

Science Fiction, Savage Misogyny and the American Dream

A Planet Called Treason. By Orson Scott Card. New York: Dell, 1979. 299 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by SANDY STRAUBHAAR, freelance translator and Dialogue's administrative secretary.

We Mormons put a lot of stock in the Local Boy Makes Good syndrome: we're proud of our Osmonds, our Marriotts, our Jack Andersons, and we're anxious to let people out there know that we knew them when. As a long-time science-fiction fan, I've enjoyed watching Orson Scott Card win the Campbell Award (for most promising new author) with his novel *Capitol*, an enjoyable enough Fifties-style old-time story, high on technology and politically conservative, reminiscent of vintage Heinlein or Asimov. (The invocation of these two names implies no small praise on my part.) There is one segment which could be called excessive, involving multiple torture inflicted by the Russians (who else?) on one of our heroes, who of course does not reveal whatever information it is that they want out of him. I don't mind it though: who hasn't had fantasies of withholding vital information while being tortured by the bad guys? One of the great American daydreams, you might say.

However, Bro. Card's second science fiction book, *A Planet Called Treason*, has turned out to be offensive enough to both my sense of traditional Mormon decency and my fledgling feminist consciousness that I spent much of my reading time choking down the bile which insisted on rising in my throat. On first glance, *Treason* looks much like other examples of the fantasy genre which are on the market. The cover art has a familiar look to it; the endpapers have the requisite global map with intriguingly-named islands and continents. From the first

page, however, it becomes obvious that this is no ordinary fantasy potboiler. It is instead an exceptionally kinky story:

The pretense ended when I began developing a rather voluptuous set of breasts.

"It's not just breasts," said Homar-noch, the Family surgeon. "Sorry, Lanik, it's ovaries. For life."

"Take 'em out," I said.

"They'll just grow back," he said.

"Face it. You're a radical regenerative."

To back up a bit: Our hero, Lanik Mueller, is a descendant of one of a group of families of exiled criminals on a planet which serves as a penal colony. Each family has a technical specialty; that of our hero's family has been experimental genetics, particularly the regeneration of lost limbs and other parts. The genetic failures, however, generate extra pieces, parts they never lost. Lanik turns out to be one of these unfortunates; he is growing female sex organs. His petite, submissive girlfriend, however, consents to like him anyway—

She . . . put her arms around me and pressed her head to my chest. When her head leaned against soft breasts instead of hard muscle, she pulled her head away for a moment, then resolutely held to me even tighter. With her head on my bosom I found myself feeling maternal. I wanted to vomit. I pushed her away and ran.

—but the general reaction is the same as his, a peculiar revulsion-attraction to the new femaleness of his body. Mueller lies in bed at night torn between throwing up and getting turned on. The overriding feeling is one of horror and disgust at female anatomy: flabby, pendulous, un-dependable, flimsy. Not since "In the Barn," a putrid little science fiction story by Piers Anthony, of fifteen years ago or so (in which human women, deliberately

kept ignorant, are cultivated as dairy cattle), have I seen such "mingled pity and terror," as the phrase has it, coupled with revulsion, as a reaction to women's bodies. The nagging question which comes to mind is, where does Brother Card get this stuff? What were they telling him and the boys at MLA, anyway, when I was off at "Dear to my Heart Night" with Mom?

So much for the first forty or so pages. (By the way, Lanik does get "cured," eventually.) By the time the book ends, however, one can't help having noticed several other things which unfortunately reinforce one's original impression. The few female characters spend most of their time on their backs; the seeming exceptions to this tendency all turn out to be disappointments. By far the most interesting character in the book, a deviously clever black woman spy, is actually a man in disguise. While most of the criminal colonies are descended from scientists or philosophers, the only female-dominated one, "the matriarchy of Bird," turns out to have been founded by "a wealthy socialite, a woman with no skills and abilities at all." Our hero's girlfriend spends most of the book literally frozen in time, hands outstretched, crying "Come back!" while he is off adventuring (righting wrongs, and vice versa): Solveig waiting for Peer Gynt. At the end Lanik does come back, buries his face in her petite, accepting bosom and protests "I'm not a good person."

The women in *Treason*, in other words, are incapable of decisions and actions, and I would have said incapable of learning, except that the abovementioned lady learns to freeze herself so she won't have to wait so long. The Schwartz tribe, the wisest and most likeable group of people

on the planet, inexplicably has no women, at least at the time of the narrative.

I read somewhere recently that the most decadent of patriarchal myths is that of the birth of Athena from the head of Zeus: new life without a female intermediary. Sure enough, a version of this story can be found in Bro. Card's book. Lanik is badly wounded at one point, and the scattered bits of his body get confused and regenerate two of him. Instant fatherhood—except that the new child is a duplicate self.

I wouldn't think twice about all this if the author in question weren't the same Orson Scott Card whose name one sees in ads for Joseph Smith's First Vision on Cassettes, and who trod the BYU campus at the same time as I did. The Mormon reader of *Treason* can't help noticing familiar motifs throughout the book, disturbingly reminding us of our kinship with the author, since Card laces the narrative with gratuitous Mormon motifs like footwashing and the Three Nephites. (Considering the Church's present anti-feminist media image, how many of Card's readers, on discovering his Mormonness, will remark: "So who's surprised? All Mormons think that way, don't they?")

Whatever *Treason's* reception among Mormons (and they probably won't read it, anyway), I can't help wondering what today's science fiction fans are thinking. Times have changed since the adolescent me used to hang around science fiction conventions. I do know that the percentage of women found at such gatherings (as fans, authors, guests of honor) has skyrocketed. Presumably *they* are not taking this sort of stuff lying down.