

Outside Authority: Reflections on Gender and Education in *Tebanu*

Lara Q. Saguisag

In *Tebanu* (Le Guin 26), the dying Ogion sees Therru and exclaims to Tenar, “Teach her! Teach her all!” He soon dies, and his message becomes a riddle for Tenar to ponder over – *what* to teach Therru? And *how* to teach her?

Tenar’s puzzle is not unfamiliar—it is a puzzle we see mirrored in contemporary society, a question we have asked and continue to ask of our educational systems: what do we teach, and how do we teach? Considering the position of *Tebanu* in the Earthsea series, and the position of Tenar in the novel, we arrive at a more specific problem regarding education: that of gender’s relationship with pedagogy. In Earthsea, the whats and hows of teaching and learning operate under a patriarchal value system, leaving women in the margins of education. With *Tebanu*, Le Guin offers options for women: they can remain outside of this system, and learn with their own methods and language, or they can pursue a radical change that can overturn this patriarchal system.

In the eyes of some critics, *Tebanu* serves as Le Guin’s “penance” (*Earthsea Revisioned* 12), making up for what they felt was a lack in the previous Earthsea books. The Earthsea of the early trilogy has been “criticized for not being feminist enough” (Littlefield 245). The secondary world that Le Guin sets up in *A Wizard of Earthsea* till *The Farthest Shore*

is a prime example of what Le Guin herself calls the ‘perfect baboon patriarchy...with rich ambitious aggres-

sive males at the top, then a great gap, and then at the bottom the poor, the uneducated, the faceless masses, and all the women.' . . . All the characters with any real power in Earthsea are men. Two of the three novels do not even have a significant female character (Littlefield 246).

Clearly, the chasm is created by lack—lack of money, education, and the right gender. To possess these then is to possess power.

In *Tehanu*, we see the same “baboon patriarchy” at work, but are informed by a different perspective. Earthsea is still “hierarchic, male-dominated; but now, instead of using the pseudo-genderless male viewpoint of the heroic tradition, the world is seen through a woman’s eyes” (*Revised* 12). That woman is Tenar, and through her eyes, the cracks, the flaws of Earthsea are made evident.

To many readers familiar with Earthsea of the previous trilogy, *Tehanu* was a “wrench (thrown) into the works” (White 39). One asks, why is there more of the mundane than the magical? Why do the characters battle with knives and pitchforks, rather than spells and staffs? The novel abandons the hero-tale, the story that “has concerned the establishment or validation of manhood” (*Revised* 5). *Tehanu* is alternative to the heroic fantasy, or what Le Guin calls in “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” the “killer story” (*Dancing at the Edge of the World* 168). We have a protagonist, but she is no power-wielding hero; there is conflict, but it is not one of combat. *Tehanu* is populated by a community of women, and the book largely focuses on their concerns, their domesticities—women’s work. Readers are made to stay at home with Tenar, and take a journey with her that is more inward and reflective than outward and aggressive.

The idea of redefining—revising—is central to Le Guin’s comment on education. The novel suggests that education is a process one undergoes, rather than a stage one achieves. For Tenar, “it was her habit of life, to learn. There seemed always a great deal to be learned” (*Tehanu* 60). As Le Guin implies in her “Bryn Mawr Commencement Address,” education involves a continuous cycle of learning, unlearning, and relearning (*Dancing* 147).

Le Guin's body of work reflects this cycle at work. A peculiar quality of Le Guin is her willingness, or one can say, her zeal, for revisiting past work. "The trouble with print is, it never changes its mind," she writes (*Dancing* vii). Yet *she*, the author, does change her mind, and she is conscious of these shifts in thought. In *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, Le Guin includes an essay entitled "Is Gender Necessary? Redux." It appeared earlier in another anthology of her work, *The Language of the Night*, and is reprinted with "reconsiderations... the original essay (appears) entire, with a running commentary with bracketed italics" (*Dancing* 7). In her rewriting, we hear two voices: her 1976 voice and her 1987 voice, with the latter refuting some of the arguments made by the first.

"Is Gender Necessary? Redux" is a rewriting, but Le Guin explains that it didn't seem right or wise to revise an old text severely, as if trying to obliterate it, hiding the evidence that one had to go there to get here. It is rather in the feminist mode to let one's changes of minds, and the *process of change*, stand as evidence" (*Dancing* 7, emphasis mine).

So as with *Tehanu* and its relationship with the first three books, she does not, or cannot, obliterate the earlier Earthsea. Rather, as Nodelman suggests:

Tehanu is not so much an attack on history as a continuation of it. It merely repeats what was always true of the Earthsea books: although each book could... be read and understood without knowledge of its sequels, the new information provided by the sequels always forced readers into a revised understanding of what went before it (180).

Le Guin has written much about how the rising feminist consciousness in the sixties and seventies and the feminist criticism of her

work have forced her to revisit her writing and the archetypes that appear in them. As Littlefield proposes, Tenar seems to parallel Le Guin's development of feminist consciousness. The Tenar of *The Tombs of Atuan* is an "independent woman ... (Le Guin) figuratively kill(s) off" (250), suggesting a present, but undeveloped, feminist awareness. As Le Guin says, "(I could not) continue with my hero-tale until I had, as a woman and artist, wrestled with the angels of the feminist consciousness" (Revised 11). Tenar in *Tehanu*, arriving two decades later, reveals an awareness that has developed from that tussle, and consequently grown, matured.

The middle-aged Tenar, like Le Guin, questions her past, but does not, cannot, obliterate it. Her past as Arha, dark priestess of Atuan, Tenar, ward of Ogion, and Goha, wife to Flint and mother to their children, are necessary to her education, essential for her to define her identity. When she is afflicted by Aspen's curse, it is her Arha-self that saves her:

It was as if she had to ask the girl Arha...to come out of the darkness and think for her. To help her. As she had helped her last night, turning the wizard's curse back on him. Arha had not known a great deal of what Tenar and Goha knew, but she had known how to curse, and how to live in the dark, and how to remain silent (*Tehanu* 152).

It was also as Arha that she "learned to learn," and this skill for being taught enables her to acquire new skills in later life (*Tehanu* 60).

But Tenar realizes that her education as Arha was severely limited. She relates to Aunty Moss:

I grew up among women...I never saw a man till I was a woman grown...and yet I didn't know what women are, because women were all that I did know. Like men who live among men, sailors, and soldiers,

and mages on Roke—do they know what men are? How can they, if they never speak to a woman? (*Tehanu* 66)

Tenar wonders how much wizards actually know about the world, when they isolate themselves from the rest of it.

The suggestion is education through isolation makes it more of a privilege. To be schooled in Roke is indeed considered a privilege in Earthsea. Not everyone can enter it—a doorkeeper stands by the entrance, saying “Enter if you can” (*A Wizard of Earthsea* 34). Certainly, no woman has crossed its threshold¹. The formal training in magic in the School of Wizardry on Roke is offered exclusively to and by males. Those who successfully complete training take honored positions in society. With education, they become vested with authority and power. Even the untrained but talented Ged recognizes early on the power that comes with disciplined magic:

As the witch kept on talking of the glory and the riches and the great power over men that a sorcerer could gain, he set himself to learn more useful lore. He was very quick at it...and he was sure that he would become great among men (*Wizard* 6).

Obviously this is the voice of the young, proud Ged, one who has not yet faced and conquered his arrogance, his shadow. But as the unfolding events and conclusion of *A Wizard of Earthsea* proves, his trained magic arms him with the language to become a dragonlord, with the skill to restore the balance he disturbed. Through the eyes of the narrator, he does become superior among “ordinary” men and even mages.

And what of female magic? In Earthsea, it seems defined and trapped by two sayings: “Weak as woman’s magic,” and “Wicked as woman’s magic” (*Wizard* 5). In a patriarchal universe, women’s magic is certainly

¹ In “Dragonfly” from *Tales of Earthsea*, a book of the Cycle written after *Tehanu*, a woman is finally allowed to enter the premises

the wrong type of magic. The term “wicked magic” implies a brand of enchantment that must not be let unleashed, must be kept in its place, presumably by the educated male’s magic. We see at work a circular argument that traps women: they cannot be trained because they lack knowledge, and they lack knowledge because they are not trained.

In *Tebanu*, Aunty Moss attempts to define female power in her terms: Ours is only a little power, seems like, next to theirs. But it goes down deep...it’s like an old blackberry thicket. And a wizard’s power’s like a fir tree, may be, great and tall and grand, but it’ll blow right down in a storm. Nothing kills a blackberry bramble (122).

It is a definition that inevitably depends on comparing itself to male magic. It is the cost of patriarchy. The female, the Other, is forced to define itself in relation, to the terms of the existing male hegemony. Earlier in the novel, Aunty Moss also struggles in defining what a woman is:

Who knows where a woman begins and ends? Listen, mistress, I have roots, I have roots deeper than this island. Deeper than the sea, older than the raising of the lands. I go back into the dark...before the moon I was! No one knows, no one knows no one can say what I am, what a woman is, a woman of power, a woman’s power, deeper than the roots of trees, deeper than the roots of islands, older than the Making, older than the moon. Who dares ask questions of the dark? Who’ll ask the dark its name? (*Tebanu* 64).

It is not a clear, organized, academic definition—it is a definition that relies highly on metaphors and questions. Tenar regards Aunty Moss’s words and realizes that “a good deal of her obscurity and cant...was mere ineptness with words and ideas. Nobody ever taught her to think

consecutively... She was a witchwoman. She had nothing to do with clear meaning" (*Tehanu* 61).

"Clear meaning" is a value set by a patriarchal system—it comes when one is trained in the "father tongue." Le Guin describes the father tongue as the "language of power, of public² discourse" (*Dancing* 147). In Roke, only males are allowed to learn and become masters of this language. In mastering the Old Speech, wizards are given the power to name and therefore control things.³

Women being cut off from education, from access to the father tongue is a problem mirrored from our world. In the 17th century, Aphra Behn struggled with sexism in the educational systems. The (male) literary critics of her time criticized her plays for not being up to standard, and for not knowing Latin and Greek. Behn heatedly charged that these critics were the same men who prevented her and other women from learning these languages in the first place (Spender 9).

Three hundred years later, Virginia Woolf lays out virtually the same scathing criticism in *Three Guineas*. She lashes out at an educational system that throughout the centuries, has remained hierarchal, hypocritical, and excluding of women. She then proposes that the solution for women is to form "The Society of Outsiders," a society that

has the same ends as (male) society—freedom, equality, peace; but that it seeks to achieve them by the means that a different sex, a different tradition, a different education, and the different values which result from those differences have placed within (their) reach... the main distinction between (those) who are outside society and (those) who are inside

² The term "public" is tricky – for even if the father tongue is considered by patriarchal society the language best, most impressive when spoken aloud in public, it is not a language made available to everyone. It is a language kept to the privileged, educated few.

³ And here we see one of the limitations of the Earthsea's father tongue – as a language based on the Old Speech, it is a language that can never be complete. As the Master Namer says in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, "No man could learn (all the words of the Old Speech). For there is no end to that language" (47). Wizards do have an advantage over witches, for formal schooling allows them to learn more of these words.

society must be that (those inside) will make use of means provided by (their) position...and those inside will experiment not with public means in public but with private means in private (173).

Despite the disadvantage of being an Outsider, Woolf continues, the benefit for a woman remaining on the fringes of male-biased education is that she stays beyond the reach of a patriarchal system which values aggression, and proves damaging even to the males it favors.

Le Guin picks up from Woolf by suggesting the existence of the “mother tongue,” the language spoken in private, of private experience. Le Guin resignedly admits that she can only define the mother tongue in the terms of the father tongue, as “the other, inferior. It is primitive: inaccurate, unclear, coarse, limited, trivial, banal” (*Dancing* 149). While the father tongue has been elevated, made the highest form of language one can aspire to master, the mother tongue is demoted, not regarded valid discourse. It is the language that Auntie Moss speaks. Yet even as Tenar experiences Auntie Moss’s limitations in vocabulary and organization of thought, she identifies Moss as a woman who wields as yet undefinable power—the witch is one who “would be a formidable enemy” (*Tehanu* 65).

Tenar herself is set apart from the “muddle, mystery, and mumbling” that is associated with witches. Partly because of her training as a priestess in Atuan, and largely because of her experience as Ogion’s ward, Tenar tastes the forbidden fruit of education. She receives formal training through Ged’s suggestion and under Ogion’s guidance, and learns to write the Runes and speak some words of the Old Speech.

But it is training that she eventually abandons, refuses. She explains to Ged that the lore, the runes of power, the spells, the rules, the raising of the forces — that was all dead to me. Somebody’s else’s language. I used to think, I could be dressed up as a warrior, with a lance and a sword and a

plume and all, but it wouldn't fit, would it?...So I took all off and wore my own clothes" (*Tehanu* 106).

Tenar steps outside the patriarchal value system, refuses to become a female man—a woman who lives by the success standards set by males. The life she chooses, that of Goha, wife and mother, is one of the few options men seem to have set up for women—but Tenar performs a feminist act, in that she makes the choice and finds fulfillment in it, even as a patriarchal system condemns such domesticity as a lack of achievement, a weak decision.

Certainly Ged sees it as that. He admits that he is “disappointed, angry” with Tenar’s refusal of training, for he feels she has then wasted the power he recognized in her (*Tehanu* 105). A reader familiar with the earlier Earthsea series may side with Ged—after all, he has been the hero of the past three novels, and one would have the tendency to listen to heroes more than to housewives. But the reader, as Ged, is led to realize as the novel progresses, that the private and domestic is as valid and important a life as the public and heroic. Tenar’s education continues, but now focused on the skills ignored and derided by formal institutions—housekeeping, cooking, and crafts such as weaving, the “art(s) of making order where people live” (*Dancing* 154).

Still, Tenar herself doubts the validity of her choice. It is a choice she is satisfied to make for herself, but a decision she hesitates to make for Therru:

“I should be teaching her,” Tenar thought, distressed. “Teach her *all*, Ogion said, and what am I teaching her? Cooking and spinning?” Then another part of her mind said in Goha’s voice, “And are these not true arts, needful and noble? Is wisdom all words?”

Still, she worried over the matter, and one afternoon...she said, “Therru,

maybe it's time you learn the true language of things" (*Tëhanu* 148).

Tenar's conflict is what Morgan calls the paradox of the Bearded Mother:

(she is) expected to be *bearded* in the sense that (she is) expected to claim for (herself) the forms of rationality, the modes of cognition, and the critical lucidity that has been seen to be the monopoly of bearded men with fully developed rational souls...But teaching itself has been characterized as one of the preeminent "caring professions" and (she is)...expected to be (a) nurturer (124).

Tenar was taught that knowledge came from Lore-books such as Ogion's, and naturally she thinks that the Runes and the Old Speech are what she must be teaching Therru.

Yet Tenar later on enacts a paradigm shift—she attempts to begin teaching Therru the Old Speech, but when she speaks the term for stone, *tolk*, she realizes that Therru is too disfigured to speak the word correctly. So Tenar says, "That's not what I have to teach you now...now, listen. Now is the time for stories, for you to begin to learn the stories" (*Tëhanu* 149). Tenar then shifts the emphasis of learning on listening rather than speaking. Speaking in the Old Speech was a mark of power. Listening, Le Guin identifies, is part of the mother tongue (*Dancing* 150).

Such a shift has been suggested by Gilligan *et al* in contemporary views of education. She posits that education is affected by, and must be considered in the light of engendered morality: the male often operates on the justice ethic (or 'ethics of right'), which values entitlement or what ought to be done, while the female operates with the care ethic ('ethics of responsibility'), which values actions that do no harm (23).

Tenar constantly asks herself what Ogion meant when he said, "Teach her! Teach her all!" Perhaps because, even as she "learned to learn," she was never taught how to teach. All her life, she has been recipient rather than provider of information. In *Earthsea*, after all, the power to give, to educate lies with the males. Tenar's opportunity to teach, it seemed, lay in her role as a mother. Thus she cares for Therru, and worries about the options available for such a damaged child. She thus feels failure when her son Spark comes home—she is shocked by his attitude, by his expectation to be served by women.⁴

Still, Tenar pursues becoming Therru's educator. One thinks that she is merely put into action upon a male's instruction — Ogion's words ring constantly in her ear. But then Ogion, though male, is on Tenar's side — that is, on the outside. In Le Guin's words, he is "a maverick mage" (*Revised* 18). He does not operate under the strict patriarchal system, and in fact, in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, differentiates himself from Roke — he is a wizard-teacher, but unlike the teachers at the School of Wizardry, he is not addressed as Master. To Tenar, he is teacher and also father, but never does he act as a patriarch. He represents what Le Guin terms as "authority without supremacy, a non-dominating authority" (*Dancing* 148). He wields authority with a sense of responsibility rather than entitlement.

Ged, like Ogion, becomes a wizard who lives on the fringes — but not by choice. He has lost his powers and privileges as Archmage, and is shocked by his sudden domesticity and ordinariness. He, like Tenar, undergoes a process of unlearning old values, learning new skills, and relearning how to live a life without magic. It is a process he begins by pitying himself. An exasperated Tenar thinks, "It's time you find out, maybe. Time you learned that you didn't learn everything in Roke!" (*Tehanu* 126). Eventually, it is Tenar who continues his education. Just as Ged coaxed her in building her identity in *The Tombs of Atuan*, she tells him to rebuild his own: "It's not a weapon or a woman can make a man, or magery either, or any power, anything but himself" (*Tehanu* 236-237).

The Masters of Roke seem to have a lot to unlearn, as well. Ogion, recognizing Therru as a child-dragon, and therefore capable of causing

⁴ Le Guin argues that society, not Tenar, failed/miseducated Spark. It returns us to an earlier idea of Tenar: over the past three years, Spark has lived among sailors, an exclusive community of men. His education is limited by that exclusivity.

change in the existing system, knows that the School “will fear her,” that the authority she is capable of wielding is above and beyond the powers of the institution. She then stands to challenge Roke’s status quo. Roke, surely, will not take such a challenge lightly. As Master Windkey puts it, “Roke, and the Art Magic will endure! Our treasure is well guarded!” (*Tehanu* 179).

The School of Wizardry on Roke can be interpreted through the reproduction theory of education. Derived from Althusserian Marxism, the theory states that institutions, most notably schools, are state apparatuses that operate on a certain ideology and creates subjects (students) who then carry on with the existing ideology (Weiler 7). Indeed we see the Masters of Roke, and their students, eager to maintain the status quo. Such a grasp on the status quo, as Master Windkey demonstrates, brings with it the inability to think beyond the box of the ideology: the idea of a woman entering, leading Roke, becomes inconceivable. So when the Master Patterner says “*A woman on Gont*,” the easy assumption for Master Windkey is to seek not a woman who would lead Roke, but one who would lead them to the (male) Archmage.

Critics of the reproduction theory of education argue that this theory does not consider individuality and the individual’s capability to create alterations. They propose the production theory, which proposes that schools are venues for subjects to become agents of change. In *Tehanu*, Le Guin’s stance is that a change is possible, and in fact, is necessary. But the agent of change must come from outside: Their strength and salvation must come from outside the institutions and traditions. It must be a new thing (*Revised* 19).

This new thing is a violent change, revolutionary. It comes in the form of a dragon.

Appearing suddenly in a novel where the mundane rather than the magical is put in the foreground, one may initially feel that the dragon becomes a plot device, a *deus ex machina*. And so it feels like a puzzling, even disappointing resolution. Even in a mundane fantasy world, dragons annihilate the misogynists and save the day. What options are left for the real world where there are no dragons?

But then we forget Therru — in this last chapter she rises, claims her name — the novel's title — and makes it her story. That the revolution begins with her is apt — as Le Guin writes, “If you're underneath, if you're kept down, you break out, you subvert. We are volcanoes” (*Dancing* 160). And Therru, now Tehanu — child, female, crippled, uglified — is underneath, thoroughly Other. She is a child-dragon, and with the part of her that is fire, of the Old Speech, she summons a dragon to her. So the change, though an “outside, new thing,” is still initiated from within Tehanu. Rather than device, the dragon Kalessin becomes metaphor for revolution that begins within.

From the two options regarding education that Le Guin presents — that of remaining outside, or of pursuing revolutionary change — she presents the idea of gaining outside authority. Authority here is not used to mean power, but rather authority as author, creator. Le Guin repeatedly writes in *Tehanu*, and elsewhere, of the value of defining the individual self using one's own language and terms, whether man or woman, and how this definition will keep on evolving, as one continues to unlearn, learn, and relearn.

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