Grinding Axess and Balancing Oppositions: The Transformation of Feminism in Ursula K. Le Guin’s Science Fiction

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“All times are changing times, but ours is one of massive, rapid moral and mental transformation. Archetypes turn into millstones, large simplicities get complicated, chaos becomes elegant, and what everybody knows is true turns out to be what some people used to think.”


Introduction: Revisioning

Ursula K. Le Guin’s fiction has always expressed her political commitments, and the changes in her imagined worlds reflect the ways those commitments have developed over the years.1 The feminist re-visioning of Earthsea in the wake of Le Guin’s changing take on gender narratives has been well documented by Le Guin herself: she dramatized the way “what everybody knows is true turns out to be what some people used to think” by bringing feminist “politics” into her heroic male “Fairyland” (Earthsea Revised 7). Le Guin’s Hainish cycle of science fiction novels and stories has always been more explicitly political than her fantasy, but their engagement with changing times from the 1960s to
the 2000s enacts a progression similar to that of the re-visioned Earthsea. While similar themes run through all Le Guin’s science fiction, in more recent texts she reworks “archetypes” that have grown closer to “millstones” when the knowledges she understood as fundamental, essential truths grew to seem more like arbitrary and contingent social constructs. Le Guin’s feminism transforms as she struggles to give representational space to voices and viewpoints she had previously, inadvertently erased; her feminist awakenings are not single or simple but ongoing and continually reevaluated.

This essay explores the development of Le Guin’s feminist worldview as it is presented in her Hainish books. I begin with The Left Hand of Darkness (1969), exploring how this influential text seen by some as Le Guin’s “first contribution to feminism” (Bucknell cited in Reid 52) could also lead Gwyneth Jones, in 1988, to read Le Guin as “hopelessly miscast as a feminist, [having] no quarrel with the reification of gender” (62). The later works I will examine, Four Ways to Forgiveness (1995) and The Telling (2000), deal not only with the politics of gender but also with race and sexuality, articulating complex and nuanced, though never entirely unambiguous, visions of feminist worlds. Just as Le Guin rewrote her 1976 treatise on gender in 1987 (“Is Gender Necessary? Redux”), marking the points with which she had come to “disagree completely,” so her later Hainish fictions come with “remarks and annotations and self-recriminations” relating to the earlier posited worlds (“Preface to the 1989 edition” of The Language of the Night 2). As mainstream feminisms have expanded to take Othered groups and discourses into account, so has Le Guin’s science fiction; yet certain themes of duality and paradox, rooted in the yin and yang of Taoist philosophy, continually recur. As I detail the changing attitudes to gender and politics in Le Guin’s work, I will also pay attention to the relationship between Taoist dualities and feminist critiques of gendered binaries.

Politics, Feminism and Duality in Le Guin

Le Guin has often resisted specifically political interpretations of her texts. She has pleaded with critics not to “reduce” her stories to “mere ideas” (unpublished letter, cited in Reid xi), declaring that “[t]heory is not enough” to account for the aesthetic, “visceral” properties of a novel (“A Response to the Le Guin Issue,” Science-Fiction Studies 8 (March 1976), cited in Wood 10). The eruption of politics from the smooth surfaces of her texts is figured, by Le Guin and others, as a discordant, undesirable “sound of axes being ground” (“Science Fiction and Mrs Brown” 109. See also Rochelle, “Ursula K. Le Guin” 416). In 1977, Le Guin wrote:

I have found, somewhat to my displeasure, that I am an extremely moral writer. I am always grinding axes and making points. I wish I wasn’t so moralistic, because
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my interest is aesthetic. What I want to do is make something beautiful like a good pot or a good piece of music, and the ideas and moralism keep getting in the way.

Interview with Win McCormack and Ann Mendel, cited in The Language of the Night 145

It is possible, however, to perceive “ideas,” theory, and politics as not external but essential to Le Guin’s aesthetic project: to hear the axes grind in tune, as part of the overall music of each text. Theory may not be “enough,” but it is certainly useful; and the idea of the novel as apolitically “beautiful like a good pot or a good piece of music” seems to be one of the large simplicities that grew more complicated for Le Guin as her “moralism” developed into feminist commitment. As early as 1978, Le Guin had begun to write about the impact which her first exposures to feminist activism and theory had on her work.

Feminist ideology . . . has forced me and every thinking woman of this generation to . . . separate, often very painfully, what we really think and believe from all the easy ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ we were (subliminally) taught about being male, being female . . . I use the tools of feminism, and try to figure out what makes me work and how I work, so that I will no longer work in ignorance or irresponsibly.

"Introduction to Planet of Exile" 137

She does not explicitly state, but it is (I think) strongly implied, that her repeated statements of her primary interest as not moral but aesthetic may have been a form of ignorant or “irresponsible” work. The essay “A War Without End,” published in her 2004 collection The Wave in the Mind, elaborates on what “work[ing] responsibly”—specifically, writing politically responsible nonrealist fiction—has meant to Le Guin. Here the aesthetic, the imagination, has become one with the political:

To me the important thing is . . . by offering an imagined but persuasive alternative reality, to dislodge my mind, and so the reader’s mind, from the lazy, timorous habit of thinking that the way we live now is the only way people can live. . . . We will not know our own injustice if we cannot imagine justice. We will not be free if we cannot imagine freedom (218-220).

These three passages suggest a narrative of Le Guin’s development into feminism. First the beauty of the text is considered to be independent of, and potentially damaged by, all morality and politics; then a process of consciousness-raising or self-examination begins and the writer questions her received notions of what morality, gender, and writing should be. Finally, as her feminist standpoint matures, the beauty of the novel is seen as inextricable from its political and moral commitments: fighting injustice and imagining “freedom” from the
oppressive "easy 'truths' and 'facts'" perpetuated by dominant masculinist, white supremacist, and heterosexist ideologies. In prose style and narrative structure, the beauty of Le Guin's science fictions is undeniable; but that beauty might well fall apart without the political axes which grind at their centers.

Le Guin's texts would also fall apart without the structuring principle of Taoist philosophy, a major personal influence which permeates all of her writing (See Le Guin with Seaton, Tao Te Ching ix). This philosophy mainly affects Le Guin's feminism in the power of the "yin/yang continuum [which] ultimately creates a union and wholeness from opposites" (Wytenbroek 175) and which "asserts...the mutual interdependence of male and female" (Spivack 7). The yin/yang symbol represents a conception of masculine (yang, bright, hot) and feminine (yin, dark, cold) forces in balance, which is at the heart of Taoist philosophy:

Knowing man
and staying woman
be the riverbed of the world

_Tao Te Ching_ 38

As this quotation demonstrates, even Le Guin's poetic rendition of the Tao can seem to promote a very limited view of gender: 'yin' woman must "stay" in her feminine realm and leave "knowing" and action to 'yang' man. And even without this restrictive model of femininity, the very idea of 'masculine' and 'feminine' 'principles' can, by the antiessentialist tenets of much feminist thought, be read as reinforcing the oppressions of binary gender. Le Guin herself has strongly criticized the model of masculinity and femininity which the gendered yin and yang suggests:

The deepest foundation of the order of oppression is gendering, which names the male normal, dominant, active, and the female other, subject, passive. To begin to imagine freedom, the myths of gender, like the myths of race, have to be exploded and discarded.

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In the antiessentialist feminism toward which Le Guin gestures here, masculinity and femininity and associated binary terms are dangerous "myths," oppositional cultural constructs: they have no meaning in themselves but only in relation to, and negation of, the opposing term. Binary gender, in this model, is critiqued as the basis of oppressive modes of thought which enforce the categorization of all life into hierarchical oppositions. If the myths of gender are exploded further, masculinity and femininity are perceived as radical social constructs: contingent elements, learned and performed (as articulated in Judith Butler's work) within a culture structured around them where male and female, masculine and feminine
are understood as ‘natural’ only because we cannot think outside these binary oppositions. In this context, to see masculine and feminine yin and yang principles as interdependent offers no particular critique to the gendered binary. Even privileging the feminine may only mean one is inverting the opposition without meaningfully criticizing its structure.

In “Is Gender Necessary? Redux” Le Guin equates dualism in general with the oppressions produced by gendered binary formations, writing of “[t]he dualism of value that destroys us . . . superior/inferior, ruler/ruled, owner/owned, user/used” (16). Yet her problem with what she elsewhere calls “the binary computer mentality” (“A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be” 98) is not with the existence of dual terms but with their opposition: not with the idea of naturally masculine and feminine experiences and perceptions but with the way that “[d]ivisions are insisted upon, interdependence is denied” (“Is Gender Necessary? Redux” 16). Is this archetype of opposition in balance a pre-feminist “millstone” she retains, one which encourages an oppressive reification of gender—or is it in fact distinct from the gendered binary hierarchies critiqued by feminist theory? In both criticism and fiction, Le Guin’s work seeks to reconcile her desire to explode the myths of gender with her investment in the gendered dualities of the Tao.

Duality ‘Without’ Gender: The Left Hand of Darkness

Published in 1969, The Left Hand of Darkness could not have had the benefit of Le Guin’s engagement with feminist theory: the texts and contexts which motivated her towards explicitly politicized writings had not yet fallen into place. The novel imagines a world without gender, an act which remains important and influential for feminism, though reified masculine and feminine principles pervade the text. My reading will show how this text sets in place certain ways of dealing with gender, duality and difference which Le Guin both builds on and critiques in later works.

On Gethen, the planet The Left Hand of Darkness explores, there is no gender as we know it. The Gethenians are androgynes who develop a sexual identity once a month when they enter “kemmer.” We are told in passing how any Gethenian is liable to be “tied down to childbearing” (93), to give one apparent example of how the Gethenians live outside the hierarchies of gender; but the viewpoint of the novel’s protagonist, a conventionally and unreflectively ‘masculine’ man from Earth, ensures that we never see Gethen’s people outside of gendered terms. Genly Ai’s voice in describing the experience of his encounter with the planet reveals the depth of gendering in Le Guin’s earliest attempt at a genderfree environment:

I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes.
I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first
as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own. (12; my italics).

It is very difficult indeed to conceive of a being to whose nature masculinity and femininity are irrelevant when that individual is consistently described as "him." Part of Le Guin's purpose was certainly to show the effect of Gethenian biology on the unavoidably gendered (male) human mind, but the masculine pronoun is used to describe the Gethenians in all sections of the novel, including mythological narratives apparently originating from Gethen itself, not only those in Ai’s voice. It is probably impossible to write an extended third-person narrative in English without some kind of commitment to gender marking; Le Guin claimed at first that her choice of the standard 'neutral' usage for The Left Hand of Darkness was apolitical. However, in 1989 she republished the 1976 essay which made this claim, incorporating her realization that language can never be truly without politics and that the pronouns she used "shaped, directed, controlled [her] own thinking" ("Is Gender Necessary? Redux" 15). Like Genly Ai, she was led to consider her Gethenian characters as more men than "menwomen," forced back into the male/female opposition she wished to eliminate by the very language she used to express that attempted elimination.3

The Left Hand of Darkness suggests a critique of gender reification not only in the way it portrays Gethenian gender but also in its use of Taoist principles, presenting yin and yang as holistic opposites independent of gender oppositions. The world of Gethen is explicitly based around ideas of opposite forces coming together to complete one another; for "[L]ight is the left hand of darkness / And darkness the left hand of light" (234; original italics). In Le Guin’s renditions of Lao Tzu, the oppositions masculinity/femininity, light/darkness, cold/warmth join with each other in the same way:

For being and nonbeing
arise together;
hard and easy
complete each other;
long and short
shape each other;
high and low
depend on each other;
note and voice
make the music together;
before and after
follow each other.

Tao Te Ching 4
At one point Genly Ai suggests that the dualism of value through which he understands the world springs from the separation of non-Gethenian humanity into male and female halves, only for his Gethenian companion Estraven to reply that Gethenians “are dualists too”; that “[d]uality is essential ... [s]o long as there is myself and the other... I and Thou” (234). This duality is not the same as the oppositional dualism that renders Genly Ai unable to see Gethenians as they perceive themselves, whole; it is Le Guin’s attempt to construct a world based on Taoism’s yin and yang but conceiving these not as an opposition between male and female but as a dialogue between the self and other (Genly Ai and Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, reaching out to one another in the darkness) who “shape each other” as “note and voice / make the music together.” While this concept is strong in the structure and the mythology of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the specifics of language and character in the novel do not quite carry it through: Genly Ai and Le Guin fall repeatedly into the traps of oppositional gender. In Sarah Lefanu’s words, Le Guin’s “political disavowals, her attempts not to grind axes ... [lead] to a surface calm that barely conceals the cracks beneath,” where the “political potential” is not “lived in the language” (143). Genly Ai’s naively chauvinistic voice and the insistent and often stereotypical genderings enforced in the text (“I thought of him as my landlady, for he had fat buttocks that waggled as he walked.” 48) belie the Taoist reimaginings of what gender could be: he does not truly meet otherness but only reflections of his own prejudices. The dualities in *The Left Hand of Darkness* are so close to gendered binaries that the novel suggests, in the end, that the fundamental “essential” is not only “duality” but also gendered hierarchy of value. In using Taoist ideas to reconfigure gender, however, this novel sets in place a project which Le Guin continues more successfully in the works to which I now turn.

**Critiquing Racialized Dualities: Four Ways to Forgiveness**

Le Guin’s continuations of her Hainish cycle in the 1990s and 2000s show a marked development from *The Left Hand of Darkness*, though many themes remain constant. In more recent works, Le Guin has moved away from the “male heroes with their crises of identity”—like Genly Ai—which Lefanu saw as a “dead weight” at the center of earlier novels (137). In their place are more diverse protagonists, less normative perspectives and a feminism more explicit than before. Le Guin is no longer timid about grinding her axes, and she uses her science fiction overtly to discuss the problems and dangerous leanings of her society. In re-visioning the Hainish universe, Le Guin responds to critics who found that her earlier work’s smooth reconciliations of light and dark, self and other, male and female minimized the political struggles of feminism and erased differences other than gender. Michelle Erica Green writes:
In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, neither race nor sexual preference operate as conceptual categories; if they exist at all, they pass unnoticed. Thus, despite their insistence that patriarchy can be overcome, relatively few utopian feminists seem able or willing to tackle even their own tendency to ignore, erase, and oppress human difference.5 (Green 168)

When it comes to race, Le Guin has long sought to avoid the erasure of human difference that occurs when white readers and writers assume that the unmarked norm for all fictional characters is whiteness; her outrage over the televisual whitewashing of her Earthsea series amply demonstrates this ("A Whitewashed Earthsea"). In accordance with this commitment, Genly Ai in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is explicitly described as black (35). What Green is criticizing, however, has little to do with whether Le Guin chooses to participate in the collective whitewashing of the fictional future. Green calls attention to the fact that race does not “operate as [a] conceptual category” in *The Left Hand of Darkness*: Genly Ai’s color is not attached to any meaning or history, which may be a utopian description (implying that ‘race’ no longer exists, only gradations in skin tone which signify nothing) but does nothing to address the complexities of “human difference” now. *Four Ways to Forgiveness* “tackle[s]” this tendency to erase: the book is about the interpersonal mechanics of the struggle to overcome a slaveholding patriarchy, and its stories revolve around the conceptual category of race in history. Le Guin’s remarks elsewhere that “the mind of the master and the mind of the slave still think a good many of the thoughts of America” make her political motivations in conceiving of this particular imaginary society quite clear (“A War Without End” 211).

*Four Ways to Forgiveness* is about the lives caught up in the collapse of a racialized slave society on Werel and Yeowe, the collection’s twin world setting.6 The slave planet of Yeowe has freed itself from Werelian rule, but one of the novel’s main messages is that freedom in name can be very far from freedom in fact or in spirit. Voices originating both within and outside Werelian-Yeowan culture remind us constantly that habits of mind are not changed simply by declaring that things are now otherwise; deeply established oppressions cannot be simply overcome. Rakam, the former Werelian “asset” woman who narrates “A Woman’s Liberation,” speaks of her reaction when, enslaved, she first heard that the slaves on Yeowe had claimed their freedom:

From the beginning it was ordained that there should be higher and lower beings, the Lord and the human, the man and the woman, the owner and the owned. All my world... stood on that foundation. Who would want to overturn it? Everyone would be crushed in the ruins. (178)

The hierarchical foundations of a world cannot be overcome easily; as Rakam’s young owner, a member of an upper-class resistance movement, proves when
he decides to free his slaves but has no idea what will result. Rakam’s life is very nearly “crushed in the ruins” of that attempt—her mother and grandmother are killed, and she is captured and routinely raped by her masters, before at last she escapes and is able to live free. The message of this first freedom’s failure is that privilege and oppression cannot be overcome by an easy action from liberal individuals comfortably located on the dominant side of an oppressive binary. In recognizing this, Le Guin is perhaps acknowledging her own implication, as a white woman, in the racist histories she abhors—she calls for the reconstruction and reimagining of the patriarchal binaries which privilege her as well as those which subjugate her to others’ privilege.

Le Guin suggests that an important aspect of revolutionary change is the “forgiveness” of the book’s title—coming through suffering and oppression by finding reconciliation on a personal level. The personal is political, and according to Le Guin it is interpersonally that former assets and owners might find the forgiveness they need to live without the opposition that has controlled their lives. The vital thing, says Hainishman and adopted Yeowan Havzhiva, is “[n]ot to change the world. Only to change the soul. So that it can be in the world. Be rightly in the world” (“A Man of the People” 163). Once the personal, the soul is changed, the world will follow, Le Guin seems to imply: if you fight with force alone then “[y]ou kill the boss and you become the boss,” but the “old slave mind, boss mind” can be changed by new ways of thinking, by education (“A Man of the People” 143). If the “boss mind” learns to “[b]e rightly in the world,” there will be no more slavery. Accordingly, the revolutionary potentials in these stories are in the ways the characters change, learning to perceive things and people in new ways. A Yeowan woman sees the humanity in a formerly dishonest politician, in “Betrayals”; a Terran envoy comes to recognize the privilege and arrogance that had kept her from seeing anything in Werel beyond its injustices, in “Forgiveness Day.” These, not larger events, are the means by which the “boss mind” will be overcome.

It is in the valuing of small actions over large political gestures that Le Guin’s Taoism manifests in Four Ways to Forgiveness—the characters “hold fast” (“Forgiveness Day” 108 and throughout; Tao Te Ching 46) to their humanity or love amid terrifying events, and it gives them the strength to survive them. Change in the Taoist mode will be a slow process, may never complete itself by transforming Yeowe-Werel into a utopia: Le Guin’s return to Werel in the story “Old Music and the Slave Women” shows the boss mind’s continuing power in the midst of a planetwide revolution, years after the events narrated in Four Ways to Forgiveness. But the struggle progresses, and Le Guin uses the imaginary setting to work through the continuing implications of her own country’s unpleasant histories. The owner/owned binary might in the end, the stories imply, give way to “an alternative way of being” (Rochelle, Communities of the Heart 163) that could resemble the Taoist dialogue between opposites for which Le Guin
reaches in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Perhaps the reconciliations of *Four Ways to Forgiveness* are too clearly white liberal imaginings, where love and the interpersonal crossings of vast cultural divides will—more or less—conquer all in the end. But Le Guin’s narratives of Yeowe-Werel show, at the very least, that she has begun seriously to incorporate the complicated realities of oppression and inequality into her Taoist fictional aesthetic.

**Beginning to Critique Heteronormative Dualities: The Telling**

The yin/yang dualities at the heart of Le Guin’s work have long been expressed in the form of the heterosexual couple. When asked to define the “central, constant theme” of her work in the 1970s, she answered ““Marriage” (“Introduction to Planet of Exile” 139). The description still stands: the marriage is usually a metaphoric merging of divergent parts into a dual whole, but that merger often takes the literal form of a heterosexual coupling—from Jakob and Rolery in *Planet of Exile* (1978) to the multiple couplings in *Four Ways to Forgiveness* which stand in for the reconciliation of a divided society. In recent critical writing, however, Le Guin has recognized the silencings and exclusions of nonheterosexual standpoints which are encouraged by the “unquestioned assumption” that “[w]e’re all straight” (“Unquestioned Assumptions” 243). In the Hainish stories published after *Four Ways to Forgiveness*, Le Guin is no longer willing to reproduce the tokenism, stereotyping and fear of the homosexual that some critics—notably Delany on *The Dispossessed* and Lamb and Veith on *The Left Hand of Darkness*—have identified in her most famous writings. She does not pretend to be a queer writer; but she works hard at breaking down assumptions and at reimagining her worlds around her changed perceptions. Like her acknowledgment of the complex issues surrounding social categories of race, I take Le Guin’s beginning critiques of heterosexuality as a part of the continuing change and development of her particular brand of feminism.

Le Guin’s last novel-length contribution to the Hainish cycle, *The Telling*, is the first of her works to date to feature a protagonist firmly located as queer. Sutty, a Terran envoy educated by the Hainish, chose to travel to the planet of Aka because it was a world where she and her partner Pao could be together freely, a society which was “not hierarchically gendered” and where “heterosexuality was not compulsory, not even privileged” (63). Le Guin’s characters are now explicitly aware of the socially constructed relationships between gender and sexuality: the very fact that Le Guin can conceive of heterosexuality as “compulsory”—socially mandated, assumed by the world at large and forced upon those who are inclined to diverge from it—shows that the ‘straightness’ of desire is no longer an unquestioned, naturalized norm in her work. This is very different from *The Left Hand of Darkness*, where the appearance of a
male can make a Gethenian in kemmer become female, automatically producing desire. In *The Telling*, however, the nonprivileging of heterosexuality on Aka is under attack. By the time the novel’s action takes place, Pao has been killed; the model of sexuality which would have proved utopian for Sutty and Pao has been driven underground, and heterosexuality is compulsory again.

The matter of sexuality in *The Telling* is intimately connected to the novel’s themes of cultural colonization. Aka has been ideologically colonized by “Unist!” Terran religious fundamentalists, rejecting its earlier culture to ape Terra in a “March to the Stars” (7) which includes the criminalization of homosexual behavior. Sutty evades the “March” in order to uncover the Akan culture she has studied; she is initiated into a system of being called the Telling which significantly resembles the Chinese religion of Taoism which was stamped out in the Cultural Revolution.10 *The Telling*, which Sutty begins by calling a religion but whose significance cannot be contained in that definition, is a strange and complex imagining of how a world’s knowledge might be constructed with “[n]o binary Dark/Light, Evil/Good, or Body/Soul” (102). Sutty likens the Telling to the Way of Taoism at times, but this is a Tao without insistent emphasis on the Dark/Light, masculine/feminine structure of yin and yang. A “two-as-one, or one in two aspects” structure is, however, crucial to the Telling and *The Telling*, especially to the model of sexuality that drew Sutty there in the first place. There is “a peculiar singular/dual pronoun, used for a pregnant woman or animal or for a married couple” which features symbolically but is mainly used for “the teacher-officiants” who tell the stories that make the Telling, the “maz.” The single-dual pronoun is necessary for maz, because they are couples: “[a] sexual partnership, heterosexual or homosexual, monogamous, lifelong” (107-8). A maz couple is a whole made from two individuals, inseparable regardless of proximity—“[t]he two that are one are not two, but the one that is two is one” (210). It is strongly implied that Sutty and Pao would have become maz, had tragic circumstance not intervened. Here Le Guin’s master trope of marriage slips the bounds of heteronormative gender, though not those of normative monogamous romance.

*The Telling* is a powerful novel of always-already disappeared utopia, which uses feminist and Taoist tropes and concepts to great effect. The queer reading to which Sutty’s lesbianism might prompt us shows, however, a few gaps in the text. One cannot help but wonder how the Telling at its height would have dealt with a maz individual who strayed from their partner or who chose to pursue another relationship after the partner’s death, or whether anyone in this society pursues nontraditional relationships; such extreme monogamy is extremely restrictive.11 And it is a little suspicious, at least to me, that compulsory heterosexuality was so vigorously imported along with Terran technology to a world which had no previous experience of such a thing; after all, even post-colonization the Akans retain some of their cultural identity. Judging by this
novel, Le Guin’s exploration into queering her worlds is not (yet) concerned with moving too far beyond heterosexuality.

Gethen Revisioned; Conclusions

Le Guin has written that “[i]t is rather in the feminist mode to let one’s changes of mind, and the processes of change, stand as evidence,” adding that “minds that don’t change are like clams that don’t open” (Introductory note to “Is Gender Necessary? Redux” 7). I want to close my analysis of Le Guin’s progression through feminist modes by examining a story which stands proudly as a piece of “evidence,” proclaiming her ideological changes. First published in 1995 and collected in 2002 in The Birthday of the World, “Coming of Age in Karhide” re-visions the setting of Le Guin’s best-known science fiction novel; the text whose gender issues I began, with feminist hindsight, by examining. The later story portrays the planet of Gethen through the eyes of a native, purposefully avoiding the gender binaries which permeated The Left Hand of Darkness. Gendered pronouns are not used: describing a relative who has entered the Gethenian equivalent of menopause, the narrator Sov says “I have already had some trouble telling this story in a language that has . . . only gendered pronouns. . . . Dory’s kemmers had been male for over a year, so I’ll call Dory ‘he,’ although of course the point was that he would never be either he or she again” (6). An earlier remark that “my mothersib Dory had bigger breasts than the ones in the pictures” of Terran women reminds readers that Dory is not, in fact, male (2). ‘Masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are clearly terms which have no meaning in this later version of Gethen, unlike the original novel; the prospect of a gender system not based on a reified, immutable binary becomes much more believable than it was when hedged around with Genly Ai’s masculinist impositions. “Coming of Age in Karhide” shows the same world that The Left Hand of Darkness conjured up, but Le Guin’s changing feminist political context has meant that neither the figure of Genly Ai nor the impossibility of nonsexist language stand in the way of the powerful trope of an androgynous humanity. The Gethen we see in this story is almost utopian: the kemmerhouse, indeed, is a polymorphous sexual utopia, where Sov enters into bodily dialogue with sexual partners—“I loved them all and they all loved me and that was the secret of the kemmerhouse” (21). The story is joyous in tone, Le Guin playing with the world her development into feminism has set free. Though she would never disavow the earlier text, this quietly feminist story clearly maps the development of her politics since The Left Hand of Darkness.

I have only traced a few of the many trajectories noticeable across Ursula K. Le Guin’s work, even within the realm of feminist criticism. As I have shown, she has quietly brought antiessentialism, postcolonial politics and critiques of
heteronormativity into the great unfolding narrative of her combined Hainish stories; many more of her fictions could be analyzed within the parameters I have set up in this essay. And it is unlikely that she will stop changing her mind, continuing to modify her universes to fit the way she perceives the world around her. Perhaps in the future the critiques that a queer reading position elicits from her texts might be addressed, so that her initial modifications of heteronormativity might extend to consider the figure of the queer in culture as well as imagining cultures that slightly queer our own. Or perhaps questions of cultural appropriation might be considered—are there any uncomfortable implications in a white American woman’s adoption of the Tao Te Ching, in her writing a science fiction novel to memorialize the destruction of Taoism in China? I do not know the answers to these questions, and much more research would be required to address them. But changing personal politics need not involve self-recrimination, and Le Guin remains prolific: continuing developments could take her into myriad as yet unimagined areas, within or outside the Hainish universe.

“Praise then Creation unfinished!”

_The Left Hand of Darkness_ 227

**Notes**

1. An earlier version of this essay was given a ‘Highly Commended’ award in the 2004 Science Fiction Foundation Graduate Essay Prize.

2. Critics who have discussed Le Guin’s Taoism far more fully than I include Barbour and Lindow as well as Wytenbroek and Spivack.

3. Similar feminist criticisms of _The Left Hand of Darkness_ have been made by Lefanu and many others. Both Pennington and Cornell suggest that the novel encourages resistance to gender hierarchy through the reader’s identification with Genly Ai, the gendered alien, and his mistakes and developing comprehension of Gethenian androgyne.

4. I have not discussed _The Dispossessed_ (1976) here primarily for reasons of space, as I find that, though its anarchist politics and ambiguous utopia are deeply fascinating and the dual worlds of Urras and Anarres exemplify holistic Taoist dualism as narrative force in Le Guin, it perpetuates gender binaries in a similar manner to _The Left Hand of Darkness_. Moylan (101-2) and Lefanu (133) discuss this in detail.

5. I will discuss “sexual preference” as a conceptual category in Le Guin’s fiction with reference to _The Telling_ in the next section.

6. Historically, all the inhabitants of the colony-world Yeowe and three-quarters of the inhabitants of Werel have been “assets,” enslaved by the Werelian “owner” class. Owners’ skin tends to be blue-black, slaves’ a “dusty” grey-blue. (“Notes on Werel and Yeowe” 285-6).
7. Rochelle discusses the model of local knowledges that underlies Havzhiva’s philosophy in detail in *Communities of the Heart* 161-3.

8. The problematics of Le Guin’s position as a privileged white liberal wishing to write from the point of view of the silenced and oppressed are discussed by Helford, with reference to *Buffalo Gals and Always Coming Home*.

9. Delany finds Bedap’s exclusion from the family life at the heart of *The Dispossessed* to be an unexamined stereotype of gay male sterility; Lamb and Veith read *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a conventionalized narrative of a tragically unfulfillable love between two men which can only end in one party’s death.

10. Learning about the Cultural Revolution in China inspired Le Guin to write *The Telling* ("The Question I Get Asked Most Often" 279), though the novel also strongly recalls Western imperialist expansion: missionaries bring “progress” and “morality” to the natives and cause the destruction of indigenous cultures.

11. Though there is no mention of any maz couple ever separating, an Akan who works against the Telling mentions he and his wife have separated (234). After the end of the Telling and the fall into compulsory heterosexuality, lifelong monogamy was apparently no longer mandated.

**Works Cited**


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