

Cristian Camilo Cuervo

Representations of Women
in Female-authored Anglophone Uchronias:
Female Agency in Alternative Worlds

Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning (Hg.)

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Women have always made history as much as men have, not ‘contributed’ to it, only they did not know what they had made and had no tools to interpret their own experience. What’s new at this time is that women are fully claiming their past and shaping the tools by means of which they can interpret it.”

Gerda Lerner (1979 [1981]: 166)

At first sight, it might seem strange to explore the representations of womanhoods in alternate histories¹. If one is concerned about the discrimination against women, their lack of choices, and their alleged attributes, one might focus on historical fiction. If, on the other hand, one is more interested in the potential of women, especially in light of the roles denied to them in patriarchal societies, one might prefer to look at speculative fiction, at utopias or dystopias, usually in futuristic or fantastic settings. The benefit of studying uchronias is, in contrast, less easy to see. However, alternate histories offer a unique opportunity to combine the advantages of studying both historical and speculative fictions. They allow for an in-depth exploration of the past as it was, with all its limitations for the expression of womanhood, but also of historical scenarios that might have been different for women but never came to pass. Uchronias invite readers (and scholars) to compare the fictional past with our historiographical reality, to evaluate the divergences, and to look at the unexpressed potential, i.e., at how history might have turned out if certain events – small or big – had occurred differently.

Moreover, the fictional pasts of the novels analyzed here have a less than comfortable relationship with the present, both at the moment of their publication and at the time of writing this book. Some of the restrictive roles taken up by women in the uchronias, for instance, echo images of womanhood still found in some contexts today, and in many cases, it becomes clear that things have not improved in the way that the feminists of the 1960s had hoped for. Sometimes, on the contrary, the uchronic pasts of some of the novels seem to be more progressive than the actual present, for example, with a woman president of the United States as early as the 1950s in *Eleanor vs. Ike* (2008), or with same-sex marriage legalized in Britain in the 1980s, as described in one of the timelines of *My Real Children* (2014).

1 For the particular purposes of this research, the terms ‘alternate history’ and ‘uchronia’ are used as synonyms. For further explanation, see the section “The Genre: Uchronia or Alternate History?” in the “Theoretical Framework”.

The potential of uchronic fiction for raising readers' awareness of both limiting and liberating constructions of femininity has long remained unrecognized. Like other genres of speculative fiction, uchronias have for a long time been a means of creative expression mainly for men, who were only rarely concerned with women's issues. Only in the last two decades has there been an upsurge in uchronias written by women, and not all of them explicitly dealing with the representations of womanhoods. As a consequence, and echoing Lerner's words, while women have been "fully claiming their past" as historians and as authors of historical novels since the 1970s, it is only recently that they are finally "shaping the tools by means of which they can interpret it", in this case, by understanding the potential – perhaps extraordinary – that only alternate histories seem to be able to offer.

Womanhood(s) in Uchronian Narratives

In 1966, Barbara Welter published the article "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860", a critique of the dominant nineteenth-century value system that defined the ideal of American womanhood. There, Welter drew particular attention to what she called the "four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (1966: 152). This set of 'virtues' responded to – and largely sought to conceal – an asymmetrical and pervasive framework of power relations based on women's submission to male authority, which included the suppression of female sexuality, the compliance with the roles of mother and wife, and the confinement to the private sphere. Other traditional definitions of womanhood, especially those based on religious grounds, simply equated it with the stage of female sexual maturity, i.e., as a state "solely or primarily defined by the ability to have and raise children" (Stasson 2021: 122). However, these assumptions of femininity never reflected the realities and true aspirations of women, but rather the social expectations and impositions upon them, grouped into unrealistic archetypes that were usually devised by men.

Although this so-called true or traditional womanhood may be categorised as a myth, it has been decisive and influential enough – like many other myths – to effectively shape realities, permeate different social dimensions (including the arts), and transcend time, in this case, well into the 21st century. As an example, the novels analysed in this book, all published between 2006 and 2015, largely deal with the enforcement of 'traditional womanhood' from several perspectives, including the stigmatization of female leadership, the demotion of women through indoctrination, the instrumentalization of women's bodies, or the various manifestations of the private/public dichotomy. At the same time, however, these narratives are also concerned with aspects that transgress the myth of true woman-