



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 26
Number 3

Article 10

4-15-2008

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Recommended Citation

Rawls, Melanie A. (2008) "Witches, Wives and Dragons: The Evolution of the Women in Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea—An Overview," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 26 : No. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol26/iss3/10>

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Abstract

A survey of the evolution of women in Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea series, examining how the author reassessed her depiction of gender in the earlier books and deliberately changed her viewpoint in the later books.

Additional Keywords

Dragons in literature; Le Guin, Ursula K.—Characters—Women; Le Guin, Ursula K.—Technique; Le Guin, Ursula K. Earthsea books; Witches

WITCHES, WIVES AND DRAGONS: THE EVOLUTION OF THE WOMEN IN URSULA K. LE GUIN'S EARTHSEA— AN OVERVIEW

MELANIE A. RAWLS

The *Book of the Dark*, written late in the time it tells of, is a compilation of self-contradictory histories, partial biographies, and garbled legends. But it's the best of the records that survived the dark years. Wanting praise, not history, the warlords burnt the books in which the poor and powerless might learn what power is. (*Tales from Earthsea 2*)

EARLY IN *A WIZARD OF EARTHSEA*, the first book of Ursula K. Le Guin's highly regarded Earthsea fantasy series, readers are told: "There is a saying on Gont, *Weak as woman's magic*, and there is another saying, *Wicked as woman's magic*" (5). These are curious declarations from an author who is internationally known for her explorations of gender politics and her critique of patriarchal social arrangements. In a world imagined and developed by a feminist writer, how is it that the magic of women is weak or wicked? Who are the women of Earthsea?

The Earthsea books were written over a period of thirty-three years. The first book, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, was published in 1968, and the last book, *The Other Wind*, was published in 2001. There is an eighteen-year gap between what the author once considered to be the concluding book of a trilogy, *The Farthest Shore*, and a fourth book *Tehanu*, which she subtitled *The Last Book of Earthsea*. The fourth book was apparently prompted by Le Guin's desire to further explore the life of the character Tenar, the female protagonist from the second book in the series, *The Tombs of Atuan*. Le Guin admits, in the foreword to the fifth book in the series, *Tales of Earthsea*, that she was twice mistaken as to what constituted the "ending" of her Earthsea tales. An invitation to write a short story set in Earthsea sent her back to that world, a challenge that re-engaged her and that resulted in a series of short stories. In these short stories, Le Guin began to explore aspects of her secondary world that, as she says in the foreword to the fifth book, puzzled her. Out of that exploration came an alternate vision of the female characters in the series, an alternate vision that culminates in the sixth book *The Other Wind*. In the last three books of the series, Le Guin's female characters evolve from relatively weak women, whose influence on their world is negligible and suspect,

into powerful women who are the agents, subjects and representatives of radical change in Earthsea.

A reader's first encounter with a woman of Earthsea is the occasion for the tale's narrator to make this suspect statement about woman's magic. This first woman is a village witch, and her first act is ambiguous: she offers to mentor the story's protagonist, a young lad who has demonstrated power. Surely the witch's invitation is a good deed. At the same time, however, the witch seeks to bind the boy to her service, a not-so-well-meant deed, at which she is unsuccessful, evidence, perhaps, that this witch is both weak and at least slightly wicked. This witch is not very relevant to the tale. *A Wizard of Earthsea* is very much a young man's story. The likely young lad, Ged, quickly passes into a world ruled by men, at which time the story switches from an omniscient narrator to limited point of view. Ged is taken as an apprentice by a mage, then chooses to go to the school for wizards on Roke Island, an all-male institution.

The rest of the women in *A Wizard* also fit into stock categories for women. The next female to appear is a young girl who acts the role of temptress. Later in the story, the same character, now a beautiful femme fatale, demonstrates ruthlessness and treachery. Following the temptress is the brief tale of the Princess Elfarran, who seems to be Earthsea's version of Helen of Troy: "The Princess Elfarran was only a woman [...] and for her sake all Enlad was laid waste and the Hero-Mage of Havnor died and the island Soléa sank beneath the sea" (50). After Elfarran comes the pretty little Lady of O, trophy wife: "The Lady of O cried out with pleasure, and bent her shining head [...]. 'Come with us, live with us in O-tokne—can he not come, my lord?' she asked, childlike, of her stern husband" (51). The presence of the Lady of O in the halls of Roke triggers the flash point of rivalry among the young wizards-in-training. A disastrous wizard's duel is the result, thereby reinforcing the general belief that women and proper wizardry do not mix. Finally there is a maiden, whose youthfulness, sweetness, and innocence, not to mention artless admiration, arouse the hero's protective, brotherly instincts.

Such is Le Guin's skill as a writer that readers might not immediately recognize her stock types. Also, without that seemingly misogynistic saying "Weak as woman's magic, wicked as woman's magic," a reader might never question the portrayal of women in Earthsea. All the good guys appear so admirable and reasonable that questioning the premises of their lives may not immediately occur.

The second book in the series, *The Tombs of Atuan*, has a female protagonist, Tenar. Tenar is a bit of a Rapunzel in that she has been taken from her family of origin and shut away from the world. She dwells in a desert on the island of Atuan, and she is priestess and prisoner of an old religion. Her antagonist is a rival priestess, who, like the witch in *Rapunzel*, intends to keep the

maiden imprisoned and powerless. The priestesses of the island of Atuan are devoted to the worship of nameless deities of death and darkness. The power of these deities ultimately is not strong enough to withstand the combined efforts of Tenar, who wishes to escape her barren existence, and of young Ged, now a full-fledged mage. The power of the women of Atuan is of the Old Powers of the Earth, about which Ged earnestly says, "are not for men to use. They were never given into our hands, and in our hands they work only ruin" (*Wizard* 118).

The third book of the series, *The Farthest Shore*, has no women at all who are relevant to the plot. *Shore* is about how an inordinate desire for immortality can destroy individuals as well as societies. When the mage Cob casts spells to make himself immortal, he breaches the divide between life and death. Magic, creativity, craftsmanship, and the will to continue with the tasks of ordinary life begin to fail throughout Earthsea, as people begin to regard their lives as futile since those lives will inevitably end unless they follow Cob's way. Ged's quest in this book is to discover the source of this spiritual ill. Two women make brief appearances in scenes intended to establish the effects of the deadly despair sweeping Earthsea. The first woman is notable for her charismatic presence, blaring voice and fantastic head-gear—a sort of Bella Abzug of the Archipelago. This woman makes a speech about why she has abandoned the practice of magic and taken up the life of a cloth merchant:

But it (magic) was tricks, fooleries. You can fool men. They're like chickens charmed by a snake [...]. But then in the end they know they've been fooled and fuddled and they get angry [...]. So I turned to this trade, and maybe all the silks aren't silks nor all the fleeces Gontish, but all the same they'll wear—they'll wear! They're real and not mere lies and air [...].
(*Shore* 49)

The other female character is a skilled artisan, a dyer of silks, who goes mad after the loss of the craft that has been her family's pride for generations (*Shore* 94-97). These scenes are brief and are not critical to the progression of the plot.

The islands of Earthsea, particularly the Archipelago where magery is most organized and practiced, is a man's world, a patriarchy. Women are of little account, until the advent of the fourth book in the series, *Tehanu*. As has been noted by a number of critics, in this book all that was written before is undermined and changed, re-visited and revised.¹ The protagonist of *Tehanu* is,

¹ Mike Cadden writes that the second three books of the Earthsea series are a shift in narrative strategy. In the fourth chapter titled "Earthsea: Crossover Series of Multiple Continua" in his collection of essays on Le Guin titled *Ursula K. Le Guin Beyond Genre: Fiction for Children and Adults*, Cadden says that the Earthsea tales shift from the genre of epic to the genre of novel. Epic, says Cadden, quoting Bakhtin, is "the national heroic past:

again, Tenar. Perry Nodelman states in his critical essay "Reinventing the Past: Gender in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Tehanu* and the Earthsea Trilogy," that "the events of the new story change the meaning of what went before" (179). States Nodelman, "In continuing her story past the now only apparently concluding events of *The Farthest Shore*, Le Guin clearly signaled that she had new thoughts about her old conclusions, and that she wanted readers to reconsider their understanding of what they had read earlier. [...]. [N]ew events change the meanings of old ones" (179-80).

The Earthsea books are not the only texts Le Guin has created then had second thoughts about. Famously she re-thought and eventually repudiated her use of the so-called generic pronoun "he" as applied to the hermaphroditic people of the world Gethen in her award-winning novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*.² For Le Guin, such reversals are to be expected, if, that is, a person inhabits history. "But in time nothing can be without becoming" (11) writes Le Guin in *Tehanu*, meaning that to exist "in time," that is, to exist in history is, by definition, to change. Since the books of Earthsea are chronicles of the history of Earthsea, change must therefore occur. Also, if the writer changes, so, too, may the writing.

The last three books of Earthsea—*Tehanu*, *Tales of Earthsea*, and *The Other Wind*—are all chronicles of a writer's change and of change in her creation. The Foreword to *Tales of Earthsea* is Le Guin's account of her "researches" in the Archives of Havnor (xiii), as she puts it, and she clearly states the historic quality of the unfolding of new tales of Earthsea. Readers witness "revision" in its literal sense of "re-vision"—"to see again" at both the level of the texts themselves and the meta-level of authorial re-creation. Evolution (or as Le Guin scholar Mike Cadden prefers to term it, "development" [79]) occurs on several levels.

Having written male-centered heroic fantasy, Le Guin examines what the "ordinary" people of Earthsea are doing even as they live through extraordinary times. In *Tehanu* we hear in Tenar's own words as to how and why she came to renounce heroic status, public recognition, and glory. Says Tenar:

When Ogion [Ged's first mentor and a much venerated wizard who becomes Tenar's foster-father] taught me [...] the words of the Old Speech,

it is the world of 'beginnings' and 'peak times' in the national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families, a world of 'firsts' and 'bests'" (86). Novels, however, tell of the present lives of, more or less, ordinary people. The narrative shift is also from the mythic to the historical: "the overriding authority of this collection is not the epic storyteller around the campfire but the historian who is researching the stories in the library" (89). Again Le Guin has created (as Tenar says) "Always at least two things, and usually more."

² See the essay "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," published in Le Guin's collection of essays *Dancing at the Edge of the World*.

they were as easy and as hard in my mouth as in his. [...] But the rest—the lore, the runes of power, the spells, the rules, the raising of the forces—that was all dead to me. Somebody else's language. I used to think, I could be dressed up as a warrior, with a lance and a sword and a plume and all, but it wouldn't fit, would it? What would I do with the sword? Would it make me a hero? I'd be myself in clothes that didn't fit, is all, hardly able to walk. (87)

Tenar, still as brave and passionate as she was in *Tombs*, takes off the "clothes that didn't fit," marries a farmer and becomes a notable housewife and mother "doing what a woman should do: bed, breed, bake, cook, clean, spin, sew, serve" (*Tehanu* 31). She chooses the non-heroic domestic life of householding and child-bearing.³

Only in a system that does not value the ordinary life, especially as lived by women, can Tenar's decision be regarded as a submission to patriarchal norms. Though she seems to have sought and accepted the status of second-class citizen, perhaps this interpretation of her action is valid only if one accepts how the power structure assigns value. Tenar appears, by her choice, to be questioning the values and definitions of the dominant culture. As an outsider and as one who has experienced power as well as powerlessness in the world of men, as well as in a world of women shaped, from a distance, by the politics of men, Tenar begins to question the old Earthsea adage, "Weak as woman's magic, wicked as woman's magic."

What is this magic that is so disdained by the mages of Roke and the powerful wizards and rulers of the Archipelago in general? What are the women

³ Recall the Elves of the Second Age of Middle-earth and their Three Rings: "But they were not made as weapons of war or conquest: that is not their power. Those who made them did not desire strength or domination or hoarded wealth, but understanding, making, and healing, to preserve all things unstained" (Tolkien II.2.262). In this light, Tenar's choice does not seem quite so "a woman's place is in the home" reactionary. Like Éowyn of Rohan, Tenar repudiates the warrior's role as a way of being in her society. (Until she meets Ged, Tenar has known men only as warriors or eunuchs.) Sam Gamgee, the Everyman (or Everyhobbit) of *The Lord of the Rings* also chooses partnership and domesticity, and is not scorned for his choice. Moreover, Tenar's explanation, in *Tehanu*, as to why she chose obscurity, when she could have lived the life of a princess in the court of kings, is more of Le Guin's "revisionist," or revelatory history. In *The Farthest Shore* we make the rather jarring discovery that the former high priestess of the Tombs of Atuan and co-hero in the recovery of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, is a farmer's wife on the island of Gont. No explanation is given as to how so visible a woman achieved this level of obscurity. The reference is fleeting, mentioned in passing in terms of the few people who know Sparrowhawk's true name. In *Tehanu*, readers are told how and why Tenar chooses the life she lives. A question not raised in the earlier book is thus addressed.

who practice magic actually doing? “The care of pregnant beasts and women, birthing, teaching the songs and rites, the fertility and order of field and garden, the building and care of the house and its furniture [...]” (*Tales* 4). In other places in the books, women are practicing the arts of finding, mending, binding, and, again, healing, all abilities useful for ordinary non-heroic living as experienced by most men, women and children. The ordinary people, and especially the women of Earthsea, are engaged in the experience of ordinary life, even though this way of living is ignored, disrespected, and all too often violently disrupted by the powerful.

From this perspective, certain speeches in the earlier books reveal some of the patriarchal premises unrecognized or unexamined in those settings. The generic words “he” and “men” and “wizards” are not truly generic. They are not applicable to all inhabitants of Earthsea, but pertain only to the men in power. The Old Powers “are not for men to use” states Ged, but apparently they are for women to use or, to be more precise, to be participant with. When the cloth merchant in *Shore* expresses her disdain for the flash and illusion of magic and declares defiantly that her cloths will “wear—they’ll wear! They’re real and not mere lies and air” (49), she may be both rejecting overt displays of power and speaking to the importance and reality of the ordinary.

A life unobsessed with status, ambition, and recognition is not necessarily an ignoble and powerless life. Meredith Tax, author of the critical essay “In the Year of Harry Potter, Enter the Dragon,” questions, “But what is the other side of heroic male fantasy? The answer is not as simple as flipping a coin with King Arthur on one side, Britomart on the other” (31). The reversals and subversions that occur in the last three Earthsea books entail more than simply presenting women in roles usually occupied by men or vice versa. Thus, in addition to choosing the ordinary life of a housewife, Tenar, now a widow with grown children, is also a dragon lord, at least as defined by Ged: “One whom the dragons will speak with” (*Tombs* 95). During an encounter with the eldest of dragons, Tenar stands eye to eye with the awesome creature, although she has little of the training of mages. Apparently, however, she also lacks their vulnerability: “She had been told that men must not look into a dragon’s eyes, but that was nothing to her” (*Tehanu* 38). With that simple phrase, Le Guin retracts the use of the generic “man” she had employed so effortlessly in the first three books. At the same time, she sets a widowed housewife on the same level as the greatest heroes of Earthsea.

Meredith Tax also writes that, “When men of power use their knowledge to fence themselves off from the dailiness of ordinary life—farming, mending, giving birth, and women—trouble is coming” (31-32). The last three Earthsea books are accounts of trouble in the Archipelago that is caused by just

that type of rejection of ordinary life by those in power. During these accounts of trouble, a revised portrait of the women of Earthsea is created.

Readers are told, in the first story of *Tales From Earthsea*, "The Finder," that women were the chief founders of the school for wizards on the island of Roke, and that the first Patterner—the mage who perceives the patterns of existence—the Tao, the Way—was a woman. This information can come as a total surprise to readers—an astonishing and delightful surprise, yes, but still wholly unexpected information. There is no precedent for this information in the first four books. The history of Roke, by Ged's time, has been revised by the men who have seized power, and women have been written out of it for so long that their place outside of Roke is not even questionable:

Village witches, though they might know many spells and charms and some of the great songs, were never trained in the High Arts or the principles of magery. No woman was so trained. Wizardry was a man's work, a man's skill; magic was made by men. There had never been a woman mage. (*Tehanu* 32)

The short story "The Finder" directly contradicts this observation. Moreover, the protagonist of the story, Otter or Medra, trains a woman to be his replacement as the Finder of Roke.

Tales of Earthsea opens during a time of great unrest, when a number of men seeking political and magical dominion are rending the world with wars, raids and misuse of wizardry. To establish a political hierarchy, with themselves, naturally, at the top, they dedicate themselves to hiding and hoarding knowledge from perceived rivals and would-be subjects. During this time, knowledge and power are more widely, though secretly, preserved by a loose web or network of village women, and a few men, who call themselves the Hand. Their sign is a fisted hand opened and extended; their cardinal virtue is trust. Unfortunately, these local practitioners of power are often blamed for the ills caused by recklessly ambitious wizards:

And things went wrong more often than right, with the wizards warring, using poisons and curses recklessly to gain immediate advantage [...]. They brought drought and storm, blights and fires and sicknesses across the land, and the village witch was punished for them. (*Tales* 4)

Thus in *Tales*, the source of the adage "Weak as woman's magic, wicked as woman's magic" is revealed. The adage was presented as a known and accepted truth in the first three books. The fourth book, *Tehanu*, began to question that belief. The fifth book reveals that saying to be false, an historical injustice now permanently institutionalized.

Another Roke doctrine is revealed to be superstition. Some of the male mages of Roke, during the days of the establishment of the school, preach celibacy because they believe that to make love is to undo power. According to this doctrine, the sexuality of mere witches and sorcerers is a distraction that will prevent a mage from reaching the summit of his powers. It is also hinted that the avoidance of women is desirable to these men because of women's association with the Old Powers of the Earth, which they find anathema, perhaps because the Old Powers of the Earth cannot be mastered. This avoidance of women eventually sours into a misogyny that shuts women off from opportunities for higher education in the art of magic. This priestly celibacy is basically a political ploy perpetrated by men interested in seeing to it that men run the school for mages, another example of the will to power that is a wide-spread affliction of the times. Later on, as is made clear in the tale "Darkrose and Diamond," the mages' practice of celibacy is established as a rite. It is supposed to be a demonstration of will and single-minded dedication to the goal of becoming a mage. (Ironically, this demonstration of will and single-mindedness is achieved by spell rather than by choice and discipline, and the young mages-to-be are enspelled without their knowledge and consent during the early part of their training.) By Ged's time, the celibacy of mages is an unquestioned way of life.

Women, however, have never seen the necessity for such a separation of men and women. Nor do witches lose their power because they are sexually active and bear children. This attitude of witches is congruent with the way they live their lives. So much of a witch's work involves joining: finding, mending, binding, and healing, all activities which bring together or make whole. Also, as Ogion observes of Tenar's life, "Never one thing, for you." "No", she answers. "Always at least two things, and usually more" (*Tehanu* 22). No woman who is doing her job can be as single-minded as a mage is required to be by his masters.

In the tale "Darkrose and Diamond," a young man, Diamond, rejects both wealth and status, as his merchant father's heir, and the power and prestige of wizardry. He chooses instead to pursue his two passions: music and the company of the woman he loves. Darkrose, the subject of Diamond's affections, is the daughter of a witch. An independent and self-confident young woman, she is an ambitious witch herself as well as a musician. Darkrose provides the counter-argument to all the male authority figures in Diamond's life who keep telling him that he must choose one thing to do with his life:

"I gave it up, Darkrose. I had to either do it and nothing else, or not do it. You have to have a single heart."

"I don't see why," she said. "My mother can cure a fever and ease a childbirth and find a lost ring, maybe that's nothing compared to what the wizards and the dragonlords can do, but it's not nothing all the same. [...]"

Just because I learned how to play music from you, did I have to give up saying spells? I can bring a fever down now too. Why should you have to stop doing one thing so you can do the other?" (139)

Diamond's mother also discourages his acceptance of the belief that he has to make and stick to one choice. She tells him that she cannot "bear to see you unhappy, without pride" (135), as he glumly and incompetently pursues first studies with a mage, then various tasks concerning his father's business. Darkrose questions the assumptions of the powerful males of her time. She lives, as far as she is able, outside of their structures and expectations. She is an example of personal integrity that Diamond cannot ignore. The character Darkrose demonstrates that to be relatively powerless, in terms of magery or political and economic position, is not necessarily to be ignoble or oppressed.

In the tale "The Bones of the Earth," readers learn that the mage who taught the mage who taught Ged's mentor Ogion was a woman (sort of a great-grandmentor). This powerful woman, called Ard, practiced a magic that was, according to her pupil Dulse, "crude. Heavy-handed . . . She didn't say where she'd learned it. [...] There are different kinds of knowledge, after all" (*Tales* 159). Ard teaches Dulse a spell for halting earthquakes. Ard's magic is of the earth or the Old Powers, those powers regarded with such wariness in *A Wizard and Atuan*, and which are closely associated with despised witches and priestesses.⁴

Ard's tale is yet another example of how the women of Earthsea have been vanished from its histories. Ogion receives all the credit for the great deed of halting an earthquake. But Ogion was only the public agent. In reality, Dulse, using Ard's spell, quiets the mountains by becoming one with the earth, while Ogion, standing visible above Gont Port, holds steady the cliffs. It is Ard's knowledge, passed without prejudice to a man, that saves the people of Gont from destruction. But she is not known and her knowledge of the Old Powers of the Earth are considered deeply suspect and transgressive.

In yet another tale, "On the High Marsh," another housewife demonstrates courage, kindness and integrity, the source of an ordinary/extraordinary ability to heal and to preserve even without the Art Magic. In offering hospitality—playing Good Samaritan—to a mage who has abused his power, the goodwife called Gift enables the mage to make amends for

⁴ When Ged, in *Atuan*, discusses the Old Powers with Tenar, he tells her, "The Earth is beautiful, and bright, and kindly, but that is not all. The Earth is also terrible, and dark, and cruel. The rabbit shrieks dying in the green meadows. The mountains clench their great hands full of hidden fire. There are sharks in the sea, and there is cruelty in men's eyes" (118). Simply put, the earth is not human and "the Powers of the Earth keep their own account" (*Wind* 187).

his misdeeds and to begin a new life as a healer of animals. She succeeds where the mages of the Archipelago have bungled, namely the education of power.

The last story, "Dragonfly," provides the bridge to the sixth book *The Other Wind*. "Dragonfly" is the story of the young woman Irian of Way who seeks entry to the traditionally all-male wizard's college on Roke Island. Irian does not know who she is, but she knows she has some kind of power. On Roke she discovers the rest of her name and, thus, her true nature. Irian, daughter of an impoverished house on the island of Way, is also Orm Irian, that is, she is also a dragon.

Readers are given intimations of this possibility—that women and dragons are somehow connected—in the earlier book *Tehanu*. Tenar dreams more than once of the habitations of dragons: "She slept, and her sleep opened out into a vast windy space hazy with rose and gold. She flew. Her voice called, 'Kalessin!' A voice answered, calling from the gulfs of light" (*Tehanu* 45-46). Tenar also appears to have taken on one of the mannerisms of the dragon Kalessin: "all the fear she had felt turned as she spoke into anger, a rage that burned in her the length of her body like a rod of fire. She gave a kind of laugh—'Hah!'—and remembered in that moment Kalessin, how Kalessin had laughed" (109). Later in the book, sparks fly from her hair as she is brushing it, and the abused half-blind little girl she has adopted, Therru, claims that she can see "The fires, all flying out" (102) as if Tenar were a dragon.

Also in the book *Tehanu*, Ogion tells Tenar the story of the Woman of Kemay, a large old fisherwoman revealed to be a dragon. At the book's climax, the dragon Kalessin calls Therru "daughter."

Throughout all six books, dragons seem to be the opposite of the Old Powers, the dark, silent, nameless, underground yin powers that are clearly associated with women. Dragons are of fire and air, the two elements considered masculine or yang. They soar in the light of the sun, and they are active and have language—very yang. Dragons desire freedom, to fly rather than dwell on the earth and be bound. They are the antithesis of domesticity, wishing to have nothing to do with houses and with making. They fear nothing but the ocean, that large body of water—water that, along with earth, is a female or yin element. In making her dragons also women in the last three books, Le Guin upsets the expectations and conventions established in the first three books, wherein mages, who are always male, and male dragons are the most powerful creatures in Earthsea. She is also overturns the well-established fairytale and mythic convention that the dragon is a male monster obsessed with treasure and maidens.

Other indications that Le Guin is upsetting the expectations and re-making the conventions of heroic tales (and familiar male-female dichotomies) are present in

Irian's story. Irian, for example, is the antithesis of the Lady of O in *A Wizard*. Irian is far from dainty, submissive or soft-spoken:

She was very tall, very sweaty, with big hands and feet and mouth and nose and eyes, and a head of wild dusty hair. She was yelling, 'Down! Back to the house, you carrion, you vile sons of bitches!' to the whining, cowering dogs. (*Tales* 207)

Yet, Irian has a beauty that lies in her size and strength, a beauty of both body and spirit. In her pursuit of truth and knowledge, she successfully challenges the most powerful mage on Roke, significantly the Summoner, the mage who deals with those powers most remote from ordinary life and perception, a

deep and somber wizardry [...] the summoning of such energies as light, and heat, and the force that draws the magnet, and those forces men perceive as weight, form, color, sound: real powers, drawn from the immense fathomless energies of the universe [...]. (*Wizard* 53)

the same powers disdained by the cloth-seller in *Shore*.⁵ It is Irian's nature, as a dragon, to fear no mage. Irian is the harbinger of the great change that is sweeping Earthsea of which women are a part, to the confusion of its male rulers. Le Guin's descriptions of these women tend to emphasize the traditional desired feminine attribute of beauty but in non-traditional terms: large size, outspokenness, charisma, courage, and strength.

The sixth book of Earthsea, *The Other Wind*, opens with the sad tale of the sorcerer Alder, a humble mender who begins to be troubled by the dead after the passing of his most-beloved wife, also a mender. He takes his trouble to Roke, which sends him to the island of Gont to consult with Ged. Ged sends Alder to Havnor, the king's city, where his wife Tenar and adopted daughter Tehanu (once called Therru) have been summoned by the ruler of the Archipelago for consultations. Here is a reversal: the hero stays home to keep house, while the housewife leaves home to become a king's councilor.

Women take center stage in this book, women and others who have been marginalized, such as Alder, who, as an itinerant sorcerer, has little prestige. The important and powerful men of Earthsea discover that they must consult

⁵ On this matter of the value of the ordinary, I offer a favorite quote taken from another fantasy, *The Story of the Stone* by Barry Hughart:

Chuang Tzu [...] had a disciple who spent seven years studying universal energy and then demonstrated his wisdom by walking across the surface of a river and back again, and Chuang Tzu broke into tears. "Oh, my boy!" he sobbed. "My poor, poor boy! You spent seven years of your life learning to do that, and all the while old Meng has been running a ferry not two miles from here, and he only charges two copper coins." (277)

with and rely upon the unimportant people who have been discounted for so long. When dragons, led by the males of the species, fly out of the west and attack the lands of human habitation, the rulers of the Archipelago are forced to employ as ambassador disfigured Tehanu, who speaks the language of dragons as her native tongue. The dragon who agrees to be envoy between dragons and humankind is that same Orm Irian, still intent on upsetting the status quo. A young woman Seserahk—who has been packed up and shipped off like so much baggage by her father, king of the Kargad Lands, to be bride to Lebannen, king of the Archipelago—has pertinent information on such weighty matters as the relationship between people and dragons and what happens to souls after death. (It is possible that Seserahk, too, is somehow a dragon. Like Orm Irian, she is a big, strong woman of forceful beauty. Despite her lack of formal education, she is intelligent, as are dragons, and, like dragons, she is fearful of the ocean.) A bargain with the Old Powers of Earth buys time for the wizards of Earthsea as they seek to unravel the riddle of the restless dead, who are attempting to invade the land of the living, thereby imperiling all of Earthsea, human and dragon alike.

The Other Wind is about joining what needs to be joined and dividing what needs to be divided, in the name of healing and wholeness. This is the practice of women—their art and their power. From the beginnings of the written histories of Earthsea, the men of power have separated themselves from women and from ordinary life. They have existed in epic—including in their self-constructed would-be epics.

An example of this destructive separation is one of the more disturbing characters in *Tales*, the wizard Gelluk. Gelluk is utterly indifferent to the suffering he causes with his single-minded pursuit of power. He is portrayed as singularly powerful and oblivious: “almost wholly absorbed in his own vision” (“The Finder,” *Tales* 37). He is an example of the single-mindedness preached at Roke carried to its negative extreme: “The spells by which he silenced, weakened, and controlled all who approached him were so habitual to him that he gave them no thought” (34).

Gelluk has been convinced by an obscure book of lore that “one true element controlled all substances, one true knowledge contained all others. [...] When he was one with the true element, he would be the one true king. Alone among men he would speak the words of making and unmaking” (*Tales* 30). In the service of this goal, Gelluk enslaves and uses any person, unto death. Gelluk speaks, with a dreamily hideous misogyny, of his quest:

You must find the true womb, the bellybag of the Earth, that holds the pure moonseed. Did you know that the Moon is the Earth's father? Yes, yes; and he lay with her, as is the father's right. He quickened her base

clay with the true seed [the element mercury]. But she will not give birth to the King. She is strong in her fear and wilful in her vileness. She holds him back and hides him deep, fearing to give birth to her master. That is why, to give him birth, she must be burned alive. (33)

Gelluk is speaking of ore that contains mercury and of the tower where he constrains slaves, dying of exposure to the vapors, to burn ore to obtain a few drops of the element. Gelluk's practice is the antithesis of the practice of women and witches.

Gelluk is defeated by two of his slaves working in partnership, one a woman, the other a man. Neither can win free of Gelluk without the other, and their relationship lasts for a time beyond the woman's death. Relationship trumps singularity in this tale, or, one might say, the way of women has its own methods of prevailing.

The last three books of Earthsea are revisionist history.⁶ Beginning with *Tehanu*, a serious inquiry into the nature and place of women and the magic they practice becomes part of the plots. "What is a woman's magic?" Le Guin's characters ask. "What is a man's?" The witch Moss answers that women's magic

goes down deep. It's all roots. It's like an old blackberry thicket. And a wizard's power's like a fir tree, maybe, great and tall and grand, but it'll blow right down in a storm. Nothing kills a blackberry bramble. (*Tehanu* 100)

Moss appears to be speaking from the new textual perspective of giving voice to women and their histories, outlook, values, and practices. And Moss's evolution as a character parallels a change in the presentation of the Old Powers from the first book, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, to the culminating story *The Other Wind*.

Moss first appears as Ged's scheming aunt in *Wizard*, practicing her "low" village magic:

Now the witch of Ten Alders was no black sorceress, nor did she ever meddle with the high arts or traffic with Old Powers; but being an ignorant woman among ignorant folk, she often used her crafts to foolish and dubious ends. She knew nothing of the Balance and the Pattern which

⁶ From the preface to Le Guin's essay "Is Gender Necessary? Redux":

It doesn't seem right or wise to revise an old text severely, as if trying to obliterate it, hiding the evidence that one had to go there to get here. It is rather in the feminist mode to let one's changes of mind, and the processes of change, stand as evidence—and perhaps to remind people that minds that don't change are like clams that don't open. (7)

the true wizard knows and serves [...]. Much of her lore was mere rubbish and humbug, nor did she know the true spells from the false. (5)

Moss's rude magic compares quite shabbily to the gravity and majesty of the school on Roke, with its high aims and principles. The tale's language makes Ged's desire to apprentice with Ogion and then to leave Gont for Roke both desirable and plausible: what talented young man would not take the opportunity to better his education among the best educated? Yet once we are told of Ard in *Tales*, Moss's early education of Ged seems less easy to dismiss. She was first to recognize Ged's power. She, like Ard, laid a foundation for a great mage:

She had taught him all her lore in herbals and healing, and all she knew of the crafts of finding, binding, mending, unsealing and revealing. What she knew of chanters' tales and the great Deeds she had sung to him, and all the words of the True Speech that she learned from the sorcerer who taught her [...]. (6)

We next see Moss in the fourth book *Tehanu*. She is still not particularly inspiring or prepossessing:

Moss's nose leaned out over her toothless jaws and thin lips; there was a wart on her cheek the size of a cherry pit; her hair was a grey-black tangle of charm-knots and wisps; and she had a smell as strong and broad and deep and complicated as the smell of a fox's den. (31)

A reader may suspect our author of extra-textual irony and that a visit to Moss's house will reveal it to be constructed of gingerbread. Moss comes to Tenar in Moss's capacity of caretaker of the dead. She makes it clear that she wishes to be friends with Tenar, the wizard's ward, but "Tenar was not at all sure what she wanted Aunty Moss to be, finding her unpredictable, unreliable, incomprehensible, passionate, ignorant, sly, and dirty" (*Tehanu* 31).

Tehanu contain a number of extended disquisitions on the magic and powers of women, making it the bridge between the old world of Earthsea and its revision. Several of these conversations take place between Tenar and Moss. Moss tells Tenar that a woman's magic is older than man's: "Who knows where a woman begins and ends? [...] I have roots deeper than this island. Deeper than the sea, older than the raising of the lands. I go back into the dark" (52). Moss says of herself, "Who am I to know, an old woman without mage-learning, without book-learning? All my learning's in the earth, in the dark earth" (53), a commentary, perhaps, both on the refusal of the society to properly educate women and, ironically, the extensive ignorance of the men in power that is the

result of this refusal. Though the earlier quote from *A Wizard* says that Moss does not traffic with the Old Powers, this latter quote does tie her to the old powers of the earth and the nameless dark.

Like Moss, the Old Powers of the Earth become less threatening and malign as the tales progress. Tenar observes Moss with the injured child Therru:

Watching Moss with Therru now, she thought Moss was following her heart, but it was a dark, wild, queer heart, like a crow, going its own ways on its own errands. And she thought that Moss might be drawn to Therru not only by kindness but by Therru's hurt, by the harm that had been done her: by violence, by fire. (*Tehanu* 33)

Moss, here, is not so much threatening as strange and mysterious, and with a capacity to heal and harm, like the Old Powers of Earth.

Le Guin rewrites the story of Elfarran in the appendix of *Tales*, re-visioning both this woman and the use of the Old Powers. Since Elfarran is presented first as Earthsea's version of Helen of Troy, a re-vision of Helen's story is also achieved, making this re-write something of a triple play. In the more developed version of her story in the appendix, Elfarran is known as the Islewoman or Lady of Soléa, and she has her own powers. Assailed by a powerful wizard who desires to possess her, she

returned [...] to her native island, Soléa, where her own powers would be strongest. [...] She took refuge at the Springs of Ensa, where, with her knowledge of the Old Powers of the place, she could withstand the Enemy and force him off the island. (*Tales* 278-79)

Elfarran and her husband Morred both perish in the defeat of their enemy, but this new version of the tale presents Elfarran as an active principal in events, and not as the prize contested over by two rivalrous men. She is no longer a helpless trophy: "a tall woman looking back over her shoulder. Her face was beautiful, and sorrowful, and full of fear" (*Wizard* 61). Her employment of the Old Powers is depicted as valorous and righteous.

The Springs of Ensa are water and water is associated with both women and life. Here is a clear indication that the Old Powers are now to be regarded as having perhaps another face, one in addition to the dark, dry, stony places of earlier portrayals of Old Powers, such as the Stone of the Terrenon in *A Wizard*. These sites are said to be inimical to men and are associated with death in the earlier books. Ironically, though, we discover in *The Other Wind* that the Dry Lands, the city of dust, rock and shadow where the souls of the dead of the Archipelago reside, was created by the greatest spell ever cast by the mages of Earthsea sometime in the pre-history of the Archipelago. The Old Powers, the

province of women and once depicted as the site of powers inimical to humans, now in the time of great change, which is the years of the latter three books, are re-envisioned as a source of life and protection. The powers of magery, once valorized as wise and creative, are revealed to be the instrument of the betrayal and the cause of the greatest of all dangers to Earthsea.

The sorcerer Alder, plagued by living dreams of the restless dead, is delivered from these dreams by the Pelnish wizard Seppel. Seppel takes him to a place called Aurun, of which he says: "Because it's not I but the Earth that will help Alder. Aurun is a sacred place, full of power. Although the people of Havnor have forgotten that, and use it only to defile it" (*The Other Wind* 170). Such a statement might be made about the power and activities of women, as they are represented in the three earlier books.

Moss's last appearance is a brief one at the beginning of *Wind*. Her nephew Ged—Sparrowhawk—takes Alder to visit her:

An old woman sat in a cushioned chair near the doorway where she could look out into the sunlight. Feathers stuck out of her wispy white hair. A speckled hen was settled in her lap. She smiled at Sparrowhawk with enchanting sweetness and pointed politely to the visitor. [...]

"This is Moss," said Sparrowhawk, "a witch of many skills, the greatest of which is kindness." (48-9)

In *Wind*, Moss is presented as benevolent and the Old Powers are no longer uniformly dark and malignant.

In the last book (but perhaps not the final book) of Earthsea, Le Guin apparently wants, as is usual in her many stories, to reconcile polarities in the Taoist manner: male and female, light and dark, fire and water, air and earth, doing and being, heroics and householding, life and death. All polarities rise from one another; the Way is their constant interaction. This is the Equilibrium of which the mages speak. The climax of *The Other Wind* is an enactment of familiar symbolic activities of reconciliation: a wall is broken to allow a rejoining and a marriage is celebrated. The women, as humans or as dragons, are key players in these events. The roles they occupy may not seem particularly dramatic or heroic until a reader looks again at what actually takes place in the stories and begins to re-interpret, in the light of new knowledge about Earthsea's histories, what actually happens and to whom. "[K]eep the house," Tenar bades Sesarakh during the climatic action of the sixth book. But Tenar is really telling Sesarakh to guard King Lebannen's body while his spirit is on a journey with those women-dragons (*Wind* 237). Sesarakh becomes a sentinel, the guardian of what is "precious," and a discussion between Tenar and Ged, in *Tehanu*, about householding and what is precious, namely women restricted to their houses because women are

"precious" (*Tehanu* 198), is re-visited. It is perhaps also reconstructed, maybe even redeemed.

Afterward comes the symbolic marriage: dark-skinned, male Lebannen of the Archipelago to light-skinned, female Seseerahk of the Kargad Lands, so that all the islands and the inhabitants of Earthsea—all the polarities—are symbolically reconciled in the archetypal royal wedding.

Alder is also rejoined, though in death, to his beloved wife Lily; but their deaths are portrayed as the fitting culmination of life.⁷ The devoted couple are set free and are last seen leaving the Dry Lands and going toward sunlight, not darkness.

It is witches, in their role of layer-out of the dead, and women in general as the bearers of life, who seem to manifest a truer grasp on how to live and how to die. The men of Earthsea have always sought in some way to deny death by pursuing power. The wizard Cob upsets more than just the Balance when he casts his spell to deny his own death. When Ged defeats him in *The Farthest Shore*, we are given to understand that is the end of the matter: the wound in the world is healed. *The Other Wind* reveals that Cob set in motion a profound change in the dynamics of Earthsea and that his defeat was only a beginning. When Ogion lies dying, he whispers to Tenar, "All changed!" (*Tehanu* 23), but nobody has any idea just how much change is truly coming. The dragons are harbingers. The solitary stance of rule and power, the entrenched position of men, is finally undermined, despite the fulfillment of the prophecy that a king will rule under the sign of peace. King Lebannen may rule, but the answer to the question, "Who shall be the next archmage?" is "A woman on Gont," an answer that makes no sense under the current hegemony. But that answer makes sense if the world is being re-invented and if rule and power are no longer the chief goals of thinking creatures. Under the developing new world order, women, dragons and the dead choose freedom over power. They do not want to rule; they do not want to be singular, heroic or at the top. They only wish to go their own way, in relationship with others, but not oppressing or being oppressed by others.⁸

One might say that the last three books of Earthsea are the four Rs: reversal, revision, re-evaluation and revelation. By composing reversals in the latter three books of premises and events established in the first three books, Le Guin revises readers' understanding of earlier characters and events. In doing so,

⁷ The lay "The Creation of Ea," the epigram for *A Wizard of Earthsea*, states:

Only in silence the word,
Only in dark the light,
Only in dying life [...]

⁸ Ursula K. Le Guin defines Tenar's freedom in her monograph *Earthsea Revisioned*. My essay "Witches, Wives and Dragons" is, in my view, an extended footnote to this monograph.

she reveals what was hidden. What had been ignored, unacknowledged or discounted in the earlier books is given meaning and importance in the later books.

Le Guin, in fact, undoes her own reliability as an author. Though each of the first three books is told primarily from the limited point of view of its main character, there is, of course, always in the background the omniscient “author” who has chosen whose story to tell and how to tell it. (And who is more omniscient than the author of a story set in the author’s own imaginary world?) The second set of three books “unmakes” (to employ a word and concept from the tales of Earthsea) the omniscience of the “author.” Le Guin, in the foreword to *Tales*, tells her readers just how non-omniscient she is:

I also wanted information on various things that had happened back *then*, before Ged and Tenar were born. A good deal about Earthsea, about wizards, about Roke Island, about dragons, had begun to puzzle me. (xi)

The “author” of the first three books did not know why women’s magic was weak or wicked, or she gives no explanation in the books, presenting that information as everyday fact. The “author” was unaware of the history of the founding of Roke. The author of the first three books seems to know the nature of dragons, and it is a nature familiar to us from our western myths, epics and folktales. In these books, dragons are indisputably male. They are powerful, generally antagonistic to humankind and quarrelsome. Yevaud, the dragon of Pendor, guards his hoard along with his eight sons in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. The dragon of *The Farthest Shore* is the splendid and heroic Orm Embar, son of the most anciently famous dragon of the realm, Orm, who died at the hands of the hero Erreth-Akbe, killing as he was killed. Bridging the first three and the last three books is the enigmatic dragon Kalessin, the Eldest, whose sex is unknown and who is always referred to by the pronoun “it.”⁹ The latter three books,

⁹ The nature and identity of Kalessin is one of the remaining mysteries of Earthsea. In her monograph *Earthsea Revisioned*, Le Guin states herself that “I don’t know if Kalessin, the Eldest, is male or female or both or something else. I choose not to know” (24). But at the climax of *Tehanu* is a curious incident. Kalessin has come at Tehanu’s call to rescue Ged and Tenar from the wizard Aspen. Tehanu sees Aspen as “a forked and writhing darkness” (219), answering one question posed by Tenar earlier in the book: what does the half-blind child see “with an eye that had been burned away” (102). The witch Ivy, refusing to accept Tehanu as a prentice, says “I mean when she looks at me with that one eye seeing and one eye blind I don’t know what she sees” (163). Apparently what Tehanu sees with her blind eye is truth or reality. She sees the truth of Aspen and knows his true name, Erisen. After Kalessin has roared in and destroyed Aspen, Ged says,

however, demonstrate how much the earlier "author" does not know about dragons. The dragons of the last three books are female: the Woman of Kemay, Tehanu, Orm Irian. They are also revealed to be descended from creatures who were, at one time, both human and dragon, as Tenar and Seserahk appear to be. These dragons are not interested in hoards or riddling contests with mages. Freedom is what they seek, freedom from the spells and oppressive influence of men.

The first three books are seemingly about power, a bright, beautiful and terrible power valorized by all in the Archipelago. (The Kargs are disdainful of magery and do not practice it—but the Kargs are portrayed as ignorant barbarians: what do they know?)¹⁰ The last three books reveal that the power of *A Wizard*, *Atuan*, and *Shore* is the kind of power sought chiefly by men. It cannot be understood as a generic type of power sought by both sexes. Writes Le Guin:

The fourth book, *Tehanu*, takes up where the trilogy left off, in the same hierarchic, male-dominated society; but now, instead of using the pseudo-genderless male viewpoint of the heroic tradition, the world is seen through a woman's eyes. This time the gendering of the point of view is neither hidden nor denied. (*Earthsea Revisioned* 12)

"Now I know who called thee, Eldest!" [referring to the child]

"I did," the child said. "I did not know what else to do, Segoy."

She still looked at the dragon, and she spoke in the language of the dragons, the words of Making. (223)

What? Has Tehanu identified Kalessin, the great red dragon, as Segoy, the creator of Earthsea? Will Le Guin address this question in some later tale? At any rate, this identification of red Kalessin with the demiurge of Earthsea makes Tehanu's earlier statement to Tenar even more amazing: "Yes. You are a red dragon" (*Tehanu* 110).

¹⁰ The Kargs are revisioned as well. The Master Patterner of *The Farthest Shore* is a Karg warrior who appears abruptly on Roke: "a sword-begirt, red-plumed young savage from Karego-At, arriving at Roke on a rainy morning and telling the Doorkeeper in imperious and scanty Hardic, 'I come to learn!'" (14). He is the token foreigner among the Archipelagans, who consider themselves at the center of the world. Seemingly this character is a gesture by the author to be more inclusive in her created society. But in "Dragonfly," Irian's story, he is Avzer who wins the respect and love of the woman-dragon Orm Irian. She also desires him—the spell of wizardly celibacy does not work on her, and, apparently, it is broken for him because he returns her love and desire, though they never physically consummate their love. Their relationship is unprecedented in Earthsea: a man and a dragon yearning for one another! Quite as revolutionary as a woman in the wizard's school. Avzer's appearance at Roke in *Shore* can now be seen as a harbinger of the great change to come.

Power and heroics shift from men to women in *Tehanu*, *Tales* and *Wind*. Typical of Le Guin, however, is that the shift is not a simple reversal.¹¹ Men remain important, even heroic, players in *Tehanu*, *Tales of Earthsea* and *The Other Wind*. Their heroics, however, are performed in conjunction with women or within the structure of values practiced by and associated with women: finding, mending, binding, healing. The texts move from masculine hierarchy to feminine web, from the tower to the house. The meek have inherited Earthsea, but they are dragons and therefore not meek: they are women who speak and act from their own values and perspective.

Finally, Tenar, the woman-adventurer, returns to her home in the mountains and to her husband Ged.

“Tell me,” she said, “tell me what you did while I was gone.”

“Kept the house,” (*Wind* 246) replies the former archmage of Earthsea.

¹¹ On his ship on the way to the Island of Roke to seek answers to the crisis between humans and dragons, King Lebannen recalls a “fragment of a ballad or lullaby from his childhood” (*Wind* 198):

O my joy!
Before bright Éa was, before Segoy
Bade the islands be,
The morning wind blew on the sea.
O my joy, be free!
(*The Other Wind* 198)

Note that, one, the song is from his childhood, when he would have been closest to his mother, living in the world of women and relationship; two, the song mentions a world before the creation of dry (yang) lands and language, the world of the Old Powers; and, lastly, the song is a yearning for freedom. King Lebannen sails toward the future with the feminine principle in his heart.

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