In her 1983 essay "Canopus in the Classroom," Lee Cullen Khanna notes that in the past fifteen years a number of women writers of utopian and science fiction novels have presented in their works "an explicitly female vision of the good society": as Khanna observes, such fictional communities usually are characterized by "genuine egalitarianism, fluid political structures, integration of individual and community development, harmony among various forms of life, and, perhaps most significant, respect for process." In her essay Khanna focuses on the articulation of this explicitly female or gynocentric vision in the recent "space fiction" of Doris Lessing; however, her generalizations apply equally to such works as Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time, Joanna Russ's "When It Changed," Ursula K. Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness, and Joan D. Vinge's The Snow Queen. In each of these works, the author suggests that androcentric societies are violent and unjust because they consider men and so-called "masculine" character traits to be superior to women and supposedly "feminine" characteristics. For instance, in androcentric societies rationality and autonomy generally are valued more highly than are intuition and emotion, interdependence and collectivity. Moreover, each of these authors presents as a positive alternative to real and fictional patriarchies an imaginary gynocentric society. As Khanna suggests, these latter societies differ from androcentric ones not because they invert the existing hierarchy but because they are non-hierarchical, treating women and men with equal respect and reveling in the complexity and diversity of human beings.

Of these writers—each of whom is making important contributions to feminist thought and to science fiction as a literary genre—Vinge has received the least attention from scholars. An accomplished science fiction writer who has won two Hugos and who is regularly represented in "Best of the Year" science fiction short story anthologies, Vinge draws upon a diverse body of literary and mythic material to present a unique vision of present-day ills and
possible futures. To date, her most ambitious work is the 1980 Hugo-award winning *The Snow Queen,* a novel somewhat lacking in characterization and dramatic conflict, but which merits serious study for its structural and thematic inventiveness.

As Vinge indicates in the brief preface to *The Snow Queen,* the "seed" from which her novel germinated is a folk tale by Hans Christian Andersen. Also entitled "The Snow Queen," Andersen’s story focuses on a young girl, Gerda, who rescues her best friend, Kay, from the clutches of an evil queen who has implanted in the boy’s eye a fragment of ice, a fragment that makes Kay view the world from a coldly rational and misanthropic perspective. A pious Christian girl, Gerda breaks the evil queen’s spell by singing a hymn to remind Kay that God loves him; her song elicits tears that wash the ice splinter from Kay’s eye. But this is not a story about two children’s transition from innocence to experience. At the end of the tale memories of their adventure already are fading from Gerda and Kay’s minds: in addition, the narrator suggests that even as adults, the two will remain devout, trusting children of God.

In *The Snow Queen* Vinge follows the basic plot of Andersen’s tale, recounting the means by which a young girl rescues her best friend from cynicism, unfeeling logic, and an older woman. But more striking than Vinge’s debts to Andersen are her departures from and reworking of his tale. Unlike Gerda and Kay, Moon and Sparks do not remain asexual and naive children; nor do they encounter a queen who is totally evil. On the contrary, Vinge’s characters are sexually active when they meet their Snow Queen, a woman who teaches them valuable lessons and who arouses their admiration and pity as well as fear, jealousy, and disgust. Conflicting emotions beset Moon and Sparks because their relationship with the Snow Queen is intimate as well as sustained. Feeling betrayed by Moon, Sparks becomes Ariennrhod’s lover and consort; attempting to regain Sparks’s trust and affection, Moon must deal with the fact that she is the cloned daughter of her rival. Finally, unlike Gerda and Kay, Moon and Sparks do not flee their powerful antagonist or repress the knowledge of evil they have gained. As Ariennrhod’s successor, Moon presides over the ritual in which her mother is killed, and having chosen Sparks as her consort, she announces to her subjects that the two intend to reform the society they will rule.

In rejecting the Christian didacticism of her source, Vinge also departs thematically from Andersen. His story does contain elements revealing the pagan roots of his folk tale: in parts 3 and 4, for example, Gerda is characterized as a child of nature whose ability to communicate with plants and animals is central to the success of her quest. Yet Andersen’s tale ultimately does not celebrate courage, intelligence, and instinctual oneness with the natural world. Instead, his story presents as ideal a life of stasis, insularity, and humble devotion to God that would preclude the need to develop or utilize such character traits. By contrast, one of the central themes of Vinge’s novel is the value of
curiosity, intuitive knowledge, and receptivity to nature’s wisdom. Rejecting a Christian framework because Christianity is rooted in and helps to sustain patriarchy, Vinge plants the seed that Andersen had given her in the “rich Earth” of Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess* (*SQ*, [i]). What results is a novel about the conflict between two futuristic worlds: the androcentric Hegemony, an imperialistic and highly technological galactic empire, and the gynocentric planet Tiamat, where those inhabitants who have not succumbed to the influence of the Hegemonic “offworlders” worship a mother goddess and rely upon the wisdom and healing powers of witch-like sibyls.

In *The Snow Queen*, Vinge makes thematic and structural use of myths of the mother goddess and accounts of witchcraft cults to emphasize that the philosophy of life indigenous of Tiamat is fundamentally gynocentric. Moreover, by concluding the novel in the way she does, Vinge leaves no doubt that the gynocentric values of Tiamat are morally superior to the androcentric values of the Hegemony; for the departure of the offworlders, the demise of Arienrhod, and the designation of Moon as the new queen of Tiamat are all presented in a positive light.

In almost all respects, the world view of the Tiamatans—or more accurately, of those Tiamatans who continue to endorse the ethical code of the planet’s enlightened founders—differs radically from the philosophy of life held by the citizens of the Hegemony. First Vinge’s Tiamatans believe human beings should strive to live in harmony with their environment and with other life forms, whereas the peoples of the Hegemony exploit humans, animals, and the land in order to gain wealth and power. Second, the Tiamatans share information with all members of the community; by contrast, the elite of the rigidly hierarchical Hegemony hoard their technological and scientific knowledge in order to oppress societies and individuals less “advanced” and less prosperous than they are. Third, the Tiamatans not only value reason but also cherish the knowledge that comes from intuition and from visionary states, whereas the citizens of the Hegemony accept as valid only logical reasoning, characterizing the utterances of the Tiamatan sibyls as “nothing more than a combination of superstitious fakery and disease-born madness” (*SQ*, p. 51). Fourth, Tiamatans view the world as based on the creative interaction of such dualities as light and dark, good and evil, and male and female. Conversely, the citizens of the Hegemony believe that one set of polarities is superior to its complements. Finally, the Tiamatans contentedly participate in nature’s cycle of birth, growth, and decay; they view change as natural and positive, not as fearsome. The primary goals of the Hegemony, on the other hand, are maintaining the stability of their rigidly stratified society and avoiding old age and death by drinking the life-sustaining blood of Tiamatan sea creatures called mers.

At the beginning of *The Snow Queen*, one learns that the values and world view indigenous to Tiamat currently are endorsed only by the Summers.

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Tiamatans who have had little or no contact with the offworlders, the Summers inherited their philosophy of life from wise and selfless scientists of a highly advanced but decaying empire of the distant past. These scientists had hidden in a cave on Tiamat a huge computer containing all of the Old Empire’s knowledge, and they had created through genetic manipulation the mers, intelligent beings who guard and maintain the computer. These scientists also had restructured the brain tissue of a few Tiamatans, giving people known as sibyls the ability to project themselves into the computer’s circuitry (SQ, p. 208). This ability to communicate directly with the secret data source is transmitted genetically; however, the modern-day sibyls are unaware that they are receiving computerized information. Instead, they believe that a Mother Goddess induces trances and speaks through them (SQ, p. 208).

Although we learn little about this Old Empire except that it had been highly advanced technologically, Vinge indicates through allusions to mother goddesses, witches, and sibyls that the values the Old Empire had brought to Tiamat are essentially those of a gynocentric rather than an androcentric culture. For instance, the society which has arisen on Tiamat is matriarchal, rule alternating between a Snow Queen and a Summer Queen. Periodically the Tiamatans sacrifice to “The Lady of the Sea” both the ruling queen and her less powerful male consort, giving their allegiance to a new pair of rulers in a ritual that reminds all members of the culture that stasis is stultifying, change regenerative.4

Place names also reveal that Tiamat’s culture is woman-centered, for the planet is named after a female figure who appears in the Enûma elish, the Babylonian genesis. In this ancient creation myth Tiamat personifies the deep, the great mother from whose formless saline body the universe was created.5 Similarly, in Egyptian mythology Tiamat is characterized as a great female fish who periodically swallows the universe, including all existing gods, so that she can give birth to a new world and pantheon.6 In addition, Vinge’s female hero comes from a Tiamatan island called Neith. In Libyan mythology Neith is a manifestation of the mother goddess, and in Egyptian mythology Neith is characterized not only as the primal world body, but also as a divine sorceress whose special task is to protect women.7

Vinge also indicates that the culture of Tiamat is a gynocentric one through the name, behavior, and values of her hero, Moon Dawnreader Summer. Lunar deities almost always are associated with the notion of becoming, with the idea that life rhythmically repeats and periodically renews itself. As M. Esther Harding notes, “the worship of the moon is the worship of the creative and fecund powers of nature and of the wisdom that lies inherent in instinct and in at-oneness with natural law.” And because the moon exerts an influence on the tides, lunar deities are often rulers of the sea—the sea, like the moon, being a symbol of the natural and desirable nature of process and change. Moreover,
in almost all cultures lunar deities are female, and cultures and cults who worship such deities generally hold a gynocentric world view, even when they do not advocate matriarchy or believe women are superior to men.

Moon’s name thus calls to mind societies that value what they consider distinctively female kinds of wisdom, power, and creativity. Similarly, Vinge’s Tiamatian sibyls, persecuted individuals who alone have access to the computerized information essential to their planet’s survival, remind us of the female seers and witches whose knowledge and skills have been devalued, suppressed, or appropriated by men or male-dominated cultures. Like the members of witchcraft cults of the past and present, the sibyls seek to heal rather than to cause wounds. Moreover, they do not attempt to hoard or sell their knowledge but share it with all, just as the witches of medieval and so-called “Renaissance” Europe had done until they were replaced by a primarily male medical profession that turned healing into a commodity.

As a “lunar” being, Moon communes with Blodwed’s pent-up animals and swims in rhythmic harmony with the mers; as a sibyl, she heals the psyches as well as the bodies of many she encounters. Gynocentric, too, is Moon’s “respect for process” (Khanna, p. 9). For although Moon realizes that change can be difficult and painful, she nevertheless argues that “Change isn’t evil—change is life. Nothing’s all good, or all bad. Not even Carbuncle [the capital city of Tiamat]. It’s like the sea, it has its tides, they ebb and flow” (SQ, p. 489). And as she unmask after having been made the new Summer Queen, she proclaims to her subjects: “The life that was is dead—let it be cast away, like a battered mask, an outgrown shell. Rejoice now, and make a new beginning!” (SQ, p. 518).

Having come to believe that “Nothing’s all good, or all bad,” that one should seek a creative and productive balance between conflicting forces and desires rather than try to eliminate all tension and discord, Moon hopes that she and her subjects can learn to integrate some of the technological and political goals of her immediate predecessor into a philosophy of life that comes from her planet’s distant past. She is confident that the gynocentric world view indigenous to Tiamat is humane and ethical; however, she also knows that Tiamatans could benefit greatly from science and technology. Thus she is convinced that her subjects must resist the temptation to fall back into a “primitive, unquestioning unity with the sea” (SQ, p. 484). It is because she recognizes the importance of both rational and intuitive knowledge, of both sensitivity to natural beauty and a scientific understanding of natural processes, that Moon chooses Sparks as her consort. For unlike Moon, Sparks always has been fascinated by and has understood the transformative powers of science and technology. Desiring to make use of both ancient and modern wisdom, Moon also urges her subjects to send to her all other sibyls, for on her travels offworld she had discovered that these persons had been created “to help . . . worlds relearn” the wisdom of an empire that had been as beneficent as it was scientifically ad-
 advanced (*SQ*, p. 488). With the help of other sibyls, Moon hopes to ensure that the Tiamatans will learn to use scientific knowledge and technological gadgets to improve the lives of all rather than to enhance and protect the wealth and power of a few.

By having Moon come from the half of Tiamat known as Summer and thereby characterizing her as a vegetation goddess, Vinge implies that as a ruler Moon will indeed rejuvenate and constructively transform her society. But the utopian society that Moon envisions is not depicted. Instead, Vinge directs attention to the evils and the corrupting influence of the Hegemony, probably because the androcentric values and behavior of the Hegemony so closely resemble those of today’s world powers. The Hegemony’s original goal had been to rebuild the Old Empire on a microcosmic scale, but never achieving anything close to the technological sophistication of the Old Empire, the Hegemony has had to settle for economically dominating politically autonomous planets. The Hegemony maintains its power over Tiamat by refusing to share any of its technological know-how with the Tiamatans and by exiling all sibyls from the Winter capital. As Jerusha, the Hegemonic police commander on Tiamat, explains:

>There were no sibyls in the city—by Hegemonic law. . . . [For] Sibyls were the carriers of the Old Empire’s lost wisdom, meant to give the new civilizations that built on its ruins a key to unlock its buried secrets. And if there was anything the Hegemony’s wealthy and powerful didn’t want, it was to see this world stand on its own feet and grow strong enough to deny them the water of life. (*SQ*, pp. 51–52)

As Moon discovers on her trip offworld, exploitation, selfishness, and cruelty are particularly rampant in the Hegemony’s center of power, the planet Kharemough. Extremely polluted and overpopulated, Kharemough is controlled by a few individuals who preside over and profit economically from a rigidly hierarchical society. As a horrified Moon reports,

> A strict caste system controlled the people of this world, defining their roles in society from the day they were born. . . . There were separate shops, restaurants, and theaters for the Technical, Nontechnical, and Unclassified ratings, and the highest and lowest could not even speak to each other without an intermediary. (*SQ*, pp. 193–94)

Moon becomes more aware of the debilitating effect of such stratification when she meets BZ, a sensitive young Kharemoughi who becomes an officer of the Hegemonic police force because his society gives him no other way to preserve his family honor. Proud of his aristocratic family and his planet, BZ feels he must kill himself when he fails to accomplish a police mission and becomes the captive and “pet” of a Tiamatan robber band. Prevented from committing suicide, he despises himself even more; when he meets a fellow Kharemoughi after his escape, he exclaims, “I never deserved the honor of your respect, or even your presence. But I deserve your scorn and your execration.
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fully. I am no better than a slave, a crawling animal” (SQ, p. 362). Yet by the end of the novel, after having been nurtured and instructed by Moon and Jerusha, BZ has begun to adopt a view of himself and of the world that is at odds with the Kharemoughi ethos. He decides to remain on the Hegemonic police force, but he now realizes that human beings and human laws are no more perfect than he is (SQ, p. 532).

Kharemough is the hub of an imperialistic empire in which individuals make fortunes not only by confiscating other planets’ resources but also by kidnapping foreigners and selling them as cheap labor or as lobotomized sexual slaves. Misogyny also flourishes in the Empire. For instance, the hard-working and conscientious Jerusha is repeatedly humiliated and derided by her male superiors. They ultimately commend her for her performance as Tiamatan police commander but then give her a routine, dead-end assignment, telling her, “The only reason you were made an inspector in the first place was merely to humor her [the Snow Queen]. This new position is more than you deserve. You know . . . that the men under your command here never accepted taking orders from a woman” (SQ, p. 473).

Jerusha’s superiors and most other men of authority in the Hegemony believe Kharemough has developed “a highly scientific structuring of society, perfectly suited to our technological orientation” (SQ, p. 204). Others, however, regard Kharemough in a different and more negative light. Jerusha, who eventually gives her allegiance to Tiamat, finds the Kharemoughi lifestyle “soulless” (SQ, p. 275); Herne calls his birthplace a sewer (SQ, p. 132); Elsevier claims that Kharemough is as socially and morally backwards as it is technologically advanced (SQ, p. 204); and Moon proclaims that the “Kharemoughis don’t exist in the real universe” but in a dehumanizing one that they have artificially and perversely created (SQ, p. 326).

However, when Vinge’s novel opens, Moon knows little of Kharemough, nor does she realize that the Winters of Tiamat have adopted the values of the Hegemony. No longer resembling a beautiful gem or a seashell, the Winter capital, Carbuncle, has become a festering sore (SQ, p. 20), a hungry beast that maims or devours most of those who come within its grasp (SQ, p. 37). The city offers its residents and visitors “every gradation of degradation” (SQ, p. 46); it is filled with “pleasure hells” in which one can gamble, buy drugs, procure a prostitute, or use dream machines in which, as Sparks explains, “you could lock yourself into terrifying experiences on other worlds, commit any crime, experience anything up to the moment of death that you had the courage to endure” (SQ, p. 160). Unbeknownst to Moon, the Winters have not just become a “tech-loving” people but have embraced the Hegemony’s entire value system. Striving to attain “beauty, wealth, absolute control . . . [and] eternal youth” (SQ, p. 28), well-to-do Winters are “privately stockpiling [Hegemonic] technology,” hoping to “set up their own little fiefdoms” when the offworlders leave Tiamat (SQ, p. 94).
Carbuncle has become a place of “rottleness and corruption” (SQ, p. 95) because the Snow Queen is willing to slaughter the mers and to exchange this valuable commodity for the scientific knowledge and technological gadgets of the Hegemony. Before coming to power, Arienrhod had held the gynocentric world view indigenous to her planet. However, shortly after becoming Snow Queen she had succumbed to the Hegemony’s view that power and immortality are good in and of themselves, even if a society or an individual must kill and oppress innocent beings to attain these ends.

The extent to which Arienrhod had made the Hegemonic world view her own is exemplified particularly well in chapters 26 and 42. In the earlier chapter, Arienrhod tells Sparks, who for some time has been her lover and consort, that to ensure she and her values will prevail in Tiamat after the departure of the offworlders, she plans to kill a great number of the Summers, most of whom have demonstrated no interest whatsoever in Hegemonic technology. When Sparks, son of a female Summer and a male offworlder, expresses horror and dismay, Arienrhod remarks scornfully:

Are you still so bound to those ignorant, superstitious barbarians that you aren’t willing to sacrifice a few of them for the future of this world? They [the Summers] play right into the hands of the offworlders; there’s a conspiracy between them to oppress us—Winter—the people who want to make this world a free partner in the Hegemony. . . . Do you want them to go on succeeding forever? Isn’t it time we had our turn? (SQ, p. 250)

As this passage reveals, Arienrhod does not wish to be disassociated from the Hegemony; she simply wants Tiamat to become a powerful force in this empire by beating the Hegemony at its own game.

Arienrhod voices similar sentiments in chapter 42, while trying to convince Moon that national self-sufficiency and power are more important than the welfare of individual Tiamatan citizens. First she explains to her cloned daughter than she had allowed Moon to be brought up as a Summer solely to enable Moon to “understand the Summer mentality, and [know] how to manipulate it” (SQ, p. 422). Then Arienrhod tries to persuade her daughter (whom she believes to be a Winter at heart) that slaughtering a large number of the “absurd, tech-hating” Summers (SQ p. 423) is justified by Tiamat’s need to begin building a technological power base of its own. Although Moon has learned that Tiamat could benefit greatly from the offworlders’ technology, she is not convinced by her mother’s arguments. Unlike Arienrhod and the Winters, she refuses to endorse the androcentric value system of the Hegemony. “Real power,” she tells her mother, is

Knowing that you can do anything . . . and not doing it only because you can. Thousands of mers have died so that you could keep your power while the offworlders were here; and now thousands of human beings are going to die so that you can
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keep it when they're gone. I’m not worth a thousand lives, a hundred, ten, two—and neither are you. . . . If I have to believe that being what I am means I’d destroy Sparks, and destroy the people who gave me everything, then I should never have been born! But I don’t believe it. I don’t feel it. . . . I’m not what you are, or what you think I am, or what you want me to be. I don’t want your power. (SQ, pp. 425-26)

“I have my own [power],” she concludes, touching the sibyl’s trefoil that hangs from her neck. This talisman marks Moon not only as a person who can empathize and communicate with others, but as an individual who can accept human failings and mortality, and who wants to create a humane and egalitarian society in which all individuals and all forms of wisdom will be valued.

Vinge’s *The Snow Queen* is an imaginative, formally sophisticated, and explicitly female envisioning of the flaws of patriarchy and of the values that might prevail in a more just, tolerant, and peaceable human community than presently exists. Yet in some ways *The Snow Queen* is disappointing—it is a good science fiction novel rather than a great one. The whining, weak-willed Sparks is occasionally tiresome; he seems totally devoid of self-esteem and hopelessly subject to manipulation once he believes Moon is dead. And the “goody-two-shoes” Moon is sometimes boring; she overcomes all obstacles with relative ease, commits no grave errors for which she alone is responsible, and rarely seems to experience depression, anxiety or outrage. Equally unsatisfying is the characterization of Arienrhod. In the concluding chapters of the novel the Snow Queen is depicted as a tragic figure, but too little information about her thoughts, feelings, and history has been presented to arouse feelings of pity, terror or empathy. Also disappointing is the meeting of Arienrhod and Moon, the climactic incident for which Vinge prepares us for forty-one chapters but to which she devotes a scant eight pages. In this scene, the emotional stress experienced by mother and daughter is asserted by the narrator rather than demonstrated by the characters as the two women unsuccessfully seek to convert each other to their respective—and extremely different—philosophies of life.

By giving her three central characters symbolic names, Vinge clearly invites readers to view them as emblems of and spokespersons for specific philosophical and moral positions. They are what Rachel Blau DuPlessis terms “cluster characters,” relatively flat characters who represent predetermined sets of traits and values and who function as Socratic questions in a text that is meant to instruct as well as entertain. But when Vinge places Moon, Arienrhod, and Sparks in a narrative that contains such realistically drawn, well-rounded characters as BZ and Jerusha, she also tempts us to view the three as distinct individuals rather than as representative types or symbolic constructs. In the end, however, the mythic and symbolic rather than the realistic mode predominates in *The Snow Queen*. Vinge essentially writes what DuPlessis calls a feminist apologue: an imaginative yet explicitly didactic work designed to
make readers living in patriarchal societies desire "real cultural change" (DuPlessis, p. 7). The intention is laudable, the vision of present-day ills and possible futures both instructive and delightful, even if Vinge’s novel, like her imaginary “good society,” is not quite perfect.

Notes


2. Joan D. Vinge, The Snow Queen (New York: Dell, 1980), preface. Hereafter all quotations from The Snow Queen will be cited parenthetically and abbreviated SQ.


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11. Like Tiamat and Neith, Arienrhod is one of the manifestations of the mother goddess, in this case in Welsh mythology. Accounts of the character and behavior of Arienrhod can be found in Graves, pp. 97–103, Walker, p. 56, and *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*, trans. Patrick K. Ford (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977).