

The Failure of the Heroine in Ursula K. Le Guin's The Tombs of Atuan

by

Tom Kinsey

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York  
College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

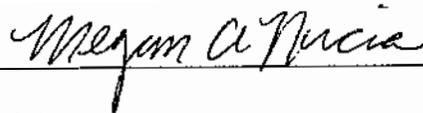
Master of Arts

May 2, 2007

The Failure of the Heroine in Ursula K. Le Guin's The Tombs of Atuan

by Tom Kinsey

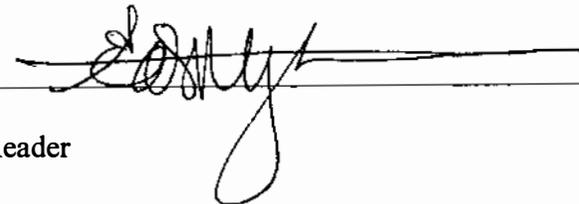
Approved:



Advisor

5-12-07

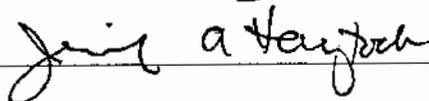
Date



Reader

5/10/07

Date



Reader

5-10-07

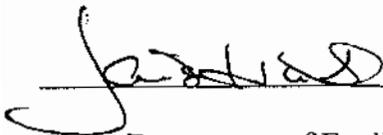
Date



Coordinator, Graduate Committee

5-21-07

Date



Chair, Department of English

5-22-07

Date

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Introduction: The Quest: Methods to Expose Imbalance and Symbolic Failure .....	1
Chapter One: The Ring of Erreth-Akbe: Celtic Myth, the Cauldron, and the Grail...	11
Chapter Two: The World of the Matriarchs Versus the World of the Patriarchs: Dominance, Struggle, and Imbalance .....	34
Works Cited .....	56

### Abstract

This thesis, a study of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Tombs of Atuan, explores the roles of the hero and heroine in relationship to Celtic mythology and the societal boundaries and strictures within the novel. It also investigates the symbolic failure of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, which mirrors the imagery of rebirth found in the Holy Grail and the Celtic cauldron, and its relationship to the failure of the heroine as a feminist symbol. The Tombs of Atuan is unsuccessful in establishing a strong feminist heroine despite its roots within the Celtic tradition and the initial power of the heroine over the hero.

## Introduction

### The Quest: Methods to Expose Imbalance and Symbolic Failure

Ursula K. Le Guin in The Tombs of Atuan (1970) seeks to construct a feminist text in which women govern and rule in a matriarchy. She also tries to create a true feminist heroine, Tenar, at the head of this matriarchy. Le Guin draws on Celtic mythology, especially the feminine aspects, and symbols such as the Holy Grail to help her tell this story. The Ring of Erreth-Akbe, a symbol of the Holy Grail, promises to bring balance and harmony through the equal union and rebirth of the male and female characters, Ged and Tenar. This rebirth, however, is ultimately flawed: Le Guin's heroine, Tenar, is dominated by Ged, Le Guin's hero. The domination of the male in this novel leads to the symbolic failure of the Ring. During the early 1970's when she was writing Tombs, Le Guin was not ready to develop an independent heroine, one who is in her own right an empowered and active woman. Instead, Tenar lacks self-empowerment and remains passive until acted upon by Ged. In her later novels, such as Tehanu (1990), Le Guin tries to correct this failure by establishing much stronger, more independent women. Her writing twenty years earlier, however, shows that Tombs remains bound by patriarchal structures. Tenar is also bound by similar patriarchal structures. The novel, therefore, is not a feminist text, and neither is Tenar a feminist heroine.

The methodology of this study considers a variety of critical research documents on Celtic mythology and literature, articles that analyze the conflicts between patriarchies and matriarchies, and scholarly articles on Le Guin and her work. To develop the many connections between Tombs and the sacred beliefs of the

Celts, the first chapter references the works of Howard Roland Patch, Nigel Pennick, and Barre Cunliffe. The works of Jeffrey Green and Jean Markale show the clear link between the Holy Grail and Celtic mythology. They also point out that the symbol of the Holy Grail has its origins in a Celtic symbol of rebirth, that is, the cauldron.<sup>1</sup> In my analysis, the point-by-point comparison between Le Guin's literature and Celtic mythology establishes and proves the link between them since the symbolic construction of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe depends upon the in-depth analysis. The second chapter, on the other hand, depicts the struggling matriarchy operating and ultimately failing beneath the power of the patriarchy, which leads to the symbolic failure of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe. The works of Heide Gottner-Abendroth, Steven Goldberg, and Heidi Hartmann clarify how a patriarchy or matriarchy functions in relationship to itself and to the other. Furthermore, in this chapter I reference the works of feminist scholars Judith Butler and Lissa Paul. The second chapter also continues the discussion of the sacred religious functions of women in religions practiced exclusively by women.<sup>2</sup>

Although it is certainly possible to consider Tombs as a bildungsroman tale, a careful analysis reveals the failure of Tenar as a feminist heroine. Kathleen Cioffi defines the bildungsroman: "In this type the main character (often, but not always, a woman) goes through a search for self that takes her through various traumatic experiences but finally results in her becoming a whole and committed person" (90). Indeed, Tenar does search for her sense of self, but this only occurs when Ged

---

<sup>1</sup> The Celtic cauldron was a vehicle through which the dead were resurrected.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to drawing upon the works of the abovementioned scholars, I wrangle with the ideas of various other Le Guin scholars. Some of the most important to the topics of this paper include Christine Thompson, Thomas Remington, Holly Littlefield, and Gail Sobat.

awakens her from her unconscious slumber in which tradition, ritual, and rules govern her intellect. Tenar's growth requires an outside agent to begin. Of course, Ged's involvement, his penetration into the tomb/womb, is the source of her awakening. The question that remains for Tenar, on the other hand, is how does she become a whole person in Tombs and to what is she committed? Though her role is without a doubt necessary for the logical conclusion of the novel—the joining of the two halves of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe and the destruction of the Tombs—Tenar needs the help of a wizard to force her to move toward the independence of thought and body that she fulfills in the next novel, Tehanu. She neither becomes whole nor finds a true commitment, other than arrival on Gont Island. It is difficult to claim that Tenar's story fits within the definition of the bildungsroman, at least in the way Cioffi postulates. Therefore, the analysis turns toward Tenar and Ged's relationship in terms of power and struggle for power. Not surprisingly, Le Guin eventually places Tenar in a position subordinate to Ged.

Ged's dominance over Tenar is the result of Le Guin's understanding of the feminist movement in the 1970s. This understanding, she admits, has evolved. Le Guin acknowledges, "I was slow and kind of stupid in some ways" (Walsh 204) in recognizing the ideas and potential of the movement. Tombs occupies a place in her literature between novels that support the male-dominated status quo and novels that relate to more main-stream feminist perspectives. An examination of five classic Le Guin novels shows an emerging pattern. In A Wizard of Earthsea (1968), the text is very much immersed in the patriarchal structure: a strong, male hero and very few female characters amid many males. After Wizard, a traditional, patriarchal tale, Le

Guin begins to play with the notion of gender and its societal implications in The Left Hand of Darkness (1969). However, critics have pointed out that “Gethenians seem like men, instead of menwomen” (Le Guin, “Is Gender Necessary?” 14), which undermines Le Guin’s attempt to depict an androgynous culture. According to the critics, the rules of the patriarchy still control her fiction. Undaunted by criticism, Le Guin wrote Tombs the following year, and she is still interested in a discourse of gender roles and power. Though she makes Tenar the character through whom we view the action of the novel, she fails to make her female character strong enough and her society of women tenacious enough to stand on equal level with the Archmage, a representative of one of the patriarchies on Earthsea. The Farthest Shore (1972) returns to the story told through the male’s perspective, once again relegating women to an inferior position through point of view. The pattern of the dominance of the patriarchal structure is only broken in Tehanu (1990), when Tenar fulfills her role as archetypal mother in order to raise the suffering, disfigured girl-child Therru to her status of power as both dragon and human. Twenty years after Tombs, Le Guin’s fulfills her feminist ideology in Tehanu.<sup>3</sup>

Even though Tombs fails to make Tenar a strong feminist character at the outset, Le Guin nonetheless begins to focus on attaining some kind of the balance between male and female characters. This balance is symbolized, of course, by the Ring of Erreth-Akbe. Though Le Guin does not achieve a true balance between the male and the female, the Ring of Erreth-Akbe offers the promise for balance, peace,

---

<sup>3</sup> See “Unlearning Patriarchy: Ursula Le Guin’s Feminist Consciousness in the Tombs of Atuan and Tehanu” by Holly Littlefield and “The Power of Women in Ursula K. Le Guin’s Tehanu” by Susan Mclean.

and harmony throughout all of Earthsea. This promise, though not fulfilled in Tombs, is realized in later Earthsea texts. As a writer, Le Guin's feminist ideologies have not progressed far enough in 1970 to the potential realized in Tehanu and The Other Wind (2001).

How then does the relationship between male and female in this story undermine the supposed power of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe to unite Earthsea in an era of peace? The first chapter examines this issue through a point-by-point analysis of the links Le Guin establishes between her text and Celtic mythology. These point-by-point comparisons underscore a main focus of this chapter: the connections between the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, the Holy Grail, and the Celtic cauldron. The Ring stands as a symbol of unity, but in Tombs much disequilibrium exists between the sexes. Le Guin also establishes associations with Celtic mythology through Ged's quest to the Otherworld and her investment in the sacredness of high places in her literature.

Several critics have already pointed out the influence of Celtic lore on Le Guin's writings. One of them, Christine Thompson, notes Le Guin's own understanding of her indebtedness to the Celtic tradition:

Le Guin's debt to Northern European myth has been noted by several commentators on her work. She herself acknowledges the influence, but explains that she did not deliberately construct the world of Earthsea so much as discover it in her unconscious. She considers that 'a genuinely mythic dimension in a work of literature cannot be imposed . . . consciously,' that rather 'it arises in the process of

connecting the conscious and unconscious realms.’<sup>4</sup> However, what surfaced from her unconscious, in the process of discovering the world of Earthsea, and what she intuitively recognized as requisite for her purpose was a culture reflecting pagan European values and the physical world out of which such values arise. (19)

Although her indebtedness to the Celtic mythology may have come out of her unconscious, a thorough examination of Tombs in Chapter One reveals the extent of this indebtedness.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter Two proves that although the Ring stands as a symbol of peace for all of Earthsea in reference particularly to the end of war, the battle between the equality of the sexes on Earthsea is just as important to the symbolic meaning behind the Ring. The Ring stands as a symbol for balance, harmony, peace, dominion, and unity, but it cannot just be limited to war. Logically, its symbolic power must extend to all facets of life in Earthsea, and in the balance and equality between the sexes, the symbolic power of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe fails. As noted earlier, Le Guin and other authors have already argued that when she was writing Tombs in 1970, Le Guin’s had not yet

---

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from Charlotte Spivak’s book, Ursula K. Le Guin and Le Guin’s The Language of Night

<sup>5</sup> I should note a brief warning. When discussing the term “Celtic” or “Celtic mythology,” it should be kept in mind that some scholars believe these terms to be arbitrary and essentially carry no meaning beyond people’s perception of Celtic identity. John Collins, a scholar who refutes the belief that early inhabitants of Britain were Celtic, writes, “The definition of the ancient Celts is ambiguous in the ancient literature, nor is their origin and distribution clear . . . [and] . . . the inhabitants of Britain were only considered to be Celtic from the 16<sup>th</sup> century; it has no basis in the classical sources” (4). Dmitra Fimi in an article on Celtic elements within Tolkien’s work notes something quite similar: “Nowadays the term ‘Celtic’ itself has been called into question,” but was a perfectly acceptable way of understanding the early inhabitants of Britain in Tolkien’s time (160). Tolkien himself declared, “To many, perhaps to most people outside the small company of great scholars, past and present, ‘Celtic’ of sorts is . . . a magic bag into which anything may be put, and out of which almost anything may come” (Tolkien 185-86). My purpose is to show the relationship between scholarly interpretations of Celtic mythology and the rebirth and regeneration motif found in Tombs and elsewhere in the Earthsea Cycle, not to draw just anything out of the Celtic “magic bag.” In this, I am selective and show restraint.

fully developed her feminist perspective. Hence, the male protagonist in the novel has a stronger role than the female protagonist, which affects the symbolic failure of the Ring.

In contrast to Ged's role in searching for the Ring, Chapter Two concentrates on analyzing Tenar's society and her relationship to it and Ged. Simply put, Tenar's world is dominated by both the Kargish patriarchy and by Ged. Although Tenar helps to unite the Ring, there is no real balance between male and female as supposedly symbolized by that uniting act. What undermines the balance is Ged's power of wizardry: the power of words. His experience, education, and abilities allow him to dominate Tenar. Her own abilities are of no match for Ged's, which overshadow her once she yields to him the little power she once had over him. The struggle for dominance eventually yields a fundamental imbalance between the sexes, which leads to the symbolic failure of the Ring. The imbalance is evident in both the role of the Place's matriarchal systems, and in the role of the patriarchal systems.

The section on matriarchy investigates the ways in which the priestesses' matriarchy has evolved and weakened. Although the priestesses of the Place had once operated a powerful, utopian matriarchy, time has weakened its influence and allowed the patriarchy greater power over them. In fact, the current matriarchy of the place is actually a heterotopia of the past utopian matriarchy. Michel Foucault's work in "Of Other Spaces" elucidates the definition of heterotopia<sup>6</sup>, which is useful in examining the definition of a matriarchy as expressed by Heide Gottner-Abendroth. The analysis

---

<sup>6</sup> Foucault defines a heterotopia as an isolated space that contains within it the cultural imprint of the place from which it comes (24). He calls the ship the ultimate form of the heterotopia.

reveals that the heterotopic matriarchy is decaying from within, and its ultimate physical destruction reveals the extent to which the Place is doomed to failure. Tenar, whose leadership is threatened by Kossil, is controlled within this system by the encroaching effects of greater, more powerful systems from without.

The following section shows the ways in which two dominating patriarchal systems affect Tenar's heterotopic matriarchy. After providing a working definition of patriarchy, I reveal that the patriarchy of the Kargish Empire dominates the matriarchy on three levels: cultural, governmental, and economic. Even in the face of this domination, Tenar turns to the representative of the patriarchy of the Archipelago, the Archmage Ged, for safety and guidance when her heterotopic matriarchy is near destruction. The obliteration of Tenar's system remains consistent with the overarching power of the patriarchy to assimilate people into its ways. Furthermore, the struggles for power between Ged and Tenar on the level of the individual parallel the struggles for power on the societal level. Masculine forms of power and control eventually subvert and dominate feminine forms of power and control. "In the fantasy fiction of contemporary women writers," notes Christine Spivak, "certain patriarchal systems prevalent in our time are quietly being questioned, subverted, and revisioned" (15). In Tombs, however, the patriarchy is not being questioned or subverted: its influence is being sustained as the status quo. Although Le Guin tries to construct a female world in which females govern and rule, she still draws heavily upon the ways in which the patriarchy dominates in building her matriarchy. The world of the priestesses is hardly "feminine." There exists only a

thin veneer of femininity over the Place, for the text does not present a fully developed female protagonist that is feminine in her own right.

The small but positive interplays between male and female cannot be overlooked, however. Just as Ged gives Tenar his name<sup>7</sup>, Tenar gives away what she has: water. In obvious violation of the sacred rules of the Place, she begins to lose her authority through her act of giving. Tenar had dreamt of being unable to bring water to someone she could never quite reach (Le Guin, Tombs 44), yet the water she gives him saves his life. Tenar's dream, in which she brings a "deep brass bowl" (44) to that unreachable someone, reflects not only the influence of the imagery of the Celtic cauldron of rebirth, but the archetype of the "great-mother," as Spivak notes (59). Tenar is first starting to take on the motherly role that will eventually be fulfilled some twenty years later in Tehanu. Ged also gives himself to Tenar, this in the form of trust: "To share one's true name with someone is thus to show absolute trust" (Spivak 52). However he might trust Tenar, the giving of his name does not result in her having any power over him.

Ultimately, the study of literary construction and the symbolic meaning of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe reveals that though Le Guin desired change in Earthsea, it was not possible in Tombs because of the weakness of the female heroine in the face of a dominating male. The Lost Rune on the Ring is a symbol of the promise of peace and harmony, delivering the people from the many forms of evil, taking them to a new level of consciousness, and in effect making them see their old lives with a new

---

<sup>7</sup> Emphasized here and elsewhere, not the wizardly power over his being through knowing his true name

perspective: giving them a sense of rebirth. The truly exciting promise of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe is its potential to bring about rebirth and resurrection.

The study, therefore, explores how these themes relate to Celtic myth and tales. Le Guin's female character does not function within the Ring of Erreth-Akbe as an independent heroine because of the imposition of the traditional patriarchal structure. A balance of power between male and female and without male dominance could have resulted in a rebirth of both characters. Ged admits that Tenar has been reborn (Le Guin, Tombs 160), and yet strangely Ged himself endures no struggle to be reborn. He remains the same: proud, resourceful Ged. As a result, the struggle for power ends in Ged's control, annihilating whatever balance could have been achieved and undermining the exciting promise of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe.

## Chapter One

### The Ring of Erreth-Akbe: Celtic Myth, the Cauldron, and the Grail

Aspects of Celtic mythology shape Le Guin's creation and use of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe. As the Ring is of utmost importance to Ged, so is the analysis of the Ring of greatest importance in understanding the ways in which its Celtic roots impact its meaning. In her approach to the creation of the Ring and the struggle behind it, Le Guin also mirrors the particular ways in which the Celts venerated the feminine in the land and their myths. Furthermore, she uses Celtic symbolism not only in Tombs, albeit in her own fashion, but throughout the whole of the Earthsea Cycle. This chapter shows the many ways she connects with Celtic mythology.

The first two sections compare and contrast many of the physical features described in Tombs. The first explores Ged's quest for the Ring, in which he essentially travels into the dark realm of the Otherworld. The Undertomb, as it is called beneath the earth of the Place, parallels the Celtic understanding of the Otherworld. The second section describes the sacred features of the landscape and Le Guin's description of religious practices such as burial of the dead and training of high priests.

The third section, "The Quest for Rebirth," examines the literary origins of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe. Essentially, the Ring connects to the Holy Grail and the Celtic cauldron of rebirth. These links to the Ring's literary ancestors change the way in which the nature of the Ring is understood. The grail and the cauldron give life. Indeed, the Ring stands as a symbol of peace, of bonding, of balance. By making the Ring whole, Ged can restore the Bond Rune, thus ending war and bringing back to

Earthsea peace, life, and balance. Unfortunately, the structure of Le Guin's text includes fundamental imbalances that contradict the essence of the restored Ring. Male and female remain thoroughly imbalanced, thus initially undermining the power of the restored Bond Rune.

The fourth and final section seeks to discover if Tombs is really Ged's story, despite the fact that it is told through Tenar's perspective. The conclusion merits pause: Tombs seems to be Ged's story. However, this section cannot adequately answer the question of to whom the story belongs. In order to understand how Le Guin's structuring of Tombs' narrative creates an imbalance between male and female, which ultimately affects the meaning and significance of the Ring, the question of to whom the story belongs overshadows the whole of the second chapter. Le Guin, however, does not provide an easy answer.

### **The Otherworld**

Ged's journey to the Kargish lands and beneath the Hill of the Place is essentially a journey into the Otherworld: into another place and into the feminine world. His search leads him to the underground and the powers that dwell there; his quest ends in finding the other half of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe and through the power of Tenar's touch, the joining of the broken bits of the Ring. Ged's quest, however, leads him not through some Elysian paradise, but through suffering and pain. Despite the suffering of the journey, his descent into the Otherworld yields him the talisman that he and other wizards believe will usher in an era of peace on Earthsea. At the end of the novel, Tenar responds to Ged's journey with a journey of her own: the denial of the power of the Tombs and the voyage to Ged's homeland.

Although Le Guin incorporates elements of the Otherworld, she departs from some of the specific details, namely the sense of the utter happiness the Celts usually felt about the place. Howard Rollin Patch describes how the Celtic Otherworld reflects the sense of life and regeneration, which Le Guin seems to depart from at least in her physical description of place. Patch notes that the Celts usually put their Otherworld in the West<sup>8</sup>, whereas in Tombs, Ged's journey is from Roke to the Kargish Lands, that is, a journey from west to east. Furthermore, Patch notices the placement of a garden within the Otherworld that is "watered by a fountain, and from this the inhabitants obtain the water of life" (619). Obviously, Le Guin departs from this description, as seen in the farthest depths of her Otherworld: "Nothing lived here, nothing at all, not even the rare, small, white spiders of the Labyrinth. The dust was thick, thick, and every grain of it might be . . . days, months, years, ages all gone to dust" (Le Guin, Tombs 114). This lack of water reflects Le Guin's decision to depict this feminine realm as one that, often like Tenar, lacks the vitality of the balance between male and female. Finally, Patch describes the voyage to the Otherworld as "nearly always over an expanse of water, frequently across the sea itself" (627). In Tombs, Ged's journey to the Otherworld in the Kargish Lands occurs over the sea. Likewise in Farthest, Ged travels across the ocean to Selidor to the opening of the Otherworld.

Even though the expanse of water might be perceived as a barrier to the Otherworld, it is important to note that the Celtic mind viewed the world of the living

---

<sup>8</sup> Christine Thompson notes that Ged's journey in The Farthest Shore to an Otherworld in the west mimics the Celt's placement of their Otherworld in the west.

to be in close proximity with the Otherworld. Gearoid O Crualaoich, in an essay in which he describes the relationships between the Otherworld of Hyde and Yates, sheds some light on the Celtic understanding of the closeness of the Otherworld: “A fundamental element of this ancestral Irish otherworld was the recognition that daily life is lived on the brink of another order of being, which is neither closed off nor far away” (227). According to the rules of the priestesses of the Place, only women and eunuchs can enter into the Labyrinth; if men were to enter, they would have to put to death or otherwise invoke the wrath of the Nameless Ones.

Nonetheless, Ged easily crosses the barrier between his world and the Otherworld. In her description of this ease of transition between one world and the other according to Celtic belief, Marjorie Burns comments that “the Otherworld is by no means readily accessible” (53), but “those who are deserving or destined” to find the Otherworld can do so, in a manner that is a “transfer...generally smooth and brief” (54, emphasis added). In Wizard when he releases the gebbeth from the other side in his attempt to summon Elfarran from the dead (Le Guin, Wizard 41), Ged proves his ease of opening, and therefore mastery, over the gates. He certainly does not show mastery of what he lets out of the gates, but that is another story. The Other Wind especially illustrates the effortlessness in which the living can travel between the lands of the living and the dead. “Twice, or three times, or every time my eyes close,” Alder explains, “I’m on the hill, and the wall below me, and the voices calling me” (Le Guin, Other 19-20).

The journeys into the Otherworld are easy for these main characters, yet as their adventures prove, escaping from the Otherworld is more difficult than it first

appears. Ged's easy entrance into the Otherworld, that is, into the labyrinth beneath the Hill of the Place, is countered by the difficulty he has in getting out. When he is underground and Tenar is watching him, he tries to cast a spell on the door leading to the outside, but "the powers that held the lock fast on the door were stronger than any magic he possessed" (Le Guin, Tombs 77)<sup>9</sup>.

However Le Guin's placement and description of the Otherworld differs slightly from Celtic beliefs, it coincides with what Miranda Green notes about one aspect of the Irish Land of the Dead. She calls it a "somber place, presided over by the god Donn, reflecting a dark aspect to the afterlife" (122). Noted largely as a solemn figure, the Celtic godhead Donn bears a relationship to the Nameless Ones. He was the first man on earth, and "as the first man alive, he was the first to die and thus to acquire control of the underworld, and it is to him that the spirits of the dead return after their earthly life. In Celtic mythology and Insular tradition, as Donn 'the brown or dark one,' he stands apart from other gods" (Cunliffe 187). Donn is not a perfect model of reference for the Nameless Ones, except for the description that the Nameless Ones, like Donn in Celtic mythology, are among the oldest entities of Earthsea.

Similarly in Le Guin's other Earthsea novels, the Otherworld is usually depicted as a stark, desolate place. In Farthest it is called "The Dry Land," with its

---

<sup>9</sup> This unsuccessful attempt to exit the Otherworld reflects the way in the Greeks perceived entering the Otherworld, as Christine Downing explains: "They [the Greeks] are not about the easy entrance into the underworld of the soul released from the body . . . but rather about the temporary, sometimes deliberate, sometimes forced, forays into the underworld of the still embodied. These are journeys that involve return or at least that are undertaken with the hope or assumed possibility of return" (117). Ged's most important objective is to find the other half of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe and join the broken parts, and Ged believes that he is going to return to Roke with the restored Rune of Peace.

entrance near the top of “the slope of a hill” (226), in which the dead “stood still, or moved slowly and with no purpose” (227). In Wizard, the entrance to the Otherworld is the place where Ged releases the gebbeth, on the “slopes of Roke Knoll [that] went up dark into the darkness” (59). Even so, the Celtic Otherworld is often depicted as a happy one, free from care, disease, old age and ugliness. Abundance, music and birdsong dominate the scene” (Green 122). Le Guin does not depict the happiness of the Otherworld in Tombs namely because of the lack of happiness of the priestesses who live in the Place. The priestesses’ strictures and rules, as well as their acknowledgement of the dark power of the Nameless Ones, deny happiness and any sense of timeless joy. Instead, her depiction of the Otherworld mirrors that which Donn presides over. Likewise, the dreariness and death of the Place only adds to Ged’s suffering, for if Ged were not the most powerful mage on Earthsea, he would have succumbed to the power of the Nameless Ones long since.

### **The Hill, The Place, and Celtic Spirituality**

Le Guin’s indebtedness to Celtic mythology is reflected in her placement of many of her important Otherworld crossings on top of or below hills. Skellig Michael, a craggy mountain island jutting up from the sea off the coast of Ireland, was considered a holy place by both the pagan Celts and Christian monks. James Roy relates the significance of Skellig Michael: “To the Celtic monk, Skellig Michael was an opening, a stairway if you will, an access point to heaven. But it was not comfortable, cozy, companionable, or complacent” (274). Just as Skellig Michael, a point elevated above everything else, is closest to “heaven,” so too does the Place function as an access point to the Nameless Ones. The narrator describes what the

Place looks like in Tombs. Moving past the golden roof of the Temple of the Godking one sees “higher up on the Hill of the Place, above them all, tawny and ruinous as the desert itself, the oldest of the temples of his race: the huge, low Hall of the Throne, with patched walls and flattish, crumbling dome” (15-16). The sacred place of the Nameless Ones is situated high on the hill above everything else, just as the heights of Skellig Michael reach above most everything else. Also, as noted earlier, Ged releases the gebbeth on top of a hill, and Alder finds himself on top of the hill leading into the land of the dead. Le Guin is influenced by the Celtic reverence for high places from the first book to the last.

Le Guin also shows Celtic reverence for land and nature. The Celts held the hills, streams, and trees in awe. In his essay “Landscape and the Celtic Soul,” James Roy states that “the Celts personalized their environment . . . usually feminizing it” (228). Le Guin constructs her narrative in Tombs and in her other novels to echo this feminization of the land, intimately incorporating character with environment. Le Guin’s narrator in Tombs calls the Place—where most of the action of the novel occurs—“the most ancient and sacred of all places in the Four Lands of the Kargish Empire” (15). Clearly, at least the way in which the Place is discussed, the land is held sacred. Furthermore, Tenar feels that the Place is violated when Ged makes his entrance into the Otherworld/Undertomb: “Sacrilege: the word came slowly into Arha’s mind. This was a man, and no man’s foot must ever touch the soil of the Tombs, the Holy Place” (71). Tenar feels violated that a man would set foot in her most sacred place, the land, the soil, the essence of that which the Nameless One inhabit and guard. Indeed, it is a symbolic rape according to Tenar’s point of view,

one that links with how the Celts felt connected to their land. Roy elucidates, “When enemies wreaked havoc [on the Celts], which usually took the form of cattle theft or straw piles put to torch, the customary formalized response was a deeply felt sense of melancholy, an idea that one’s own person had been violated” (228).

In addition to land, trees also had special importance in Celtic mythology. Many of these sacred trees were revered for their protective qualities. The hawthorn and the elder tree, for example, were believed to give protection against lightning strikes. The ash tree was a symbol of protection because it represented the “principle of stability” (Pennick 66-67). Tenar’s environment in Tombs, however, sorely lacks a comparable symbol of protection and stability until Ged’s entrance into her life. This lack parallels Tenar’s vulnerability, even though she sometimes feels her “exalted” position as the One Priestess makes her superior to the other High Priestesses.<sup>10</sup> In addition to its promise of rebirth, the Ring of Erreth-Akbe fills that lack of symbolic protection and stability, even though making it whole also causes Tenar to suffer.<sup>11</sup> A significant connection between Tombs and Celtic myth is the use of the apple. Pennick notes that apple orchards “are sacred Celtic groves” (114). The apple

---

<sup>10</sup> A good example is the altercation between Tenar and Kossil. Tenar curses Kossil openly in front of a crowd of other priestess (Le Guin, Tombs 121).

<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the environment in Tombs is desert, through which a “murky green river . . . flowed” (14). In contrast to Le Guin’s depiction of a dry land, the Celts held a “reverence for springs [that] was widespread” (Cunliffe 199). In the first paragraph of Farthest, the fountain stands in the center of a small court within four walls of the Great House, the “central place of wizardry” (1). Interestingly enough, though Roke is the center of the male hierarchy of power in the Archipelago, the Celtic influence pointed out here seems to be interjecting a hint of the feminine in the landscape within the center of Roke, especially if the Celts “usually feminiz[ed]” the landscape, as James Roy notes. This signifies that even within the original trilogy, Le Guin may have been trying to balance masculinity and femininity. The choice of this environment breaking with the sacredness of trees and springs points to Le Guin’s connection between the barrenness of place and the barrenness of choice for the women who live and worship the Nameless Ones and the male god figureheads in the Place. Perry Nodelman in “Reinventing the Past” makes a fascinating study of gender relations between the original trilogy and Tehanu, the supposed “last book” of Earthsea.

symbolizes fellowship between two female characters, Tenar and her friend Penthe. Penthe gives Tenar an apple after hearing that she was sick for some time. “I saved the very best ones out,” she tells Tenar (Le Guin, Tombs 45). The apple is significant in a text where the environment is a desert, for the apple represents sweetness and life in contrast to the dryness and death of the desert. Penthe herself in offering an apple to Tenar does not symbolize any significant protection or stability from the people who would cause the One Priestess harm. Only Ged in his quest for the Ring can offer these.

Although Tombs lacks the specific Celtic arboreal symbols of protection and stability, they exist elsewhere in many parts of the Earthsea Cycle. For example, the first chapter of Farthest is labeled “The Rowan Tree,” which makes a link to the rowan tree of Celtic mythology that wards off “witchcraft, bad luck, and harmful sprites” (Pennick 66). The ash tree is also specifically mentioned in Farthest as part of the bucolic setting: “the sun of March shone through young leaves of ash and elm, and water leapt and fell through shadow and clear light” (Le Guin, Farthest 1).

Tombs is also devoid of the wooded setting revered by the Celts. The narrator relates, “Behind the Hall and encircling the whole crest of the hill ran a massive wall of rock, laid without mortar and half fallen down in many places. Inside the loop of the wall several black stones eighteen or twenty feet high stuck up like hug fingers out of the earth . . . They stood there full of meaning, and yet there was no saying what they meant” (Le Guin, Tombs 16). The lack of vegetation accords with Roy’s assertion, “the holiest places in Ireland . . . do not invite us in” (247). As mentioned before, the Hill of the Place carries a similar atmosphere as Skellig

Michael: holy, but not comfortable, not cozy, never truly inviting. Indeed Tenar, even as high priestess of the Nameless Ones, does not often traverse the hillcrest of monoliths, and just “twice a year, at the full moon nearest the equinox of spring and autumn, there was a sacrifice before the Throne and she came out from the low back door of the Hall carrying a great brass basin full of smoking goat’s blood” (Le Guin, Tombs 17). This sacrifice parallels the act of “human sacrifice among the Gauls [that] is mentioned by several classic writers” (Cunliffe 191), Lucan, Poseidonus, and Strabo among them.

Tenar also undergoes her own mock sacrifice, initiating her into the priesthood that she is supposedly reincarnated into. In this scene Tenar is just a child, and a sword in the hands of an executioner is poised above her neck. Before the blade can descend, somebody dressed in black rushes out to stop the downward stroke. The two figures, which represent life and death, dash up the stairs, and a priestess comes out and pours a bowl of black liquid over the stones upon which she genuflects (Le Guin, Tombs 3). This ritualized mock beheading is important to the custom of acquiring a new One Priestess, and in this ritual Tenar loses her first name and becomes Arha, the Eaten One. “O let the Nameless Ones behold the girls given to them,” chant the priestesses, “who is verily the one born ever nameless. Let them accept her life and the years of her life until her death, which is also theirs. Let them find her acceptable. Let her be eaten!” (3). After this sacrifice, where she symbolically loses her head, she also loses her identity as Tenar. Le Guin’s narrative is informed by these Celtic viewpoints, which Pennick recounts: “According to Celtic belief, the human head contains the essence of an individual’s being” (75). Remove

the head, remove the essence, remove the identity. Of course Tenar cannot really be killed, but the mock sacrifice will have to suffice to appease the Nameless Ones she now serves as Arha.

In Le Guin's mythology, the space below the Hill of the Place is where the Nameless Ones dwell, and it appears that sacrifices, both mock and actual, take place to appease the spirits and to ensure that the ones they are giving them are worthy of acceptance. The control over whom or what is sacrificed to the Nameless Ones is Tenar's area of power and mastery. It may appear that due to Tenar's status as the One Priestess that she is a leader, but further examination of her role in the Place in the next chapter reveals that she is much less a leader of her order than she is just another sacrifice to the Nameless Ones.

Tenar's role as an increasingly independent woman grows throughout the course of the novel. In order for Tenar to grow as an independent woman in the world of Le Guin's Earthsea, she needs the help of a man: Ged. Her training as a priestess, symbolized by the ritual and loss of personal identity, does not allow her to grow as an independent woman by herself. Her independence is, paradoxically, dependent upon Ged's entrance into the Otherworld and into her life.

Nevertheless, after her self-burial in the depths of the Undertomb and her regeneration—rebirth—later in the text, Tenar reclaims her identity.<sup>12</sup> Tenar spends a lot of time beneath the earth in the tunnels, reflecting her loss of identity. Indeed, the darkness represents the state of nothingness into which descends her identity. Le Guin

---

<sup>12</sup> Only through the intervention of Ged does Tenar reclaim her identity.

mirrors Celtic burial practices and regeneration in Tenar's time in the darkness and her eventual rebirth from that darkness.

In his discussion of Celtic burial practices, Nigel Pennick claims, "These artificial hills of the dead were images of the otherworld. Those who died went inside the mound, leaving the world of the living to reenter the womb of Mother Earth. At death, part of the human spirit passed to the otherworld for regeneration and eventual rebirth" (79). Certainly this belief parallels Tenar's own reincarnation: "At the death of the One Priestess of the Tombs of Atuan, the ceremonies of burial and purification are completed within one month by the moon's calendar. After this certain of the Priestesses and Wardens of the Place . . . seek the girl-child who was born on the night of Priestess' death" (Le Guin, Tombs 9). The child is observed over a length of time, and if she is free from the diseases of childhood or is not physically deformed in any way, she will become the one who is known through her life as the "Priestess Ever Reborn" (9). Therefore, according to Kargish belief, the soul of the One Priestess is reborn after the body of the deceased priestess is buried—returned to Mother Earth—and the body of the next priestess is found to be without blemish—regenerated. This Kargish belief is another important link to the motif of regeneration that Le Guin establishes in Tombs and repeats elsewhere in the Earthsea Cycle.

Furthermore, the Place contains not only the Undertomb, but a vast Labyrinth of tunnels and caves. Most of this labyrinth, like the monoliths, is most likely created by human beings, and it mirrors the construction of caves and pits by Celtic societies to honor their dead and build for them an entrance to the Otherworld. Green provides a good description of why the Celts dug these pits:

The idea of sinking shafts into the ground seems to have been primarily for communication with underworld powers who inhabited regions deep below the earth. Human beings and animals were sacrificed to these deities, and they were propitiated also by offerings of food and other items. The Deal find<sup>13</sup> is extraordinary in showing us, perhaps, a glimpse of how such deities were thought of by the Celtic devotees. (135)

After her time spent underground in the very Otherworld Ged travels into, Tenar loses her imposed non-identity as Arha, is reborn, and surfaces.

Ged, on the other hand, does not face similar struggles with the loss of identity. As the mock sacrifice for Tenar means loss of identity, language for Ged through the Old Tongue means an increase in spells, therefore further developing his sense of identity. In conjunction with the Celts, wizards have been compared to Druids. Thompson makes a particularly good comparison between the Druids and the Wizards of Roke:

The training of the wizards of Roke has much in common with what is known of the druids in Ancient Celtic times. The apprentices are like apprentice druids, an elite group, chosen because of innate ability, and put through a lengthy, rigorous, secret training, learning the lore of the past and the arts of making magic, and learning the ethics of practising their art. The apprentices learn runes and spells and charms, all depending on accurate repetition of the exact words; they learn the

---

<sup>13</sup> An excavation in Kent, England, discussed by Green (my footnote).

songs that retell the deeds of past heroes, thereby learning the traditions of the past. (20)

The following chapter demonstrates the important role language plays in shifting the balance of power between Ged and Tenar toward Ged, but at this point it is significant that learning the exact words for spells is essentially what makes Ged a wizard. His knowledge of words for spells is exceptional, and even his quest for the Ring of Erreth-Akbe brings him to discover a lost word in the Old Tongue, the Lost Rune, the Bond Rune, the sign of peace.

Seemingly naturally intelligent, however, Tenar has her own rituals and words she must memorize, as the Wizards memorize the Old Speech. Roy notes that in an illiterate Celtic society “oral culture thus favored the man with the most prodigious memory, and his skill in presenting the Word was immensely powerful” (232). In Tombs Tenar must memorize and sing “the songs whose words no man understood, which she had learned syllable by syllable, long ago, from Thar” (Le Guin, Tombs 49). Tenar’s songs and dances are not only a communion with the Nameless Ones, but also a communion with the feminine, since she knows words to songs that “no man understood.” Ged shows a similar ability to commune with the creatures of the world around him in his demonstration of his power over a rabbit, as examined in Chapter Two. In discussing the way in which Celtic society revered the spoken word, Pennick explains, “There are a number of important principles in Celtic myth, in which the naming of things is paramount. According to Celtic teachings, the true essence of anything is contained magically within its real name. When we know someone’s or something’s true name, then we have power over it” (57). Le Guin

echoes this Celtic attitude: “Since the name of the person is the person, in the most literal and absolute sense, anyone who knows it has real power, power of life and death, over the person” (Tales From Earthsea 309). Power, control, naming, gaze, and gender is discussed at length in the next chapter, but for now it suffices that Le Guin makes a very obvious connection here to the way in which the Celts imagined the power of the names of things.

### **The Quest for the Rebirth**

Le Guin draws not only important relationships to the landscape and spirituality of the Celts, she also echoes an important theme found in The Mabinogion, a collection of Welsh stories: even in death exists the possibility of rebirth. This next section explores the relationship among the Celtic cauldron, the Holy Grail, and the Ring of Erreth-Akbe. Upon comparing some early rebirth motifs in The Mabinogion to the origins of the grail story, a clear connection between the grail, at least in its archaic form before the introduction of Christian elements and Tombs becomes clear.

The cauldron is a significant element of Celtic mythology. The story of “Branwen, Daughter of Llŷr” in The Mabinogion is a good example of the motif of rebirth by means of the cauldron: “The Irish . . . began to kindle a fire under the cauldron of rebirth; corpses were thrown in it until it was full, and the next morning the warriors sprang forth as fierce as ever” (79). Another story that depicts rebirth through cauldron is found in “Peredur, Son of Evrawg.” In this story, the cauldron is symbolized by a tub in which a woman bathes a corpse. After being rubbed with ointment, the corpse comes back to life (242). The most important part of this

segment of the story is the touch of the woman giving life back to the dead. Indeed, it is Tenar who is holding the ring of Erreth-Akbe when Ged uses his wizardry to reunite the pieces: “She felt a queer little tremor on the palm of her hand, as if a small animal sleeping there had moved” (Le Guin, Tombs 141). Rebirth needs the touch of a woman, and the Ring of Erreth-Akbe symbolizes the restoration and rebirth of the world, like the corpse bathed, anointed, and brought back to life in the Celtic cauldron.

Historically, the stories of the Holy Grail follow those of the cauldron.<sup>14</sup> As noted above, a connection between Tombs and the Holy Grail exists,<sup>15</sup> although at least one other scholar disagrees. Brian Atterbery makes the claim that there is no grail story in Le Guin’s Earthsea fiction and that “there is no Welsh or Irish legend to give us the story unadorned” (269-70), but a thorough study of the interconnectedness that Le Guin shares with the power of the cauldron and the grail as symbolized in the Ring of Erreth-Akbe shows that Atterbery’s argument does not hold true. The evidence herein refutes Atterbery’s claims that there is no grail story within the Earthsea cycle and that there is no Celtic mythic tradition with which to reflect. Remington points out that there is a link between the Sword of Erreth-Akbe, set atop the highest tower in Havnor, and the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, which Tenar eventually wears. He claims that the sword, “the Lance, or Spear, representing the male,” and the ring, “the Cup, or Vase, the Female, reproductive energy,” are symbols of the grail story (282).

---

<sup>14</sup> See Jeffrey Gantz’s introduction to The Mabinogion and Jean Markle’s Women of the Celts

<sup>15</sup> See “A Time to Live and a Time to Die: Cyclical Renewal in the Earthsea Trilogy” by Thomas Remington. He makes a good case for a connection between the grail story and the Sword and the Ring of Erreth-Akbe.

Remington does not push the link to its furthest possible point, however. He does not link the Holy Grail to its symbolic predecessor, the Celtic cauldron. The cauldron serves as a symbol of rebirth in a pagan manner instead of the grail that serves as a symbol of Christianity. Le Guin has called herself a “congenital non-Christian,”<sup>16</sup> and it seems that she avoids consciously integrating Christian symbols in to the text. By linking the symbolic properties of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe to the Celtic cauldron, Le Guin has also inadvertently delved into the tradition of the grail.

Scholars have long noted the relationship between the Christianized Grail story and its Celtic parallels: “Of course the Holy Grail undoubtedly owes much to the numerous vessels and platters in The Mabinogion; the cauldron in ‘Branwen,’ the bowl in ‘Manaydan,’ the cauldron in ‘Culhwch,’ the bowl in ‘Owein,’ and the salver in ‘Peredur’ (Gantz 26). Le Guin draws from the same sources, or at the least the same archetypal ideas in the imagery of rebirth and circularity. Cauldrons, bowls, and even tubs to a certain extent are circular, as is the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, and their role is to restore death to life. Pennick points out, “The Holy Grail is a perfect amalgamation of pagan and Christian spirituality . . . [and it] may be no more than an illusion that leads people on a fruitless search to find it” (63). The quest for the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, on the other hand, is no illusion. Ged’s work gets finished. The ring is united: “It is whole now as if it had never been broken” (Le Guin, Tombs 142).

It is Jean Markale, though, who thoroughly explores the Quest for the Grail in relationship to its feminine and Celtic identity:

---

<sup>16</sup> As quoted by Laura Comoletti and Michael Drout in “How They Do Things With Words: Language, Power, Gender, and the Priestly Wizards of Ursula Le Guin’s Earthsea Books” (114).

Of all Celtic myths, or myths incorporated into that context, the myth of the Grail has been the most persistent, and has given rise to the greatest number of variations and interpretations. The Grail itself has meant whatever one wished it to mean, both in the Middle Ages and in modern times; and, though undoubtedly a pagan object, it was transformed by early thirteenth-century Cistercian mysticism into an esoteric sacred vessel. (173)

Le Guin has incorporated the myth of the Grail into her body of literature, and though her Earthsea novels largely lack Christian mythology, the Ring of Erreth-Akbe serves as a symbol important not only to Ged's and Tenar's spiritual and emotional rebirth but to the whole of Earthsea. Here Le Guin has made the grail take its form in the Ring of Erreth-Akbe. The Ring is sacred, and it is the "vessel" through which Ged believes Earthsea can be transformed.

Most Grail stories share some basic components. Markale outlines these:

So, from whatever angle one analyses the legend of the Grail and all its many versions, some permanent and fundamental themes emerge: vengeance by blood after some action that has shaken the balance of the world and led to the infertility of the kingdom; the impotence of the king who can no longer rule; ritual sacrifice, whether human or animal or through some substitution of the victim or offering; tasks inflicted on those who set out on the Quest; female characters who belong to a fairy world and guide those who take part in the Quest; and the queen, princess or empress who controls the drink of the power

and sovereignty, which is given only to the man who has overcome all the tasks. (199, Markale's emphases)

Not all of these common themes fit within Le Guin's narrative, but her text does include several interesting points of similarity. One of these points is the reasoning behind Ged's quest, which is for the most part noble: he wants to restore the Ring. There is no "vengeance by blood" on Ged's part, but he does seek out the Ring to restore the shaken balance of the world: "I told them that if they liked, I would go seek the rest of the ring in the Tombs of Atuan, in order to find the Lost Rune, the key to peace. For we need peace sorely in the world" (Le Guin, Tombs 136). The "impotence of the king" reflects the absence of a king on the throne of Havnor, and according to the wizards in Earthsea, with no king there can be no rule. As for the "tasks," it is simply the rigors of Ged's quest that he must go through: inability to free himself (77), lack of water (84), tests of memory (85), restoration of the Ring (141), and holding back the darkness (147).

Tenar also fulfills certain roles in the quest, as her journey for identity and Ged's quest for the Ring inevitably link together. As stated above, Tenar is a part of "ritual sacrifice," both mock and real. She does not necessarily belong to a "fairy world," but definitely to the Otherworld into which Ged intrudes. She also acts on a number of occasions as Ged's guide, protector, and ultimately, rescuer, which ties into her role as the One Priestess, the "queen, princess, or empress": "At each halt Arha dripped some of the water she had brought in a flask into the mouth of the man, a little at a time, lest life returning kill him" (91). Even though Ged ultimately holds up the roof of the Tombs to keep it from collapsing upon them, Tenar is the one who

first had the power to decided whether Ged should live; however, though Tenar might play an important part in the restoration of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe and be an essential component in the link to the grail story, the question of whether Tombs is Ged's or Tenar's story remains.

### **Is This Ged's Story?**

The analysis so far has focused on Le Guin's association in Tombs and other Earthsea novels and stories to Celtic mythology, while showing that Le Guin incorporates into her narrative the feminine through the use of the Celtic. While the first and third books of the Cycle, Wizard and Farthest, focus exclusively on the male perspective, the second book seems to focus on the feminine perspective. Le Guin also scatters hints of the feminine throughout the masculine world on Roke island, which connects with Roy's statement that the Celts oftentimes feminized the landscape. Furthermore, these pockets of femininity within a larger backdrop of masculinity are similar to the idea of the heterotopia, which I develop in Chapter Two. Though it would seem that Tombs is the only book of the original trilogy displaying a feminine perspective, it may in fact be another one of Ged's stories.

The claim could be made that since the narrator tells Tombs from Tenar's point of view, then it must be Tenar's story. Le Guin scholars such as Gail Sobat read Tenar as a heroine.<sup>17</sup> Sobat, however, does not account for Ged's journey and how crucial his quest is in the driving of the action of the text, so although her comparison to Pratt's theory of the heroine's quest is informative, her analysis that Tenar is a

---

<sup>17</sup>In "The Heroine's Quest for Self in Ursula K. Le Guin's The Tombs of Atuan," Sobat shows this in a compelling comparison to Annis Pratt's outline of the different stage of the heroine's quest (24).

heroine is not quite accurate. If one were to argue that Tenar is a heroine simply because the story is told from her point of view, then it is possible to rebut that claim by arguing that though she may be a heroine she is certainly no feminist heroine: Ged drives much of the impetus for action. It is Ged's quest into the Otherworld that shakes up Tenar's life, and it is Ged's search for the Ring of Erreth-Akbe that compels him down into the Undertomb. Without Ged's action, there is no reaction from Tenar. Without Ged, there is no Tenar, only Arha, and Arha would have not struggled with authority and begun to develop independent thought separate from the influence of the Archmage.

Other critics have noted that although Tombs is told from a female's perspective, the story is actually an extension of Ged's experiences. Jungian psychoanalytic theory and Perry Nodelman's interpretation of that theory in comparison to the original trilogy supports this assertion: "Jung asserts significant differences in the psychological makeup of males and females when he posits the existence of a female principle in males, the anima, and an equivalent male principle in females, the animus" (183). Nodelman continues:

[the trilogy can be seen as a singular] sequential story of one psyche's integration, as represented by Ged ... In Wizard, he confronts his shadow, those aspects of himself his conscious mind has rejected and must acknowledge; then in Tombs he moves down into his unconscious, as represented by the underground tombs of Atuan, and there confronts his anima, Tenar, and integrates it into himself as he

places the ring of Erreth Akbe on Tenar's wrist; in The Farthest Shore, finally, the anima Arha is replaced by Arren. (183)

Therefore, according to this analysis, Ged's involvement in Tombs is just a continuation of his story, as begun in Wizard.<sup>18</sup>

Ged may indeed have a greater claim on driving the action of the novel. Unfortunately for Tenar, whose characteristics as Arha are ever apparent when she confirms her role in the Place and rejects Penthe's exhibition of a greater will to change her life's circumstances and environment (19), her beliefs as Arha only affirm the need for Ged to enter the Tombs to make something happen. At first, Ged quests solely for the Ring of Erreth-Akbe and for its symbols of rebirth, the roots of which are evident in the grail and the cauldron. His quest drives the action of the novel because his actions eventually change Arha into Tenar.

Even though the action of Tombs belongs more to Ged than to Tenar, the text suggests that a balance between the sexes might exist in the Earthsea novels. Ged enters into the labyrinth of a woman and helps to bring together the pieces of the Ring in order to resurrect the lost rune. Sobat calls this the "marriage of true minds" between Tenar and Ged, and, in what might be seen as a type of ritual marriage ceremony, the two halves of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe are joined. . . . With the mending of the two halves, the Rune of Peace is restored and harmony will reign in Earthsea" (30). Holly Littlefield responds to this prophecy: "According to the wizards and mages, once the Ring of Erreth-Akbe was reunited and a king sat on the throne in

---

<sup>18</sup> "Bright the Hawk's Flight: The Journey of the Hero in Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea Trilogy" by Virginia White provides an intriguing analysis of the ways in which all three books of the original Earthsea Trilogy can be interpreted as one continuous quest embarked upon by Ged.

Havnor, all would be right again in Earthsea; an era of peace and prosperity should now be upon them. It is made clear right away in the beginning of Tehanu, however, that this is not the case” (252). While this is true, the final novel, The Other Wind, ushers in a new peace, a new balance, especially one over life and death and the destruction of the wall retaining the souls of the dead (Le Guin, Other 205). It is overly optimistic to think that the prophecy of the ring of Erreth-Akbe would be fulfilled right away. Consistent with the action and themes of Le Guin’s novels, there has to be a death in order to be a rebirth; there must be a significant struggle beforehand. One cannot expect the Ring just to work immediately. At any rate, such an instantaneous working of the Ring would distort the continual death and rebirth motif Le Guin weaves throughout the whole of her Earthsea texts.

So far, the analysis of Tombs has focused on the Celtic elements within the text and Ged’s importance in driving the action of the novel. Tenar’s role, however significant it is, appears to be of slightly less important than Ged’s. As the Ring stands for balance as much as it does for peace, the text does not reflect the balance symbolized by the joining of the Ring. Nevertheless, Tenar’s importance to the text can be summed up best by Ged: “Look! In the place of darkness I found the light, her spirit. By her an old evil was brought to nothing. By her I was brought out of the grave. By her the broken was made whole, and where there was hatred there will be peace” (Le Guin, Tombs 178). The following chapter focuses on Tenar’s role in the Place and in the worship of the Nameless Ones and her entrapment within a world dominated by patriarchal structures despite Le Guin’s best attempts to construct what appears to be a matriarchy.

## Chapter Two

### The World of the Matriarchs Versus the World of the Patriarchs:

#### Dominance, Struggle, and Imbalance

As Le Guin uses Celtic mythology in the creation of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, likewise the analysis of the Ring sets the stage for its ultimate symbolic failure. The Ring of Erreth-Akbe, the symbol of peace and balance, is undermined by the imbalances between male and female. Le Guin depicts this imbalance through the portrayal of the roles of men and women on both societal and individual levels. The women of the Place are aware and proud of their heritage, for men, kings, and princes used to seek their wisdom. The time in which the action of the novel occurs shows the decay, decline, and eventual destruction of the physical and cultural place in which the priestesses live. Altogether, the structure and rules of the Place symbolizes a past the priestesses cannot preserve in the face of the overarching control of the patriarchy of the Kargish Empire. Their Place is in fact a heterotopia, an isolated space containing within it the cultural imprint of the place from which it comes.

The originating imprint of the current heterotopia, a past utopian society of women in the Place, used to hold cultural, governmental, and economic power. The patriarchy, however, as represented covertly by the emergence of the power of the Godking and the Twin Gods as well as overtly symbolized by the arrival of Ged, eventually holds power over the heteropic society in which Tenar supposedly has supreme control. Ultimately, the patriarchal system of the Kargad Lands has cultural, governmental, and economic control over the priestesses of the Place. Furthermore, Le Guin echoes this structure in the relationship between Ged and Tenar. Tenar, who

held the power at first, loses it to Ged. Therefore, though the Ring of Erreth-Akbe symbolizes rebirth and balance, these symbols in Tombs are ultimately flawed. The matriarchy crumbles, and the patriarchy triumphs. Tenar is dominated by Ged.

Tombs, which is bound on all levels by the patriarchy, is consequently no feminist text, and Tenar is no feminist heroine.

The analysis of the topics of this chapter is developed through three main sections. The first section examines the similarities between the religious practices of the Place and the religious practices of Celtic women. Then a careful consideration of the construction and the role of the matriarchy of the Place reveals that the matriarchy seems to adhere to Heide Gottner-Abendroth's definition of matriarchy, but in fact the Place is a heterotopia of the Place of the past, in which a true matriarchy was respected and revered by the inhabitants of the Kargad Lands. Michel Foucault's explanation of the heterotopia makes clear the idea that the Place is a reflection of the past utopian structure of the Place. Moreover, it is a heterotopia in threat of crumbling in the face of a stronger, much more pervasive and persuasive patriarchy.

The second section reveals the ways in which the patriarchy dominates the heterotopic matriarchy and examines what constitutes a patriarchal system and how it opposes and dominates the matriarchal system. Of especial importance are the ways in which the Kargish Empire holds cultural, governmental, and economic supremacy over the Place and its caretakers. These three aspects demarcate the power of the men of the Kargad Lands. This system of control is covert, however, since the priestesses seem to be unaware of its dominance and its effects on their lives. Tenar's role as the One Priestess of the Tombs of Atuan is a construction of the strictures and tradition of

the Place, but it is also one that makes her feel empowered. In fact, she does manipulate and show strength over the strongest mage in all of Earthsea. Then Tenar loses power to Ged, just as the matriarchy loses power to the patriarchy. When Ged enters into Tenar's life, on the other hand, he brings with him the influences of another patriarchy, an overt system of control by the Wizards of Roke. He also brings with him the method of ultimate control over Tenar: language.

The third section once again revisits the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, its relationship to rebirth, and its symbolic failure in this text due to the imbalances between men and women on societal and individual levels. Furthermore, there are connections between the imbalances within the text and the cultural context within which Le Guin was writing. Altogether, the dominance of the masculine in Tombs gives way to the power of the feminine in Tehanu and The Other Wind, thus taking Tenar from being a non-feminist heroine into being a feminist heroine in her own right, with her own thoughts, and her own decisions. Themes of masculine dominance in Tombs give way to themes of feminine power in the subsequent Earthsea books. Tombs, however, is still reflective of the patriarchy in which it was written.

The crumbling of the ancient matriarchy in favor of the newness of the patriarchy is also reflective of the social system in which Le Guin grew up. According to Judith Butler, "Irigaray argues that both the subject and the Other are masculine mainstays of a closed phallogocentric signifying economy that achieves its totalizing goal through the exclusion of the feminine altogether" (9). As mentioned above, Le Guin published Tombs in 1970, and though she was aware of the feminist movement, it does not seem to impact Tombs as much as it influenced Tehanu and

the latter Earthsea stories and novels. “Briefly,” Le Guin begins, “I was slow and kind of stupid in some ways. This present wave of feminism started in the mid-60s. It was partly fueled by the misogyny of the New Left. There’s no doubt about that. Women found themselves pushed aside” (Walsh 204). Walsh’s interview with Le Guin took place in 1995, twenty-five years after the publication of Tombs. Tombs reflects the way in which the patriarchal society was trying to dominate and exclude the feminine, and as Irigaray would have it, the domination came through the use of a closed phallogocentric economy. The priestesses, however, still think they have power. The following section explores the failure of that power.

### **The Decay of the Matriarchy and Failure of the Heterotopia:**

#### **Social Instabilities of Tenar’s Domain**

Tenar’s role in her domain has a lot in common with the role of women in Celtic religious practices. Strabo, a Greek geographer and historian during the rule of Augustus, noted that there existed women’s religious practices that showed the strength and sometimes barbarism of women in these isolated communities. He described an island on which a group of women lived and worshiped the god Dionysus in strange, ritualistic ways. Men were not allowed on the island. Once a year, they demolished the roof of their temple and rebuilt it before nightfall, yet the unfortunate woman who dropped her load of the rebuilding material was torn apart by the other women (Freeman 121).

The role and religious functions of the priestesses of the Place parallel this example of isolated religious practice. For instance, most of the priestesses worship either the Twin Gods or the Godking; the worship of a male figurehead, as in the

worship of Dionysus, is more important than the worship of a goddess. Just as the woman who failed to help rebuild the roof of the temple was sacrificed, so do the priestesses of the Place engage in ritual sacrifice to perpetuate their holy sacraments. Men were not allowed on the island of Celtic women, just as men are not allowed in the Undertomb, which in Tombs serves as a metaphorical island of isolation. Le Guin's tale reflects the elements of sacrifice and isolation in Celtic mythology

Isolation of woman on islands also occurs in Celtic stories. Phillip Freeman identifies these Celtic elements in medieval texts: "Even medieval sources may retain some vague memories of earlier Celtic religious women living on sacred islands. One such story is a Welsh tale called The Spoils of the Un-World that describes nine virgins on an island caring for the fire beneath a supernatural caldron. This magical pot was sought after by King Arthur as a forerunner of the Holy Grail" (125).

Although the specifics differ in Tombs, the theme of the stories is essentially the same. I have already pointed out the connections among the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, the cauldron of rebirth of early Welsh texts, and the Holy Grail. Although Tenar is not consciously guarding or caring for the Ring as the nine virgins in The Spoils of the Un-World care for the fire beneath the cauldron, she still remains in the dark spaces of the Labyrinth that serve as the protector of the Ring until the arrival of Ged. The Welsh story describes an island of isolated, religiously devoted women; similarly Tenar and the other priestesses are just as isolated.

This isolation takes place in a world dominated by men. Wendy Davies notes, "It is scarcely remarkable that [Celtic] societies, like most others, were dominated by men: men were the actors in public life; they had powers over persons, themselves

and others . . . Both Irish and Welsh material clearly suggests that women were considered subject to men” (148). The role of religious isolation of women may have served as an outlet to escape the dominating influence of men. Unfortunately, in the community of women of the Place, the women are still subject to men or male godheads: “They learned the sacred songs and the sacred dances, the histories of the Kargad Lands, and the mysteries of whichever of the gods they were dedicated to: the Godking who ruled in Awabath, or the Twin Brothers, Atwah and Wuluah. Of them all, only Arha learned the rites of the Nameless Ones, and these were taught her by one person, Thar, the High Priestess of the Twin Gods” (Le Guin, Tombs 13). The priestesses, regardless of their worship in relative isolation, serve male entities, thrusting them further into a world dominated by men.

A matriarchal utopia used to exist in the Place, however, showing that at some time in the past the feminine was at the very least equal with the masculine. Manan explains to Tenar that men used to seek the power of the Nameless Ones through the wisdom of women. Long ago, the women used to settle quarrels between the petty princes and chiefs of the Kargad Lands, thereby showing the importance of women in the everyday lives of the governing bodies of the Kargish people. It all changed when the Priest-Kings consolidated their power over the Kargad Lands, and the counsel of the Nameless Ones went into disuse (28). This past matriarchy was the foundation for the current social structure of the Place.

A working definition of a matriarchy serves as a tool to show the ways in which the current Place is a heterotopia of the past matriarchy in danger of destruction. Heide Gottner-Abendroth, former professor at the University of Munich,

universally defines the matriarchy on four interconnecting levels: economic, social, political, and cultural. Although the current Place does not fit into two out of the four different aspects of a matriarchy, the utopian matriarchy of the past certainly does. On the economic level, “matriarchies are most often agricultural societies in which women have control of the means of production” (1). The utopian matriarchy is economically sound, for if the text does not explicitly explain that the women are the means of agricultural production, then it is at least clear in that people from all over the Kargad Islands used to come to the Place to offer gifts of gold and other wealth, which are buried and all but forgotten beneath the Place in the Great Treasure Room of the Tombs of Atuan (Le Guin, Tombs 114). This great massing of wealth shows that the priestesses were economically sound at one point. “On the social level,” according to Gottner-Abendroth, “people live together in clans that are formed according to the principle of matrilinearity, in which kinship, clan names, social positions, and political titles are passed on through the female line” (2). Only females, serving as priestesses, are allowed in positions of power. All titles are passed on through the female line, and the social relationships the women have are clan-like in effect, with each woman knowing her place in the social hierarchy. It seems that both the current and past societies of the Place were similar, if not equal, in their understanding of social hierarchy and with all titles passing on to women.

The political level of the current Place, by way of contrast, differs greatly from the past utopian matriarchy. Essentially, “no member of the household is excluded” from the political process (2). Sharing authority and decision making, princes and kings seek the advice of the priestesses and the Nameless Ones when the

utopian matriarchy is strong. Once the Kargish Empire comes into existence, the role of the priestesses in the political process all but ceases. The cultural level, however, has remained the same throughout the years. Gottner-Abendroth explains the following:

On the cultural level, matriarchal societies have a complex religious system that must not be characterized as ‘fertility cult.’ The fundamental concept expressed in myths, rituals, and spiritual customs is the concrete belief in rebirth. Every person knows that after death she ...will be reborn as a child into the same clan. This concept is the basis of the matriarchal view of life, which honors the cycle of growth, death, and return of life within the cycles of nature. The Earth is venerated as the Great Mother who grants rebirth and nurtures all. (4)

The religious system of the Place demonstrates the nature of the “complex religious system,” which believes in rebirth and contains a ritualized form of worship. On the whole, the priestesses still believe theirs to be a strong society of women.

Though the priestesses believe they still have a powerful matriarchy, their society is actually a heterotopia of the past utopian society of women. While this past is a source of pride and perceived power, it is the cause of the rigid structure that sets up the ultimate destruction of the Place. In his essay “Of Other Spaces,” Michele Foucault calls the ship “the heterotopia par excellence” (27), and to extend this metaphor, the social structure of the Place is like a ship that carries with it that little piece of the place from which it comes, the past utopian matriarchy. Just like a ship lost beneath the ocean, the Place is eventually swallowed by the earth.

Foucault describes five principles upon which a heterotopia operates. He notes in his first principle that there is probably no society that exists without some kind of heterotopia; he observes further that “in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted upon utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (24). The utopian matriarchy of the Place represents a foundational society, and the Place as it now stands both represents and inverts the ideals of the past, where the women were revered for their knowledge and wisdom. Its current function, analyzed in this and the next section, shows it to be a failing society, a sinking ship so to speak.

The fifth principle describes the ways in which the heterotopia can be entered. Foucault states, “Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closings that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopia site is not fully accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory . . . or else the individual has to submit to rites and purification” (26). In its physical location in the middle of the desert, the Place remains rather isolated. The Undertomb is perhaps the most isolated area of the Place, but it is precisely into this space that Ged penetrates. Tenar’s space in the Undertomb, though not freely accessible for most people, needs its rites, ritual, and rules for entrance. It requires the sanctity of darkness, a woman, or a eunuch; that is, the space needs these symbols of purity to prevent offending the Nameless Ones. Ged breaks the rules by shining his werelight in the darkness, and Tenar understands this violation to be sacrilegious (Le Guin, Tombs 71). Though

celibate, which castrates him symbolically, Ged is still no eunuch. He is in clear violation of the rules; he is not a purified individual. Moreover, Ged's entrance is not compulsory; rather, he embarks on a journey to the Tombs of Atuan on his own free will. His entrance precipitates the downfall of the Place, the greatest and last change the Place encounters.

The second principle, the most important principle to Tombs, describes the manner in which an existing heterotopia, ubiquitous throughout every society, can change. "The second principle of this description of heterotopias," Foucault explains, "is that a society, as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another" (25). Even as the place cannot exist synchronously with its matriarchal past, certainly the Place changes even more drastically than it already has; at the end of the novel, it is destroyed. At an earlier point in its history, however, the Place is revered for the skills of its women, marking both the power of the women in the culture and the respect for women the Kargish people once showed the priestesses. The history of the Kargish Empire is unfolding to the point where the patriarchy is overwhelming the positions of power of the past, thereby relegating the Place to an inferior position in society. Though the Place is a heterotopia that mirrors a past society that once highly valued women as a source of knowledge, wisdom, and guidance, it no longer reflects the dominant society. The threat of its sinking and destruction is realized at the end of the novel when the physical realm is annihilated beneath billowing swells of rock and dirt.

Overall, the patriarchy looms above all aspects of the text, dominating the heterotopic matriarchy and setting the stage for its doom.

### **The Ascendancy of the Patriarchy: Masculine Forms of Control**

The weakening of the heterotopic matriarchy causes a power vacuum that allows for masculine forms of control to infiltrate, if not easily, then eventually and with permanent results. First of all, the Kargish Empire has long since assumed control over the cultural, governmental, and economic aspects of the islands and the Place. The results of this multi-faceted form of control has made even a high priestess believe that worshipping a male Godking has much more relevance and much more purpose than the worship of the Nameless Ones. Second, Tenar's diminishing power in her society allows for Ged to eventually demonstrate his dominance, imparting an overt form of patriarchy over the covert form the priestesses believe has very little control over them. Initially, Tenar has power of surveillance and life or death over Ged, but as the narrative progresses, the One Priestesses surrenders her power and falls under the control of the Archmage from Roke.

In order to analyze the patriarchal dominance in this section in comparison to the heterotopic matriarchy, a working definition of what constitutes a patriarchy needs to be considered. Heide Hartman succinctly describes the patriarchy "as a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchal, establish or create independence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women" (143). The analysis in this section shows this definition to be true. Steven Goldberg adds to the definition: "Patriarchy is universal. For all the variety different societies have demonstrated in developing different types of

political, economic, religious, and social systems, there has never been a society which fails to associate hierarchal authority and leadership in these areas with men” (15). Even in Le Guin’s text with its powerful women, the universality of the patriarchy shows. Goldberg even claims that a real-life matriarchy is nothing more than myth and legend, used as a literary device to “ridicule men,” and as myth to “reflect male fears,” but “as anthropological descriptions of real societies [it is] nonsense” (19). Tombs neither ridicules men nor reflects male fears, but it does fit into Goldberg’s claim of the universality of patriarchy.

Furthermore, even if a society begins as a utopian matriarchy, it will still fall eventually beneath the ubiquity of a patriarchal system according to the ideas postulated by Goldberg. The heterotopic matriarchy, on the other hand, still struggles to define itself as a powerful place in opposition to the patriarchy. The heterotopia is crumbling beneath the weight of the patriarchy, and its final demise by getting sucked into the earth and Tenar’s fleeing into the Archipelago shows that Le Guin’s texts argue that the patriarchy, in either its covert or overt forms, will eventually reign.

The High Priestess Kossil shows explicitly how the heterotopic matriarchy is failing and allowing the patriarchy supremacy over the priestesses’ cultural bonds. The priestesses who serve either the Twin Brothers or the Godking are usually devoted to serving their male gods. Tenar, as Arha, is also devoted to her gods, the Nameless Ones, and through her forms of rite and ritual, as expounded in the previous chapter, shows more of a devotion to the past utopian matriarchy mirrored in the heterotopia than does Kossil. To exemplify this point, Tenar and Kossil argue about whose god is stronger: “All that happens in his realm is the concern of the Godking,

the Man Immortal, whose servant I am. Even into the places underground and into the hearts of men does he search and look, and none shall forbid him entrance!” (Le Guin, Tombs 119). Even though Kossil does not mention the Undertomb and the Nameless Ones by name, clearly she perceives that the male godhead is much stronger than the Nameless Ones Tenar serves. When in anger Tenar curses Kossil at the end of their altercation, she is inadvertently showing her disgust that not only has the reign of the Godking, the “Man Immortal,” weakened the priestesses’ bonds to the past, but that the members of the heterotopic matriarchy are also fighting among each other. It strains their cultural bonds, it weakens their sense of self-identity, and it throws them into a fight among themselves instead of strengthening the system that each of them supposedly treasures.

When Kossil berates Tenar, she also indicates the Kargish patriarchy has increased governmental control over the Place, at least symbolically. She also shows that some women perceive that a male figurehead has authority over all, even over the sanctity of religious worship and the past. The social hierarchy among the men in the Kargad Lands has established that the Godking, a male, is the ruler and that all, even Tenar’s Nameless Ones, are subordinate to him. It matters not that the Godking could in fact hold no power over the Nameless Ones. The perception that he is more powerful, established by the formation of the male hierarchy, gives Kossil her sense of his superiority over all.

The economic base of power resides in the hands of men. In comparison to the golden, resplendent domes of the Godking, the temples of the Place are crumbling and decaying. The narrator describes this comparison:

Showier, and centuries newer, was the Temple of the Godking a little below it ... Only after a traveler approaching from the east had seen the gold roof and the bright columns would he see, higher up on the Hill of the Place, above them all, tawny and ruinous as the desert itself, the oldest of the temples of his race: the huge, low Hall of the Throne, with patched walls and flattish, crumbling dome. (15-16)

This description is a clear indicator that the gold in the coffers of the Kargad Lands are devoted to the beautification of the temples and buildings associated with the powerful Godking and the Twin Brothers. Little or no capital has been devoted to the upkeep of the Hall of the Throne, with its crumbling dome signifying the falling of the matriarchy and the full establishment of the patriarchy. Money, time, effort, energy are all expended in the effort to support and maintain those establishments that sustain the patriarchy, which is creeping further into the lives of all priestesses and the holiness of the Place. By reiterating Irigaray's position on the "phallogocentric signifying economy that achieves its totalizing goal through the exclusion of the feminine altogether" (Butler 9), it is clear that in Tombs that closed economy is symbolized by the glittering golden dome of the Godking. The men have the power to control the resources of the land, thereby excluding the women from even general upkeep of their holiest of structures. In the buildings devoted to the male godheads, it shows the depth to which the feminine is excluded from economic power.

In contrast, Tenar tries to adhere to the old beliefs and her position of power. Though the heterotopic matriarchy is decaying and falling under the control of the patriarchy, she tries to maintain control over the intrusion of the Archmage into her

most sacred space. Tenar manipulates the space of the Labyrinth she knows intimately. Ged, who cannot know his way around in the Labyrinth never having been there before, is for a time her subject. Conversely, once Ged returns to health, he shows his dominance over Tenar through his ability to work magic with words. Altogether, this changeover reflects the Place's societal transformation in relationship to the development of the power of the Kargish Empire. Furthermore, the imbalance of power between male and female underscores the symbolic failure of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe in Tombs.

When Tenar first realizes a man is in the Undertomb, she assumes first the power of surveillance over Ged. Tenar knows about many spy holes she can use to peer into the vast network of the Labyrinth. The narrator relates that Tenar "spent the night going, silent and without lantern, from one spy hole to another in all the dark buildings of the Place, and on the windswept hill" (Le Guin, Tombs 83). Tenar has learned the location of all the spy holes from Thar, and it is only a matter of time before she discovers Ged's whereabouts and delights in her power over his death.<sup>19</sup> She wields power, authority, and control over the Archmage in this act of surveillance. When she finally spots Ged through one of her spy holes, she sees that though he is still obstinately trying to escape, "the power [is] gone out of him," with "no spell to stir those stones aside" but only wielding the hilt of "his useless knife," the tip of which is broken and discarded beneath his feet (84). Her power over him is

---

<sup>19</sup> Though Tenar thinks she might enjoy Ged's death, she cannot get rid of the memory of the three captured men she condemned to a slow death through starvation and thirst (Le Guin, Tombs 39). Her guilt is another reason for disobeying age-old rules about the sanctity of the Place.

complete. The last vestige of his masculine power is lost, as symbolized by the broken phallic object. She only has to leave, and let him die.

She does not choose to let him die, however. She makes her presence known. Unfortunately for Tenar, once she speaks to him she begins to lose her power over the wizard. She says just one word, “Wizard!” (84), yet this is enough for Ged to begin to assert his influence over her. After her initial conversation with the wizard, Tenar questions herself: “Why had she spoken to him?” She admits, “she [is] afraid of his power, the arts he had used to enter the Undertomb, the sorcery that kept that light burning” (86). Unbeknownst to her but known to any reader of the Earthsea Cycle, the power that Ged uses is derived from language, the Old Tongue. Speech in Tombs acts as a controlling mechanism, and even though Tenar is unaware of Ged’s source of power, she is very afraid of it. She has good reason to be afraid of Ged’s ability to use language, for ultimately it is the way that Ged chooses to control Tenar.

During the brief period before Ged learns Tenar’s name, Tenar exerts herself to maintain supremacy over him. She brings him food and water, and Ged returns to health. During one of their conversations, Ged gazes upon Tenar and Tenar snaps, “You are not to look at me!” Ged responds, “My lady . . . I do not mean offense. I am a stranger, and a trespasser. I do not know your ways, nor the courtesies due the Priestess of the Tombs. I am at your mercy, and I ask you pardon if I offend you” (97). Tenar blushes, showing that Ged’s words have an influence over her, but Ged does not see her blush for he obeys her and averts his gaze. Their conversations reveal that although Ged admits he is in a subordinate position to Tenar, he is gradually resuming an authority similar to the one he enjoys in Roke. Eventually, through

language, he asserts power over her. To do this Ged discovers her true name and by naming her “Tenar” he removes the old identity Arha, ironically an identity without identity, and takes from her whatever power she has left over him.

While Tenar holds power over Ged’s life, Ged holds power over Tenar’s name, which according to Le Guin’s rules of magic in Earthsea, gives Ged the ultimate power. Le Guin explains, “Since the name of the person is the person, in the most literal and absolute sense, anyone who knows it has real power, power of life and death, over the person” (Tales 309). Here is the essence of Ged’s power over Tenar. Not only does he give her back her identity as Tenar, he takes away from her the self-assurance she had before, albeit an unconscious, ritualized, decaying self-assurance. She tells him, “I am not a priestess any more” (Le Guin, Tombs 128). She remembers that she had a true identity before she became Arha, before the mock sacrifice that symbolically removed her head and took her identity, before she was Priestess of the Tombs. Tenar has to rebuild her self-assurance, whereas Ged never loses his, even when he comes close to death. It is telling of Ged’s trust in Tenar that he gives her his name (140), but the major difference between Ged’s and Tenar’s ability to control through each other’s names is that Ged has the training that gives him the knowledge to control her through her name, but Tenar has none. As a result, even though Tenar knows Ged’s true name, she cannot use it to control him.

In the way that marks him as both wizard and head of the patriarchy on Roke, Ged uses her name to control her. In a moment of doubt while the Tombs are crumbling around them, Tenar wants to tear away from him, whom she sees as having a face that is “black and twisted like a demon’s.” Ged tells her, “By the bond you

wear I bid you come, Tenar,” and she obeys (150, emphasis added). Even though the bond he speaks of is the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, Ged uses her name at the end of his command to call her forth. By using her name, she has no choice but to obey. After the Tombs have crumbled and Tenar and Ged are together on the outside, Ged calls a rabbit to him, paralleling the way in which he calls Tenar, and tells her, “What is not a secret, but rather a gift, or a mystery, do you see, is the power of calling” (158). Furthermore, the narrator of Tombs makes it perfectly clear that Ged has all the power at the end of the novel: “He had made her follow him. He had called her by name, and she had come crouching to his hand, as the little wild desert rabbit had come to him out of the dark” (171).

### **The End of the Quest: The Symbolic Failure of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe**

However noble Ged’s quest to locate and make whole the Ring of Erreth-Akbe and the lost rune of peace, the symbolic end of the quest, like the heterotopic matriarchy, eventually fails in Tombs. Ged does unite the Ring, and he does return home with the lost rune, signaling the possibility for rebirth for the whole of Earthsea. In fact, Le Guin highlights several ways in which Ged and Tenar both might have achieved symbolic rebirth if their societal relationships did not impose a structure of dominance. Ged tells Tenar, “You are—more than I had realized—truly reborn” (Le Guin, Tombs 160). Largely unaware of the results of his patriarchal dominance over her, Ged nonetheless continues to control Tenar’s thoughts and actions. As argued above, without Ged, Tenar would have remained Arha. While Arha, Tenar does exercise some initial control over Ged’s actions, but she quickly surrenders any power to him and to his ability to use magic and magical words. Because of Ged’s

domination and because of the domination of the society, Tenar cannot be a feminist heroine with her own independent thoughts and actions. Most of her actions are controlled by Ged or at least in some way manipulated by his superior knowledge and experience in life.

A glimpse of Tenar's motherly strength as seen later in Tehanu briefly surfaces in Tombs, however. Before Ged enters and changes her life, she has a feverish dream in which she finds herself carrying "a full bowl of water, a deep brass bowl, through the dark to someone who was thirsty" yet always unable to reach that person (44). The dream is symbolic of Tenar's guilt, but it also suggests the Ring of Erreth-Akbe and its own relationship to the Holy Grail and the Celtic cauldron of rebirth. As discussed before, the Celtic stories "Branwen, Daughter of Llŷr" and "Peredur, Son of Evrawg" depict how the application of water or something wet brings the dead back to life. Tenar's dream foreshadows her choice to give Ged water and as a result bring him back from the brink of death. Therefore, Tenar's life-giving choices link her to the touch of the Celtic woman bathing the corpse in the cauldron. In Tehanu, Tenar takes care of the burnt child Therru, as well as taking care of the now ex-Archmage Ged, whose powers were burnt out in Farthest. The society in Tehanu demands great physical and emotional strength from Tenar, most of which she lacked in Tombs. This dream, which links her act of giving water to the Celtic cauldron to the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, shows that even early on, a kernel of feminine strength within Tenar is growing. The life within this kernel is quelled by the forces of both the covert (Kargish) and overt (Archipelago) forms of patriarchy.

Little does Tenar realize, however, that her choice to give Ged water and food ends up destroying her world. Tenar's world is one of mostly passive domination, either by ritual or by the control of economy and power through the force of the male gods, but it is a system that Tenar wants to stay in until Ged shows her a different way. When Tenar is released from her unconscious life and brought into the light of consciousness, the destruction of the Tombs is already set into motion. Indeed, the destruction of the Tombs is symbolic of Le Guin's attempts to show that although a patriarchy can dominate a matriarchy, the power of the patriarchy can be dissolved. Unfortunately, Tenar's promising release from the Kargish patriarchy is dampened by her admission into another, this one represented by the Archipelago in which the Archmage Ged and the Council of Wizards have dominion.

At the end of the novel, Tenar travels with Ged to the Archipelago seemingly because she has no other choice. She shows that whatever power she might have been once capable of fails in relationship with someone else of equal or greater power. By her own admission, all that Tenar ever knew, which is little more than now-meaningless ritual and ceremony, means nothing, and that she has learned nothing else. Upon hearing this, Ged "look[s] away, wincing as if in pain" (162). Ged winces because he has taught her something or at least has tried to; she has the ability to learn and grow yet at this point in her life cannot see that she is capable of much more: a self-empowered woman.

Lissa Paul argues that Tenar's character in Tehanu fulfills this ability to grow and be self-empowered:

But in Tehanu . . . Le Guin scraps male-order heroism.<sup>20</sup> She creates Tenar, a feminist, pro-creative, recreative hero. . . . The traditional male hero, the dragonslayer and dragonlord, marked by his capacity to defeat evil, to win, and to receive public adoration and power, is nowhere in sight. In the new mythology Le Guin creates, the dragon is transformed into a familiar, a guide for a new female hero. . . . Le Guin moves out of the hierarchical ordering of the heroic world . . .” (116).

In Tombs, however, Le Guin does not make this leap from dominated women with some budding internal strength to a fully self-empowered woman, as exemplified by Tenar in the fourth Earthsea novel.

At the end of the novel, with Tenar being brought to Havnor and eventually to Roke, Ged’s quest is finished, the lost Rune is returned to the people of Earthsea. In the course of the quest power shifts from Tenar to Ged, and even though the story is told from Tenar’s perspective, the evidence points to Ged as the dominant hero in this text. Since Le Guin’s does not balance male and female roles on the societal and individual levels, she undermines the true meaning and purpose of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe: restoration, rebirth, balance. Power cannot be in flux, with one person dominating the other, in order for the Ring to function as a symbolic token of peace.

With the balance of power shifted in Ged’s favor, the fundamental purpose of the lost Rune, to stop “the wars and quarrelling among all the lands of Earthsea” (134), is undermined. True peace cannot be attained when male and female are not in

---

<sup>20</sup> The first three books of Earthsea focus almost exclusively on the struggles of the male hero (my footnote).

balance with the sharing of power. Unfortunately Tenar, who is at the center of this domination, is restricted and relegated to her place in the society with little to no hope or desire of ever leaving it. When Ged enters her life, she finds herself faced with two options, when in truth there should have been only one for her: death to the male intruder. Instead, she chooses to grant Ged life. With that choice, she begins a struggle for dominance with Ged that she initiates and Ged finishes. The struggle for dominance reflects the larger complications of the society in which Tenar lives on an individual level, and it also contradicts the purpose of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe to bring peace and harmony. The power to dominate is rooted in Ged's control of language, which also reflects the way in which men tended to control and manipulate language according to the patriarchal structure. This fundamental imbalance stands in opposition to the overarching purposes of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe. It also shows that Tenar, Le Guin's heroine, is truly no feminist heroine, and that The Tombs of Atuan is no feminist text.

## Works Cited

- Atterbery, Brian. "On a Far Shore: The Myth of Earthsea." Extrapolation 21.3 (1980): 269-77.
- Burns, Marjorie. Perilous Realms; Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-earth. Toronto: Toronto UP, 2005.
- Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Cioffi, Kathleen. "Types of Feminist Fantasy and Science Fiction." Women Worldwalkers; New Dimensions of Science Fiction and Fantasy. Ed. Jane B. Weedman. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech, 1985.
- Collins, John. "Celtic Myths." Antiquity 71.271 (1997): 195-202.
- Comoletti, Laura B., and Michael D. Drout. "How They Do Things With Words: Language, Power, Gender, and the Priestly Wizards of Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea Books." Children's Literature 29.1 (2001): 113-41.
- Cruaíaoich, Gearoid O. "The Inner-Outer Otherworld of Hyde and Yeats: Translation and World-View in the Irish Literary Revival." Éire-Ireland 35.2 (2000): 226-42.
- Cunliffe, Barre. The Ancient Celts. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Davies, Wendy. "Celtic Women in the Early Middle Ages." Images of Women in Antiquity. Eds. Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1983.
- Fimi, Dimitra. "'Mad' Elves and 'Elusive Beauty': Some Celtic Strands of Tolkien's Mythology." Folklore 117.2 (2006): 156-70.

- Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." Trans. Jay Miskowiec. Diacritics 16.1 (1986): 22-27.
- Freeman, Philip. The Philosopher and the Druid. New York: Simon, 2006.
- Gantz, Jeffrey. Introduction. The Mabinogion. Trans. Jeffrey Gantz. New York: Dorset, 1976.
- Goldberg, Steven. Why Men Rule: A Theory of Male Dominance. Chicago: Open Court, 1993.
- Gottner-Abendroth, Heide. "The Structure of Matriarchal Societies." ReVision 21.3 (1999): 31-35. Ebscohost. SUNY Brockport Lib., Brockport, NY. 02 Jan. 2007 <<http://ezproxy.drake.brockport.edu>>.
- Green, Miranda. The Gods of the Celts. Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1986.
- Hartmann, Heidi. "Towards a Definition of Patriarchy." Oppression, Privilege, and Resistance: Theoretical Perspectives on Racism, Sexism, and Heterosexism. Eds. Lisa Heldke and Peg O'Connor. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. A Wizard of Earthsea. 1968. New York: Bantam, 2004.
- . "Is Gender Necessary?" Dancing at the Edge of the World. New York: Harper, 1990. 7-16.
- . Tales From Earthsea. 2001. New York: Ace, 2002.
- . Tehanu. 1990. New York: Pocket, 2004.
- . The Farthest Shore. 1972. New York: Pocket, 2004.
- . The Left Hand of Darkness. 1969. New York: Ace, 2000.
- . The Other Wind. 2001. New York: Ace, 2003.
- . The Tombs of Atuan. 1970. New York: Pocket, 2004.

Littlefield, Holly. "Unlearning Patriarchy: Ursula Le Guin's Feminist Consciousness in The Tombs of Atuan and Tehanu." Extrapolation 36.3 (1995): 244-58.

The Mabinogion. Trans. Jeffrey Gantz. New York: Dorset, 1976.

Markale, Jean. Women of the Celts. Trans. A. Mygind, C. Hauch, and P. Henry. London: Gordon Cremonesi, 1975.

Mclean, Susan. "The Power of Women in Ursula K. Le Guin's Tehanu." Extrapolation 38.2 (1997): 110-118.

Nodelman, Perry. "Reinventing the Past: Gender in Ursula K. Le Guin's Tehanu and the Earthsea 'Trilogy.'" Children's Literature 23.1 (1995): 179-201.

Patch, Howard Rollin. "Some Elements in Medieval Descriptions of the Otherworld." PMLA 33.4 (1918): 601-43.

Paul, Lissa. "From Sex-Role Stereotyping to Subjectivity: Feminist Criticism." Understanding Children's Literature. Ed. Peter Hunt. London: Routledge, 1999.

Pennick, Nigel. The Sacred World of the Celts. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1997.

Remington, Thomas. "A Time to Live and a Time to Die: Cyclical Renewal in the Earthsea Trilogy." Extrapolation 21.3 (1980):278-286.

Roy, James. "Landscape and the Celtic Soul." Éire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies 31.3 (1996): 228-54.

Sobat, Gail. "The Night in Her Own Country: The Heroine's Quest for Self in Ursula K. Le Guin's The Tombs of Atuan." Mythlore 81.3 (1996): 24-32.

Spivak, Charlotte. Merlin's Daughters: Contemporary Women Writers of Fantasy.

New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.

Thompson, Christine. "Going North and West to Watch the Dragons Dance: Norse

and Celtic Elements in Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea Trilogy." Mythlore 15.1

(1988): 19-22.

Tolkien, J. R. R. The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays. Ed. Christopher

Tolkien. London: Allen and Unwin, 1983.

Walsh, William. "I am a Woman Writer; I am a Western Writer: An Interview with

Ursula Le Guin." The Kenyon Review 17.3-4 (1995): 192-205.

White, Virginia. "Bright the Hawk's Flight: The Journey of the Hero in Ursula Le

Guin's Earthsea Trilogy." Ball State University Forum 20.4 (1979): 34-