated its singular use of 'cognitive estrangement' (Amis, 1960:99; Suvin, 1988:99).³ It was only in the 1970s that women authors started making use of science fiction's particular quality of 'estrangement' and, with authors such as Le Guin and Joanna Russ at the forefront, women began to manipulate the genre to 'challenge and expand prevailing notions of gender roles' (Bowers, 2009:27). This infringement of feminists on the still male-dominated domain of science fiction was often met with resistance, rejection and criticism, as the majority of

³ In *New Maps of Hell*, Amis defines science fiction as 'that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo-technology, whether human or extra-terrestrial in origin' (1960:18). Thus, placing familiar situations in unfamiliar contexts allows for deeper examination and new perspectives.

male readers, authors and critics alike were dead set against women authors in the genre (Lukin, 2006:111; Yaszek, 2006:79; Pearson, 2006:173). Even Gernsback, who supported and published women authors, showed ‘condescending support’ at best (Donawerth, 2006:23).

At the same time as the work of these early women authors came under attack from male fans and critics, they were often overlooked (Attebery, 2006:50) or derided by feminist scholars and critics too. Joanna Russ (2007:213), for example, refers to the work of early women authors of science fiction as ‘ladies’ magazine fiction’.⁴

‘Ladies’ magazine fiction’, however, has more recently regained a place under the academic microscope as being a ‘complex, politically charged mode of fiction that engaged the values of 1950s America in critical and creative ways’ (Yaszek, 2006:77). There is much use, after all, in women’s magazine fiction should it allow its audience to reconsider ‘sex and gender relations’ and how those relations are influenced by society (Yaszek, 2006:85). This element of science fiction is of as much importance today as it was to the audience of 1950s women readers who were conditioned to believe that ‘autonomy ... [was] simply incompatible with love and family’ (Harvey, 1993:xviii; Lukin, 2006:108).

In contrast to the initial struggles of women writing science fiction, Marleen S. Barr (1987:187) states that women have now become an established part of the science fiction genre, allowing ‘feminist fabulation’ to pave the way for the toppling of patriarchy. L. Timmel Duchamp (2006:357) also believes that the matter is settled, saying that ‘thirty years of feminist sf have created a context in which feminists may write with subtlety and

⁴ According to Yaszek (2009:41), this refers to ‘postwar’ or ‘midcentury women’s SF’ authors.

in constant conversation with the canonical feminist sf texts they assume their readers will know well'. In spite of these optimistic viewpoints, however, sexism is still as discernible in the genre as it is in other spheres of society. The reaction against women authors and the subsequent controversy surrounding the 2015 Hugo Awards, speak for itself. A block of male authors called the 'Sad Puppies' manipulated the nomination process in order to eliminate novels perceived by them to be too focused on social and political messaging (including feminism). The novels that were subsequently nominated, were mostly written by white, male authors, supposedly because of their focus on science fiction itself (Stingl and Weis, 2015:61)

Research questions

With women authors' presence in the genre thus firmly established, my research interest crystallizes into research questions: How far is a new generation of women writers of popular science fiction willing to indulge in Barr's 'fabulation'? Do current authors indeed engage in experimentation with sex and gender in their work, and if so, to what extent do they use it in their work to challenge the status quo?

Research problem

Since science fiction written by women has long been a battlefield for gender issues, numerous studies on gender roles in feminist science fiction already exist (Merrick, 2009:1). *Queer universes: Sexualities in science fiction*, for example, demonstrates the diversity in the field (Pearson, Hollinger and Gordon, 2008). Editors Wendy Pearson, Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon refer in their introduction to the subject of queer theory in science fiction as existing 'within a field of conflicting discourse' (Pearson, Hollinger and Gordon, 2008:3). Considering how widely gender and sexuality in science

fiction has been read and written on, I thus propose a new angle from which to approach the investigation: among the studies available, I have been unable to find any focusing on sexual and emotional intimacy specifically as indicators of gender identity and attitudes. Sexual intimacy is an integral part of gender identity and sexual orientation, whether in homosexuality or in heterosexuality; and while gender identity is not at all determined by *sex*, it is closely related to sexuality and choices in sexual intimacy. In order not to simply replicate work that investigates gender in science fiction, I believe that sexual and emotional intimacy can provide a deeper than surface focus through which to examine gender performances, stereotypes and portrayals.⁵

It has to be stated emphatically at the start that gender cannot be indicated by intimacy and that intimacy is by no means a defining attribute of gender. But gender performativity most certainly intersects in complex ways with desire and with behaviour in situations of sexual intimacy. An author can therefore use the depiction of intimacy as a tool to portray specific gender qualities in order to comment on existing gender roles, gender performances and societal stereotypes, thereby engaging in the ‘feminist fabulation’ advocated by Barr (1987). How an author chooses to portray different gendered characters or characters with different sexualities approaching, taking part in and being affected by intimacy (with the inclusion of agency and embodiment) will show whether or not that author is instigating an investigation into gender, and will most likely reveal the depth of such an investigation.

Owing to the several and varied approaches to gender, gender identity and sexual identity (Andemahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz, 1997:102-104, 242-246; Grosz, 1994:3; McNay,

⁵ In *New Maps of Hell*, Amis claims that sex in science fiction is ‘almost oppressively normal’ and often glossed over (1960:64-66, 84). In contrast, sex (sexual intimacy) plays a prominent role in *The Sentients of Orion*.

1999:95), it is important to discuss and then define these terms before continuing.⁶ ‘Gender’ is often opposed to ‘sex’, with ‘sex’ referring purely to the individual’s biology and ‘gender’ to the cultural aspects thereof. Most gender theorists distinguish between ‘sex’ (i.e. one’s maleness or femaleness), ‘gender’ (one’s behaviour and identity as feminine or masculine, along with the expectations that shape this behaviour), and ‘desire’ or ‘sexuality’ (i.e. the kinds of people one desires, which governs one’s affiliation as homosexual, heterosexual or LGBTI).

For a long time, sex has been seen as biological, with gender as the social construct assigned to a sex. There are, however, those who feel that insistence on a difference between sex and gender simply compounds feminist issues. Judith Butler is the foremost but not the only advocate of this position. According to Veronica Hollinger (2006:331) ‘[t]he gendered roles of men and women have always been constructed upon the conviction of direct, natural, and stable relations among physical/biological sex (embodiment), gender (the range of feminine and masculine behaviors performed in the sociocultural sphere), and sexual desire (an individual’s particular orientation to a range of possible objects of desire – as a rule, all but heterosexual object choices are discouraged).’ She then points out how performative gender theory, on the other hand, shows how the difference between men and women in most cultures is due not to biological factors, but to the ‘social and cultural valuations and expectations’ ascribed to biological bodies (Hollinger, 2006:331).

⁶ Regarding complicated definitions of sex, Kate Bornstein says ‘[t]he trouble is, we’re living in a world that insists we be one or the other [woman or man] – a world that doesn’t bother to tell us what one or the other *is*’ (1994:8). Likewise, in their chapter on Gender Roles, William H. Masters, Virginia Johnson and Robert C. Kolodny also point out that stereotypes and assumptions about sexuality lead to problems in defining terms such as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ (1986:187).

Butler's (1990) theory of gender as performative, while welcomed by many in the field of feminism as liberating, is interpreted by some scholars, such as Rosalyn Diprose (2002:59-72), to mean that the very performance of gender is prescribed by the discourse of 'the other', thus rendering the possibility of transgressive gender performance moot. Others, such as Martha C. Nussbaum (1999) and Rosi Braidotti (2005), also criticise Butler's third-wave approach to gender issues. Nussbaum (1999:44-45) says:

Butler suggests to her readers that this sly send-up of the *status quo* is the only script for resistance that life offers ... Butlerian feminism is in many ways easier than the old feminism. It tells scores of talented young women that they need not work on changing the law, or feeding the hungry, or assailing power through theory harnessed to material politics. They can do politics in safety of [sic] their campuses, remaining on the symbolic level, making subversive gestures at power through speech and gesture. This, the theory says, is pretty much all that is available to us anyway, by way of political action

Third-wave feminism, according to Claire Snyder (2008:188), is a reaction to second-wave feminism in its rejection of 'a unified category of women', its embrace of 'the anarchic imperative of direct action', and its adherence to a 'philosophy of nonjudgment'.⁷ Nussbaum argues, with some validity, that there is more merit in practical feminism than in the highly theorised version offered by Butler, but I do not believe that Butler's complex presentation should be grounds for disputing the gravity of her challenge to the patriarchal status quo, or the solidity of her theory of gender as performative (Nussbaum, 1999:45).

Braidotti likewise criticises post-feminist neoliberalism as 'a variation on the theme of historical amnesia in that it expresses the rejection of the sense of a common connection to other women'. She accuses this form of feminism of ascribing women's status solely to

⁷ See Leslie L. Heywood's *The women's movement today: An encyclopedia of third-wave feminism* for an in-depth overview of third-wave feminism and its adherents (2006a; 2006b). Also see a more detailed history of feminism further on in this chapter.

‘financial success or status’, of seeing profit as the driving force of progress made by women and, lastly, of being ethnocentric (2005:171).

These criticisms of post-feminism do carry merit within their contexts, but they do not negate the worth of Butler’s theories. The notion of gender as performative remains influential and forms one of the theoretical cornerstones of my research. When referring to gender as performative or even to gender performance in this study, it will not be to the notion of performance as a political tool, as discussed by Cherie Winzell (1994:78), but to Butlerian ideas of identity as performativity and to gender as being formed in and by action, rather than being an essential attribute of identity.

Definition of terms and concepts

To completely avoid any confusion and for the necessary stringent delineation of these terms, the following definitions provided by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2011: no pagination) will be adhered to for the duration of this study:

Sex refers to a person’s biological status and is typically categorised as male, female, or intersex (i.e., atypical combinations of features that usually distinguish male from female). There are a number of indicators of biological sex, including sex chromosomes, gonads, internal reproductive organs, and external genitalia.

Gender refers to the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person’s biological sex. Behavior that is compatible with cultural expectations is referred to as gender-normative; behaviors that are viewed as incompatible with these expectations constitute gender non-conformity.

Gender identity refers to ‘one’s sense of oneself as male, female, or transgender’.

Sexual orientation refers to the sex of those to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted. Categories of sexual orientation typically have included attraction to members of one’s own sex (gay men or lesbians),

attraction to members of the other sex (heterosexuals), and attraction to members of both sexes (bisexuals) (APA, 2006).⁸

As intimacy is central to my thesis, it is also important to delineate and provide a working definition for it. Intimacy in this thesis does not refer to a modernist portrayal of intimacy as a sense of interpersonal understanding and unspoken communication; the study deals with sexual intercourse as a specific subset of intimate behaviour in spite of the expected ‘resistances, ambivalences, and concords that inevitably arise when someone speaks with passion and authority about sex and identity’ (Berlant, 1995:379). Sexual intimacy is a deeply nuanced and even nebulous concept, dealing with every aspect of how people act in sexually intimate situations. The same nuances that inflect general intimacy are pronounced in sexual intimacy.⁹ As a result of the nuanced nature of intimacy, this study, while focusing on intimate acts and thoughts related to sexual intercourse, must also include acts or thoughts in which there is *symbolic* reference or allusion to sexual intercourse, such as pleasing, emotional warmth, violence, emotional blackmail, enabling, suppression or fulfilment (Ricci, 1994:no pagination). Thus, while the focus of the thesis is sexual intimacy, I also take cognisance of the impact of emotional intimacy (both during sexual intercourse and on its own). Using sexual intimacy as a starting point, but also addressing other aspects of intimacy (including embodiment and agency), sets the study apart from others and makes it an original contribution to the study of gender in science fiction.

⁸ In some instances where direct quotations provided in this thesis do not adhere to the above definitions, it is because, while the ‘categories of sex and gender are sociologically distinct, they are regularly conflated in popular discourse’ (Ezzell, 2016:188).

⁹ Masters et al also refer to people being ‘discouraged from conversations or questions about sex’ (1986:28). They demystify the topic by dedicating their second chapter to a detailed discussion of sexual biology (Masters et al, 1986:27-54).

In order to place my thesis in context, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of both feminism and feminist science fiction. Starting in the mid-1800s, what used to be sporadic, poorly organized efforts by women to challenge the patriarchy developed into what is now referred to as first-wave feminism, mostly associated with obtaining the right to vote, and gaining financial and legal independence from men (LeGates, 2001:197). The 1960s saw the beginnings of second-wave feminism. Adherents were critical of the first-wave for not having achieved equality in terms of economics, education, and legal rights. Kate Millet, for example referred to the first-wave as ‘a wasteful drain of energy’ in *Sexual Politics* (1970:83) a text that, together with Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* is seminal to radical feminist theory. Second-wave feminism was known by protests, ‘separate women’s groups and a quest for sexual agency (LeGates 2001:327). *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir (1949) was also highly influential in the movement as was *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 2013). By the 1990s, third-wave feminism, with its focus on diversity among women, inclusion, queer theory and challenging stereotypes was criticized as being simply a continuation of the second wave with a marked ‘lack of cohesion’ (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004:89). Rowe-Finkbeiner provides an ‘oversimplified timeline’ saying:

the first wave won the right to vote; the second wave won the right to enter the professional workforce; and the third wave combines previous efforts, modified by a woman’s right to choose what works best for her – either “traditional” femal roles, “nontraditional” roles, or a combination of the two. (2004:89-90)

Seen as either an extension or a replacement for third-wave feminism, post-feminism seeks to establish a society free of a gender binary, believing that second-wave and third-wave aims have been reached. That we are living in a post-feminist era is of course not universally agreed upon, and neither is the meaning of the term ‘post-feminist’. Some

might even claim that we are living in an era of renewed misogyny, making the necessity of feminism ever more intense.¹⁰

With feminism briefly outlined, I can now present an overview of the development of feminist science fiction. Science fiction, particularly the place of women and the role of gender in the genre, has received much scholarly attention and has led to what is now widely known and accepted as ‘feminist science fiction’. Leaders in the field, such as Ursula K. Le Guin and Joanna Russ, in being both authors and critics, have created a strong link between critical theory and practice in the genre, and James Tiptree’s *And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill Side* (1972) is a good example of science fiction by a woman explicitly addressing sex and gender on different levels, and of critical analysis through a feminist lens bringing out these layers. On the surface, Tiptree tells a cautionary tale against the desire for that which is different and against alien sex, but on a deeper level the hero is ‘unmanned’ by removing his sex drive (and thus his ability to procreate) and by proving the desire for the ‘other’ as not specific to men, despite stereotypes of men as slaves to their own desire (Pearson, 2006). Both Wendy Pearson (2006:176, 181) and Hollinger refer to how Tiptree’s tale further points out shortcomings of and issues with heterosexuality, with Hollinger (1999:27) calling it ‘a kind of inescapable heterosexual bind’. Pearson’s analysis of *And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill Side* further shows how sexuality, gender and race are issues integrally connected to colonialist discourse and add to the establishment of a ‘hierarchy of normal/different’ which casts women, people of colour and people of non-heterosexual orientation as the ‘other’ (Pearson, 2006:184).

¹⁰ See Feminism, Ethics, and History, or What Is the ‘Post’ in Postfeminism? by Misha Kavka for an overview (2002:29-44).

Racial difference plays as significant a role in colonial ‘othering’ as gender difference does. Cathy Hawkins (2006:208), however, claims that science fiction is still ‘ill-informed’ regarding race, a view that is widely shared (Govan, 1984:43-47; Delaney, 2000:383-397; Green, 1994:166). A major criticism against racial othering in science fiction is that it often uses aliens simply to duplicate, rather than to challenge existing relations of race and gender (Wolmark, 1993:28).

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, first refers to the ‘other’ as a status ascribed to women by men (Hawkins, 2006:208). According to her theory, women are ‘constructed as foreigners surviving in an all male world’ (De Beauvoir, 1949:no pagination). This complaint was taken up in feminist science fiction, and, in *The Women Men Don’t See*, James Tiptree Jr. describes women who, because of their status of oppressed ‘other’ in a male world, have to survive ‘in the chinks of your world machine’ (Tiptree, 1995:163).¹¹ Gerard Loughlin (2004:5) says ‘[t]he erotic is the lure and embrace of the truly alien, the flesh that is other’. Feminists started using this ‘othering’ in science fiction both to show and understand how gender is an integral part of human cognition and metacognition. According to Jenny Wolmark (1993:1-2), feminist science fiction has two aims: ‘to indicate alternative ways of being and knowing that do not take contemporary gender roles as a naturalized given; and to provide a means of critiquing the effects of cultural assumptions about gender on the ways in which people live, including the ways in which we, as humans, interact with knowledge, with social institutions, and with each other.’

While the aims of feminist science fiction are clear, widely divergent approaches are followed by writers in the field, such as Joanna Russ (2007), Marleen Barr (1987, 2008), Lucie Armitt (1990) and Veronica Hollinger (1999), when addressing gender. Russ and

¹¹ *In the Chinks of the World Machine* subsequently became the title of Sarah Lefanu’s critical book on women’s science fiction (1988).

Hollinger, for example, provide essentialist lesbian responses, while Armitt and Barr provide more heteronormative perspectives. These authors and critics set the groundwork for a comprehensive understanding of gender in science fiction by their examination of the uniquely defamiliarising capacity of science fiction to experiment with gender roles and attitudes and the impact thereof on women's lives. Hollinger (1999:24), however, says

in spite of science fiction's function as a literature of cognitive estrangement, and in spite of the work of both feminist writers and critics in their on-going efforts to re-think the problematics of gender – especially gender's impact on the lives of women – heterosexuality as an institutionalized nexus of human activity remains stubbornly resistant to defamiliarization.

This remark, coming after all that went before, again brings me to my research question: are current women writers of science fiction still attempting to destabilise patriarchy, or, more specifically, the gender binary, through defamiliarisation?

Review of the literature

While much of the scholarly background to this thesis is covered in the Introduction, and much of it has been incorporated into Chapters Two to Seven of this thesis, it remains necessary to place the study within the context of current thinking about sexual intimacy, science fiction and gender. To that end I will provide a short overview of the literature concerning those aspects of my study that have not yet been addressed. This does not constitute a complete survey of the literature, as most sources are referred to elsewhere in the thesis, but it offers a synopsis of current and prominent work in the fields of feminism and gender in science fiction written by women, as well as body theory, embodiment, gendered language and intimacy.

There are numerous recent sources that provide an overview of feminist science fiction, such as Vint (2006), Pearson (2006), Nolan Belk (2008) and Christy Tidwell (2011). Justine Larbalestier, in *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (2002) and *Daughters of the Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (2006), also provides crucial up-to-date information about the more current state of gender issues in science fiction. Of these texts, I have drawn most strongly on Larbalestier's work in *Daughters of Earth*, which foregrounds and enacts the productive intersections between feminist science fiction, scholarly criticism and gender. There have been positive reviews of her work (such as Tan, 2003:22), but Debra Rae Cohen's review of *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (2004:311) focuses on the scathing criticism by other feminists that women writers of science fiction seem to be subject to, and accuses Larbalestier of doing the same. While I, as a newcomer to the field, originally found the hawkish stance taken by some critics in the field of feminist science fiction puzzling, Jane Donawerth and Brian Attebery's response essays in *Daughters of Earth* brought some perspective. Both these authors shed light on the origin of feminist science fiction in the pulps and on the 'permeable ... boundary between fan and author' (Donawerth 2006:26), which eventually translated into the expectation within the genre that readers would offer critiques of and alternatives to science fiction stories, which in turn evolved into the seemingly intrusive and possibly extreme attitude of literary critics in the field (Donawerth, 2006:20-35; Attebery, 2006:50-66). Seen in that light, the fierce criticism surrounding feminist science fiction compounds a particular part of the tradition, which makes a positive contribution to the genre.

David Seed (2005) gives a good survey of the field in the *Blackwell Companion to Science Fiction*, which touches on the different discourses and movements with some reference to feminist science fiction. He mostly focuses on key authors and provides a selection of science fiction stories as opposed to critical analysis. Owing to its content, Edward James

and Farah Mendlesohn's (2003) *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* is more relevant to the proposed study. The Cambridge Companion series supplies collections of critical essays and the authors whose work is collected in James and Mendlesohn's anthology provide detailed insight into different theories and approaches in the field. Another valuable source is *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (Bould, Butler, Roberts and Vint, 2009), which provides a wide academic overview of the genre, with particular chapters focusing on feminism, queer theory and feminist science fiction.

Before moving from science fiction into gender studies, it is important to provide a brief overview of feminist criticism. An academic expansion of feminist literary criticism in the 1970s 'introduced to readers an extensive new area of research' (Eagleton, 2011:2). Marxist criticism posed questions regarding the 'class bias of the literary tradition', but increasingly feminist literary criticism added questions regarding the 'androcentricity' of the canon (Eagleton, 2011:2). Elaine Showalter's *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977), for example, made the hegemonous focus of literary criticism of the time quite apparent as lesbians and women of colour leveled the same accusations of exclusion against feminism that feminism leveled against patriarchy (Eagleton, 2011:3).

Even today, critics are not in agreement as to the purpose of feminist literary criticism. Anglo-American feminist literary criticism, according to Eagleton, is based on 'the presumption that there definitely is a female tradition, buried like hidden treasure in literary history, and that the task of the feminist critic is to dig it out, brush it down and exhibit it' (2011:5). Toril Moi, however, states that the foremost purpose of 'feminist criticism has always been political: it seeks to expose, not to perpetuate, patriarchal practices' (1990:xiv). While I do touch on the canon of 'forgotten' women authors of

science fiction, my study definitely leans toward the political side of the spectrum. I believe the future of feminist criticism, lies in its being a ‘growing, changing, constantly self-transforming phenomenon characterized by a resistance to codification and a refusal to be rigidly defined or to have its parameters prematurely set’ (Fetterley, 1978:viii).

Philomena Essed, David Theo Goldberg and Audrey Kobayashi’s (2004) *Companion to Gender Studies* is one of several comprehensive anthologies of gender studies and stands as an exemplary overview of the many different aspects of gender studies and gender discourse. The volume contains chapters on specific theories applied to gender studies. The 2017 overhaul of Lucinda Peach’s (1998) *Women in Culture: A Women’s Studies Anthology* is titled *Women in Culture: An Intersectional Anthology* and provides an in-depth practical guide with contributions by some of the most influential writers and critics in the field (Scott, Cayleff, Donadey and Lara, 2017).¹²

When discussing the many aspects of gender discourse, Michel Foucault’s work is germinal. The ‘discipline’ aspect that he refers to in *Discipline and Punish* is not of such interest for the proposed study as his concept of ‘docile bodies’ and how they are meticulously shaped by political and social forces (1995:136-169). The ideal body at any given time might bear some subconscious reference to the state of society in general and, according to Foucault, it is possible that that ‘ideal’ did not become so by accident. The work of Foucault, which placed the body in particular relation to power, has led to a focus in gender studies on the way societal power structures wield control over the bodies of women (Armstrong, n.d.).

¹² In addition to these anthologies, there are some excellent, up-to-date introductory textbooks available, such as *Introduction to Women’s and Gender Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach* by Melissa Gillis and Andrew Jacobs (2016) and Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson’s *Introducing Gender and Women’s Studies* (2008).

In a gender-focused analysis of science fiction works, body theory is often applied. Sexual desire for a partner's body plays an important role in intimacy and has often been discussed in literature about gender identity. In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf, drawing on John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1979), shows how the differently 'trained' response triggers of men and women to desire 'maintain men's power in the myth' (1991:152). Men 'look at women's bodies, evaluate, move on; their own bodies are not looked at, evaluated, and taken or passed over'. For the status quo to be changed to 'an equal gaze, equal vulnerability, equal desire' (Wolf, 1991:152), and thus gender equity in situations of intimacy, a better understanding of human bodies is needed. In women critics' responses to science fiction, body theory, as exemplified by Audre Lorde (1984) and Susan Bordo (1993), is often used and also plays an important part in this study. Bordo (1993:187) argues that the current obsession with female slimness is a manifestation of 'contradictions in the social body – contradictions that make self-management a continual and virtually impossible task in our culture'. Attaining the seemingly elusive ideal weight has left women with feelings of inadequacy and failure at a level that traditional patriarchy (as discussed by Wolf) could not attain even at its height.¹³ Bordo goes further and investigates how 'the cultural management of female desire, on the one hand, and female flight from a purely reproductive destiny, on the other' led to an 'over-determination' of the slenderness ideal (1993:187). In the male/female binary, where the mind is associated with masculinity, and the body is associated with femininity, women are seen as more embodied, and frequently more problematically embodied, than men. Even so, power in

¹³ There are various understandings and definitions of patriarchy. For the purposes of this study, I shall use the definition provided by the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, with emphasis on the latter part of the definition (emphasis added): 'A system of society or government in which the father or eldest male is head of the family and descent is reckoned through the male line; a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it' (*Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2005:1302).

relation to the bodies of male characters and gender-neutral characters in *The Sentients of Orion* will also be examined where pertinent.¹⁴

In view of the discussion on embodiment, including male embodiment, and given the social division of people into two (and only two) types of sexed bodies, it is appropriate to address works that deal with masculinity, or, as Raewyn W. Connell (2000:10) argues, ‘masculinities’. Some, like Matthew Ezzell, radically believe that ‘gender is a category of inequality and doing manhood is, by definition, doing dominance’ (2016:195). Connell’s various works on masculinity and hegemonic masculinity (1987, 1995, 2000, 2002), along with Connell and James W. Messerschmidt’s (2005) revisiting of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, are core to recent mainstream understandings of masculinity. Ezzell, however, believes (with some justification) that these efforts to humanise masculinity contribute to the pernicious establishment of ‘healthy masculinities’ and a ‘kinder, gentler patriarchy’ (2016:195). C.J. Pascoe and Tristan Bridges provide an excellent overview of the most recent exploration of masculinity, inclusive of the above views, in their edited volume *Exploring Masculinities: Identity, Inequality, Continuity and Change* (2016). Eric Anderson’s Inclusive Masculinity Theory (2016:178-187) provides an alternative to Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity and, by implication, to Ezzell’s insistence that gender itself needs to be dismantled in order to ‘eradicate ... categories of inequality’ (2016:195).

In the same way as bodies (both female and male) and society shape each other, discourse also shapes society. Anthony Giddens (1992) builds on the works of Foucault (even though he is not always in agreement with Foucault). He claims that sexuality, which was

¹⁴ See Harrison Pope, Katharine Phillips and Roberto Olivardia’s *The Adonis Complex* on the topic of male body obsession (2000).

originally considered a private and ‘fixed’ subject, now ‘continually features in the public domain and, moreover, speaks the language of revolution’ (Giddens, 1992:1). While Giddens agrees with Foucault that ‘discourse becomes constitutive of the social reality it portrays’, he sees it not as a ‘fixed’ one-way process, but as one of ‘institutional reflexivity’, which changes and moves continually (1992:28). He feels the process is not necessarily controlled because the terms are incorporated into the ‘frames of action’ taken on by society. This process is aided by the particular changes in modern society, as knowledge is constantly incorporated into ‘contexts of action’ (Giddens, 1992:29). This reflexivity is similar to the recurring cyclical dynamic between body theory and embodiment referred to earlier.

Bearing in mind Giddens’ and Foucault’s insights into the role of discourse, this thesis, of necessity, gives attention to how language is used, and how language can be gendered to convey certain images and ideas.¹⁵ Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick’s edited volume, *The Language and Sexuality Reader* (2006), contains excerpts from several writers who address gendered language, while Le Guin’s often-reprinted essay ‘Is Gender Necessary: Redux’ (1993:161-169) provides a science fiction-infused perspective on the issue. Armit describes language as ‘the initiator, as well as the descriptor of social codes’ and makes a case for science fiction to ‘shake us from our complacences’ by the use of a ‘new language’ (1990:136).

Like many who write on gendered language, Wendy Martyna starts off with the ‘Harvard pronoun wars’, but she focuses mainly on attempts by the patriarchal mainstream to discredit any attempts at gender neutrality in language (1980:483). She concludes that the resistance to gender-neutral language can be ascribed to ‘anti-feminism’ and even more to

¹⁵ The use of gendered pronouns is a method of defamiliarising the ‘normal’ use of language to refer to gender norms and stereotypes.

a ‘general cultural reluctance to acknowledge the power of language in our lives’ (1980:492). In *Pronoun-envy*, Anna Livia also refers to the pronoun wars (2000:3), but instead of focusing on the politics of language like Martyna, she discusses gendered and non-gendered characters in science fiction, and examines in detail several authors’ attempts at creating gender-neutral pronouns. While both approaches carry merit, Livia’s work has the most relevance for this study.

Stereotypes are at the forefront of gender issues. Like all stereotypes, gender stereotypes are particularly pervasive (Krueger, Hasman, Acevedo and Villano, 2003:108). They are, however, dynamic (Diekman and Eagly, 2000:1171; Lopez-Zafra and Garcia-Retamero, 2012:170). The general perception among the mixed-gender group who took part in Esther Lopez-Zafra and Rocio Garcia-Retamero’s study is that female stereotypes and social roles are changing more rapidly than men’s (2012:170). While Lopez-Zafra and Garcia-Retamero are only two authors in this field, their findings that men are stereotypically

expected to have more agentic characteristics (such as self-assertion and dominance) and women are expected to have more communal characteristics (such as being kind and supportive) are relevant. This Agency and Communion are seen as basic traits. Agency encompasses mastery and control, whereas communion is defined as the act of sharing one’s thoughts and emotions with another or others. (Lopez-Zafra and Garcia-Retamero, 2012:170)

Intimacy is obviously central to the proposed study and therefore requires some comment. Ethnicity, race and culture influence attitudes and stereotypes related to intimacy, as shown in the work of Berardino Palumbo (2013), who refers specifically to Sicilian

attitudes to intimacy,¹⁶ and Patricia Price (2012), who also examines race and ethnicity in intimacy. Heidi Anderson Reamer (2013) focuses on spatial intimacy (or proximity) in relation to bodily intimacy. Carolyn Birnie-Porter and John Lydon discuss the ‘nature and function of sexual intimacy’ and come to the conclusion ‘that sexual intimacy is best conceptualized as a subtype of intimacy’ (2013:236). I would venture that based on Wolf’s ‘desire triggers’ (1991:156), this might be true mostly for women, while men are more likely to experience emotional intimacy as a sub-type of sexual intimacy.

Any discussion of sexual intimacy and sexuality would be incomplete without reference to Masters et al’s *Masters & Johnson on Sex and Human Loving* (1986). While relatively dated, and criticised as embracing ‘scientific nativism’ (Connell and Dowsett, 1992:191), this volume provides an invaluable and ground-breaking examination of sexuality from a number of perspectives, namely, biological, psychosocial, behavioural, clinical and cultural. Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton’s edited reader, *Culture, Society and Sexuality*, contains a more theoretical overview of the field of sexuality studies, and includes essays by a number of leading scholars in the field on sexuality, gender, sexual identities and power (2007). Both Masters et al’s volume, and Parker and Aggleton’s, have contributed significantly to my understanding of the relationship between intimacy and gender.

Sexual intimacy in science fiction written by women is portrayed with differing degrees of explicitness. In *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), for example, Le Guin deals in depth with the technicalities of intimacy between gender-neutral characters, but she does not

¹⁶ These are relevant to this study because of the Latin influence on de Pierres’ Latino race, language and culture.

necessarily describe in great detail any actual acts of sexual intercourse.¹⁷ In contrast, Octavia Butler's works, such as *Lilith's Brood*, contain vivid and detailed descriptions of sexual encounters (2000:82, 191, 295). While Le Guin's 'androgynous' imagination does not extend to the physical details of intimacy, Butler's interest in interspecies eugenics necessitates a rather detailed discussion of the technicalities involved in sexual intercourse. The substantial contribution made by these authors to feminist science fiction adds value to my thesis in its examination of the continuation of their tradition.

As mentioned before, intimacy, in this study, also encompasses negative intimacy, which includes 'negative affect in relationships, negative dialogue, rejection of commitment or concern for others, interpersonal disharmony, nonreciprocated friendliness, and escape from or avoidance of intimacy' (Suedfeld, Wilk and Cassel, 2013:195). Isolina Ricci provides an even more detailed list of negative intimacies, including concepts such as anger, hate, victimisation, emotional abuse, humiliation, violence, bullying and fear (1994:no pagination).

Contribution of the research

Building on a field as rich and deep as demonstrated here, it is quite likely that women authors of science fiction today do carry on the tradition of those who went before them. However, since the feminist literary criticism of science fiction pertains mostly to science fiction works of significant literary merit, and could be perceived as an academic pursuit, my research question should perhaps be refined to consider whether women authors of *popular* science fiction today carry on the tradition (Nussbaum, 1999:37). By popular, I mean that which is read by the average reader, not necessarily what is read by the scholars,

¹⁷ Le Guin explains that physically neutral beings develop gendered genitalia during *kemmer* (1969:90).

in the same manner that the pulp magazines of yore were ‘popular’. To that end, I have chosen a science fiction series, *The Sentients of Orion*, by a popularly acclaimed, yet relatively unknown Australian author, Marianne de Pierres, to serve as the sample for analysis in this thesis (De Pierres, 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010).

Despite a diligent literature search, I have been unable to find any scholarly articles or books that refer to *The Sentients of Orion*. There are some positive book reviews, with Liviu C. Suciu pointing to the potential of the series to be a ‘blockbuster space opera’ (2008:no pagination). There are also mentions of the awards de Pierres’ books were shortlisted for or have received (Aurealis Awards, 2010:no pagination). De Pierres’ *Parrish Plessis* series (2004, 2004, 2005) is the subject of a chapter on ‘Cyber Punk and Post-Humanism’ in *Apocalypse in Australian Fiction and Film* (Weaver, 2011:159-185) but while de Pierres (n.d.) authors several websites on her works, and has a wide online following, no academic sources on *The Sentients of Orion* seem to exist to date.

Since there are no academic sources available by which to further place Marianne de Pierres within the wider genre of Australian science fiction, I rely on *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (2016, no pagination) which names de Pierres as a ‘contemporary writer’ alongside other Australian women authors of science fiction such as Deborah Biancotti, who won the Aurealis Award in 2000 and 2007 and the Ditmar Award in 2000 and 2003; Isobelle Carmody, who won the Aurealis Award in 2006 and was shortlisted for the same award a number of times; Leanne Frahm, who won the Ditmar Award in 1981 and 1998 and the Aurealis Award in 1996; Alex Isle who, as Sue Isle, won the Aurealis Award in 2001 and was nominated for two Ditmar Awards, in 1996 and 2008 and Tansy Rayner Roberts, who won the 2013 Hugo Award and the 2015 Ditmar award for Best Fan Writer (Science fiction award database, 2017:no pagination).

Kossew (2004:1), when looking at Australian feminist authors, refers to ‘post-colonising’ women as being ‘caught between masculinist discourses of nationalism and a kind of maternal role involving compassion and reconciliation’ while Sheridan (1995:169) refers to the areas ‘where tensions and collusions between “sex”, “race” and “nation” become visible’ as ‘faultlines’ on which she suggests feminist authors in the postcolonial area should focus. As will become clear in the research presented here, de Pierres does, whether advertently or inadvertently focus on those very meeting places of place, gender and race and in *The Sentients of Orion*. Her work will be shown to mirror the ‘theme of belonging and yet being an outsider’ found in works by post-colonial feminist writers such as Nadine Gordimer in *The Pickup* (2001:92, 164) and Eva Sallis in *The City of Sealions* (2005:2). By including de Pierres’ *Parrish Plessis* novels in *Apocalypse in Australian film and fiction: A critical study*, Roslyn Weaver places de Pierres as central to apocalyptic Australian science fiction (Weaver 2011:164-186).¹⁸

In order to theorise intimacy and gender within the framework of science fiction written by women, I will examine the portrayal of intimacy to evaluate the extent to which de Pierres attempts to comment on and subvert existing gender stereotypes. Based on Wolmark’s (1993:28) remark that science fiction often uses aliens to duplicate rather than to challenge existing relations of race and gender, I hypothesise that there will be a fictional enquiry into gender, based on the richness of the field, but that a closer examination of intimacies in these ‘less literary works’ will prove the enquiry to be superficial and inconsistent in nature.

¹⁸ See Addendum B for comments by de Pierres regarding the current state of feminist science fiction in Australia.

This thesis thus makes an original contribution in its specific focus on intimacy when examining gender representations in popular science fiction, but also in its focus on the as yet unanalysed works of de Pierres. As shown in this chapter, there is a rich and deep history of gender aspects in science fiction written by women (on which much research has been produced), but focusing on intimacy as an influencing factor on gender representation in the award-winning *The Sentients of Orion* by de Pierres sets the study apart from other studies on gender in science fiction, and provides a new, unexplored perspective on gender issues in the genre. While I fully expect de Pierres to engage in gender commentary, I do not anticipate an analysis of intimate encounters to reveal a focused and consistent attempt to subvert existing gender stereotypes or challenge the heteronormative gender binary.

So far in this introductory chapter, the background for this study has been established, and the key terms have been explained. My research problem and hypothesis have been set out, a brief review of the literature has been presented and I can now explain how the rest of my thesis unfolds by providing a breakdown of the chapters.

Chapter overview

Chapter One, 'To the Brass Tacks', ensures the academic integrity of the thesis by providing a detailed discussion of the methodology, research design and theoretical framework I apply. While this chapter does provide theoretical grounding for the thesis, it is important to note that the theory is predominantly integrated into the body chapters where relevant. Chapter One further includes a more detailed discussion of the hypothesis and aims of the thesis, since they are only briefly touched on here in the introduction. The chapter finally presents the criteria for inclusion and the limitations of the study.

The consecutive chapters deal with a close reading and analysis of *The Sentients of Orion*. This analysis, which makes up the body of the thesis, is divided into six chapters, focusing on Mira, the principal character; Mira as mother; the primary female characters; the primary male characters; supporting male characters; and finally, the alien characters. The following detailed breakdown of these chapters might be facilitated by the synopsis of the novels' plot provided in Appendix A.

Chapter Two, 'Our Hapless Heroine', focuses on the main character, Baronessa Mira Fedor, and on how the intimate situations of an intellectual, social, sexual and emotional nature she is involved in are used by de Pierres to comment, directly or indirectly, on gender portrayals, performance and stereotypes. The most important relationships addressed in this chapter are between Mira and *Insignia*, Mira and society in general, and Mira and Trinder Pellegrini (with a particular focus on the loss of virginity and on rape).

The third chapter, entitled 'Motherhood for Mira', is based on intimacies relating to Mira as mother. Motherhood forms an integral part of Mira's character and, since it is closely linked to gender, provides ample material for analysis. Against the backdrop of motherhood in science fiction, particular attention is given to Mira's relationship with the orphans from Villa Fedor; Vani, the runaway boy; and Nova, Mira's biological child. These are all intimate bonds, allowing this chapter, along with Chapter Two, to reflect on the diversity of Mira's roles as a woman.

In Chapter Four, 'Of Warriors and Washerwomen', the focus falls on intimacies involving the primary women characters in the series, with the exception of Mira, and on how those intimacies reflect gender dynamics. The women discussed are Cass Mulravey, Marchella Pellegrini (also known as Mesquite), Rast Randall, Fariss O'Dea, Bethany Ionil, Samuelle

and Miranda Seward. The impact of motherhood on the choices and freedom available to women, agency in procreation, along with ageism and individualism in terms of gender performance, stereotypes and sexuality come to the fore in this chapter.

Chapter Five, 'Men of Character', focuses on Trinder Pellegrini and Jo-Jo Rasterovich as the male characters who are most closely linked to Mira. The chapter examines the gender portrayals of the two men as highlighted by the intimate encounters shared by them and other characters. Light is shed on the pressures of societal expectations regarding masculinity and sexual performance and on the negative effects of hegemonic masculinity on both men and women.

Chapter Six, entitled 'The Extras', is based on Thales Berniere, Tekton of Lostol and the military men, including Innis, Catchut, Latourn and Lasper Farr. The chapter highlights classical masculinity, masculine hegemony and the pressure placed on male characters to act in accordance with certain gender-related stereotypes.

The seventh chapter, 'Alien Orgies and Virtual Orgasms', revolves around characters that are considered alien, and the manner in which the intimacies they are part of comment on their gender roles and the way their gender is portrayed and/or performed. The characters discussed here include the invading Saqr, Djeserit, the biozoons, the Post-Species Extropists,¹⁹ Sole and Nova. This chapter focuses on the alien representing the female threat to patriarchy, but also on different uses of 'othering' and intimacy across species and races in challenge to the heteronormative gender binary.

¹⁹ A group of aliens who have, through genetic engineering, developed beyond species, gender or body.

‘Re-images and Re-imaginings’, the concluding chapter, discusses the findings and addresses the implications of the findings for my hypothesis. It answers the research question of whether or not Marianne de Pierres, as representative of current women authors of popular science fiction, uses incidences of intimacy in *The Sentients of Orion* to comment on and challenge the gender status quo. The conclusion provides a general overview of the depth of the gender investigation in *The Sentients of Orion*, and provides scope for further research based on the findings of this thesis.

Chapter One: To the Brass Tacks

Also, I, as the interpreter of this text, come from a cultural context of my own. I needed to be conscious of my own culture; otherwise, if I were not conscious of my own prejudice, I would unconsciously project it on the tale.

(De Vos, 2014:4)

Introduction

In order to be relevant, valid and reliable, research must contribute to the existing scholarly literature and rely on valid methodology. This chapter describes the research design of this study. It further presents the hypothesis and aim of the thesis, and discusses the theoretical framework, research instruments, criteria for inclusion and the limitations of the study.

Having placed my study in context in the introduction chapter, I can now present my research design, and the hypothesis and aim of the thesis. I will also discuss the theoretical framework of the thesis and the research instrument I use. The main hypothesis of this study is that *The Sentients of Orion*, in accordance with earlier science fiction written by women, will present a fictional exploration of gender in challenge to the patriarchal status quo, but that a deeper investigation into incidences of intimacy in *The Sentients of Orion* will prove the gender commentary to be of superficial nature only. I thus expect to find a surface nod to gender (based on the existing tradition), but I expect a closer investigation, which I aim to execute through the window of intimacy, to reveal *The Sentients of Orion* to hold no real or sustained challenge to the heteronormative status quo.

Aims

The main aim of this study is to ascertain whether de Pierres incorporates gender commentary in *The Sentients of Orion* as a challenge to the patriarchy, and further to ascertain the extent to which her depiction of intimacy strengthens such challenge (if

present), or reveals it to be superficial. I will next discuss the theoretical framework and the research instrument I applied in achieving my aim.

Theoretical framework

Insofar as it focuses on a single sample out of many current science fiction works written by women authors, the study can be considered a ‘case study’. While many definitions for case study involve multiple data sources (Merriam, 1988:16) and social phenomena (Nunan, 1992:76; Yin, 1984:23), these do not apply. The only aspect of a case study that is pertinent to this thesis is that a single instance is selected from a larger assemblage of objects and phenomena and then investigated to ascertain how it functions in context. This method, according to Jack Richards and Richard Schmidt (2002:65), ‘provides an opportunity to collect detailed information ... and may or may not be based on the assumption that the information gathered on a particular individual, group, community, etc., will also be true of the other individuals, groups or communities’.

In literary theory, the term ‘close reading’, as derived from New Criticism, is a form of textual analysis that focuses on the details, ambiguities and formal aspects of the text without any consideration given to contextual or environmental aspects. This method, while no longer in vogue, had strong proponents, such as Cleanth Brooks (1942) and René Wellek (Wellek and Warren, 1984), and had an ‘irreversible’ impact on literary criticism (Baldick, 2008:225). I deviate from close reading prescripts in that I incorporate the historical and social contexts surrounding *The Sentients of Orion* into my analysis. I do, however, adhere to its principles in my attention to irony, metaphor and symbol to make meaning of the text (Leitch 2001:17-19).

The selected texts, which form the centre of my research, are analysed using selected strategies of close reading in a careful reading and re-reading to expose different layers of meaning in the text.¹ To this end I followed the steps suggested by the Harvard College Writing Center for close reading (2015:no pagination). These steps, which include most of the precepts mentioned by Brooks and Wellek, include annotating the text, identifying patterns, contradictions, similarities or repetitions and, finally, asking questions (how and why) regarding those patterns (Harvard College Writing Center, 2015:no pagination). Applying these close reading strategies through a selection of critical approaches enables me to examine themes and representational strategies, looking not only at what is said about gender, but also at *how* it is said.

My main approach is a qualitative exploration of selected incidents through the theoretical lenses of feminist literary criticism, gender theory and, where applicable, queer theory (Baldick, 2008; Butler, 1990; Gilbert, 1996; Larbalestier, 2002, 2006; Moi, 1990; Flax, 1990; Andemahr et al, 1997). There are various theoretical angles that can be applied when exploring the literary depiction of intimacy, including Judith Butler's theory of gender as performative (1990), Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell 1995; 2002; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and body theory by, among others, Susan Bordo (1993; 1999). There is a large body of scholarship in these fields, which all share a common interest in gender and identity. While I draw eclectically on these interpretive paradigms during the course of my research, I find myself most closely aligned with poststructuralist feminism, as expounded by Jane Flax (1990) and Judith Butler (1990; 1993). Poststructuralist feminism allows for the intellectual flexibility to 'resist universalist or normalising conceptions of women' and to share 'the French feminist rejection of

¹ The *Merriam Webster Unabridged Dictionary* defines close reading as a 'detailed and careful analysis of a written work; *also*: the product of such analysis' (Britannica Digital Learning, 2015:no pagination).

metanarrative explanations and prescriptive norms for gender and sexuality’ (Staats and Graff, 2012: no pagination).

Research materials and selection criteria

This study thus entails an inter-textual, thematic content analysis and close gendered reading of a particular science fiction series with a focus on intimacy. The series consists of four novels, namely, *Dark Space* (2007), *Chaos Space* (2008), *Mirror Space* (2009) and *Transformation Space* (2010). The novels are available as e-books in the Kindle Store (Amazon, 2016), but for this thesis I use the 2007-2010 Orbit editions for page numbering and ease of reference. To expedite reading, in-text citations of the novels are abbreviated as follows: *Dark Space* is referred to as DS, *Chaos Space* as CS, *Mirror Space* as MS and *Transformation Space* as TS. To further facilitate negotiating the thesis, a synopsis of each novel is provided in Appendix A.

Science fiction is not always considered to be suitable material for in-depth academic study. Brian McHale says ‘we can think of science fiction as postmodernism’s noncanonised or “low art” double, its sister-genre in the same sense that the popular detective thriller is modernist fiction’s sister-genre’ (1987:59). Similarly, within science fiction, a differentiation can be made between high-brow and low-brow literature – popular works that aim to tell a story; and critically acclaimed, ‘canonized’ works (McHale 1987:63) which might, for example, contend for the Hugo or Nebula Awards.² I was specifically not looking for ‘high-brow’ science fiction, but for popular science

² The difference between popular and critically acclaimed science fiction is analogous to that between a film that is a box office mega hit in spite of poor reviews from the critics, and a critically acclaimed movie that flops at the box office: even though not mutually exclusive, there is a clear differentiation between ‘popular’ and ‘critically acclaimed’. See McHale (1987:59-72) and Jeff Cupp and Charles Avinger (1993:175-184) for applicable parallels between modernist fiction and science fiction.

fiction. I was hoping to find a science fiction series written by a woman that would represent what the general reader is reading. Firstly, this series is intended as homage to the early pulps, where modern science fiction had its roots. Even though many stories of great merit by prize-winning authors did appear in the pulps, especially after Gernsback took up the reins (Bowers, 2009:24; Rieder, 2009:25), they were often disregarded in literary circles and considered entertainment for the masses as opposed to literature for discerning readers. I chose these novels for the same reason that Robin Roberts gives in her plea for study of the pulps: ‘Despite their neglect in the academic world, pulp magazines deserve our attention because they were popular, influential, and their patterns help explain the emergence of feminist science fiction’ (1993:41).

Secondly, I was interested in science fiction that is being widely read by the general public. This would enable me to ascertain whether ‘popular’ science fiction written by women authors reflects the already established gender-related commentary found in critically acclaimed works. De Pierres is a well-established author whose work is fairly well known and has been reviewed in *Locus*.³ She also maintains a strong online presence, from which I assume that she has a wide audience and that her work is influential among readers of science fiction (De Pierres, n.d.). While *The Sentients of Orion* is ‘popular fiction’ and not ‘part of the canon of approved texts’ (Roberts, 1993:48), the presence of all the novels on the Aurealis shortlists does ensure that the series is solid enough to stand up to the scrutiny of academic analysis (De Pierres, n.d.) and can thus prove efficacious in an examination of current trends in gender representations in popular feminist science

³ See Adrienne Martini (2014:22) and *Publishers Weekly* (2009) as examples.

fiction.⁴ Reviews and websites are, in the main, subjective, but do offer an indication of de Pierres' standing as a 'popular' author.

In reviews (*Publishers Weekly*, 2009:no pagination), the series is described as 'space opera', which, in the original sense of the term, precludes the presence of hard science and which would, in general, not be considered of great literary merit. The series conforms to aspects of space opera in the original sense in that it is a tale of 'high adventure in outer space' and not based on hard science (Levy, 2008:132). Certain perceived weaknesses in the plot of *The Sentients of Orion*, along with some loose ends (which will be presented in detail in the concluding chapter), could also be seen to conform to space opera's original reputation, according to Michael Levy (2008:132), of being deficient in terms of 'fine writing, or literary standards'.

Although, like the clichéd space operas of old, *The Sentients of Orion* is not necessarily based on hard science or of impeccable literary merit, it does, in other respects, conform to the characteristics of 'new space opera', which is deemed a much more respected sub-genre of science fiction (Levy, 2008:132; McAuley, 2003:24). Originating mostly in England, new space opera applies cyberpunk principles such as hard science and 'fine writing'. It focuses on 'character development' and 'literary standards' infused with political commentary, but other than cyberpunk, retains the wider planetary backdrop of the original space opera (Levy, 2008:132).⁵ *The Sentients of Orion* conforms to 'new' space opera in its cyberpunk element, but also, even more relevant to this study, in its

⁴ The Aurealis Awards (established in 1995) aims to recognise outstanding Australian authors of fantasy, horror and science fiction.

⁵ The August 2003 issue of *Locus* (Issue 522 Volume 51(2)) is entitled 'New Space Opera' and contains contributions by some of the more influential authors in the subgenre, such as Gwyneth Jones and Stephen Baxter. Also see Gardner Dozois and Jonathan Strahan's (2007) edition of *New Space Opera*.

detailed characterisation and its move away from the ‘chauvinism’ present in original space opera (Wolfe, 2014:67).

In spite of the aforementioned shortcomings in terms of plot and cohesion, the novels were critically well received. *Dark Space* was shortlisted for both the 2007 Aurealis Award for Best Science Fiction Novel and the 2008 Ditmar Award for Best Novel and was a BSFA⁶ nominee in 2008. *Chaos Space* and *Mirror Space* were shortlisted for the Aurealis Award in the Best Science Fiction Novel category in 2008 and 2010 respectively and *Transformation Space* was the winner of the Aurealis Award for Best Science Fiction Novel in 2010 (De Pierres, n.d.).

Once the novels were identified, I proceeded with close reading and analysis. I read all the novels several times, annotating all incidences of intimacy as they pertain to specific chapters in this thesis. I initially planned to structure my chapters according to the characters who are afforded their own section headings in *The Sentients of Orion*. I had to adapt this slightly, however, as that approach would have left out too many prominent characters. Accordingly, Chapter Two contains all incidences of intimacy involving the main character, Mira. Since motherhood proved such a prominent aspect to Mira’s development, I added Chapter Three, which contains all intimate incidences pertaining to Mira as a mother. For Chapter Four, I extracted all incidences of intimacy relating to the principal women characters, even though none of them head sections in the novels. This chapter includes Marchella, Faja, Rast, Faris, Bethany and Samuelle. Chapter Five includes all incidences of intimacy involving Trinder Pellegrini and Jo-Jo Rasterovich, since, among the male characters who have their own section headings, they are the most important. I extracted intimacies relating to the other male characters for Chapter Six,

⁶ Annual awards voted for by members of the British Science Fiction Association.

focusing first on those to whom section headings are devoted, namely, Tekton and Thales Berniere. I further included secondary male characters whose intimacies pertain directly to my thesis, namely, Innis, the royal police officers, the mercenaries and Lasper Farr. I selected incidences of intimacy involving prominent alien characters, namely, the invading Saqr, Djeserit, the biozoons, the Post-Species Extropists, Sole (God) and Mira's 'daughter' Nova for Chapter Seven, even though Sole is the only alien character who heads any sections of the novels.

When deciding which incidences of intimacy involving the above characters to include in this study, the *Oxford Dictionary of English* definition of intimacy applies. Intimacy is firstly defined as '[t]he state of being personally intimate; intimate friendship or acquaintance; familiar intercourse; close familiarity' and secondly as a 'euphemism for sexual intercourse' (Stevenson, 2010:916). As nuanced as intimacy is, it would not be appropriate to consider intimacy, and emotional intimacy in particular, without taking negative intimacy, as mentioned by Suedfeld et al (2013:195) and Ricci (1994:no pagination; 1997:76) into consideration. This would include closeness that is perceived as negative or unwanted, threats and physical or implied violence.

The inclusion of instances of intimacy is narrowed by whether or not any incident comments on or bears relation to the gender depictions both in that incident and in the series as a whole. The incidences of intimacy analysed in this study thus include both positive and negative instances of emotional, physical and sexual closeness between the principal characters insofar as they pertain to the gender performances, depictions and stereotypes presented in *The Sentients of Orion*.

Mira and a number of other characters in *The Sentients of Orion* are of the ‘Latino’ race. This is a fictional race, of which the culture and language seem to be loosely based on modern Italian. Throughout the novels, de Pierres uses a number of concepts and words from this culture without providing explanations. The same applies to technical terms or terms unique to the novels where de Pierres provides no explanation and assumes her readers will be able to infer the meaning. Mostly, it is possible to garner the meaning of these words from the novels, but for the purposes of clarity in negotiating this thesis, I provide brief explanations or translations of these terms. Instead of creating a separate glossary of terms, I incorporate glossed terms in the footnotes at the end of each page.

Limitations of the study

There are several limitations to this thesis that need to be addressed at the outset. The ‘case study’ nature of this thesis is limiting in that it focuses on *The Sentients of Orion* only. At the same time, as a case study, the findings can be considered to apply to other samples from the field (Richards and Schmidt, 2002:65), which presents interesting options for future research.

The limitations brought about by the narrow text selection not only pertain to the focus being on a single series written by a single author, but also to the presence or absence of gender commentary in Australian science fiction, which might differ significantly from science fiction discourse in other parts of the world since Australia and New Zealand are generally considered spatially and culturally remote. Stephan Kraitsowitz (2011:8) argues that Australian science fiction ‘appears ... to be just a small segment of a literature born in Europe, crystallized in the 1920 US pulps and today gone global’. This disparaging argument is based on his analysis of a number of anthologies of Australian science fiction

short stories, but Australian involvement in the genre cannot be nullified based on weaknesses in the compilation of certain anthologies. Even with their flaws, the anthologies, notably *Metaworlds: Volume 1. Best Australian Science Fiction* (Collins, 1994) and *Strange Constellations: A History of Australian Science Fiction* by Russel Blackford, Van Ikin and Sean McMullen (1999) do show a long-standing Australian involvement in science fiction and any differences in terms of gender commentary based on geographical and social factors would create interesting opportunities for further research.

As the examination of gender representation is focused through the narrow window of intimacy, any openly stated gender commentary presented in non-intimate conversations or situations is precluded from the thesis. A much stronger case for de Pierres' intent to challenge the gender status quo might be made by including these situations and/or conversations, but while that would increase the breadth of the analysis, it would simply yield a superficial discussion of gender-related commentary. The intent of this thesis is precisely to see whether the narrow focus on intimacy proves that de Pierres' attention to gender issues is consistently applied on a deeper level.

While not strictly speaking a limitation, certain inconsistencies I encountered while analysing the texts need to be clarified. Minor plot inconsistencies will be discussed in detail in the concluding chapter of the thesis. There are also inconsistencies in the use of italics with regard to certain characters' names throughout the novels. For example: 'if she used *Sal's* [italics] vein-sink, what would happen? Would Sal's [no italics] personality meld with hers? *Sal* [italics] was unhealthy, not sane in the way of other biozoons' (TS 323). For the duration of my thesis, where quoting directly from the novels, the style used by the author is retained, inclusive of the inconsistencies. Where I refer to names of the

characters in question without quoting from the novels, I adhere to the style most commonly used by the author, which, in the case of the biozoons *Sal* and *Insignia*, is italic font. The problem is exacerbated by the use of italic font to represent telepathic speech between characters. The characters who can communicate telepathically seemingly do not always choose to do so (CS 57-59). When quoting directly from the text, I again retain the style applied by de Pierres, inclusive of inconsistencies.

Lastly, referring to Elane De Vos (2014:4), the perspective that I, as researcher, bring to the analysis, while not necessarily a limitation, needs to be taken into account, as it will inevitably colour the interpretation I bring to the novels. I grew up during the 1970s and 1980s in a conservative, small-town, Afrikaans setting. Subsequently, sex, gender, sexuality and intimacy were not topics for consideration, much less for conversation during my formative years. It is a testament to the changing of the times, the influence of feminism and (relevant to this thesis) of feminist science fiction, that, in spite of my previously limited exposure, I have developed an interest in and was given the freedom to enter into postgraduate studies focusing on gender. The close reading of *The Sentients of Orion* has allowed me a fresh vantage point – applying feminist literary theory to these works of fiction sheds new light on gender and power dynamics in intimate relationships.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the methods I have applied and the materials I have used, and explains why those methods and materials were considered to be the best choice for this study. These details contribute to a deeper understanding of the scope of the thesis and its aim of investigating how intimacy inflects de Pierres' gender commentary. The successive chapters will focus on the results obtained by applying the methodology presented here.

Chapter Two: Our Hapless Heroine

The possibility of rape shapes the space I inhabit, designating certain hours and places as dangerous to me while to men they remain open prospects ... I was rapable, and therefore I had to be careful.

(Cahill, 2001:1)

Introduction

Female characters in science fiction have not always been treated well.¹ When they were not simply absent altogether, they were often portrayed as ‘receptacles for male valor, scientific expertise, or, literally, for out-of-this-world sex’ (Papke, 2006:145; Rabkin, 1981:9). Fortunately, second-wave feminism’s focus on issues such as ‘sex, gender, race and class’ (Papke, 2006:145) was taken up by women science fiction authors, which led to the horizons of the female characters in science fiction broadening far beyond the kitchen sink (Rabkin, 1981; Russ, 1980; 1995; Larbalestier, 2006; Barr, 1981; Lefanu, 1988).²

The women in *The Sentients of Orion* are varied and complex and include a genetically exceptional noblewoman pilot, two Amazonian warriors, a matriarchal crone, a doggedly determined housewife and mother, a rebel, a feminist politician and a misguided medical researcher. The diversity of these women does not stop with different careers and social standing, but encompasses a variety of body shapes, races, gender portrayals and psychological profiles, reflective of such diversity in the real world.

Baronessa Mira Fedor is the female protagonist of *The Sentients of Orion*, and this chapter focuses on her intimate interactions with other characters in order to investigate how the

¹ Eric Rabkin refers to criticism that was often directed against the genre for ‘treating its female characters with lust, disdain, hostility, smarm and ever-present narrow-mindedness of both the ignorant and willful varieties’ (1981:9).

² Russ sees the growth in feminist utopias, for example, as ‘obviously contemporaneous with the women’s movement itself’ (1981:71).

author uses moments of intimacy (emotional, sexual and intellectual) to comment, albeit indirectly, on gender. Of particular interest are Mira's relationship with her biozoon³ spaceship, *Insignia*, her interactions with society in general and her relationship with Trinder Pellegrini, the Principe⁴ of Araldis.

Mira and Insignia

Not only is Mira's relationship with *Insignia*, the biozoon space ship, the most intimate of her relationships, it is also the first relationship between any two characters introduced in *The Sentients of Orion*. Consequently, it warrants a primary place in this analysis.

De Pierres, markedly, chooses the very first words spoken between any two characters (Mira and *Insignia*) to be a comment on appearance: '*I heard you are beautiful.*' It could be assumed that, in literature involving women's agency, the initial focus placed on the female protagonist would be on her capabilities, her intelligence, or even her emotions. The fact that the emphasis is placed on appearance in this manner does not bode well for my expectation that de Pierres will mount a challenge to the gender status quo. If beauty is the primary characteristic brought to the readers' attention, it seems possible that gender stereotyping might simply be perpetuated in the novels. However, in the light of de Pierres' regular allusions to existing works of science fiction and her incorporation of well-established science fiction tropes such as 'the alien invasion, the planetary romance, the race of telepaths, and the gender-reversed society' (Attebery, 2006:53), this focus on appearance could be interpreted as a token nod to the traditional science fiction heroine, who, as a matter of course, was breathtakingly beautiful (Russ, 2007:209).

³ A race of sentient, biological space ships.

⁴ A Latino term denoting nobility (Prince).

What marks the interaction between Mira and *Insignia* as intimate is the fact that the words are spoken inside Mira's head. Mira is part of a long line of Latino pilots who carry a family gene enabling them to communicate with, and thus pilot, the organic biozoon space ship belonging to the royal family. Mira is an aberration – the first female of the line to carry the gene – and thus the first female with the ability to communicate telepathically with *Insignia*.

In early science fiction, telepathy was often ascribed to women but as a power of evil and unnaturalness, usually used in support of the dark forces in a battle between good and evil (Attebery, 2006:56).⁵ In Mira's case, her anomalous genetics, which allow her access to a telepathic relationship with *Insignia*, are considered abnormal by the male establishment at the Studium. It is not the telepathy itself that is judged evil but the fact that it is available to a woman. This particular intimacy has previously been denied to women and Mira's partaking in it is the first sign of de Pierres upsetting the apple cart of gender depictions.

In the first conversation between Mira and *Insignia* (DS 7), *Insignia* acknowledges having been lonely for a long time. Loneliness, in many ways the antithesis of intimacy,⁶ is manifest in many of the characters in *The Sentients of Orion*, and is often used by de Pierres as a gateway to intimacy. One major prerequisite for intimacy or closeness in a relationship is the divulging of personal information and insecurities (Jiang, Bazarova and Hancock, 2011:58; Joinson and Paine, 2007:29) and, by addressing loneliness, *Insignia* is opening the channels for the development of an intimate relationship with Mira. Mira's

⁵ Leslie Stone, for example, sets the 'terrible combined mental power' of the Golans against the more human Detaxalan men (1931:48). She queers the trope, however, by making the reader more sympathetic toward the alien Golans.

⁶ Bornstein says in *Gender Outlaw* that having a particular identity along with 'the need to belong to a group of people with a similar identity – these are driving forces in our culture and nowhere is this more evident than in the areas of gender and sexuality' (1994:3-4).

reply, referring to the death of her father, who was the previous Innate,⁷ reciprocates this sharing of personal information, and sets the tone of intimacy for the relationship between these two characters.

Apart from the very close telepathic intimacy between Mira and *Insignia*, there are constant sexual allusions in their interactions:

It was said that for Fedors, first *union* with a biozoon was like a wedding night ... Her need for *union* with the Cipriano Clan's organic pilot ship had become a craving, a hunger in her mouth that she could not satisfy, and ungovernable heat in her lower belly. Such feelings were improper for a Baronessa – but then, a Baronessa had never harboured the Inborn pilot gene⁸ before: indeed, a *woman* had not. (DS 8, original emphasis)

There are numerous other in-text examples of the sexual nature of their relationship. When Mira is in Primo vein,⁹ '[g]row-receptors skittered over her skin and burrowed in ... She concentrated on the tingling at the base of her skull where the vein insinuated itself into neural lanes' (DS 415). Mira/Primo loses 'all connection with her physical self' as she becomes 'a force amongst other forces, an energy thrusting forward against returned energies' (CS 2). Mira reluctantly begins 'the process of separation' and when she is 'disgorged' from Primo, it supports her 'gently' as she feels 'the last reassuring intimacy of the Primo drop away' (CS 14). Later, Mira allows Primo to 'adhere gently to her skin, massaging her body' (CS 54) and *Insignia*'s 'sensors skittered over her body like light, loving fingers' (CS 106). Shift¹⁰ is described as 'the exquisite, stabbing, devouring, mind-inverting pain of shift and then the release'. The 'warmth' of Primo pulses around her and

⁷ The title of a person (usually male) who pilots the biozoon. Each spaceship has its own 'innate'. The title is given in reference to the 'innate gene' all such pilots possess..

⁸ Like the Innate gene, this is a gene that enables biozoon pilots to pilot biological spaceships.

⁹ The Primo and Secundo veins refer to the seats on the biozoon spaceships where the first and second pilots sit. The Primo vein can only be occupied by a pilot with the Innate gene and biological fusion between the pilot and the ship takes place.

¹⁰ Moving into 'Shift' is the way in which Orion spaceships jump from one star system to another, traversing vast expanses of space. The exact science of it is never revealed.

Mira allows *Insignia* to ‘subsume’ her (CS 236) and the Primo’s receptors to ‘penetrate’ her (CS 241).

When Mira and *Insignia* strike their deal before *Insignia* takes them through imperfect shift, the wording and imagery is sexual in nature with distinct overtones of *jouissance*:

It bucked inside her, contorted and fought her, building to a peak of pain energy where she knew it would rend her open: disperse her. But then its final rush came and silhouette engulfed her, deluging her vibrating pain with stillness. The meeting of sensations trampolined Mira’s molecular structure high and wide, and as it fell back into an arrangement that felt more or less like her own she became aware of *Insignia*’s long and heartfelt ‘*Aaahhhhhhhhh ...*’.

Although it is not initially apparent, or significant, *Insignia* is neither male nor female. Mira, however, addresses the biozoon as ‘Bella’ (DS 412), which, in keeping with the Latino element in the novels, is an Italian word with the -a ending signifying the female form. Much later, prior to them finding *Insignia* and leaving Araldis, the mercenary Rast Randall questions Mira’s use of the female pronoun ‘her’ when referring to *Insignia* (DS 400). This could indicate that, as a lesbian, Rast has wider boundaries when thinking about gender than Mira does, but it might be that Rast simply thinks of *Insignia* as a machine. Mira assumes the latter and replies to Rast by saying ‘[t]he biozoon is not inanimate. Only a fool would treat them [sic] as such’. Mira’s choice of the feminine form of address might be due to her not understanding, or not being able to grasp, *Insignia*’s gender, or simply to ignorance, as she and *Insignia* have at that time not yet discussed gender. Mira only starts referring to *Insignia* as ‘it’ after the first *union* between them, as if sharing that sexual intimacy with *Insignia* gives her insight into the biozoon’s gender complexity (CS 15). *Insignia*’s gender and the subsequent introduction of gender-related

pronouns initially seem unimportant but will prove, as the story unfolds, to be one of the main vehicles de Pierres uses to deliver her gender commentary.

Once they have escaped from Araldis, and *Insignia* thanks Mira for the ‘*union*’, Mira feels slightly embarrassed:

Now that they were separated, the reminder of her intimate immersion in the ship’s biologics embarrassed her a little. And yet she had so longed for it – like desiring a stranger from afar to find out, once you had been intimate with them, that they were still only a stranger. (CS 18)

Gentzler and Kerns’s work focuses on gender differences when ‘investigating how attachment relates to sexual experiences’. They find that young girls are more likely to have sexual intercourse to ‘feel close to their partner’ than boys are (2004:252).

The conversation about gender that follows is enlightening, with *Insignia* assuring Mira, ‘*When we fuse again you will learn much more about me.*’ Mira tells *Insignia* that she is the ‘first woman’ of her line to ‘bear the pilota gene’. *Insignia*, apparently, has even less of an idea regarding Mira’s gender than Mira has of *Insignia*’s (CS 19). ‘*Woman? I hear your people use that term frequently. What does that mean?*’ Mira explains to *Insignia* that she is the ‘female’ of the species: ‘Male – female’, in response to which *Insignia* says,

‘*You are different to my other Innates – yes, I see that. But the humanesque nuance of it escapes me. Our sexuality is diverse and subtle ... I need several of my own kind to reproduce. It is our way of keeping our species strong. Unlike you who have genetically limited yourselves to a single choice*’.

While this is the most detailed explanation so far of *Insignia*’s sex and sexuality, Mira later admits to Rast Randall that she is still ‘not sure of *Insignia*’s gender’ (CS 51). *Insignia* refers to genetics and reproduction, which would have them discussing sex, *not* gender as

Mira refers to it. This is not only indicative of Mira's remaining confusion, but also of the complexities of gender fluidity. As Mira's entering into Primo vein has so many symbolically sexual connotations and allusions, *Insignia's* sex/gender becomes a more prominent issue, for one thing because all previous Innates who have gone through this same semi-sexual process of piloting from Primo vein, have been male.

Mira and *Insignia's* story unfolds like a human love story. Initially the intimacy of having *Insignia* in her head and the constancy of the intimacy makes Mira fear for her sanity. As her flight from the Studium progresses, though, she longs 'to see Insignia without covers, to know that it was real, to understand the forgotten language, to know she was sane' (DS 41). By the time she reaches Araldis, Mira thinks of *Insignia's* presence as a 'comfort' (DS 91) and when they finally meet in person, Mira's greeting '*Bonjourno, bella*' and *Insignia's* reply '*You are here?*' seem very natural, like the meeting of two good friends (DS 415). When *Insignia* surges away from Araldis, the ship and Mira are so close that they become one entity, 'Mira/Primo' and '[f]or a singular and infinite moment [Mira] had found herself at home'. For two such diverse beings to experience such a close union on a psychological, physical and spiritual level is, from a science fiction perspective, a marriage of sorts, created by de Pierres to comment on what can be seen as a patriarchal institution.

Mira and *Insignia* contribute in different ways to the developing intimacy between them. During the escape from Araldis, there is a moment where Mira has to make a choice between their lives and those of the people on another ship trying to move into Shift at the same time as they are. While Mira on her own is unable to make the choice, Mira as a mother has no problem doing it. *Insignia* gains Mira's trust by sharing with her '*If you choose the riskier option for us your baby will die*'. Her sharing of this intimate knowledge moves Mira away from thinking '*I cannot choose such a thing. I cannot!*' to thinking a

definitive ‘*Us. Save us ...*’ (CS 4). Mira’s choice forces *Insignia* to go through the process of ‘exfoliating’ during Prime, something it has not done before. It later thanks Mira for the opportunity, saying ‘*I ... enjoyed our union*’. Their bond is strengthened by *Insignia* nudging Mira about motherhood, by their first *union* and by Mira enabling *Insignia* to explore new physical experiences during an act that simulates sexual intercourse. De Pierres thus demonstrates that, contrary to traditional, patriarchal norms and expectations, non-binary couples can and do have enduring intimate relationships, strengthened by the same factors that contribute to heterosexual relationships (coexistence, communication, interdependence and synergy).

An interesting aspect of the developing relationship between Mira and *Insignia* affects their agency. Owing to the physical intimacy of their *union*, *Insignia* knows that Mira is pregnant, confirming what Mira knows instinctively. *Insignia* asks Mira why she is ‘*not happy to be bearing life*’ and Mira’s response (CS 19) addresses one of the biggest problems that follow rape, and one of the biggest problems associated with Araldis procreative processes: ‘*I had no choice.*’ *Insignia* responds that biozoons do have a choice, but instead of referring to sexual or reproductive choice, it refers to the misrepresentations in its contract and the regret it feels regarding its choice to enter into a contract with the Cipriano family. *Insignia* rues a *choice* which led to a dissatisfying outcome, comparing a bad career move to rape. This shift in nuance from sexual agency to contractual agency indicates a grasp of the *concept* of choice, but shows *Insignia*’s incomplete understanding of the significance of Mira’s physical violation and lack of sexual and reproductive agency. This incident mirrors the manner in which men can find it difficult to fully understand the effects of male hegemony on female agency, as well as the way that women can find it difficult to understand that men too are victims of patriarchy.

Despite the deeply intimate aspects of their relationship, Mira and *Insignia* never fully understand each other's motivations and sensibilities. This lack of insight (based on both gender ignorance and cultural ignorance) leads to various conflicts, for example when *Insignia* takes offence (CS 54) and forcibly expels Mira from Primo. *Insignia*'s reaction to Mira's cultural ignorance is reminiscent of a lover withholding sexual intercourse, and casts Mira as the powerless party in the relationship.

These misunderstandings and the skewed power dynamic do not, however, diminish the trust between the Innate and the biozoon. When Mira runs from Rast's advances (CS 56), *Insignia* is very concerned and their momentary spat is forgotten. *Insignia*'s concern for Mira's needs and its wish to protect Mira make it necessary for Mira to put her flight from Rast in perspective by sharing her memories of rape with *Insignia*. She knows that her secret is safe with the biozoon based on a previous revelation that *Insignia* 'can directly communicate' only with Mira. Mira feels such a need to share her misery that she is willing to confide in *Insignia* in spite of the alien ship's previous inability to relate to 'humanesque' sex/gender or gender-related violations. *Insignia* is indeed puzzled: '*That appears to be an unnatural violation. But we are very different from you humanesques. Respect for each other is intrinsic in us*' (CS 58).

It is necessary for Mira to give *Insignia* a more detailed explanation of humanesque agency and reproduction. The conversation they have to that end is deeply intimate and touching, both for its content and for *Insignia*'s genuine attempts to understand Mira and relieve her distress. Mira tries to explain the cultural implications of the violation to *Insignia*: '*Among my kind it is accepted that a man will decide when he will be fertile. This occurs between marriage partners, though, and is not forced upon acquaintances*' (CS 58). Reminiscent of *The Rape of Sita*, a fictional representation of the difficulties involved

in overcoming the trauma of rape (Collen, 1993), Mira realises that sharing the incident brought no relief, that '[n]o peace came from reliving it; no amity' (CS 58). She cries and again rolls into a foetal position to 'relieve the ache' in her belly. *Insignia* remains quiet 'for some moments' before responding: '*And now you do not wish to be touched.*' The ship understands why Mira ran away from Rast, as this is a statement, not a question. While it does not relieve her pain, the exchange enables Mira to understand her own reactions better: 'I do not wish to be vulnerable' (CS 59).

Coming back to the question she had asked earlier about Mira being happy about the pregnancy, *Insignia* now, with new understanding of the complexity of the situation, asks '*What of the foetus? Do you care for it?*' The question is relevant, as women who fall pregnant from non-consensual sex do sometimes seek to terminate their pregnancies, something to which even anti-abortion advocates tend to be sympathetic. Research shows that up to 50% of adolescent girls who fall pregnant after rape choose to have an abortion (Holmes, Resnick, Kilpatrick and Best, 1996:322). Pregnancy caused by rape is seen according to law as a 'bodily injury' and, if perceived as such, a woman 'may justifiably heal herself of her injury by terminating the pregnancy' (Bridges, 2013:476). Mira herself wonders – would her baby be 'a Fedor or a Pellegrini'? The only answer she can afford *Insignia* is a whispered 'I do not know' (CS 59).

The rape and Mira's detailed reaction to it become central to the development of emotional intimacy between her and *Insignia*. Mira's rape is mirrored when Landhurst and his party forcefully board *Insignia*. Humanesques boarding her is not unusual, but in this case, *Insignia* informs Mira, '*they have forced one of my sphincters open*' (CS 106). *Insignia* is bleeding and even as her voice is fading she calls to Mira '*Don't leave me*'. In order to save *Insignia* and all aboard, Mira is forced to breach *Insignia*'s trust and privacy in a

gross and almost brutal way; overriding the biozoon's controls and forcing her into Autonomy. Even Landhurst, who is cutting into *Insignia*'s belly with chainsaws, refers to taking Autonomy as 'a cruel act' (CS 113). Despite their being different life forms, both Mira and *Insignia* are shown to be vulnerable to violation, which increases the closeness between them even more.

Deep intimacy on various levels, including the closeness of conflict, has now been established between Mira and *Insignia*. With the deepening level of intimacy between them, there comes a change in *Insignia*'s attitude toward Mira and, more specifically, toward Mira's baby. *Insignia* warns Mira against drinking wine, upon which Mira not only ignores the warning as if it had not been uttered but pours herself another glass. It seems reminiscent of a parent/child or an immature romantic relationship (CS 167). While the incident reflects Mira's conflicting feelings regarding the baby, it also shows her defiance in the face of *Insignia*'s assumed authority. *Insignia* seems oblivious to Mira's rebellion as it consequently instructs Mira to rest for the good of the baby (CS 239). The relationship between Mira and *Insignia* is increasingly representing a husband/wife relationship with *Insignia* fulfilling the role of dominant husband and Mira playing the wife.¹¹

There is constant conflict in the relationship from this point on, as *Insignia* increasingly displays traits that are stereotypically male. It is in control and it disregards Mira's feelings while implementing this control. Mira feels disempowered and is extremely upset when she finds out that *Insignia* has 'enhanced the length' of her sleep cycle and has 'nourished' her without her knowledge (CS 172). *Insignia* is acting out of parental concern for both Mira and the baby, saying '*It was for the best – for the baby*', but after the rape, and being denied a choice by Trin, Mira experiences it as an abjuration of her agency. The spats

¹¹ There are striking similarities between this depiction of a marital relationship and the relationship between a parent and child.

between *Insignia* and Mira never last long and they seem able to move on ‘automatically’ after a while (CS 178).

The level of trust and intimacy, and also the element of choice involved in *Insignia*’s relationship with Mira as her Innate, come to the fore when the biozoon’s contract expires and terms are renegotiated. *Insignia* puts before Mira the possibility of its expelling the bodies of all on board ‘into space’ if it should have no vested interest in keeping them alive. At Mira’s shocked reaction the biozoon pragmatically claims it to simply be ‘a possibility’, not necessarily a threat.

‘You are my Innate. But that does not prevent me making decisions that concern my well-being. My culture is not the same as yours. Humanesques make that mistake. One of their greatest failings is that they suppose other sentients to be and to think the same way’. (CS 242)

This utterance is not simply reflective of *Insignia*’s agency, but can be seen as a veiled warning against the misguided habit of patriarchy to judge all people to be the same and therefore subject to a stable gender binary. It also reminds the reader of the oft-voiced objection that second-wave feminism does not make allowances for different experiences of womanhood amongst different cultural and ethnic groups, thereby making itself irrelevant to them (hooks, 2000:9-10). The utterance further confirms the traditional state of marital relationships within the patriarchal system, which is being mirrored by Mira and *Insignia*. According to this tradition, the man is in charge and the woman, in vowing to ‘honour and obey’, loses her right to make decisions.

The marriage symbolism between Mira and *Insignia* is further underscored when, under threat of fire from Sophos Mianos, *Insignia* forces Mira to enter into a binding contract, similar to a marriage contract, which will last until either party dies. *Insignia* ‘rewards’

Mira for her agreement by spreading the ‘luscious warmth’ of ‘a cocktail of endorphins’ through Mira’s body. To make the contract truly binding, however, *Insignia* asks Mira to agree to leave her baby, once born, in the care of the biozoon (MS 199). Two things are of significance in this intimate incident (which culminates in a physical flood of pleasure similar to orgasm): *Insignia* obtains Mira’s agreement under duress; and *Insignia*, as an alien life form of unknown gender, is able to take care of Mira’s baby ‘more adequately’ than Mira herself. The implication is that Mira could, theoretically, be freed from the responsibility of taking care of the baby, which would free her to pursue her other goals. Various theorists such as Shulamith Firestone have wished to free women from the confining ‘burdens’ of childcare (1972:25). Also see Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels (2004:3-4) on this point.¹²

Mira falls into a deep depression after her rescue from the Bare World.¹³ She tries to explain her depression to *Insignia* by saying she is heartsick ‘beyond integrity’. *Insignia*, however, makes light of Mira’s plea for understanding:

Dramatics. My previous Innates had considerable inner strength. Perhaps it is a difference between your reproductive roles.

Mira couldn’t tell if *Insignia* was baiting her by suggesting she was not as mentally strong as her male ancestors – the biozoon didn’t understand the humanesques’ dual-sex evolution. *Insignia*’s species’ reproductive process was more elaborate and involved the participation of several of its kind. Yet the ‘zoon’s comment still stung her. Mira had travelled so far from the patriarchy of Araldis and with each world, each struggle, she’d shed the beliefs that she’d been born into. Her innate sense of equality had lain dormant on Araldis until her life had been threatened by Principe Franco. Now, her sense of entitlement grew with every passing moment. (MS 205)

¹² This issue is explored in more depth in Chapter Three and Chapter Four.

¹³ A semi-sentient world/planet inhabited by Extropists.

Insignia's comments are openly sexist but, jarring as they are, serve to accentuate the information provided directly thereafter, namely, a very direct exposition of Mira's development in terms of agency and self-belief in a patriarchal society. There is no dissimulation or innuendo: only a clear statement of Mira's (and thus de Pierres') truths concerning reproduction and agency. This overt comment on gender discrimination is confirmation that de Pierres purposefully first created, and then moved, Mira world by world away 'from the patriarchy of Araldis'. This passage is of key importance as it answers, in theory at least, the question posed by this study of whether the author is purposefully commenting on and subverting the gender status quo.

The relationship between Mira and *Insignia* remains reminiscent of a heteronormative human relationship. Mira resorts to sarcasm and *Insignia* uses silence 'as punishment'. Even after Mira apologises, *Insignia* remains 'stubbornly silent'. They act either like children or lovers (MS 273), and each behaves in a manner stereotypically associated with a specific gender. Lopez-Zafra and Garcia-Retamero explains how beliefs concerning gender stereotypes 'attribute specific characteristics to women and men' (2012:170).

While *Insignia* is intent on Mira's protection and survival, it has very little loyalty to or empathy with other humanesques. When telling Mira about Rast and Jo-Jo being left behind, trapped in Medium,¹⁴ it says '*I preferred to be without them*' (MS 276). This lack of empathy in the biozoon is further demonstrated when *Insignia* has to nurse Thales Berniere in Secondo Vein.¹⁵ It is 'annoyed' and Mira realises that *Insignia* does not 'welcome relationships with ordinary humanesques' (TS 39). It cares only for itself, her and her baby.

¹⁴ Medium is a gigantic, sentient Extropist space ship comprising a myriad alien beings acting as one.

¹⁵ Secondo Vein is the second pilot's seat on a biozoon. Biological interaction with the space ship can take place here, but it is more limited than Primo Vein.

In its focus on Mira and her baby's survival, *Insignia* shows the same lack of empathy toward Mira that it displays toward others. For a second time *Insignia* keeps Mira sedated to save her and the baby from further 'trauma'. Mira is angry, because she has expressed her feelings about that very clearly before, but *Insignia* simply says '*I am not beholden to you, Mira ... Our bond is my choice*'. Even when Mira protests that she is an equal partner in choice, *Insignia* is only willing to grant her a grudging '*Perhaps*' (MS 295). *Insignia* is acting more and more like a typical patriarchal husband, thus increasingly displaying traits that are associated with men. This reluctant granting of equal partnership is similar to Adrienne Rich's description of a husband who 'was willing to "help". But it was clearly understood that this "help" was an act of generosity' (1977:7).

While *Insignia* feels no compunction in overriding Mira's wishes, it insists on Mira's unflinching obedience to its demands. The biozoon is deeply angry with Mira for leaving the protection of the pod in order to address the OLOSS¹⁶ security summit. It feels that Mira is not only disregarding its wishes, but is also endangering their baby. *Insignia* appears manipulative, using 'concern' to coerce Mira to cooperate and resorting to masculine passive-aggressive behaviour (Hobfoll et al, 1994:51) when asking '*Are you able to make a decision as to where to go? Or is your mind impaired by your hormones?*' (TS 7). The biozoon's continuing stance of control and punishment is increasingly patriarchal and sexist in nature.

Much is made of *Insignia* being genderless or 'above' gender, but its behaviour in its relationship with its Innate definitely conforms more to masculine stereotypes than feminine ones. It is possible that de Pierres purposefully used the initial female form of address, 'Bella' (DS 412), and a feminine-sounding name, *Insignia*, in combination with

¹⁶ OLOSS – the Orion League for Sentient Species – a controlling agency involved in intergalactic governance.

these increasing traits of male agency, sexism and aggression to emphasise *Insignia's* androgynous personality. When Mira is concerned about her new-born baby's gender anomalies, *Insignia*, who has no designated sex or gender, says the anomalies are '[a]rbitrary and unimportant. Nova is healthy; that is all that matters' (TS 154). *Insignia's* attitude is based on an understanding it has of Nova's gender as explained to it telepathically by Nova herself. *Insignia* refers to Nova as 'she'. 'She? Mira wants to know. 'But you say she has no gender.' *Insignia's* response is telling. "'She" is a pronoun you seem comfortable with, and I'm happy to accommodate your need' (TS 155).

When people are faced with gender permutations that are alien to them, they tend to want to make them fit into what is known. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin, (1969) addresses this same human need for a sex/gender binary, but comes under criticism for using male pronouns for the genderless Gethenians instead of creating or using existing gender-neutral pronouns (Russ, 2007:215). Octavia Butler, contrary to Le Guin and de Pierres, chooses to use 'it' from the start to refer to the non-gendered Ooloi in *Lilith's Brood* (2000:49). In the same way that Mira initially referred to *Insignia* as 'she', she now refers to her genderless child as 'she'. In addition to wanting things to seem familiar and 'normal' there is a facelessness to 'it', which makes people want to avoid 'it' as a pronoun when referring to a person. Le Guin's essay 'Why is Gender Necessary? Redux' in *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction* (1993:161-169) provides an in-depth examination of the relationship between gender and pronouns.

While Mira and *Insignia's* gender performances up to this point are distinctively female and male, this does not remain static. Research shows that stereotypes are dynamic and 'readily encompass the complexity of change over time' (Diekman and Eagly, 2000:1186; Lopez-Zafra and Garcia-Retamero, 2012:170). The roles played by *Insignia* and Mira are

reversed when Mira tells the biozoon to return to Araldis. *Insignia* thinks it is a joke, but Mira has a very clear aim, which she articulates with enough agency to dominate the thus far dominating 'zoon. 'To take Wanton to its kind. To help the survivors. To find Djeserit and Vito and Cass Mulravey.' When *Insignia* balks, Mira invokes the agreement between them: 'We had an agreement. You will assist me to help those on Araldis, and then I will go where you wish' (TS 181). It is as if the responsibility of motherhood has changed the submissive female role Mira has been playing in relation to the more dominant male role depicted by *Insignia*.

From their initial meeting to the end of the series, the development of the intimate yet strife-filled relationship between Mira and *Insignia* reflects constantly on gender roles and on interpretations of sex and gender. Their story, which starts with distance and cultural misunderstanding, moves through a period where *Insignia* completely dominates Mira, and ends with Mira standing her ground and defying *Insignia*'s efforts to force her into a submissive role. The result leaves them both respecting and fulfilling a mutually agreed contract, thus placing them on a relatively equal footing in terms of agency and representation. De Pierres created and manipulated the intimacies between Mira and *Insignia* in order to comment on gender stereotypes and power roles in traditional, heterosexual marriages.

In spite of the high level of intimacy between Mira and *Insignia* as Innate and biozoon, Mira yearns for intimacy with her own kind, and on their arrival at Sclar she feels slightly sad when she sees Thales and Fariss together. It is 'not from jealousy, but envy. She hadn't experienced comfort in another's company since her sister Faja had died. Even *Insignia* and the nurturing of the Primo vein did not fill her need for humanesque intimacy' (TS 43). No matter how close Mira and *Insignia* are, Mira longs for a more familiar kind of

intimacy. Since it is addressed so directly by the author, examining Mira's intimate exchanges with people of her own kind is a logical next step.

Mira and Araldis society

In the same way as Mira and *Insignia*'s initial meeting reveals much about their future relationship, the Studium¹⁷ graduation ceremony serves to introduce Araldis society, and reveals it as a sycophantic patriarchal hierarchy full of hidden agendas and gender inequality. The public moment becomes an intimate one based on how Mira is publicly shunned, and her expectations of acceptance and recognition are irreparably shattered with the words: ““You *are* different,” Cochetta Silvio had drawled loudly enough for all ... to hear. “So somber, Baronessa. So *thin*”” (DS 8). The insults are tellingly not spoken by a man but by another female student. Much has been written about how patriarchy has led women to be enemies rather than uniting against male oppression. Even within the feminist movement, those who think differently are seen as ‘a dangerous threat’ (hooks, 2000:12). Similarly, Mira's failure to fit in is as much a threat to her female peers as it is to the male establishment.¹⁸

Cochetta uses the word ‘thin’ as an insult. There are characters of varied races and species in *The Sentients of Orion*, and so it is difficult to establish what the ‘ideal’ body type would be and why ‘thin’ is an insult. While depicting Mira as ‘thin’ could be playing to stereotypical female weakness, it could also be seen as a comment on the measure of control that she has been exercising in balancing the Innate ability, the social slights and the sexist curriculum at the Studium. Her outer thinness and her inner sombreness complement each other – she is the way she is because that is what her society has made

¹⁷ A Latino term for university or place of study.

¹⁸ Also see Alanna Callaway (2008:68).

her. De Pierres uses 'thin' in line with current theories of embodiment that hold slimness up as a measure of personal control (Bordo, 1993:164), portraying Mira as self-contained and disciplined (Foucault, 1995:135-169). Of course, in our present society, thinness, far from being an insult, is considered the ideal.

Up to the moment when Franco betrays her, Mira is aware of the snubs she receives from other minor royals during the graduation ceremony but her excitement at receiving the Pilot First qualification at the end of her graduation ceremony makes her immune to the taunts and deaf to the 'perfunctory applause' (DS 9). She is able to remain 'self-possessed' in spite of the taunts. Denying recognition is a form of interpersonal violence (Taylor, 2013:97) and, as such, an act of intimacy: 'disrespect', 'disregard', 'mean spiritedness', 'humiliation', 'violence' and 'bullying' are all manifestations of 'negative intimacy' (Ricci, 1994: no pagination; 1997:no pagination).

The reason Mira is snubbed by her fellow students at the Studium is her possession of the Innate gene, which is considered abnormal in a woman. Mira's possession of a special ability makes her 'Other' at the Studium, but her ability to embrace that which makes her different, namely, *union* with *Insignia*, relieves the pain that being outcast would normally bring. She knows that when she receives the award of Pilot First at the end of the ceremony, she will be recognised for what she is, and that '[t]hen she would be properly honoured ... and Cochetta Silvio and her brittle friends would dare not speak aloud their demeaning thoughts of her again' (DS 11). It is, however, doubtful that people who resent her (as a woman having the Innate gene) would suddenly come around once it is officially acknowledged that she possesses the special ability. It is more likely to confirm her otherness and to fuel the animosity that she has been experiencing.

Even the degree Mira receives, and for which she receives scant acknowledgement from her peers, is considered a ‘feminine degree’ (DS 11). Women are largely ‘underrepresented in both education and careers involving science, technology, engineering and mathematics’ (Martin 2012:3) and even when confronted with successful women mathematicians, ‘women and men held consistent implicit stereotypes that men are associated with math’ (Stout, Dasgupta, Hunsinger and McManus, 2011:256). De Pierres thus further implies the extent of sexism in the Studium. Reflective of current trends in Western higher education, where females are considered more suitable for ‘easy’ degrees in Humanities than in the ‘rational’ Sciences, girls on Araldis are only deemed able to study easy or ‘soft’ degrees – Mira does not receive the same ‘neural fact-augmentations’ as the male students, ‘being a woman who would never truly hold a position of importance’ (DS 284). She has to study at night and ‘secretly’ to master the arts of piloting, in spite of her possessing the Inborn right and ability to pilot biozoons.

While society is usually more concerned with interpersonal violence of a *physical* variety (Cvancara and Kinney, 2009:329), verbal violence can be more pernicious (Gortner, Gollan and Jacobson, 1997:337) and also more harmful in the long term (Ney, 1987:371). Verbal violence leads to the victim experiencing their social environs as antagonistic (Vangelisti, Maguire, Alexander and Clark, 2007:360–365), as well as to problems with commitment and closeness (Vangelisti, 2002:656-657). The rejection, or lack of recognition Mira undergoes at the hands of her peers plays a role in the formation of her character and may be instrumental in her very guarded and sombre demeanour, her thinness and the lack of intimate social relationships in her life.

The environs literally turn hostile when Franco Pellegrini announces on stage that the ‘Fedor birthright has come to an end with the Inborn gene falling to a woman’ (DS 12).

Suddenly Mira is not only deprived of official recognition of her abilities, but also of the redemption that would have been garnered by such recognition. Instead, she is publicly shunned and shamed for being a woman and stripped of her birthright by the patriarch. This act of hostility puts the spotlight glaringly on the previously implicit gender inequities of Araldis. Mira has no power in this situation. Her Innate gene cannot undo what Franco has declared. He is the law; she is a helpless woman in an environment that is suddenly more than just pettily maleficent; it is actively discriminating against her on the basis of her gender. Hate crimes against women (for no other reason than that they are women) are commonly perpetrated in current societies. Honour killings (Grewal, 2013:1-19), female genital mutilation (Masters et al, 1986:32), the recent mass sexual molestation in Cologne (Chambers, 2016:no pagination), the abduction of schoolgirls by Boko Haram (Peters, 2014:186-190) and sex slavery of Yazidi women by the Islamic State (Binetti, 2015:1) come to mind.

Just how far Mira has come from patriarchal Araldis (MS 205), and the reactions of different societies to strong women, is demonstrated much later when she is allowed to give witness before the OLOSS security summit about the geni carriers¹⁹ she has seen in Post-Species space. Not surprisingly, Sophos Mianos accuses her of having killed the royal family to steal their biozoon and Landhurst supports him by saying Mira is ‘not a reliable source’. After the Balol ambassador says ‘[t]he woman is a warrior ... Let her speak’ (MS 384), it is notably the aliens who protest the character assassination launched against Mira. There is a ‘ripple of objection’ at her imminent arrest (MS 386) led by the uuli and skieran²⁰ ambassadors. The uuli ambassador says they ‘wish the humanesque woman to speak’. The biozoon ambassador says ‘Baronessa Fedor should be heard’. After the

¹⁹ Extropist space ships designed for genetic warfare.

²⁰ Two alien species.

summit members, who are the most influential beings in OLOSS space, vote, it is announced that ‘Baronessa Fedor will be heard’ (MS 386). This incident indicates that not all societies silence strong women – a reprimand to both Araldis society and current society.

Mira and the men of the world

Initially, Mira is only exposed to upper class Latino²¹ society but the Saqr²² attack throws her into close contact with everyday people, both men and women. Some of these people are good, some less so. Many of these interactions are intimate and many of them are used by de Pierres to comment on gender representation. Mira’s initial encounters are mostly with men, and are mostly negative.

When Mira meets Jancz and Ilke, she is extremely vulnerable to them. They threaten her not only with exposure to the Carabinere²³ but also with physical harm. Even though Ilke, the female Balol, is probably much stronger than Jancz, it is the male humanesque who searches Mira. This highlights Mira’s physical vulnerability.

He leaped forward, pinning her down, and she felt his male urge swelling against her abdomen. For a long, terrifying moment she thought that he would abuse her. His ragged breath and grasping fingers told her that he was thinking about doing so. (DS 85)

The by-the-way manner in which Jancz first attacks her and then ‘rolled off her’ implies male control and the male prerogative. It is clear that he is in a position to ‘abuse her’ if he should wish to do so, that such abuse takes place as a matter of course, and that she has no

²¹ The ruling class of Araldis, very similar in language and customs to Latin/Mediterranean cultures.

²² A water-based alien species that invades Mira’s home planet of Araldis.

²³ The Araldis royal military police force in service of Principe Franco.

real defence other than her telepathic connection with the ship. There is the same implication of non-sexual physical violence when Jancz later pretends to cut Mira's hands off with a 'chopping movement' (DS 90). In Jancz's world, sadly similar to some current patriarchal societies, masculinity is hegemonic; men are entitled to threaten and women are only entitled to obey.

The non-Latino servant Mira meets when she is alone in the street after the attack on Vila Fedor reprises Jancz's sentiment, which shows it not to be the exception (DS 188). Mira lifts her hands 'in a supplicatory gesture', but her approach is met first with suspicion by the male servant, and then, after some 'sly' calculation on his part, with an implicit threat of sexual violence. Mira realises that 'he might rape her' (DS 188). Rape is a possibility and one that she, as a woman alone, is perfectly susceptible to. The fact that the man who threatens her is a servant exposes the fragility of the respect afforded Mira by her aristocratic status and her family ties; once alone, she is vulnerable to male violence like any other woman.

When Mira and her fellow fugitives find shelter with Loris and her husband, Con (DS 206), Con watches Mira with 'hard eyes' before he grabs and searches her. His intent is not sexual by nature, but he uses his masculinity to intimidate Mira with his rough touch as he grabs and searches her. Who is better off after this incident is debatable, as it is Mira who gets away with extra food, provisions for the baby and a pistol. Loris, however, is the one who has to stay behind with 'a fresh bruise' and trembling hands (DS 205). The violence (sexual and otherwise) that Mira escapes from will be borne by Loris. Helping Mira escape from Con is Loris's only form of protest.

Yet another man who does not have Mira's best interests at heart, and who would exploit a woman simply because he can, is Stationmaster Landhurst. His intent is not sexual; it is to steal *Insignia* from Mira. His intimidation techniques are threatening and intimate. Using Mira's gender against her, he casts doubt on her right to ownership (CS 102). He twists 'her words easily' and forces her to 'defend' Trin's decision to stay behind on Araldis and lead the survivors (CS 103). Even Landhurst, though, cannot resist the opportunity to give Mira 'a sly smile' and make a sexual joke about women fainting in his rooms, but not usually in his 'office'. His intention in the quip is to emphasise his position of power and to position Mira as a possible receiver of his sexual favours. In response, Mira remains focused on her short-term goals: she needs to get supplies and she needs to contact OLOSS. In order to achieve those goals she has to put up with Landhurst's innuendos and slights. Once he agrees to grant her those things, however, she stands up to him and shames him by saying compassion is not something she expected but 'decency will do'. Landhurst does have 'the grace to blush' (CS 105).

There is a constant and unmistakable undertone of threat and violence in all of the above encounters. Through the regularity of these incidences of intimidation, de Pierres is embedding the theme of women's vulnerability to men's violence, and the continued foreshadowing of sexual and other forms of violence ultimately culminates in Mira being raped by Trin at the end of *Dark Space*. The rape, however, will be discussed in detail along with Mira's relationship with Trin later in this chapter, since *he* is the one who actualises the hereto implied threat of sexual violence.

As if to avoid all random social meetings with men being depicted as threatening, one stranger comes to Mira's aid twice during the onslaught on the Carabinere compound (DS 231). First, the 'brawny filthy man' shouts at Mira that they would get her 'little 'un back'

and then, in the stampede, ‘the brawny man hauled her up on her feet’ before vanishing ‘in the crowd’. Her saviour is depicted as ‘brawny’, but no face or name is ascribed to him. This embodiment of masculinity reflects the gender expectations of strength and physical development placed on men by society.

Another man who breaks the mould of male hostility, and thus challenges stereotypes, is Kristo. While his relationship with Mira starts out as completely impersonal (DS 236), they grow closer through a series of events starting with him choosing to heed Mira’s input about the broken TerV.²⁴ He is able to put aside the preconceptions the other men seem to have about ‘aristo’²⁵ women, and he is willing to do that publicly, regardless of the ‘peer pressure’ from Innis. Even so, Mira places him in the same category as the other antagonistic, traditional men when his questions make her reflect on how little tolerance she has for *their* ‘ignorant bigotry’. A bigot he might be, but Kristo shows insight in recognising that Cass and Mira, though both women, are not the same. ‘All I know is you ain’t like Cass’ (DS 247). In discerning the difference between these two women, Kristo inadvertently addresses a major issue in feminist discourse. Beginning with Chandra Mohanti (1984:338), several feminist theorists of colour have taken issue with Western Feminism’s tendency to speak for all women. bell hooks is one of the most prominent critics accusing Western feminism of exclusivity and of encompassing only white, western women and their issues to the detriment and the silencing/marginalisation of women of other cultures (hooks, 2000:16). De Pierres also implicitly criticises Mira for her judgement of Kristo, using this incident to highlight the injustice of treating all men as bigots and oppressive misogynists without taking male individuality and agency into account.

²⁴ An all-terrain vehicle used for transport on the planet and also in space.

²⁵ A Latino term for aristocratic or royal.

During their nights of shared guard duty, the distance between Kristo and Mira is bridged to some measure. They talk about the people they have lost in the attack; Mira her sister and Kristo his mother, and while this is a shared intimacy, it stops there as Mira walks away, leaving Kristo 'to struggle with his grief. She had enough of her own' (DS 248). When his life is in danger a few days later, though, Mira risks herself to save him, thus reciprocating the closeness he has created by confiding in her. The situation shows a reversal of expected gender stereotyping, since the 'damsel in distress' is the one in need of saving in a stereotypical view of gender relationships, and not the other way around. Through this series of events, de Pierres presents the anti-stereotypical idea that men can also be vulnerable, both physically and emotionally. During the frantic escape from Ipo (DS 346) Kristo saves Mira from a certain death (DS 358). She reaches 'for him as if he were ... Insignia'. Kristo rescues her from physical death but Mira accepts the emotional lifeline as well: 'Mira felt immeasurably grateful to him, not simply because he had pulled her inside the barge but because she did not have to explain herself to him. At some level, despite their differences, he saw things as she did. She had not experienced that before' (DS 362). Based on shared experiences and gradual intimacy, Kristo of the plain features, the suspected bigot, becomes a friend to Baronessa Mira Fedor, which, as an intimacy in itself, is a comment on and a breach of both the class and the gender divisions in society.

The description of Kristo as having 'a broad face with flat, plain features' is not a particularly charitable one (DS 236). It does not set him apart from the other miners, farmers and mercenaries and creates an expectation of sullen machismo. After their shared experiences, though, he becomes the closest thing Mira has to a male friend. How Kristo transcends his appearance might be a reflection on making snap judgements based on

outward form. Unfortunately, his unflattering appearance is also reflective of the unimportant role he ends up playing.²⁶

In spite of their closeness, Kristo largely disappears from Mira's life and from the series. He makes a brief reappearance as 'one of Mulravey's men' (MS 19) and again when he overrides both Cass and Innis to support Trin's decision to move on (MS 216) and freely offers to help (MS 331). He appears again occasionally; usually as a foil to Innis's boorishness, as a protector of Trin's leadership (TS 140) and as defender of Mira Fedor's memory (TS 268). While Kristo is afforded more of a personality than the brawny stranger at the compound, he never develops into a fully rounded character, remaining on the periphery. He seems to serve merely as a figurehead for masculine reason and logic. The manner in which Kristo is simply written out of the story is definitely a weakness in de Pierres' storytelling, but, based on the importance of his early intimacy with Mira, it does not necessarily imply a weakness in her investigation of gender.²⁷

These random incidences of positive and negative intimacy with various members of society serve to establish the gender framework of Araldis. While there are good men, there are also bad men who would take advantage of a woman if given the opportunity. In the same manner, though, not all women are kind to other women, and while some, like Loris, would help Mira, others, like Cochetta, would demean and belittle her. Through this behavioural spectrum of the characters in *The Sentients of Orion*, de Pierres is not only undermining the idea of homogeneity in both men and women, but is seemingly

²⁶ In the symbolism of science fiction, Mira's previously commented-on beauty almost signals her central role in the text, while Kristo is almost doomed by his plainness to an insignificant role in the plot.

²⁷ See the concluding chapter of this thesis for a more in-depth discussion of inconsistencies and plot weakness.

commenting on the futility, if not impossibility, of generalising about gender-normative behaviour.

Mira and Trinder Pellegrini

So far, attention has been given to encounters of emotional and physical closeness, both negative and positive, between Mira and *Insignia*, as well as between Mira and random members of society. The relationship that Mira has with Trinder Pellegrini, the crown prince of Araldis, is different though. Trin is the first person with whom Mira has a sexually intimate encounter; the impact of this event reverberates through the whole *Sentients of Orion* series. As their relationship develops, it provides scope for nuanced comment on gender in Araldis with particular focus on agency and on inequality in procreation.

When they first have intimate contact, neither Trin nor Mira acts in ways that are expected from their respective genders in a society as conservative and patriarchal as Araldis. Mira breaks various taboos by joining Trinder unchaperoned, wearing only her bathing skins, allowing him to kiss her and, most importantly, by responding quite passionately to his kiss. Trinder, on the other hand, does not embrace this sexual opportunity in what could be considered a manly fashion. Perhaps he is intimidated by Mira's initiative, perhaps by her difference; in any case, he is unable to perform sexually as 'his ardour softens' (DS 31). He shoves her away and an opportunity is lost. Even their initial awkward teenage fumbblings and a kiss on a beach (DS 30) provide a clear instance of de Pierres directly addressing gender stereotypes through instances of physical intimacy.

Although Trin and Mira do not actually have sexual intercourse leading up to this, they are on the brink of it, and when things go wrong, both Mira and Trin are profoundly affected.

According to Laura M. Carpenter (2001:132) women seem to think of their virginity as a precious gift to a man while men think of their virginity as a liability. Mira's gift is rejected and Trin's liability multiplies beyond proportion after this incident.

In the tradition of many cultures, women who have lost their virginity are deemed to have lost their worth in terms of suitability for marriage. Bleeding at first intercourse often serves as 'proof' of virginity. Men, on the other hand, have no hymen and there can therefore be no 'proof' of their virginity or lack of it. Even if a man were known to have had intercourse previously, there would be no loss of worth either physically or culturally. These differences in how society views virginity based on gender not only create deep-seated inequality but also differences in how men and women perceive their first experience of intercourse (Tsui and Nicoladis, 2004:95).²⁸

Within the old-fashioned Araldis framework, Mira risks being branded immoral for being alone (and potentially having sexual intercourse) with Trin. She is wary, but she is enamoured of the young Principe, which, according to Lily Tsui and Elena Nicoladis (2004:102), is a typically feminine rationalising of risk by linking romance and being in love with first intercourse. Women tend to be more psychologically inclined towards an emotional connection between sex and love than men, and sexual intercourse therefore tends to serve the goal of emotional intimacy for them. In the light of conservative society's negative views on premarital sex, love is often the explanation or justification for participating in it outside of the moral bounds.

²⁸ Masters et al refer to 'neovirginity', a practice popular in 'modern Japan and Italy' whereby hymens are surgically reconstructed 'for those who wish to conceal their sexual histories from their future husbands' (1986:33).

Trin is unable to ‘prove his manhood’ by having sex, something that is ‘expected’ from men. That a woman is needed for him to prove himself is a topic of contention in itself, as it puts the woman in a passive and receptive role as opposed to the active virility of men, and strengthens the stereotype of innocent women and experienced, worldly men (Tsui and Nicoladis, 2004:96). Being saddled with the stigma of his inability haunts Trin as much as his rejection of her haunts Mira. His subsequent addiction to bravura,²⁹ along with the destructive effect of society’s expectations of men to always be ‘up for it’ and manly, will be referred to in more detail in Chapters Five and Six, as this also impacts on a number of other male characters.

The incident on Tourmaline Beach is pivotal to how the story unfolds. Mira ‘*rolled up onto her knees as if slapped but he could not tell her that she scared him – that women scared him*’. In an intimate situation that subverts several gender stereotypes, it is Trin’s holding on to stereotypical machismo and his inability to admit emotional vulnerability by confiding in Mira that significantly affect the way the rest of the narrative develops.

After this encounter on the beach, the next time Mira and Trin are alone together much has changed for them (DS 158), but they are both still affected by their previous encounter. Mira has turned from Innate apparent to a fugitive who is sleeping in her sister’s outbuildings and Trinder has turned from a proud, outwardly sexually confident prince to an exiled nobody who, having gone AWOL from the Carabinere compound, is creeping into a stranger’s outbuildings looking for an illicit sexual encounter with an underage alien girl.

²⁹ A virility-enhancing drug, similar to modern-day Viagra.

Mira wakes up in the dark, only classifying the intruder as a threat once she identifies his ‘odour’ as male (DS 158). This ties in with the image that keeps surfacing in the text – of men in general posing a threat to women. In *The Sentients of Orion*, de Pierres creates a world where a man entering a woman’s sleeping area at night, holds the probability of sexual violence being perpetrated. De Pierres is drawing attention to the status quo that makes women feel unsafe, even in their own space. Ann J. Cahill (2001:10) summarises this threat and how it influences women’s everyday lives:

The wrong that rape presents in contemporary society is not limited to ... the imposition of persistent fear on women ... It is not coincidence that many measures women take against the prospect of being raped involve the limitation of their mobility, and indeed, the rendering small of their bodies.

When the light reveals the intruder to be Trin, Mira’s reaction is complex. Fear remains ‘shrill ... in her voice’ (DS 172), but added to that there is ‘enough accusation in her tone for a lawmon³⁰ demanding a life sentence for a killer’ (DS 172). Trin’s rejection of her on Tourmaline Beach has hurt Mira deeply and in this moment of vulnerability the hurt spills over. For one, short moment, there is a chance of clarification and perhaps even reconciliation between Mira and Trin, but this moment passes when a ‘deafening explosion’ shakes the room and knocks them down together on the floor (DS 172). De Pierres uses the physical intimacy between the two characters to parody their emotional disconnection. Mira pushes away from Trin, as eager to escape from their physical proximity as she is to find out what caused the explosion.

During the attack on Villa Fedor, Mira calls out to Trin, but he ‘did not answer, nor did he come outside’ (DS 173). As much as Mira needed him on Tourmaline Beach to partner her

³⁰ A Latino term for lawyer.

in her first tentative explorations of sexual intimacy, she needs Trin now, yet his actions, or lack of action, reconfirm his inability to reciprocate or to address her need of him. Trin is consumed by the knowledge that his desertion of desk duty inadvertently led to the attacks. In answer to Mira's question about calling the Carabinere, he replies, 'I'm not there, so they cannot know'. Although Mira is unaware of the implications of what Trin is saying, this is the most honest moment yet between them.

For the first time, Trin acquiesces to the conditions of intimacy – he reveals a truth (even if veiled) that renders him vulnerable: because he deserted his station at the Carabinere call centre to meet Djes, they are now unable to contact the Carabinere for help. Trin's intimate revelation comes too late, though. Mira 'did not wait' to listen, or to appreciate the confidence. Trin fails Mira, but Mira fails Trin in not responding to his belated attempt at creating intimacy. The third chance for these two characters to connect passes unrequited amidst the sound of explosions, enabling de Pierres to make a powerful statement about the harmful effects that insufficient communication has on intimacy and close relationships between men and women.

Once the possibility of reconciliation with Mira is gone, Trin is, ironically, the one who leads her away from danger 'as if she were blind' (DS 183). When she comes to her senses, though, Mira violently rejects this closeness, asking Trin to 'please go' (DS 185). Trin responds to Mira's rejection by resorting to an old pattern – he calls her a misfit. He directly follows this act of negative intimacy by declaring that '[t]his is not the time for dispute', making it seem as if Mira (for causing him to call her names), and not *he* (who actually did the name calling), is at fault. Mira's nods seem to indicate that the jibe at her otherness hits home and that she is submitting (in typically female, 'communal' fashion) to his display of 'agentic' male leadership. According to Lopez-Zafra and Garcia-Retamero,

‘more agentic characteristics (such as self-assertion and dominance)’ are stereotypically ascribed to men, while the more ‘communal characteristics’ (e.g. supportiveness and kindness) are expected of women (2012:170).

This submission is temporary, however, because Mira again bursts out in anger after what she refers to as her ‘moment of complicity’ (DS 187). Trin’s response to her calling him a liar is to slap her face ‘with deliberate force’. A woman who shows a bit of resistance can be controlled by psychological violence such as insults and blaming, but a woman who openly defies a man apparently warrants physical violence. This incident demonstrates how easily psychological violence can lead to physical violence (Crowell and Burgess, 1996:16).

Trin’s slapping her is not a proportionate response to Mira’s verbal attack. While the ‘honour system’ of the Latino race does not allow for a man to be called a liar, I believe it is simply a question of Trin being able to get away with it. His masculinity is under threat – he knows Mira has no recourse (as a woman and a fugitive with no family) and that she is not in a position to reciprocate the violence physically.

Crying, Mira leaves the building and the only thing that makes her return to Trin (and thus accept the violence he meted out) is the threat of even greater violence at the hands of the armed man she meets outside. She has little choice: ‘If she ran he might kill her; if she went inside he might rape her. Her imprudent rage at Trin Pellegrini had brought her to this’ (DS 188). De Pierres’ depiction of this scenario is in accordance with and thus a comment on reality, as in situations of intimate partner violence, female partners often blame themselves for the violence (Campbell, Dworkin and Cabral, 2009:234; Hjort Nielsen, Hansen and Elklit, 2014:1187; Cahill, 2001:127), and they often stay with the

perpetrator to protect themselves from worse situations because of a lack of social support or economic means (Connell, 1987:11; Waldrop and Resick, 2004:296; Cahill 2001:124).

As is often the case with women unable to leave their abusers, the violence escalates further (Crowell and Burgess, 1996:16). Trin abandons Mira yet again by fleeing the Carabinieri compound without her (DS 268) and much later, when the two are reunited in the Pablo Mines, he has already made up his mind to ‘sire’ a child with her as the only way to continue the royal Cipriano line.³¹ Mira is completely oblivious to Trin’s procreative intentions and only tries to run away because she still thinks he is trying to force her to take *Insignia* to OLOSS (DS 381). When Trin orders Seb and Vespa Malocchi to hold her, Mira realises that there is more to his actions than just getting her to leave Araldis. ‘What is this, Trinder? ... What else do you want? What does that dogged face you present to me mean?’ Trinder shows ‘one last moment’ of hesitation before revealing his intention to ‘make a bambino’ (DS 381-382).³² He begins ‘the silent release mantra that would trigger his fertility’ and while his friends hold her down, he forces her ‘robe open and himself inside her’ (DS 382).

The rape falls outside of Susan Brownmiller’s description of rape as ‘a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear’ (Brownmiller, 1975:15). It is a rape of practical intent to preserve the royal line, but even so, it remains a complete violation of Mira’s agency and reinforces the utter lack of communication and understanding between Mira and Trin. De Pierres again emphasises the possible escalation of intimate-partner violence: a slur becomes a slap and ends in rape.

³¹ The royal line, which has the Pellegrini family as rulers.

³² A Latino term meaning ‘baby’. Also contracted as ‘bino’.

In *Rethinking Rape* (2001), Cahill considers the two main schools of thought regarding rape – Susan Brownmiller’s assertion that rape is ultimately a non-sexual act of violence and power; and Catharine MacKinnon’s counter theory that rape is simply an extension of compulsory heterosexual sexuality in a system that renders women inferior and without sexual agency. Cahill (2001:3) provides a succinct summary of the two positions: one argues that ‘rape was violent and therefore not sexual’ and the other that ‘rape was violent precisely due to its (hetero)sexual content and meaning’. Having sexual intercourse is interchangeably referred to as being sexually intimate, which would enable us to understand rape as the ultimate form of negative intimacy whether interpreted as an act of violence or as a sexual act.

Cahill rejects both schools of thought, pleading for rape to be reconsidered as ‘a pervasive, sustained, and repetitive, but not ultimately defining, element of the development of women’s experience’ (2001:5). She places the body as central to the identities of women and thus pleads for rape to be approached ‘as a crime not limited to an assault on a woman’s sexuality, but as an assault on various but fundamental aspects of her embodied selfhood’. This approach includes both violence and sexuality in the nature of rape, positing that ‘the particular violence of rape is sexual, and that the sexuality inherent in it is violent’ (2001:8).

Through Mira’s failure to run away and her incomprehension of what is about to happen to her, de Pierres subscribes to Cahill’s theory that women, even under threat of violence, ‘can remain mired in social expectations of feminine kindness, passivity, and fragility’ (2001:200). Cahill argues that these expectations, along with the imbedded instinct ‘not to fight back, not to resist, not to have faith in one’s bodily strength’ make women easy targets (2001:201).

The fact that the rape is (to Trin) a necessity for the survival of their line, not one of power or of sexual intimidation, does not affect Mira's reaction to it.

Mira's thoughts circled to Trinder Pellegrini, his breath suffocating hers, and his brutal thrusts. His men with their hands bruising her shoulders. She rolled to her side and brought her knees up under her breast. (CS 19)

This is a conscious echo of Mira's reaction on Tourmaline Beach when Trin initially rejected her sexual advances and she also rolls onto her knees (DS 30). Now, however, she is completely traumatised by the violation, regardless of the motivation or possible justification for it. She experiences 'inner misery' (CS 54).

And the misery made her angry. How could she allow Trin Pellegrini's act of violence to defeat her when so many Cipriano women had suffered as she had? *They* had not died inside from it. *They* had not been rendered impotent with resentment. *They* had accepted and moved through it. Yet while the memory of hard male fingers on her body remained, Mira was caught on a pendulum of emotions. (CS 54)

Women who are raped or exposed to intimate partner violence or domestic violence may feel anger and shame at themselves, both for having been raped and for their inadequacy in dealing with the emotional fallout (Campbell et al, 2009:234; Hjort Nielsen et al, 2014:1178). In her depiction of the rape as being motivated by neither violence nor sexuality, yet containing both, de Pierres confirms that regardless of the motive, rape is a crime against the person of a woman, with grave physical and psychological results.

The lack of agency in having intercourse and in falling pregnant is a thread woven throughout the gender landscape of *The Sentients of Orion*. Trinder's initial inability to deal with sexual intimacy might be a foreshadowing of the inadequacy he feels as the perpetrator of such inequality. While the rape has a massive impact on Mira, both physically and emotionally, their whole relationship is nuanced by Trin's initial rejection

of her as a young girl, by the rape and by the stereotypical gender roles they perform in relation to each other thereafter, whether by choice or by compulsion.

Conclusion

This initial chapter, which presents Mira's intimacies with *Insignia*, with society at large and with Trin, reveals a definite focus on gender: *Insignia* helps Mira to come to terms with gender scenarios that are different from those she is accustomed to and to regain agency in their symbolic husband/wife relationship. De Pierres further uses Mira's intimacies with society at large to reflect on several gender trends, in some cases by highlighting stereotypes and in other cases by discarding them. The manner in which de Pierres uses the increasingly negative intimacy between Mira and Trin allows for an examination of gender as performative, and the damage societal gender expectations can cause to both men and women.³³ The constant undertone of sexual violence culminates when Trin, the most obvious representative of male oppression and patriarchy, rapes and impregnates Mira. De Pierres uses these intimacies, both positive and negative, to shape Mira's understanding and performance of gender. De Pierres's exploration of gender performativity in this chapter is more profound than one might have expected from space opera.

³³ De Pierre changes the fairy tale as Mira's Cinderella eventually achieves her transformation without, or despite of, the input of Trin's Prince Charming.

Chapter Three: Motherhood for Mira

There are times ... when I envy the barren woman who has the luxury of her regrets but lives a life of privacy and freedom.

Adrienne Rich (1977:1)

Introduction

Becoming a mother has an indelible influence on a woman's life and, as a result, motherhood is often the focus of feminist studies.¹ Deborah R. Rogers posits that since *all* women, even women who are not mothers themselves, are daughters, '[t]he mother-daughter connection at the core of female development marks women psychologically, physically, and spiritually' (2007:3). As a result of arguments like that of Firestone (1972:25) which are quite radically against the burden that motherhood and pregnancy places on women, feminists are often perceived as the enemy of motherhood, but in *Mommy Myth*, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2004:30) argue that those very feminists 'were the ones who tried to make motherhood less onerous, less lonely, less costly to women'. These contrasting views bear witness to the contested nature of motherhood among feminists.

There are several mothers in *The Sentients of Orion*, but how their being mothers influences their choices and their gender performances will be addressed in detail in Chapter Four. Instead, the current chapter will focus on how de Pierres poses a challenge to the status quo through the intimacies surrounding Mira's motherhood and mothering. While the intimacies she shares with *Insignia*, with society and with Trin are of huge importance to who Mira becomes as a person, and to the gender roles she performs, her

¹ The capacity to become a mother is one of the key biological facts that differentiate women from men and is therefore one of the key signifiers of sexual difference.

most defining characteristic throughout *The Sentients of Orion* is motherhood.² Before analysing specific incidences of intimacy involving Mira as mother, three aspects of motherhood itself will be addressed: the relationship between mothers and daughters; the idea of motherhood as a social construct; and the history of motherhood in science fiction.

Motherhood

There is irony in Mira's constant urge to mother, as her own mother is mentioned (briefly) only twice in the series (DS 40; DS 153). Feminist psychoanalysis states that individuals first seek recognition from their mother (Taylor, 2013:97), but Mira's primary caregivers, those who 'mothered' her, were her sister and other women. In her absence, Mira and Faja's mother is most prominent in her daughters' efforts to overthrow the injustices of the system to which she subscribed; particularly the control that the patriarchal system afforded men over the procreative process. This ties in with the theory of matrophobia expounded by Rogers (2007:6), who says that, contrary to overt matricidal notions, '[f]or some women ... a phobic response to the maternal body may be a reaction to the possibility of repeating a passive, dependent existence'.

Mira is depicted as having a strong sense of mothering, but as demonstrated by Rich (1977) in *Of Woman Born* and Douglas and Michaels (2004) in *The Mommy Myth*, there is no such thing as an innate mothering instinct. The insights of Rich and Douglas and Michaels have greatly influenced my views of the concept of motherhood as a social and discursive construct and not something innate. Mira's strong urge to mother thus begs examination. It could, in accordance with theories of matrophobia, be based on a need to be different from her own, absent mother (Rogers, 2007:7). Possibly her lack of a

² This is reminiscent of Butler's Lilith, who, along with her race, is defined by her status as mother (2000).

nurturing mother, and the resulting lack of recognition, compounded by the lack of recognition from her peers at the Studium and from the male Aristos give rise to Mira's strongly depicted maternal emotions. In view of the overt gender commentary revealed thus far, the continuous and deliberate casting of Mira as mother warrants further scrutiny. In addition to the above considerations, de Pierres' use of motherhood and childcare as deciding aspects of her main character takes place within a specific context, namely, the science fiction genre within which depictions of motherhood and family life and its implications for gender representation, along with critique of such depictions, have long been a focal point. While some feminists have called for women to be freed altogether from the limits of mothering (Firestone, 1972:25), others have complained about a lack of addressing these issues in feminist science fiction. Many feminist science fiction texts that address gender have simply not given attention to who would raise the children. According to Russ (2007:25):

What is most striking about these stories is what they leave out: the characters' personal and erotic relations are not described; child bearing arrangements are never described; and the women who appear in these stories are either young and childless or middle aged, with their children safely grown up. That is, the real problems of a society without gender-role differentiation are not faced.³

De Pierres structuring of her main character and the plot implicitly responds to Russ's remark, by a particular focus on the physical and emotional impact of children on women's everyday lives. Further on in this chapter, it will become clear that Mira experiences her pregnancy as onerous, albeit not to the same extreme as Firestone theorizes. Firestone has been very influential in terms of the feminist struggle for freedom from biological shackles (1972:25). The general theme of motherhood is woven

³ This criticism of omitting child-rearing was levelled at Ursula le Guin after her attempt at androgyny in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969).

throughout *The Sentients of Orion* with the same ‘advocacy’ of motherhood that is found in the work of Octavia Butler (Allison, 1990:471).⁴

During and after the attack on Araldis, Mira becomes mother to a diverse group of children. Her sole motivation throughout *The Sentients of Orion* is rescuing her children and, by extension, her planet from the Saqr. Her actions, from when she is first forced onto a spaceship by Trin, are mostly determined by that which would bring her closer to saving these children. The close relationships and intimate encounters between Mira and a number of humanesque orphans, in particular Vito and Vani; the alien korm child (who is never assigned a name or a gender); Djes, a half-alien girl child; and Mira’s biological child, Nova, will now be examined in turn to reveal how de Pierres continues to inflect instances of physical and emotional intimacy with gender commentary.

Mira as foster mother

Several orphaned children are saved after the attack on Villa Fedor, and once Mira regains her equilibrium, she becomes mother to all of them to differing degrees. As if in response to the criticism that science fiction does not focus on the details of child-rearing (Russ, 2007:211), these details are woven deeply into the story of *The Sentients of Orion*. The descriptions even include the baby’s thighs being ‘raw from urine scalds’ (DS 191), the ‘smell of his excretions’ on Mira’s fingers, which she had nowhere to wash off (DS 194), Mira diluting milk for the baby and her devising a way to carry him in ‘the outer layer of her fellala’⁵ to free her hands in order to ‘move quickly if she had to’ (DS 192). De Pierres ensures that no detail of caregiving is left out, thus highlighting the taxing and continuous

⁴ See Octavia Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood* (2000), which includes *Dawn* (1-248), *Adulthood Rites* (252-517) and *Imago* (519-745).

⁵ A loose over-garment worn by the women of Araldis, reminiscent of the Arabic abaya.

nature of childcare, and the limitations it places on women, as they are the group who frequently default into the role of mothers and caregivers.⁶

The contrast between men's and women's differing approaches to needy children is demonstrated when Mira, a woman, is drawn to the 'bino⁷ and forms an intimate bond, shaping her actions to accommodate its needs. Trin, on the other hand, has no involvement, physically or emotionally, with any of the ragazzo, and clicks his male tongue 'with impatience' when Mira points out the child's needs. Con, the man who shelters them after their escape from Villa Fedor (DS 202), does show some involvement with his daughter as he pulls 'the ragazza close to his side'. He does it with his gun in the other hand, though. The girl will be nurtured and protected, but she will not be allowed to hinder his actions. This aspect of the novels sheds light on how taking care of children impacts on both men and women's choices and on the measure of physical and emotional involvement of characters of different genders in child-rearing. Taking full-time care of children limits the caretaker's options and de Pierres sets out to demonstrate this aspect of gender inequality in detail throughout the story. Mira, as young adult, of course, loses the last of her relatives during the attack, and becomes an orphaned ragazzo herself, making the theme of childcare poignantly relevant.

One bambino in particular, Vito, becomes the focus of Mira's mothering efforts. While initially Mira cares for Vito (DS 191) because of 'a stab of guilt', she soon adopts him as her own. Vito is an alien Pagoin,⁸ like Istelle, and he shares Istelle's 'long, thin limbs'. His thinness makes him seem more like Mira's biological child than the other orphans she takes under her wing. His thinness also makes him an outcast in a society that mistrusts

⁶ This could again lead to an essentialist view of women as being inherently caring and nurturing.

⁷ A Latino term for a baby is 'bino, while children and youths are referred to as ragazzo or ragazza.

⁸ An alien species.

slimness as a physical trait, which is another link to Mira. These physical similarities might be what draws Mira to Vito, but their connection is strengthened by the ragazzo being Mira's last link to *her* mothers, Faja and Istelle.

Mira is further bound to Vito by the guilt she feels at having an 'escape fantasy' of 'losing' Trin, Djes, the korm and Vito in the crowd outside the Carabinieri compound (DS 220). At first the thought of walking away alleviates 'the weight of Mira's misery' but then:

A stab of pain that had nothing to do with starvation pierced her belly. There was no escape for her. She was trapped here with the rest, waiting. Faja had died here. Vito, the korm and Djeserit were her last connection with her sorella – she could not abandon them in the way that Trin Pellegrini had abandoned her. *No*.

The manner in which motherhood is structured under the patriarchal system, even in the post-feminist era where it is referred to as 'new momism'⁹ by Douglas and Michaels (2004:4-5),¹⁰ leads to mothers being isolated and overwhelmed. No matter how intimately bound they are to their children, mothers often feel trapped by the unending responsibility and unattainable social expectations of motherhood. This cycle of feeling trapped (even to the point of considering infanticide) and the subsequent guilt experienced by mothers are discussed by Rich (1977:xvii) and Douglas and Michaels (2004:13,25) as part of what keeps women in positions of powerlessness and inferiority to men. De Pierres thus uses the intimacy between Mira and her adopted children to address a very important aspect of

⁹ According to Douglas and Michaels (2004:4), 'new momism' is 'a highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet'.

¹⁰ Further described as 'a set of ideals, norms and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach' (Douglas and Michaels, 2004:4-5).

gender inequality, and Mira's fantasies about escaping from the responsibility are representative of what many mothers feel.

When describing Vito, de Pierres applies slimness in the same manner as she does with Mira. The fact that thinness is seen as a negative attribute is a comment on societal notions of normative bodies. In baby Vito's case, however, his thinness cannot be a symbol of his self-control, as it is with Mira. It is rather a symbol of his vulnerability to social cruelty, of his rejection (as an orphan and moreover a thin orphan) by that society and of the lack of control from which he has suffered during the attacks on Villa Fedor and the subsequent deaths of his stand-in mothers. If no 'mothers' step in to take care of orphans, they might die of starvation. Through Vito and his 'long, thin limbs', de Pierres conjures up the divestiture of a society without mothers (DS 191).

Vito is dehydrated. He is short not only on hydration, but also on nurturing. His physical state, his 'raw' thighs, 'loose' skin and 'slightly shrunken' crown are all indicative of the state of deprivation Vito finds himself in as a child who has lost first his mother and then two adoptive mothers. This finds resonance as 'Mira glimpsed her own fragility mirrored in his' (DS 191). Vito might only be a bambino, but de Pierres purposefully juxtaposes his male vulnerability with Mira's by specifically giving prominence to his maleness. 'Though its genitals were partially internal', Mira guesses 'it to be a ragazzo'. Before a gender is 'guessed' by Mira; Vito is referred to, even by Mira, as 'it'. Once sex has been established based on genitalia, the pronoun changes to 'him', in line with modern-day practices (Ceccarelli, 1997:141).

Much ado has been made about gender-related pronoun use in general (Martyna, 1980; Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 2001), as well as specifically in science fiction

(Mandala, 2010; Armitt, 1990). As discussed in earlier chapters, Le Guin came under sharp criticism from feminists such as Russ (2007:215), who felt she could have invented a neutral pronoun for her gender-neutral characters in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Le Guin, 1969). De Pierres' very obvious shift from neutral to male pronoun here might be a conscious nod by the author to this aspect of the history of the genre.

Another orphan rescued from Villa Fedor is the korm, a furry, bird-like alien child. Unlike Vito, the korm is never assigned a gender and is referred to as 'it' throughout the series. It is alien in every respect and its alien nature seems to exempt it from even being assigned a 'comfortable' gendered pronoun, unlike Vito, Nova and *Isignia*. The korm does not speak, it 'chitters' and in near animal fashion, dips its 'crest for a scratch'. Mira initially trembles when touching the korm, as 'she had never exchanged affection with an alien before' (DS 200). As the story unfolds, though, Mira becomes closer to the korm, starting with an uninhibited touch (DS 232). The korm seeks to establish intimacy with Mira in spite of being completely different from her. This seems to indicate that a child of any gender, race or species will be attracted to nurturing and de Pierres implies that kindness can overcome strangeness in the establishment of intimacy.

It is difficult for Mira to forge intimate relationships, not only with the korm, but even with Vito, who resembles her closely on a biological level. When Loris asks her about the name of the 'bino (DS 204), Mira admits to herself that she had not thought to name him because '[d]oing that would make him closer, more hers'. When she does name the child, she chooses Vito, the name of her father. Vito sounds like *vita*, which means life, but according to Latdict (n.d.), *vito* in fact means 'to shun' or 'to evade'. The etymological ambiguity here implies that, even while embracing intimacy, Mira is rejecting it. This could be a possible indication of reluctant motherhood, and a comment on the gender

inequalities inadvertently brought about by caring for children. On the other hand, it could be that Mira is not rejecting the responsibility, but her earlier disappointment with intimacy with Trin or even the traumatic turn of events that has brought Vito into her care.

Mira chooses to embrace both the intimacy and the responsibility as Vito's solemnity touches her heart: 'He gave a tiny cry of recognition and she slipped a finger in his mouth for comfort' (DS 204). Both Mira and Vito perform what is required of them to establish an intimate bond. The successful forging of such a bond is exemplified when Mira tries to imagine a future Vito and 'her heart ached for that young man' (DS 289). De Pierres significantly depicts Mira's first positive relationship that is not with a woman as being with an infant instead of with an adult male. Baby Vito symbolises men as innocent of any patriarchal or political agenda, cautioning against uniformly judging men as oppressors.

Apart from the korm and Vito, Mira comes to the aid of another ragazzo, Vani, who is not from Villa Fedor (DS 196). He is cornered by some armed humanesques while raiding a fridge with Mira. Mira, standing in the shadow, does not step forward when they take Vani's food. She does not intervene when they beat Vani. It is when they grab him and bend him over, 'making obscene gestures' that she, shocked by the sexual 'crudity', steps in. Mira's increased sympathy and subsequent intervention in Vani's oppression might be based on her having experienced sexual abuse herself.

Even when she later leads Vani 'by the hand', Mira can feel 'stiff suspicion' in him. As an orphaned, homeless child, he is vulnerable to exploitation by both men and women and he does not interpret her being a woman, or her rescue of him, as vindicating factors. The lack of trust precludes any true intimacy between them, and deprives Vani of the possible future protection Mira could provide. Children who flee war or conflict are often exposed

to sexual abuse (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1995: no pagination), and perhaps based on a stereotypical perception of physical vulnerability or likely victimhood, people assume that abuse is more prevalent among girls (Child Family Community Australia, 2013: no pagination). Homeless boys, in particular, are at risk from sexual violence or sodomy perpetrated by males (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2002: no pagination). In this relationship, devoid of intimacy and trust, de Pierres shows the depth of the resulting loss, regardless of gender, that accompanies extreme deprivation of emotional and physical closeness. It further poses a challenge to the stereotypical ideas that all sexual violence is aimed at women, and that men cannot be victims. The incident also emphasises intimacy as ‘chosen’. Merely rescuing Vani does not lead to the establishment of intimacy, as he does not wish to trust Mira. Vito, Djes and the korm are different because of the relationship of trust they choose to form with her.

Djes, the half-breed alien girl saved by Mira from Villa Fedor, briefly serves as a surrogate daughter to Mira (DS 172-176), but also steps into a mothering role, taking care of Mira (DS 184-185). After Mira fails (in what could be seen as a motherly duty) to warn Djes against Trin’s predatory nature (DS 157), her role as surrogate mother to Djes mostly involves reuniting Djes with her own mother, Bethany, something Mira does as penance for not warning Djes away from Trin (DS 218), but also because of her empathy with Beth as a mother separated from her child.

After returning from Scholar and escaping from Medium with Jo-Jo, Mira returns to save her adopted children and the other humanesque survivors from the islands on Araldis. She is under the mistaken impression that Vito, her adopted ragazzo, is dead. When she finds him to be alive, she is distressed at how little he weighs and that he does not ‘seem to know her’ (TS 365). The korm comes ‘jostling’ toward her and Mira’s tears ‘sprang freely

to her eyes'. Vito also recognises her and the long-awaited reunion is complete when Djes, '[t]he young girl she had rescued from the ruins of Villa Fedor', is 'in her arms ... clinging to her with relief and disbelief' (TS 367). All her efforts since leaving them have been to reunite with the ragazzo and Mira's joy at seeing them again is not in the slightest diminished by the fact that she has become a biological mother since last seeing them. Once they are safely back on *Insignia*, and Mira is with both Vito and Nova, '[s]he held them close, inhaling their scent and revelling in the touch of their skin. She could not remember ever feeling such aching joy. She would not leave her baby, or Vito again. Ever' (TS 376).

These images are in distinct contrast to the mid-twentieth-century belief that, for women, 'achievement and autonomy were simply incompatible with love and family' (Harvey, 1993). Mira is a mother *and* she saves the universe, through more than 'mending her slip' (Yaszek, 2008). While this seems a satisfyingly feminist approach to mothering and caregiving, it could, however, be argued that the image of motherhood de Pierres presents here subscribes to the unreasonable expectations set by 'new momism' (Douglas and Michaels, 2004:4-5).

Mira as biological mother

For much of the first part of *The Sentients of Orion*, Mira's motherhood is related to her adopted children. After Trin rapes her and she escapes from Araldis, leaving her adopted orphans behind, Mira finds herself pregnant with a child who is biologically hers. In this intimate situation there are clear allusions to Octavia Butler's Lilith, a strong mother figure in feminist science fiction (Allison, 1990:471). Mira's pregnancy, like Lilith's, is notably not one of her own choosing (Butler, 2000:246). For both women, however, unsolicited

pregnancy turns into a source of strength, allowing them to ensure the continuation of their respective races.

Mira examines herself in the mirror aboard *Insignia* (CS 170) and she looks ‘vastly different’ from the person she used to be: ‘This person was thinner and had lost much of her vibrant crimson colouring. As with Rast, there were exhaustion shadows under her eyes and her skin had developed a waxen texture.’ Mira’s thinness, which sets her apart from others, is even more evident than it initially was, as if her rape and pregnancy have driven her even deeper into herself, clinging more tightly to the control she needs in order to cope with her trauma.

Mira is ‘taking care’ to hide her pregnancy even from those people with whom she has intimate relationships. Her reluctance to have it become public involves two questions: ‘How would the men react?’ and, referring to social prejudices against rape and single motherhood: ‘[h]ow would she explain it?’ (CS 323).

No. For the moment she would keep her secret close. Time enough for Thales Berniere to be appalled. For Rast to sneer. For Josef Rasterovich to lose his fascination with her. An unwed woman with child was a burden and an ill omen across most cultures and species. A woman who had been raped was worse. (CS 324)

The societal stigma and victim shaming attached to rape is spotlighted by de Pierres in Mira’s attitude to her pregnancy. She is experiencing feelings of guilt and stress about having to provide ‘explanations’. The explanation is simple – she was forced to have intercourse by a man who subsequently impregnated her. In modern-day reality, as in the society of Araldis, however, the woman is often ‘to blame’ and subjected to a deep sense of shame (Campbell et al, 2009:234; Hjort Nielsen et al, 2014:1178).

In spite of Mira's misgivings, the people she cares about do not react to her rape and pregnancy the way she thinks they will. Rast Randall, the first humanesque Mira confides in (CS 329), does not react the way Mira thought she would.

‘Women get raped,’ said Rast harshly, her pale skin flushed with emotion. ‘Sometimes in war, sometimes just for the hell of it. That’s what happens.’ She gripped Mira’s wrist and pulled her close. Then she hugged her tightly for a long moment. (CS 329)

Joseph Rasterovich is the first of the men to notice Mira’s belly, ‘unnaturally round on her slim frame’ (CS 337). His ‘heart’ contracts when he sees it and he thinks ‘*No. Surely not ...*’ It does not, however, diminish his admiration for Mira, so he too does not react to her pregnancy in the way Mira thought he would. Contrary to the rejection and scorn Mira expects, she is met with support and compassion. De Pierres uses the intimacy between Mira and Rast and Jo-Jo respectively, to challenge the stereotypical prejudices held by both men and women about rape and pregnancy out of heterosexual wedlock.

Mira’s pregnancy affects her relationships with other people, but it also affects her body. Even from the womb, the unborn baby plays an active role in Mira’s survival, and thus in the establishment of an intimate bond between them. In the Bare World,¹¹ Mira is saved by the kicks of her unborn child moving ‘frantically’ inside her (MS 103). Mira speaks to her unborn child in the same way she does to *Insignia*; in her mind: ‘*I’m not sure how you helped me but I know that you did. What manner of person are you to exert such force of will from the womb?*’ (MS 105). In spite of the baby not responding, Mira feels ‘the beginnings of attachment’. This early bonding between Mira and her child mirrors that

¹¹ An artificial world created by the Extropists.

used by Octavia Butler to depict in-womb bonding between Lilith and her child, Akin (Butler, 2000:254).¹²

Even while they are bonding, the baby is hindering Mira in her escape. Mira being hampered by pregnancy fatigue (MS 149) in trying to escape near-certain death is a strong acknowledgement of this inequality brought about by sex. Men do not bear children and men's bodies are not hindered by the toll of pregnancy. When *Insignia* finds Mira in the Bare World and informs her Innate that '[a] parasite taps' her energy, the disadvantages of pregnancy are further highlighted. Mira inadvertently mistakes her baby for the parasite, instead of realising that it is Wanton that *Insignia* is talking about. In order for Mira to survive, *Insignia* instructs her to remove the Wanton parasite. The baby 'parasite', however, remains.

A further analogy between the parasitical Post-Species creature and a humanesque baby is drawn when Mira tells Wanton 'I'll carry you in my clothes again so that I can have both hands free' (MS 196). This is very similar to what Mira does with baby Vito during their flight from Ipo when she carries him in 'the outer layer of her fellala' to free her hands in order to 'move quickly if she had to' (DS 192). This is reminiscent of *The Heat Death of the Universe* (Zoline, 1967:137), where children are described as 'leeches'¹³ who should by rights be 'salted off' and of Firestone's view that children are shackles that disempower women (1972:25). Rich (1977:1), not going so far as to call children parasites, does refer to the deep resentment mothers can feel toward the constant drain of pregnancy and children.

¹² In Jewish mythology, Lilith is the first woman and, before Eve, the mate of Adam. Butler's Lilith bears a child who saves humanity. In comparison, Mira's name sounds like a derivative of Mary, who, according to the Bible, fell pregnant with and gave birth to Jesus, the saviour of all humankind. Mira, symbolising Mary and mirroring Lilith, gives birth to Nova, who saves the universe.

¹³ Also see Douglas and Michaels (2004:8).

When Mira tries to hide her pregnancy physically after coming to terms with it, it is no longer from embarrassment or denial, but to complete a disguise, as instructed by Jelly, who has a very pragmatic approach, referring to her ‘being preggers’ and telling her to ‘Make ye chest look big ta hide ye belly’. He tells Mira to ‘[w]alk between us, and don’t walk like a lady. Don’t speak either’ (MS 363). The pregnancy that is endangering Mira ‘disappears’ as she performs the actions of a man and tries to walk in a stereotypically male fashion. Ironically, she chooses Rast Randall, a woman (albeit a gender-nonconforming woman), to model her stance on. This gender reversal, which leads to the ‘disappearance’ of Mira’s pregnancy, cements de Pierres’ depiction of pregnancy as a liability that places only women, and not men, at a physical disadvantage.

The same attention de Pierres gives to the minutiae of child rearing and child bearing, she gives to birth itself, which makes sense as the intimate process of giving birth has as far-reaching an impact on Mira as childcare and pregnancy. It affects her choices and the actions available to her in a way that comments on the burden placed on women during the actual process of giving birth (TS 6). Mira has to, for example, ‘*move slowly*’ (TS 41) and the birthing process leaves her ‘vulnerable’ (TS 71).

Through Dolin, the male clinician who points out the ‘accepted term’ that Mira should use when referring to giving birth, de Pierres is commenting on mothering and birthing advice provided by male childcare experts in the 1950s and 1960s, where men told women what to do and think (and which words to use) during the intimately female process of giving birth (Douglas and Michaels, 2004:64). De Pierres uses the male clinician to represent patriarchal control over and interference in women’s bodies and reproductive processes.

When the baby is born, Mira says ‘It’s a girl’. Linnea confirms it with ‘Guess so. Can’t see no man’s tackle down there’. The ‘tackle’ is what determines the sex of the infant (TS 147). A baby is normally assigned a biological sex at birth (Masters et al, 1986:189;¹⁴ Ceccarelli, 1997:141) and de Pierres uses Nova’s birth to comment on this practice and the restrictiveness of it.¹⁵ The male clinician breaks the news to Mira: ‘Baronessa, there is no other way to say this than plainly. Your baby doesn’t have reproductive organs of either sex.’ Throughout her conversation with Dolin, Mira refers to the baby as ‘she’ and ‘my daughter’ and she names her Nova, a girl’s name.¹⁶ Her desire for a girl child is stronger than biological evidence to the contrary (TS 149). De Pierres thus highlights gender as a socially assigned construct, and not as biological.

Further tests show the anomalies in Nova’s genome markers and it turns out that Nova was not born with ‘dual sex organs’ as initially thought, but with none at all. She is ‘not a neuter exactly’ but ‘[s]omething else’ (TS 154). This is another striking similarity between de Pierres’ work and that of Octavia Butler, as Lilith gives birth to Akin, who is firstly genetically engineered to be male, and then only becomes fully male after a metamorphosis (Butler, 2000:254, 272). I do not believe these similarities to be coincidental. *Lilith’s Brood* is a keystone text as far as science fiction’s challenges to gender stereotypes are concerned and in creating parallels between Mira and Lilith (and their children), de Pierres is declaring her own perspective on gender and confirming her challenge to the gender status quo.

¹⁴ Masters et al suggest that ‘cultural expectations’ regarding sexuality and gender begins in the womb even before a child is born (1986:189).

¹⁵ Bornstein, using sex and gender interchangeably, says ‘we’re assigned a gender at birth’ (1994:22).

¹⁶ Nova may be assumed to be a girl’s name because of the ‘-a’ ending, typical of feminine names in Italian, on which Mira’s Latino language is loosely based.

Rather mundane in the face of the baby's intriguing gender circumstance, the attention to the details of motherhood again comes to the fore when Mira is unable to tell the midwife how she is planning to feed her baby. Mira's helplessness and 'embarrassment at her exposed ignorance' (TS 80) is typical of new mothers, particularly those suffering from postpartum depression (Letourneau et al, 2007:441). De Pierres again highlights the fallacy that all new mothers instinctively know what to do, thereby challenging the social construct which leads to many women doubting themselves needlessly (Rich, 1977:1; Douglas and Michaels, 2004:325-326).

Conclusion

Mira's intimate relationships with children allow de Pierres to comment on the intimacy between mothers and children, on the burden (and thus inequality) that childcare and giving birth place on women, and on motherhood as a social construct. De Pierres also uses these intimate relationships to comment on the limitations of the heteronormative gender binary.

Mira (like Lilith) is never given a choice about becoming a mother. In the next chapter, which discusses the intimacies of secondary women characters, some women are afforded the option that Mira is not, with clear consequences for their personal freedom. Although motherhood is only one aspect of intimacy woven into the stories of those women, it is instructive to see how their lives are affected by the choice to become mothers as opposed to the choice *not* to do so.

Chapter Four: Of Warriors and Washerwomen

There are plenty of images of women in science fiction.
There are hardly any women.

Joanna Russ (2007:217)

Introduction

Women are traditionally considered to be the builders and keepers of community (Campbell, 2011:18; Hassan and Abu Daud, 2008:361). In science fiction, there are numerous instances where women sacrifice themselves and/or their needs in order to keep the community safe and operating. Octavia Butler, for example, creates scenarios in which community has an impact on the survival of all involved. Her heroines, like Lilith (Butler, 2000), are often self-sacrificing for the greater good or to avert annihilation (Hairston, 2006:374). The same trope of community preservation can be seen in the women of *The Sentients of Orion*. Some of them are royalty, some of them are Amazonian warriors, but many of the key characters are simple, ordinary women trying to protect their families and ensure the survival of the community. Like the heroines in Octavia Butler's works, they 'rarely live for themselves alone' (Hairston, 2006:299).

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell (2004:35, 178) lists the renewal and/or preservation of community as a key feature of the hero. Accordingly, even though the tendency is to equate 'hero' with male, de Pierres' women meet the requirements of classical heroism. This portrayal of women as self-sacrificing heroines can, however, be seen as harmful to feminism. The criticism that Butler received for the 'motherly sacrifices of her feminist heroines for the future of the community' (Hairston, 2006:300) could be levelled against de Pierres when looking at sacrifices made by the women of the *Sentients of Orion*, like Mira, Cass, Marchella and Bethany.

Focusing on instances of intimacy, this chapter examines how de Pierres' portrayal of the heroic and everyday women in *The Sentients of Orion* reflects on the gender status quo, and also if those portrayals (whether they be sacrificial or not) add to or detract from de Pierres' interrogation of gender norms and roles. The chapter starts out by examining how the lack of procreative agency affects the women of Orion and the manner in which women form intimate bonds, such as surrogacy. The chapter then proceeds to examine, in turn, instances of intimacy involving the major female characters, namely, Cass Mulravey, Marchella Pellegrini, Rast Randall, Fariss O'Dea, Bethany Ionill, Samuelle and Miranda Seward in order to ascertain whether de Pierres' use or not of these intimacies as a tool to comment on or challenge the heteronormative gender binary, or not.

The sisterly struggle for procreative agency

It has previously been established that the women of Latino Crux¹ are dispossessed in terms of procreation. According to Laura Shanner (2004:no pagination), '[s]ignificant physical, sexual, economic, social, psychological, and ethical ramifications follow from producing offspring, and reproductive choices necessarily involve attitudes about sexuality, gender roles, and family structures'. The struggle to repossess control, or even just a measure of input in this vital process, is ongoing in *The Sentients of Orion*, and the secretive *swestr* or Pensare² take the lead in this struggle. The manner in which the *swestr* meet in isolated groups is strongly reminiscent of the feminist 'consciousness raising' (CR) movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Hawkins, 2006:211). Such imaginary consciousness-raising groups have also been created by other writers of science fiction, for example Lisa Tuttle in *Wives* (1976), Frank Herbert in *Dune* (1987) and Suzette Haden Elgin in the *Native Tongue* trilogy (2000; 2002a; 2002b).

¹ The planet where the Araldis Latino culture originated.

² A secretive women's group aimed at reclaiming reproductive agency for the women of Araldis.

Other than the organised Pensare, it is the normal, everyday relationships between women in the *Sentients of Orion* that represent the struggle for equality, agency and survival. Judith Taylor (2013:96) mentions the pain brought about by women's refusals to acknowledge other women as worthy of friendship or respect. There seems to be a tendency among feminists to portray female relationships as lacking in love and support, filled with 'emotionally charged intimacy', which 'complicates or queers dominant understanding of women's friendship' (Taylor, 2013:97). Adrian Piper (2007:no pagination) also paints a dark portrait of hurtful friendships between women. Rooted in second-wave feminism, Rich (1980:652), however, refers to the 'survival relationships' women enter into with each other, regardless of their relationships with men: 'It is the women who make life endurable for each other, give physical affection without causing pain, share, advise, and stick by each other' (1980:656).

In the intimate relationships between the women of *Sentients of Orion*, we find the 'emotionally charged intimacy' referred to by Taylor (2013:97) in Mira's relationship with Rast Randall (CS 261). Other than that, though, the hurt and betrayal projected by Taylor (2013:96) and Piper (2007:no pagination) do not feature in close female relationships. In Mira's relationships with major female characters, there are instances of initial distrust, or respect hard-earned and grudgingly given, but mostly the relationships between women in *The Sentients of Orion* mirror Rich's 'survival' friendships (1980:652-656). These intimate relationships often take the form of surrogate 'family' relationships for those whose own families are destroyed or dysfunctional. Istelle, for example (DS 155), serves as surrogate mother to Mira, Loris is a surrogate sister (DS 202), and Mira herself is surrogate mother to Djes (DS 172-176).

The women in *The Sentients of Orion* are not portrayed as a homogenous group. In line with the stance Butler (1990:xxxix) takes, they are diverse in terms of background and expectations, as well as their cultural understanding and performance of gender. In spite of this diversity, there are common bonds and a sense of solidarity in the face of danger. An early indication of goodwill among women is found just after the graduation ceremony (DS 14). When Mira is desperately trying to flee the Studium to avoid Franco forcibly subjecting her to ‘*gene transference*’,³ that would render her insane, an elderly Galiotto servant steps into the role of surrogate mother by providing her with the necessary clothing and items for survival. Alba Galiotto opens her robe in order to give Mira her ‘biometric stripe’⁴ (DS 16), revealing her aged flesh, ripping the strip from her breast and shedding blood to help Mira on her way. Mira has to ‘force herself not to avert her gaze’. This could indicate respect, but it could also indicate that Mira finds physical intimacy distressing and embarrassing. The fact that a girl of Mira’s age had never seen ‘old skin’ before speaks of either a deeply conservative society, or of a girl deprived of intimate female nurturing, comfort and mothering. As the novels unfold it becomes clear that, in Mira’s case, it is a combination of the two.

Not taking into account new developments in the areas of gender and gerontology (Freixas, Luque and Reina, 2012:44-58; Hurd Clarke, Bennett and Liu, 2014:26-33), older women are said to have been failed by feminism, and I believe de Pierres uses Alba as a counter to Mira’s youth in an effort to highlight the existence of old women, a demographic until recently often absent from feminist dialogue (Rosenthal, 1990:1). Freixas et al refer to the negative stereotypes that have until recently hampered the study

³ Franco wants to forcibly transfer Mira’s genetic ability to pilot the biozoon to his son – a process that would either kill her or render her insane. This could symbolise the results of the patriarchal disenfranchisement of women.

⁴ A device that will give Mira access to areas normally forbidden to her.

of feminist gerontology (2012:45). They call for ‘an individual revision of ageist stereotypes’ as the only way ‘to carry out high-quality research that empowers’.

It is also in this moment of intimacy, with an old woman baring (and tearing) her own flesh to help a young woman, that a key element to de Pierres’ feminist approach is introduced: there is a ‘myriad of finely etched lines on the woman’s breasts’ which Mira is shocked to see for two reasons – firstly the exposed flesh, but also the fact that ‘[w]omen are forbidden to mark their bodies’. Those marks are indicative of membership of the secret underground society of the *Pensare/Swestr*; Alba is one of the women labouring to restore gender equality in humanesque society. While the *Swestr* are an integral part of the gender framework of *The Sentients of Orion*, this specific incident between Alba and Mira holds gender inferences separate from Alba’s political affiliations. It is not legal for a woman to mark her body, indicating a restriction on women’s rights, yet Alba would be safe against a body search as nobody would ‘dare disrobe’ an old woman, indicating a high level of respect for women. De Pierres uses this fleeting intimacy to acknowledge liberal feminism, which holds this dichotomy to be typical of patriarchal societies where women are afforded respect on a surface level, yet have no autonomy over their own bodies (Baehr, 2013:no pagination).

A more enduring intimate relationship than the one between Mira and Alba exists between Mira and her sister, Faja, and de Pierres uses their first conversation (DS 151) to introduce another of the main gender tropes in *The Sentients of Orion*: reproductive agency. During the Cipriano migration to Araldis, an ‘alteration’ was made to ‘the terms of ... fertility’.⁵ Mira believes that the migration and subsequent alteration of fertility terms was for the good of the race and for the protection of the women:

⁵ The Cipriano family, the ruling family on Araldis, have apparently migrated there from a world on which women used to have a say in reproduction.

‘We left to arrest the dilution of our race. When our women were raped during the wars, it led to much interbreeding with our enemies. *That is why they altered the terms of our fertility.* To protect us.’ (DS 152) (My emphasis)

The level of trust and intimacy between Faja and Mira is demonstrated in what Faja is willing to reveal, because in Mira’s opinion, what Faja speaks next constitutes ‘treason’:

‘They think only of the men ... the men ... The men say they left Crux for the sake of our future. That is a lie, Mira! They left for the sake of *their* future: to keep their women restrained. Things had begun to change on Crux. The many wars had opened our eyes to other ways ... I – *we* believe that our clan leaders wish only to strengthen their patriarchy – that our race was never in danger of dilution.’ (DS 151-152)

As sisters, Mira and Faja are united not only by blood, but also by being women, and it is against this intimate backdrop that de Pierres chooses to explain the previously hinted at Pensare and to spell out the feminist aspirations of *The Sentients of Orion*. Faja shows Mira ‘intricate lines and patterns etched into her flesh’, which Mira recognises as Pensare from the old Galiotto woman who helped her escape the Studium (DS 16). In their opposition to the gender inequalities encapsulated in the patriarchal regime and their particular focus on procreation, the Pensare/*Swestr* show many correlations with Herbert’s sisterhood of the Bene Gesserit (1987:508).⁶

Like Mira and Faja, Istelle, who raised Mira, is also described as having ‘spider-thin limbs’ and seeming ‘frail in comparison with the solid Latino shape’, but there is still ‘something beautiful’ in spite of her thinness (DS 155). Thinness is obviously not the ideal in Latino society, and the description of Istelle, in addition to what is already known about Mira’s body, stresses the point. There are different ways of interpreting this depiction of

⁶ While the Bene Gesserit are focused on eugenics and on producing their messianic Kwisatz Haderach (Herbert, 1987:22), the Pensare are focused solely on regaining agency in procreation (DS 152-153). Unlike the Bene Gesserit, they have no semi-religious belief system. Both Herbert and de Pierres have, however, created women’s groups in which solidarity can be fostered.

women's bodies. Either de Pierres is pandering to the current social preference for thin women, making her heroine desirable and conforming to what is acceptable to the reader, or she is exposing the underlying implications of that preference by using science fiction's strategy of estrangement to offer an alternative.

The intimacy of Istelle and Mira's relationship is revealed by the personal nature of the information they share as much as by their embrace. Istelle refers freely to being 'born wombless' and subsequently abandoned by her husband. She acknowledges being 'othered', not only for her thinness, but also for her childlessness, a reminder that we live in 'a culture where being a "normal" woman is equated with being a mother' (Agonito, 2014:38). De Pierres uses Estelle's intimate confession, which points to the pervasiveness of the 'stigma of "emptiness" and "lack of fulfillment"' attached to childlessness (Agonito, 2014:74), to expose the essentialist reduction of women to the reproductive function.

Mother Cass

After the attack on Villa Fedor, where Mira loses both her surrogate mothers, Faja and Estelle (DS 172), she forms an intimate bond with Cass Mulravey. They first meet when Mira performs an act of kindness, sharing food she barely has enough of for herself with Cass's child (DS 220). Their first formal meeting plays out based on the kindness that Mira shows (DS 234) and the bond remains between them to the end of the story. The friendship between Cass and Mira is an example of Rich's survival friendships between women (1980:652-656).

Cass represents the practical aspects of motherhood and is representative of the everyday woman on Araldis. She is not a leader in any official capacity, she does not belong to any secret society and she has no education. She reminds Mira of Beth, except that Bethany's

air of being well studied contrasts with Cass's education by 'hard experience' (CS 281). Cass's movements from moment to moment are in service of the children she cares for. Innis, her immature, misogynistic brother, acts as another of these children, leading to Cass's agency (also in terms of education) being blocked in a manner typical of patriarchal systems.

Cass, like Loris (DS 202), suckles Mira's child Vito (DS 246) and Mira, looking at her, finds 'no hint of hopelessness, no surrender in her face'. Even though Innis is constantly there as a menace in the background, his sister, Cass, seems to be in control and has the power to 'overrule' him (DS 247) with regard to practical aspects such as guard duty. Indicative of the intimate nature of their relationship, Cass continues breastfeeding Vito for as long as she has milk (DS 259). Breastfeeding is completely socially acceptable (DS 259), and, from the care Cass later continues to give to Vito, also indicates a strong surrogacy principle, even 'kinship' (Parkes, 2005:205). Cass is a mother to all.

This mothering impacts directly on every aspect Cass's life. She is a woman who, while relatively free in that she can come and go as she pleases and is not subordinate to a particular man, is completely bound by the patriarchal system through the limitations of child-rearing. *The Mommy Myth* (Douglas and Michaels, 2004:1-27) and *Of Woman Born* (Rich, 1977:xiii-xxii) as well as *The Last Taboo: Saying No to Motherhood* (Agonito, 2014) provides numerous examples of how the social structure of modern motherhood disenfranchises women physically (Agonito, 2014:7-28), mentally, creatively (Agonito, 2014:55-77) and economically (Agonito, 2014:91-100). Every small detail of her life is affected by securing the welfare of the children in her care, and detailed examples are constantly provided, for example her moving the 'bino's head from Kristo's feet (DS 268). The wealth of detail implies, as discussed in *Our Hapless Heroine*, that de Pierres

deliberately crafts Cass to represent the reality of motherhood in a patriarchal society in response to criticism from scholars like Russ (2007:211), regarding the lack of parenting detail in feminist science fiction. It further serves to highlight the impact child-bearing and child-rearing have on women's freedoms. De Beauvoir (1949:no pagination), for example, refers to pregnancy as 'tiring work that offers woman no benefit as an individual but that demands serious sacrifices'. In a similar vein to de Beauvoir's dismissal of motherhood, Cass's life, as mother, is one of burden and sacrifice.

Cass is a loyal friend to Mira. She is the only one who questions the legitimacy of Trin's leadership and she is the only one who challenges him openly about where Mira is (CS 27). The negative intimacy (Ricci, 1997:no pagination) between Trin and Cass Mulravey is indicative of Trin's bad conscience and his flawed leadership, as the battle between them comes to represent the battle of the sexes on Araldis.

There is a strong divide between 'your women' and 'my men' (CS 381), which makes it impossible for Trin to optimise his resources. Trin tries to deflect Cass's request for envirosuits⁷ for the women by telling her Mira has deserted in a stolen AiV. In response, Cass leans intimately close 'until her stale breath [is] hot on Trin's face' and says 'I do not believe that. And if you do not give my women suits to wear I will make sure that everyone else does not believe it either. Then we will see what respect you garner, *Principe*' (CS 27). Trin is forced to acquiesce, but his anger is not because of her challenge to his leadership or his loss of face; it is because Cass is challenging his masculinity, leaving 'his men ... close to naked' (CS 69).

⁷ A special suit making it possible to survive in the harsh desert atmosphere on Araldis. Reminiscent of the still suits worn by the desert Fremens in *Dune* (Herbert, 1990:29).

De Pierres further uses these heated exchanges and negative intimacy to show that the battle for procreation on Araldis has not been completely won by the men. While they control fertility, they still need women to impregnate. When many Carabinere die from exposure, Trin holds Cass responsible, but she simply points to the women who have survived, telling Trin instead to ‘see what you have saved. I’m sorry for your men, Trinder Pellegrini. But you have saved your future. Without these women you are nothing. You cannot even breed’ (CS 73). Cass echoes Gerard Schuiling (2005:221), who says in his exploration of sex-role reversal: ‘[l]oss of females, after all, is always a greater disaster for reproduction than loss of males, for females produce only a few, precious eggs, while males overflow with sperm’. In this incident, even while pointing out that patriarchy cannot function without women, de Pierres strongly incorporates a ‘third-wave’ feminist position, which acknowledges the necessity of men’s contribution to society and to reproduction.

Initially, Cass is described as having ‘soft, limp’ breasts (DS 235) and, in spite of her ‘exhausted’ and ‘stubborn’ look (DS 220), she is not depicted as looking masculine. When she reunites with Mira, Mira recognises her ‘thin, ragged’ shape (TS 364). When she, however, challenges Trin’s leadership and his ability to procreate without the help of her women, he perceives her in a very different way. He can ‘smell her stale sweat and see the knots in her straggling hair. Her shape was mannish under her envirosuit, her breasts limp and flat’ (CS 381). Expecting challenges to come from a man, not from a woman, Trin projects ‘mannish’ qualities onto Cass (CS 381). By thus casting Cass in a masculine light, Trin changes the rules of engagement into something that he feels able to handle. While his interactions with Mira have already established Trin as a misogynist, de Pierres reinforces this by showing him only willing to enter into conflict with a person who can be categorised as male.

The whole time Mira is away, Cass fights a proxy war with Trin on Mira's behalf, even though she is never sure that they have not simply been abandoned by her. As much joy as there is in their eventual reunion (TS 364), there is ultimate sadness as Cass, who has throughout been depicted as the essence of motherhood and caregiving, has lost both her biological children since last seeing Mira. In the same way that she fought for the rights of the other women, she also saved their children for them. She is able to save Mira's adopted child, the alien korm, and Bethany's daughter, Djes, but her own children are both lost to her. Mira sees 'the pain on Cass's face. She wasn't just starved and exhausted, her spirit was in tatters' (TS 365).

It could be argued that de Pierres might have aided the feminist struggle more by focusing on Cass's strength and agency as a mother, as opposed to depicting her as a caricature-like archetype of the self-sacrificing mother. I believe, however, that highlighting the stereotype (contrary to leaving it out completely as Russ (2007:211) charges happens in feminist science fiction) poses its own manner of challenge to the status quo.⁸

Marchella/Mesquite

Just after Cass and Mira first meet during the initial flight from Ipo, Mira, at the behest of Marchella Pellegrini (in the guise of Mesquite), takes charge of the group of women (DS 337). She acts as a sheepdog in keeping the women together by shouting at them 'over and over' to stay close, and by physically 'pushing them together' (DS 338). The assumption of leadership forces Mira to enter into a contract of closeness with these women. While Mira is herding the women to safety, the men are 'running in all directions, some armed

⁸ Luce Irigaray upholds mimesis as a tool for the subversion of stereotypes. She theorises that the patriarchal subversion of women can only be challenged (and changed) by unfaithful and exaggerated repetition of negative stereotypes (1985:3).

with shovels and picks, others with rifles'. These men shout at the group of women to 'git back inside', confident in their ability to protect their women from harm (DS 338). Ironically, it is by ignoring the men's instructions that Mira manages to escape certain death and save most of the women in her care. The perilous situation they find themselves in forces the women to band closely together (DS 286) and depend on each other. There is even talk about arming themselves (DS 314), with Mesquite urging them to 'not rely on the men' to save them (DS 321). In this stereotypical representation, de Pierres contrasts the solidarity and collaboration among women with the (apparently) inherently violent nature of men.

Mesquite is the tough and streetwise leader of the embattled women of Ipo. Mesquite knows men well, knowing they will want to sleep near cars or women (DS 271), and also senses the danger posed to Mira by Innis (DS 287).⁹ She does not hesitate to make use of forceful tactics more associated with masculinity than with femininity to disprove Mira's claim of Aristo women not using violence (DS 287).

Before her death, Mesquite reveals herself to be Marchella Pellegrini, crown aristo and sister to Principe Franco. She passes on to Mira the burden of responsibility for the other women that she, as aristo and leader, has so far borne (DS 337). This she shrewdly does in Faja's name – calling on the strength of Mira's intimacy with her dead sister, on the role of surrogacy fulfilled by Faja and Marchella herself in Mira's life and also on the fact that Faja, like Marchella, was a member of the Pensare, thereby binding Mira closer to the organisation she ultimately wants her to lead.

⁹ Cars are often equated with masculinity in popular culture, but Gad Saad and John Vongas provide scientific evidence by demonstrating how driving fast cars leads to a measurable increase in men's testosterone levels (2009:88).

Both as Mesquite, the community leader in Ipo, and as Marchella Pellegrini, the aristocratic ‘eccentric ... maiden’ aunt (DS 99), Marchella represents matriarchy in *The Sentients of Orion*. Jilda suspects Franco’s ‘*much-loathed sorella*’ of wanting to depose her son (DS 96), but Marchella seems to have another agenda. At dinner she deliberately provokes her brother, Franco, with constant references to his greed, criticising him for keeping the planet ‘in check as if it were one of [his] women’ and referring to men as stealing ‘our choice to have children’ (DS 108). Franco accuses her of choosing ‘manliness’ over her ‘true sex’ and of knowing nothing ‘about acting like a woman’ (DS 109). She does not disagree, and claims that doing so at least afforded her the choice of not being forced by a man ‘to bear his bambini’ (DS 109). For Franco, as for many adherents of the heteronormative gender binary, a female challenge to the patriarchy (and thus to masculinity) implies a shortfall in femininity.

Marchella keeps deliberately fuelling the negative intimacy (Ricci, 1997:no pagination) with her brother until he hits her:

Trin found himself half out of his seat. He looked to his mother but she did nothing ... The Principessa had seen this before and she seemed almost pleased that Franco had asserted his right.

Yet Trin had never heard Cipriano traditions so vehemently and shockingly challenged before. He believed it was his choice as to when and with whom he would father children, and that no familia woman had a right to refuse him. At the Studium he had heard whispers of a secret women’s group that opposed Franco and the old traditions but they appeared to be nothing other than ginko-incited grumblings.

Marchella climbed slowly to her feet. Her gaze met Trin’s as she retook her seat, dabbed her mouth with the cloth and delicately drank down her small glass of wine. She seemed neither repentant nor cowered. She seemed ... satisfied.

This was for me!

The calculation of her act shocked Trin almost as much as Franco's violence. (*Dark Space* p. 110)

As proves to be the case between Mira and Trin much later in the story (DS 187), the abuse in this incident quickly spirals from emotional to physical (Crowell and Burgess, 1996:16). De Pierres applies the shock factor of this increasingly negative intimacy to force Trin (and the reader) to question the gender status quo and the system that makes it acceptable for Franco to slap his sister.

Tia Marchella may want to usurp Trin's throne, but more likely she wants to open the future Principe's eyes to the social injustices on the world he is destined to inherit and rule, including those concerned with procreational agency. This likelihood is confirmed in the lengths Marchella goes to in order to address the gender inequality in Latino society. Most strikingly, her mission is demonstrated in her dealings with Tekton, the Lostolian Godhead.

The negotiations between Marchella and Tekton for a mining contract are described in no fewer than three different incidents in *The Sentients of Orion*: once when Trin listens to an audio recording of the events (DS 161-165); then as retold from Tekton's point of view (DS 303-307); and again when Mira listens to the transcripts (CS 177). In Trin and Mira's versions, the element of sexuality that is found in Tekton's version is underplayed. Here, Marchella is simply an ambassador and Tekton a business interest (DS 161-165). In Tekton's version, his sexual harassment of Marchella and her use of her sexuality to gain her ends come to the fore (DS 303-307). By including more than one version of the same incident, de Pierres stresses the subjective nature of information and 'truth'.¹⁰ What

¹⁰ In her comparison between the short fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee, Deirdre Byrne notes that 'both *events* and *accounts* purportedly have a relation to truth' (2000:237, emphasis added).

women perceive in their intimate interactions with men is not necessarily always the same as what the men perceive, and vice versa.¹¹ This is indicative of the urgent need for open dialogue between men and women regarding subjects such as rape, sexual harassment, agency and consent.

The parts that are missing from Trin's and Mira's versions of events are overwritten with the word '**SUPPRESSED**' in bold print (DS 162; 163; 164; 165). The use of 'suppressed' instead of 'edited' or 'censored' is a comment on the suppression of female sexuality and voice. It also foreshadows the importance of the hidden information in subsequent versions of the conversation. The full version, as told from Tekton's point of view (DS 303-307), could easily be read as Tekton forcing the unwilling Marchella to perform oral sex on him, but in reality Marchella's act is calculated – doing whatever it takes to get what she wants, which is to get a Latino woman nominated for testing for the tyro programme on Belle-Monde.¹² She places herself in a position of disempowerment in order to empower all the women of her race on a permanent basis, and instead of a stereotypical victim, she is the instigator and the 'winner' in this unequal sexual exchange. It is during the third narrative of this event, when Mira listens to the recording (CS 177), that it becomes clear that Marchella's 'whole purpose had been to save them ... *No*, not that ... to *free* them'. The women of Araldis could never be free while their fertility was 'held to ransom' (CS 177). In support of de Pierres' depiction of information as subjective, Mira is unable to understand what has really taken place until she listens to all the available 'truths'.

¹¹ This subjective construction of reality is quite topical when high profile sexual harassment cases increasingly show different interpretations of events as perceived by either the victim or the accused.

¹² A programme selecting and training people to become 'tyros', a title for those newly able to communicate with Sole, the god-like entity discovered by Jo-Jo.

Not having any choice in fertility and reproduction contributes to the suppression of women by the patriarchal system of Araldis. This is distinctly relevant to aspects of modern-day reality, where many women have no access to birth control and no wherewithal to protect themselves against sexual violence (including that perpetrated by intimate partners or husbands). Both these situations render women vulnerable to unwanted pregnancy, which, if culminating in motherhood, can (as consistently demonstrated by de Pierres and several feminist authors [Douglas and Michaels, 2004: 1-27; Rich, 1977:xiv]) have an indelible impact on their freedom.¹³ Even in less dire circumstances, women's lives are so radically changed (and often disadvantaged) by their becoming mothers that female choice, *agency*, is frequently removed from the procreational process where, as Rosemary Agonito and Rich (among others) have argued, it should take centre stage (Agonito, 2014:1; Rich, 1977:xv). Whether through emotional closeness to Mira, abusive negative intimacy with Franco or unwanted physical intimacy with Tekton, all Marchella's intimacies, regardless of gender performance, are calculated acts of warfare in a struggle for the liberation of fertility. Through Marchella, de Pierres champions the feminist cause of women's right to control their own bodies and to have an equal say in the very basic but all-important choice of whether or not to become mothers.¹⁴

Rast Randall

A soldier in the more traditional sense of the word is the mercenary, Rast Randall, whom Mira meets at the same time she meets Mesquite. Both Rast and Fariss O'Dea physically echo C. L. Moore's (2015:no pagination) Jirel of Joiry, a 'ferocious' female warrior, 'tall

¹³ Also see Firestone's second-wave manifesto, *The Dialectic of Sex*, which was aimed at liberating women from the confines of childbirth and childcare (1972:25).

¹⁴ Marchella conforms remarkably closely to Kathleen Hall Jamieson's description of a medieval witch in 'asserting her right to influence other women' and in that she is 'older, unmarried, childless ... transmitted advice about contraception' (reproduction in Marchella's case), and uses 'speech in socially disapproved ways' (1995:3).

as most men, and as savage as the wildest of them’, and their presence in *The Sentients of Orion* is a nod to the warrior women from the golden age of science fiction, who are mentioned with admiration by Yaszek (2006:86). They stand in sharp contrast to the way women are often defined only by the biology of being wives and mothers (Rich, 1977:xv). In the decidedly masculine portrayal of these two women, de Pierres poses a challenge to what Judith Halberstam (1998:xi) describes as the ‘considerable anxiety about even the prospect of manly women’ that permeates modern-day culture.

Rast is first described as ‘an ’esque with a battered combat hood half-pulled over stark white hair. Her pale face was so lean and hollow that it seemed as if the flesh barely covered the bone. Across her cheekbones she bore the red markings of a tattoo’ (DS 259). Rast is ‘a head and a half taller than Mira, and muscular. A quick, predator type, not often seen on Araldis’ (DS 262-263). Rast’s appearance is a reflection of her character, and the word ‘stark’ is a fitting adjective for both.

Rast never introduces or declares herself in terms of gender (or sexuality). She simply *is*. Jo-Jo, for example, never thinks of her as a woman, or in particular gender terms. When he does, though, he does not fully understand it, ‘[i]t just *was*’ (TS 164). The pervasiveness of Rast’s performance of masculinity calls to mind Butler’s (1990:45) definition of gender as ‘the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’. Through Rast’s female biology, along with her consistently masculine identity performance, de Pierres renders her either gender-queer or gender-nonconforming. This, of course, needs to be detached from her more subtle performance of sexuality, which happens to be lesbian.

Rast is depicted as extreme in terms of her masculine appearance, but is still considered physically attractive within the parameters of modern-day, Westernized society. Stereotypes surrounding lesbians are numerous and the manner in which she is described adheres to the traditional depiction in literature of lesbian women as masculinised.¹⁵ As far back as 1928, young Stephen in the iconic *The Well of Loneliness* (Hall, 1928:(2) part 4-5) is described as having a ‘curious suggestion of strength in her movements’, being ‘tall for her age’ and having ‘over-broad shoulders’ and a ‘cleft in her chin’. Like Rast, Stephen’s ‘figure was handsome in a flat, broad-shouldered and slim-flanked fashion’ (Hall, 1928:(8) part 1).

As if in exaggerated parody of the stereotype, Rast’s sexual pursuit of Mira, like her appearance, is depicted in masculine terms. When they are initially introduced, Mira is subjected to Rast’s gaze, which is ‘an assault of evaluation and immediate censure’ (DS 259). The nature of Rast’s stare is masculine, reminiscent of Wolf’s claim that men ‘look at women’s bodies, evaluate, move on; their own bodies are not looked at, evaluated, and taken or passed over’ (Wolf, 1991:152). Shortly after meeting, Rast initiates physical contact between herself and Mira as she ‘slipped a casual arm around Mira’ (DS 266). She progresses from casual touching to unabashedly asking Mira to move in with her, because ‘I like your voice. And your body’ (DS 297). She is not in the slightest put off by Mira’s rejection, touching Mira again, commenting on her body, running ‘a hand down Mira’s arm’. She is seemingly not deterred by the fact that ‘Mira stood absolutely still, like a hunted animal’ (DS 326). Rast does not desist and much later, while joking with the other mercenaries about *Insignia*’s gender, Rast touches Mira twice. The touch in itself might be

¹⁵ Wendy Geiger, Jake Harwood and Mary Hummert (2006:170-178) provide a detailed typology of lesbian stereotypes. Of the types they mention, such as ‘lipstick lesbian’ and ‘free spirit’, the more negative ones, such as ‘hypersexual’ and ‘angry butch’ seem to be relevant to the depiction of Rast.

innocent, as might the jokes, but the touch in this particular context turns the talk about ‘self-fuckers’, group sex and ‘hard-ons’ into an open sexual advance (CS 51). This ultra-masculine portrayal of sexual pursuit is queered in that it is perpetrated by a woman. While sexual harassment is not at all gender-dependent, the majority of victims are women and de Pierres’ use of negative intimacy in Rast’s aggressively masculine pursuit of Mira highlights the manner in which women often find themselves at the receiving end of unwanted male attention.

In spite of Mira’s obvious discomfort, Rast’s overtures become increasingly aggressive, even more strongly constituting sexual harassment. ‘Mira flattened herself against the stratum wall to avoid touching her’, but, instead of respecting the unspoken cue, Rast ‘swayed across and leaned her body against Mira’s. She dropped her head to Mira’s neck, brushing her lips against the bare skin’. Mira reacts strongly, wrenching ‘free’ and saying that Rast has ‘no right to –’. Rast reacts first in anger: ‘Fuck it, woman, what’s your problem?’ and then in embarrassment, looking around to see if there might be a witness to the altercation (CS 56). Her sexual innuendos do not stop there as she later ‘ran her tongue over the neck of the bottle’ telling Mira she could ‘teach’ her a lot (CS 168).

Rast is unaware that her touch is unwanted and she is unable to see that Mira is not the one who is out of line in this situation. Rast, like many of the men discussed in Chapters Five and Six, poses a sexual threat to Mira. Like the men, she is also not really interested in whether Mira reciprocates the physical attraction or not. Her actions toward Mira constitute harassment and threat on a par with that of Innis, but somehow, because Rast is a woman, it is perceived as less threatening than when men do it. Rast’s actions, as well as her reaction to Mira’s rejection, are a strong critique of a patriarchal society in which men

are not only free to follow through their sexual attractions aggressively, but also to take exception when women reject their overtures.

It is not only Rast's sexual approaches that are masculine. She is willing to resort, casually, like a man, to violence and threat (DS 283) and shoots Brusce simply to make a point: 'I killed him because they need to know that I mean what I say' (DS 319). She admits to Mira that she killed him because 'he would have raped you to make his point. Men like that can't let things go' (DS 320). Rast shoots a Galiotto servant who tries to deny her and her wounded men access to the palace infirmary at point-blank range (DS 409) and during their escape from Intel Station she 'fell upon a man, her hands at his throat. Determination. Sweat. Fingers taut and strained with the choking of him. Mira forced her sight/sense away from the intimacy of murder' (CS 110). The manner in which Rast resorts to violence without giving it any thought is stereotypically masculine.

Mira keeps company with 'known mercenaries' due to 'a coincidence based on mutual survival' (CS 105). Mira knows she needs Rast because 'she can kill' (DS 400), even though she herself is also sometimes a victim of that casual violence. Rast once shakes Mira 'so hard that her neck snapped back', ostensibly to keep Mira from fainting (DS 404). On Scholar, she pulls Mira up 'by her throat' (CS 205). Whether Mira would tolerate such treatment from a man, even one whose violent protection she were dependent on, is questionable.

When Mira eventually reacts very negatively to Rast's sexual overtures, Rast threatens to desert her: 'If you want me on the same film as you, Baronessa, then maybe it's time you told me what happened to you – after Ipo' (CS 328). Mira tells Rast about everything: 'their flight in the TerV: the deaths, her fingers dipping in the child's skull-wound, burying

the child, pulling her mother from the grave, the korm starving ... Finally the last of it came out – how they had held her down for Trinder, and why; his fertility chant and his sickening remorse’ (CS 328). It is ironic that a physical intimacy, which Mira rejects, is what leads to the deepest emotional intimacy yet between the two women. De Pierres is most likely not inferring a juxtaposition between physical and emotional intimacy through this ironic turn of events, but rather highlighting the inextricably link between the two types of intimacy.

More than anything else, more than confiding in anybody else, Mira’s intimate disclosure to Rast is what assuages her pain as ‘the vacuum of spent words made room for quiet, grieving, relieved tears’ (CS 329). Rast’s reaction to what Mira tells her is of as much value to Mira’s healing as the relief of telling is:

“Women get raped,” said Rast harshly, her pale skin flushed with emotion. “Sometimes in war, sometimes just for the hell of it. That’s what happens.” She gripped Mira’s wrist and pulled her close. Then she hugged her tightly for a long moment.

“We’ll get your world back for you, Baronessa ...”. (CS 329)

This incident is a watershed in the relationship between Rast and Mira. The grudging respect Rast has for Mira (CS 16; CS 109) turns into a more intimate friendship. Rast takes on the role of protector and, somehow, a caring lover. Their new emotional closeness is demonstrated in their ability to communicate telepathically (CS 245). The manner in which they physically act toward each other also evinces physical intimacy. Mira ‘sways’ in Rast’s grip (CS 240) and Rast then eases Mira ‘gently’ into Primo (CS 241) in a manner that is sexually suggestive.

Other than highlighting the stereotype of lesbian masculinity, the severity of masculinity, with which de Pierres portrays Rast, begs further examination. All physical descriptions of Rast are of an entirely masculine person. She is a soldier with ‘hardened muscles’ (DS 325), ‘forearms taut as wire and the veins on the backs of her hands ... like bulging tributaries’ (CS 327). Thales initially describes her as ‘lean and muscular, her face rigid with fury’, her masculinity even more pronounced next to the very feminine Mira, whom Thales perceives as ‘fragile-looking and trembling with emotion’ (CS 233). Mira’s seemingly incidental observation of a sleeping Rast provides the key to de Pierres’ hypermasculine portrayal of Rast. Mira is portrayed as sitting and

watching Rast’s face. The mercenary seemed more feminine in sleep, her skin smooth and her lips soft. But the shadows under her eyes and the bruise along one cheekbone kept the picture real. Rast was as unpredictable and pitiless as the Extropists she had fought against and yet Mira felt envy again at the woman’s freedom. Was it as easy as that? Could you just grasp it? Or did you have to be able to kill and fight and view life through a sieve of cynicism? (CS 170)

Rast could have easily been portrayed as lesbian *and* feminine, but she is portrayed as extremely masculine (also in her intimacies) to emphasise the lack of freedom that hampers everyday (feminine-appearing) women like Mira and Cass. In order to be free, it is likely that a person in Mira’s world has to be a man, or, like Rast, sacrifice nearly all vestiges of femininity. Jamieson (1995:120) points out the potentially harmful nature of the traits traditionally ascribed to women when she refers to the ‘femininity/competence bind’. She builds on the work of scholars such as Inge and Donald Broverman, Frank Clarkson, Paul Rosenkrantz and Susan Vogel, who posit that what are perceived as stereotypically feminine characteristics are actually ‘inconsistent with maturity and primarily negative’ in contrast with masculine traits which are ‘associated with mental

health and psychological maturity' (Broverman et al, 1970:1-7).¹⁶ This motif of women performing masculinity in order to gain freedom is used by de Pierres to comment on the options women in patriarchal societies have, and on the price some women pay in order to live a life free from the constraints which beset 'ordinary' woman like Cass Mulravey.

There is poignancy in Mira trying to copy Rast's stance when she has to mimic a man (MS 363). This makes it appear as though Rast is more of a man than the men Mira knows, as if (in view of the above explanation for Rast's lack of femininity) she is freer and more able to command her circumstances than even the men around her. Unlike what is normally expected of a woman, Rast is able to lead men by the force of her ability and her personality and she is able to bring Jo-Jo in line very easily too (MS 136). When Jo-Jo confronts her about working with the Extros, Rast says: 'I told you when we met. I'm nobody's bitch. I earn where I choose and so does my crew' (MS 142).

The only time Rast shows weakness is when she is trapped in Medium, removed from her body and from all contact with other people, apart from a very intimate telepathic communication with Jo-Jo. Jo-Jo thinks of it as the 'only chink he'd seen in her armour' and labels it as 'a psychological one. Trapped inside the Extro ship, unsure whether they were actually alive or just an aggregation of sound bytes, Randall had nearly lost it' (TS 113). The fact of the matter is that she did *not* 'lose it'. Jo-Jo might be more able than Rast to 'survive and function in the Post-Species environment', but she is more able to 'survive and function' there than either Latourn or Catchut, who are both men (MS 185-195, 252-

¹⁶ Ezzell (2016:192) posits that a patriarchal system makes it impossible to enact masculinity without enacting dominance.

261, 367-377).¹⁷ The weakness is there, but it is a human response to a loss of freedom, not a gender-related weakness based on Rast being a woman.

In *Transformation Space*, when Mira appears again on Araldis, Rast emotionally intimidates Trin and ‘rubs his face in’ being saved by Mira (TS 363), then bodily attacks him, tripping him up, gripping his head with her thighs and ‘pushing his face into the sand’, thus affording Mira more time (TS 363). It is again her masculine aggression and strength that allow her to help Mira.

As they meet again on Tourmaline Beach, Rast lifts Mira ‘from her feet to embrace her’. ‘Never figured to see you alive again,’ she drawled. ‘Never figured to be so pleased to see you alive again. Looks like I’ll be owing’ you again’, which flusters Mira (TS 371). This moment of intimacy is important when seen in the light of an earlier incident. Right after Mira’s abduction, Rast threatens to kill Jo-Jo (MS 31). He taunts her, and saves himself by saying that if Rast kills him, she will never be sure of whom Mira would choose between the two of them. As it turns out, Mira chooses Jo-Jo, but Jo-Jo dies, and the physical tension illustrated between Rast and Mira at their reunion on Tourmaline Beach leaves room for Rast to take over the position as Mira’s mate and lover. Even though de Pierres challenges the narrow definition of a happy ending as prescribed by the heteronormative gender binary in hinting at the potential of Mira and Rast becoming partners, she does not place undue emphasis on this intimacy or on the manner in which it is gendered. In this way she allows the relationship, much like Jo-Jo’s earlier reflections on Rast’s gender, to ‘just [be]’ (TS 164), and presents a world that is approaching post-gender, where emotional intimacy and care take precedence over the gender of one’s partner.

¹⁷ The mercenaries, Latourn in particular, seem to suffer from shell shock (CS 117). George Mosse posits that Western society’s rejection of shell shock is based on its being a threat to ‘the ideal of manliness’ (2000:96).

Fariss O'Dea

Another woman who, like Rast, is physically equal to, and even superior to many men, is Fariss O'Dea. She is taller than Thales 'by more than a head' (MS 228), and stands 'towering head and shoulders above the rest' (TS 173). When Thales sees her face for the first time, he notes that her 'cheeks and forehead were broad and her nose straighter than any he'd ever seen. Beneath it, her large mouth was shaped by thick, sensual lips' (MS 230). Her looks are more feminine than Rast's – she is depicted as a woman with feminine qualities in spite of her physical strength and size. Her manner is also softer than Rast's. Apart from women usually being physically softer due to a thicker layer of body fat, I do believe that depicting women as 'soft' has greatly contributed to the suppression of women by the patriarchal system. Soft women behave. They do not question and they do not challenge. They conform. Holding softness up as the feminine ideal thus aided the oppression of female independence and self-belief.

Fariss intimidates Thales, but it is 'her pragmatism that frightened him most; the dry, flat nature of a voice that didn't bother with lies. Like the mercenary Rast Randall, but without the hint of malice in it' (MS 228). He later describes her to Mira as being 'more ... likeable ... than Rast Randall' (MS 347). This is another example of how society expects women to be feminine, even differentiating between shades of masculinity and femininity to determine acceptability and thus attractiveness.

In her actions, Fariss conforms more to masculine stereotypes than to feminine ones. She is lewd, like a man, squeezing 'one of her breasts into a lewd shape' and insisting on 'playing' with Thales to alleviate her sexual boredom (TS 54). She has an insatiable appetite for sex (TS 55), food (TS 39) and adrenaline (TS 9), and there is a 'sparkle in her

eye at the promise of trouble. She relished conflict and battle', in this, too, conforming to stereotypically masculine violence (TS 81).

Fariss strengthens the masculinity of her manner when circumstances compel her to do so. When she has to protect Thales, her 'lips pursed and all her muscles tensed, making her appear even larger' (MS 285) and when threatening Macken (for the same purpose – protecting Thales), she 'stuck out her jaw in a way that made her wide, generous face ugly' (MS 289). However, when she sees Thales safe, 'the tall soldier's face softened' and she 'scooped up Thales in her arms as if he weighed nothing' (TS 42-43). In Fariss, de Pierres provides a very clear example of gender performativity. Fariss needs, and thus enacts, the facade of ruthlessness and masculinity in order to function in the male-centred milieu she moves in. Outside of that, her performance of gender allows for femininity and softness.

Sexually, Fariss is heterosexual in spite of the perception her more masculine gender performance might evoke. She is very dominant in her sexual approach, a trait which is stereotypically more masculine than feminine, and the relationship between Fariss and Thales holds strong elements of BDSM. According to Elena Faccio, Claudia Casini and Sabrina Cipoletta's understanding of BDSM, Fariss practises a form of dominance and submission, which 'represents the set of customs and rituals relating to the giving and accepting of control between partners' (2014:752).

De Pierres writes against the backdrop of a long history of BDSM in science fiction, and Lewis Call (2013:16), among others, posits that 'large and increasingly receptive audiences' can be shown 'positive, sympathetic representations of kink' by examining the use of BDSM in science fiction and fantasy. Simula (2012:484) refers to 'undoing' gender or 're-doing' gender as opposed to 'doing gender' as detailed by Sarah Fenstermaker,

Candace West, and Don Zimmerman (2002:37). In her depiction of the sexual relationship between Fariss and Thales, de Pierres allows for Call's 'positive, sympathetic' portrayal of BDSM (2013:16), and also for the 'undoing' of gender as the mechanics of the act are not dependent on either party's gender (Simula, 2012:484).

The actual intercourse between Fariss and Thales is analysed in detail in Chapter Six, as it is mostly narrated from Thales's point of view. Of more interest in this chapter is the power aspect of their relationship. There are rules in the intimate relationship between them, and Fariss is very clear on what those rules entail: 'My rules are simple, pretty one. When I want your attention, I get it. And don't you ever lie to me ... Got it?' (TS 55). These 'rules' affect their partnership in more than just the sexual aspect. Within the parameters of their power sharing, Fariss allows Thales the freedom to do what he needs to do to save Scolar, even if she does not fully understand his motivation. This is important, because if 'she'd forbidden him, he didn't know what he would have done. His urge to obey her was so strong' (TS 81-82).

Women often become trapped in relationships with controlling men, and what is initially experienced as flattering attention to what they do and where they go can result in the loss of all freedom within a relationship. De Pierres is careful to show that Fariss and Thales's relationship is not simply an inversion of this patriarchal dynamic. When Thales explains his relationship with Mira, Fariss 'accepted his clipped response without insult or comment. She was a pragmatic person, not a sensitive one' (TS 211). The rules allow for mutual respect and accommodation in all aspects of their relationship, in spite of the fact that Fariss is clearly (with incorporation of Thales's choice) the dominant partner. This explanation keeps Thales and Fariss's relationship from being perceived as pure coercion,

instead of the power-sharing dynamic which de Pierres applies to present an alternative to traditional male/female power relationships.

Similarly to Rast Randall, Fariss is depicted as having no mothering instinct (other than toward Thales). Pregnant women make her 'angry' (TS 54) and she asks Mira 'You having a fucking baby? Now?' (MS 392). Mira rightly does not confide in her, thinking 'Fariss O'Dea was not one ... to concern herself with affairs of childbirth' (TS 9). This might be construed as not very feminine, as the typical gender stereotype has all women wanting children and yearning for motherhood, with the 'biological clock' ticking away and failure to bear children construed as the ultimate failure (Shanner, 2004:no pagination). While Fariss's attitude does go against the stereotype, the idea that all women, straight or gay, like and want children, should be rectified. In spite of strong arguments by Rich (1977: xiv), Douglas and Michaels (2004:64) and others against women displaying a 'natural' urge to become mothers, and in spite of previously discussed evidence that the 'mothering instinct' is nothing more than a social construct, the perception remains that women are biologically designed breeding machines. Women who choose not to have children are still seen by society as 'immature, unreliable, or even selfish' (Shanner, 2004:no pagination). Agonito refers to the 'rare cases' of women who prefer not to have children, and how these women 'are ... made to feel selfish or guilty' (2014:77). In order for feminism to be truly inclusive, it is important that the right of a woman *not* to have children should be respected as much as her right to have them.

In a further correlation between the two women, Fariss lives a life that encompasses the same kind of freedom that Rast Randall enjoys. This reintroduces Mira's questions regarding the choices and/or sacrifices these women have to make in order to claim such freedom (CS 170). Regardless of stereotypes, it is clear that the lives (and freedom) of

both Rast and Fariss would be seriously compromised by childbearing and child-rearing (Shanner, 2004:no pagination). Rich (1977:1) poignantly describes feeling envious of a childless woman ‘who has the luxury of her regrets but lives a life of privacy and freedom’. This is another nod to the argument of feminists like Firestone (1972:25) that children hamper women and cost them their freedom. In juxtaposing Fariss and Rast as child-free (and therefore free), with Cass Mulravey and Mira, who are bound by their emotional ties and the practical implications of taking care of their children, de Pierres highlights the unbalanced state of motherhood in modern-day reality. I do not believe that she is attacking motherhood itself, since there is nothing ‘natural’ about women being tied down in such a manner. Rather, she is criticising the social construct which leads to mothers suffering from feelings of inadequacy, isolation, being overwhelmed and the financial burden of providing unpaid labour.

Before getting involved with Sammy and Consilience, Fariss considered joining the Pensare (TS 178). While Orion society does afford a single woman choices in the manner of expressing her disagreement with the patriarchal status quo and embracing certain freedoms, all these choices serve to cast them as ‘other’: they are either undercover *Swestr*, or they are mercenaries and soldiers. In line with Body Theory, Rast’s and Fariss’s exceptional status is reinforced by their bodies, which are, like them, larger than life. In order to grasp freedom, de Pierres implies, a woman has to be more than ordinary, emphasising that freedom, sadly, is not available to the majority of women, and that all choices have consequences.

Fariss is aware of the value of freedom, and even the ‘conflicting emotions’ Thales stirs in her (TS 381) do not lead to her compromising that freedom. While Fariss experiences emotions (which are stereotypically associated with women), she is able to set them aside

when she makes decisions regarding her future and her freedom in a manner that is more typically masculine.¹⁸ As behoves the male hero of a romance, she exacts a promise to wait from Thales, leaving him with a ‘lingering, deep, breath-robbing kiss’ and the promise of being together in a far-off future (Campbell, 2004:329).

Bethany the scientist

Yet another female character who does not conform to societal expectations is Bethany Ionil, known as Beth. As the sister of warlord Lasper Farr, Bethany brings to mind the ‘scientist’s daughter’, a stereotypical character often used to depict women in early science fiction (Amis, 1975:45; Russ, 2007:209). Bucking the trope, though, there is both depth and complexity to Bethany, whose gender, sexuality and approach to motherhood deeply inflect the novels.

Jo-Jo first meets Bethany in prison. As her story unfolds, it becomes clear that her physical circumstances are symbolic of the psychological prison in which she finds herself. Jo-Jo describes her as having a ‘sagging thin arse and tiny odd-shaped breasts’ and in spite of, or perhaps because of, her being ‘permanently naked, she didn’t attract him in the slightest’ (CS 31). Beth’s body reflects the impoverished state she finds herself in after abandoning her child.

Mostly based on his lack of sexual interest, Beth is able to confide in Jo-Jo about her decade-long relationship with a Mioloaquan man who forced her to abandon her mixed-race child before abandoning her in turn. Jo-Jo’s reaction to this demonstrates the negativity surrounding such inter-species relationships: ‘You were flipping a scaly? How

¹⁸See Lisa Barrett and Eliza Bliss-Moreau’s ‘She’s emotional. He’s having a bad day: Attributional explanations for emotional stereotypes’ (2009:649-656).

the hell did that happen?’ (CS 30-32). While the relationship is afforded a certain level of respectability (by heteronormative standards) through its duration and the fact that they have a child together, it is clearly not the norm in Orion. This surface recognition is reminiscent of gay relationships in modern-day, liberal society, where there is a greater level of mainstream acceptance of long-term, stable gay relationships, helped by the presence of children (Agonito, 2014:38).

The child in this case has to receive ‘genetic alterations’ to live (CS 32), which highlights the depth of Beth’s and her partner’s mutual alienness. The parents are not altered, however, and neither are their cultural expectations. Beth and the child eventually become ‘an embarrassment’ and the alien man turns more and more to his own species until Beth ‘found him lying with one’ (CS 32). In their different expectations, Bethany and her lover are so far apart that they are from different species. De Pierres uses this negative intimacy to comment on the importance of parents communicating before a child is born, and on the impact that a child can have on the sexual and emotional intimacy of its parents, a phenomenon supported by Agonito (2014:35-42).

In her fear of losing her man, Beth makes the ‘moral mistake’ of abandoning her child; sacrificing motherhood in an effort to claim love. Her subsequent abandonment by the man for whom she has sacrificed all brings regret, begging the question of what she would have done if he had not left her stranded. There are definite correlations between this cautionary tale against romantic involvement (and procreation) between species and *And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill’s Side* (Tiptree, 1972). While she feels deep regret afterward, Bethany, for a while, indulges in what Agonito (2014) refers to as the ‘last taboo’, and walks away from motherhood. De Pierres uses this tale of intimacy gone

wrong to highlight the obvious double standards – a bad father is bad, but not remotely as bad as a bad mother.

When the Saqr attack, Bethany selflessly returns to the cells to rescue Jo-Jo and Petalu-Mau. This is reciprocated when Jo-Jo calms her terror in the darkness (CS 61), but she again comes to the rescue when Jo-Jo is floating untethered in space, a victim to feelings of utter hopelessness and uselessness until he hears ‘Bethany’s voice ... in his helmet, drowning out his own cries’ (CS 135). The friendship that develops between Bethany, Jo-Jo and Petalu-Mau serves to redeem Beth, but it also implies that Jo-Jo and Petalu-Mau may be fulfilling the role of surrogate children in the place of the daughter she has abandoned (CS 37).

Throughout their association, there are numerous instances of semi-intimacy between Mira and Beth. They share intimate information with each other and find themselves in situations that can definitely be deemed intimate, yet their relationship never develops into anything deeper than superficial friendship. Mira briefly considers confiding in Beth (CS 323), but does not, and later feels ‘a pang of loss for Bethany Ionil’s brief friendship’ (TS 8). Three factors contribute to this failure of intimacy between the two women. Firstly, the depth of each woman’s individual misery keeps her from truly connecting. Mira is wracked with emotional pain and Beth is ‘submerged in her guilt’ (CS 284). Another factor that feeds the distance between them is Mira’s deliberate withholding of information regarding Djes: ‘She would never tell Bethany the rest of it – how Trinder Pellegrini was a treacherous, selfish man who had seduced her Jess’ (CS 284). Mostly, however, there is an element of distrust on Mira’s part based on Bethany’s relationship with the powerful Lasper Farr (CS 281-282).

There is such deep enmity between Bethany and her brother that the ‘animosity between the siblings poisoned the air’ (MS 92). Beth fears Lasper for ‘the casual and complete callousness with which he dispensed violence’ (MS 93), but her need to find her daughter is strong enough for her to put her pride and fear aside, saying ‘You were right. And I was wrong, Lasper. And I need your help’ (CS 257).

When Beth asks Lasper for help, her deepest resentment against him is his attitude toward her gender and her sexuality, which he uses to belittle her in every sense. Lasper implies that the only reason Beth can think is because he taught her to do so (MS 94) representing a typical male view of women’s intellect as inferior to that of men.

When Beth accuses her brother of ‘[n]ot seeing the things driven by simple emotion’, his response is to attack her morals: ‘While you, my dear, have always given in far too readily to simple primitive urges’ (MS 95). Lasper despises his sister for her ‘preferences’ and for her ‘attraction to alien species’ (MS 100). Beth has indeed made poor choices driven by emotion and sexual need, but the manner in which Lasper uses those mistakes to cast a slur on her confidence, her intellectual ability and her competence is a demonstration of how women in any patriarchal society are punished for and held back by their sexuality. It remains an active double standard – ‘[a] woman’s worth and status are diminished if she is perceived as being sexually experienced, whereas a man’s social status is enhanced by his sexual promiscuity’ (La France, 2010:299).

Lasper may be mistaken in judging Beth’s entire character by her sexuality, but he is correct in his accusations of poor judgement. Even after the Mio man has deserted first their child and then Beth on Araldis, she still goes to him when he calls for her. Thales comes across them behind a closed door:

The front of her nightdress was open, her eyes closed and mouth creased in pain. Beside her was a stranger; a heavily gilled and scaled Mioloaquan with modified limbs and primitive facial features. The Mio's sharp teeth and fish mouth were clamped around her nipples and its fins were lashing at her side, whipping against her flesh ... When she saw Thales her expression sharpened. The Mio pulled his teeth roughly from her breast. Thales did not miss the flush spreading across her chest and the quickening of her breath at the pain. (MS 98)

Both the opening of the door (MS 98) and Beth's plea for acceptance from Thales (MS 99) symbolise her 'coming out' in a sexual sense. Thales, however, feels betrayed.¹⁹ He wants to '[r]un to his home, and his wife, and his bed; to the comfort of the things he knew and trusted'. He is so insecure in his masculinity that he actually seeks reassurance about his own sexual prowess: 'Are you saying that I cannot please you?' Her transgression lies as much in her not being 'the simple, sad woman he'd thought her to be' (MS 222), as in her making him doubt his masculinity. Through this portrayal of intimacy, de Pierres provides a succinct encapsulation of patriarchal attitudes toward female exploration of not only alternative sexualities, but any sexuality or sexual desire that is considered 'unwomanly'.

Deserting her, as well as coercing her into feeling she has no choice but to desert her own child, constitute abuse by the Mio. It defies belief that Beth would still go to the man who subjected her to this, and the automatic assumption would be that she is acting like a typical abused woman who is unable to break away from a cycle of abuse.²⁰ This element remains, but closer reading of her subsequent conversation with Thales shows her reasoning to be more closely aligned with traditional masculine attitudes than with traditionally feminine ones: she 'switched on the light' as she enters the room, removing

¹⁹ Thales's sexual approach to Beth stems from a need for comfort. Beth's decision to provide sexual intimacy, and thus the comfort Thales seeks, might be based on a subconscious need to comfort the child whom she has abandoned.

²⁰ According to Nikki Wedgwood (2009:336), 'sexual desire is socially constructed (along with gender) through a long and conflict-ridden process'. She further states that feminists and gender theorists alike need to do more research on why certain people are sexually attracted to certain other people, and specifically why women are often physically attracted to men who are abusive toward them.

any vestiges of shame and secret, thus strengthening the ‘coming out’ theme. She apologises, but not for what she just did, only for ‘not [having] been more discreet ... She didn’t look guilty. Nor did she seem to want forgiveness’ (MS 99). Beth states her appreciation for their relationship, but says ‘that is not enough. I have sought pain for a long time. It’s part of me, and you are only temporary’. Like a man, she is completely unemotional when she puts the picture in perspective for Thales, exposing his hypocrisy and the ridiculousness of his attitude. She reminds him that he has no right to expect exclusivity from her: ‘You have a wife, Thales, who you yearn to see ... Even you could not pretend that what you feel for me is anything more than convenience ... I don’t judge you for it, Thales. So please don’t judge me. You asked me for comfort and I gave it to you. Would you deny me the same even if my comfort sometimes takes a different form?’ (MS 99). She claims her right to be different and embraces her sexuality, refusing to give either her lover or her brother ‘the pleasure of guilt or embarrassment’ (MS 100). This clarity and courage is extraordinary in a woman living in a society as traditional as theirs, and Beth claiming her right to sexuality echoes de Pierres’ general theme regarding the reclamation of fertility rights.

Proving herself to be the exception rather than the rule, Bethany assumes leadership of Consilience (TS 378). The similarities between Beth and Rast, another female leader, manifest in physical changes. Beth looks ‘older, more worn, but there was a tautness to her body, a resolution that comes with assuming responsibility. He’d seen it before in Lasper Farr, and the mercenary Rast Randall’. Thales’s observation echoes what de Pierres has already established through her portrayal of Rast and Fariss – for a woman in Latino

society to seize freedom and operate independently, she has to eschew femininity to a certain degree and embrace a performance of masculinity.²¹

Samuelle

Samuelle, the leader of Consilience, leads without any discernible masculine traits. While she is as ‘different’ from the other women as Rast, Fariss and Bethany are; her difference lies not in her masculinity, physical prowess or sexuality, but in her age.²² Samuelle is not only described as an older woman; she is described by Thales as an *aged* woman with ‘the oldest face he’d ever seen’ (MS 236). Samuelle’s inclusion in the *Sentients of Orion* is a definite acknowledgement by de Pierres of the role ageism plays in conjunction with sexism in the subjugation of women. Rosenthal (1990:1-6) posits that feminism has to a great degree failed older women: ‘Powerful myths and stereotypes of aging limit the lives of middle-aged and old people. For women as they age, the intersection of ageism with sexism can be devastating in circumscribing their activities and controlling their self-image. The varieties of ageism affecting women grow out of sex role stereotypes and discrimination combined with ideas about the nature of the middle-aged and old’. De Pierres’ portrayal of Samuelle defies these preconceptions.

Renowned feminist, Germaine Greer, referring to both the emotional and physical effects of menopause, paints a wretched picture of post-menopausal women who aim to hold on to youth and beauty, which, in modern-day, Westernized society, signify their worth (Greer, 1991:4-5, 338). Instead of advanced rejuvenation techniques as in Orion, aging women in

²¹ This raises the question of whether Orion society expects a degree of masculinity in a leader, or because masculinity is an inherent quality of leadership, something which falls beyond the scope of my thesis.

²² In referring to possible double binds women in leadership find themselves in, Jamieson says ‘childbearing is expected to be chosen over intellectual pursuits, silence over shame, and invisibility over acknowledgement of aging’ (1995:14).

modern-day, Westernized society use plastic surgery and make-up to retain their beauty. A study by Laura Hurd Clarke and Andrea Bundon (2009:208) shows older women to believe that the use of lipstick is ‘an essential means of proving to health professionals, family members, and friends that they were healthy and independent’. Samuelle, however, is a woman who chooses to embrace ‘the positive aspects of being a frightening old woman’ (Greer, 1991:4). By eschewing youth, she frees herself from the beauty myth, enabling her to take on a leadership position. She confides in Tekton:

‘After the war I decided to stop rejuve,’ she mused aloud ... ‘I found it damn useful looking like an old woman – in ways I had never dreamt – as long, of course as I kept my agility. Looking old’s one thing, creakin’ round like a bag-o’-bones is another. So I modified my suit ...’ (MS 292 – 293)

A current example of the benefits of ‘looking like an old woman’ is that Samuelle is able take advantage of the stereotypical expectation that old people will always behave legally and ethically to convince the station guard that she is carrying drugs in her spare suit, and not a dead body or booty, thereby smuggling Tekton to safety (MS 290-291).

Stowing Tekton in her spare nano-suit creates an oddly intimate situation that allows for gender inversion. His power and prestige are stripped from him as he assumes the outward appearance of a female nano-suit. The station guard manoeuvres Tekton in the suit in a similar way to a woman being subjected to unwanted sexual attention: ‘Tekton endured the rough handling, disgusting grunts and loud profanity from the soldier who lugged him through the ship’s corridors’ (MS 291). The role inversion not only briefly casts Tekton as a woman, but as an *aged* woman. Inside the suit, which is made for old women, he ‘could not shake the notion that he was in a burial wrap’ (MS 291). De Pierres uses this intimate encounter to comment on the stereotypical way society views older women. Men think of

the end of ovulation as ‘a premature death, a tragedy’ (Greer, 1991:3), and for all her practical use in our beauty- and sex-obsessed society, an aged woman might as well already be wearing her death shroud.

In a scene that Tekton witnesses through the future-predicting bifurcation device, Lasper Farr forces Samuelle to shed her combat suit, leaving her naked and exposed in front of a room full of people. Tekton sees her as ‘old, and her skin looked several sizes too big for her skeleton. It hung from her neck and belly and arms like a loose shift’ (TS 124). When Samuelle refuses ‘to be shamed’, thus rendering his emotional violence moot, Lasper Farr turns to physical violence, having his soldier punch Samuelle ‘in the back’ (TS 125). This act of violent physical intimacy leaves Tekton more shocked than Samuelle’s aged nakedness does. He bemoans her pain, thinking that Samuelle is ‘a good woman despite her flaccid old age’ (TS 126).

Together with Jelly Hob, Samuelle is written off as ‘ancient and seemingly harmless’ (TS 233), yet de Pierres challenges the stereotype by depicting her as powerful enough to ‘enrage’ Lasper Farr (TS 334-335) and, more importantly, to initiate the revolution leading to the fall of the powerful male warlord. The simple message of an old woman: ‘Sammy says the time is now’ (TS 357) brings an end to Lasper Farr’s empire and his tyranny.

Miranda Seward

All of the women discussed so far in this chapter are involved in struggles for survival, contributing in various ways to the war against the Saqr, which raises questions about the characterisation of the uninvolved, self-serving Miranda Seward. The Dictor is a woman of excesses and her nature is reflected in her ‘bosoms quivering in hyperbeat with her chins’ (DS 210). According to Tekton, it seems ‘almost as if her chins acted as repositories for

the food, freeing her tongue to do what it did best – complain’ (DS 242). She has ‘more than her fair share of chins and equally shivery thighs’ (DS 114). Miranda’s appetite for food is matched by her appetite for sex (CS 224), but while such appetites in Fariss O’Dea speak of strength and health, in Miranda, they somehow bespeak inadequate control and a lack of morals. According to Janet Tomiyama and Traci Man, obesity is ‘stigmatized’ and there is much social pressure on overweight people to conform to the slimness ideal (2013:4). De Pierres could thus be commenting on fat shaming which is prevalent in modern-day Westernized society, or simply be depicting Miranda as a weak, indulgent woman whose body reflects her excesses.

Miranda is the only woman Godhead at Belle-Monde, a fact she uses in her favour. Seduction is a tool for her as she has sex with Jo-Jo ‘in return for an introduction to God’ (DS 114), and elicits information from Tekton, using ‘artful timing’ to expose her flesh to him (DS 79). Miranda’s lack of emotional involvement in her sexual encounters, and her treating men like ‘priced meat’ (DS 211), does not conform to the stereotypical feminine image. She is, however, able to switch smoothly into portraying a girlish side as she produces a ‘single tear’ and ‘lifted her skirt to display the full undulation of her thighs’ when she is caught snooping through Tekton’s materials (DS 244).

Miranda is proud of her ‘repertoire’ of ‘erotic’ techniques (DS 114), but more often than not these are applied for functional purposes and not for her own sexual pleasure. The one time Miranda has sexual intercourse without any particular motive is when Tekton finds her ‘quaffing champagne and eating oysters out of parts of Doris’ that even Tekton, Doris’s lover, has not accessed before (DS 243). Her choice of sexual partner in this motive-free instance allows for the possibility that Miranda might be lesbian, and not bisexual, only having sex with men when it serves a purpose. De Pierres shows how

‘abusing’ and performing gender in a specific manner in order to attain her aims seems to have compromised Miranda’s choices with regard to sexuality.

Miranda is driven by ambition and there is very little she would not do to further her career. In order to fund her academic research, she accepts money to create a biological weapon used to suppress the mental capacity of the people of Scola (TS 259). It could be coincidence, but de Pierres chooses one academic’s scholarly ambitions to pave the way for the destruction of a whole planet of other academics. This is surely a critique of the ambitious and manipulative behaviour of academics in modern-day liberal democratic society, who show no ethics in their research or academic conduct. It has been implied (Hoff Sommers, 2015:no pagination) that academics have ‘hijacked’ feminism, using it as a political correctness platform to suppress freedom of expression on campuses.

Added to this, Miranda is the only woman who is never involved in any form of emotional intimacy with another person. She is a world removed from the women on Araldis, who are bound together by issues of survival. A criticism directed against modern feminism is that it has become a theory-based discipline exercised by academics, far removed from the lives of everyday women (Nussbaum, 1999:45; Braidotti, (2005:171). There is room for the possibility that de Pierres is using Dicter Miranda Seward to comment on the current state of feminism and feminist academics. There is also the suggestion in the depiction of Miranda’s intimacies (or lack thereof) that women in positions of great power (such as being companion to a god) lose their ‘feminine’ ability to forge meaningful relationships.²³

²³ All the women who are depicted as ‘free’, such as Rast, Fariss, Samuelle and to a certain extent Miranda and Beth, conform to Ezzell’s signifiers of masculinity, namely, ‘control of self and others, resisting being controlled, resisting exploitation’ (2016:192).

Conclusion

The other women on Araldis, the housewives, lovers, daughters and soldiers who have survived the Saqr attack and the brutal escape from Ipo, have negotiated ways in which to come to terms with their sexuality and perform gender in ways that allow them to function optimally in a hostile patriarchal society. The circle of female friendship is complete when Mira walks along the beach toward the survivors, bringing hope of rescue, and the women recognise her and show joy in their recognition. The women ‘spill’ down the beach to meet her. Cass ‘broke from shelter and ran down to the beach, arms outstretched’. Djes, ‘like Mulravey’, ran down the beach (TS 363). Rast lifts Mira ‘from her feet to embrace her’ (TS 371) and Josefia Genarro cries ‘She’s come for us!’ (TS 363).

Lorraine Nencel (2004:no pagination) notes that many studies on sexuality are ‘primarily concerned with how oppositional gender relations are expressed and affect women in their sexual experience and practices’ thereby defining women's subjectivity through the paradigm of power. She feels that even the increasing emphasis on positive aspects such as ‘agency instead of victimization’ serve only to prop up the paradigm of power. Nencel, however, writes within a radical feminist paradigm, which does not fit in with my more literary study of intimacy. Although the role of power in the gender performance and sexuality of the various women discussed in this chapter has an impact on their lives, whether through instances of inequality or instances of empowerment, the aim of analysing these instances is not to strengthen oppositional gender categories. Rather, it is to examine how the author uses instances of intimacy to comment on the gender status quo. The findings of this examination will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

Chapter Five: Men of Character

Masculinity is never a state comfortably obtained and occupied; each day sees a new onslaught of assaults and tests. Masculinity is a project never complete.
(Mechling, 2001: 198)

Introduction

Examples of ‘real’ men, or those who conform to hegemonic masculinity, are myriad in science fiction. Sometimes they are simply themselves, but other times these characters are used by authors to comment on how society influenced masculinity and our concepts of it. Susan Wood, for example, posits that Kate Wilhelm’s *No Light in the Window* yielded the first example of how men were skewed and damaged by ‘conformity to North America’s ideal of the strong, silent male’ (Wood, 1980:9). There are ample examples in *The Sentients of Orion* of how the men, especially in stressful situations, choose a course of action that goes against their natural inclination when they think their action of choice might be deemed unmanly. This could lead to more importance being attached to their performance of masculinity than to their behaving ethically – their façade of manliness thus superseding their ‘essential selves’.

Men are abundantly represented in *The Sentients of Orion*, but two men in particular stand out for their physical intimacy with Mira and their role in the outcome of the plot. They are Trinder Pellegrini, the Latino prince and Jo-Jo Rasterovich, mining scout, drifter and the God Discoverer. This chapter will focus on the intimacies of Trinder and Jo-Jo in turn to examine how de Pierres applies those intimate encounters to comment on the gender status quo. The analysis will address various questions regarding masculinity: do Trin, Jo-Jo and the other men demonstrate masculine hegemony? Do they measure up, or attempt to measure up, to the societal ideal of ‘the manly man’? Are they true to their own selves, or

slaves to an idealised performance of masculinity? Do they, in moments of intimacy, oppress or empower the women who cross their paths?

Trinder Pellegrini

The main antagonist, and the man whose actions largely drive the plot, is Trinder Pellegrini (known as ‘Trin’). His performance of masculinity plays out in terms of his leadership role, but also in two intimate relationships: one with Mira Fedor, and the other with Djes, an alien child. Before looking into societal expectations that cause Trin to perform masculinity in the manner that he chooses to perform it, these two relationships and the light they shed on gender depiction in *The Sentients of Orion* need to be analysed.

Trin is a prince, and also Mira’s initial love interest. Accordingly, he can be expected to conform to the fairytale stereotype of a tall, handsome hero (Campbell, 2004:18; Vogler, 1998:24). Contrary to this expectation, there is no physical description of Trin. Is he tall? Is he fat? His inability to carry Seb Malocchi (DS 142) raises some questions about his physical condition, but no description is given to enlighten the reader until very near to the end of the series when Jo-Jo describes Trin in unflattering terms as a ‘thin, crimson-skinned ’esque with an aquiline nose that dominated his gaunt hawkish face’ (TS 274). The fact that there is no initial description of him might be an early indication by de Pierres that Trin does not adhere to classical hero requirements.

While Trin’s relationship with Mira is discussed in detail in Chapter Two of this thesis, there are aspects of his character not related to Mira that influence the depictions of masculinity in *The Sentients of Orion* as a whole. Trin is the face of patriarchy on Araldis, and while it is possible to sympathise with him initially, his choices and his insecurities continually alienate him from those around him, and thus, from the reader. The themes of

loneliness and belonging are strong throughout the series and Trin's desperation to belong manifests itself in his drive to procreate, something that ironically leads to his being the only character left completely alone at the end of the novels.

After his inability to have sex with Mira on Tourmaline Beach (DS 30-31), Trin is shaken to his very core. While Mira is greatly affected by his rejection, Trin is devastated by his inability. Trin deals with his 'failure' by becoming addicted to 'bravura' and starting to fail his Studium courses. According to Michael Johnson Jr. (2010:239), '[s]ocially dominant males aspire to be "genuinely" male by producing an ejaculative response according to a rigidly observed and ruthlessly imposed timing'. Ejaculation (and maintaining an erection) thus becomes imperative in order for a sex act to be considered successful, and men who are unable to conform are punished 'by indicting the validity of their "maleness"'. Sexual impotence for men also tends to carry far more 'stigma' than for women as their manliness is tied up with their ability to procreate (Dudgeon and Inhorn, 2003:37-38). In depicting Trin's failure to perform sexually, de Pierres not only openly addresses what has long been considered a taboo subject, but also highlights the closeness of the link between sexual functionality and modern-day perception of masculinity.

There are many reasons, apart from normal teenage fumbling, why Trin is not able to perform sexually. One of these could be his fear of not living up to the societal expectation of stepping into his father's shoes, and taking up the mantle of the patriarchy. He is also intimidated by Mira's sexual and emotional expectations. This is validated during the attack on Villa Fedor, when his continued inability to provide what Mira needs (DS 173) becomes a likely cause of his resorting to physical violence during their escape (DS 187).

His drive to continue his line destroys any chance of redemption for him in Mira's eyes. Even though he believes that he did what he did in order to save his world, Trin is wracked with guilt after raping Mira. Sleep turns into a hellish semi-consciousness filled with 'fear and contrition':

It was in that state that Mira Fedor was with him most often; her dust-caked skin and exhausted eyes, her overtly thin body, the thick-ridged tight pressure of her virginity as he took it from her.

You must understand ... he told her over and over while he slept ... understand why I did it.

But the Mira in his dreams did not understand. She thrashed against him, outraged and desperate. At times she transformed into his mother and he was the one who cried and begged to be left alone. (CS 22)

After the rape, Trin and Mira do not meet again until the very end of the story. In spite of their geographical separation, their fates are intertwined by virtue of a number of factors: the effects of the traumatic rape on both of them; Mira's subsequent pregnancy; and her need to find Trin again in order to rescue her adopted children.

In addition to Mira, Trin's other intimate relationship is with Djeserit Ionil, an underage alien girl. Even while he finds her alien enough to wonder if she might be 'contagious with something' (DS 133), Trin is very focused on Djes's sexuality. He notices the many skin folds covering her pubic area and feels shame when he is sexually excited by the pressure of her small breasts against him. He has to press 'himself flat against the bedside to hide his growing erection' and the 'sensation of her lips on his palm sets his blood throbbing' (DS 134). Trin flees, more ashamed of being sexually aroused by an alien than of being aroused by a child.

Trin is not oblivious to the fact that Djes is a young girl, but instead of questioning his attraction to her, he manages to lay the blame at Djes's door. Faja calls Djes a 'bino, to which Trin replies 'Hardly a 'bino, Baronessa ... *She could not be and stir such things in me*' (DS 145). In an intertextual allusion to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1958), Trin does not take ownership of his sexual reaction to the girl child, but instead transmutes his reaction into a sexual action taken by Djes, which is completely unfounded at the time. Later, Djes does take the initiative and seduces Trin for all intents and purposes (DS 147), but for him to 'blame' her initially for *his* attraction is specious and something that closely mirrors modern-day reality.

When Djes seduces Trin, her 'strangeness fuelled his passion, as if repulsion was his true attractor. She was bold and vulnerable at once. But more than that ... she was alien and unrestrained' (DS 147). He sees her as 'part ginko and not quite an adult' and wonders if 'her strangeness cured him of his need for bravura' (DS 160). Trin's by now much-vaunted fear of women (DS 31; DS 98) seems to be negated by Djes's alienness. He is truly enamoured of the 'alien dark' (Pearson, 2006:176).

Trin himself has trouble understanding his sudden intense attachment to Djes. He saves her (DS 175), carries her (DS 217) and knows that he cannot leave her: 'He didn't have time to examine his reasons for thinking so – but from the moment he had seen her alive after the bomb blast at Villa Fedor he had wanted to protect her. He knew that if he lived, then so must she' (DS 220). Mira cannot understand Trin's motivations either: 'Djeserit was a juvenile alien on a world that despised her kind and Trin Pellegrini was a privileged humanesque used to the finer things. What use, what attraction could he possibly have for her?' (DS 218).

To give Trin the benefit of the doubt, he might simply be in love with Djes, caring for another person deeply for the first time in his life and therefore putting her well-being above his own. He is, however, projecting the deficiencies he feels in his masculinity onto Djes. It is ironic that through having sexual intercourse with an alien, which is a social taboo, he can function normally, which in turn validates him in society's eyes. Projection is an important part of attachment, and Trin projecting his need for masculinity onto Djes becomes inseparable from the love he feels for her.

The intensity of Trin's attraction to Djes is further amplified by the repulsion he feels for her alien nature. He is attracted to Djes's 'unwashed alien smell' (CS 24) at the same time he is repelled by it, and this ambivalence governs his feelings toward her (DS 372). It is also her 'otherness' that determines Djes's role in Trin's future fantasies – she would be 'in the background of his life, smoothing paths, supporting him' (CS 24). All hinges on the Crown aristo, Mira Fedor, returning with the child he had begat with her by rape; based on her alienness, Djes can never be more than a background accoutrement. Djes's racial otherness renders her inferior in the power dynamic between her and Trin, in a manner similar to how women, simply by virtue of being 'non-male', are cast as other, and thus associated with lack and deficiency.

It takes a long time for Trin to develop a different perspective on his attraction to Djes. His main concern is with what other people think in response to her being alien. It is only once she turns her head in shame at being alien, that he suddenly sees 'the child in her and guilt surged through him. Had Mira Fedor been right? Was his relationship with the half-breed Miolaquan a corruption?' (CS 29).

Djes's turning more alien 'each passing day' (TS 12) is symbolic of her increasing independence. She is the one who takes the physical initiative, cupping Trin's face and explaining that she has only been exploring further, not avoiding him. Only once she has initiated the touch does he pull her into his lap (like a child) and they kiss (CS 363). He later wonders how he can find her 'even remotely attractive' (TS 12). For him, Djes's 'devotion to him somehow neutralized the offensiveness of her independent manner' and her refusal to listen to him (CS 364). Trin is annoyed by Djes's independence, mostly as it implies that some aspects of her existence are beyond his control, which is a threat to his masculinity.

Trin's attitude toward Djes is the most offensive aspect of this situation, and also the feature that reveals his true nature as a masculine oppressor. Djes is coming into her own by growing into her alien form, but Trin is 'unsure whether it pleased or displeased him' (MS 15). Now, not only her alienness, but also the hero status afforded her by the other survivors, threatens Trin. His ambivalence at her growing independence is two-pronged. Firstly, he is jealous and resentful of her outshining him and usurping his leadership (MS 16), but of more importance for this study, he feels threatened by a woman showing strength and self-determination (Ratliff and Oishi, 2013:688). At the same time that the survivors are all dependent on her 'ability to swim like a fish' (TS 12), Trin is planning to 'win her back' from the sea the moment they reach safety (MS 43). His insecurity makes her independence a threat (MS 211). Instead of embracing the positive aspects that Djes could bring to his leadership, he fears it; perhaps even more than he does her alienness. She is to be allowed her freedom, and even her otherness, but only in as far as he benefits from it. The moment circumstances allow Trin will reshape Djes into something less alien, somebody less strong.

The role of provider has long been considered a male role (e.g. Christiansen and Palkovitz, 2001:84; Ehrenreich, 1983:100). Trin fails in this role. By pointing out Trin's failure in this regard, de Pierres confronts the stereotype that forces men into accepting the role of breadwinner if they wish to be considered mature and manly (Ehrenreich, 1983:105). Instead, it is Djes who fishes 'throughout the day', providing food. The people who thank her call her a 'ginko girl' and that causes Trin to further remain 'distant'. The sound of the name she is called makes 'him feel sick' (CS 229). He does not feel that way in defence of Djes, though, but in disgust at himself for being with her. He fails not only as provider, but as protector and lover too.

When he finally acknowledges Djes as 'his woman' (MS 128), Trin embraces her in front of everybody – the Carabinere, the women and his mother, saying: 'We need you, Djes ... I need you' (MS 18). It is as if the realisation of his need enables him to overcome the social barriers that have so far kept them apart. Those who might object are the Carabinere (representing the patriarchal band of brothers), the women (who represent society), and Jilda (who represents all the meanings that coalesce around the figure of his mother). Trin's acknowledgement might seem sincere, but is, in the context of his continued suspicions and fears regarding her (MS 131; MS 209), simply another effort to control Djes.

Trin shows consideration for Djes's welfare (MS 207), but his concern is again aimed at affording him control of her movements; an attempt that fails as she stumbles 'to the nearest cave before he could finish' speaking. To add insult to injury, she leaves him to meet Cass Mulravey. The two women sit close, 'murmuring to each other' (MS 207). This incident has several gender inflections. While Cass and Djes are talking strategy in the

fashion of male soldiers, the Carabinere ‘moved around ... preparing the food’ in a way normally associated with women.

Another gender aspect that de Pierres is addressing here is that of societal expectations and the fluctuating nature of morals. Amanda B. Diekman and Alice H. Eagly (2000:1186) argue that stereotypes are dynamic, and ‘readily encompass the complexity of change over time’. Lopez-Zafra and Garcia-Retamero’s work on the dynamic nature of gender stereotypes substantiates these claims (2012:169-183). In the same way, Trin reflects how only ‘a few weeks ago, Djes’s open near-nudity would have shocked and disgusted him, and yet no one noticed her undress, so intent were they all on survival, so trusting and used were they to her ways. Djes had saved them. She would be forgiven anything’, proving that mores, like stereotypes (including gender stereotypes), are changeable depending on circumstances and on need (MS 207).

When sexual intercourse between Djes and Trin is described, de Pierres depicts Trin as a surprisingly considerate lover. Djes wants to get down on the ground, but instead he bends her over and penetrates her from behind. This is not for any reason of pleasure or experimentation, but the ‘ground was too rough for her bare skin. He would not risk injuring her’ (TS 145). He eases her into the unfamiliar position, stroking her back and murmuring ‘gentle reassurances’ until she relaxes, ‘arriving at her climax before him’ (TS 145). He thinks of her orgasm as ‘his success in pleasuring her’ and that enables him to orgasm too. While many men measure their sexual success by their partner’s orgasm, the male orgasm is deemed even more integral to what is deemed sexual ‘success’. Johnson (2010:239) refers to the ‘ejaculation imperative’ whereby ‘hegemonic notions of masculinity’ are established through the importance attached to male orgasm. Adhering to this one aspect of his masculine performance, overshadows for a moment Trin’s other,

more selfish efforts to establish power and masculinity. His tenderness could be seen as atypical behaviour for him, but ironically, this break from one manner of masculine oppression only serves to perform another facet of masculine hegemony.

Trin's perception of and wish to conform to what is considered masculine dictates his actions. Instead of sharing his true feelings with Djes, he hides his insecurities from her: 'He nearly told her how he felt – the jealousy born from seeing her with Joe on the beach that night – but pride and wariness stopped him' (TS 263). Hiding his feelings impedes intimacy between Trin and Djes, and while he holds his dignity intact, he loses an opportunity to invest and grow emotionally. He literally rejects the shoulder Djes offers him to lean on. Even though he 'dearly wanted to' lean on her, it is 'something he couldn't do. He must never do. As it was, too many of them saw her as his strength' (TS 264). After all, 'he was Principe' (TS 263). Trin never examines his feelings and never allows himself to act in any manner that would render him less masculine (or open him to the possibility of appearing less than masculine). De Pierres is commenting, through this careful and consistent depiction of Trin's selfish and self-harming performance of masculinity, on the impact of masculine hegemony in the leadership of the patriarchy.

As a person, but also as the crown prince, Trin's character is shaped by two main forces, the first of which is an unhappy childhood. Trin hates the 'suffocation' and neediness of his spurned mother, but when he seeks escape in his father's company, he is dismissed with a decided 'lack of interest' (DS 28). Trin reacts to his father's lack of recognition and his mother's emotional blackmail by 'nursing' his hurt and turning it on his mother in the form of verbally abusive utterances. According to Yvonne Vissing, Murray Straus, Richard Gelles and John Harrop (1991:224), verbal violence in interpersonal relationships can take the form of attack, degradation or coercion, all strategies that Trin applies

liberally to his mother. As much a victim of patriarchy as his mother is, Trin is helpless in the face of his father's rejection, but according to that same system, he is entitled to impose his frustration on his mother (Spitzberg, 2011:352).¹

Patriarchy condones and legitimises Trin's treatment of his mother, probably because, as Rich (1977:xiii) says, '[t]here is much to suggest that the male mind has always been haunted by the force of the idea of *dependence on a woman for life itself*, the son's constant effort to assimilate, compensate for, or deny the fact that he is "of woman born"'. Here de Pierres is negatively highlighting this aspect of modern-day reality since these actions, regardless of his motivation for them, do not add to Trin's charisma as a character or as a man.

The second influence that forges Trin's personality and his leadership is the fact that he is in effect a patriarch-in-waiting. In the shadow of his father, Trin is an impuissant figurehead without real influence. The one time Trin challenges his father politically, he is met with 'a cold, unforgiving stare' (DS 29) in compensation for which Trin surrounds himself with sycophantic friends, soaking in 'the salve of their clamour' (DS 29). These efforts of Trin to strengthen his masculinity are foiled as he is subjected to his father's 'superior' masculinity, leading to him performing more and more insincere and supplementary forms of masculinity to affirm his standing and his power.

Trin compensates by having meaningless sex with women he despises. Thanks to his position as Principe and the false courage he finds in the drug bravura, there are many such women in Trin's life. Chocetta and Lancia Silvio, two of Trin's women admirers, fall

¹ Also see 'Displaced aggression is alive and well: A meta-analytical view', where Amy Marcus-Newhall, William C. Pedersen, Mike Carlson and Norman Miller provide an in-depth discussion of their 'displaced aggression hypothesis' (2000:670-685).

‘apart like halves of sliced moist-fruit, making room for him against their ample thighs’ (DS 29). They are not skinny, but instead conform to the Araldis ideal of round, soft women. Body theory, as expounded by Bordo (1993:164), among other theorists, would see this as indicative of their lack of discipline and control: these are easy women with easy lives. The system asks no more of them than to attain ‘soft degrees’, to pleasure men and to bear children.

He’d been sleeping with the Silvio Marchesas on alternate nights, and sometimes with both of them together during their last term at the Studium. He knew it should have been exhilarating, two women, but their constant need for reassurance and attention spoiled things. He could smell his mother on them and the same weak familia-women’s way. No doubt both wanted to bear a Pellegrini child. But it would not be them that he chose. *Never them.* (DS 30)

Trin’s attitude toward the Marchesas is typical of men who are willing to have sex with women, but despise them for providing it (Mankayi, 2008:628). The women men have sex with are not necessarily the women they eventually choose to become mothers to their children, since ‘motherhood’ is often endowed with mystical qualities of purity (Rich, 1977:xv; Douglas and Michaels, 2004:27). Trin’s promiscuous sexuality sets the backdrop for de Pierres to comment on men struggling to establish their masculinity through sexual conquest, as well as on the double standard that allows for men with many sexual partners to be considered manly, while women who ‘sleep around’ are considered sluts.

The Oedipus complex, as proffered by Freudian psychology, would have Trin competing with his father for his mother’s attention. De Pierres, however, queers Trin’s Oedipal leanings in that he has no desire for attention from (or to have intercourse with) his

mother. Instead he unwittingly pursues his father's lover, the aptly named Luna, who is the 'most beautiful, and oldest' of the women in Riso's Bar (DS 34). She is unlike the ample-shouldered Silvio sisters and has a similar frame to Mira Fedor. The ideal on Araldis is portrayed as rounded and curvy, but first Mira and now Luna with her 'sheer magnificent beauty' is depicted as slender, showing their difference from Araldis ideals, but also aligning them with the current ideal in modern-day Western society. At the same time, though, Luna does not conform to current ideals at all in the fact that she is old. She is so close that Trin can see 'the tiny age lines round her lips' (DS 34). A facet of patriarchy is denying the sexuality of older women (Hurd Clarke and Bundon, 2009:198-212; Rosenthal, 1990:6), something de Pierres is juxtaposing here with men's desire for underage girls. By depicting the older Luna as sexual, de Pierres is not only contradicting the patriarchal tendency to desexualise older women, but also accentuating Trin's immature need for recognition from older women (particularly those who are sexually involved with his father).

The courtship dance Luna and Trin do is 'reserved for couples on their wedding night' (DS 34) and it becomes a skewed mirroring of Trin and Mira on Tourmaline Beach. Luna, like Mira, does not act in the way a demure aristo woman should, but *this* time, under the influence of bravura, Trin is able to do what is expected of him, his ardour leaving him 'sweating and breathing heavily', thrusting his hips 'against the crease of her flanks' and slipping his hands 'around her to cup ... her breasts' (DS 34). Trin is, however, again doomed not to be fulfilled. Luna gives 'a little *faux* cry' and is pulled away by her palace minders, leaving Trin feeling 'robbed and left punch-drunk'. The fears of social ridicule that made Trin fail sexually with Mira are made manifest when the Silvio sisters mock him mercilessly after Luna's departure: 'Did she dump you, Trinder? ... Did she leave you

rovente,² poor darling?’ (DS 35). Again de Pierres is not only pointing out the fragile state of Trin’s masculinity and societal pressure on men to enact their masculinity through ‘functional’ and visible sexual conquest, but she also highlights how men themselves are victims harmed by patriarchal stereotypes regarding gender and sexuality. According to Michael Messner ‘[i]ndividual men are always on the cusp of being publicly humiliated, either by their own stupidity by other men, or worse: by a beautiful woman’, a situation men avoid through participation in ‘the safety of the male group’ (2016:200).

In contrast to the stereotype of women prudently holding back sexual favours in return for financial recompense (Dudgeon and Inhorn, 2003:41), Luna is providing instead of withholding such favours in return for security – providing the foil to Mira’s virtue in the Madonna–whore dichotomy (Crawford and Popp, 2003:13). Trin wants her desperately, but he wants her not only for her ‘heavy and soft ... women’s breasts’ and her beauty. He wants her because he needs to ‘have Franco’s property’. *Property*. Historically, women have been seen as chattels of either their father or their husband, and in many parts of the world they are still legally bound to their male guardians, but Trin is not thinking of Luna as Franco’s property in this sense. He is thinking sexually and playing out the Oedipus myth by sexually supplanting his father as the procreator.

This intimate incident is non-stereotypical in three ways. Firstly, de Pierres places far more emphasis on describing Trin’s genitalia than Luna’s. She remains covered in brocade throughout, but the ‘fine hair’ on his groin as she ‘fixes her lips’ to him is described in detail. Also, Luna is the initiator and the aggressor in this situation, not Trin. There is a ‘cooling in his response’, which she ignores in her efforts to pleasure him. Finally, Trin does not end up triumphantly ravaging his father’s concubine. Instead, he is unable to

² A Latino term meaning hot and scorched.

maintain an erection and Luna mocks him like the Silvio sisters did: ‘What is it, bambino Principe? Are you afraid of women?’ (DS 98). De Pierres uses the intimacy with Luna to address parental influence and ageism, but also to underscore Trin’s powerlessness. Society imposes expectations of a masculine performance on him but simultaneously consistently undermines his masculinity and all his efforts to assert himself.

Probably from fear of rejection, Trin avoids any manner of closeness, not only sexual.³ When his nurse, the elderly Tina Galiotto, cries while packing his clothes for exile, he is embarrassed by ‘her show of emotion’ and has ‘no words of comfort for her’ (DS 106). Even emotional closeness from the woman who has most probably been a surrogate mother is something Trin seeks to ‘escape’ from. Similarly, he stands ‘stiff in the embrace’ of his own mother when she seeks to comfort him (DS 107).

Patriarchal power on Araldis is passed down from father to son and, as in many modern-day situations, is carried over regardless of the suitability of the progeny. Christian Montforte, for one, does not think much of Trin’s ability to rule on Araldis: ‘If you weren’t the Principe’s son I would leave you here for desertion. But you are our heir – *Crux help us*’ (DS 225). Montforte does not survive the Saqr to see Trin become ruler of a group of followers who are loyal to him based on a misplaced belief in his courage and leadership. One of Trin’s first thoughts as new Principe is, however, to perpetuate the system by producing an heir, without which he ‘would never govern this world’ (DS 371).

Procuring this heir and continuing his line becomes Trin’s sole purpose, for which he will sacrifice all. In the dark tunnels of the Pablo mine, the patriarch is preparing to procreate:

³ According to Masters et al, those ‘who don’t like themselves very much or who feel ashamed of who they are often have a difficult time establishing and maintaining intimacy because they are preoccupied with trying to prove themselves to others or with trying to gain recognition or respect’ (1986:235).

Now, with difficulty, he put all thoughts from his mind and slipped into meditation. The trance took some time to get right. He had not practiced it since he had come into his potency. It had seemed unnecessary.

As Trin struggled to find the exact inner route, he wondered if he had been foolish in neglecting the ritual. Familia males practiced daily before their potency commenced, so that they had command of themselves when it burgeoned. Once the rush was on them, the lessons were never as well learned: the mastery never as complete.

In silent mime he began the fertility mantra. When he was satisfied that his body was prepared he took the borsa from inside his fellala and removed from it a pliable strip: He carefully broke pieces from one end and chewed the dried plant in delicate bites. (DS 376-377)

De Pierres' use of such a complicated ritual for what should be a straightforward, natural act serves to accentuate the danger of complete patriarchal control of procreation. For a man to make a woman pregnant, he has to eat a certain plant and enter into a meditative state to access a fertility mantra. He has to *act*. All that is required of the woman is to receive his seed. She is passive, has no say in the procedure and no choice in accepting or rejecting the seed. She is a powerless breeding vessel, not unlike the situation in which some women still find themselves in present-day society.

Trin is troubled by what he is about to do, but as he delusionally believes he is saving the world, he is methodical in his planning. He first determines that Mira is indeed the only 'unrelated Crown aristo female' left alive (DS 376). He then activates his fertility and lures Mira out into the darkness. In order to re-establish some measure of trust and intimacy with Mira after having abandoned her at Dockside, Trin mentions to her that *Insignia* is safe and 'hidden at the palazzo on the Tourmaline Islands, near the beach where ... where ...' (DS 379). There is much calculation in Trin's choice of words. He knows that *Insignia* means everything to Mira, and he harkens back to a time when trust and intimacy did exist between him and Mira. He also tries to play on her loyalty to her family, but that has the

opposite effect from what Trin had hoped for. Mira lashes out at him, not only for alluding to her family, but also for having sexual intercourse with an underage Djes (DS 380).

‘Do not speak of Faja. Do not use my familia. I am no longer a ragazzo like Djeserit who will worship your royalty.’

‘Djeserit is not a ragazza, she is a woman.’

‘If that is so then you have forced her to be so – you have stolen her youth from her. It is indecent what you have done.’

Trin is so determined, however, that Mira’s confirmation of his indecency gives him the courage to proceed with the far greater indecency that he has rationalised himself into believing he *has* to perpetrate: beget a child with her through forced sexual intimacy. Trin admits that what he is doing is brutal (DS 381) and when he rapes her, he cries (DS 382), but that does not stop him from the all-important mission of continuing the Pellegrini line, and of perpetuating patriarchy. The rape itself and the impact it has on Mira have been discussed in detail in Chapter Two of this thesis. Of interest in this chapter is how de Pierres uses it as an example of how all else (especially women’s needs, rights and agency) falls to the wayside in modern-day, liberal democratic society’s perpetuation of masculine hegemony.

Trin delivers a particular performance of gender in his enactment of leadership. Robert Dean, when discussing Cold War masculinity, points out how the fear of being deemed ‘unmanly’ has a direct influence on choices made by politicians under international threat. According to his findings, ‘gender must be understood not as an independent *cause* of policy decisions, but as part of the very fabric of reasoning employed by officeholders’ (Dean, 1998:30).

The first time Trin chooses to act in a certain way to avoid being thought a coward is at the silo fires when Montforte's voice, calling him a 'useless cazzone' through the farcast, keeps him from running away: 'Christian's words stopped Trin like a blow to the head ... If he died here, he would be ... pathetic and ignoble. The idea was more overpowering than the fire roaring behind him... *I am important! I am ...* For no reason of valour – only the knowledge that the balance should be tipped' (DS 141). Trin returns to the fallen Seb Malocchi and carries him out of the flames. Saving another person's life is an act of intimacy. He has, however, 'never borne the true weight of another man' and he is 'betrayed' by his muscles. In spite of being doggedly heroic and mentally strong, Trin is spoilt and physically soft and weak (DS 142) and he acts bravely for one reason only – not to appear unmanly.

Trin's first true follower, Joe Scali, will forever be loyal to Trin, only because of his mistaken assumption that Trin knew where he had been hiding and had come back to Dockside especially to rescue him (DS 282). The intimacy between them is unfounded and artificially sustained by Trin. He does feel a 'twist of his conscience' at letting the lie become truth, but he is quite calculated in his deceit: 'Familia prized sacrifice and courage. Joe would be forever indebted to him and that could be useful enough' (DS 289). As a leader, his trust base is built on the lie of non-existent bravery, another example of Trin pretending to be more manly and heroic than he is. De Pierres could be using this to show that the heroic ideal of sustained bravery is nearly impossible to achieve, but it is more likely that she is pointing out the dangers of 'false' heroism, which is simply based on desperate efforts to maintain an image of masculinity.

Trin leads, but he is performing an expected role, pretending a bravery and stoicism he does not feel. His outward performance is in line with Dean's (1998:51) remarks regarding

the role of masculinity in American politics: ‘Kennedy constructed an aristocratic persona embodying the virtues of the stoic warrior-intellectual’.⁴ Inside him is fear, gnawing ‘around the edges of his stomach’ (MS 41), and when they reach the safety of the islands, he allows his tears to ‘run, unchecked, down his face’ (MS 45; 128). This is one of the very few times that he allows himself to show his true feelings and ironically this, together with the numerous close escapes from imminent death, increases the level of intimacy between him and his followers more than any of his wildly heroic acts perpetrated to enforce his masculinity.

The first time Trin shows anger as a leader, it is directed toward a woman. Liesl, Innis’s girlfriend, accuses him of bearing false witness against Innis (TS 265). He roars at the woman in ‘righteous anger’ that he is unable or unwilling to control. ‘I am Principe! ... I do not lie!’ (TS 265). This negative intimacy brings a tension and wariness to the group. In this incident, Trin’s performance is one of masculine domination. A study by Arnold Buss and Mark Perry shows that men measure slightly higher than women on hostility and verbal aggression and significantly higher on physical aggression (1992:452). It is, however, debatable whether Trin would have shouted at a man.⁵

For Trin, the end of his leadership and his relationships begins with the death of Cass Mulravey’s son, when Jo-Jo and Rast rejoin the group of survivors. The newcomers bear knowledge of the history between Trin and Mira, and their conversation unmask certain of Trin’s carefully performed lies. It becomes apparent that he is the one who has sent Mira away from the planet, rather than her being the one who abandoned them all.

⁴ While Dean’s remarks refer to JFK, who is often seen as the epitome of male leadership in American history, they also pertain to Trin in his attempts to establish himself as a male policial leader (1998:51).

⁵ Anger is ‘usually not a primary emotion’ but stems from underlying feelings of ‘hurt, resentment or frustration’ (Masters et al, 1986:256).

Even though it is Cass who accuses Trin ‘*You sent her*’, it is to Djes he turns to defend himself: ‘Djes, that’s not how it was’ (TS 279). Trin is, however, unable to close the floodgates as Rast confirms that to find ‘a way to get back here to help you all’ was Mira’s prime objective. The Principe quiets his people down with an order, applying ‘his arrogant manner with ease’ (TS 279). He is able to keep his bluff for a while longer, but then Mira herself arrives on the beach.

When Mira arrives, hailed as a saviour, Trin finds the idea of being saved by her ‘repugnant’ (TS 363) and when he sees her walking toward them he is ‘more fearful of her than the Saqr’ (TS 371). Fear creates intimacy, albeit negative intimacy, between Trin and Mira. He knows that she could unmask him. He plots to ‘speak with her alone before she said things that might damage the balance of things here, things that could undermine his authority’, but Rast trips him up and sits on his back, her ‘thighs pushing his face into the sand’. Mira’s ability to destroy Trin with the truth was a figurative female ‘monkey on his back’. Now there is a real female monkey on his back. Being pinned down by a woman foreshadows the emasculation Trin is about to endure at the hands of Mira Fedor (TS 363).

Trin is under the false impression that Djes ‘will never leave him’ (TS 374) or ‘betray him’ (TS 18). Contrary to his expectations, Djes takes charge of *Sal*, the hybrid biozoon, and announces her intention to leave Araldis, ‘cutting across him’ as if he no longer exists. He is no longer included in her agenda (TS 374). As it becomes clear that Djes, and even his mother, are leaving him, ‘Trin suppressed a moan. Everything he’d tried to preserve for the renewal of his world had just disintegrated before him’ (TS 375).

Any hope of restoring closeness with Djes is further damaged by Trin trying to defend his ‘right to sire a bambino’, saying ‘it has always been the way among our people’ (TS 375).

Djes's reply is a condemnation of the whole system. 'Then your way is wrong,' she says simply. Trin's last weapon is to declare his love, as if that would right all the wrongs, but Djes turns around and walks away. Women will supposedly endure all kinds of abuse in the name of love, and Djes walking away from Trin in spite of his wounded declaration puts paid to that particular stereotype.

There is no redemption for Trin as he refuses to acknowledge that what he has done is wrong. Instead he chooses to continue falling victim to the falsehoods held by his patriarchal society. "She does not understand our ways, Principe," said Tina. Trin's sore heart eased a little, and he took solace in the truth. Djes wasn't one of his kind; she didn't truly understand his beliefs. Tina was right. But there were still those with him that did. Perhaps that was enough' (TS 375). While he is able to salvage some remnants of self-respect (markedly through the endorsement of a woman), de Pierres very clearly indicates, through Trin, the detrimental outcomes of a masculine lack of emotional availability and of an irrational devotion to patriarchal values and ideals.

Jo-Jo Rasterovich

Jo-Jo Rasterovich, the God Discoverer, serves as down-to-earth foil to Trinder Pellegrini's royal ostentation, and is initially represented as the stereotypical manly man. Other than Trin, he does not seem to give much thought to any performance of masculinity, and seems freely able to express his sexuality. He drinks; he curses; he has random sex; he is his own man who interacts with the universe on his own terms to the point of telling God to 'fuck off' (DS 117). His computer pointer consists of 'high-heeled-legs' and 'a set of pouting scarlet lips' (DS 254), he is very comfortable with masturbation (CS 33) and he doesn't mind sharing tales of his sexcapades with other men 'over an evening of cards'

(CS 248). He prefers to avoid ‘situations’ (MS 30), a euphemism which is indicative of a dislike of intimacy and closeness. Jo-Jo also watches pornography (DS 88). He keeps ‘a substantial array of bizarre recreational flesh simulations, for which no one could reprimand him’. His relationship with ‘the hottest sexpot sims of Galaxy Productions’⁶ is what Jo-Jo considers perfection (DS 113).

In the history of feminism, especially during the ‘sex wars’ of the 1980s, one of the focal points of women’s anger towards men was pornography (Haran, 2006:259). Radical feminists like MacKinnon (1987:172-174) and Andrea Dworkin (1981:151) take a strong stance against pornography, arguing that women should be able to take legal action against the porn industry for damages incurred. Others, however, argue that this stance casts women as victims, and that legislation might interfere with women’s sexual agency, particularly in terms of BDSM (Haraway, 1991:141). In Jo-Jo Rasterovich’s case, the presence of pornography in his cabin serves to depict him as virile, and to spotlight his bachelorhood and distaste for matrimony. He uses pornography to satisfy his needs after his ‘closest, most terrifying scrape with a real woman’ puts him off intimacy for life (DS 113).

The sexual encounter that so traumatises Jo-Jo takes place on the planet Ikar and his memory is still very clear about being invited for a drink by ‘a woman with several degrees, more than her fair share of chins and equally shivery thighs (which he could see through the strips of material that wound around her legs like snakes)’ (DS 114). Jo-jo no longer enjoys the encounter:

...with his face trapped between the woman’s thighs.

‘Can’t breathe,’ he snuffled.

⁶ Simulated pornographic programmes.

‘I’m assuming that you are having trouble breathing,’ she warbled. ‘I am told that it is the most erotic movement in my repertoire. I can clench for indefinite periods of time given the right mood. And you, *God-discoverer*, have put me in the mood.’

‘Let go,’ gasped Jo-Jo.

But the smart didn’t seem to hear him.

‘I don’t mean to be forward,’ she continued, ‘but you could be the recipient of other such delights for a small favour. I could be persuaded to perform in a number of ways, including my formidable chin massage – *my chins massage you*, ha! ha! – in return for an introduction to God.’

Chagrin was too insipid a word to describe how that made Jo-Jo feel. The woman was bribing him with sexual suffocation. Furious and desperate, he resorted to a move told to him by a court-martialled special-forces hermaphrodite on Bosun.

He bit her pubis with all musterable ferocity. (DS 114-115)

According to descriptions of other desirable women (DS 29), the woman has the body type considered ideal in Araldis society, yet Jo-Jo has to overcome ‘faint repulsion ... at her physical appearance’. In spite of his negative feelings, Jo-Jo prostitutes himself to the woman for a ‘swollen credit voucher ... waved under his nose’ (DS 114). This incident reverses the stereotypical double standard that applies to prostitution: women may sell themselves, but men may not. It is interesting that while he has no qualms about receiving money for having sexual intercourse with a woman he finds repulsive, Jo-Jo takes umbrage when she turns the situation around and offers him further sexual favours ‘in return for an introduction to God’ (DS 114). Her request changes what Jo-Jo perceives as basic prostitution into some kind of moral prostitution, further queering the stereotype.

Jo-Jo is out of his depth in this encounter and the suffocation he experiences with his head between her thighs is denotative of his preference for kink-less sex and his longing for

freedom. Jo-Jo is being asphyxiated: literally by the restrictions to his movement and figuratively by a woman being in control of sexual intercourse of an unfamiliar nature to him. De Pierres is underlining two stereotypes here: men do not like women who take charge sexually and, probably for the same reason, men tend to be uncomfortable with sexual intercourse that lies outside their comfort zone, as it could prove a threat to their performance of masculinity through sexual mastery.

Whatever the particulars, the incident so traumatises him that months later, sitting with Tekton in the *ménage* lounge at Belle-Monde, Jo-Jo is desperate to escape the particular woman when she enters the lounge. He is so eager to get away that he considers his escape lucky in spite of having to enter into an unbreakable Hera⁷ contract with Tekton to expedite his flight (DS 178).

While Jo-Jo is trying to get a hold of the mineral required by the Hera contract, he spends less time than usual with his ‘sim women’⁸ and, needing masculine release, decides to visit ‘the invitation-only bordello pseudo-world of Vela’ (DS 180).⁹ He forms a bond, based on a shared sexual encounter, with an OLOSS judge.

At one stage during the thirty-hour binge, he Cossack-danced naked with the OLOSS judge (Samuel L.) on the back of a pair of stocky Balol twins. His toes bled from the frill pricks, but during the process he and Samuel L. bonded for life. (DS 180)

The bond between them does not keep Jo-Jo from blackmailing his new friend with a ‘rather nifty recording dice of the entire binge, including Samuel L.’s attempt to give adequate cunnilingus to the bordello’s mistress, who had six state-of-the-art orifices’ (DS

⁷ An unbreakable, intergalactic contract. Failure to honour the terms is punishable by death.

⁸ Simulated women used in Jo-Jo’s virtual pornography.

⁹ Jo-Jo’s visit to the sex planet brings to mind Connell’s reference to the ‘racialized character’ of sex tourism in which ‘first-world’ men seek out sex with ‘exotic’ locals (2000:64).

181). This betrayal leads to freedom from the Hera contract, but later Samuel L. exacts revenge by sending Jo-Jo to prison on Dowl. The friendship starts – and ends – with shared sexual indulgences that, while heterosexual, are rather unusual by heteronormative standards. De Pierres applies this to comment on the manner in which men bond over their sexual encounters with women (Wong, 2011:210).

There are similarities between Jo-Jo and the feckless, macho character of Han Solo in *Star Wars* in their galactic stumblings from crisis to crisis. Jo-Jo's crises mostly result from sexual encounters: his first crisis arises from the Hera contract he has to fulfil in order to escape the predatory Miranda Seward, and the second from losing his ship while trying to set up a sexual liaison with Ilke and 'Jud' in a bar on Dowl (DS 392). Jo-Jo's complicated sex life is used by de Pierres to challenge the stereotypical view that having random sex with strangers, and avoiding emotional intimacy, will necessarily simplify a person's life.

While his gender performance is decidedly masculine, and his sexual orientation thus far is heterosexual, Jo-Jo shows equal desire for the 'singularly ugly Balol female' and her 'antagonistic' male partner, who makes him feel 'somewhere between wary and randy. Ugly could make an 'esque as damn horny as beauty' (DS 392). It is Ilke, however, that he ends up taking to his room. It seems that in spite of flirting with bisexuality, de Pierres chooses to keep her main characters (Jo-Jo and Mira) heterosexual: while readers may be deemed 'ready' for alternatives to traditional gender roles in sexual intercourse in secondary characters, or even in the peripheral lives or fantasies of the main characters, the baseline (when push comes to shove) remains heteronormative. While this indicates a probable disinclination for homosexuality in de Pierres, it does also mirror consensus society where sexual encounters are mostly heterosexual.

Jo-Jo's previously discussed disinclination for erotic asphyxiation does not keep him from enjoying pain. He allows Ilke, the Balol, to 'walk on him', causing him so much pain that he has to 'raise his endorphin levels to cope'. She presses her spines into his buttocks, which he finds 'outstanding' and 'truly illuminating' (DS 393). This incident, according to Meg Barker (2013:21), would qualify more as 'kinky fuckery' than as 'real BDSM', but is incorporated for two reasons: to challenge the status quo of heteronormative, non-kinky sex, and to show, yet again, how easily Jo-Jo is distracted and led into trouble by sex.

When he realises that his aptly named ship, *Salacious II*, has been breached (DS 394), Jo-Jo's attitude changes and Ilke, no longer an object of sexual desire, is 'shoved ... onto the floor'. Jo-Jo conforms to male aggression, but Ilke is the one who reverses the stereotype in this case. It is already considered unusual (Barker, 2013:21) that the female partner is the dominant one administering pain, and her 'growling menacingly' for him not to 'run out on Ilke' in reaction to being shoved away, is not typically feminine either (DS 393). She also shows 'fully flushed arousal' to which Jo-Jo responds by threatening her with a gun and telling her: 'Put your clitoris away' (DS 394). Here de Pierres plays with stereotypical performances of masculinity and femininity. Ilke is patently masculinised, which poses no problem until Jo-Jo also starts behaving in a masculine fashion.

Women are traditionally expected to be demure during intercourse and not to display the full extent of their arousal as it is deemed 'off-putting' and 'threatening' (Carpenter, Janssen, Graham, Vorst and Wicherts, 2008:37). These expectations are coloured by women being impacted more strongly by biological factors resulting from sexual intercourse, such as pregnancy (Cook, 2007:915; Carpenter et al, 2008:37). Prior to the advent of modern contraceptives, women who did not want to conceive would benefit from not encouraging intercourse through excitation, as corroborated by studies that show

lower measures of sexual excitation and higher levels of sexual inhibition in women than in men (Carpenter et al, 2008:37). Access to modern contraceptives has, however, drastically changed women's attitudes toward sex (Cook, 2007:915).¹⁰ De Pierres uses Ilke as an unlikely example of a sexually liberated woman who is not subject to inhibitions of a social or practical nature and is therefore not scared to display her arousal to the full.

In spite of his threats to rip her apart, Jo-Jo is outwitted by Ilke and her partner. He ends up in prison, naked and without access to his resources. He is forced into an emotionally and physically intimate relationship with his fellow prisoners, and also with the guards, who can adjust the 'privacy controls' whenever they feel 'narky or pervy' (CS 31). There is no privacy and nothing can be hidden. Since he feels no physical attraction to the woman whose cell is connected to his, Jo-Jo opens up an information exchange, which allows for the establishment of intimacy (CS 31). The three of them, Jo-Jo, Bethany and Petalu-Mau, exchange stories and the bond that forms between them causes Jo-Jo to turn away 'out of respect when she had to piss' (CS 34).

The exchanges between the three prisoners shed light on Jo-Jo's feelings toward women and on the way aristo women are perceived by outsiders. When Bethany claims the Latinos 'don't have any regard' for women, Jo-Jo counterclaims that they 'like 'em plenty as long as they lie on their backs and kick their feet up in their air when they're told' (CS 33), an assertion strongly reminiscent of the early twentieth-century maxim to 'lie back and think of England'. Jo-Jo wonders why he has 'never picked up a Latino woman', but the thought makes him shiver. He would, apparently, rather forego sexual pleasure than 'pick up' an aristo (CS 33).

¹⁰ In spite of advances in the field of contraception, the lack of 'reversible methods of contraception available for use by males' leads to 'the burden of contraceptive responsibility' being shouldered by women (Masters et al, 1986:85).

The relationship between Jo-Jo and Bethany Ionil, though intimate, is strictly platonic and, while he feels protective toward her, he knows she is not ‘his kind of woman’. He assumes, however, that Bethany and her mysterious visitor are having sexual relations, in spite of her protests to the opposite, and in the same manner, Petalu-Mau assumes that Jo-Jo wants ‘to make ’uns with Beth’ (‘’uns’ referring to babies). Both these cases portray society’s inability to understand or trust the existence of non-sexual yet intimate friendship between members of the opposite sex (CS 33). De Pierres challenges the depressing idea that all relations between men and women are by default sexually inflected: when Bethany loses her shirt during their escape from the Saqr, Jo-Jo gives her a ‘token’ look, but Bethany puts it in perspective by telling Jo-Jo he knows her ‘butt’ better than she does (CS 132).

When Mau is completely exhausted during their escape, Jo-Jo galvanises him into action by attacking his manhood. The fear of losing face in terms of masculinity is stronger for Mau than the fear of death. The insult that finally gets Mau to his feet is being told that ‘Beth’s got bigger balls than’ him. Any insult is acceptable except that of being unfavourably compared to a *woman* in terms of ‘balls’ (CS 130). Obviously, both Jo-Jo and Mau respect Bethany. She is responsible for having saved them both on more than one occasion. She has shown surprising physical strength, even rescuing the heavy Petalu-Mau by physically dragging him away from danger. Whether de Pierres intends the slur on Mau’s manhood to imply that *anything* is better than being a woman, or whether being a woman is simply the most antithetical thing to being a man, is debatable.

Jo-Jo also forms a relationship with the mercenary Rast Randall. The first opportunity they have to talk is aboard *Insignia* when they take off for Rho Junction (CS 308). Their conversation is relatively neutral until Mira becomes the topic of conversation. Rast warns him off, telling him not to ‘waste all that precious-earned bachelorhood on the Baronessa ... Doesn’t take to men much, either; prefers my type’. While the ‘moment[s] of camaraderie’ between the two is lost after this (CS 311), Rast remains a ‘sounding board’ for Jo-Jo. She is a woman, but he perceives her to be his equal in background, intellect and insight into Lasper Farr’s plans. It is possible that it is her lack of femininity (as discussed in detail in Chapter Four of this thesis) that makes her accessible to him.

That Jo-Jo sees Rast as an equal is demonstrated when he loses his temper completely. This does not happen because of a jibe about Mira, but because of an implication that he is not a good pilot, and because of the manner in which Rast and the male mercenaries fall ‘into their synchronised laugh again’ when he spills his beer. His underlying reason for attacking Rast is probably Mira, but on the surface it seems that, in order to preserve his ‘manliness’, he has to react. He attacks Rast as he would a man, getting his hands ‘to her neck’ and repeatedly pounding her head ‘against the floor’. The incident is not as shocking as it might have been had Rast been portrayed as feminine in the slightest. As it is, she bests Jo-Jo physically, thus performing hegemonic masculinity. Whether that justifies Jo-Jo trying to beat up a woman (even one well able to defend herself) opens all kinds of gender-related questions. Some cultures deem violence against women acceptable, but in modern-day liberal democratic society, it is considered wrong. The ‘protection’ thus afforded women is a double-edged sword shielding them from aggression by physically stronger men, but on the other hand, entrenching the stereotype of women being weak and needing protection. Rast’s fellow mercenaries do not come to her defence during the attack, showing that they know her to be more than able to take care of herself in a combat

situation (MS 31). This level of defensive ability is what Cahill has in mind when she offers women self-defence as a solution to the threat of rape and male violence (2001:202).

Rast's threat to 'finish it' if Jo-Jo should ever try to 'take' her again is deflected when Jo-Jo returns to the heart of the matter: 'But then she [Mira] won't have to choose between us ... and you'll never really know' (MS 31). De Pierres casts Rast as Jo-Jo's rival, and his equal, both in physicality and in love.

Jo-Jo's acceptance of Rast as leader is not in line with his manly persona. When the Extros are about to board Insignia, she leans close and whispers to him: 'We got one rule in my crew, Rasterovich. My word. You ignore it, you wind up dead. Either by them or by me. And like it or not, for the moment you're one of my crew.' Jo-Jo acquiesces, realising that then 'was time to swallow any arrogance on Randall's part and survive' (MS 136). Jo-Jo not only follows Rast, he 'admires' her (MS 137), allowing de Pierres to challenge the stereotypical expectation of insurmountable conflict between 'Alpha males'.

When Jo-Jo and Rast are trapped in the Extropist Medium, he is the one who rescues her from madness by finding her and communicating with her telepathically (MS 182-195). When commenting on Mira's telepathy in Chapters Two and Three, the role of women telepaths in science fiction was discussed. For Jo-Jo now to display the same trait is an interesting progression in his gender development.¹¹ As if to emphasise the emotional growth in him, in Medium he is not 'Jo-Jo' or 'Rasterovich'. He is 'Joseph' (MS 257).

He returns to Rast in Medium in spite of not having 'much affection' for her, but Jo-Jo is desperate not to be 'left alone' trapped in Medium (MS 369). When he physically draws her out of the gel, their roles are totally reversed, with the rough mercenary completely

¹¹ Telepathy is also sometimes seen as metaphor for enhanced emotional sensitivity.

submitting to Jo-Jo's ability to get them to safety. She panics, but when Jo-Jo tells her 'I'm right next to you', she immediately calms down (MS 372). Once they are safe, Rast verbalises their reversed situation by saying 'I won't ever forget that you got me out of there' (MS 373). Their transposed situation seems to bring balance. They are finally able to work together as a team with the last vestiges of ego stripped from them by their experience (MS 377). Most likely their gender preconceptions are still very much in play, but in this semi-professional, non-sexual situation where survival depends on intimacy, gendered hierarchies become less evident.

Even while Jo-Jo, Catchut and Rast Randall do not necessarily like each other, their circumstances keep placing them in intimate situations during which they mostly display the kind of grudging respect seen earlier among the mercenaries. While there is no emotional or physical closeness involved, their sharing of food 'that looked like dry dough and drinking from a bucket' is intimate in nature. The camaraderie between them is emphasised by their shared new body shape: 'They were all bone-thin, and paler than a living person should be.' Their suffering is written on their bodies and while their thinness may indicate a measure of control and adaptation to the mental hardships they have gone through, it also indicates their present frailty (Bordo, 1993:186; 1999:9). Even strong men and seemingly invincible women have an end to their strength.

In their new relationship, Jo-Jo and Rast are able to talk about Mira. They speculate on whether she might still be alive, admit to their roles in Mira's disappearance, and openly admit their mutual romantic feelings toward the missing Baronessa Fedor (TS 70). Jo-Jo manages to divert the conversation when Rast gets aggressive (TS 69) and they are able to maintain the new, neutral 'place of understanding' (TS 164). Rast still goads Jo-Jo, suggesting he might be 'too weak' to complete a full perimeter search, but instead of

reacting as he might have before, driven by male aggression and the need to maintain face, he admits his fatigue: 'I am ... and I'm bettin' you are too. You're just too dogged to say so' (TS 109). By refusing to be baited, by following her lead and by refusing to perform in the expected gender-related manner, Jo-Jo not only survives, but also demonstrates how he is outgrowing his macho persona and its limitations on his capacity for intimacy. Herein lies one of the biggest differences between Jo-Jo and Trin. Jo-Jo, who initially seems more macho than Trin, is secure enough in his masculinity to move away from the hegemonic aspects of it, and to embrace other forms of masculinity. Trin, on the other hand, is controlled by his fear of being deemed unmanly and his inability to let go of his macho interpretation of masculinity thus excludes him from any significant emotional growth.

Jo-Jo and the two mercenaries go out to watch the Araldis sunset 'by unspoken consensus' and while appreciating the beauty, Jo-Jo realises that since they'd met 'he'd never once thought of her as a woman. He didn't know what that meant. It just *was*' (TS 164). In this thought, Jo-Jo again displays how he has been growing emotionally. According to Le Guin's discussion of gender in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969:94), women and men want to be considered feminine or masculine and by nature they evaluate others accordingly. Moving past this mindset, in the way Jo-Jo does, is a near impossibility.

Owing to the pressures of hegemonic masculinity, men often feel forced to act in a certain manner in order to appear manly, but when Jo-Jo gets trapped by Saqr in the library at the Studium, he feels true fear, and there is no room for adherence to any performance of gender – only for surviving (TS 170).

He sat for a long time, clutching the com-sole, aware only of the sound of his heartbeat and the wetness between his legs. Jo-Jo Rasterovich hadn't pissed his pants since he was a kid, waiting for his mum to get through an evening with her latest beau... He was four years old.

The loss of control didn't make him proud but he wasn't ashamed either.
He'd seen what the Saqr could do. He was no hero. (TS 171)

Jo-Jo rejects hero status (which is almost always associated with men), and at the same time he rejects the shame associated with digressing from gender norms. De Pierres puts this in perspective by providing the glimpse of Jo-Jo's childhood. A child of four cannot yet 'know' that society labels it 'unmanly' to wet his pants, as it is not 'unmanly' in itself. De Pierres uses this incident to expose the fatuous and harmful manner in which masculine hegemony pressures men never to show fear or weakness. The fact that she situates her critique against the backdrop of sexual intimacy is not a coincidence.

When Mira and Jo-Jo first have contact, it happens through a third party, the biozoon Sal, when Mira is locked in Jo-Jo's cabin. Even though they do not physically meet, the situation is quite intimate due to her sharing of his personal space, and as such, serves to show the depth of Mira's inexperience with men. She is a product of her society and Araldis society must keep their women on a tight leash indeed if the sight of a man's 'personal effects, body scents, lubricating gels and other appurtenances' can make her skin warm 'with embarrassment' (DS 88).

The point is driven home when she uncovers Jo-Jo's 'extensive library of recreational simulations', which leaves her 'shocked by the vulgar contents'. In spite of the many gender stereotypes that have been subverted so far, here both Mira and Jo-Jo are portrayed in a manner aligned with current societal expectations of their respective genders. Jo-Jo, has a stereotypically masculine need for and access to porn (Hardy, 2004:11). His stash is hidden, but not too deeply, which implies slight embarrassment but general acceptance of the habit. Mira, as a woman and an innocent one to boot, is shocked and horrified by the images, instead of being curious or turned on. All the images do for her is to call up the

possibility of sexual assault. While sexual abuse is very real for many women, and there are many negative connotations regarding the role of pornography in such abuse, the two characters suddenly conforming so closely to expected gender delineations has a very tongue-in-cheek feel to it.

Mira and Jo-Jo meet in person for the first time when Lasper Farr introduces them (CS 254). They shake hands and ‘something appalling’ happens to Jo-Jo when their hands touch.

The worst of things. Perhaps it was the incredible softness of her hand. Or the way her erect posture seemed to be a brace against the hard life she led. Or maybe it was the deep, deep look of desperation in her eyes. But in that moment, the something that had glued Jo-Jo together for his entire life came unstuck. He found himself stranded between diffident and nervous – a place he had never been before. (CS 255)

Jo-Jo’s ‘irrational stab of jealousy’ (CS 258) and his ‘pounding heart’ (CS 259) bear evidence of how deeply he is infatuated with Mira.

Mira in turn finds ‘Joseph Rasterovich both repellent and fascinating. Repellent because of his coarse and presumptuous manner, yet fascinating because he had been to places that she longed to hear about. The contrary emotions left her tongue-tied in his presence – and inclined to take refuge in aloofness’ (CS 281). She thinks of him as somewhere between ‘perceptive’ and ‘dim-witted’, but after talking with him for a short while, she realises that ‘he could be perceived as handsome by some. Not in the pure, aesthetic way of Thales the scholar, but his face displayed a damaged kind of strength, an unkempt confidence’ (CS 285). Their conversation is intimate and confidential, since Mira shares with Jo-Jo her desire to become a tyro so as to free the women of Araldis, but it does not end well. Jo-Jo accuses her of having a ‘god complex’ and Mira feels ‘bitter anger’ that ‘a man such as

this could never comprehend oppression' (CS 286). For the story to adhere to the classical journey of the hero (Campbell, 2004:16), there have to be obstacles, 'tests' and 'ordeals', also in the path of true love (Vogler, 1998:29). What is of importance is that de Pierres chooses a gender issue – reproductive agency – to serve as an obstacle between Jo-Jo and Mira. This indicates her interest in using intimacy as an index of gender-political issues.

When Jo-Jo later meets Lasper Farr, Farr takes control of the situation in a display of masculine dominance when he makes a point of ignoring Jo-Jo's proffered glass (CS 287). Farr's petty gesture is intended to undermine Jo-Jo's person, but also his masculinity and, knowing this, Jo-Jo struggles to 'control his anger; to appear as calm as Farr' (CS 288). Farr wants Jo-Jo to agree to his plan and in order to do this he makes a veiled threat and offers Jo-Jo Mira's safety as incentive (CS 288). What started as a snub turns into threatening, negative intimacy, and Jo-Jo's annoyance grows into murderous anger. He wants to 'stuff his fist so far down Farr's throat that he could squeeze the man's balls with his fingers'. Lasper Farr evokes this response by manipulating the constraints of hegemonic masculinity. He knows that Jo-Jo will respond to the snub with anger, which is a masculine response, but he also knows 'even more compelling' than Jo-Jo's pride is Jo-Jo's impulse to go to the rescue of Mira, who 'needed protection'. In Jo-Jo's words, the fact that his emotions are influencing his decision is 'fucking ridiculous'. De Pierres again uses an incident of intimacy, albeit negative intimacy, to point out that men can be as disadvantaged by masculine hegemony as women are. She is also commenting on men's stereotypical aversion to emotion.

Jo-Jo is not comfortable with emotion, but when his mind stops working and he depends solely on emotion, he has his epiphany:

But slowly something else began to happen: a feeling in his chest, spreading with every breath, across his skin, into his heart, along his ribs; a searing feeling, but warm – warm and alive. A feeling that made him stronger ... better, even.

Not a feeling to live for – a feeling to die for.

His heart had an answer for him. *Mira Fedor*. (CS 393)

Jo-Jo has a stereotypical male attitude toward being in love. He is so uncomfortable with the emotion that he compares it to being evacuated into space with a limited supply of oxygen and uses words like ‘catastrophically, mind-screwingly new’ to describe his feelings (MS 3).

It was the visceral fear and barely breathing that Jo-Jo grappled with now. Not in the exact moment that he realized Baronessa Mira Fedor had been abducted, but right afterwards, when he knew he was prepared to give up his reason for living to find her. (MS 3)

His discomfort with emotion, ascribed to his masculinity, is mocked but, more significantly, mirrored by Rast Randall when she rescues him from dropping into space. She saves him, but when she sees he has been crying, she starts laughing: ‘Love’s a bitch. Ain’t she?’ (MS 5).

When Jo-Jo tries to carry Mira after their escape from Medium (TS 307), he is unable to lift her. In the moment when his male strength fails him, it is the image of the female mercenary Rast Randall that he sees and it is the knowledge that Rast would have been able to save Mira that gives him the strength to lift her (TS 309). His acknowledgement of the weakness and the pain he is experiencing is not typically male. The ‘panic and fear and pain’ that he has experienced while trapped in Medium burns away ‘on a surge of hot fury’. This is the second time anger saves Jo-Jo from certain death as it pulls him ‘back from the brink of despair and defeat’ (TS 311). Resorting to anger in the face of imminent

death is a more masculine trait and the contrast between sensitive Joseph and angry Jo-Jo is interesting in gender terms.

When Jo-Jo is desperately trying to save them, Mira cannot induce him to listen to her, so she punches him ‘in the side of the face’ (TS 316). This unfeminine gesture brings him to his senses and Mira is able to pull him away from *Sal* so it can assist them in reaching *Insignia*. This is similar to what men usually do to hysterical women (at least in stories) and it is another undeniable role reversal. Now, they can attempt to reach *Insignia* together, ‘holding hands, pulling each other along’. Jo-Jo has no more strength than Mira does and he is in tears. They speak in words of ‘encouragement or instruction’ and manage to climb through *Insignia*’s egress scale (TS 317). It seems that escape is only possible for Mira and Jo-Jo when they shed the bounds of traditional gender expectations, and this, in turn, is only possible when they find themselves in an extreme situation. This is a pivotal moment in terms of gender depiction in *The Sentients of Orion*. De Pierres seems to be implying that there can only be salvation from the patriarchy in cooperation between genders, but she also seems to admit that such cooperation will most probably only come about when dire circumstances force people to let go of their preconceived notions.

Jo-Jo cannot stop the stream of tears running down his face and he cannot pick Mira up to carry her to Primo vein. He is able to crawl over to her:

Mira reached out and clasped his hand, letting him know that she understood. She’d thought him so rough and self-reliant, closed off, when they’d been together in *Insignia* before. Like Rast Randall, though more predictable and with a peculiar type of integrity. But this man who’d come to help her was altogether different, raw and open and unsure ... He brought her fingers to his face and held them against his cheek. He was trembling, as if needing her close. She felt the hot wetness of his face against hers. Felt his exhaustion to match hers. He turned and pressed his lips into her palm. (TS 318)

It is when he has none of his original machismo or bravado left that Joseph becomes the kind of man Mira is able to trust and love. Nova, as an extension of Mira, loves Jo-Jo from the moment she sets eyes on him and she chooses to be with him in Secondo vein (TS 377).

Jo-Jo's character and his intimate connections with other people can be described in the words director George Lucas uses to describe Han Solo: 'a loner who realizes the importance of being part of a group and helping for the common good' (Bouzereau, 1997:8). With that realisation, however, Jo-Jo Rasterovich, the God Discoverer, also realises that he is the only one who can save the people he has come to love. Jo-Jo is able to convince Solo to leave 'Nova and Mira alone' (TS 393). He does this by sacrificing himself: 'My life is yours anyway. You resurrected me. And you've altered my mind for your expediency. Perhaps I was the always the one [sic] you would take. Perhaps you knew that at the beginning' (TS 393).

Heroism in popular narrative is currently prescribed by Hollywood, but de Pierres, as an Australian author, depicts a different kind of hero. According to Chris Vogler (1998:xx), Australian heroes are different from Hollywood heroes in that '[t]he most admirable hero is one who denies his heroic role as long as possible and who, like Mad Max, avoids accepting responsibility for anyone but himself'. The sacrifice that Jo-Jo makes is not one of masculine bravery and heroics. Contrary to the stereotype, it is a quiet sacrifice made on an emotional and intellectual level. Nova looks at Mira and says '*Josef has saved us, Mama*' to which Mira responds by 'bending down to kiss Jo-Jo's lifeless lips gently' (TS 395). Jo-Jo's act of heroism and his death plays out in an intimate setting without fanfare and still, like their escape, devoid of gender posturing. In the context of strong gender

performances in *The Sentients of Orion*, this sacrifice is more powerful for not being shaded by gender stereotyping.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have noticed that de Pierres consistently uses incidents of intimacy to bolster her interrogation of gender norms. She not only comments on gender stereotypes, but also critiques the heteronormative status quo by means of the intimacies in which Trin and Jo-Jo are involved. Her depiction of Trin's and Jo-Jo's contrasting gender performances and masculinity is carefully crafted not only to focus on their embodiment of male privilege and female suppression, but also to present how vulnerable men are to the negative aspects of hegemonic masculinity.

Chapter Six: The Extras ...

We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.

Kurt Vonnegut (2009:v)

Introduction

Masculinity, like femininity, is constructed; not necessary, but contingent. The ‘fragility of the construction, maintenance and constant repair of masculinity means that the boy and then the man must constantly “prove” his masculinity’ (Mechling, 2001:198). This chapter will investigate whether this is also the case for the men who are presented in *The Sentients of Orion*. The previous chapter was assigned to Jo-Jo and Trin as the main protagonist and antagonist of the story, so this chapter focuses on the supporting cast: Thales Bernier, ingenuous scholar and philosopher; Tekton, the architect; the royals carabineer, Catchut and Latourn, toughened mercenaries who blindly follow a female leader; Innis, weakling and bully; and Lasper Farr, the warlord. These men are very different in their gender perceptions, their adherence to gender stereotypes, their performance of masculinity and their cultural beliefs. It is interesting to note that none of the men is explicitly depicted as homosexual. This may be an indication of unconscious conformity to the dominant mode of heteronormativity on the part of de Pierres.

Following the order in which they are mentioned here, the chapter will focus on the intimacies of these men to examine if and how de Pierres structures those intimacies to further her appraisal of gender: how these men perform masculinity (whether hegemonic or not in terms of Connell and Messerschmidt’s typology [2005]); how they conform to or challenge stereotypes about ‘manly’ conduct in intimacy and sexuality and how these incidences subjugate or uplift the people (men or women) with whom they share intimacy.

Thales

The first man under consideration, Thales Berniere, is the character in *The Sentients of Orion* through whom de Pierres most openly explores boundaries of gender and sexuality. He portrays the role of the original ‘swooning damsel’ from the pulps (Larbalestier, 2002:124), in spite of being a man, and in spite of holding the romantic interest of two of the main female characters. Thales is first introduced as having ‘prostrated himself for the last time that day’, which is an indication of the role he is to play throughout (CS 7). In view of the role reversal de Pierres sculpts around Thales, it is very interesting that Mira later uses him, the man who least adheres to masculine hegemony and general masculine gender expectations, as an example to prove to her child that not all men are bad (TS 253).

Thales is initially portrayed as being happily married, but the fact that he ‘had recently stopped suppressing and begun to acknowledge’ a certain ‘innate perversity in his nature’ (CS 7) is another early indication of what is in store for his character. That Thales’s new-found ‘perversity’ is mentioned in the context of his wife’s no longer being interested in having sexual intercourse with him, sets the stage for possible further indulgences of a sexual nature (CS 8).

Having children is something on which Thales is very focused. Women’s reproductive agency has been central to the plot so far, and the implications of childbearing and rearing have been discussed in some detail in previous chapters. While Thales and Rene have no children, there is significant role reversal in terms of their attitudes toward having children. Rene’s lack of interest in sexual intercourse seems to reflect more on her perception of childbearing than on her sexual attraction to Thales’s masculinity. She is interested neither in the ‘slightly primitive’ act of childbearing, nor in ‘non-biological parenting’. This lack

of interest in parenting is stereotypically more associated with men than with women. De Pierres' use of gender reversal to expose the fallacy that all women yearn to be mothers is strengthened in Thales, who portrays the traditionally feminine role in his craving a child 'as deeply as he craved new knowledge' (CS 8).

When Thales is upset about not being chosen to study on Belle-Monde, Rene tells him to 'calm down' and comforts him physically. He runs 'to her like a child, kneeling to bury his head in her lap ... She was older than he but more beautiful than all the young women on Scolar.¹ She would always be so. The beauty of her intellect held him in far greater thrall than any physical loveliness' (CS 10). As well as being older than her husband, Rene is also depicted as Thales's 'mother' in an Oedipal relationship similar to that which Thales will enter later with first Bethany and then Fariss. There also is a reversal of the stereotypical gender roles here, as Thales, 'like a child', portrays the emotionally dependent partner and Rene, who comforts him as a mother, is the cool, logical partner who relies on her intellect instead of her emotions. The reversed performance of gender-typical emotions exposes stereotypical perceptions of dependency, but de Pierres also addresses another stereotype through this intimate incident: Thales's appraisal of Rene's beauty. As has been discussed in Chapters Two and Four of this thesis, older women are not considered objects of beauty in modern-day reality, regardless of their level of intellect.²

Scolar seems to be a free society, intent on questioning and learning, yet it is 'governed by old men who want nothing more than the status quo' (CS 11). This description of 'old men' who, like those in William Butler Yeats's *Sailing to Byzantium*, are images of

¹ In relationships with an age gap, it is more common for the man to be the older partner, and age gap relationships with the woman as the older partner are often subject to societal bias and judgement (Lehmiller and Agnew, 2011:40).

² Greer (1991) makes an unequivocal case for the dislike society harbours toward old women.

uselessness and conservatism, allows for the consideration of old men being as much victims of ageism as old women (Finneran, 1996:193). In fact, their hegemonic governance, their conservatism and their clinging to the status quo put Scholar society in the realm of patriarchy and confirm that the reversed roles played by Thales and Rene are not necessarily the norm there either.

Rene, extending her performance of masculinity, treats Thales the way one could envision a career-minded man treating his emotionally clingy wife:

Rene pushed him gently away and stood. 'I will be in muse when you are ready to be rational. I have made many sacrifices for you, Thales. It is unkind for you to reward me with such childishness.'

Contrition played him. 'Rene, please ...'

'Go for a walk, Thales. Young men need exercise.' (CS 12-13)

At this, Thales 'stormed from the apartment' (CS 44). He rages against having 'his life defined by his marriage or his relatives' (CS 46). He throws things around the apartment, and to his 'chagrin, his frustrations turned to tears' (CS 48-49). Thales's emotional performance has stereotypically feminine qualities, while his wife performs traditional masculinity in being the unemotional voice of reason. In the intimate setting of marriage, Thales and Rene both conform to the gendered norms of marital behaviour, but their reversed performances of these norms allow de Pierres to pose a challenge to the stereotypes.

When Rene has him incarcerated in a parody of female oppression by virtue of hegemonic masculinity, Thales wants to know '*What kind of city is this where one cannot disagree with one's wife without being jailed?*' (CS 94). His cellmate, Amaury, replies: 'Even in Scholar I would have thought that would be permitted' (CS 96). Amaury Villon and Thales

talk at length about all things philosophical and an intimate bond is established between them (CS 118-123). Their discussion is the closest any two characters, apart from Mira and *Insignia*, come to knowing each other in depth and forming a meaningful relationship. It is an intimacy which ‘in other circumstances, would have nourished Thales’s soul’ (CS 137). Their discussions serve to further highlight the fact that Scolar, as a representative of an advanced society, might be more repressed in terms of gender relations and other aspects than is evident on the surface. In male friendships of old, the focus was often on ‘loyalty, fellow feeling, and concern for the other’s interests’ instead of on intimacy and it was based on these characteristics that people deemed male friendships superior to those of females (Strikwerda and May, 1992:110). Some studies show, however, that American men have very few close friendships with other men, and that the friendships they *do* have seem to be shallow and unsatisfying to them (Pogrebin, 1987:253).

When Thales later impulsively rescues Mira and Latourn from Sophos Mianos, his heroism is not particularly masculine in nature – he cries out ‘a childish, frightened noise’ (CS 203) and his words become ‘incoherent, angry sobs’ (CS). When Mira sees Thales clearly for the first time after his rescue, she ‘did not think she had ever seen a more beautiful man’ (CS 205). Attractive men are traditionally described as ‘handsome’, while the word ‘beautiful’ is usually reserved for attractive women. Mira’s description of Thales thus strengthens the impression of femininity created by his timid performance. Thales, even though performing the function of rescuer (a traditionally male function), does not come across as heroic or masculine in either actions or appearance.

An intimate bond is formed between Thales and Mira as they share information, and Thales can finally ‘unburden himself a little’ (CS 264). Emotional unburdening is out of character in a masculine performance that would traditionally require stoicism and silence

(Dean, 1998:29). Thales responds to Mira's flattery, but again not in a typically masculine manner: he blushes as he 'had not been called a man before – not by a woman' (CS 265). Even though Mira is captivated by him, it is his mind, not his masculinity, which attracts her.

While these incidents do nothing to establish Thales as what society expects from a man, he finds Mira's refinement and her 'crimson colouring' sexually attractive (CS 267). He constantly acts outside of the gender expectations for masculinity, but his sexual orientation is heterosexual, as demonstrated by his attraction to Rene, Mira, Bethany and Fariss.

Thales observes Mira's clothes and wonders 'that Latino men could find attraction in their women under such voluminous garb'. The clothing is traditional and conservative and completely covers up anything that could be sexually attractive. In cultures where women are completely covered, such as certain countries in the Middle East, not knowing what is beneath the layers of cloth leads to men fantasising about what there might be. The fantasy fuels more desire than actual knowledge (or free access) would have done, thus placing women in a double bind. Either they are completely covered by their clothing and inaccessible, stimulating men's lustful fantasies by means of mystery, or they are considered sexually provocative for not wearing enough clothes. De Pierres highlights how, either way, in accordance with a hegemonic form of masculinity, men do not need to take responsibility for their sexual desire.

The bacterium that Lasper Farr has injected into Thales's eye³ (CS 280) is taking its toll and as Thales struggles with the changes in his body, he also struggles with changes in his belief system: 'Idealism and principles had been desirable – laudable, in fact – when he was safe. Now they had begun to seem both futile and dangerous' to Thales (CS 330). He reflects that his life is starting to 'unravel' and wonders how important it is 'which philosophy was observed when moment by moment his body was being destroyed' (CS 330). In this instance of intimate introspection, Thales's decaying body is representative of his decaying society and the necrosis in the values that used to be meaningful.

Continuing his non-masculine response to panic and anger, Thales 'flings' himself out of the room and runs 'randomly' through *Insignia* (CS 330), searching for a means to commit suicide. His surface motives are denying Lasper Farr and freeing Rene 'from the guilty burden of her husband'. However, he spends too much time fantasising about people's imagined responses to his imminent death to be convincing, asking himself 'How long before she would find out he was dead? How would she feel then? Relieved? Annoyed? Would she hold a requiem?' (CS 331). By creating the image of a stereotypically hysterical female, de Pierres is cementing Thales's feminine aspect, which serves throughout to expose the absurdity of certain gender stereotypes, and at the same time focuses on the concept of hysteria.⁴

³ In *Neuromancer* (Gibson, 1984:45-46), arguably the ultimate cyberpunk novel, Armitage inserts 'toxin sacs' containing a 'mycotoxin' into Case's arteries. Case can only access the neutralising antidote if he completes a specific task within a certain time frame. As if to emphasise the cyberpunk element in its antecedents, *The Sentients of Orion* closely echoes *Neuromancer* when Lasper Farr injects a barrier-eroding bacterium into Thales's eye. This will release toxins that Thales carries in his body, killing him unless he completes a certain task within a specified time (CS 280).

⁴ See Luce Irigaray (1985:46) and Diana Fuss (1995:55-72) on the roots of hysteria as being a uterus perceived to be out of control. In the 16th and 17th centuries any form of disproportionate emotion was labelled as pathological and hysterical (and thus feminine).

Thales is diverted from his suicide effort (to which he is as little committed as to a relationship with Mira) by Bethany Ionil. In dealing with the sobbing Thales, Bethany steps into a masculine performance while Thales 'leaned on her shoulder as if he was injured' in continuation of his performance of femininity. She takes him to her bedroom where he 'huddled into her pillows like a sick child'. Bethany frowns like a 'worried mother'. The intimacy between Thales and Bethany, in echo of that between Thales and Rene, has a strong Oedipal element, which is confirmed when Thales initiates sexual intercourse by asking Bethany to be 'comforted' (CS 333). In contrast to many understandings of conventional masculinity, Thales does not equate sexual intercourse with a display of masculine strength and force as outlined by Matthew R. Dudgeon and Marcia C. Inhorn (2003:41).

As Thales negotiates a meeting to acquire the DNA that Lasper Farr wants, he reflects on the women he is involved with. He sees them in a spectrum from unacceptable to unattainable, starting with Rast. He is scared of the mercenary with 'her stark white hair and the mouth that switched between maliciousness and laughter in an instant'. He finds Mira, on the other hand, 'at least' comprehensible, since she has 'manners and breeding'. Bethany, with whom he is having a sexual relationship, is not his ideal woman. She makes him sigh as he has

never met a woman like her. Despite her toughness she seemed willing to do things for him, to listen. The respect she gave him was intoxicating. She loved the way he spoke, and his ideas. And her lovemaking was so natural. It made him forget that her flesh had lost its tautness and that her hair was thin and lacking lustre

It seems he makes love to Beth despite his objections to her looks (which is ironic in the light of his maimed face). Then, there is of course the ideal he still strives for – Rene, with

the hair that ripples ‘like poured water’ (CS 344). De Pierres uses Thales’s thoughts as a reflection on the fact that in matters of intimacy reality is often a compromise between what a person wants and what is available. It is Thales’s yearning for perfection and refinement and his inability to value the intimacy he shares with Bethany that causes the relationship between them eventually to break apart (MS 49).

In spite of being depicted more in terms of feminine than masculine traits, Thales is typically male in his thoughts on women: he feels threatened by assertive women, and sees Rast as ‘an expert in the art of belittling’. As demonstrated by his thoughts above, he dislikes the physical characteristics of older women, and while he likes Mira for her heritage and class, he mostly yearns for the perfection of Rene (CS 343-344). The same can be said for his thoughts on sex: Scola does not have any ‘sex parlors’ or ‘sex industry’ and philosophers are not accustomed to pay for ‘carnal pleasures’. Thales is shocked by the idea of The Hoccs.⁵ He imagines ‘Rene’s repulsion at the very notion’ (CS 346). The ideas Thales holds surrounding women and sexual differences are very idealistic, and are reflected by his thoughts on sexuality and sex. By depicting him as feminine, but ascribing stereotypical and easily recognisable masculine thought patterns to him, de Pierres is commenting on the persistence of those stereotypes.

In a twist of irony, thoughts of Rast Randall, the woman whom he most despises, inspire Thales to embark on a path of emotional development:

The woman was more of a man than he was in so many ways ...

Thales felt a sudden desire to shirk off his upbringing – his beliefs – and become someone else. A person of action – not a piece of flesh manipulated against its will by a Lasper Farr or a Sophos Mianos and especially not by a Gutnee Paraburd. A strange coagulation of certainty

⁵ A red-light district on Rho Junction.

occurred deep inside his chest. He could change. (CS 346, emphasis added)

Thales's decision to change does not keep him from wanting 'to vomit' when he sees various aliens performing 'samples of the pleasures on offer' in The Hocs. His intention manifests itself when he keeps walking without Latourn, deciding that he is 'better off without the surly man' in spite of his terror of The Hocs (CS 349). When Tekton later storms into the lab with Manruben, Thales averts his eyes from Manruben's 'exposed and shrunken manhood' (CS 354), as he does later on Edo with the 'explicit sex acts' depicted on the walls (MS 161). His fears are more of non-normative sexual practices and exhibition than of any other threat, allowing de Pierres to comment on the puritanical approach that patriarchal systems often prescribe to sex. Unbridled and uninhibited sexual practices are a threat to the heteronormative binary, which, in turn, is crucial to the perpetuation of the patriarchy.

Thales is described as beautiful, and perceived to be so by men (MS 92) and women (CS 205) alike. Traditionally, women have been stereotyped by the 'trivial' association between them and their concern with their appearance, but there has been a gradual widening of 'the gaze' to include masculine bodies, and body theory now applies to men as much as to women (Bordo, 1999: 217; Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994:1177; Lemon, 1997:30; Wheeler, 1999:A22). In *The Adonis Complex*, Harrison Pope, Katharine Phillips and Roberto Olivardia say that 'men of all ages ... are preoccupied with the appearance of their bodies' currently. They label the specimens of perfection other men strive to emulate as 'supermales' and claim that the inability of normal men to equal these 'supermales' in appearance can lead to 'feelings of inadequacy, unattractiveness, and even failure' (2000:2-4). Toby Miller (2004:no pagination) suggests that body dissatisfaction 'has crossed genders' and this impacts greatly on 'conventional maleness'.

The loss of his beauty (MS 51) and the loss of his innocence change Thales irrevocably. In parody of the feminine stereotype, he now feels that his beauty, or loss of it, reflects on his worth. He falls into despair and self-pity and thinks of himself as ‘diseased’ and ‘abhorrent’ (MS 87). De Pierres again uses the feminised Thales to comment on the damage done to both men and women by societal expectations of physical appearance: how society evaluates his attractiveness determines how he beholds and evaluates himself.

For many years, women were held to such expectations in terms of beauty and physical appearance – they were required to adjust their appearance to suit society, while men were not. This has been changing with the advent of the metrosexual movement, and with the mainstreaming of the LGBT movement. There is money in men’s appearance and, increasingly, men are being put under pressure to attain what is held as the ideal body shape and physical appearance. Researchers such as Barber (2016:269) and Cahill (2011:79) note a shift in the beauty industry from only focusing on women to also demanding men to conform to certain ideals in terms of physical experience and beauty.

In the same breath as Thales declares himself unworthy based on his lack of beauty, he again ironically finds time to reflect on and criticise Bethany’s ‘looking much older’ under the harsh Edo lights (MS 87). In his world, as in ours, a man with a necrotic face is still better than a woman with a few wrinkles. The irony goes deeper in that it is Bethany who manages to save Thales from despair by putting both his lost beauty and his lost ideals in perspective (MS 88).

Thales reappraises their relationship:

She cared for him, that was clear. But what could he give her in return?
Could he give her love? He didn’t know. Rene was still his wife. And

Bethany ... Bethany was comfort and a reasoned voice. Bethany was experience. Beth was ... He kissed her cheek and settled into her embrace. (MS 97)

His earlier decision to leave his naivety behind seems laughable when Thales, shortly after compartmentalising Beth in this way, finds her, in their own apartment, making love to a Mioloaquan man (MS 98). The manner in which Thales reacts to the discovery epitomises the heteronormative rejection of any sex that is not mainstream.

He knew of masochism. It was an ancient practice. But on Solar it was understood that deviant sexual practices were a sign of sublimated frustrations and low self-worth, not a true, healthy expression of sexuality. (MS 98)

Bethany is kind in not calling Thales a bigot for his reaction. Instead she calls him ‘an idealist and a purist about some things’. She also, indirectly, compares him to a child, which Thales finds more upsetting than any of the events leading up to this conversation. Being called a child is a serious slight to Thales’s manhood, tenuous though his performance of masculinity might be (MS 99). Here de Pierres is using Thales’s reaction to Bethany’s sexual activity to stress how sexuality in men is ‘sanctioned and encouraged’ in many modern-day societies, while women's sexuality may be ‘closely monitored, constrained, and condemned’ by the same society (Dudgeon and Inhorn, 2003:41).

The memory of Beth ‘and the Mio slapping her with its fins – the glazed pleasure on her face as its teeth pulled at her skin’ does not leave Thales. He is repulsed by the image but ‘the tiny trickle of desire’ he felt at seeing them together seems ‘to be growing stronger by the moment’ (MS 160). He follows through on the invitation to ‘diversion treatment’ by a company named ‘Ardour’. Like the ‘the invitation-only bordello pseudo-world of Vela’

where Jo-Jo goes for recreation (DS 180), Ardour is a 'clean' bordello. The well-maintained 'Health Watch'⁶ (DS 389), along with 'many infection screenings' (DS 180), has seemingly rendered STDs innocuous in these high-class, exclusive sex establishments. This is in marked contrast to the dirty prostitute in *The Hocs* (DS 321). De Pierres seems to be using this contrast, and her depictions of the intimacies surrounding commercial sex, indirectly to champion improved conditions for sex workers (Stadler and Delaney, 2006:452).

In a similar vein to de Pierres, Ashwini Tambe (2006:221) offers a theoretical approach by critiquing 'sex radical arguments that posit brothels as realms of contractual exchange between strangers', arguing that prostitution should be viewed as an alternate family instead of as an 'alternative to heteronormative domesticity' (2006:219). Yen-Wen Peng (2007:322) notes another interesting polarity, usually 'ignored' by feminists, namely, that 'the buying of sex is often an alternative to free, casual sex'. Peng's argument takes into account that '[i]f a man seeking free, casual sex is not condemned as exploiting women's bodies and dignity, why should a man who pays for it be necessarily condemned?' (2007:322). In the interest of fairness, it *is* important not only to look at feminist considerations surrounding prostitution, but to keep in mind that those who use prostitutes do so from a particular viewpoint. While emotional intimacy does not feature greatly in the bordellos depicted by de Pierres, the customers are afforded a level of emotional succour beyond the purely contractual, again implying that she might be making a case for wider tolerance.

Thales's visit to Ardour is a turning point for him in terms of sexuality and sexual perceptions. In the most detailed sexual encounter so far in any of the novels, Thales, who

⁶ A pre-paid, built-in health check and health repair system used in Orion.

has consistently been revolted by any sexual practices that are not strictly heteronormative, is led step by step into the world of BDSM (MS 168-171). The carefully described incident culminates in Thales reaching climax in 'shouts of ecstasy'. De Pierres has continually depicted Thales as more feminine than masculine in many of his actions and perceptions, and making him the submissive partner in this exchange confirms the earlier allusions. The pleasure Thales derives from being submitted to domination and pain is indicative of disaffection with our social norms, which firstly cast women, instead of men, as submissive, and secondly, imply that the women (or submissive partners) are forced into and degraded by their submission. Thales, for one, feels that the experience has 'given him some peace' and 'left him feeling stronger in some way. Liberated almost' (MS 217).

In spite of the Ardour experience allowing Thales to break away from his restrictive views on sexuality and, in his own perception, to face up to 'the shallow, selfish, needy inner man' underneath the veneer of 'naive idealist', he is still unable to allow Bethany that same freedom. The double standard remains. Thales is able to accept his enjoyment of pain in himself, but in Bethany he judges it and rejects it. Men's sexuality is 'forgiven' for being polymorphously perverse, while women's sexuality is required to be chaste and monogamous (Dudgeon and Inhorn, 2003:41). Thales washes before going back to his apartment, feeling 'decency' holds him back from returning to Bethany 'smelling of intimacy with another' (MS 217), still angry at her for not extending 'the same courtesy to him'. Even though Thales is blind to his hypocrisy, Bethany clearly has the moral high ground: she does not try to hide or deny her sexuality, nor does she pay for the sexual intercourse in which she partakes.

After leaving Beth, Thales yet again finds himself in a situation more stereotypically associated with women when he is nearly killed by a stranger (MS 226). He is only able to

put up ‘a miserable attempt against the man’s superior strength’ and to ‘writhe and twist his head from side to side’. The object the man forces into Thales’s mouth, leaving him with his ‘mouth ... so full he could barely breathe’ has sexual intimations, and the scene mirrors the attempted rape of a woman by a man. It also recalls Jo-Jo’s near asphyxiation in a similar sexual scene and both these cases are redolent of power and powerlessness. In view of his consistent performance of femininity, Thales’s inability to protect himself brings to mind Cahill’s (2001:200) assertion that women are often rendered vulnerable due to their feminine conditioning.

Like a damsel in distress, Thales is rescued, but to his consternation his rescuer speaks in a ‘woman’s voice. Low and soft. *A woman?*’ (MS 227). Thales goes into shock and starts ‘shaking uncontrollably’. He is ‘overcome by weakened muscles, unable to get his fear reaction under control, terrified that his bowels would loosen and empty where he stood’ (MS 229). Like the man in a typical romance novel, the woman ‘pulled Thales closer and stroked his back. Her hands were surprisingly gentle and soothing’. Thales allows ‘himself to be supported by her, shivering against her body warmth’ (MS 230). Thales’s reactions could well be replaced by those of Christy in *Lord Braybrook’s Penniless Bride* (Rolls, 2009:267), who ‘blushes’ and ‘trembles’, feeling ‘dizzy’ and ‘leaning against’ the strong body of said Lord.

Thales eventually confides in Tekton that he was ‘saved by a ... woman’. It is hard for him even to say the words. The good fortune of being alive is overshadowed by the shame of being saved by a woman.⁷ In his mind ‘Fariss was a woman but that alone seemed an insufficient way to describe her’ (MS 265). This implies that, in Thales’s perception at least, a woman alone is not able to do what Fariss has done. A mere woman could not have

⁷ This is reminiscent of Rich’s assertion that “the male mind has always been haunted by the force of the idea of *dependence on a woman for life itself*” (1977:xiii, original emphasis).

saved him. She has to be a woman *plus* something extra to make her capable of any extraordinary feat and to make her saving him bearable. In this intimate disclosure, de Pierres is commenting on the commonly held misperception which equates weakness with femininity and strength with masculinity. The irony of Thales holding this perception in spite of his sustained performance of femininity showcases the incongruity of the stereotype.

In order to smuggle him safely off Edo, Thales has to pose as Fariss's sexual plaything, or 'booty', once again a position one would stereotypically expect a woman to be in. Fariss, by contrast, performs an effortless masculinity. She is not acting outside of the manner she usually does, as the loader operators, the mercenaries and the soldiers around them find nothing unusual in her taking a 'foot-warmer' on board with her. Thales walks with 'his eyes downcast, not sure if he was appalled or thrilled by the charade. The idea of being at the whim of this woman enthralled him' (MS 285). What Thales does not realise is how vulnerable he is to sexual exploitation by any of the people watching them, should Fariss's protection fail. Masculine hegemony comes into play: as a man, even a man projecting mostly feminine attributes, it is not possible for Thales to fathom the vulnerability of a woman in such a situation.

Thales's titillation at having to share Fariss's bed to keep up appearances ends when Fariss gives him a clear explanation of the vulnerable state he finds himself in. It, notably, takes a woman to point the peril out to him:

Maybe there's some things you oughta know about booty. Booty only goes out of their cabin to eat and crap. San is down the corridor on the left. Check there is no one about before you go there ... Don't talk to anyone, and don't wander about for no good reason. Booty's fair game if

they get caught out alone. Farr's soldiers ...'ll kill you. Or whatever pleases them most. (MS 286)

For the first time, Thales realises that he is 'completely dependent on her for his safety – his life' (MS 286). This is not a situation in which many men have found or are likely ever to find themselves, while it is, unfortunately, a situation with which many women would be able to identify (Cahill, 2001:206).

His physical reaction to Fariss is as confusing to Thales as his dependency on her. He cannot 'stop trembling' and for the first time a female has the ability to dispel the inevitably unfavourable comparisons to Rene that have influenced most of his previous intimate encounters with women (MS 287). Thales leans in to kiss Fariss, and finds the 'taste of her ... breathtaking'. For a brief moment he takes the initiative in a masculine fashion, but he is immediately relegated to his 'feminine' position when, in return for the kiss, Fariss punches him in the face. It is not 'a gentle slap, but a full-fisted punch to the jaw' that has him holding his face 'in silent agony' (MS 288). It is never explained whether Fariss hits him for the benefit of keeping up appearances in front of the mercenary, Macken, who enters the cabin, whether she hits him for kissing her, or whether she hits him only to establish power and dominance. According to Nicola Gavey's interpretation of 'unwanted sex', it might be argued that Thales is emotionally vulnerable and that the sex he has with Fariss is coerced and takes place under duress (2005:136). If Cahill's criteria were applied, then the efficacy of Thales's desire would mark their sexual intercourse as consensual (2014:303).

According to Betty La France (2010:299), '[t]he traditional sexual script ... describes men as initiators of sexual activity and women as gatekeepers of sexual requests'. Accordingly, when Fariss and Thales have sexual intercourse for the first time, the reversal of their

gender portrayals is cemented. Thales is the one with the heart fluttering with ‘excitement and nervousness’ while Fariss is the one to massage his testicles ‘with strong, practiced fingers that fell just short of inflicting pain’. Typically, Thales finds himself ‘in a sea of conflicting emotions: arousal, embarrassment – a woman had never handled him so perfunctorily before – and fear, what if he couldn’t perform?’ (MS 308). The performance angst is the only typically masculine reaction in Thales’s medley of feelings.

After Thales’s quick orgasm, Fariss, in a manner that diverges from the female gender stereotype, uses Thales’s fingers ‘without a qualm’ to bring herself to a climax and then promptly falls asleep. She has drawn him ‘against her chest’, a position in which Thales feels ‘peculiar’ as it is ‘not a man’s position’. In spite of feeling strange, he feels himself ‘protected and for the briefest moment – content’ (MS 309).

Macken, the mercenary, mistakenly believes that Thales is a whore, a piece of property, and decides to sample the wares. Macken, in a way, is completely non-sexist in that he sees male and female whores as equal (if only as equally worthless). He says: ‘Whores is whores in my mind – and I don’t pay for them, no matter how ejicated’ (MS 312).

Although men too fall victim, there is a common misconception that gender-based violence only affects women (Abelson, 2016:394). Thales is therefore again portrayed in what is stereotypically assumed to be a feminine position; that of potential rape victim. The scene mirrors Mira’s rape on the beach, with the exception of the fact that Thales is able to defend himself against the rape by killing Macken (ironically by blowing his testicles off) (MS 313). Fariss does show up in time to get him to safety, but in the moment that it matters most, it is Thales who saves himself by an uncharacteristically masculine show of force. This insightful digression from Thales’s feminisation serves not

to break the pattern of his gender performance, but to demonstrate that men, as well as women, are vulnerable to rape, and that all rape victims can, under the right circumstances, defend themselves (Cahill, 2001:11, 206).⁸ De Pierres further applies this incident of negative intimacy to highlight the plight of women who, under threat of violence, kill men.⁹

Thales's emotional growth and his change in status and in gender performance are reflected in his body and face, and 'even the patterns of his speech', which have changed so much that he is unrecognisable to Mira when they finally meet again on Intel station (MS 319). His beauty, like his sexual naivety, is gone. Mira too, has changed, both in her appearance and in her 'expression'. There is no more 'confusion and softness', only 'determination and below that, perhaps, a deeper embedded anger' (MS 323). They both embody their experiences and in their changed state they seem to have aligned their gender performances to be closer to each other.

Thales responds to Mira's labour and its implicit reinforcement of her womanhood by briefly adopting a more masculine performance of gender (MS 325). In a highly stereotyped situation, Thales is forced to forsake his portrayal of feminised helplessness in order to step into the stereotypically male role of protector, a role he fulfils by helping Mira find a safe place to give birth (MS 339). Thales does step into the role, but even then, it is his *fear* that steadies Mira's panic, not his assumption of masculine control. She is, also stereotypically, still the one who 'must stay calm and think' (MS 339).

⁸ Mira was, after all, attacked by a whole group of men. Cahill does not imply that any manner of self-defence would prevent rape under such circumstances (2001:207).

⁹ Jen Green edited two anthologies of *Reader, I Murdered Him*, which narrate incidents of women killing men in response to their violence and aggression (1989, 1997).

Along with the changes in aspect and demeanour they have both undergone and their mutual survival of sexual violence perpetrated by men (MS 323; MS 348), Thales and Mira now share imminent incarceration and possibly even death in their desperate efforts to be true to their ideals. Thales has changed and while he was never ‘the person she’d first imagined him to be ... he had his own strengths, his own sense of honour’. Mira feels herself lucky ‘to have seen to the true heart of the man’ (TS 38). Thales, in turn, realises that the ‘bond between him and Mira was not romantic, as his feelings had been for Rene. Nor did it resemble the deeply passionate way Fariss moved him. It was more a genuine warmth, and a desire to see things go well for her. Friendship ... that would grow and endure, given a chance’ (TS 87-88). When they part on Sclar, Thales calls Mira ‘a true friend’ and one he’ll never forget (TS 178). In this journey of intimacy turned into friendship, de Pierres again addresses the question of non-sexualised friendship between men and women.

Between Thales and Fariss the intimacy goes much further than their sexual relationship. In fact, ‘her impact on his life was beyond measure. On the trip to Intel station ... she’d instructed him on when and how she would like sex, and slapped him if he offended her. Her behaviour made a mockery of the way he’d been socialised – sensibilities, etiquette, appetites all turned inside out’ (TS 54). The behaviour he refers to is mostly Fariss acting outside of the societal perimeters prescribed for her gender, something that is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. The question is whether Thales falls in love with Fariss in spite of her breaking most gender rules, or because of her breaking most gender rules.

The relationship between them showcases an emerging pattern of violence and abuse related to sexual intimacy in *The Sentients of Orion*. The intimacy between them does, however, develop from a purely physical attraction, fraught with violence, into deep

emotional intimacy, setting it aside from the other sexual relations portrayed in the books. When she calls him ‘Hon’, the ‘casual endearment filled him with unbelievable warmth’ (TS 212). When he finally saves Fariss’s life, in a reversal of the status quo, she ‘slapped him on the back’ and says ‘Make a soldier of ya yet’ (TS 219) and when they both survive the crash landing, she ‘pulled him into her arms as though he was a small child being rescued by its mother’ (TS 219).¹⁰ When she holds him, he savours her ‘sweaty and stale’ smell and he ‘passively’ allows her to stroke away his ‘exhaustion and claustrophobia’ along with his fear (TS 227).

In another highly stereotyped scenario, Thales and Fariss part ways, but he has grown enough to believe that she will be back. His heart breaks, but he knows they cannot be together for the moment. De Pierres queers the stereotype by depicting Fariss as the proverbial cowboy riding off into the sunset. In the final moments of their relationship, Thales performs the traditionally feminine role of the partner who stays at home while ‘her’ husband goes out to conquer the universe.

Tekton

Another man who, like Thales, takes pride in his appearance is Tekton, the vain and body-conscious Lostolian Godhead.¹¹ He has ‘over a thousand spare epidermises’¹² (DS 390), carries a ‘small holdall of skin lotions’ (DS 25) and is very concerned with ‘rejuvenation’¹³ (DS 21). These concerns are traditionally more feminine, but the emergence of the metrosexual man and the shift in ‘gaze’ to incorporate the male body, have made these

¹⁰ This reinforces the Oedipal attraction depicted in Thales’s relationships with both Rene and Bethany.

¹¹ A title for those chosen to serve Sole (also known as God).

¹² Spare skins carried to rejuvenate old skin, thus negating the effects of aging.

¹³ A medical procedure which perpetuates youth and keeps people from aging at all.

concerns more gender-neutral.¹⁴ He is also very sexualised and conscious of his manhood, either ‘graciously’ displaying his genitalia for others to gaze on in a ‘show of gratitude and good faith’ (DS 22) or flashing them in a fit of annoyance (DS170). He encourages the incorporation of ‘physicality’ in his students, as he believes it improves their designs (DS 25).

Lostolians are humanesques, not aliens. They are ‘not the most attractive of humanesques, with their tight, colourless skin, but Tekton managed to convey confidence and elegance despite that’ (MS 90). He possesses a degree of glamour, based on confidence, causing people to treat him as if he were indeed good-looking. De Pierres portrays Tekton as an average-looking, even ugly man, who by benefit of hegemonic masculinity is completely secure in his appearance and his sexuality. Pope, Phillips and Olivardia’s explication of ‘Body Dismorphic Disorders’ (BDD), might however render Tekton’s obvious comfort with his penis size to be anti- stereotypical as, according to their findings, while there might not be any solid statistical evidence, concern about penis size is ‘very common’ among men (2000:165-167).¹⁵

To be elected as Godhead to Sole, which is a big honour, Tekton goes through ‘some excruciatingly unpleasant lovemaking sessions’ with the ‘puffy offspring’ of the Chancellor, using sexual intercourse to get what he wants (DS 25). This is a reversal of the stereotypical view of women ‘sleeping their way to the top’. The description of Doris Mulek as ‘puffy’ and the intercourse as ‘unpleasant’ not only shows Tekton’s clinical lack of involvement, but serves to depict the incident as completely negative. Her puffiness in itself, by the standards of modern-day, Western-influenced society, deprives Doris of

¹⁴ See the discussion of Thales’s beauty earlier in this chapter.

¹⁵ Pope et al refer to a number of other common male insecurities such as breast size, hair loss and height in their discussion of BDD (2000:153-169). Also see Masters et al (1986:28, 45-48) on this point.

sympathy and dignity. Tekton, however, remembers Doris's agreement to have sex with 'a sense of jubilation', not 'because of love or some such blighted theory but because of the sheer pleasure of having set out to climb a rung on the ladder to exponential success and succeeding' (DS 209). Jo-Jo Rasterovich later remarks that 'Tekton had wedded and bedded her to get to Belle-Monde and everyone knew it' (DS 391).

Tekton has the god-given task to '*show/beauty*' (DS 57) for which he finds inspiration in 'the ripple of Dicter Miranda's thighs' (DS 61). He is unable to 'subdue his erection' at the thought of her 'untuned flesh' for longer than a day and is completely focused on emulating her '*sensual flow*' (DS 62). Complete obsession with sex is not usually ascribed to women, so Tekton's performance of masculinity in this instance conforms to societal gender expectations.

Tekton 'took up perving' (DS 77) and 'wooing Dicter Miranda with the sole ... ambition of gaining a closer inspection of her thighs' (DS 78). He feels an emotional detachment from the attainment of this goal, an attitude typically credited to men. He also goes about his wooing in typical male fashion, trying to impress Miranda with 'extravagant fare' and blowing 'the best part of his month's complimentary food allowance' on her in the hope of getting another glimpse of her naked thighs (DS 79).

Miranda, for her part, is playing the role of a typical female seductress. She in turn needs information from Tekton, and in order to get that information, she calculatedly plays the innocent, 'flirts' and 'banter' and provocatively crosses her legs, 'showing a large measure of undulating thigh flesh' (DS 79). Using wiles and 'playing' a man to achieve a certain goal is the feminine offset to the masculine role Tekton is playing. The textbook gender performances played by the Archi-Tect and the Dicter are stereotypical to the point

of farce. They both perform in a manner they think might get the results they want, based on their assumption that the other party will have certain stereotypical gender expectations, thus perpetuating the charade. De Pierres thus shows up the ridiculous roles of the woman as seductress and the man as sexual manipulator.

Tekton is unable to separate his sexual wants from his professional judgement. After catching Miranda snooping in his affairs, his ire is diverted by Miranda's complimenting his 'prolonged erection' and lifting her skirt. She is portrayed as blatantly using sex for gain, but he is the sop who falls for it in another of de Pierres' jabs at stereotypes surrounding men's sexuality and desire (DS 245). When Miranda mentions having the 'fondest memories' of their tryst on Sclar, Tekton's objectivity is 'swamped' by 'the merest hint of her over-abundant pheromones' (CS 92). Focusing on any task instead of on physical gratification is hard for Tekton. Even normal negotiations are 'sexy' to him – 'almost as sexy as conceiving a new model or overcoming a design flaw' (CS 150). Odd little things send Tekton off on sexual daydreams, for example him partaking in 'a little auto-eroticism' while studying Latino power structures, or imagining 'an odd vision of the head and shoulders of the young Baronessa Fedor with the body of a biozoon, conducting fellatio upon him' (MS 21). This plays into the stereotype of men being able to think of nothing other than sex and is exaggerated to the point that it can be concluded that de Pierres is poking fun at the stereotype.

Tekton has 'lurid' thoughts of 'Miranda and Doris locked in a vigorous bout of bikini-clad *amour*' (DS 212). These 'ménage fantasies' of Tekton come true much later when he walks in on 'Miranda quaffing champagne and eating oysters out of parts of Doris that not even he had visited'. He joins them (on Miranda's invitation) and his 'rush of akula¹⁶ was

¹⁶ A biological surge of virility, directly linked to Tekton's erection.

akin to a lava eruption on Mount Frenzy. He plunged after the oysters with a true connoisseur's enthusiasm and worked off his frustrations' (DS 243). Tekton's intimate endeavours with both these women have so far been aimed at attaining something, be it promotion or information. This time the intercourse is also utilitarian, but not in terms of gain, simply in terms of carnal gratification and the relief of frustration. There is no indication whatsoever of emotional intimacy. The women play an active role here by initiating the sexual intercourse, but in doing so they are playing out a stereotypical male fantasy about two women having sex and asking the man to join them. While the scenario seemingly serves to empower women sexually, de Pierres is in actual fact showing how it *disempowers* them by casting them in the role of passive sexual objects for men's delectation. Tekton's joining them detracts from their sexual agency and the power they might have derived from practising non-heteronormative intercourse. De Pierres thus demonstrates how women's 'sexual empowerment' can very easily become negatively inflected by the hegemonic nature of masculinity.

In Lostolian culture, which seems to subscribe very heavily to hegemonic masculinity, it is perfectly acceptable to display one's nakedness, and also one's erection outside of sexually intimate situations. Tekton does this, apparently to the embarrassment of Marchella Pellegrini, whom he meets in her capacity as Ambassador (DS 305). Tekton apologises and explains, somewhat disingenuously: 'The sight of your beautiful planet excites my physiology. On Lostol it is not a thing we hide. It prevents much deception when you can see what excites a person' (DS 303).

Marchella is, however, 'much less naïve' than Tekton thinks and the realisation that she is open to negotiations gives him a 'painful' erection which he does not try to hide, 'giving her the full benefit of his arousal' (DS 309). Once he hears that she wants something in

return for access to the mines of Araldis, Tekton knows that he will attain the sexual gratification he seeks. Even though her skin is ‘rough in comparison to that of a Lostolian female’ and he can smell ‘the light perspiration on her brow’, Tekton is turned on. He is portrayed as a person who is willing to have sexual intercourse with anything that moves – even that which offends his sensibilities (DS 310). Marchella smells bad to him, and he obviously has a penchant for women with more ‘flopping flesh’ (CS 79) than Marchella has, but he is bent on gratification.

With the confidence of one used to getting his own way, Tekton reached for her, running his tongue along the side of her face, tasting the bitterness of iron and the tang of copper. He then shuddered into a seated position and pulled her down to him. With her face pushed to his thighs, he sent his logic-mind diving under the sea of his *akula* and began building magnificent cathedrals in his free-mind. (DS 311)

This situation could easily be read as Tekton forcing the unwilling Marchella to perform oral sex on him. She places herself in a position of disempowerment in order to permanently empower all the women of her race, and instead of a stereotypical victim, she is the instigator and the ‘winner’ in this unequal, if mutually utilitarian, sexual exchange.

In spite of his inability to focus on anything other than intercourse for very long, and his willingness to have sex with just about anybody, Tekton does draw the line somewhere. He finds the ‘famous skieran sculptor, Fenralia’ fascinating, and spends lots of his leisure time on the way to Rho Junction ‘imbibing some of the artist’s exceptional hallucinogenic hoard’. Tekton finds ‘Fenralia’s gelatinous body and trailing tendrils almost as inspiring as Miranda’s flesh, though – due to their odour – not at all sexually appealing’ (CS 315). He agrees to pose naked for Fenralia, but when he sees ‘that Fenralia’s sexual organs had unfolded from within her/his bell-shaped body and were creeping across the floor to him,

rather like pieces of meat escaping a frigerator', he concocts an excuse with his moud¹⁷ and makes a hasty escape (CS 315). Tekton runs away as Jo-Jo eventually manages to do from Miranda Seward (DS 115). There is no incident in *The Sentients of Orion* involving a woman running away from sexual approaches, by which de Pierres highlights that somehow, even when they do not welcome certain advances, the power in the sexual exchange is still in the hands of the man.

While Tekton does not directly take part in the sexual incident between Manruben and the prostitute who comes to the warehouse on Rho Junction, he is a witness to the incident. The prostitute, a humanesque female, performs fellatio on Manruben as payment for a pair of 'delicately interwoven' handcuff bracelets. Tekton is 'caught between utter revulsion and complete fascination' (CS 320-321) and while he wants to 'leave the warehouse, this grubby artisan and his whore, and never return ... he had come too far and risked too much to let Manruben's sexploits deter him' (DS 321). The prostitute brings Manruben to a climax, but 'on his final groan she smeared something between the crease of his slack-skinned buttocks' which causes 'several further violent thrusts of his pelvis' and makes him fall backward 'clutching his chest'. The prostitute, oblivious to Manruben's possible cardiac arrest, 'pounces' on him, 'rattling about under the craftsman's clothes' until she finds and grabs her bracelet and 'totters off' on her high heels (DS 321).

This depiction of the prostitute encodes two conventional ideas about sex workers: first, she is seen as a woman of the night, in possession of secret knowledge that enhances sexual pleasure and, second, she is portrayed as a heartless 'whore' who scrabbles for payment and runs off. Neither of these stereotypes does much toward humanising sex work and dignifying women who engage in it. As Tekton is the perceiver of this incident,

¹⁷ A floating butler/personal assistant.

however, the reader must assume that the viewpoint portrayed and the prejudices displayed here are his. Tekton's poor view of prostitutes is reinforced when he describes Thales and Bethany, in their eagerness to leave Rho Junction, as '*easier than a Belle-Monde prostitute*' (MS 20). This incident and Tekton's attitude toward the prostitute are used by de Pierres again to comment on the double standards surrounding modern-day prostitution. Tekton, who has no qualms about prostituting himself to others in order to gain what he wants, and who regularly engages in sex for the fringe benefits it might hold, does not think of his own actions as prostitution. He reserves his scorn for the women who make a profession out of providing sex, absolving himself from the very thing he is judging the prostitutes for.

The prostitute in the warehouse stands in contrast to the sex workers at Ardour (MS 168) and Vela (DS 180) in that she is unclean, of low status, and involved in prostitution to gain luxury goods, not for survival. Peng (2007:329) points out how '[t]he stigma attached to "voluntary" prostitutes is a major factor that strengthens, or at least maintains, the continued preclusion of the normalization of prostitution'.

Reinforcing his own double standards when it comes to sex, Tekton sets out to seduce Bethany Ionil in order to gain access to Lasper Farr. He is again completely emotionally detached, and only involved in the 'seduction' in order to gain what he needs from Bethany (MS 23). Instead of her haggard looks garnering sympathy or interest from Tekton, he analyses her, thinking that a 'woman ages so gracelessly if she does not pay attention to herself'. His views on prostitutes are in line with his views on women in general, but also show Tekton to be the product of a society (much like ours) obsessed with women's appearance.

On Edo, Tekton recognises himself as the subject of the Fenralia ‘statue of a humanesque’ male whose genitals ‘every few moments’ change ‘in a carefully fluid but determined motion, from flaccid to erect’ (CS 273). He is at first ‘flabbergasted’, but then a ‘disturbingly exhibitionistic and egoistic streak ignited in Tekton. After all, his sexual prowess *was* formidable, even to the likes of the voracious Dieter Miranda Seeward. Legendary even. And perhaps there was potential for this to turn his way’ (MS 56). He later sits in his room and masturbates so as to be able to compare his erection with that of Fenralia’s statue and finds it ‘a very good likeness’ (MS 114). Tekton is performing his masculinity, measuring his manhood and convincing himself that it is bigger and better than others. He has thus identified his masculinity with his penis.

Based on this bolstering of his masculine ego, Tekton is overconfident when Lasper Farr’s men sweep him away from the statue. When Farr threatens Tekton by implying that he (Farr) is capable of anything, ‘without consequence’ and ‘with or without shame’ (MS 116), Tekton feels ‘his akula swell and himself stiffen’ (MS 60).

Tekton grew hard at the man’s bald statement. It was not a new thing for him to find eroticism in power – but danger? Perhaps academia had become too predictable, too familiar to stimulate him any more. (MS 117)

Tekton is fascinated by the fact that he seems to ‘be developing an erotic attraction to the idea of physical threat’ (MS 119). The archiTect’s akula seems to be the driving force behind most of his actions and thoughts. Even under threat of death, he is stirred with desire, and enamoured of that desire, seemingly unaware of how his obsession with sex is rendering him incapable of recognising or protecting himself against imminent physical danger. It is only under *true* threat to his life, in danger of being blown off an invisible bridge high above Edo, that the performance finally lets up and Tekton’s ‘akula and the

erection that had been with him for hours ... completely deserted him' (MS 122; MS 175). Tekton's transcendence of his heavily sexualised masculinity is reminiscent of Jo-Jo, who is only able to step out of his particular masculine performance under truly dire circumstances (TS 318). Here de Pierres is commenting on the invasive depth of socially constructed masculinity by implying that it blinds men to reality and that only radical and extreme circumstances can liberate men from its pervasive grip.

Sole (God) biologically modifies the people chosen to communicate with him. This process, known as 'shafting', affects people differently (DS 4-5). In Tekton's case, his brain is divided into 'free-mind' and 'logic-mind' (DS 57). These two sides of his mind operate independently and in opposition to each other in a manner which, for the most part, seems to echo the Freudian division of the self into id (lust) and ego (reason), with the superego (or logical mind) fulfilling the role of judge and moral arbiter. The thought of seduction, for example, captivates Tekton's free-mind but makes his logic-mind shudder. His free-mind 'bleats' for 'agreeable intercourse' and regularly overwhelms him 'with a rush of akula', leaving him 'rigid-tight with pleasure' (DS 303), while his logic-mind is focused on the task at hand (DS 209).¹⁸

Tekton's free-mind and his logic-mind are not in agreement about strong women. When he hears that Jelly Hob was taking him to see Sam, free-mind squeals '*Good-ee! Powerful women are sooo -*' while logic-mind completes the thought: '*Dangerous ... And mind that*' (MS 249). He is attracted to strong women and feels 'a sliver of jealousy' watching the 'magnificent woman - Fariss - hover over Berniere' (MS 280). While he is travelling with Sam, Tekton is, in reinforcement of his superficial prioritising of appearance, horrified at having to 'spend the duration of the trip to Intel in the close proximity of a

¹⁸ Tekton's two minds also represent reason and emotion, the former having long been associated with male, the latter with female nature (Jaggar 1989:486).

strange, bossy and altogether physically unappealing old woman'. Logic-mind again corrects him: '*A clever and resourceful old woman*', but his free-mind 'would not be convinced. *But so ugly*' (MS 292).

Tekton's rescue from the shrine by Jelly Hob (MS 240), and the subsequent emotional intimacy he witnesses between those opposed to whatever Lasper Farr is planning (MS 281), seem to have deprived him of his usual cunning. He tries 'to be arrogant' with Sam, but cannot, and deduces that he does not 'have the heart for his usual conceits' (MS 291). There is further evidence of his having changed and of his insight into it:

Tekton gave Hob's shoulder a light squeeze. He was not inclined to friendly physical displays, but the occasion seemed to call for it. Though their acquaintance had been brief, the grubby pilot genius had saved his life and extended him compassion and kindness. Tekton had never needed those things before; never cared for them nor offered them to others ... To say that the scales of selfishness had fallen from Tekton's eyes was perhaps overly dramatic, but his perspective had altered, he allowed, on some counts. And now he wanted an opportunity to explore his newfound compassion, see how it affected his decision-making and the outcomes of events in his life. (TS 30)

Even Tekton's sexual interests are different after his discovery of compassion. He looks at the Balol female with 'interest' (TS 37), but declines to act on his interest, instead sitting in his cabin, wishing for simpler times, for safety and for 'regular sex'. He does entertain the thought of getting aroused, but not much comes from it since on 'an insalubrious hybrid biozoon, in a location that could well be in the teeth of an impending galactic war, and with only two obnoxious mercenaries for companionship, thoughts of carnal pleasure were neither easy to sustain nor really practical' (TS 96). Finally, de Pierres set the parameters within which even the most sex-driven of men realises the inappropriateness of sexual thoughts.

Tekton's newfound insight into himself and his urges does not keep him from looking at the pregnant Mira Fedor in the DSD and 'sneering' that '*She's been busy*' (TS 97). While it is possible for Tekton, under dire threat of death, to evolve beyond his total focus on sex, his ingrained disrespect for women seemingly cannot be suppressed. This reinforces Butler's assertion that men's view on sexual difference mostly precedes their view on sexuality (1990:xii).

When Tekton later helps Mira to Primo vein, it is not because he was 'much taller than her, or stronger, but he had energy where hers was spent' (TS 319). Only in the face of ultimate destruction can there be equality between the Lostolian and the Baronessa, as de Pierres yet again indicates how extreme conditions are required in order for stereotypical gender perceptions and destructive adherence to masculine hegemony to be shaken.

Innis

Complementing the primary male characters in *The Sentients of Orion*, there is a rich cast of supporting men. Innis, the royal police officers, the mercenaries and Lasper Farr all merit closer scrutiny in terms of the contribution their acts of intimacy make to the challenge de Pierres is posing to the gender status quo.

At the Carabinere compound, Mira first meets Innis, who, like Jancz and the non-Latino servant discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, subjects Mira to a stare that 'roamed her body in a way that made her stomach clench' (DS 233). Throughout this thesis, feminist critiques of 'the male gaze' have been highlighted, and de Pierres is acknowledging the

gendered exchange according to the literature. Men look differently than women do, and in this particular case the 'gaze' holds much implicit threat.¹⁹

Innis fulfils an important role in the gender landscape drawn by de Pierres. He is the stereotypical dumb, bullying sexual predator and he is a constant reminder of female vulnerability to male violence. The threat that he poses to Mira does not, however, remain in the background. The uninvited, though relatively harmless, intimacy of his invading her personal space causes Mira 'alarm', which is most likely compounded by her memory of the gaze with which he had 'roamed' her body earlier (DS 248). When Innis grabs Mira to 'teach' her about men, it is with the intent to rape her and Mira, galvanised by fear, reacts 'without thinking' as she stabs him with the knife Cass had given her (DS 293). As a woman in a world dominated by men, Mira's being vulnerable seems to warrant rape. Her *resistance* to rape, however, warrants death in Innis's eyes.

Innis is often controlled by women (DS 269), which causes a deep resentment in him. He is beholden to his sister as she is the one to hide his worst deeds from others (TS 141), yet he despises all women. Innis's feelings of disempowerment are focused on Mira, who, in his eyes, represents all women, and shares their liability in making him feel inferior (Scully and Marolla, 1985:255). In attempting to rape Mira, Innis is trying to gain control and to establish masculine superiority.

Rape, as discussed in detail in Chapters Two and Five, is by scholarly consensus seen as an act of violent power over another person.²⁰ This theorising is confirmed by Diana Scully and David Marolla's (1985:256) practical research. Their interviews with 114 convicted rapists show that the rapists commonly 'believed men have the right to

¹⁹ See Wolf (1991) and also Laura Mulvey's (1975) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', which draws on Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1979) to discuss male 'scopophilia' or pleasure in looking.

²⁰ See Cahill (2001:14) and Brownmiller (1975:391).

discipline and punish' and that '[i]n the final analysis, dominance was the objective of most rapists' (Scully and Marolla, 1985:259).

When the threat turns from implied violence to physical violence, Mira is left with no recourse (DS 291-293). Innis, as a man, is simply stronger than she is. There are numerous studies that break down the exact strength advantages men have over women (Miller, MacDougal, Tamopolsky and Sale, 1993:113; Reid et al, 2009:954-959). As if to stress Mira's weakness in this situation, Marrat's strength is partnered with Innis's to make it completely impossible for Mira to defend herself. De Pierres' use of this incident of negative intimacy demonstrates the weakness in Cahill's (2001:203) proposal of self-defence as a deterrent to rape.

When Innis eventually prepares to break away from the group with his motley crew, he stands with 'a spear in one hand and a club in the other'. He is 'gaunt and belligerent and filthy' (TS 267) and strongly reminiscent of a caveman. Innis represents the baser form of masculinity and humanity, and the words that de Pierres uses to describe him confirm his abhorrent nature. It could be argued that there is little difference between Innis and Tekton, who also holds women in the lowest possible regard and who is not beyond sexual coercion (DS 165), but two things set them apart: Tekton never considers or tries to perpetrate retributive rape, and Tekton, in contrast to Innis, eventually manages to break free from his misogynistic performance of masculinity. Innis can also be compared to Trin, who does rape Mira (CS 171). While Trin never truly escapes the confines of hegemonic masculinity (the perpetuation of which is his reason for the rape), he does show some measure of growth and emotional development in the intimacy he manages to establish with Djes. Innis, on the other hand, remains blind to the harmful nature of his gender performance, and continues on a path that is completely devoid of healthy intimacy.

The military men

Alongside the civilians like Thales, Tekton and Innis, the military figures in *The Sentients of Orion* provide some measure of insight into de Pierres' gender account by the intimacies they engage in. The military comprises two main groups: the Carabinere, or royal military police force and the contracted mercenaries. There is a significant measure of difference between the two groups in terms of their approach to women.

The Carabinere, who hold Mira down for Trin to rape, have 'shared Trin's righteousness, the imperative that his line should continue, that a woman should be accepting of everything' (CS 171). They follow orders and the horror that they perpetrate is possible through their perfectly disciplined bodies (Foucault, 1995:141-162). Their performance is a well-crafted manifestation of the hegemonic nature of masculinity in Orion society.

The mercenaries, in contrast, also have sexist views and attitudes, but these are more open and less insidious than those of the Carabinere. Both Catchut and Latourn are devoted to Rast, who is a woman. Latourn is very focused on getting sexual release (CS 264, CS 349), but his sexual approach to Mira is more benign and incidental than that of the Carabinere. He thanks Mira for getting them on board and through Shift and admits that he had never met 'one woman who could do that before' (CS 175). Even as he thanks her, he goes on to make lewd remarks, asking if Mira needs 'a hand' to wash the disinfectant spray off (CS 199). This is more instinctual than goal-oriented. It is acceptable for men in his milieu to say things like that, regardless of whether they have any intention of carrying it through. It requires no response and Mira, recognising this, does not give any.

Catchut, the other mercenary, takes his cue from his commander, Rast. When he, like Latourn, makes crude sexual jokes about having poked his 'shaft into a jam roll' and

moves his thighs apart ‘in an exaggerated fashion’, it is not directed at Mira. It is incidental to his manhood and his being a soldier and a habitual expression of his masculinity. He finds himself in company where reference to sex is acceptable and he does not exclude Mira from this company (CS 169). De Pierres’ depiction of this particular performance of masculinity shows men ‘making jokes about women’ and femininity to ‘allow [them] to claim masculinity at women’s expense’ (Barber, 2016:270).

The well-mannered Carabinere most probably show Mira more respect in their address and approach, but the uncouth mercenaries are the ones who cause her less harm. The royal police officers’ perfect adherence to masculine hegemony turns out to be more harmful to Mira’s agency than the surface sexism of the mercenaries. In contrasting the abrasive mercenaries with the cultured royal carabineer, de Pierres demonstrates that in a world of hegemonic masculinity, surface civility does not imply equality, and surface sexism does not necessarily imply misogyny.

The power players

Alongside the men and women of military persuasion are the men who train them and use them – the men of power. Principe Franco, Sophos Mianos and Lasper Farr all have the same ‘confidence born of authority’ (CS 200). War, which defines Lasper Farr, plays a big role in establishing his masculinity and subsequent authority. This has also long been a tradition in reality: Dean (1998:32), for example, says ‘[w]ar gave members of a privileged class the opportunity to demonstrate their toughness and courage, to test their endurance, to acquire gravitas’.

Lasper Farr is toughened to the point where he is devoid of kindness and unable to generate positive intimacy (CS 253). His own sister describes him as ‘much more than an

opportunist ... He is most single-minded and he allows nothing to interfere with his ambitions. No one. No even family' (CS 282). Thales Berniere thinks of Farr in terms of 'the casual and complete callousness with which he dispensed violence' (MS 93). Farr's performance of masculinity mirrors current society where Dean (1998:32) describes '[t]he creation and reproduction of a community of Spartan warrior-heroes' which 'promised individual and collective redemption from the effeminate temptations of materialism and promised ... conformity with the ... ideals of manly civic virtue, service, and sacrifice'.

Farr condemns Bethany, saying 'Jess's life is at stake because you abandoned her for your lover. No other reason' (CS 288). He shows no understanding of her sexual needs or choices. It seems he is elevated above sexual needs, but he is very much a prisoner of gender parameters. He has no freedom to act other than as an ice-cold, unemotional warlord who completely condemns those who do get influenced by sexual needs and desire. Lasper Farr, in his loneliness, his cruelty and his complete incomprehension of intimacy and sexuality, seems to share Trin's situation of isolation due to poor choices in relation to intimacy.

Conclusion

The primary male characters in *The Sentients of Orion* perform their gender perceptions in different ways, including being stereotypically cold and devoid of emotion, being openly or overtly misogynistic, or even totally embracing a performance of femininity. Many examples are given of men acting against their natural inclination in order to adhere to societal expectations. Mira, for one, thinks of these men as 'damaged somehow' (CS 175). In the course of these performances, intimacy, both sexual and emotional, is approached by men in a manner which in some cases empowers and in others disempowers women.

De Pierres' detailed depictions of Trin's efforts to control Djes, for example, bring to mind Adrienne Rich's claim that 'controlling women's movements' is one of the primary ways in which women are oppressed by patriarchy (1977:xvi).

The sheer range of masculine gender performances in *The Sentients of Orion* can be seen as confirmation that there is, indeed, a fictional analysis of gender. De Pierres, however, takes care to construe a picture of masculinity that is focused on the men behind the performance, allowing for good and bad within the same person and within the variations of performance. Connell's model of male hegemony investigates how institutionalized masculinity exercises and holds hierarchical power over all other gender groups (1995:24). This model, however, does not stand unchallenged, as some critics focus on the positive aspects of masculinity instead of on the domineering, oppressive tendencies of the gender role (Davis, 1997:555, 563; Miller, 2004:no pagination) and de Pierres, in her depiction of men like Jo-Jo, Petalu Mao, Jelly Hob, Thales and Tekton, explicitly leaves room for development and for agency within which these men can challenge the negative aspects of hegemonic masculinity.

Chapter Seven: Alien Orgies and Virtual Orgasms

The alien green pencils – not alien little green men – are coming to rewrite the patriarchal hocus-pocus that threatens to turn women into robots.

(Marleen Barr, 1993:10)

Introduction

The aliens in *The Sentients of Orion*, as in science fiction in general, represent various aspects of ‘the other’. In its examination of intimacy as an indicator of gender, this chapter will examine not only aliens, but also alienation, which forms the basis of othering. According to Heidi Kaye and I. Q. Hunter (1999:1): ‘Otherness and alienation are states of existence not only for imaginary ETs but for all who have been excluded from dominant categories of the human, the natural and the native.’

Before delineating how this chapter will approach intimacies involving alienation and alien characters, it is necessary to determine which characters in *The Sentients of Orion* are alien, and which are not. With the possible exception of Jo-Jo Rasterovich, all the characters in the *Sentients of Orion* are strictly speaking ‘non-human’. Jo-Jo’s ancestors originate from Earth, but taking into consideration that ‘his family hadn’t lived on that world, in that constellation, for a thousand years’ (DS 111), it can be concluded that there are no actual *humans* in *The Sentients of Orion*. There are ‘humanesques’, but even the Latinos, like Mira and Trin, are vividly red coloured, and thus alien. Another significant difference between the humanesque Latinos and human society is their method of procreation, in which women have absolutely no say and men are one hundred percent in control.¹ For the purposes of this study, humanesques will be considered ‘human’, but

¹ Current society’s lack of gender equality in terms of reproductive rights, as discussed in previous chapters of this thesis, cannot be said to match the totalitarian male control depicted in humanesque society.

even so, it is interesting that both the colour red and the female lack of choice in procreation are elements used by Edgar Rice Burroughs in *A Princess of Mars* (2014) to attain defamiliarisation.²

In *A Princess of Mars*, control over procreation and the roles allocated to the female of the species are ultimately what determine the differences between the social structures of green and red Martians. Green Martian females do not play any role in the procreation process other than laying eggs. Mating is simply ‘a matter of community interest’ (29) and motherhood does not exist. This disempowerment of their females and the lack of emotional intimacy have impoverished the green Martians, leaving them ‘devoid of all the finer sentiments of friendship, love or affection’ (16). In contrast to the green females, Dejah Thoris, the red princess, is afforded the choice to mate with John Carter and she is able to visit the ‘little incubator’ every day (69). She has agency over her body and specifically over her role in the process of procreation and mothering, which is what sets her apart from the disempowered green females. This finely nuanced depiction of the female role in procreation and the results thereof on Martian social structures, together with the use of the colour red to depict the aliens who are the closest to humans, are reflected both in de Pierres’ red-coloured Latinos and in the ongoing battle in *The Sentients of Orion* for women’s right to participate equally in the process of reproduction.

To reiterate, this study considers the red-skinned humanesques to be ‘human’, leaving a selection of non-human-esque aliens for discussion. These include the invading Saqr; Djes, the half-breed consort of the crown prince; the biozoons, who are a species of sentient space ship; the genetically engineered and very evolved Post-Species Extropists; Sole, the

² As defined in the Introduction to this thesis.

Entity known as God and Nova, Mira's 'daughter'.³ These aliens (both species and individuals) will be discussed in turn to ascertain how de Pierres' uses the intimacies they are involved in, in their role as other, to reflect on the heteronormative gender status quo.

The Saqr

Attebery's 'alien invasion trope' is central to the manner in which the Saqr invade Araldis and, in the process, catalyses the events of *The Sentients of Orion* (2006:54). They are insect-like, 'glistening, carapaced' creatures 'with six fore-claws and two hind claws' and while they 'have no discernible head, mouth lobes protruded from the tube at one end of its body. Tiny eye-spots glittered in the light, in a semicircle behind the lobes' (DS 215). The Saqr attack with slashing claws, but mostly using 'thin, needle-like stylets' protruding from their mouths (DS 216). In this they are strongly reminiscent of A. A. Attanasio's 'zötl's' (1989:54), that puncture human brains with a 'feeder tube' intending to cause pain or, in the case of the Saqr, death. These creatures, similar to the zötl's, are so alien and so hostile that intimacy with them inadvertently leads to death.

There are no incidences of intimacy involving the Saqr. Their sentience is debatable, according to Rast Randall, who says they are 'primitive as fuck' (TS 26). They are depicted as creatures, and referred to using the gender-neutral pronoun 'it'. Jo-Jo's research shows the '[b]astards don't even need each other to spawn' (TS 210). The closest Saqr come to approximating intimacy is the manner in which they 'probe the flesh' of their victims (CS 66). As the tips of the Saqr's feelers 'reached the dead man's face they paused, hovering above the closed eyes. A needle-like probe shot out from one of them, directly into the man's eye socket' (CS 66). To Jo-Jo they 'appeared to be tasting the

³ Both Extropists and Saqr display a hive mentality similar to the 'insectlike' Buggers in *Ender's Game* (Card, 1985:191) and the assimilating Borg in *Star Trek* (Frakes dir., 1996).

body'. This invasive 'probing' has sexual intimations, but that is as close as the Saqr approach intimacy.

The Saqr are 'Tardigrada giantus ... *relative of anthropods*' (TS 168). They are water creatures, but '*have been shown to survive for decades in a dry state*' (TS 168). They have, however, been genetically altered and each of them is now a '[h]ost body being prepared for use' by the Post-Species (MS 104). The alteration allows the Saqr to be active outside of the water, thus able to wreak destruction and death on the desert planet Araldis. Water is a symbol of the feminine (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996:345), and de Pierres' linking of the Saqr's loss of dependency on water with their lack of gender consideration, sexual procreation and meaningful intimacy is pertinent as it presents a catastrophic picture of a world that rejects feminine value and values.

Non-male aliens

The Saqr's lack of gender distinction is based on their primitive nature. They are notably neither gender-neutral nor evolved beyond gender – they are simply lacking. This detail aside, though, their not adhering to the heteronormative gender binary places the Saqr in the same class as the other non-humansque aliens in *The Sentients of Orion*, who are all gender-neutral, evolved beyond gender, or female. A possible exception could be the Balol scientist Balbao, who is male (TS 3), but in spite of the alien impression made by Balols (DS 392), they are shown to be humansque and not alien through Tekton's description of a 'humansque technician, a Balol matron with thick skin ruffles around her neck and wrists' (DS 55).

Another possible exception is the artist, Fenralia, whose sex/gender is never firmly established. Festival-goers on Edo discuss the origins of the quixite statue, speaking of the model, Tekton:

‘I heard he balled Fenralia ... and she liked it so much she made a sculpture of him and his better parts.’

‘Fenralia’s a she?’ The tall one sounded surprised.

‘Hard to say with ginks like that,’ replied the woman. ‘Fen looks like she’d stick those tentacles anywhere they’ll fit.’ (MS 225)

Fenralia’s sculptures are reminiscent of *Sur* (Le Guin, 2005:356), where art is representative of female power, but while the women in *Sur* claim the land by creating sculptures in the ice (in lieu of planting a phallic flag), Fenralia uses quixite to create a glorified phallus (CS 273; MS 55; MS 225). Fenralia is referred to as ‘it’ by Mira (CS 274) and Tekton, shedding further doubt on its conforming to a specific gender. With Fenralia’s unknown status in terms of biology, gender and sexuality, and the biozoons, Post-Species and Sole all having gender matrixes different from humanesques, Djes, who is half alien and half humanesque, is the only heterosexual female non-humanesque alien in *The Sentients of Orion*.

According to Roberts (1993:9), science fiction authors use ‘the figure of the female alien’ to ‘affirm the essential otherness of Woman and the threat that she poses to patriarchal society’. Pearson (2006:183) provides two ways in which science fiction casts women as ‘alien’. Women are firstly ‘uncritically’ seen as alien in a male-dominated heteronormative world, but this ‘man = normal, woman = other’ context is also critically examined through

feminist critiques of science fiction, allowing for ‘conscious understanding and criticism of both the analogy ... itself and the social conditions that create it’.

Djes the female alien

Roberts (1993:9) describes the female alien as often being ‘nonhumanoid; nevertheless, her specifically feminine traits, such as mothering, nurturing, passivity, and sexual attractiveness to human males, suggests that this figure represents human women’. All these traits are present in Djes, the young alien girl with whom Trin has a relationship. Another trait common to alien females is the use of magic and psychic abilities, and while Djes shows no sign of telepathy or any other magical power, she is a water creature, symbolic of the unconscious and the intuitive – all qualities associated with the feminine (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996:123).⁴ These powers, along with the ability to reproduce, are seen as a direct threat to male dominance (Roberts, 1993:9). De Pierres thus codes Djes as a traditional female alien and, as such, an example of the feminine threat to patriarchy.

Djes is described as a ragazza, a child, with ‘madly fluttering neck gills’ and sulphur-coloured skin. The rest of the description, from Trin’s point of view, is sexual. She is not depicted in the way a child would be, but in the way a woman would be, with the focus on her ‘pebble-like breasts and layers of external skin-folds covering her pubis’ (DS 132). De Pierres’ description further elucidates the role Djes is to play – child-woman and source of irresistible sexual fascination to the young humanesque prince.

Trin’s initial sexual response to Djes is reminiscent of the alien-enamoured humans in *And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill’s Side* (Tiptree, 1972:160-167). On the surface, Tiptree’s tale is a caution about ‘alien sex’ but, according to Pearson (2006:176),

⁴ Telepathy is considered female and alien, while technology is male and rational (Melzer 2006:8).

also about the limits of heterosexuality. Pearson reiterates Hollinger's (1999:27) view of its being a tale about the 'more dismal exigencies of a naturalized heterosexuality ... as a kind of inescapable heterosexual bind'. Hollinger further refers to sexuality as 'the failed attempt to know the irreducibly alien' (1999:27).

Trin's sexual impotence, his yearning for Djeserit's 'alien dark' (Jones, 2002:180), and the fact that sexually lusting after the 'other' is not 'specific' to men (as apparent in the subplot of Bethany and the Mio) serve to create gender-related parallels between Tiptree's tale and *The Sentients of Orion*. Rather than de Pierres possibly moralising against trans-species sexual relations, I contend that she is, like Tiptree, bringing to her work a certain 'lamentation for the impossibility of knowing the (heterosexual) beloved across the divide of gender' (Pearson, 2006:181).

Acting outside of feminine stereotypes, Djes takes the sexual initiative by drawing Trin into the outhouse in the garden of Vila Fedor and, even when he tries to 'push her away', she 'clung to him with surprising strength, hugging herself close to the swell of his groin' (DS 147). Trin is confused by her proactive approach and by her readiness until Djes explains: 'I am ready for quenching, but here ... they do not understand such things. The Baronessa only knows of quenching in the ways of the Latino. When the man says. When the man wants. I am not Latino and I want ... now' (DS 147).

Djes's sexual ripeness and the inability of the people who care for her to understand it are aspects that make her, if possible, even more alien. This portrayal contradicts patriarchal stereotypes of the passive, receptive woman in congress with an active man, and evokes

patriarchal fears of women's sexuality as somehow out of control.⁵ The intimacy between Djes and Trin directly posits the existence of sexuality and gender paradigms that fall outside of the heteronormative binary. It also clearly shows the patriarchal control over 'quenching'. The societal parameters regarding sexuality and gender are so firmly set that it seemingly takes an element of alienness to escape them; another comment by de Pierres on the restrictive nature of the heteronormative status quo.

Djes is not only made to feel shame for her cross-species sexual relationship, but for her very alienness. When Trin asks her about her ragged breath, she turns 'her head away in the way unique to the young; a way that told Trin that she did not want to answer his question' (CS 29). She is having breathing difficulty because of her alienness and she is ashamed to say that to Trin. In order to fit in, Djes is forced to try to hide her alienness. She cannot, however, hide who she is, and as 'the alien dark' she is fated to be, is 'perennially assigned the abject role' (Pearson, 2006:182).

Once Trin is recognised as a leader, Djes's position also changes. She progresses from underage ragazza to whom he is illicitly attracted into *his* (note the possessive) 'half-breed woman' (CS 23). Any impropriety is, however, laid at *her* feet as she is the one put to shame by society for their sexual relationship, not Trin.⁶ At the same time, ironically, the fact that she is 'his' half-breed woman affords her some measure of distinction; this would not necessarily be afforded all persons of mixed species. The fact that allowances are made

⁵ Djes's early puberty and her being 'ready' for sex at an age younger than humanesque women mirror Rachel, the young girl trapped in the body of a chimpanzee in *Rachel in Love* (Murphy, 1987:237-238) and Doris in *Wives* (Tuttle, 1976:192), both stories in which female sexuality is depicted as animal-like (therefore alien) and threatening to the status quo.

⁶ Under patriarchy, women have stereotypically been blamed for every sexual misconduct starting with the Fall from Eden.

for Djes based on her status, does not mean that divergence in terms of gender and sexuality is readily accepted in people who do not have connections.⁷

When Djes and Trin are sexually intimate, he bends her over and takes her from behind. He strokes her, murmuring ‘gentle reassurances’ until she relaxes, ‘arriving at her climax before him’ (TS 145). In Chapter Five the motives of Trin’s caring in this scene is already called into question. The fact that ‘taking her from behind’ can be considered a sexually submissive position (Xu and Zheng, 2016: no pagination) might further confirm the doubtfulness of his caring – taking away some of the power she has been gaining and placing him back in control. As an outflow of the hegemonic nature of masculine power, Trin’s actions and decisions are most likely not based on a Machiavellian agenda. More likely, he is unaware, as the sexually inexperienced Djes is, of the deeper implications of this intimacy. While acknowledging Dworkin’s controversial position as a radical feminist, her view of the ‘inequality of the sexes’ as being ‘intrinsic’ to [hetero] sexual intercourse does remain valid in situations as the one described above (1987:8).

Djes turns more and more alien as their flight from the Saqr continues. Trin struggles with her adapting back to a water creature, thinking she might be ‘choosing to become incompatible with him’ (CS 304). She now has a ‘taut, lean, muscled body’ (TS 145), a token of control and mastery of her abilities. While he fears losing her, he has to force himself ‘not to recoil’ from her alien touch. He is ‘losing her to the sea’ as she is growing into her species, which he flinches away from, but he cannot avoid it because ‘[h]er special physiology’, the very alienness that he reviles, is ‘all that kept them alive’ (CS 363; MS 43).

⁷ See the discussion later in this chapter on *Sal*, the hybrid biozoon, and the abuses engendered by non-conformity.

Djes is an '*aqua species*' (DS 133). She becomes 'like a seal' in the water (CS 231) and the 'webbing on her fingers had grown thicker and longer ... the Mio part of her was overtaking the 'esque' (CS 304). Djes starts identifying more with the sea creatures than with the survivors (CS 362; MS 43). It is noteworthy that the term for Djes's sexual ripeness is 'quenching', which is another water-related term. Trin's 'losing her to the sea' (CS 363) through her becoming more and more a water creature means she is growing in confidence in her sexuality and, in my view, it is her *femininity* (indicated by her affinity with water) that is becoming more and more a threat to Trin, not her alienness (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996:123).

As Djes embraces her alien femininity, she is empowered, and Trin, instead of benefitting from her new strength, is disempowered (MS 15). He becomes more and more insecure, harbouring 'unworthy suspicion' of her feelings for Joe Scali (MS 131), trying to keep her from 'murmuring' with Cass Mulravey (MS 207) and even begrudging the attention she gives to the korm, who can be of no possible threat to Trin (MS 209). To avoid antagonising Trin, Djes becomes a hoverer, somebody who smooths things over for Trin, keeps the peace, feeds him and tends to his needs (TS 265-267) and those of his guests (TS 280). She plays down her own role in taking care of the survivors and performs in a more stereotypically feminine manner in an effort to placate Trin's masculine insecurities (MS 128). The lengths Djes is willing to go to in order to accommodate his needs, both physically and emotionally, indicate her devotion to Trin, but de Pierres questions exactly how far Djes is willing to go to appease him when she later finds him in the mountains – alive, but injured. She cries 'soft noises and tiny, spare tears, as though her system could barely stand to lose the water' (TS 263). Djes is relieved to find him, and she does cry, but if water indeed symbolises her feminine power, her reluctance to let go of it, even for the

sake of Trin, is a significant foreshadowing of her abandoning her submissive gender performance, and leaving Trin.

When Jo-Jo, Rast and later Mira arrive at Tourmaline Beach, Djes has difficult decisions to make (TS 281). She has to find a way to reconcile her new, adult self with the woman who rejected her as a child, and she has to come to grips with the fact that her lover is a rapist (TS 367). Ironically, what helps her come to acceptance is Jo-Jo explaining to her that her mother, Bethany, ‘tried to follow her ... to Araldis ... and how brave and smart and resourceful Bethany was, and how she’d saved him ... and the power that Farr wielded and Bethany’s desire to distance herself from her brother’s fanaticism. And finally how her mother had helped Mira’ (TS 369). He simply states that ‘[s]ome things need to be faced. Mira tells the truth’ (TS 368). De Pierres brings this particular mother/daughter relationship full circle as Djes, the abandoned daughter, finds the strength to break free from a toxic relationship in the strength of the mother whose own relationship choices led to the initial abandonment.

Djes completes her transformation from an abandoned child into a woman with a say in her own destiny, and that of others, when, ‘in an oddly final gesture, she scooped water in her hands and splashed it over her face’ (TS 370). Water has already been established as representing the feminine (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996:123), so in this gesture Djes acknowledges the importance of her femininity and embraces it – not as something to get lost in, disappearing into the ocean, but to the extent that it enables her to face up to that which she wants to deny. In the end she is as strong as she needs to be, because the moment she hears of Trin’s betrayal and lies, she leaves him (TS 375). This is not simply a reactive form of power embodied in Djes’s saying no. Instead she takes up the mantle of leadership and becomes responsible for the future of the majority of the survivors (TS

374). Ultimately, de Pierres portrays Djes fully embracing her feminine power as what brings down the patriarchal system to which Trin is heir. In this, Djes, as the only female alien in *The Sentients of Orion*, powerfully embodies Roberts' posited threat to patriarchy (1993).

The biozoons

The first alien group falling outside the established gender binary of current society is the biozoon pod, a species of sentient spaceship of no specified gender.⁸ When humanesques try to come to grips with biozoon gender, they mostly try to assign either male or female gender to them, leaving no room for fluidity in gender (CS 51). Others, like Rast and the mercenaries, not understanding *Insignia* in terms of sex, gender or sexuality, fall back on making crude jokes (CS 51), which is an uncomfortable parallel to modern-day reality.

While biozoons 'do not have a clear distinction between male and female', they are not 'hermaphrodites' either, needing 'several of their own kind to reproduce. Two are not enough' (CS 51). Among them, in terms of sexual agency, '[r]espect for each other is intrinsic' (CS 58). The leader of the biozoon pod is the 'Omniarch', a title that stresses the genderless state of the biozoons, a highly developed species. The biozoons and Doris Lessing's highly evolved and androgynous Canopeans share the opinion that 'having emotional or physical or psychological characteristics that are considered as appertaining to one sex rather than another ... is normal on the more backward planets' (1979:142). Through *Insignia*, the biozoons echo the implication that clinging to male/female gender assignments is what stands between humanesques and further evolution (MS 301). *Insignia* describes biozoon sexuality as '*diverse and subtle ... I need several of my own*

⁸ In *Gender Outlaw*, Bornstein refers to 'gender ambiguity' as 'a refusal to fall within a prescribed gender code' while 'gender fluidity' is 'the refusal to stay one gender or another' (1994:52).

kind to reproduce. It is our way of keeping our species strong. Unlike you who have genetically limited yourselves to a single choice' (CS 19). De Pierres thus applies the alien view of intimacy to put forth the possibility that human perceptions of gender and sexuality might be weak and limiting. If female aliens are representative of the female threat to patriarchy (Roberts, 1993:9), it is possible that the non-gendered aliens of *The Sentients of Orion* are representative of the threat that gender incoherency (Butler, 1990:143-149) and gender fluidity hold for the heteronormative binary status quo.

The intimacy and complexity of Mira's relationship with *Insignia*, and her lingering embarrassment at 'the reminder of her intimate immersions in the ship's biologics' (CS 17), have been discussed in detail in Chapter Two of this thesis. There are, however, also moments of intimacy between Mira and other biozoons, and between *Insignia* and other humanesques. Most notable is Salacious II, or *Sal*, the hybrid biozoon that is stolen from Jo-Jo and mistreated by the Post-Species. *Sal* is party to Jancz trying to kill Mira (DS 87), and Mira knows it to be 'perverse and damaged' (TS 313). The only reason *Sal* agrees to help Mira and Jo-Jo when Jancz and Ilke are trying to kill them is a lingering sense of loyalty toward Jo-Jo, its 'true captain' (TS 314). The depth of *Sal*'s feelings of betrayal is an indication of the closeness that used to exist between it and Jo-Jo. Even after Jo-Jo later explains to *Sal* that Ilke and Jancz are responsible for the act of abandonment, Jo-Jo must further promise to free *Sal* 'to the Pod' by rescinding its contract before the damaged biozoon trusts him enough to address him again as '*my captain*' (TS 320). It is the promise of freedom, more than other reassurances, that convinces *Sal* to help them. When Mira tells *Sal* that its '*fins will never be tied again*' (TS 324), the biozoon makes a noise which is 'part screech, part wail. Mira felt the creature's relief and anger, but underneath it all still mistrust' (TS 324). Masters et al refer to the 'loss of trust' that inevitably results from 'deceit in an intimate relationship' (1986:239). In *Sal*, de Pierres demonstrates the

importance of trust in intimate relationships; the harm that a breach of trust (if only perceived as such) can cause; and sometimes, the impossibility of regaining intimacy after a loss of trust.

Sal's damaged state could be representative of victims of gender-based or intimate partner violence, or people who are bullied or ostracised for diverging from the heteronormative gender expectations. Jancz and Ilke are the equivalent of mean kids (backed by masculine hegemony and the heterosexual system of two genders only). *Sal*'s resulting psychosis is not only due to their politically incorrect failure to respect/accept what it is in terms of gender, but also to the actual, horrifying abuse perpetrated to uphold that same system. In *Stone Butch Blues* (1993:8-9), Leslie Feinberg's raw description of abuses perpetrated against gender-nonconforming people is deeply disturbing.⁹ While there are promises of freedom, which lead to its cooperating with Mira and Jo-Jo, *Sal* is scarred and will remain distrustful of those who adhere to a single gender. Similarly, while there are increasing promises of mainstreaming and acceptance from current-day cisgender society, the distrust caused by years of rejection and abuse for gender and sexual non-conformity is likely to remain.

The other biozoons differ from *Sal* in that they are all powerful and healthy members of a pod, and are clearly depicted as sexual beings. The process of transferring Mira from *Insignia* to the Omniarch is distinctly sexualised. It takes place through *Insignia*'s 'pelvic girdle' where *Insignia* 'deliberately' tears a 'membrane to allow her to pass' into a 'narrow, rucked slit'. *Insignia* seems 'almost submissive' and Mira sees an image 'of *Insignia* arching its long back and curling its tail carefully out of the way'. *Insignia*'s pelvic girdle begins to 'shudder' and Mira feels contractions vibrate through the biozoon'

⁹ Also see Feinberg's *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink and Blue* (1998:5-6) for a deeper understanding of the 'horrendous social punishments' trans people are subjected to.

(MS 303). The scene, which contains sexual overtones and elements of both a masculine and feminine nature, contributes to de Pierres' depiction of the nuanced biozoon gender configuration and the pronounced sexuality of the healthy members of the species.¹⁰

The biozoons are not emotional at all (CS 19; CS 198; CS 242). When Mira accuses *Insignia* of being unfeeling, its response can again be applied to gender differences between the two species: '*My culture is not the same as yours. Humanesques make that mistake. One of their greatest failings is that they suppose other sentients to be and to think the same way*' (CS 242). This seems to be a charge against gender perceptions in current-day society. Cisgender society holds forth only two genders, and insists that everybody should, by default, fall into one or the other (Feinberg, 1998:1).

In spite of the gender differences (and *Insignia*'s protests to the contrary) Mira interprets the '*hereditary ... Omniline*' family structure of the biozoons as '*really ... not greatly different from humanesque social ordering*' (MS 296). The *Omniline* initially seem to turn their back on the rest of the universe in order to preserve their own species (MS 305), but they do eventually intervene when it becomes obvious that doom is imminent without them. '*We have reconsidered*', is how the Omniarch explains their sudden choice to become involved (MS 389). They are depicted as aloof and pragmatic, but when it truly matters the biozoons conform to human(esque) standards of compassion and reason. While the biozoons do pose a threat to humanity based on their lack of emotional involvement and their pragmatism, their differences from humanesques are rendered comprehensible, both in terms of their physical differences and their gender differences. Commonalities *can* be found between the two species. More alien, however, than the biozoons, and further

¹⁰ The incident is feminised through the birth imagery.

removed from humanesque in their physical appearances and their gender representations, are the Extropists, or Post-Species.

The Post-Species Extropists

The Extropists are a technologically advanced ‘multi-species group that opposes’ the belief in evolution as ‘a natural process that should not be interfered with’.¹¹ They believe they are ‘destined to control and shape their own evolution’ using extreme measures of ‘genetic manipulation’ (CS 237). In science fiction, such advanced technology can signify both ‘masculinity, and also ... cultural anxieties about gender’ (Merrick 2003:246). As the Post-Species are the most technologically advanced of all the beings in *The Sentients of Orion*, incidences of intimacy involving them will be analysed taking both of Merrick’s signifiers into account.

The Post-Species are clearly considered dangerous (CS 339; CS 369; CS 370). These beings, which randomly inhabit bodies and are intent on the evolution of their minds, with casual disregard for their host bodies, fit into what Hollinger (2009:272) refers to as the ‘neo-Cartesian future’.¹² Against this framework where the self is not the body, which simply serves as a crutch for the mind, the technologically advanced Post-Species beg examination of the cyberpunk element in *The Sentients of Orion*.

The prose in *The Sentients of Orion* is not characteristic of cyber-punk, but there is a strong correlation with some core themes of the genre as identified by Bruce Sterling (1994:xiii):

¹¹ Extropy is defined as ‘the pseudoscientific principle that life will expand indefinitely and in an orderly, progressive way throughout the entire universe by the means of human intelligence and technology’ (*Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2005:620).

¹² There are similarities to the body-switching characters in *Schild’s Ladder* (Egan, 2002:3).

The theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. The even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry – techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self.

This Post-Species correlation to cyberpunk is further evidenced by de Pierres' nod to Katherine Hayles's term 'PostHuman'. Hayles (1999:xiv) posits that our interaction with and level of dependency on technology has already led humanity to a new state of 'post-humanism'. De Pierres' Post-Species/Extropists represent the ultimate 'transhumanist vision' in their mastery of 'mind uploading' (Hook, 2004:2517). According to Kim Toffoletti (2007:4), 'tension between the human and technological is indicative of the posthuman. And it is this tension that disrupts traditional understandings of selfhood, identity, the body and reality'. Pertinent to the gender landscape in *The Sentients of Orion*, posthumanism or Post-Species holds implications of a post-gender state.

The Post-Species have separated consciousness completely from their bodies, and even from their brains, in what Joan Haran (2006:253) refers to as an 'extreme version of Cartesian dualism'. Haran further points out the difficulties that such disembodiment might pose for feminist theorists as it challenges the concepts of 'woman' and of 'body': a grasp of both of these concepts is integral to feminism (2006:254). A key aspect brought to the fore by posthumanism (and by implication by de Pierres' Post-Species) is a strong 'anxiety about boundaries', including procreative and gender boundaries. The 'revolutionary potential of cybernetics to reconfigure bodies' brings with it the threat, if uncontained, to the 'autonomy of the (male) liberal subject' (Hayles, 1999:113). While retaining the traditional female threat of the alien to masculinity, the Post-Species further represent the threat of gender fluidity to the static gender binary proscribed by patriarchy.

Extros are described as ‘not like any humanesque’; ‘[d]amn near impossible to predict’ (CS 170). Rast tells Jo-Jo that ‘they don’t think like us – or like any alien I’ve known’ (CS 337). Extros are even more alien than aliens, totally different from humanesques in their appearance, their logic (CS 337), their corporeal bodies (CS 340-341) and their gender. Some look like ‘transparent fluid-filled figures with large oval heads’ (CS 339), ‘super-brains swimming around in lumps of jelly’ (CS 340) or ‘lightweight fragile flyers and butterflies, creatures without abdomens’ (CS 340). The ‘corporeal part of the Extropists takes many different forms’ (CS 339). The diaphanous appearance of the Post-Species could be representative of their incomprehensible nature. They (and by implication the gender fluidity they represent) are so far removed from humanesque (societal) understanding that they are translucent. They are fluid, ‘jelly’-like creatures embodying the intangible nature of that which lies beyond the parameters of what is deemed ‘normal’. Toffoletti (2007:82) poses the question of whether ‘posthuman, post-gender images, like queer, bisexual and transgender bodies’ can engender a ‘move beyond a dialectical way of thinking about, not only gender, but other social categories of difference’, a question which can be applied directly to de Pierres’ Post-Species. While little is known of Post-Species reproduction, the question arises of whether they change gender as they change bodies. Does the body they assume change its gender performance in line with that of the occupying Post-Species being, or does the body they assume become gender-neutral in reflection of the occupier? In her prologue to *How we Became Posthuman*, Hayles discusses the gender implications of posthumanism against the backdrop of the Turing test (1999:xi-xiv).

After her abduction by the Post-Species (CS 372), Mira becomes violently angry ‘feeling years of exercising restraint and manners breaking away’. ‘*This ... this ... abduction ...*’ she thinks, ‘*I will not be kept like this!*’ One could argue that Mira is being kept captive as

a 'helpless woman' because of her gender, but at the same time the men (Jo-Jo, Catchut and Latourn) are trapped and helpless with Rast in the Extro gel (MS 182). The Post-Species seem to be not only genderless, but lacking in gender discrimination when it comes to their experiments.

Throughout her captivity, the Post-Species appear merciless and pitiless toward humanesque problems in general and to Mira in particular. In this context, other than previously implied, they do seem to represent a masculine threat to femininity.¹³ The threat they pose along with their physical alienness leads to extreme defamiliarisation, which is countered by the introduction of Mira's gaoler, Wanton-poda. In contrast to the other Post-Species, Wanton-poda is made accessible by its small size, its having a name and the intimate relationship it establishes with Mira. Using intimacy, de Pierres personalises the impersonal, and thus lessens the threat posed by the Post-Species.

Mira takes a careful look at the cephalopod body that Wanton-poda inhabits. The 'small, dark tumourlike mass', which seems to be the 'implanted Post-Species Identity', is seated inside the bell-shaped exterior and Mira wonders if it can 'survive outside its host' (MS 36). Wanton-poda's body seems fragile and ethereal, more like a failed experiment than an evolved species. This could be indicative of the fragility of human understanding of the concept of such otherness, bringing to mind *Insignia's* earlier accusation that humanesques fail to understand anything different from themselves (CS 242).

The relationship between Mira and her keeper is constructed on the basis of their establishing some common cultural norm for communication, such as Mira not using an aggressive tone or asking direct questions (MS 9). Wanton-poda is more able to manage a

¹³ Philip K. Dick, in contrast, portrays his killer cyborgs in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* as unemotional, uncaring females posing a threat to masculinity (1999).

feminine style of communication and is seemingly intimidated and agitated by directness and aggression, which are more masculine in nature. Mira's consistent use of the pronoun 'it', when referring to Wanton-poda, renders it genderless, but they are so alien to each other that gender seems immaterial. Regular norms of communication are not suitable, but Mira's willingness to experiment with social approaches, such as flattery (MS 11), indicates the development of some sort of rudimentary intimacy between her and the Post-Species creature. The conversation that ensues from this intimacy is about species and bodies, but the choice of words turns it into something reminiscent of present-day gender discussions. Wanton-poda, referring to Mira's 'rudimentary understanding', says that their use of host bodies is not 'a deviation, merely a choice' (MS 39). 'So others of your kind choose differently?' and 'Post-Species offers many choices' are other phrases suggestive of current gender debates regarding which kinds of sexual partners, and how many, are acceptable.

Using the newly established intimacy between them, Mira pleads with Wanton-poda to escape with her to a place of safety:

I know oppression, Wanton-poda. That's where I came from. That is why I am carrying the child of a man I loathe. Oppression is wrong, whether it be amongst humanesques, aliens or Post-Species. You have a right not to be afraid ... I have a right not to be afraid. (MS 65)

This plea for freedom from oppression for all species, in combination with the previous intonations of gender, is strongly indicative of de Pierres' making a deliberate case for gender equality and for the inclusion of genders that may be different from our parameters of understanding.

Mira and Wanton-poda manage to escape (MS 105), but Wanton-poda loses its 'host' body 'poda' and becomes Wanton only, thereby embodying the questions regarding the role of the body in consciousness. A sentient being losing its body while continuing to exist as itself is of interest to Body Theory, in the same way that the post-body state of the Extropists is. What is it that remains when the body disappears? How transient is the influence of society on the body if a consciousness can exist without it? Would such consciousness still possess a gender/genders? Hollinger (2009:268) raises similar questions: 'What might be in store for the human body as it becomes increasingly vulnerable to technological intervention and transformation? What might be its future as virtual experiences become increasingly accessible and increasingly difficult to distinguish from embodied ones?'

Even though Wanton warns Mira in advance, saying: 'Wanton will look different. Don't be frightened by the change' (MS 104), Mira is reluctant to touch the Extro without its cephalopod exterior, not sure whether doing so would hurt her or her baby.¹⁴ Somehow, it having a body, strange as it was, made it more acceptable to Mira. Wanton-poda becoming Wanton is a good example of a mind shedding its body with no alteration to 'its-self'. Wanton is apparently still Wanton, but Mira's fear and avoidance of physical intimacy with the now bodiless alien is a symbolic repudiation of giving more importance to mind than to body. In Mira's discomfort with this superiority of mind over body, de Pierres seems to echo Hayles' (1999:19) warning against the inclination in cybernetics to place information as central to being human, which would be a return to Haran's Cartesian dualism – the body simply acting as vehicle, secondary to the mind (Haran, 2006:253). From this position 'it is a small step to perceiving information as more mobile, more

¹⁴ Again there are similarities with Octavia Butler's Oankali morphing into a new being with different sexual functions and needs (2000:108-112).

important, more essential than material forms' rather than seeing the body as crucial to the human experience (Hayles, 1999:19).

Wanton, in spite of being very different, and now having no body, shows humanesque characteristics. When threatened by abandonment or death (MS 203; TS 181), it is close enough to Mira to admit fear: 'Wanton had thought itself unable to experience fear, Mirafedor, but Wanton was wrong. Wanton does not wish to cease existing' (TS 181). Wanton proves itself to experience compassion, fear of loneliness and fear of death in common with the humanesques, again rendering the bodiless, genderless Post-Species accessible on an individual level. At the same time as fearing and loathing the Post-Species, Mira has a positive, emotionally intimate relationship with Wanton (TS 251).

Apart from Wanton-poda, who serves as their spokesperson, the Extropists are purposefully portrayed as a faceless multitude.¹⁵ Both at the convocation on Rho Junction (CS 366) and in Medium (CS 183) they are 'a clamour of voices, thousands, millions of them'. They are a multitude, and they are a threat (MS 142; MS 192). For Jo-Jo, '[b]eing suspended within the Post-Species auditory space, deprived of most of his sense, had been the second worst experience of his life. The first was being shot out into space in an EVA suit with little air and no certainty of being rescued' (TS 23). The Extropist experience in general is not one that is beneficial to humanesque well-being, due, in part, to the suspension of all rules and parameters understood and adhered to by humanesques. The differences between humanesques and Extros suffocate the former, leaving them 'with little air' (TS 23). When the Extros attack, killing 'over a million tourists inside the Great Diorama Well of Mapoor', Tekton experiences '[o]utrage, horror and despair' (TS 98). He wonders how 'could anyone ... any *thing* ... perpetrate such ruin ... such *sacrilege*? *All*

¹⁵ See previous comment on 'hive mentality'.

our greatest achievements ... Everything that we are. Everything we strive for. All our beauty' (TS 98). After viewing the destruction caused by the Extros on Dowl, Mira also thinks of them as '*[p]itiless. The Post-Species are pitiless*' (TS 201). In depicting the Post-Species as a faceless, clamouring mass, de Pierres echoes other alien invasion texts which 'champion the individual over the collective, and mourn the loss of individual space' (Hedgecock, 1999:104).

The intensity of Post-Species callousness in the eyes of the humanesques can possibly be ascribed to a fear of the unknown. This episode is a definite counter-example of the destructive power of 'othering', and demonstrates that the fear between Extropists and humanesques is reciprocal. Wanton says to Mira that '[f]ear and anxiety emotions are known to be diminished by familiarity' (MS 36). The lack of familiarity, and thus intimacy, between humanesques and Post-Species is shown clearly by the many intimacy-related questions Mira has about them: '... how different were the Non-Corporeal to the Hosts? ... Did they value compassion? Did they experience emotion at all?' (TS 290).

Any chance of familiarity being established between the species is lost when Medium (the sum of all the faceless Extropists) starts transforming:

Medium glowed brighter than ever. The last of its outer skin sloughed away to allow a ghastly, glistening birthing.

Fluid sprayed forth in great bursts, sizzling as it touched the hot sand. A bulbous shape, the size of a dozen biozoons, had emerged. Then the shape split wide in another spray of fluid and a cavernous yawning hollow opened before them. Huge triangular-shaped objects glistened around the edges of the hollow. Teeth. (TS 316)

This menacing shadow becomes a large, 'expanding mass like an exploding star' and it is only once *Insignia* gains altitude above it that they recognise it as a gigantic space ship,

‘an organic lifeform’ (TS 372), which is a continuously growing ‘*single Saqr*’ (TS 326). When it seems that all is lost, and the Post-Species will destroy *Insignia* and all aboard, it is another Post-Species being, Wanton, who comes to the rescue (TS 384-385). Mira is ‘overcome with relief and sadness and loss’ (TS 386). De Pierres has prefigured Wanton’s selflessness (TS 251), but this quality is substantiated when it sacrifices itself in order to protect humanesque society from being taken over by its own sort, proving again the falseness of generalising about the ‘other’.

If, as I posit, the genderless Post-Species represent a similar threat to the current gender context that female aliens represent to patriarchy, that threat is lessened by the intimacy between Mira and Wanton, and by Wanton’s willingness to die in order to preserve Mira’s world. Gender fluidity, as an unknown quality, is feared. If seen as a faceless multitude, those who uphold gender fluidity are perceived as perpetrators of that threat. Breaking down the indeterminate mass into individual entities, and developing intimacy through the exchange of knowledge and through a willingness to renegotiate the norms and the parameters of communication could, as in the case of Mira and Wanton, lead to greater acceptance and mutual appreciation.¹⁶

The technological advances of the Post-Species set them apart from other beings in *The Sentients of Orion*. In modern-day developed societies, technological advances have already affected human health, age, physical performance and reproductive issues. These advances might in all probability develop to affect gender, or even sex – a strange and therefore threatening thought. Hollinger (2009:274) refers to a tendency among feminists to disavow ‘technoscience’ because of their ‘conventional identification with nature and

¹⁶ This is not to say that intimacy and compassion between two individuals can nullify the cruelty shown by one species, sex, gender or gender condition to another.

the body', but other feminists, such as Haraway (1991:35), no longer see this kind of technological advancement of our bodies (and perhaps our gender choices) as optional.

Only one thing threatens the Extropists as a species, and that is Sole, also known as the Entity, or God, implying that the only thing that could prevent technology from taking over would be a more evolved being or a higher power. Wanton tells Mira that the Post-Species '*wish to destroy the Entity, so that they may control their own evolution. They fear a more evolved being than themselves*' (TS 385). Both the Post-Species' effort to gain access to Mira's innate gene and their 'scientific and ... ruthless' effort to destroy Sole are aimed at gaining freedom in evolution, which, significantly, is their form of procreation.

While some Post-Species are referred to as 'Non-Corporeal', they have not completely transcended bodies and thus express body fluidity rather than disembodiment. These Non-Corporeal Extropists are on Araldis for quixite, the mineral which they believe 'will help eliminate their dependency' on the corporeals (TS 303). This strengthens the parallel between the Post-Species and humanesque females from Orion in their mutual issue, namely, choice in procreation. While the women form a sisterhood and choose a political approach to regain some say in the humanesque reproductive process, the Extropists turn to body invasion and scientific experimentation on subjects from other species (CS 237) in order to 'increase choice' (MS 39). In this sense, de Pierres again equates the Extropists, and the threat they pose to the status quo, with the threat disenfranchised women pose to the patriarchal system.

Sole

Sole, unlike the Extropists, is only a presence – it has no body, gender or compassion. When the Extropist attacks start, Sole disappears (TS 50). It does so without bothering 'to

warn the tyros of the danger. Whatever the nature of its sentience, compassion surely did not feature' (TS 133). Tekton has been 'afforded a glimpse into the Entity's mysteries, and he'd not seen anything resembling compassion among the terrifying dizzying universe of knowledge and experiences he'd been plunged into' (TS 195). He comes to the conclusion that Sole is playing a '*game. Of course, of course! Sole wants to play*' (TS 197).¹⁷ The other tyros share Tekton's conviction: that Sole has an ulterior motive and that they've been 'incredibly foolish ... pleasing a creature that cares little for anything' (TS 260).

Sole's lack of caring is further evident in the painful manner it chooses to commune with humanesques. Mira feels '[i]ts presence [enter] her mind like a shaft rammed along her backbone, a painful, stiffening jolt and a sense of invasion' (TS 387). The description has sexual overtones, as if de Pierres places Sole as masculine aggressor against Mira's femininity.

If emotional intimacy is based on closeness and communication, it is doubtful that intimacy can exist between Mira and Sole. Apart from the fact that their very contact is painful to Mira, there is a depth of miscommunication between them. What Sole sees as '*little problems, little things, little one*' is to Mira a '*cruel game*' played by the Entity (TS 387). In this incident de Pierres not only points out the depth of miscommunication between genders, but also the conflict between gender fluidity and adherence to static gender norms.

Nova, who is more easily able to communicate with Sole than Mira, establishes rapport with the Entity and guides it, by asking questions and by projecting feelings such as a '*grave melancholia*' (TS 388), into admitting that it feels lonely and is seeking its origins.

¹⁷ This is a comment on some religious views of the deity as 'beyond' human concerns and therefore, in some way, uncaring. It also suggests that such an existence would be, without compassion, profoundly immature and motivated only by its own amusement.

In the intimate conversation where humanesque, half humanesque and god-like entity share information, it transpires that Sole is causing the destruction of Orion in order to battle its own isolation and melancholy. Using Sole's destructive efforts to gain intimacy, de Pierres strengthens the theme of isolation and loneliness in opposition to intimacy.

Sole can be convinced to stop the destruction and rather to '[l]ook into the future' for answers if Nova will keep it company and assuage its loneliness (TS 390). This awkward intimacy between two gender-neutral or genderless characters, one of whom is perceived as male (Sole) and one as female (Nova), demonstrates that people tend to assign gender regardless of biology in order to make sense of their society; loneliness and isolation are not gender specific and neither is the ability to assuage the loneliness of others by creating intimacy.

Like fantasy, science fiction is a literature of estrangement (Jackson, 1981:4; Melzer, 2006:1), depending heavily on some form of alienation, and like fantasy, it 'attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss' (Jackson, 1981:2).¹⁸ As a literary theme, alienation can be seen as 'the estrangement of the literary character or persona from something with which he/she has been, should be, or would like to be in conformity and consonance' (Gray Diaz, 1988:31).

This 'theme of solitude' surrounding 'the alienated figure' is deeply woven into the fabric of *The Sentients of Orion* (Gray Diaz, 1988:31).¹⁹ According to Nancy Gray Diaz (1988:31), the counter to alienation, 'the theme that stands in opposition to it, is

¹⁸ See Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981:4,8,19, 46 etc.) for a detailed explanation of the shared roots of science fiction and fantasy.

¹⁹ Wanton-poda (MS 203), Insignia (DS 7), Lasper Farr (CS 288), Sole (TS 388) and Jo-Jo (DS 180) all reveal different aspects of loneliness.

reconciliation'. In *The Sentients of Orion*, de Pierres places the creation of intimacy with others (and Others) as a central counterfoil to loneliness and alienation.

Jo-Jo convinces Sole to exchange Nova's companionship for his own – not by evoking feelings of compassion that would prevent Sole from taking a child from its mother, but by showing that companionship with Nova would not be in Sole's best interests:

Nova has been altered by the Post-Species. They oppose your existence. Their changes to her will damage you. It was always their intent to use her against you. And her mother. (TS 393)

Nova

Nova, Mira's biological child, holds great interest for the intimacy-related discussion of gender in *The Sentients of Orion*. Jo-Jo rightly points out to Sole that there 'have been some changes' to Nova's metabolism:

The child's brain patterns are altered, and its endocrine and vascular systems are running at an accelerated rate. I have compared the brain activity to those of my previous Innates, and there are no similarities.

You are saying that my child is not humanesque?

Not entirely. (MS 202)

Mira notices other differences too: 'Amazingly, in a few days she'd developed some neck control, and was ... looking around with bright eyes. Mira was sure that 'esque babies normally took weeks to develop that kind of strength' (TS 202-203) and she realises 'that little about Nova would be like a normal child. Wanton had admitted that in-vitro experimentation had occurred while she'd been captive on the Hub planet. Was her baby

in some way like the Post-Species?’ (TS 203). Nova confirms this by telling Mira that the child only ‘*gained clear thought*’ during their time on ‘*the Hub world*’ and Mira knows for certain that the ‘Post-Species had altered her child’ (TS 254). The Post-Species experimentation leaves Nova ‘*not entirely*’ humanesque, regardless of how the reader, and Mira, may project humanesque qualities onto her (MS 203).²⁰ It is tellingly only in her capacity as an alien-altered being that she is able to defend *Insignia* against the gigantic Post-Species Saqr ship (TS 384).

Baby Nova easily enters the ‘mind meld’ between Mira and *Insignia*. The child’s presence is like a ‘brilliant clear orb ... radiating curiosity and wonder’ (TS 182). Nova is the one to convince *Insignia* of Mira’s purpose. Had it just been Mira and *Insignia*, chances are they would have continued their circle of bickering and would not have come to a mutually agreeable solution.²¹ Nova, however, acts as the deciding factor, ‘mediating their argument in some way’ (TS 200). This could simply be Nova’s nature, or the child could be performing what is expected of ‘her’ dubiously assigned gender: the role of peacemaker. If Nova takes on this feminine characteristic, it is by choice, not by default, as she actively rejects other stereotypically female traits, such as being in need of care (TS 254) and ‘she’ is beyond being assigned a specific gender (TS 148-154).

In Italian, on which de Pierres’ Latino language is mostly modelled, Nova means ‘new’. Nova is not only a new being heralding a new beginning after the trauma of Mira’s rape; the child is also a new type of humanesque and embodies gender innovation. By ascribing gender-neutrality to Nova, who is benign (in contrast to the destructive Post-Species and

²⁰ Even though Nova has no particular gender, being born ‘with no man’s tackle’ (TS 79) and without ‘reproductive organs of either sex’ (TS 148) *Insignia* assigns her the pronoun ‘she’ to help Mira negotiate the unfamiliar gender landscape (TS 155). I follow suit by referring to Nova as female when syntax requires a pronoun.

²¹ See Chapter Two of this thesis.

the vindictive Sole), de Pierres portrays the positive aspects of gender fluidity as opposed to highlighting the threat it holds. This, too, is new. Finally, Nova represents hybridity as a new means to address the lack engendered by alienation (Kaye and Hunter, 1999:7).

Conclusion

The level of threat to humanesque society posed by the different alien species seems to increase exponentially with their level of 'otherness' and the level of gender fluidity they project. Djes, while alien, is half-humanesque, female and wholly benign. Whether Nova is humanesque or alien is debatable. The child has humanesque parents, but the Extros have changed 'her' into a gender-neutral creature with alien psychic abilities. As pseudo-humanesque, Nova holds no threat to humanesques and, to the contrary, plays a role in their survival. The gender-neutral biozoons, who share quite a few humanesque values, are shown to be indifferent to humanesques, with their indifference bordering on threat (CS 242). The Saqr are completely alien and their lack of gender assignment indicates their status as undeveloped, low-level organisms. Because of this state, they pose a huge threat to the survival of the humanesques on Araldis. The very highly developed Extropists are post-species and also post-gender. They are also the ones who, by using science to transcend gender, pose the most immediate threat to the continuation of humanesque society. They hold as much of a threat for the gender status quo as the empowered female aliens in the early pulps held for patriarchy (Roberts, 1993:9). Sole, on the other hand, belongs to no species. It is completely alien, has no gender ascribed to it (in spite of its sometimes masculine performance) and might even be post-technology. Significantly, the threat it holds for humanesque society lies in its loneliness, its emotional isolation and a marked lack of intimacy.

There is a clear parallel between the status of aliens in science fiction and women in consensus society (Wolmark, 1993:3; Pearson, 2006:183). In their intimate relationships, the aliens in *The Sentients of Orion* address different aspects of this parallel. Through her sexual intimacy with Trin, Djes represents the traditional threat of the female ‘other’ to the patriarchal status quo; the Post-Species posit the threat of masculine technology to the feminine, and the accepted implications of posthumanism to the gender binary (Hayles, 1999:xi-xiv). De Pierres, however, also uses aliens to gesture towards transgender/gender-fluid identities and the possible threat they hold for the current patriarchal status quo. She also holds forth the tantalising possibility of gender hybridity and mutual acceptance as counterfoil to the threat, thus eclipsing Jenny Wolmark’s (1993:28) caution that aliens are often used by writers of science fiction simply to replicate current conditions of gender and race. Instead of mere replication, de Pierres weaves a backdrop of intimacy and belonging against which she poses a vibrant challenge to the patriarchy through aliens who portray gender possibilities far beyond those existing in our current society.

Conclusion: Re-images or re-imaginings

Introduction

I embarked on this study fully expecting to expose the nature of the gender commentary in *The Sentients of Orion* as superficial, if not absent altogether. The narrow focus afforded by the close analysis of selected incidences of intimacy in the preceding chapters provides the needed insight into de Pierres' gender landscape to fully address my expectation. This concluding chapter provides a short overview of my thesis, after which the findings are discussed in relation to the research question and hypothesis. Finally, some recommendations for further research, as based on the findings, are presented.

Before discussing my findings, I again refer to the delineations and limitations of this study as set forth in the introductory chapter. The 'case study' nature of this thesis and its narrow focus on *The Sentients of Orion*, while limiting to a degree, present many options for further research in the application of the findings to other samples from the field (Richards and Schmidt, 2002:65).

Overview

Science fiction, specifically science fiction written by women authors, has developed into a genre that, due to its unique element of estrangement, is ideally suited to challenging the patriarchal system. There is a strong history of women authors using science fiction to comment on and raise questions about the heteronormative gender binary as enforced by patriarchy.¹ It is this tradition that led to my research question, namely, whether de Pierres,

¹ As demonstrated throughout this thesis.

as a current woman author of popular science fiction, still aims to subvert gender stereotypes. Having chosen Marianne de Pierres' *The Sentients of Orion* as sample for analysis, my hypotheses were twofold: that there would most likely be an exploration of gender present in de Pierres' *The Sentients of Orion*, but that a closer analysis of sexual and emotional intimacy (as having extensive gender implications) would reveal it to be simply a superficial nod to the tradition.

I set out to prove my hypotheses by using an inter-textual, thematic content analysis and close gendered reading of the four volumes of *The Sentients of Orion*, with a focus on intimacy. Intimacy, however, is deeply nuanced, necessitating the application of a range of theoretical approaches. I have thus applied the lenses of feminist literary criticism, gender theory, hegemonic masculinity, body theory and, where applicable, queer theory. Focusing on primary characters, I have analysed both positive and negative incidences of emotional, physical and sexual closeness as they comment on or contribute to the gender performances, depictions and stereotypes presented by de Pierres.

Before discussing the findings, certain plot inconsistencies need to be addressed as they relate directly to the research question. In the first of these, at the beginning of the series Djes is referred to by Trin as 'the ginko' (DS 145), and Faja then tells him that Djes's 'mama is a Miolaquan and her father a Lostol. So in fact she is part 'esque. Only she has many of her mama's features' (DS 145). Later though, it transpires that Djes is the daughter borne by Bethany Ionil, a humanesque woman, to her alien, Miolaquan lover and that her alien aspect is inherited from her *father*, not from her mother (CS 32). Either Faja Fedor does not know the true story, or else it is simply an oversight on the part of the author. This detail is of importance, though, as the second version of events depicts the *man* as forbidden, different and other, instead of the *woman*, as the first version does,

making it an inversion of the common trope in feminist science fiction of casting the female as the ‘alien dark’ (Tiptree, 1972:168; Jones, 2002:180; Pearson, 2006:176).

Apart from this minor, but relevant, inconsistency, the largest gap in the development of the plot pertains to the freedom of choice Latino women have in their fertility. The fact that de Pierres presents this as a central theme and plotline speaks of a deeper gender undercurrent than I initially expected. Pregnancy, childbearing and child rearing have always played a role in gender politics, and have been seen by some feminists as part of the oppression of women in a patriarchal system (Hawkins, 2006:205). Firestone (1972:25) argues for the radical feminist view that all women are slaves to the ‘biological contingences of the human family’ and must ‘take charge of’ and ‘reject’ the biological function of childbearing.² More recent feminist scholars, such as Denise Thompson (2001:5), disagree with this radical stance, positing that childbearing is not exploitative as such, but can be so when it takes place ‘under conditions of male domination’. Having the power of reproduction, or at least a say in the procreative process, has long been a measure of empowerment or gender status not only in feminism, but also in feminist science fiction (Burroughs, 2014; Le Guin, 1969; Tuttle, 1976).

Making the reclamation of decision-making power in the reproductive process by Latino women a central theme in *The Sentients of Orion* announces in no uncertain terms that the author is aware of the literature on and the debate around the issue in feminist science fiction. Reclaiming a say in procreation is set up under the leadership of Marchella and will be attained through Mira being assigned a tyro to Sol (DS 341; CS 58). There are several powerful references to the theme when Mira refers to ‘fertility being held ransom’ (CS 177) and her obligation to ‘unbind our women’ (CS 285). For some reason, though,

² Dworkin (1981:151) and MacKinnon (1989:172-174), for example, seem to view hetero sex as rape almost by its nature.

this very interesting and potentially enriching subplot never comes to fruition. After the theme has been firmly established, there is never again any oblique reference to it, right up to the last chapters of *Transformation Space*. After the destruction of Mintaka by the Post-Species geni-carriers, Sole disappears. This news disturbs Mira, who remembers in a by-the-way fashion that ‘Marchella Pellegrini – Trin’s rebel aunt – had wanted Mira to become a tyro to the Entity, had seen it as a way to help the women of Araldis escape their repression by learning how to reverse the Latino male control over fertility. To that end, Mira had harboured a wish to secure a place of study among the brightest minds in the galaxy. And now it was too late’ (TS 198).

The long absence, and then return, of this particular aspect of the plot so late in the series, and then in such a tangential fashion, detracts from the potential challenge to the patriarchy posed by *The Sentients of Orion*. I cannot help but feel disappointment that such a relevant topic, so centrally introduced, was not actualised. In an SF Signal web interview, de Pierres refers to her earlier work, such as *The Sentients of Orion*, as ‘an apprenticeship’ to her later writings (Weimer, 2015:no pagination) and, as a result, certain lapses in plot consistency are to be expected. This difficult-to-exonerate example of unfinished writing is one of the less flattering space opera characteristics of *The Sentients of Orion*. Regrettable as this particular lapse is in view of my hypothesis, my disappointment is limited to this one aspect of de Pierres’ approach to gender portrayal, and though she failed to deliver in this instance, I believe it to be a simple plot oversight, and not a failure in her intent to comment on the gender status quo.³

³ See Appendix B for further comment by de Pierres herself.

Findings

In line with my expectations, I was proven correct in my hypothesis that de Pierres, as woman author of popular science fiction, would incorporate gender commentary in *The Sentients of Orion*. I was, however, incorrect in my assumption that her gender interrogation would simply be of surface value, and a mere nod to the tradition of women authors of science fiction challenging the patriarchal status quo.

The close reading with its focus on incidences of intimacy in *The Sentients of Orion* has revealed, in spite of the underdeveloped plot line regarding reproductive rights, a consistent challenge to the gender binary. De Pierres achieves this by using, among other things, gender reversal and androgyny, along with other, less neatly categorisable versions of gender-nonconformity and gender fluidity, to destabilise the gender status quo.

Gender reversal has long been a trope in science fiction, often used by women writers in reaction to male-dominated stories that simply did not provide for the existence of strong women characters. The range of science fiction gender reversals covers everything from simple role inversion to the annihilation or complete non-existence of male characters (Attebery, 2006:57), and has received attention from, among others, scholars such as Sam Moskowitz in the anthology *When Women Rule* (1972:27) and Russ in 'Amore Vincit Foeminam': *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (1980:2).

De Pierres uses gender reversal but not in the traditional sense of matriarchal utopia or dystopia. Instead of a society ruled by women, as in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) or Leslie F. Stone's *The Conquest of Gola* (1931:38-49), her inclusion of the trope appears in a number of different plot lines, for example the lack of gender and the lack of gender recognition in *Insignia*; Amazonian women warriors who are physically and

emotionally equal and sometimes superior to the male characters; the way Thales's male character is written as a parody of the stereotypical 'fainting heroine' of pulp magazine science fiction (Attebery, 2006:56); and the 'elevated', all-encompassing gender of the genetically altered Nova. In contrast to simple role reversal, Nova is presented as an improvement on humanesque biology. It could be argued that de Pierres is presenting gender fluidity as an improvement on the static gender binary.

Many feminist science fiction writers have used the concept of androgyny as a way to comment on sex/gender. Ursula Le Guin (1969:90), Marge Piercy (1976:110) and Gwyneth Jones (1997:305-325) all have androgynous or 'ungendered subjects', and de Pierres structures Nova, the biozoons and the Extros in the same manner: they are neither male nor female, yet both at the same time. Androgyny is often intended as a perfect balance of male and female characteristics but seldom achieves this. Le Guin (1993:168) points out in 'Is Gender Necessary? Redux' that even her Gethenian experiment inadvertently portrayed androgyny with a predominantly male inflection. Also see Barr's 'Charles Bronson, Samurai, and Other Feminist Images: A Transactive Response to *The Left Hand of Darkness*' (1981:141). In her particular depiction of androgyny, de Pierres not only acknowledges the history of the genre, but also makes a case for balance between male and female without one gender dominating the other

Even if only through addressing certain issues related to gender, the analysis further shows, contrary to my hypothesis, how instances of intimacy in *The Sentients of Orion* are consistently applied in reinforcement of de Pierres' challenge to the patriarchal status quo in general, and the gender binary in particular. Mira Fedor's character allows for the examination of nuanced aspects of intimacy such as peer pressure, adolescent desire, loss of virginity, rape, pregnancy, motherhood and agency, all of which comment on and

challenge the status quo. Through intimate exchanges with *Insignia* and the Extros, de Pierres uses Mira to introduce alternatives to sexuality, gender and reproduction which are in direct contrast to the heteronormative binary; all resulting in a many-layered exegesis of gender roles, portrayals and stereotypes.

De Pierres' rendering of male characters is further proof of the presence of a gender investigation. For example, Trin's portrayal as a symbol of the patriarchy, a rapist, and a man who lusts after 'alien dark' in the forbidden joys of sex with a young girl in itself poses a challenge to an untenable status quo. A closer examination of the intimacies Trin is involved in disproves my hypothesis that the challenge posed by de Pierres only carries surface value. Trin's gender performance is deeply affected by his sexual impotence, by which he is stereotypically emasculated. His subsequent addiction to performance-enhancing substances speaks of the extremes he is willing to go to in his desperate search for a convincing performance of masculinity. Trin's lack of agency as societal expectations force him into actions he does not feel comfortable with, along with his inability to show hesitation or fear as he experiences these emotions, mark the extent of the damage inflicted on men by masculine hegemony and hegemonic masculinity.⁴ Instead of simply the villainous face of the patriarchy, Trin, through his intimacies, is depicted as a nuanced and conflicted character in terms of gender and gender performance. De Pierres uses this, as she does the various intimacies involving the other men in *The Sentients of Orion*, to present a many-layered commentary on what it means to be a man, and on how the stereotypical expectations that go hand in hand with masculine hegemony are limiting in terms of gender not only to women, as is often assumed, but also to men.

⁴ See Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:829-859), as discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, for a more detailed discussion of the concept of hegemonic masculinity.

The women portrayed by de Pierres pose a basic challenge to existing stereotypes by virtue of how varied they are in terms of goals and motivations, appearance, gender and sexuality. Analysing their intimacies, however, reveals the author's consistently deeper-than-surface critique of stereotypes. Her continued focus on motherhood versus freedom from motherhood, and her underlying commentary on the price of 'otherness' that Marchella, Rast and Fariss pay for the measure of agency they enjoy in a male-dominated society, are threads woven throughout *The Sentients of Orion*. Each of the women in the series diverges in some way from the gender expectations associated with being a woman and de Pierres' most overt challenges to patriarchal structures of gender and sexuality can be found in the manner in which these women engage in sexual and emotional intimacy.

In her choice of Djes as female alien and the object of Trin's desire, de Pierres again poses the obvious challenge I hypothesised would be there. Tradition dictates that Trin would desire an alien woman, so to a certain extent Trin's attraction to Djes can be seen as a 'surface' nod by de Pierres to the historical challenge science fiction poses to the status quo. In pointedly portraying all the other non-human-esque 'aliens' as very sexual, but without gender, the author uses incidences of intimacy to pose a deep and detailed challenge to the heteronormative gender binary, which is contrary to the second part of my hypothesis. In the same way as the female alien traditionally poses a threat to patriarchy, de Pierres' post-gender aliens are depicted as an undeniable threat to the heteronormative binary.

Future research

While this study shows that intimacy is a tool consistently applied in *The Sentients of Orion* to comment on and subvert the heteronormative gender binary, which is a pervasive

stronghold of patriarchy, it also presents several new questions to consider for future research. This study focuses on Marianne de Pierres as representative of modern women authors of science fiction and on her series, *The Sentients of Orion*, as a representative sample of her work. It would be of interest to investigate whether the gender interrogation de Pierres weaves in *The Sentients of Orion* in challenge to the patriarchal status quo is replicated in her other science fiction series, such as the Peacemaker books and the *Parrish Plessis* series (de Pierres, 2004; 2004; 2005). The *Parrish Plessis* series receives academic scrutiny in *Apocalypse in Australian Fiction and Film* (Palumbo, 2013), which examines the contribution of the series to the post-apocalyptic tradition of Australian science fiction. The series thus already holds proven worth as a basis for academic analysis, and a further investigation into the manner in which the author comments on gender within its pages would prove interesting.

From this first step, a logical outflow would be an investigation of whether other Australian women writing science fiction use intimacy as a tool in gender commentary. Applying a similar analysis of intimacy to popular authors from countries other than Australia will, of course, broaden the scope of the findings. Also, using the deeper insights afforded by a focus on intimacy, a comparative study of the manner in which ‘popular’ authors and their more literary, academic counterparts challenge the gender binary, will prove very informative. Applying intimacy as a focus would enrich any of the proposed research projects.

Conclusion

De Pierres’ use of intimacy as a tool to comment on gender in *The Sentients of Orion* serves as a reminder that cultural absolutism cannot sustain itself. The class-based,

patriarchally inclined Latino society, the domination of the warlords, the evolved Extro society, and even god must make way for new systems, whether of politics and society, or of gender delineations. Bornstein (1994:21) says:

There's a real simple way to look at gender: Once upon a time, someone drew a line in the sands of a culture and proclaimed with great self-importance, 'On this side, you are a man; on the other side, you are a woman.' It's time for the winds of change to blow that line away. Simple.

This argument against absolutism is supported by Feinberg (1998:1) who says that '[e]ach person should have the right to choose between pink or blue tinted gender categories, as well as all the other hues of the palette. At this moment in time, that right is denied to us. But together, we could make it a reality'. In my view, de Pierres' representation of gender identities through her depiction of intimate situations aligns with Bornstein's and Feinberg's calls for recognition of a wider spectrum of gender positions.

Along with physical intimacy, de Pierres' interrogation of gender norms is buttressed by belonging, or emotional intimacy. From the genderless *Insignia* revealing to Mira that it has been lonely in the first chapters of *Dark Space* (DS 7) to the denouement in *Transformation Space*, which reveals the gender-evolved god entity to be suffering from crippling loneliness (TS 388), the need of all beings of all species, races and genders to *belong* and to be loved is a golden thread through *The Sentients of Orion*. This brings us full circle to the quotation with which I opened this thesis (Butler et al., 1994:34):

Crafting a sexual position, or reciting a sexual position, always involves becoming haunted by what's excluded. And the more rigid the position, the greater the ghost, and the more threatening it is in some way.

In using both sexual and emotional intimacy to address and challenge the 'crafting' and 'reciting' of gender positions, de Pierres poses a strong and consistent challenge to the gender binary. She thus sets out to diminish the pain caused by exclusion and actively follows the science fiction tradition of providing alternatives, thus silencing Butler's greater ghosts.

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Appendix A: Synopsis of *The Sentients of Orion*.

The story, which is told from a variety of viewpoints, follows Mira, a young woman trying to save her planet and her solar system from the invading Saqr and their overlords, the Post-Species Extropists. After being raped and impregnated by the crown prince, Trinder Pellegrini, to ensure the continuation of their line, Mira flees the planet Araldis with the help of *Insignia*, her sentient biozoon spaceship, whom she pilots by means of a genetic abnormality usually found only in the men of her family. She faces a number of challenges along with a widely varied cast of characters in her efforts to stop the invading forces and be reunited with the survivors on Araldis. *The Sentients of Orion* deals with issues of conflict, politics, religion, intercultural relations, and (of relevance to this thesis) intimacy, which bring different aspects of power into focus. The series contains four novels, namely, *Dark Space*, *Chaos Space*, *Mirror Space* and *Transformation Space*.

The first novel, *Dark Space*, begins with Mira's escape from Prince Franco's plan to forcibly remove her genetic ability to pilot the biozoon spaceship so he can transfer the gene to his son, Trin. The danger escalates when genetically altered Saqr invade the planet, and Mira flees in the presence of Trin and a group of orphaned children. Trin abandons Mira, feeling guilty about his relationship with an underage alien girl, but they eventually reunite after joining forces with civilian refugees and a group of mercenaries. Mira is the last surviving female aristocrat and so Trin rapes and impregnates her before forcing her to leave Araldis with the biozoon spaceship to find help. In concert, a mining scout discovers an Entity called God, and various highly educated people endeavour to get closer to it – some in search of personal glory, some in search of knowledge and some in an effort to liberate Araldisean women from male oppression.

Political orchestration is central to the plot of *Chaos Space*, the second novel. The two main political forces are OLOSS and the Extropists. Mira, in the company of the mercenaries, approaches OLOSS, but is met with duplicity and subterfuge. Now also fleeing pursuit by OLOSS, the group, joined by the disillusioned philosopher Thales, Jo-Jo the God Discoverer and Bethany Ionil (mother of Djes), throw themselves at the mercy of the third political force, Consilience. Even the purportedly neutral Consilience ultimately hinges on political machinations and blackmail as Mira and her companions are forced into a mission to Extropist space. On Araldis, meanwhile, Trin aims to establish himself as political leader, hide his role in Mira's departure, deal with challenges from the women in the group and come to terms with his sexual relationship with an underage half-alien girl, Djes.

The third novel, *Mirror Space*, focuses largely on loss of freedom as different characters find themselves imprisoned by Post-Species aliens. Mira is rescued, but only after genetic experiments are conducted on her unborn baby. Power struggles in relationships form a focal point as Mira and *Insignia*, Trin and Djes, Thales and Fariss, Tekton and Lasper Farr negotiate power in their physical, emotional and sexual relationships. With the support of a number of alien species, Mira is able to convince OLOSS of the Extropist threat, not only to Araldis, but to the whole of Orion.

In *Transformation Space*, the last novel, the ruling political forces of OLOSS, the Extropists and Consilience gravitate back toward the embattled planet of Araldis, where Trin and the other survivors await rescue. After having given birth to a gender-neutral child, Nova, Mira and *Insignia* are reunited with Jo-Jo, Rast, Trin, Djes and the other refugees on Araldis. Revolution is a recurring theme as Lasper Farr is unseated, OLOSS's position of superiority is undermined, Trin is dethroned and exposed as a rapist, and the

invading Saqr are transformed, under the direction of the Entity, into a gigantic Extropist spaceship intent on the destruction of the universe. Djes takes over leadership from Trin while Jo-Jo, Mira and Nova negotiate a deal with Sole. When Jo-Jo agrees to become a permanent companion to the Entity, which he originally discovered, the plot comes full circle as he sacrifices his life for that of all living beings in Orion.

Appendix B: Interview with Marianne de Pierres

This is an informal e-mail interview between me (DB) and Marianne de Pierres (MdP). Content has been slightly edited for publication.

DB: I have done a close reading of your series *The Sentients of Orion*, focusing mainly on the manner in which incidences of intimacy are applied to comment on the gender status quo. The close reading was done against the backdrop of science fiction's rich history of gender commentary. This interview is aimed at enriching my doctoral thesis, which revealed a consistent challenge to the narrow heteronormative interpretation of gender and gender roles:

DB: Your writing follows an august line of women sf authors, such as Ursula Le Guin and Octavia Butler. To what extent was your writing influenced by these figures?

MdP: Probably my biggest female speculative fiction author influences have been Octavia Butler, Sheri S. Tepper, and Nancy Kress. I have, of course, read a lot of Le Guin's work as well, but Octavia Butler really pierced my heart. Her style is both engaging and subtle. With Nancy Kress I was more enamoured with her ideas. *Beggars in Spain* sent my imagination sparking in all directions, and eventually directly influenced how I wrote my young adult *Night Creatures* series. And, honestly, I don't think I've ever recovered from reading Tepper's *Grass*. What an outstanding example of world building! Then there were others who played an important role in the history of my reading culture such as C.J. Cherry, Wilhelmina Baird, Mary Gentle, Gwyneth Jones, Lois Bujold and Nicola Griffith.

Y'know, I can clearly remember thinking at one point that I wanted to write like Octavia. How naïve and precious of me to think anyone could emulate her.

DB: Gender issues have long been a focus in sci-fi written by female authors. When you started working on *The Sentients of Orion*, was it your intention to incorporate it as an element in your story? (If yes, what was your 'gender agenda'?)

MdP: My intention was to write a story that explores what happens to women and children during conflict; hence the narrative direction of *Dark Space*. But as the series unfolded, I realized I wanted more than that. It became important to represent the diversity of human existence, and bring a woman's perspective to space opera. Rarely do you see a female protagonist in SF carrying a child, for instance, and that woman and child being the focus of the story. So my goals evolved as the story did.

DB: In many instances it seems that intimate encounters (sexual or otherwise) between characters in *The Sentients of Orion* comment in some way on the gender status quo. The sexual intimacy between Bethany and her alien love, between Trin and Djes, between Thales and Fariss and the implied intimacy between Marchella and Tekton are just some instances that come to mind. It seemed to me these encounters, in various ways, reconfigure existing gender stereotypes. Would you agree with this? If so, in what ways would you say the stereotypes are reconfigured?

MdP: In a word, yes! The *Sentients of Orion* series presents diverse gender configurations and power relations in relationships. Some of those couplings are traditional and dysfunctional. But others are much more flexible and nuanced and successful. I've always believed that if we could see into the far future, we'd be surprised to see that though many aspects of social interaction have changed, many have remained the same. When we meet Mira and Trin, he attempts to dominate and oppress her and her (only viable) solution is to escape. Yet his subsequent relationship with Djes is different. The power dynamics are altered. As a couple they find a kind of balance that helps their relationship function. I was interested all the way through with what made relationships work or not.

DB: Some characters, such as Rast and Thales, are gender-nonconforming. Thales, for example, seems to adhere far more to feminine stereotypes than masculine ones. Were you deliberately trying to queer the gender pitch?

MdP: I think I did with Rast. I knew she was queer from the get-go. She just popped into my head as a fully formed character. With Thales, however, I constructed a character who'd had certain influences in his life and therefore it seemed only logical that he'd develop to be a certain kind of personality. He was an antidote to the swaggering arrogance of Rast, Trin, Jo-Jo, and even Tekton.

DB: Would you say there is redemption for Trinder Pellegrini as a man and as a male ruler? Why/why not?

MdP: I was so tempted to write a happily ever after for Trin, but I felt that wouldn't be true to his nature. Was partial redemption reasonable, yes! But complete redemption ...? Possibly not. His mental scars were deep and profound, and he would always default to certain thought patterns and behaviours when confronted or cornered. But as he matured, he developed some insight. He wasn't as totally unlikeable at the end as he was in the beginning. I think by the end of the series we understand him, and that helps negotiate his often unacceptable behaviour. But, personally, I would never trust him with my heart. I also wanted to show how even very flawed characters can love deeply. It felt right that Djes left him though.

DB: It is never specifically mentioned in the books, but purely speculatively, do you think Mira and the Pensare will manage to reclaim their agency over reproductive rights?

MdP: It's something they will die trying to do, I know that. And really, Mira's journey is only just beginning.

DB: Motherhood has been stringently interrogated by feminist science fiction. Did this tradition influence your portrayal of motherhood/mothering in *The Sentients of Orion*?

MdP: Probably not significantly. I think my portrayal of motherhood was more likely influenced by the fact that I was parenting three small boys as I wrote the books. They were, at once, both alien beings and yet intimately part of me. I delved into those feelings for Mira, Nova, and to a lesser extent, Vito: the depth of a mother's understanding of her child, and the fact that children sometimes 'mother' the

parent. On reflection, Mira's and Nova's relationship with Insignia had some significance too. Insignia represents the 'meta-mother', nurturing yet capable of almost anything to protect those she loves.

DB: On a more personal note, is there anything of your own experience of motherhood in the portrayal of maternal bonds in *The Sentients of Orion*?

MdP: I guess I covered this in the previous answer ☺

DB: In a 2015 interview with SF Signal, you refer to *The Sentients of Orion* as a kind of 'apprenticeship' for your later work. In retrospect, is there any specific aspect of the story that you would like to write differently?

MdP: It was an apprenticeship in the sense that it was the first time I'd written novels in third person. But I also learned a lot of technical things, like the effect of fooling around with time lines. If I could go back, I would probably write *Dark Space* with a completely linear time line. And of course I would know how the series ended, so there are little tweaks throughout along the way. I would also possibly have extended the end of *Transformation Space*. I know I wrapped it up a little quickly. I would like to have taken some more time to say goodbye to the characters.

DB: In your experience as an author, would you say that the gender-related challenge mustered by science fiction over many decades has yielded practical results in the genre, or in society as a whole?

MdP: Despite not being able to back it up with any quantitative evidence, I would say I think so, yes. I've certainly had personal experiences where readers have been in contact with me because my queer or trans characters have provided them with a sense of normality and acceptance and given them courage to be themselves. And as a feminist, I've experienced some adverse reactions to my writing by traditional male space opera readers. *The Sentients of Orion* was different and therefore didn't give them quite what they wanted. Of course, there were others who were intrigued and engaged in the feminist and diverse viewpoints. With the latter, I like to think that some of that transferred into how they view the world today. Once you introduce a conversation and plant the seeds, somewhere, sometime, someone will absorb it. It is an incremental, trickle feed phenomenon, not an overnight revolution. I am 56 and have recently re-edited some of my books written five years ago. I could see even in them how identity politics has made some my earlier writing clunky and thoughtless. On some level we are getting there!

DB: In the context of the past relationship between sci-fi and gender, and considering your many references to gender inequality, patriarchy and masculine hegemony, do you envision a future in which sci-fi written by female authors continues posing a challenge to the gender status quo?

MdP: I hope so! My only fear is that (certainly in Australia) there is no culture that encourages female authors to write SF. It's hard to get it published and even harder to reach an audience. Certainly, writers like Anne Leckie and Lauren Beukes have broken through to an extent through awards etc., but we need more like that. It's a hard slog writing SF in today's market. Being a *woman* writing it is just an extra

hurdle to overcome, not because of any publisher bias, but just because SF doesn't attract a large reading audience to begin with, and female-authored SF can hit some obstacles with male readers' perceptions.

DB: Finally, what are you currently working on, both in terms of fiction and academically speaking?

MdP: I'm currently completing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Queensland. My research topic explores how female speculative fiction authors envision feminism in their work. I deconstruct three particular texts: *Vn* by Madeline Ashby, *God's War* by Kameron Hurley, and *Zoo City* by Lauren Beukes. As part of the project I am also writing a feminist time travel novel entitled *A Once and Future Past*. It's the most challenging book I've written to date because the main character is transported back to 1400's France with an advanced AI implant to help her negotiate the task that has fallen to her. It's a fun but difficult process developing the plot. The critical essay will discuss how my work compares to the case studies with regard to its projection/forecast for future feminism. I should be finished in early 2018. I'm about halfway through right now. It's been an awesome period in my life for learning.

Lastly, thanks. I'm TRULY honoured that you're spending so much thoughtful time in my universe.

Best of luck!
Marianne de P