

THE SILVER SEER: GENDER, SEX, AND THE DIVINE FEMININE IN
URSULA K. LE GUIN'S *THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS*

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Abstract

This Project Thesis considers Ursula K. Le Guin's application of feminist difference theory in her most celebrated science fiction novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Le Guin's work is consistent with much of the art and literature produced in the 1960s and 70s insofar that it explores themes of androgyny, but in this thesis I argue that the Karhiders of Winter cannot be defined as genderless, as many scholars have recommended. My iconoclastic reading arises from a close analysis of the Foreteller ritual, where Faxe the Weaver transforms into a female *silver seer* during the collective's peak state of consciousness. This complex and mystifying scene seems to suggest superior spiritual power located in women's bodies, a view that is inconsistent with androgyny.

To convey the significance of this passage in Le Guin's work and what it means for feminist criticism, I will be acknowledging the long historical tradition of female mystics, mediums, priestesses, and spiritual leaders in the western world, and how these women have revolutionized our cultural landscape through their femininity. I will address the ways in which Le Guin appears to draw from this tradition, creating a character with the status of leader—or Weaver—and a numinous atmosphere that harkens back to sacred rites of the past. The Foreteller sequence is one of the most important scenes on sex and gender in the novel, and it demands a gendered reading that elevates woman to the most sacred position in Karhider society: the silver seer.

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“Under the nation’s politics and parades and passions runs an old darkness, passive, anarchic, silent, the fecund darkness of the Handdara. And out of that silence inexplicably rises the Foreteller’s voice.” – Genly Ai

In her most celebrated work, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the late and beloved Ursula K. Le Guin depicts a world of gender-bending aliens who live on the ice planet Winter, known as Gethen to those on its surface. True to Le Guinian form, the novel raises important questions about gender and sexuality. The Gethenians of Winter are gender-fluid, possessing the ability to transform into the male or female sex. Our Earthling narrator, Genly Ai, visits Winter with a mission: to persuade the aliens to unite with the Ekumen, a collective of eighty-three planets in the galaxy. Through the perspective of Genly that is much like our own, we learn of entirely new, and at times bizarre, sexual customs amongst the Gethenians. This essay will focus on the Foreteller scene in Le Guin’s text, a richly evocative section of Le Guin’s novel that has been overlooked by feminist critics. The scene considers manifestations of gender and sexuality in Karhider sacred ritual, and offers an illuminating look into the culture’s ideas of femaleness, maleness, and gendered binary. Le Guin herself took an avid interest in concepts of duality—yin and yang, light and dark, male and female. Her work also draws on various religious traditions, notably from ancient Chinese and North American Indigenous cultures. For these reasons it is important that we look critically at the Foreteller scene, as it contains references to themes of duality and sex in sacred practices. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin constructs female gender as a space of power and mysticism through Faxe the Weaver, who transforms into a woman when the Foretellers acquire their highest state of consciousness. I therefore argue that Le Guin’s text is not anti-feminist as many critics have suggested, but rather a feminist novel that features the female sex as inherently powerful, accessed by the Gethenians only through sexual reproduction and spiritual enlightenment.

i. Androgyny, Feminist Criticism, and the Big “Difference”

Published in 1969, Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* was written at a time when pop culture was brimming with performances of androgyny. Rock legends Grace Jones, David Bowie, Iggy Pop, and Patti Smith dominated stages worldwide using gender-bending productions of clothing, makeup, and personality as a statement of activism and personal freedom. High fashion brands were also embracing the androgynous look: in 1966, Yves Saint Laurent created the first women’s tuxedo. Like the performing artists of the 1960s and 70s, Le Guin wrote *The Left Hand* as a gender thought experiment, blurring lines that divide man from woman and using this flexibility to create a new discourse on gender and sexuality.

Many critics have viewed Le Guin’s work as a utopian narrative insofar that it imagines a world without sexual difference, and therefore erases gender injustice. But the text has also stirred a great deal of controversy in feminist discourse. As Attebery notes, “Two objections have been raised against the book: first, that it does not go far enough in its depiction of androgyny; and second, that androgyny itself is, rather than a liberating vision, a betrayal of feminist aims” (131). Regarding the first objection, feminists have argued that Le Guin’s work is problematic due to its use of masculine pronouns for the Gethenians, the sexism of the male narrator Genly, and Le Guin’s ascription of masculine traits to gender-free characters; Estraven for example, is depicted as politician and tough outdoorsman but not housecleaner or mother of his child. The

second objection feminists have to Le Guin's work is described in Gelpi's "The Politics of Androgyny." Gelpi claims, "It is impossible for the female vessel to contain masculine intelligence and spirituality, while it is not only possible but natural for the masculine vessel to be filled and fulfilled by feminine emotion and physicality" (151-52). Though feminist criticism of Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and indeed, many of her other works, induces thought-provoking discussion on gender issues in science fiction and our own society, feminists are all too quick to align the sexist views of Le Guin's characters with Le Guin's personal beliefs. Unfortunately, much of the criticism of the author's work has been fuelled by such agendas that fail to see beyond the estranged male protagonist's views of a gender-bending, alien society. Le Guin describes Genly as "a sexist," but clarifies that he is "not a mean one. Not a misogynist" (Mishan). In her novel she does not allow Genly's sexism to go unpunished, and his sentence is a revelation of weakness in his own culturally conditioned ideas of masculinity. Contrary to feminist criticism of the text, Genly's ideas about gender are not a reflection of Le Guin's own. They are there to serve the author's feminist goal: to pose a critique of the western male's perceptions of masculinity and femininity, identifying both the strengths and weaknesses in this gaze.

I argue that the principal gender message of the novel is not about the utopian possibility of a genderless society, as many scholarly readings have recommended. Certainly, Le Guin explores androgyny as a way of re-evaluating gender ideals, demonstrating that there is room for removal or reconfiguration of gender in cultural, political, and religious spheres. But it is a mistake to view the Gethenians as a gender-free society. My iconoclasm arises from looking closely at Le Guin's character Faxe the Weaver, whose transformation into armed woman visionary in the Foreteller ritual seems to suggest superior spiritual power in women, a view that is inconsistent with values embodied in androgyny. By elevating women to positions of power in religion, Le Guin distinguishes the male sex from the female, and we are forced to perform a gendered reading of a supposedly genderless society. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is not an anti-feminist text, nor do the gender-fluid Karhiders possess an entirely "neutral sexual identity" (Fayad 62) as many critics have argued. It is a feminist work that subverts common western religious traditions with male priests and male gods by featuring a female seer as leader of the society's Handdara religion. As we will discover, there are numerous instances where Le Guin accentuates sexual difference through her distribution of power.

Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and indeed, her own style of feminism, model what was defined later in the 1970s and 1980s as "difference" feminism. Pioneered by psychologist Carol Gilligan, difference feminism "highlights the different qualities of both men and women, but asserts that no value judgment can be placed upon them" (*Psychology's Feminist Voices*). Gender difference theorists like Gilligan were central and conventional feminist critics during the 80s, but have, throughout the years, received intense criticism due to the theory's danger of essentialism. Many later feminist critics find gender difference theory "damagingly reminiscent of a romanticized 19th century 'separate spheres' ideology, and hence quite pernicious" (Bender 4). But Leslie Bender asserts that we live in a bi-polar gender system, and as feminists we must find ways to work within the binary system:

Whether we like it or not, gender is still (and historically has been) an organizing concept in our society. We have no choice but to work and theorize for change from a position within a bi-polar gender system. We can challenge its dichotomized thinking and bi-polar substantive construction, but we cannot ignore its systemic, political, practical, and lived effects. (8)

Since the publication of Bender's essay in 1990, much of the western world has become more flexible in its outlook on gender, but male/female distinctions still shape our reality. The work of gender difference theorists remains relevant and useful in feminist studies today. Rather than attempting to abolish notions of gender altogether, Bender believes there is a benefit to difference theory that serves as a "springboard for change":

There is enough that is cohesive and common about the category of women to bridge the differences [between men and women] for purposes of political solidarity. . . . Gender difference theories, which investigate and work from these acknowledged commonalities among women, provide a rich vein (a motherlode) for us to tap in our reconstructive and transformative efforts. (7-8)

Bender poses an alternate way of thinking about difference theory, arguing that "gender difference analysis can give birth to feminist solidarity" (8). For the purposes of our conversation on *The Left Hand of Darkness*, I will be adopting Bender's understanding of feminist solidarity and applying it to Le Guin's style of feminism. There are many ways Le Guin taps into the "motherlode" for inspiration in her creative writing, and *The Left Hand* is filled with moments of women's strength and solidarity.

ii. Mothers and Mad Kings

Before I move into my primary claims about Gethenian sacred practices, I believe it helpful and necessary to address some of the other instances where Le Guin accredits power to the female gender on Gethen. In science fiction, every alternate reality story line must confront the 'mating problem'—there must be a way for societies to reproduce. Science fiction authors Suzy McKee Charnas and Nicola Griffith have found creative ways for their societies to procreate: Griffith's *Ammonite* features a mixed lesbian society that finds methods of reproducing, while in McKee Charnas's *Motherlines*, female horse riders mate with their stallions. Woman on Le Guin's planet, like woman on Earth, is birthing vessel, her cosmic womb a home for new life. In fact, Gethenians must become female in order to give birth. A detailed explanation of Gethenian mating patterns is found in the field notes of Ong Tot Oppong, female investigator of the first Ekunemical landing party of Gethen. It is noteworthy that this section of the text is in the voice of a female researcher; unlike Genly's observations that are often sexist in tone, Ong provides us with hard facts on Gethenian sexuality from a woman's perspective. Ong describes the three stages of kemmer, noting the femaleness in Gethenian pregnancy, birth, and lactation:

The sexual cycle averages 26 to 28 days (they tend to speak of it as 26 days, approximating it to the lunar cycle). For 21 or 22 days the individual is *somer*, sexually inactive, latent. . . on the 22nd or 23rd day the individual enters *kemmer*, estrus. In this first phase of kemmer (Karh. *secher*) he remains completely androgynous. . . [The] second phase of kemmer (Karh. *thorharmen*), the mutual process of establishing sexuality and potency, apparently occurs within a time span of two to twenty hours. . . [The Gethenians] do not know whether they will be the male or the female, and have no choice in the matter. . . The culminant phase of kemmer (Karh. *thokemmer*) lasts from two to five days, during which sexual drive and capacity are at maximum. It ends fairly abruptly, and if conception has not taken place, the individual returns to the *somer* phase within a few hours. . . If the individual was in the female role and was impregnated, hormonal activity

of course continues, and for the 8.4-month gestation period and the 6- to 8-month lactation period this individual remains female. . . the breasts enlarge somewhat, and the pelvic girdle widens. With the cessation of lactation the female reenters somer and becomes once more a perfect androgyne. (96-7)

Le Guin could have confronted the mating problem by designing her aliens to mate and give birth exclusively in male form. It is science fiction—writers can envision any impossibility and make it possible; and the tone would have certainly elicited strange and stimulating conversations on gender. But Le Guin chooses not to stray from natural reproductive laws of human beings on Earth, opting instead to emphasize women’s innate ability to harbour life, birth it into existence, and support it to the end of her lactation period. Indeed, her discussion on gender difference quite literally “gives birth” to feminist solidarity. Women on Earth and women on Gethen are united in their shared ability to bring life into the world, and the complex timing and conditions required for it to happen make Gethenian birth—and Gethenian female bodies, for that matter—as miraculous as we know them to be on Earth.

It is essential at this stage to acknowledge positions of female leadership in Le Guin’s text. Kings, diplomats, and other elected officials on Winter are portrayed almost entirely as androgynes, but with mostly male characteristics. There is one exception, however: the pregnant King Argaven. While feminists have argued that Le Guin’s lack of female qualities in androgynous political leadership is problematic, they often dismiss the gravity of a pregnant king in a supposedly genderless society. This essay will not delve deeply into the politics of Le Guin’s world to address women’s power on Winter; my target is the Foreteller sequence. But it is imperative to note that along with Le Guin’s female characterization of Faxe as seer, she offers leadership roles for women, even pregnant women, in other areas of Gethenian society. As feminist readers we must not allow Le Guin’s male pronouns to cloud our assessments of gender in the text. A pregnant king in an androgynous society is a radical feminist concept, and perfect for the world of science fiction. Feminist critics find fault with Le Guin’s use of male pronouns and stereotypical male characteristics in her androgynous characters, but have neglected the feminist message of a pregnant king, as well as the most powerful scene on sex and gender in the novel: the Foreteller ritual.

iii. Male and Female Energies in Handdara Ritual

Genly’s visit to the Foretellers of Otherhord is one of the key scenes for understanding Le Guin’s construction of gender and sexuality in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Like the reader, Genly is a stranger to the planet Winter and its customs. But in the Foreteller scene, the alien visitor comes to understand the Gethenian perspective. The Foretellers practice the Karhidish religion of Handdara, which Genly understands as “a religion without institution, without priests, without hierarchy, without vows, without creed.” He confesses, “I am still unable to say whether it has a God or not” (57). In the Foretelling ritual, male and female energies are combined to achieve spiritual awakening, and early in the sequence Le Guin strikes a sexual/psychological balance fit for an androgynous society and a religion “without priests” and “without hierarchy”. But as the ceremony progresses, Genly seems to learn—and I will contend—that Handdara should not be considered a religion “without hierarchy.”

Any society, fictional or not, is influentially defined by its distribution of power to men and/or women in religious practices. In the Foreteller sequence we can see Le Guin’s interest in

gender polarities and how these forces work together, but it is also evident that the Handdarata look to Faxe for spiritual guidance and wisdom. Faxe holds a position amongst the Foretellers that signals respect, power, and even superiority. It also appears to be a Gethenian natural law that the Weaver *must* shift into female form to become the seer and retrieve answers of truth for the asker. Because the Weaver is strongest in female form, we must denounce Genly's initial observations of the religion and conclude that there is indeed a hierarchy in Handdara, and femaleness is superior. The effect: a feminist reading that reclaims power for women in a long western history of male-dominant religions.

Though the Handdara seer is essentially female, Le Guin designs the Foreteller ritual as an all-inclusive circle, representing all sexes and mental states. The circle consists of *nine* Karhidars: two Zanies or "time-dividers," five celibate Indwellers of Otherhord, "adepts in the Handdara disciplines of Presence, and also ... so long as they remained Foretellers, celibate," a Pervert, and Faxe the Weaver. Genly notes, "One of these Celibates must be in kemmer during the Foretelling" (66), and he is able to pick him out in the group, seated next to the Pervert. Curiously, Le Guin also uses the number nine as a spiritually significant number in *Always Coming Home* and *The Tombs of Atuan*, two very different works published after *The Left Hand of Darkness*. She is clearly directing us to consider her intent going into these scenes, offering repeated numerical symbolism to pique our interest. Le Guin's nine bodies of the Foreteller circle represent sexual and psychological differences. The Zanies are described as "insane" and possibly "schizophrenics." When Genly asks Goss, a Karhider, if the Zanies can be "cured" of their illness, Goss responds, "Cured? ... Would you cure a singer of his voice?" (66). The Pervert, another member of the nine, represents physiological abnormality. Genly explains the Gethenian concept of perversion:

Excessive prolongation of the kemmer period, with permanent hormonal imbalance towards the male or the female, causes what they call perversion; it is not rare; three or four percent of adults may be physiological perverts or abnormal—normals, by our standard. They are not excluded from society, but they are tolerated with some disdain, as homosexuals are in many bisexual societies. The Karhidish slang for them is *halfdeads*. They are sterile. (67)

While other scenes in *The Left Hand* demonstrate gender differences that, for Genly and the reader, evoke stereotypical perceptions of typical male/female roles and behaviors, the Foreteller ritual stands apart as a message that is more serious and focused. Le Guin includes multi-faceted identities in Handdara religion to call attention to the difference of the individual and cohesiveness of the collective. We are able to see that Le Guin is concerned with binaries beyond the male/female, and works to balance these opposing forces. Genly points us to the magnitude of the scene when he looks into the eyes of Faxe and acknowledges, "His clear eyes compelled truth" (61). The circle of nine represents all bodies, genders, and psyches. Though the pervert may be "tolerated with some disdain," he is "not excluded from society." The Zany's insanity is not recognized as a disability but as a gift. It is admirable that Le Guin chooses the most powerful scene in the novel to recognize marginal, underrepresented, and misrepresented figures in our society; the insane, the perverted, the celibate, and the historically oppressed sex are all given space in the Karhider ritual as members of a community. And each has an important part to play.

Although Le Guin uses male pronouns for her Karhidars, she creates gender distinction in the Foreteller circle. During this ceremony, the Pervert and kemmerer are seated next to one another, and the sexual stimulation between them is used to raise the consciousness of the group. Genly watches the two characters interact:

The Pervert of the group . . . paid no heed to anyone but the one next to him, the kemmerer, whose increasingly active sexuality would be further roused and finally stimulated into full, female sexual capacity by the insistent, exaggerated maleness of the Pervert. The Pervert kept talking softly, leaning towards the Kemmerer, who answered little and seemed to recoil. None of the others had spoken for a long time now, there was no sound but the whisper, whisper of the Pervert's voice . . . The Pervert laid his hand quickly and softly on the kemmerer's hand. The kemmerer avoided the touch hastily, with fear or disgust, and looked at Faxe as if for help. Faxe did not move. The kemmerer kept his place, and kept still when the Pervert touched him again. (67-8)

Le Guin does not depict sexual intercourse between the Pervert and kemmerer, but moments after Genly witnesses the dynamic between the pair, his visions begin; the erotic exchange actually appears to induce Genly's trance. The Pervert and kemmerer also facilitate building the energy for Faxe's mutation and his retrieval of Genly's answer from the other side. Undeniably, the Pervert and kemmerer are crucial to the Foreteller ritual. By constructing a scene where sexual polarities in a supposed non-gendered society are pushed to an extreme in that society's spiritual practice, Le Guin impresses on us the necessity and inevitability of gender, even in the world of science fiction.

iv. The Silver Seer

As we look closer at the significance of Genly's visions in the Foreteller circle, we must not diminish their importance by making the mistake of viewing them as mere hallucinations, or any kind of pathological disease or disturbance. We know from Le Guin's text that Genly is gifted with "mindspeech," a form of telepathic communication that enables him to converse with others through the mind and, as Genly describes, is "voluntarily sent and received" (72). Genly offers to train Faxe in mindspeech but Faxe politely declines, stating, "Well, I thank you, Genry. But my business is unlearning, not learning. And I'd rather not yet learn an art that would change the world entirely" (72). Part of the spiritual discipline of the Foretellers of Otherworld is to *unlearn* rather than learn, a rather Zen-like philosophy Le Guin has adopted for her novel. In understanding the Foreteller ceremony, we must recognize that Faxe and the Foretellers are not some wacky, cultish fringe group when compared with Genly who, even though he is a human being, possesses unique and powerful psychic abilities.

Genly's experience in the Foretelling ritual is nothing short of extraordinary. He poses his question to Faxe: "Will this world Gethen be a member of the Ekumen of Known Worlds, five years from now?" (66). Genly must then sit outside the circle of nine and await his answer. As the ritual progresses, Genly is pulled into a dreamlike, sexual chaos, undergoing visions of his own: "I was surrounded by great gaping pits with ragged lips, vaginas, wounds, hellmouths, I lost my balance, I was falling If I could not shut out this chaos I would fall indeed, I would go mad, and there was no shutting it out" (69). Genly, experiencing a momentary loss of self, is seized with visions of female anatomy, only the vagina resembles "ragged lips," "wounds, hellmouths." Le Guin appeals to a common trope in literary and artistic representation of the vagina as dark, dangerous, violent, and chaotic, leading us to question whether the ritual is evoking ancient mysteries of the feminine or forcing Genly to confront his own fear of women. In her book *Sexual Personae*, Camille Paglia defines "The woundlike rawness of female genitals [as] a symbol of the unredeemability of chthonian nature" (17). She outlines how women,

because of their anatomical connection to nature and its cycles, have been historically associated with qualities of nature—chaos, mystery, creation, destruction. In the Foreteller ritual, Genly is confronted with the power of this earthy “sexual chaos,” the feminine chthonic madness he can never understand. Paglia comments further on historic perceptions of and responses to female genitalia:

Male bonding and patriarchy were the recourse to which man was forced by his terrible sense of woman’s power, her imperviousness, her archetypal confederacy with chthonian nature. Woman’s body is a labyrinth in which man is lost. It is a walled garden, the medieval *hortus conclusus*, in which nature works its daemonic sorcery. Woman is the primeval fabricator, the real First Mover. She turns a gob of refuse into a spreading web of sentient being, floating on the snaky umbilical by which she leashes every man. (12)

Genly, alone and stranger to the world of Winter, is not able to surround himself with the familiar company of men that reinforce his status as a male. The Karhidiers are gender-fluid and have far different perceptions of the male and female sex, and because of this, Genly becomes lost in the “labyrinth” during the Foreteller ritual. Many feminist critics have argued that Karhidiers do not occupy roles of female power in society, but Faxe as female Weaver surely has the most critical role of all: to guide Genly into the infinite, secret vortex of woman’s power, and back again.

Unable to control the visions, Genly resigns himself to the position of watcher, submitting to the tremendous force created by the collective’s sexual energies. He narrates his helplessness in the experience:

The emphatic and paraverbal forces at work, immensely powerful and confused, rising out of the perversion and frustration of sex, out of an insanity that distorts time, out of an appalling discipline of total concentration and apprehension of immediate reality, were far beyond my restraint or control. And yet they were controlled: the center was still Faxe. (69)

Genly’s admission of helplessness signals a de-masculinization of his character. By staging Genly in a spiritual transaction between himself and the Foretellers, then rendering his character helpless to the “ragged lips” and “hellmouths” seen in his hallucinations, Le Guin diminishes his power as a man, especially as the ritual segues into Faxe’s full transformation into a woman.

At the pivotal moment when the Foretellers reach a state of transcendental awareness, just before they acquire the answer to Genly’s question, Faxe—center of the circle—transforms into a woman. Still unable to move or speak, Genly beholds the metamorphosis:

. . . in the center of all darkness Faxe: the Weaver, a woman, a woman dressed in light.

The light was silver, the silver was armor, an armored woman with a sword. The light burned sudden and intolerable, the light along her limbs, the fire, and she screamed aloud in terror and pain, “Yes, yes, yes!” (69)

Bathed in light and adorned as a warrior, Faxe as woman is the conduit for the Foretelling circle; it is through *her* the answers to the future are revealed. The remaining eight Foretellers hold space in the ritual, building oppositional energies between male and female, but the beacon of fire is Faxe, as woman. Through Faxe, “the center of all darkness,” Le Guin creates a manifestation of the divine in female form. Moments after Faxe’s transformation, Genly receives his answer: “Five years from now Gethen would be a member of the Ekumen: yes” (70).

Some days later, Genly speaks with Faxe about the physics involved in the Foreteller circle. Faxe explains the science behind the ritual and his role as conduit: “I serve as the filament. . . The energy builds up and up in us, always sent back and back, redoubling the impulse every time, until it breaks through and the light is in me, around me, I am the light . . . The Old Man of

Arbin Fastness once said that if the Weaver could be put in a vacuum at the moment of the answer, he'd go on burning for years" (71). Le Guin impresses on us the importance of the Weaver's position in the circle. Faxe reaches a state of highly concentrated energy that could, at the moment of its greatest potential, go on burning for years. Le Guin grounds mystical, religious elements of the Foreteller ritual back in hard science fiction, further developing the significance of Faxe's place as actualized woman; there is both scientific truth and divine wisdom in the Weaver's power. Faxe as woman is not a hallucination like Genly's visions of the "hellmouths." He is a very real and very powerful physical force of energy, and through this energy, life's truths are discovered. The futures on other planets are also revealed, as seen in Genly's question that involves the planet Gethen and the multi-planetary alliance Ekumen. This signals a universal power and consciousness accessed by the Foretellers, and Faxe, the silver woman warrior, is center of it all.

v. Goddesses, Mystics, Mediums, and Witches from East to West

In many of her works, Le Guin has engaged with various spiritual and religious practices of cultures from around the world, adopting or at times appropriating art, philosophies, and rituals from these practices. Her book *Tao Te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way* offers a rendering of a twenty-five hundred year-old Chinese text that, as Le Guin expresses, "speaks to people everywhere as if it had been written yesterday" (Popova). Le Guin comments on her ethical aim in recreating a modern, accessible version of the text:

Scholarly translations of the *Tao Te Ching* as a manual for rulers use a vocabulary that emphasizes the uniqueness of the Taoist "sage," his masculinity, his authority. This language is perpetuated, and degraded, in most popular versions. I wanted a Book of the Way accessible to a present-day, unwise, unpowerful, and perhaps unmale reader, not seeking esoteric secrets, but listening for a voice that speaks to the soul. (Popova)

Le Guin's admiration and respect for the *Tao Te Ching* is discernible not only in her contemporary version of the text, but in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and much of her other work as well. Ideas of balance, duality, opposing forces, and the image of Yin and Yang all come up again and again in her fiction. She marks nearly every one of her novels with this message—at times encrypted, at others glaring—and invites us to consider its significance in the texts and more broadly, in our own lives.

Throughout her career, Le Guin has looked to Eastern cultures for inspiration in her creative process, particularly in relation to themes on religion and spirituality. In *The Left Hand*, we can speculate on the source of these adaptations by looking closely at the Foreteller ceremony where Le Guin has explored sexuality in a sacred space. Certainly, there are Eastern ideas of balance and duality that can be found in this scene. But Faxe's metamorphosis at the peak of the ritual, juxtaposed with Genly's intense hallucinations of female genitalia demand a numinous reading of the scene where power is rooted in femaleness. It is therefore useful to our analysis of the text to compare the Foreteller ritual with cultural traditions of the East and West that honor female power in sacred practice. Camille Paglia describes how cultures of the East and West differ in their preservation of ideas of female power or the divine feminine:

Buddhist cultures retained the ancient meanings of femaleness long after the west renounced them. Male and female, the Chinese yang and yin, are balanced and interpenetrating powers in man and nature, to which society is subordinate. This code of

passive acceptance has its roots in India, a land of sudden extremes where a monsoon can wipe out 50,000 people overnight. The femaleness of fertility religions is always double-edged. The Indian nature-goddess Kali is creator *and* destroyer, granting boons with one set of arms while cutting throats with the other. She is the lady ringed with skulls. . . Western culture from the start has swerved from femaleness. The last major western society to worship female powers was Minoan Crete. (8)

While Le Guin surely looked to goddesses of the East for inspiration, there are a number of traditions in the West that have revered women not as goddesses, but as mystics, seers, and spiritual leaders for people to follow, and these histories would have influenced Le Guin's work. In this next section I will offer a comparison of Le Guin's character Faxe to women of the West who have drastically altered our cultural landscape through their femininity. Further, I will compare spatiality in the Foreteller circle with Western sacred rituals. There are many similarities to be drawn out, not just in the status of women as spiritual leaders, but in the quality and atmosphere of the ceremonies.

Le Guin's 1960s and 1970s America was a period of revival for influential female figures of the past. Feminists pored through texts from over the centuries, searching for women's art and literature that might have been lost in a male-dominant history, a history that was beginning to change. Faxe's transfiguration into a woman in the Foreteller ceremony is highly evocative of the mystical visionary writings, artwork, and music of Saint Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th century nun living in what is now Germany. Hildegard, having been the most renowned, rebellious, and celebrated woman of the 12th century, resurfaced in the 60s as an important figure in feminist studies. Hildegard spent a lifetime recording her divine encounters into her books *Scivias*, or *Know the Ways* (1151), *The Book of Life's Merits* (1163), and *The Book of Divine Works* (1173). Her writings deal with social and ethical matters, philosophy, the cosmos, farming, and medicine. Hildegard also composed liturgical choral music that is still performed today. In 1998, David Lynch and vocalist Jocelyn Montgomery released *Lux Vivens* or *Living Light*, a modern rendering of some of Hildegard's most famous musical pieces. Most relevant to our discussion, Hildegard created paintings of her visions from God, and one has only to look to these illustrations to see the closeness between her artwork and Le Guin's Foreteller scene. Hildegard's "First Vision: Fiery Life Force," "Fifth Vision," and the famous "Frontispiece of Scivias" (*Hildegard of Bingen Famous Works*) all depict her mystical experiences and their association with fire. In "First Vision," Christ stands as a fiery figure supported and enclosed by God's embrace. "Fifth Vision" and "Frontpiece of Scivias" show Hildegard in the state of receiving a vision; she writes in her tablet while her scribe Volmar sits next to her, recording her revelations. In both illustrations, flames of light enter into Hildegard's head. She receives divine messages from God in the form of fire. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Genly describes the appearance of Faxe during his transformation: "The light burned sudden and intolerable, the light along her limbs, the fire, and she screamed aloud in terror and pain, "Yes, yes, yes!" (69). Le Guin uses fire to heighten the drama of Faxe's transformation, and Genly is both frightened and astonished by the occurrence. It would seem Le Guin is inspired by the history of fire in mysticism. It is very likely she would have been exposed to the works of Hildegard, as the medieval saint's extensive collection resurged into 1960s popular culture, the same time Le Guin was writing *The Left Hand*. And considering Le Guin's interest in feminism and the natural environment—political platforms for which Hildegard's work was repurposed—it is possible that Le Guin knowingly adopted materials by this alluring woman.

Another figure in women's religious history that stands out as a likely inspiration for Le Guin's character Faxe is 16th century Spanish mystic Saint Teresa of Ávila. Like Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa's visions were documented. During her life Saint Teresa wrote the *Vida*, a spiritual autobiography that has been the subject of study for centuries. Her account of her "Ecstasy," a wholly sensual and personal experience with God, reads as a violent sexual encounter transmuted into spiritual terms with elements of what we would today call sadism and masochism. Teresa's Ecstasy has been an influential undercurrent in art and literature as well as theological debate since the time of its creation. Italian baroque sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini takes Teresa's words into visual form, his towering marble statue *Santa Teresa in Estasi* (1651) full of movement yet serene, sexual yet pure, the angel a divine aggressor. Metaphysical poets of the Renaissance have also found inspiration in Teresa's work. Richard Crashaw's beautiful literary rendering of Teresa's account forms connections between the divine fire and her sexuality: "Love touched her *heart*, & lo it beats / High, & burns with such brave heats." Later in the poem, Crashaw connects the image of Teresa's fiery heart to her breath: "For she breathes all fire. / Her weak breasts heave with strong desire" (661). To read Saint Teresa's *Vida* or experience art and literature inspired by the mystic is to get lost in a riot of the senses. The visionary quality in Teresa's Ecstasy, in all its pain and beauty, is what has stood the test of time in art and literature. Petersson explains, "The vital source of the seraphic vision . . . is also the conceptual principle of Crashaw's and Bernini's re-creations of the vision" (41). The image of the pure, feminine Saint Teresa spiritually ravaged by a male god is forever imprinted in Christianity and Western culture.

In the *Vida* we can see remarkable similarities between Teresa's Ecstasies and Le Guin's portrayal of Faxe's spiritual transformation. Saint Teresa describes her encounter with an angel: He was not tall, but short, and very beautiful, his face so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest types of angel who seem to be all afire. They must be those who are called seraphim. . . In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain, but spiritual, though the body has a share in it – indeed, a great share. (40)

Like Hildegard, Teresa casts herself into the divine flames of God, stating, "It is not we who put on the fuel; it seems rather as if the fire is already kindled and it is we who are suddenly thrown into it to be burned up" (41). Both saints acknowledge the pleasure and pain associated with God's fire, and this style of commentary seems to be picked up by Le Guin in her imagining of the Foreteller ritual. Faxe burns like the seraphim, a messenger from God, while Genly, disturbed and ecstatic from the experience, is recipient of the message. In fact, the message is specifically for him: "Five years from now Gethen would be a member of the Ekumen: yes" (70).

We do not need to look to the distant past of female saints, however, to see religious elements Le Guin has adopted for her ritual scene. Recent history of Christianity has seen prominent female figures in the Church who, like Hildegard and Teresa, have also received tremendous attention and criticism. Aimee Semple McPherson, an American Evangelist Christian, rose to popularity through her emotionally impactful, rhetorical style of preaching. As Maddux explains, McPherson "innovated feminized personae including the servant and the bride.

Her critics took issue with this feminized rhetorical style, which had fallen rapidly into disfavor over the preceding decades” (42). McPherson’s style included “performative sermons, enthusiastic crowds, healing services, and radio evangelism” (43), all of which produced strong emotional reactions in the masses. Maddux summarizes, “The exchange between McPherson and her critics illuminates the backlash against feminized Christianity as it also highlights the dangers of associating femininity with emotions and appearances” (42). Le Guin would have been aware of McPherson’s role in feminized religious history, and much of her work deals with themes of femininity and their associated “emotions and appearances.” Having lived in California for a large part of her life, it would have been unlikely for Le Guin to miss seeing, or at the very least, knowing of McPherson’s Angelus Temple, a megachurch built in 1923 in the Echo Lake district of Los Angeles. Originally constructed to seat 5,300 people in a single service, the church is still open for worship today and has almost 10,000 members.

As a woman in a traditionally male-dominant religious society, McPherson had momentous sway. But it was not only the style of preaching she delivered that made her so famous and beloved. Contrary to most female leaders up until the 20th century, McPherson embraced her feminine appearance, choosing not to hide beneath unrevealing clothing but instead, follow the womanly trends of her Hollywood star surroundings. Lois Van Cleave, a friend of McPherson’s and longtime attendant of the Angelus Temple, comments on McPherson’s unabashedly feminine dress code:

She used to carry a bouquet of roses, huge bouquet of roses. . . Now up to this time women leaders were very plain, very conservative in their dress. And they had to look holy. And Semple McPherson was out here in the west where there were movie stars and where there were all kind of people that looked attractive, and she realized that women preachers didn’t have to look like last year’s warmed-over biscuit. . . They could look up to date. Nice. Have the nice hairdo. Look nice and wear stylish clothes. She didn’t have a mannish voice or a squeaky woman voice. She had just the most pleasant voice that captivated you when she’d start to talk you just sat forward and say ‘This woman’s saying something important.’ (*A Look Back* 3:20)

McPherson’s power over the American people in the early part of the 20th century is inspiring for Christians and non-Christians alike. She embodied a fully feminine style of rhetorical preaching and appearance, dismantling male-dominant systems that came before her. Ultimately, McPherson and other women involved in the feminization of Christianity facilitated in paving the way for other women leaders to come: “The ‘feminization’ so evident in late-nineteenth-century Christianity both resulted from and further inspired women’s increased access to leadership within American Protestantism” (Maddux 45). Le Guin’s centering of Faxe coming into female form at the height of the Foreteller ritual demonstrates an avid interest in female religious leaders, and as feminist readers we must look to the cultural undercurrents that have informed her text. Faxe, Saint Hildegard, Saint Teresa, and Aimee Semple McPherson are all examples of power concentrated in the female body. Le Guin reaches back through a long history of specifically feminine religious experiences to establish a feminist position on sexuality and gender difference, all the while articulating these materials within the traditionally masculine mode of science fiction. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a rare artistic achievement and valuable contribution to feminist discourse.

Along with the many references to religious practices, Le Guin’s ritual scene in *The Left Hand of Darkness* also contains numerous parallels to magic practices in the West over the last two hundred years. Spiritualism was a movement born out of the mid-nineteenth century in

Hydesville, New York when two young sisters, Mary and Margaret Fox, developed a means of communicating with a poltergeist haunting their family home. The events in the Fox household garnered national attention and many Christian believers in America, Quakers in particular, accepted the hauntings as genuine interactions with the spirit world. As interest grew, Spiritualism became an established practice in North America and parts of Europe and, most pertinent to our discussion, featured women as central to the rituals. Spiritualists conducted séances around a table in the domestic space of a parlor room where a ‘medium’ would gather with her ‘sitters’ to establish contact with the dead through various communicative techniques. Alex Owens explains how Victorian women, who prior to the Spiritualist movement had little power or sway in religious spaces, became viewed as intrinsically gifted Spiritualist mediums:

Spiritualist mediums became the ‘repositories’, the ‘vessels’, the bearers of the spiritual message and channels for Divine communication. And what is vital here is that spiritualists assumed that it was innate femininity, in particular, female passivity, which facilitated this renunciation of self and cultivation of mediumistic powers. (10)

Spiritualists believed that through the body of woman, a spirit could manifest itself more easily; woman was seen as biologically designed for the work, more passive, receptive, and physiologically ‘open’ for materialization of spirits. These beliefs, though rooted in patriarchal ideologies promulgating passivity of the female sex, also offered women positions of leadership in sacred ritual, an utterly radical shift for the time. Further, the increasing popularity of Spiritualism meant that women could now lecture publicly on their experience as a medium, moving women’s influence from the private domestic sphere to the public. Many of the women who lectured at Spiritualist conferences were young, sometimes children, and gave trance lectures where they would undergo the process of communication with the dead in a public setting. 19th century Spiritualism coincided with and contributed to early feminist efforts, and the American social landscape changed drastically because of it. Whether Le Guin consciously or unconsciously adopted elements of Spiritualism and its history in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the influence of the period is certainly there. Actually, by investigating histories of western sacred ritual, we can see Spiritualism is perhaps the most closely related ritual to Handdara Foretelling that we know of; the balancing of male and female sexes with the prominence of the female medium is utterly the same. As feminist readers we must consider the historical and cultural importance of a scene like the Foreteller circle where a woman is the central and most powerful figure.

Spiritualism also made its presence in fictional works like Henry James’s *The Bostonians*, where the gatherings—that included some of history’s first feminist activists—are referred to as “a rendezvous of witches on the Brocken,” and groups of “witches and wizards, mediums, and spirit-rappers, and roaring radicals” (6). James stages the pragmatic and wholly old-fashioned Southerner Basil Ransom against the young and beautiful Miss Verena Tarrant, a feminist lecturer and medium, to demonstrate cultural tensions in the 19th century between an intellectual, unemotional, male-dominant body of Americans and an emotional, unexplainable, and intuitive style of ritual and politics founded by women and other marginalized groups of society. Even the chauvinistic Basil Ransom is spellbound by Miss Verena’s lecture on the rights of women:

The young man lost all sense of time. He wondered afterwards how long she had spoken; then he counted that her strange, sweet, crude, absurd, enchanting improvisation must have lasted an hour. It was not what she said; he didn’t care for that, he scarcely understood it; he could only see that it was all about the gentleness and goodness of women, and how, during the long ages of history, they had been trampled under the iron

heel of man. It was about their equality—perhaps even (he was not definitely conscious) about their superiority. It was about their day having come at last, about the universal sisterhood, about their duty to themselves and to each other. (72)

Fascinatingly, James's depiction of Basil Ransom being delivered the capital 'T' Truths of women by the sweepingly feminine Miss Verena casts a noteworthy parallel to Genly's experience in the Foreteller ritual. Like Genly, Le Guin would define Basil as "sexist" but "not a mean one. Not a misogynist." And both men undergo a life-altering experience with a woman in power. The "insanity" of the encounters "distorts time" (*Left Hand* 69). Genly's experience is more erotically charged and ethereal, the "hallucinations of sight and touch" and "great gaping pits with ragged lips" (69) terrifying him and torturing him. But Basil is given a look at history; his moment is intellectual, political. And though he disagrees with Verena's argument, he is touched: "He was the stiffest of conservatives, and his mind was steeled against the inanities she uttered . . . [but] to *his* starved senses she irresistibly appealed" (72-3). Both Genly and Basil have profound moments of insight and are changed by the events. And Verena and Faxe come out on top – with power, command, and all control. James and Le Guin create a moment for their male characters to learn about women's histories and future potential, their stormy, chthonic sexualities, and the tremendous forces of nature located in their bodies.

Another intriguing parallel with Le Guin's Foreteller scene and modern sacred ritual is the balancing of gender and the use of sex as an element in magic. In Spiritualist séances, men and women were seated alternately as a means of balancing energy. Wicca, a contemporary religious movement established by Gerald Gardner in 1954, features men and women in erotic exchanges during a ceremony. Like the alternate seating seen in Spiritualist séances, sex in Wicca and other religions is often used to build energy or create magic through opposites. Gardner's *The Book of Shadows* contains instructions for initiation into Wicca, many of which involve sexual pleasure. Gardner outlines one of the steps in initiation into the second degree:

"I consecrate thee with oil." (He anoints her with oil on her womb, right breast, left hip, right hip, left breast, and womb again, thus tracing a point down pentacle.)

"I consecrate thee with wine." (He anoints her with wine in the same pattern.)

"I consecrate thee with my lips" (he kisses her in the same pattern), "High Priestess and Witch Queen." (Klaassen 4)

By looking closely at elements in ritual magic over the last two hundred years, we can see that Le Guin is drawing from traditions that utilize gender opposites for spiritual purposes, and also feature women as prominent and essential to achieving higher states of consciousness. We cannot know of Le Guin's direct sources of inspiration for the Foretelling scene in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, but we do know what she would have been exposed to, and are thus able to make accurate parallels between her artistic imagining of a female seer in ritual, and histories of other female religious leaders.

vi. Light is the Left Hand of Darkness

It is puzzling that feminist critics have not considered Faxe and the Foreteller scene in Le Guin's work as a section to which feminist rhetoric should be applied, particularly considering the Gethenians' inability to attain a state of femaleness except for during sexual reproduction and the highest forms of spiritual attainment. The Gethenian access to femaleness only in these primal, crucial, and sacred moments of life suggest adoration for the female sex, both in the eyes of the Gethenians and Le Guin. Women are powerful and influential members of society on

Winter, much more powerful than feminist critics have given them credit for. Le Guin establishes that women—specifically in their differences from men—are physically and psychically built for navigating the spirit realm, as seen in Faxe’s role as warrior seer and in Gethenian mothers. With an observant look into the history of gender and sexuality in religious practices, Le Guin creates an intellectually stunning piece of science fiction that celebrates the female sex and its connection to the numinous.

Like many artists of the 1960s, Le Guin pursues themes of androgyny in her work. But it is a critical misstep to view the Karhidiers of Winter as a genderless society. They are gender-fluid, yes, but not without gender distinction. Le Guin’s aliens adopt and maintain a specific gender for sexual, psychological, and spiritual purposes, and we can see this best exemplified in the Foreteller sequence. This scene also provides us with a closer look into Le Guin’s gender difference feminist values that present men and women as equal but with different abilities. After nearly 50 years, *The Left Hand of Darkness* remains relevant in feminist studies. This is precisely because Le Guin simultaneously explores androgyny—experimenting with bodies, sexualities, roles, and stereotypes—while also demonstrating that difference theory can form a basis for effective feminist criticism. In her distinctions between the male and female sexes, Le Guin also manages to somehow forge “feminist solidarity” (Bender) within a traditionally male-dominant literary genre. Her mastery of science fiction and eloquent, yet incessant application of feminist critique to the genre should be recognized as a victory for women.

Le Guin’s study of Eastern duality concepts forms a captivating parallel to her thought experiments with gender difference, and in *The Left Hand* these studies complement each other, creating a cross-cultural, trans-historical framework for which we may perceive gender. The meaning behind Le Guin’s title is found in the closing moments of Genly and Estraven’s journey when Genly draws a yin-yang in the snow. He explains to Estraven, “It is yin and yang. *Light is the left hand of darkness* . . . Light, dark. Fear, courage. Cold, warmth. Female, male. It is yourself, Therem. Both and one. A shadow on snow” (287). Genly’s mission is to act as envoy for the Ekumen and unite Gethen with his world and the others, but along his journey, he learns of the many dualities in life that can be found in his own world and another light-years away. Le Guin acknowledges perfection in opposites, that two beings can be friends even though they are alien to each other. Man/woman, human/alien, our differences fuel Gethen, the Ekumen, and all cosmic existence.

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