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# Between Literary Transmission and Magical Transgression: The Intellectual Project of Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Quartet

Evan Guillout

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**UNIVERSITE RENNES 2**

**Dossier de recherche**

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**Between Literary Transmission  
and Magical Transgression:  
The Intellectual Project of  
Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* Quartet**

**Evan GUILLOUT**

**Sous la direction de Sylvie BAUER et Helene MACHINAL**

**Année 2023-2024**



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# Introduction

To be free, after all, is not to be undisciplined. I should say that the discipline of the imagination may in fact be the essential method or technique of both art and science.

(Le Guin and Wood 36–37)

Nowadays hailed as one of the most influential American writers in the field of speculative fiction, Ursula K. Le Guin has even been granted the title of a “creator of worlds” (Philips) by *Humanities*, the magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Although Le Guin has also written several collections of poetry (*So Far So Good*, 2018) and of essays (*The Language of the Night*, 1993), she is indeed mostly known for her science-fiction and fantasy stories set in otherworldly universes, including the central work focused upon in this paper, the “Earthsea” series (Le Guin, *The Earthsea Quartet*)<sup>1</sup>, set in the eponymous fictional archipelago. The fictional universe constructed by the author is indeed as alive as its protagonists, and could be considered as one of its main characters. In “De l’ensemble à la totalité: L’effet de monde dans les littératures de l’imaginaire contemporaines”, Anne Besson even introduces the concept of “world-works”<sup>2</sup> (Besson, “De l’ensemble à la totalité” 2), works or franchises centered around a fictional universe, different from the Earth as we know it, with its own geography, customs, political systems... These worlds are “both topographies and wholes: descriptions of universes, developed over several occurrences which are themselves the subject of fictional expansions, including recreational ones”<sup>3</sup> (Besson, “De l’ensemble à la totalité” 2). In the case of the series under study, the universe is expanded page by page, novel by novel as it is explored by its characters and expanded by its author.

The cycle spans over a total of six books, published between 1961 and 2001: *A Wizard of Earthsea*, *The Tombs of Atuan*, *The Farthest Shore*, *Tehanu*, *Tales from Earthsea*, and *The Other Wind*, as well as a stand-alone novella, *The Daughter of Odren*<sup>4</sup>. All of these narratives are thus located in the Earthsea archipelago, where magic abounds but is mostly mastered by a select minority of witches and wizards who offer their services to the common people. An overarching theme of the cycle, the act of knowing the true name of objects, animals, and

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1 Throughout this paper, I will refer to the 2015 Puffin Books edition of *The Earthsea Quartet*. Any quote from the books will be followed by the page number of said edition.

2 My translation. Original text: “oeuvres-mondes”.

3 My translation. Original text: “à la fois des topographies et des ensembles: des descriptions d’univers, développées en plusieurs occurrences, qui elles mêmes ont fait l’objet de prolongements fictionnels et notamment ludiques”

4 <https://www.ursulakleuin.com/novels-and-collections>. Accessed January 19<sup>th</sup> 2024

people, finds its roots in the workings of the Earthsea magic system. Indeed, Le Guin imagined a world where names hold tremendous power, to the point that knowing someone's true name means to have a non-negligible influence over them. As such, the young protagonist Ged, as the custom wills it, undergoes a renaming ceremony, which requires the presence of a veteran wizard, Ogion:

On the day the boy was thirteen years old, a day in the early splendor of autumn while still the bright leaves are on the trees, Ogion returned to the village from his roving over Gont Mountain, and the ceremony of Passage was held. The witch took from the boy his name Duny, the name his mother had given him as a baby. Nameless and naked he walked into the cold springs of the Ar where it rises among rocks under the high cliffs. [...] As he came to the bank, Ogion, waiting, reached out his hand and clasping the boy's arm whispered to him his true name: Ged. Thus was he given his name by one very wise in the uses of power. (23)

Still, as "Ged" is the protagonist's true name, and the one that will be used to refer to the wizard throughout this thesis, it is both his greatest asset and his most important weakness. Therefore, use-names are commonplace in this fictional world:

Seeing him in the high pastures often with a bird of prey about him, the other children called him Sparrowhawk, and so he came by the name that he kept in later life as his use-name, when his true-name was not known. (17)

All in all, the importance of names in the archipelago leads to erudition itself being a powerful weapon, as it is best exemplified in an early passage of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, in which Ged makes his debuts in spellcraft under his aunt's tutelage:

When he found that the wild falcons stooped down to him from the wind when he summoned them by name, [...] then he hungered to know more such names and came to his aunt begging to learn the name of the sparrowhawk and the osprey and the eagle. To earn the words of power he did all the witch asked of him and learned of her all she taught. (16)

Although both the universe of Earthsea and the *Earthsea* cycle need to be properly investigated, this early passage already exposes knowledge and understanding as invaluable tools, something for which Ged viscerally "hungered". Furthermore, the previous two passages showcase that the young wizard's scholarly hunger can only be quelled by a mentor, one way or another, someone who shares their arcane expertise with him. Ogion and Ged's aunt thus both embody the idea that the act of learning carries a heavy social dimension, as it is both the manifestation of and the pillar of a bond between individuals. In both cases, it should also be noted that such transmission is of the generational kind: Ogion and the aunt are more experienced and knowledgeable than Ged due to their age, and they impart their wisdom to a representative of the younger generation, thus ensuring the continuity of knowledge.

Still, in order to tackle said themes with accuracy and reliable foundations, I must, just like Ged, rely on the works of more experienced masters, and exploit as best as I can the research that has already been conducted on similar topics.

Indeed, as one of the most well-known works of Ursula Le Guin, who is herself highly celebrated in the literary sphere, *Earthsea* has garnered important scholarly interest, and past works on the cycle must be taken into account when reading this paper. Gender dynamics in the setting, for example, have been studied by several thinkers. Among them, in the article *Witches, Wives, and Dragons*, Melanie A. Rawls studies the role of women in the archipelago, and how the most patriarchal customs are revealed throughout the books, an aspect which is best exemplified through a recurring adage in the books. As Rawls puts it:

Early in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the first book of Ursula K. Le Guin's highly regarded Earthsea fantasy series, readers are told: "There is a saying on Gont, Weak as woman's magic, and there is another saying, Wicked as woman's magic". These are curious declarations from an author who is internationally known for her explorations of gender politics and her critique of patriarchal social arrangements. In a world imagined and developed by a feminist writer, how is it that the magic of women is weak or wicked? Who are the women of Earthsea? (Rawls 129)

As Rawls' analysis of gender roles in the world of Earthsea intersects with the setting's politics of knowledge, I will make use of her work later in the paper. Other scholars' writing tackle topics similar to my own approach of Le Guin's works. For instance, Professor Thomas Alan Shippey's expertise in fantasy literature allows for an insightful analysis of *Earthsea's* themes. Therefore, his article "The Magic Art and the Evolution of Words: Ursula's Le Guin *Earthsea* Trilogy" provides highly interesting elements that fuel our reading of the cycle and our understanding of what magic represents:

A light turns on, an engine starts, regardless of who is at the switch; but spells are not the same. A mage, then, is knowledgeable, like a scientist; but his knowledge needs to be combined with personal genius, a quality we tend to ascribe to artists. (Shippey 150)

Thus, Shippey's definition of the mage as a hybrid between a scientist and an artist, Rawls' feminist reading of *Earthsea*, as well as several other scholarly works, will be of great use to this paper and I intend to exploit them adequately in order to support my own writing. However, I also plan to offer a new reading of the quartet, by tackling its intellectual themes in a new way: Although I will pay close attention to the ways knowledge and innate talent are handled in the four books, as Shippey does, I also intend to consider curiosity and imagination as crucial intellectual qualities, which are defended both by the characters in the novels and by the author who wishes to impart those traits to her readership.

Another crucial work on Ursula Le Guin is the volume *The Legacies of Ursula Le Guin: Science, Fiction, Ethics*, which comprises several essays offering a modern and critical outlook on the author's various works. *Legacies* specifically aims to "explore the literary and imaginative, speculative and provisional responses Le Guin has created when engaging with the ethical questions of how we – women and men, plants, and animals, cultures and

individuals, ancestors and descendants – can live together” (Robinson et al. 3). As far as this paper is concerned, the statement that “we turn to the arts and to literature in the hope of finding ways to re-imagine and re-engineer the world we live in” in our own troubled modern contexts, and Le Guin’s focus on “post-gender and anarchist societies [and] indigenous knowledge” (Robinson et al. 2) are especially striking.

Although the volume mostly tackles other works written by Ursula Le Guin, such as *The Dispossessed*, through the lens of “a tradition of ambiguous literary utopias” (Wise 47), a small section is dedicated to Earthsea series, “The Earthsea Books as a Helix of Time”, which is found within the chapter “The Language of the Dusk”, and which deals with the “helical trajectory of the Earthsea books” – returning by moving forward, progressing by turning back” (Stone et al. 97), an interpretation which will prove useful in the later parts of this paper.

This section also brushes upon topics specific to each novel, such as *The Farthest Shore*’s intertwining of “the spoilage of Earthsea’s ecology”, “failure of language”, and “individual moral choice” (Stone et al. 97–99). More relevantly, it also briefly tackles the relationships between gender and knowledge in *Tehanu*, “wherein women’s knowledge is offered as an alternative to the androcentric archive of wizardry” (Stone et al. 99). Although I intend to focus more intently on this matter in the body of this dissertation, it is important to highlight *Legacies*’ critical approach of the assumptions that *Tehanu* defends “the idea of a feminine mystique, of a knowledge from the depths that challenges masculine rationality” (Robinson et al. 131), through an in-depth analysis of the novel’s themes and the author’s intentions.

Nevertheless, before delving into the details of the text itself, an overview at Ursula’s Le Guin’s life is necessary in order to properly understand how essential the topic of intellectual transmission is to this paper, to *Earthsea*, and to the author herself.

Ursula Le Guin, née Ursula Kroeber, was born in 1929 and died in 2018 (Jonas), grew up in a familial environment which predisposed her to a life driven by curiosity and critical thinking, raised by “[the] anthropologist Alfred Kroeber and [the] writer Theodora Kroeber” (Ursula K. Le Guin Foundation, “Biography”). Furthermore, according to Le Guin herself, “There were lots of visitors, lots of talk and argument and discussion about everything, lots of books around, lots of music and story-telling. The life of the mind can be a very lively one. I was brought up to think and to question and to enjoy” (Ursula K. Le Guin Foundation, “Ursula on Ursula”). The curious and analytical nature of the author is also made apparent

through her own writings, as “Le Guin has said her fiction reflected attitudes she learned from her father: “[...]curiosity about people different from one’s own kind; interest in artifacts; interest in languages; delight in the idiosyncrasies of various cultures; a sense that time is long yet that human history is very short—and therefore, a sense of kinship across seas and centuries” (Philips). In *The Earthsea Quartet*, this dimension of her identity as a writer is visible through its setting, the diverse archipelago that we have mentioned, as well as the various skin colors of its protagonists, ranging from “red-brown like Ged and [his classmate] Jasper and most folk of the Archipelago” (44) to the “white-skinned, yellow-haired, and fierce” Kargs (18).

Thus, it comes to no surprise that *A Wizard of Earthsea*, along with the following stories of the cycle, reflects important parts of Le Guin’s background such as her knowledge-driven childhood and her constant immersion in intellectually stimulating activities. Furthermore, this correlation between fiction and reality also emphasizes *Earthsea*’s focus on learning, as well as our own decision to focus on this aspect of the book series.

Once more, continuing our analysis of the works’ themes, it is essential that we delay our progression in order to explain the reasoning behind the choice of limiting our material to the first four books of the cycle, despite the existence of the two other books that have been mentioned earlier. Indeed, apart from the mere practical implications, as exploiting an entire hexalogy as a primary source would prove rather complicated, the option to study the first three books exclusively has been considered. Indeed, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, *The Tombs of Atuan*, and *The Farthest Shore* can effectively be considered a trilogy, a staple structure in speculative fiction, as the novels have been published in very quick succession, namely 1968, 1971, and 1972 respectively. By contrast, *Tehanu* was published twenty years later, in 1990<sup>5</sup>. From a narrative standpoint, a mirror-like structure can also be observed: As we have mentioned it before, Ged is a mage in training in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, learning to master his powers and to understand his role as a user of magic. In addition to Ogion, he follows the teachings of the masters of Roke, the “School for Wizards” (39), where “all high arts are taught” (32). In *The Tombs of Atuan*, the story follows Tenar, a young girl forced to undergo the ceremony of the “Remaking of the Priestess” (179), in order to become the leader of an isolated cult worshipping the ominous “Nameless Ones” (183). Ged makes an appearance in the story, in details we will tackle later in this thesis, albeit with a secondary role. He also does so as a changed man and a far more experienced wizard than he is in the first tome. Finally, in *The Farthest Shore*, the young Prince Arren, must embark on a dangerous journey

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5 <https://www.ursulaklequin.com/novels-and-collections>. Accessed January 20<sup>th</sup> 2024

with Ged, now Archmage, as sorcery begins to fade away from the world. Indeed, as the mage explains to his fellow masters at Roke:

It seems that there is nothing very wrong; or if there is, it lies in this, that our lands are ungoverned or ill-governed, so that all the arts and high skills of men suffer from neglect [...] There is a dimming of the sun. I feel, my lords—I feel as if we who sit here talking were all wounded mortally, and while we talk and talk our blood runs softly from our veins... (322)

Nevertheless, although these first three novels appear to perfectly sum up the scholarly journey of Ged, from novice to veteran to Archmage, along with Tenar's tale at the center of this potential trilogy, *Tehanu* is still relevant both in the context of the *Earthsea* cycle for and our own analysis of its themes of intellectual acuity and transmission: the story focuses on the relationship between Tenar, who is now a widow named "Goha", "mistress of a flock of sheep and the land to pasture them" (483), and the "burned child" she took in, "Therru" (488). All in all, Ged, Tenar, and their companions, find themselves involved in several mentor-mentee duos, which are depicted in a variety of fashions throughout the four novels, each interacting with the fictional world's customs in different ways. Finally, perhaps the author herself puts it best: "I never thought of Earthsea as a trilogy, but for a long time I saw it as a three legged chair" (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 629).

The tetralogy can then be associated with the *Bildungsroman* literary genre, "a novel which shows the development and formation of a character, from childhood to adulthood, through various experiences and spiritual crises, [and which] emphasizes the influence of the early years upon later behaviour and the gradual discovery of a philosophy of life through experience and initiation" (Grellet 127). Such a structure makes *Earthsea* a perfect fit for a teenage audience, who both yearns for a fantastical adventure and faces the transition between childhood and adulthood themselves. Indeed, Laurent Bazin, who specializes in contemporary youth literature, argues that adolescence is "the prime period for an internal search for the self and for one's own determination"<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, on the question of the search for novelty as both a common sentiment among teenagers and a selling point, he claims the following:

When considering that the most important factor of attraction, in youth literature more than any other genre, is the yearning for travels and the need for imagination, we understand that the teenage-marketed contemporary novel which has produced the greatest publishing successes of the last decades is a type of fiction that relies on escapism.<sup>7</sup> (Bazin 2)

Although Ged's story is given the most focus in the cycle, as it is explored throughout several books, it should be noted that Tenar, Arren, and Therru face their own trials and

6 My translation. Original text: "Moment par excellence de la recherche de soi-même et de sa détermination".

7 My translation. Original text: "Si l'on considère que le premier moteur de l'attraction, en littérature de jeunesse encore plus qu'ailleurs, reste l'envie d'ailleurs et le besoin d'imaginaire, on comprend que le roman contemporain pour adolescents ayant produit les plus gros succès éditoriaux des dernières décennies et continuant de tenir la une de l'actualité éditoriale soit un type de récits privilégiant l'évasion".

undergo their own character development, which allows the readers to witness a plurality of experiences.

Supplementary information about the *Bildungsroman* is necessary, as it is a genre that lends itself perfectly to the aim of this paper. Indeed, Karl Morgenstern compares the novel, and the *Bildungsroman* in particular, with the epic genre, and thus claims that “the novel, [...], is suited more than any other genre to show the inner aspect of the human soul and to reveal its intimations, endeavors, battles, defeats, and victories”. This argument lies in the idea that “the characters stand fully formed” in the epic drama, whereas “the novel has more time and space to develop and present its dispositions” and its characters “are supposed to develop before our eyes (Morgenstern and Boes 651). This emphasis on character development, then, allows for meaningful character interactions of various kinds, which aligns with our own focus on transmission. Furthermore, these parallels extend to the very etymology of the genre? In Morgenstern’s words, “The kind of formation (*Bildung*) that the novel, as we saw, is supposed to both depict and confer will either occupy itself with one of the many aspects of man, his intellectual, moral, or aesthetic sides” (Morgenstern and Boes 655). The definition of the genre as a “formation-novel”, as well as its pluralities, namely its “intellectual, moral or aesthetic sides” is especially interesting as Ged’s personal development occurs in accordance with his educational formation under Ogion and the Masters of Roke. It should also be noted that Morgenstern’s statement that “the novel has more time and space to develop” its plot and its characters is even more applicable to *Earthsea* as it is a cycle, a cluster of novels. Indeed, its serial aspect allows for more characters and viewpoints to be introduced, for its fictional world to be expanded, and for ellipses to occur. With these elements, Ged, Tenar, and the others islanders are granted many chapters to grow and to interact with one another. Finally, we may even refer to *Earthsea* as a “*Bildungcycle*”, since the story spans over several books, with time ellipses between each entry as well as changes of central characters. Therefore, the reader may also be changed throughout the publishing process of the novels, their own personal evolution aligning with the characters’ growth.

Other extremely relevant theoretical elements external to the cycle include the term of power-knowledge, introduced by Michel Foucault. As seen with Ged and his aunt above, the very notions of knowledge and learning implies the existence of a hierarchy between a teacher and a disciple. Although it pertains to the field of social philosophy rather than literature, Foucault’s theory may still apply to our reading of *Earthsea*. According to him, these two notions are intrinsically linked, and each depends on the other. For instance, in *Histoire de la Sexualité – La volonté de savoir*, Foucault articulates the two concepts with those of gender

and sexuality, to the point of suggesting the existence of a “power-knowledge-pleasure paradigm which supports our societies’ discourses on human sexuality”<sup>8</sup> (Foucault 19). Naturally, this three-headed system is linked to another foucauldian concept: biopower, that is to say “disciplines of the body and population control”<sup>9</sup> (Foucault 183). The relationship between these three fields is best summed up as such:

Various disciplines rapidly developed during the classical era – schools, middle schools, barracks, workshops – as well as the apparition of problems related to birthrate, lifespan, public health, housing, and migration, as far as political practices and economic observations are concerned. Hence, multiple various techniques emerged in order to exert a subjugation of bodies and a control over populations. And so the era of a “bio-power” begins.<sup>10</sup> (Foucault 184)

Through the specifics of the fantasy genre, namely the presence of magic, the principles and paradigms exposed by Foucault are fully materialized in Le Guin’s novels, in the form of an actual ability, albeit a mystical one: Contrary to most depictions of magic, sorcery in *Earthsea* does not allow its users to cast fireballs or energy blasts with a single word, but instead grants power over the very essence and body of beings: “Who knows a man’s name, holds that man’s life in his keeping” (70). In a sense, then, *Earthsea*’s magic consists of a form of biopower, although it is mostly exerted from one individual to another rather than from an institution to an entire population. As written above, the proportional relationship between knowledge and power even extends to animals, since “When [Ged] found that the wild falcons stooped down to him from the wind when he summoned them by name, [...] then he hungered to know more such names” (16), and to non-sentient beings: in the words of the Master Namer: “He who would be Seamaster must know the true name of every drop of water in the sea” (50). Furthermore, the aforementioned presence of use-names reinforces both the tremendous power and the vulnerability entailed by knowledge: such nicknames act as a form of protection towards magic, while true names have a dual connotation: on the one hand, they are a weapon which equals a dragon’s might and its mastery of the Old Speech, since the “use of the Old Speech binds a man to truth, this is not so with dragons. [...] They can lie in it, twisting the true words to false ends” (87). Therefore, when Ged confronts the dragon of Pendor, he claims “We are matched, Yevaud. You have your strength: I have your name” (89). On the other hand, due to the vulnerable position having one’s true name known, it allows for meaningful friendships to grow and be

8 My translation. Original text: “Le régime de pouvoir-savoir-plaisir qui soutient chez nous le discours sur la sexualité humaine”.

9 My translation. Original text: “Les disciplines du corps et des régulations de la population”.

10 My translation. Original text: “Développement rapide au cours de l’âge classique – écoles, collèges, casernes, ateliers; apparition aussi, dans le champ des pratiques politiques et des observations économiques, des problèmes de natalité, de longévité, de santé publique, d’habitat, de migration; explosion, donc, de techniques diverses et nombreuses pour obtenir l’assujettissement des corps et le contrôle des populations. S’ouvre ainsi l’ère d’un bio-pouvoir”.

strengthened. For instance, in the first tome, Ged's friend Vetch gives him his true name, Estarriol, when his comrade's morale is low: "It was a great gift that Vetch had given him, the knowledge of his true name. [...] Thus to Ged, who had lost faith in himself, Vetch had given that gift only a friend can give, the proof of unshaken, unshakable trust" (70). In the end, true names are best summed up in *Tehanu*, when Tenar explains their workings to her surrogate daughter Therru: "It is your strength, your power; but to another it is risk and burden, only to be given in utmost need and trust". (491)

Finally, as we will explore in a few pages, transgressions related to knowledge occur when magic meddles with life and death in *The Farthest Shore*. The novel's main antagonist is Cob, a wizard who has "found the way of Immortality, which no other ever found", upsets the "balance and the equilibrium of life and death" (460) through his actions. Hence, Cob's arc is one of the many instances of knowledge, power, and lives depending on one another, which aligns with Foucault's theory.

Moreover, in addition to its focus on knowledge and its transmission on an intratextual level, the "Earthsea" cycle itself must also be understood as a tool of transmission of knowledge and values, from the author towards the audience. In *A Wizard of Earthsea's* afterword, found in the complete edition, Ursula Le Guin explains the reasoning behind the decision to focus the first book on a wizard-in-training:

Would writing for older kids be so different from just writing? Why? Despite what some adults seem to think, teenagers are fully human. And some of them read as intensely and keenly as if their life depended on it. Sometimes maybe it does. [...] Back then, in 1967, wizards were all, more or less, Merlin and Gandalf. Old men, peaked hats, white beards. But this was to be a book for young people. Well, Merlin and Gandalf must have been young once, right? And when they were young, when they were fool kids, how did they learn to be wizards? (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 155)

Through this passage, the analogy between Ged and magic, as well as young readers and imagination, is made apparent. As Le Guin sought to write a story that would connect with teenagers in search for literary excitement, an entire fictional world, with its own customs regarding creativity and knowledge, was created. Nowadays, as I have mentioned in the very beginning of this introduction, the cycle is seen as one of the most important works of fantasy aimed at a younger audience, to the point that the BBC considers it to be one of the hundred "greatest English language novels of all time"<sup>11</sup>, along the likes of many classics such as *Orlando: A Biography* (Woolf) or *Lord of the Flies* (Golding). As far as its specific genre is concerned, the first tome, and the series by extension, are often regarded under the prism of

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11 "Discover 100 amazing novels with brand new BBC Sounds podcast". <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/494P41NCbVYHLY319VwGbxp/discover-100-amazing-novels-with-brand-new-bbc-sounds-podcast>. Accessed April 24<sup>th</sup> 2024.

their alleged audience, as *The Guardian* referred to the first entry as “the most thrilling, wise and beautiful children's novel ever” (Craig). Still, one must slightly nuance the idea that Le Guin wrote *Earthsea* specifically and only for teenagers. As read in the afterword of *A Wizard of Earthsea*:

Once upon a time, a publisher asked me if I'd write a novel for teenagers. “Oh, no!” I said. “No, thanks very much, but I couldn't!” It was the idea of writing with a specific audience in mind or a specific of reader that scared me off. (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 155)

Although her initial reaction is tainted with doubt as she rejects the “children's literature” label, Le Guin later ponders: “Would writing for older kids be so different from just writing? Why? Despite what some adults seem to think, teenagers are fully human.” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 155). Hence, although the author accepts to write for children, she refuses to infantilize her audience and to place it in a temporal stasis, both within and without her novels, as she acknowledges teenagers grow and mature along the publication of books throughout the years:

Though Tehanu is named for the child character, neither it nor the two books after it are books “for children” or definable as “young adult.” I had abandoned any attempt to suit my vision of *Earthsea* to a publisher's category or a critic's prejudice. The notion that fantasy is only for the immature rises from an obstinate misunderstanding of both maturity and the imagination. So, as my protagonists grew older, I trusted my younger readers to follow them or not, as and when they chose. (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 9)

Moreover, the impact of *Earthsea* can be seen through the several adaptations that the cycle has inspired, which I will broach in the last section of this paper. The change of support, as *Earthsea* is transposed from the novel to the screen, will be of particular interest here.

Due to the importance on the author's intentions and the audience's reception, analyzing the parallels between reality and fiction, as well as the intellectual norms that regulate them, appears as relevant, especially when linked with the notion of a writer's influence and the power of their words. Indeed, researcher Anne Besson argues that speculative fictions, including fantasy works, have the power to instill a will to change the world in its readership, hence turning works of this specific genre into powerful political tools:

As opposed to the misconception that speculative fiction and the cultural practices associated with it [...] are linked with an escape away from the harsh realities of existence, [...] examples of a strong link between this cultural area and political and ethical uses abound and are seldom new<sup>12</sup>. (Besson, *Les pouvoirs de l'enchantement* 9)

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12 My translation. Original text: “Contre une idée reçue qui lie encore les littératures de l'imaginaire et les pratiques culturelles qui leur sont associées [...], à une “évasion” loin des dures réalités de l'existence, [...] les exemples sont pourtant nombreux et anciens qui montrent au contraire une forte association de ce domaine culturel et d'usages éthiques et politiques.”

Along with science-fiction, then, fantasy worlds are clearly distinct from reality, and are yet able to portray issues equivalent or similar to those of our own reality. Hence, the universe depicted in *Earthsea*, like many other constructed worlds, can be seen as a place where transgressive ideas regarding knowledge and intellectual curiosity can be safely explored and shared. In some cases, as Besson explains further in her book, and as we will go over later, such nonconforming ideas go beyond intellectual stakes and tackle larger problems, setting up actual revolutionary movements.

Furthermore, norms abound within the field of literature itself, as the fantasy genre is well known for its tropes and archetypes. In Le Guin's previous quote, the author refers to the well known wizards Merlin from the Arthurian cycle and Gandalf from J.R.R Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, whose appearance shapes our general perception of that same archetype. In the *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature*, a "wizard" is thus defined as such:

A practitioner of magic, usually a male of considerable academic attainment and social status (unlike witches) [...] The wizards of modern fantasy literature are usually figures of great pretension, who maintain a quasi-aristocratic bearing while dressing like medieval monks. (Stableford, *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature*)

Nevertheless, one of my intentions in this paper is to properly account for how Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* and its protagonist Ged stand in stark contrast with this traditional and one-dimensional depiction, thus embodying another transgression, a project clearly expressed by Le Guin herself both within the cycle and in supplementary material, which we will study in detail throughout this paper.

Likewise, her strong faith in her intended audience, the youth and the youthful at heart, as well as in the possibilities of the fantasy genre, is made apparent in "Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?", an essay present in the collection *The Language of the Night*:

For fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living. They are afraid of dragons, because they are afraid of freedom. So I believe we should trust our children. (Le Guin and Wood 40)

Two recurring notions thus seem to stand out when it comes to the analysis of the themes of knowledge and imagination in *Earthsea*. First and foremost, the concept of transmission, that is to say "the process of passing something from one person or place to another", or "the act of giving or sending something", is linked to the topics of education and mentorship which are crucial to the cycle. The relationships between Ursula Le Guin and her readership, as well as the field of literature and its conventions, can also be interpreted as

forms of transmission. Moreover, transgression, as in “an action that breaks a law or rule”, can occur both within and without *Earthsea*: several characters or entities, such as the aforementioned “Nameless Ones”, stand in the path of the characters quest for enlightenment, in details I will go over later. On a larger scale, literary norms, such as the archetype of the wizard that Le Guin defines in *The Language of the Night*, can be challenged by subversive authors. Finally, the prefix “trans-”, contained in both “transmission” and “transgression”, implies a movement, and the idea that something is crossed. It may be then relevant to oppose these two concepts with the notions of status quo, stability, or inaction<sup>13</sup>.

All in all, my intent in this paper lies within the principles defended by Ursula Le Guin in this quote. As we have established that the author is determined to both embrace and challenge the codes of fantasy, and speculative fiction as a whole, and that said genre is, according to Anne Besson, able to influence “ethical and political” debates, an important question regarding *Earthsea* arises: indeed, given Ursula Le Guin’s status as a well-known fantasy writer, a genre defined by its stable archetypes as well as its potentially transformative power, to which extent does the *Earthsea* cycle offer a platform for the author’s beliefs regarding the role of literature as far as knowledge and imagination are concerned? In short, which processes of transgression and transmission can be observed between the author, her work and those of other authors, her readership and other potential actors?

In order to accurately study and clarify the stakes raised by the *Quartet*, and in order to attempt to provide some answers, if there are any, I will mainly rely on supplementary material written by the author herself, such as afterwords found in the complete and illustrated edition of *The Books of Earthsea*, or the essays contained within *The Language of the Night*, as well as Anne Besson’s theory regarding the transgressive aspects of speculative fiction and the changes it may bring forth. Scholarly articles such as the few I have mentioned early in my introduction, in addition to other similar works, will also be of great use. Furthermore, I will employ writings dedicated to fantasy, including Brian Stableford’s *Dictionary*, Anne Besson’s *Constellations*, or Vincent Ferré’s *Tolkien: Sur les rivages de la Terre du Milieu*, along with other fictional works in order to draw comparisons between *Earthsea* and its counterparts within the fantasy sphere. More generally, works about literary reception and the practical aspects of the book industry will also be cited through this paper, such as Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss’ writings on reception theory, which emphasizes the role of the audience and sees its perception of a text as a crucial part of the identity of a text. More

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13 In this paragraph, all definitions are taken from the online version of the Cambridge Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>. Accessed January 26<sup>th</sup> 2024

specifically, studies on contemporary literature and the state of the publishing sphere, namely *Tout n'est pas littérature !* (Ferrier), will also be mentioned.

I will first tackle the themes of knowledge, teaching, and intellectual open-mindedness as they are addressed on an intratextual level, that is to say within the *Quartet* itself. As such, the different kinds of mentorship showcased within the cycle will be at the center of my analysis, and I will focus on how they may conform to or challenge the norms and traditions of the setting, in addition to the personal growth of its central characters. My two other axes will instead deal with the extratextual level of *Earthsea*, the context that both surrounds it and is affected by it, albeit on different levels: on the one hand, I intend to study the conventions of the fantasy genre and how they are explored, played with, or even subverted in Le Guin's *Earthsea* cycle, thus challenging the expectations of her audience as well as introducing new generic elements. On the other hand, my final angle of approach will focus on *Earthsea* in its purest essence: a work of literature which exists within an actual context in which many actors take part, from its day-to-day readership to the publishing world.

## **I) Portrayal of intellectual pursuits within *Earthsea* itself**

First of all, as we have established earlier, magic and knowledge are closely tied together in the world of *Earthsea*, as the first chapters showcase how powerful knowing one's true name is. Hence, practitioners of magic serve a crucial role in the archipelago, to the point that each of their actions are related to the state of the world. Master Hand, one of Ged's mentors at Roke, gives such a lesson to his student:

The world is in balance, in Equilibrium. A wizard's power of Changing and of Summoning can shake the balance of the world. It is dangerous, that power. It is most perilous. It must follow knowledge, and serve need. To light a candle is to cast a shadow. (48)

Other characters of the cycle, along with the reader are indirect recipients of this lesson, as balance and disorder are often at the core of the plot of the *Earthsea* books. It is then relevant to analyze its characters under their identity as students, mentors, teachers, appellations which are sometimes combined, and how they handle erudition and education.

### **I.1. Ged's growth, from a reckless novice to a wise mage.**

Magic, knowledge, and balance are thus interwoven to raise extremely high stakes, which the young goatherd-turned-mage Ged must learn how to deal with. I aim to analyze the laws and norms that surround this fragile order and how it intersects with Ged's own personal experiences, which stand between subversion and conformity. In the introduction, I have introduced the idea of a "*Bildungcycle*", which would follow the same principles as the *Bildungsroman* while expanding over several entries: I will thus seek to analyze how Le Guin exploits such a format to better showcase the progression of her main character, who evolves as he gathers more knowledge and new ways to use it.

#### **I.1.a. An anti-mad scientist, seeking to repair his wrongs.**

Indeed, the workings of *Earthsea*'s magic system are mostly revealed to the reader through the eyes of its first protagonist, Ged. Although other characters, like Tenar in *The Tombs of Atuan* and *Tehanu*, and Prince Arren in *The Farthest Shore* serve as focalizing characters, Ged's status as a novice in wizardry makes him the prime candidate for learning important information about magic. In the extracts previously quoted, Ged's aunt and Master Hand are among the numerous characters who impart their knowledge to the protagonist, who "[hungers] to know such more names" (16), as we recall. Nevertheless, the warnings against the dangerous nature of sorcery, as highlighted by Master Hand, prove themselves relevant

when Ged's youthful ambition grows more and more unpredictable. Just as the young wizard's relationships with others may provide him with wisdom, some of his comradeships evolve into bitter academic rivalry, as shown in his interactions with Jasper of Roke:

Standing there with rage in his heart, looking after Jasper, Ged swore to himself to outdo his rival, and not in some mere illusion-match but in a test of power. He would prove himself, and humiliate Jasper. [...]. He did not see, or would not see, that in this rivalry, which he clung to and fostered as part of his own pride, there was anything of the danger, the darkness, of which the Master Hand had mildly warned him. (49).

As the narrative voice foreshadows it, the consequences of Ged's darker emotions and unbridled ambition are dire. In the very next chapter, through an attempt at necromancy, he unintentionally summons a lethally persistent shadow, which sets off the plot for the rest of the novel:

The shapeless mass of darkness he had lifted split apart. It sundered, and a pale spindle of light gleamed between his opened arms, a faint oval reaching from the ground up to the height of his raised hands. In the oval of light for a moment there moved a form, a human shape: a tall woman looking back over her shoulder. [...]. Then the sallow oval between Ged's arms grew bright. It widened and spread, a rent in the darkness of the earth and night, a ripping open of the fabric of the world. [...] And through that bright misshapen breach clambered something like a clot of black shadow, quick and hideous, and it leaped straight out at Ged's face. (63-64).

The narrative weight of the wraith is immediately showcased as it takes the life of Nemmerle, the current Archmage, who "had spent all his power, and with it his bodily strength was gone" (65), trying to protect Ged.

Although references to other works of speculative fiction will be at the core of the later sections of this paper, one cannot ignore the parallels between the drastic consequences of the young mage's ambition and a well-known cautionary tale of science fiction, *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley, which features the most famous example of the "mad scientist" archetype: Victor Frankenstein. This archetype is closely linked to this paper's notion of transgression, since its representatives seek to "appropriate divine powers as they meddle in the creation of beings, modify the work of nature or God, or any other manipulation leading to a disturbance within the cycle of life"<sup>14</sup> (Machinal 12). Their transgressive actions thus go beyond the simple ethics of the scientific field and have religious, blasphemous connotations, especially since the "mad scientist" is anchored in mythology: the titan Prometheus, the embodiment of "hubris", who grants mankind "a position of power thanks to fire"<sup>15</sup> (Machinal 11), and Faust, "who is associated both with creation and transgression"<sup>16</sup>

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14 My translation. Original text: "Ils s'arrogent des pouvoirs divins, en se mêlant de créer des êtres, de modifier l'oeuvre de la nature ou de Dieu, ou toute autre manipulation menant à une interférence avec le cycle de la vie."

15 My translation. Original text: "une position de pouvoir grâce au feu".

16 My translation. Original text: "associé à la fois à la question de la création et à celle de la transgression".

(Machinal 12) due to his deal with the Devil, are among the first examples of masters of knowledge who attempt to challenge the status quo of the world and of the human condition. As Ged breaks the rules surrounding magic and meddles with the spirit of a long-gone woman, he appears to be set on joining Prometheus, Faust, but more importantly Victor in their subversive ambitions as a “mad magician”.

Indeed, both novels have a similar foreshadowing process: *Earthsea*'s characters and narrative voice have been shown to repeatedly warn Ged and the reader of the consequences of careless uses of knowledge, and *Frankenstein*'s famous epistolary structure comprising several embedded narratives provides the story with a retroactive dimension, which heightens the dramatic aspect of the tale. Likewise, just like in *Earthsea*, such dangers are explicitly mentioned by some of its characters, as Victor does to his naive friend Walton:

After days and nights of incredible labour and fatigue, I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter. [...] I see by your eagerness, and the wonder and hope which your eyes express, my friend, that you expect to be informed of the secret with which I am acquainted; that cannot be: listen patiently until the end of my story. and you will easily perceive why I am reserved upon that subject. [...]. Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow. (Shelley 53–54)

In this extract, then, Victor and Walton display traits akin to Ged's, who is himself defined by his transgressive acts in his field of predilection, namely magic instead of science, and by his youthful inexperience. Furthermore, *Earthsea*'s “spell of summoning up the spirits of the dead” (30) that Ged reads back at Ogion's house can easily be compared with Victor Frankenstein's scientific prowess of creating life from “bones from charnel-houses” (Shelley 55). Another relevant analogy can be drawn between the respective atmospheres that surround these pivotal moments in each novel. Indeed, in the aforementioned extract of *Earthsea*, the passage of the summoning of the shadow makes heavy use of contrasts between light and darkness, as the author describes “a rent in the darkness of the earth and night” and a “terrible brightness” (63). Likewise, the birth of Frankenstein's creature occurs in a similar setting, and also contains antithetical structures:

It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. [...] It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. [...] His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. [...] His hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips. (Shelley 58)

Just as the shadow summoned by Ged conjured “a terrible brightness”, the most well-known *Frankenstein* passage occurs in a dimly-lit setting, and the newly-born creature arbors contrasting physical traits, as his horrific features create a “horrid contrast” with his monstrous ones. Even those pairs of traits contain oppositions based on color, given the Creature’s unsightly “black lips” and “white sockets” on the one hand, as well as his splendid “teeth of a pearly whiteness” and his hair of a “lustrous black” on the other. Through the highlighting of the similarities between the two works, I aim to introduce the possible analysis of Ged as a “failed version” of a mad scientist. Indeed, Victor Frankenstein’s hubristic transgressions lead to him being plagued with a “gloomy and black melancholy” (Shelley 185), and ultimately to his demise at the end of the novel: his tale ends with him “exhausted” and “his eyes closed forever” (Shelley 220). This fate serves as a grim conclusion for the creator who persisted in rejecting his creation which he calls a “vile insect” and an “abhorred monster” (Shelley 102), in addition to depriving it of a name. In stark opposition, Ged resorts to self-improvement and empathy in order to put an end to a similar chase:

As they came right together it became utterly black in the white mage-radiance that burned about it, and it heaved itself upright. In silence, man and shadow met face to face, and stopped. Aloud and clearly, breaking that old silence, Ged spoke the shadow’s name and in the same moment the shadow spoke without lips or tongue, saying the same word: “Ged.” And the two voices were one voice. Ged reached out his hands, dropping his staff, and took hold of his shadow, of the black self that reached out to him. Light and darkness met, and joined, and were one. (164)

Ged’s decision to accept his shadowy self by giving it his name thus echoes Master Hand’s previous statement that “to light a candle is to cast shadow”, and that a wizard’s power must “serve need” (48). Although the reader may first interpret the mage’s words as the idea that magic must be used sparingly, his advice takes on a new meaning after Ged’s final confrontation with the shadow: sorcery must also be used according to the needs of others, that is to say with compassion and generosity. Therefore, just as “the demon is Frankenstein’s deepest self” (Oates 551), as well as the product of his ambition, the shadow is Ged’s dark counterpart, his inner nature. In fact, Joyce Carol Oates’ statement that “[The creature] is, in the end, a “modern” species of shadow or Doppelganger -the nightmare that is deliberately created by man’s ingenuity” (Oates 548) can easily be applied to the young wizard and the entity he created through necromancy.

Hence, unlike Frankenstein, Ged refuses to consider himself “blameless of any wrongdoing apart from the act of creation” (Oates 546). As such, the two “[students] of unhallowed arts” (Shelley 9) face extremely different fates. We have seen that Victor

Frankenstein dies in pain and anguish at the end of the novel, doomed by his past mistakes. Meanwhile, the story of Ged, who sought to correct his wrongs, concludes on a hopeful tone:

So of the song of the Shadow there remain only a few scraps of legend, carried like driftwood from isle to isle over the long years. But in the Deed of Ged nothing is told of that voyage nor of Ged's meeting with the shadow, before ever he sailed the Dragons' Run unscathed, or brought back the Ring of Erreth-Akbe from the Tombs of Atuan to Havnor, or came at last to Roke once more, as Archmage of all the islands of the world. (168)

Not only will poets sing the feats of the protagonist, immortalizing him through art, his following adventures are mentioned by the omniscient narrative voice, which also ensures a form of continuity on a metatextual level: the reader is certain to see more of Ged in many, many other tomes.

### I.1.b. After the Shadow: the evolution of Ged.

As seen above, after his first mistakes regarding the uses of knowledge and his reconciliation with his darker self, Ged is set to become "Archmage of all the islands of the world", thus becoming the wise old man the reader encounters in *The Farthest Shore*. Although *A Wizard of Earthsea* aims to provide both Ged and the reader with a lesson about the dangers of misused knowledge, the protagonist continues to both improve throughout the books, and to display the invaluable insight he has gained following his past adventures.

For instance, the quest he undergoes alongside Prince Arren in the third tome of the series, and the antagonist Cob he encounters during its climax, serve as direct reflections of his own mistakes in the first tome. As explained above, Ged's fatal flaw was his transgression of the rules of magic and the imbalance it caused. He thus learned that power, which, in *Earthsea's* setting, is proportional to one's knowledge of the world, must be accompanied with caution and a sense of duty. By contrast, Cob is just as experienced as Ged, yet lacks his humility, as shown in an exchange between the two mages:

"In Havnor, when your hair was white, you were called Cob. But that was only a use-name. How shall we call you when we meet you?" "You will call me Lord," said the tall figure on the dune's edge.

"Aye, and what else?"

"King and Master." (445)

As the narration makes Cob's arrogance explicit, it should be noted that this flaw is seconded only by his cowardice. Earlier, on the same page, Ged warns Arren that what lies before the two protagonists is "but a sending, an appearance, no true man" (445). Indeed, Cob later disappears, "like a candle-flame blown out". Therefore, although this passage can seldom be defined as the antagonist's first appearance in the novel, Cob's negative traits seem

to mirror Ged's own qualities, which the latter has developed throughout his adventures. Again, we recall Master Hand's lesson, which the now-veteran wizard seems to have internalized. By contrast, Cob's magic serves his own transgressive delusions:

You sought it. All of you. You sought it and could not end it, and so made wise words about acceptance and balance and the equilibrium of life and death. But they were words—lies to cover your failure—to cover your fear of death! What man would not live forever, if he could? And I can. I am immortal. I did what you could not do and therefore I am your master; and you know it. (460)

Cob's immortality is afterwards revealed to stem not from a prolongation of life and a magical means to keep death at bay, but from having had "the courage to die" and found "the way back from death" (461), that is to say to return from the Dry Land, Earthsea's afterlife, in which Ged and Arren face the necromancer. Cob is then both the practitioner and the subject of his dark experiments, a characteristic which makes him resemble another emblematic mad scientist of Gothic literature, Dr. Jekyll, from *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*: just like Cob, Jekyll seeks to transcend the limits of humanity and attempts to split his psyche in two in order to get rid of his somber impulses. He is ultimately successful in this endeavor, as he manages to obtain "two characters as well as two appearances one was wholly evil, and the other was still the old Henry Jekyll". Akin to Frankenstein and Cob, Jekyll's actions are associated with transgression and darkness, and his accomplishment is introduced as such: "That night I had come to the fatal cross-roads" (Stevenson 79).

Moreover, the nature of Cob's immortality shares many similarities with Ged's "Spell of Summoning" (63) to bring back the spirit of the princess Elfarran in the first tome. The invocation, Ged's rhetoric question "Do years and distances matter to the dead?" (62) and Cob's wording thus justify our focus on the "trans-" prefix in the introduction: death is not an entity to be avoided, but rather a realm separated from that of the living by a nigh-unbreakable barrier. Therefore, transgressing the limits of magic requires an actual movement, a crossing of said frontier, which Cob, Ged's shadow of his former self, is all too eager to accomplish.

The relationship between the two wizards, their differing approaches to knowledge and balance, and the "-trans" prefix can also be explored through the lens of W.A. Senior's article "Cultural Anthropology and Rituals of Exchange in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea*". According to Senior, gift-giving plays a significant role in the world of Earthsea and shapes the dynamics between the characters of the cycle: "Equilibrium or Balance consists of a system of exchanges, a system which implies obligations and responsibilities for those involved because of the reactions and fluxions that any earlier action generates" (Senior 104). If we follow Senior's interpretation, Ged has thus displayed his generosity several times when

it comes to sharing his knowledge with others: as Archmage of Roke, he is at the top of the setting's main scholarly and educational infrastructure, and he carries on his role even outside of its physical location, as shown by his interactions with Prince Arren throughout their adventure:

Arren wondered at this power which his companion now used so lightly, and once he said, "When we began our voyage, you used to work no charms." "The first lesson on Roke, and the last, is *Do what is needful*. And no more!" "The lessons in between, then, must consist in learning what is needful." "They do. One must consider the Balance. But when the Balance itself is broken—then one considers other things. Above all, haste." (420)

Not only does Ged take the time to impart his knowledge to his companion, acting as a mentor figure, he also makes the distinction between Roke's "first and last lesson", and its practical implications. He thus teaches in the process the importance of an invaluable skill: critical thinking.

Other instances of Ged as a knowledge-giver occur several times throughout the series, even when he is not an Archmage yet, such as in *The Tombs of Atuan*. Indeed, we recall that the novel focuses on Tenar, who must become the high priestess of the ominous Nameless Ones at a very young age. During the ceremony of the "Remaking of the Priestess", Tenar is figuratively "eaten" (179) and takes on an impersonal name, and is thus described as a "little girl, who had no name any more but *Arha*, the Eaten One". (181). Both the narrative voice and the other characters then refer to Tenar as such, until Ged meets her and gives her back her name; "Take care, Tenar" (256), he tells her at a time where Tenar still knows neither his name, nor her true one. Later on, she reclaims her name and subsequently, her identity: "I am Tenar.[...]. I have my name back. I am Tenar!" (258). Finally, Ged gives her his own true name, which he refers to as a gift "for [hers] to keep" (273). On the other hand, Cob lacks such generosity, and selfishly hoards knowledge for himself, thus opposing the concept of balance as explored by W.A. Senior. In fact, as we see above, Cob mocks Ged when the latter asks for his name, and responds with an arrogant taunt, whereas the now-Archmage told Tenar his true name, one of the most powerful pieces of knowledge in *Earthsea*, unprompted and without second thought.

### I.1.c. A teacher's retirement: learning to pass the torch.

In order to leave the Dry Land and rid the world of the threat Cob represents, Ged casts a final spell, uttering "Be thou made whole" as he draws "Agnen, the Rune of Ending" (466) on the necromancer. Unfortunately, not unlike Nemmerle in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the effort leaves Ged "exhausted" and "forspent", and the narrative voice claims that "There was

no more light in Ged's yew-staff, nor in his face" (467). For the rest of the series, including *Tehanu*, he is thus known as "he who had been Archmage" (477).

Hence, *Tehanu* takes place directly after the events of *The Farthest Shore*, with Tenar as its focalizer instead of Ged. In this book, the mage's first appearance is far from flattering, as he is brought to Tenar by a dragon, and in a very poor shape, making his survival dependent on Tenar's care: "His hands were clenched on the rust-dark mail of the dragon's neck, and his head leaned against the base of the sword-thorn, as if he were asleep" (516). According to John Rosegrant, such a state is a consequence of Ged's metaphorical death in the Dry Land, and "Ged's underworld journey [...] represents him moving closer to his unconscious and surrendering the arcane knowledge that had been alienating him from it" (Rosegrant 117). The loss of his sorcery then shatters his identity as a "Wizard of Earthsea", both in his own eyes and through the perception of the reader. Nevertheless, Rosegrant argues that said witchcraft and the status that came with it was "alienating", and that this deprivation was necessary for him to learn how to take on a supportive role. On an extradiegetic level, then, "Ged moves off center stage in the Earthsea books after *The Farthest Shore*" (118) and leaves the protagonist position to Tenar.

Indeed, he is at first plunged into despair, lamenting the extent of his ruin:

I have no power, nothing. I gave it—spent it—all I had. To close—So that—So it's done, done with. [...] Like pouring out a little water, [...] But now I have nothing to drink. And what difference, what difference did it make, does it make, one cup of water in all the desert? Is the desert gone?—Ah! Listen!—It used to whisper that to me from behind the door there: Listen, listen! (546)

We can notice Ged's fragmented, nonsensical speech, which perfectly fits within the context of the series: his simplistic syntactic structure and vocabulary are not only reflections of his wounded pride and mental state, but also of the loss of his magic and knowledge. Tenar thus take on the role of a helper, an emotional mentor, just as Ged, in his former days, was to others, with both gentleness and firmness. Indeed, she first tries to soothe his pain, claiming that he has "been hurt" and that he "will be healed" (547), then calls him out on his selfish perspective, telling him "Why do you think only of yourself? Always of yourself?" (548), which ultimately proves beneficial for the former Archmage.

Tenar's status as an emotional guide, and later on as a love interest to Ged, as the two "held each other so fiercely, so dearly, that they stopped knowing anything but each other" (657) in the second half of the story, is thus crucial to Ged's character development. Although Rosegrant opts to analyze this act through the lens of gender roles, claiming that Ged "has added to his masculinity" (Rosegrant 118), as it is one of the first steps the wizard makes in

his journey from a prestigious life as Archmage to a more humble one as Tenar's partner in the countryside, a relevant interpretation to which we will come back later, one must also look into this progression and its relationship with age and youth. It is therefore necessary for us to link Rosegrant's article and *Tehanu* with "From Master to Brother: Shifting the Balance of Authority in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Farthest Shore* and *Tehanu*" by Len Hatfield. Though the article mainly deals with the theme of authority in the series, it also provides an insightful interpretation of the overall tone of *Tehanu*:

In fact, because Tenar, the girl we met in *Tombs of Atuan*, is the protagonist, now an older woman, it might be argued for a moment that this last book is not part of the series in the same way that the earlier tales are: this seems hardly to be a children's story at all. (Hatfield 54).

While Hatfield uses Tenar as an example for this tonal shift, its principles can still be applied to Ged's story. In fact, the author of the article also mentions that *Tehanu* is about Ged, who "lacking the power of magic, [...] must relearn how to live in the world" (Hatfield 56). In addition, the word "children" in "a children's story" obviously refers to the audience of the book, who may have grown throughout the publication of the series. Therefore, one can also read *Tehanu* with this appellation in mind, even if such a reading may not seem so evident at first. Indeed, the title of this book is ultimately revealed to be Therru's true name, as Tenar concludes that "She has been Tehanu since the beginning. Always, she has been Tehanu" (690). Despite the title, the young girl is hardly an active entity for the majority of the book, as the adult characters are instead the focus of the novel, and its most active participants.

Still, I believe that this focus is precisely caused by the fact that Ged has not yet learned "how to live in the world", the central lesson he has to internalize in *Tehanu* just as he integrated the previous teachings of his masters in the previous books. The pride and faith a master such as Ged feels for his disciple Arren, who has "taken his true name, Lebannen, King of Earthsea" (539), is expressed several times in *Tehanu*: Tenar tells the young king "when he spoke of you, when he said your name, oh, then I saw him for a moment as he was—as he will be again—All pride!" (605) and Ged later confides to Tenar "All that a king can do, he will do well" (669).

But the most significant example of the motif of passing the torch to the younger generation occurs at the end of the novel, in the last chapter, which is appropriately the same as the title of book, and the name of its most pivotal character. Furthermore, said chapter contains fire imagery, as Tenar calls upon a mighty dragon:

In the gulfs of light, from the doorway of the sky, the dragon flew, fire trailing behind the coiling, mailed body. Tenar spoke then. "Kalessin!" she cried, and then turned, seizing Ged's arm, pulling him down to the rock, as the roar of fire went over them, the rattle of mail and the hiss of wind in upraised wings, the clash of the talons like scytheblades on the rock. (687)

Although Tenar is apparently the one who summons Kalessin, the reader learns that it is Tehanu who shares an close bond with their savior, due to her draconic ancestry:

"Tehanu," the dragon said. The child turned to look at it. "Kalessin," she said. Then Ged, who had remained kneeling, stood up, though shakily, catching Tenar's arm to steady himself. He laughed. "Now I know who called thee, Eldest!" he said. "I did," the child said. "I did not know what else to do, Segoy." She still looked at the dragon, and she spoke in the language of the dragons, the words of the Making. (688)

Therru, whose true-name Tehanu is now known to all, is thus revealed to hold tremendous power in the context of the fictional setting and the novel itself, as her presence and her actions lead to tremendous narrative shifts. It should also be noted that this final chapter begins with Therru's point of view and inner thoughts, which were mostly inaccessible by the reader prior to this: "The child turned left and went some way before she looked back, letting the blossoming hedgerow hide her. [...] She needed to fly, but she could not ; she was not one of the winged ones" (685). On the other hand, as a stark contrast from this grandiose finale for Therru, the adults' story ends on a very mundane and practical note, as Tenar muses about "the rows of beans and the scent of the bean flowers" (691), showcasing that she and Ged are finally ready to leave their riotous adventures behind them, settle down, and let their younger disciples become heroes.

## I.2. Learning in the archipelago: alternative educational methods.

Although the growth of Ged and the secondary characters in his story is one of the focal points of *Earthsea*, one must not forget that said progression is largely caused by the various kinds of tutelage the characters undergo. The concept of “disciplinary academy” and its connection with pop culture, as explored by Denis Mellier, is thus invaluable for this section, as “academic spheres are settings in which programmed fictional disturbances occur. Boarding schools, colleges, and campuses provide a particularly fruitful confrontational environment”<sup>17</sup> (Mellier 1). Yet, as I will explore below, the degree of institutionalization of instances of education in *Earthsea* is rather variable, depending on the parties involved and the aim behind each lesson.

### I.2.a. “Travel broadens the mind”: Two vastly differing journeys.

The characters’ intellectual journeys align with moral and personal progressions, as we have explored above, and these transformations are often accompanied by a concrete, geographical movement. Hence, many characters’ arcs within *Earthsea* can be compared to Joseph Campbell’s narrative formula of the hero’s journey:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (Campbell 28)

While some of its principles may easily be applied to Ged’s adventures within across the archipelago, attention can also be brought to the other protagonists of the cycle. Arren, for example, is the perfect candidate for such a heroic journey, as he is a young prince set on a quest to save the world. The first pages of *The Farthest Shore* then perfectly align with the typical departure of a hero:

This first stage of the mythological journey—which we have designated the “call to adventure”—signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown. (Campbell 53)

“Destiny” comes in the shape of the Archmage Ged, who asks Arren “will you come with me?” (324) to go to “a zone unknown”, that is to say, “where the trouble is” (321). Later

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<sup>17</sup> My translation. Original text: “Les mondes de l’enseignement constituent des scènes sur lesquelles se jouent des dérèglements fictionnels programmés. Boarding schools, colleges ou campus offrent un milieu conflictuel particulièrement fécond.”

on, the “zone unknown” is even revealed to be the setting’s afterlife, the “Dry Land” (455), where Cob is finally confronted. Other elements of the hero’s journey include the “supernatural aid”, “a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man)” (Campbell 63), which perfectly correspond with Ged, the “atonement with father” (Campbell 116), during which the hero “must have a faith that the father is merciful” (Campbell 120). In *The Farthest Shore*, Arren indeed makes a mistake when, at sea, his faith in Ged begins to waver: “Arren saw now what a fool he had been to entrust himself body and soul to this restless and secretive man, who made impulse move him and made no effort to control his life” (390). Arren then forms an alliance with the madman Sopli, who has been promised “life. Eternal Life.” (391). This alliance against their “mutual enemy” (393) ultimately leads to Ged being severely wounded, a spear “struck between the shoulder -joint and collar-bone, tearing one of the great veins, so that it bled heavily.” (396). It is only after Ged has partially recovered that Arren confesses to Ged and submits himself to his clemency, as seen in the following exchange:

“I betrayed—” he said, and stopped. “I betrayed your trust in me.” [...] You were hurt and needed my help. I did nothing. The boat drifted, and I let her drift. You were in pain, and I did nothing for you. [...]

“You have strength enough.” The mage’s voice was tender, but beneath tenderness was that same hardness that had risen in the depths of Arren’s own shame, and mocked him. “What you love, you will love. What you undertake, you will complete. You are a fulfiller of hope; you are to be relied on.” (409)

Finally, Arren is able to “return” as a dutiful “master of both worlds” (Campbell 212):

The disciple has been blessed with a vision transcending the scope of normal human destiny, and amounting to a glimpse of the essential nature of the cosmos. Not his personal fate, but the fate of mankind, of life as a whole, the atom and all the solar systems, has been opened to him. (Campbell 218)

Indeed, the last pages mention that “King Lebannen [...] returned Havnor to be crowned” (478), thus becoming a political leader within the mundane world, while still having gained experience as the savior of the mystical Equilibrium, which allows him to have a persistent link with the magical world, as “he came seeking Ged to bring him to the coronation” (478).

Throughout this journey, emphasis is placed on the lessons Arren has learned, and Ged occupies a double status as an occult helper and as a teacher. We recall that the Archmage indeed explicitly teaches him “the first lesson on Roke, and the last, is *Do what is needful*. And no more!” (420), and its practical applications. Later on, Arren is able to display critical thinking and introspection regarding his growth and the knowledge he has gathered, while still questioning Ged’s teachings:

I was a child when I began this voyage, a child who did not believe in death. You think me a child still, but I have learnt something, not much, maybe, but something: I have learnt that death exists and that I am to die. But I have not learnt to rejoice in the knowledge, to welcome my death or yours. [...] Why should I not desire immortality? (422)

If we look at Tenar's arc in *The Tombs of Atuan* with a similar approach, it becomes apparent that her personal heroic journey is even more tied to knowledge than Arren's, and is yet mostly static. Just as Gail Sidonie Sobat does in *The Night in Her Own Country*, I will aim to "examine *The Tombs of Atuan*, a female *bildungsroman* about a heroine who, for much of the novel, dwells under ground" (Sobat 24), although the gendered dimension will be left out, for the moment. Tenar is indeed confined to the titular tombs, where the temple consists of "a cube of stone, plastered white, windowless" (187). It is only with the help of Ged, who is also her "supernatural aid", to quote Campbell, that she escapes both from the physical boundaries of "the Place of the Tombs" (182), as it is destroyed by an earthquake: "The whole great ruinous mass of stone and masonry changed shape like clay in running water, sank in upon itself, [...] and collapsed" (281). Hence, Tenar's story contains two "calls to adventure" as per Campbell's terminology: the first one is imposed on her as a child, "as she does not answer the call willingly, but, torn from her mother at the age of five, is brought to the Place of the Tombs of Atuan to assume the duties of the One Priestess" (Sobat 25). The process is described as such: "They seek the girl-child who was born on the night of the Priestess' death. [...]. And at the year's end she is taken to the Hall of the Throne [...]: for she is the nameless one, the Priestess Ever Reborn." (182). The second call to adventure is one she embraces voluntarily, and its first signs are alluded to through her fascination with the images produced by Ged's light, despite her apparent hostility:

"Oh my Masters, death will deliver him to you, and he will never be reborn!" Yet even as she prayed, in her mind's eye she saw the quivering radiance of the lighted caver, [...], and instead of terror at the sacrilege [...], she thought only how strange it was, how strange..." (227)

These early signs of transgression culminate in the collapse of the Place of the Tombs, as seen above, and her escape, with Tenar feeling as if "a dark hand had let go of its lifelong hold on her heart" (295). The story of *The Tombs of Atuan* is thus not one of glory or heroic deeds, but rather one of freedom and self-affirmation. Given *Earthsea's* overall themes and the topic of this paper, it is not surprising to see that this newfound physical liberty is accompanied by a freedom of the mind.

Indeed, her education as Priestess was ruled by obscurantism: Tenar was "taught to disbelieve in [magic]" and doesn't know how to read, as it is "one of the black arts", a vision offset by Ged's statement that it remains "a useful one" (271). It is only once she has left the Tombs that Tenar is able to learn the most, until she comes to the "white streets of Havnor"

(300) at the end of the novel, a stark contrast with the “Undertomb [...], the very home of darkness” (200) that lies below the Place.

The various events of the journey between Atuan and Havnor thus allow for many lessons to take place, and Tenar’s knowledge of the world expands accordingly. For instance, she learns what aspens are as “they [stop] in a grove of trees whose golden, quivering leaves still [cling] to the boughs” (286), and is able to put a name on “wet, hideous things like purple rocks with orange lips” as she encounters them: “mussels” (292). Just like Arren, her transgression of limitations is narrowly linked to the knowledge she is able to acquire, and it is through a nomadic form of education that she is able to experience significant changes, both on a personal level and on a practical scale.

### I.2.b. The supportive teacher Ogion and the harmony between interpersonal bonds and intellectual enlightenment.

Although the journey itself is a way for *Earthsea* characters to sharpen their intellectual abilities and improve as individuals, a consequential part of it is due to the relationships established along the way.

In an effort to analyze teacher-student relationships and the importance of close emotional when it comes to apprenticeship, I believe it is necessary to cross our reading of *Earthsea* with educational studies. Works highlighting the benefits of pleasant teacher-student relationships abound, such as Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl’s “Social and Emotional Learning and Teachers” article, in which the author argues that such a way of envisioning education improves both parties’ performances. As she explains, “Teachers are uniquely situated to recognize significant adjustment problems or identify common disruptive behaviors” (Schonert-Reichl 147). Another relevant work is Michael Lambert’s “Education reform and the Hero’s Journey”, as some parallels can be drawn between its main ideas and our own approach of the novels through the notions of “transmission” and “transmission”, the core of this paper. Lambert indeed argues that “The first step is to tell [students] that personal fulfillment is an option” and that “The word “transformation” occupies a prominent spot on [his] blackboard” (Lambert 35). The presence of the “trans-” prefix, that is to say the prefix of movement and crossing, and the emphasis on a student’s own potential and well-being align with *Earthsea*’s patterns, which in turn proves fruitful for our analysis.

As shown in the novels, while “Roke Island, where all high arts are taught” (32) is the setting’s pinnacle of education, and a pivotal location for the majority of the series, Ged,

Tenar, Arren, and many others learn invaluable lessons in more intimate and personal environments. As such, *Earthsea*'s characters manage to achieve Lambert's objective of "allowing our humanity to flower from within society's systems" (Lambert 37).

For instance, Ogion, Ged's first master, is nothing but patient and understanding with him, and shares important knowledge and advice, such as the mysterious saying "To hear, one must be silent" (26). As read above, Ged applies this concept of deliberate passivity when he merges with his shadow instead of fighting it, thus resolving the main conflict of *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Furthermore, Ogion's main objective is to respect Ged's wishes, therefore focusing on tending to his pupil's "personal fulfillment" rather than teaching him as much as possible. With this in mind, he insists that Ged is "not bound to [him] or to [his] service" (31) and leaves him the choice between the quaint "Re Albi or Roke" (32). Nevertheless, this separation does not mark the end of Ogion's status as a guide for Ged. In the middle of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, as Ged struggles in his conflict with his shadow, he arrives at Ogion's house in the shape of a "great hawk" and the mentor restores his original form "weaving magic with his hands more than with words" (117). True to this epithet, "Ogion the Silent" (116) subverts, or transgresses, the traditional ways of mages of Roke, as we have established that speech is the core pillar of *Earthsea*'s magic system. Once again, he also displays his patient benevolence and faith in his student tormented by despair:

"Ogion spoke. "Those are bitter scars you bear, lad," he said. "I have no strength against the thing," Ged answered. Ogion shook his head but said no more for a time. At length, "Strange," he said: "You had strength enough to outspell a sorcerer in his own domain, there in Osskil. You had strength enough to withstand the lures and fend off the attack of the servants of an Old Power of Earth. And at Pendor you had strength enough to stand up to a dragon." (119)

Hence, Ogion takes the time to create "a safe, caring, supportive, participatory, and well-managed environment" (Schonert-Reichl 138) before delivering practical advice to his disciple, advising him to "hunt the hunter" (120), which leads to Ged turning the tables against the shadow. This renewal of hope, brought forth by both emotional and factual guidance, greatly contrasts with the protagonist's previously hopeless situation. In accordance with the series' and this paper's theme of teacher-student relationships, said state of mind is characterized by Ged's impression that he betrayed his former mentors, rather than a self-centered sentiment:

In his mind all the Masters of Roke gathered, Gensher the Archmage frowning in their midst, and Nemmerle was with them, and Ogion, and even the witch who had taught him his first spell: all of them gazed at him and he knew he had failed their trust in him. (107)

Finally, Ogion continues to act as a teacher even as Ged's formation is finished: in *Tehanu*, then, the silent mage transgresses gendered norms pertaining to education, as

exemplified by the sayings “Weak as a woman’s magic” and “Wicked as a woman’s magic” (16) in order to take Tenar under his wing. The latter thus exposes the details of Ogion’s selflessness to Tehanu:

Ogion was my father, the way I’m your mother now. He looked after me and tried to teach me what I needed to know. He stayed with me when he’d rather have been wandering by himself. [...] He always listened, so they called him the Silent. But he used to talk to me. He told me stories. Not only the great stories everybody learns, the heroes and the kings and the things that happened long ago and far away, but stories only he knew. (489).

Once again, Ogion’s methods are shown to combine both knowledge-sharing and social and emotional skills, similarly to Schonert-Reichl’s research. This teacher-student relationship therefore transcends the usual definitions and norms regarding these kinds of bonds, and Ogion takes on a parental role towards his student, while still taking the care to hone his pupils’ intellectual skills and sharing his knowledge with them.

Lastly, his dedication to a “transformational journey” (Lambert 37) through education is such that his dying words align with these values, as he urges Tenar to ensure that Therru is educated just as he taught his former students: “Teach her, Tenar, [...] teach her all! - Not Roke. They are afraid” (500). Ogion’s last act as a mentor is then to keep the young Therru away from an institutionalized and archaically gendered place such as Roke, hence, “[holding] back those dehumanizing forces that would reduce us to data points” (Lambert 37).

I.2.c. Jacques Rancière’s *Le maître ignorant* and *Earthsea*’s peculiar mentors.

We have thus seen that Ogion’s teaching style places the student’s emotional well-being at the center of the teacher-pupil dynamic, and using the safe environment he created to instill knowledge and skills in others. By doing so, he deviates from the traditional ways of institutions such as Roke, adapting his methods to each student instead. Yet, there are other ways in which Ogion, as well as other mentors, tackle education in an unconventional manner.

The principles of these peculiar teaching philosophies correlate with those defended by Jacques Rancière in *Le maître ignorant*, in which the author offers his perspective on the pedagogy of the teacher Joseph Jacotot, centered around intellectual emancipation. The first two chapters, “An Intellectual Adventure”, and “The Ignorant’s Lesson”<sup>18</sup>, are particularly of note, and will be referred to regularly throughout this section.

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18 The quotes of Jacques Rancière’s book throughout this section are all translated by me. Original text: “Une aventure intellectuelle” and “La leçon de l’ignorant”.

First of all, the main ideas defended by Rancière directly correlate with *Earthsea's* own themes, as early as the first pages of *Le maître Ignorant*: “The explainer is the one who establishes and dissolves the distances [between understanding and learning], who expands and contains it within their speech” (Rancière 13). Not only does magic in the archipelago revolve around knowledge and oral enunciation, we have previously seen that most of the lessons taught by the “explainers” of the series are done so in conversational settings. In addition to the examples shown in earlier sections, one might think, for example, of the methods Tenar employs in educating Therru:

“Can I plant it?” said Therru, looking at the wrinkled stone of her peach. “Yes. This is a good place, near the old tree. But not too close. So they both have room for their roots and branches.” The child chose a place and dug the tiny grave. She laid the stone in it and covered it over. Tenar watched her. (508)

In this passage, then, Tenar imparts essential botanical knowledge to Therru as the situation calls for it, in a casual, conversational manner, but does not plant the tree in the place of her foster daughter, opting to let the child learn through practice instead. This choice leads us to another important principle defended by Rancière, namely the conscious decision to let students learn on their own, rather than through a hierarchical system:

All of their efforts and exploration aim towards this: a man’s word has been told to them, which they want to recognize and answer to, not as students or scholars, but as men; as if you answered someone who speaks to you and not someone who examines you: under the banner of equality<sup>19</sup>. (Rancière 22)

While it is not surprising to see Tenar and Ogion display such behavior, the Masters of Roke, despite their gentleness, adhere to more rigid and vertically-organized systems of education, and draw attention to knowledge itself, even in its more abstract aspects:

Ged worked also with the Master Summoner now, but that Master was a stern man, aged and hardened by the deep and somber wizardry he taught. [...] Sometimes indeed he was uneasy working even such lesser spells as the Summoner taught him. [...] There were certain phrases that must be said in spells of Summoning that he did not like to say. They made him think, for an instant, of shadows in a dark room, of a shut door and shadows reaching out to him from the corner by the door. (57)

Unlike previous examples, the Master Summoner, despite his erudition, is shown to dismiss the priorities and wishes of his student, focusing instead on the mysterious “phrases” that must be taught. Earlier in the novel, the otherwise understanding Master Hand also displays shades of a similar behavior:

To change this rock into a jewel, you must change its true name. [...] It is the art of the Master Changer, and you will learn it, when you are ready to learn it. But you must not

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19 Original text: “Tout leur effort, toute leur exploration est tendue vers ceci: une parole d’homme leur a été adressée qu’ils veulent reconnaître et à laquelle il veulent répondre, non en élèves ou en savants, mais en hommes, comme on répond à quelqu’un qui vous parle et non à quelqu’un qui vous examine: sous le signe de l’égalité.”

change one thing, one pebble, one grain of sand, until you know what good and evil will follow on that act. (48)

Here, the prevalence of the modal “must”, signifying obligation, is especially noticeable, as the Master Hand insists on the duties and restrictions that must accompany knowledge and magic. Furthermore, the experienced mage’s words are ambiguous when it comes to the time Ged will be ready, as the moment does not seem to depend on the disciple’s own volition and self-examination. Understandably, the novice is left “dissatisfied” (48).

Once more, *Le maître ignorant* addresses similar educational issues and warns against the dangers of such methods: “[Joseph Jacotot], like [other professors] knew that the goal was not to force-feed students with knowledge and make them rehearse the words like parrots”<sup>20</sup> (Rancière 9). Even though the Masters of Roke pay attention to the moral and practical implications of magic and of the actions of their students, this over-reliance on what is already known has been shown to be detrimental. In *The Farthest Shore*, as magic begins to fade from the archipelago, the line between a dependence on what has already been acquired and a dangerous arrogance, is revealed to be extremely thin, as seen in the words of the Masters Changer and Windkey:

Strange news, and should be looked to. Our power is not threatened only because a few sorcerers have forgotten their spells. [...] Do not the storms of heaven obey our words? Who can fear for the art of wizardry, which is the oldest of the arts of man? (321)

Of course, as we have established before in our analysis of Arren’s heroic journey, it is a young prince untrained in the arts of magic, and exempt from Roke’s hierarchy, who ultimately saves the world and brings their powers to all practitioners of magic, including the old Masters.

Finally, this disregard for hierarchy, or at the very least its most extreme forms, means that freedom in a general sense is essential as far as intellectual emancipation is concerned. Indeed, according to Rancière, “the student must see everything for himself, must keep comparing and answering the threefold question: What do you see? What do you think of it? What do you make of it?”<sup>21</sup> (Rancière 42). For this to happen, the student-teacher relationship must be physically severed, even if temporarily: “The ignorant will learn on his own what the master ignores if the master believes he can do so and forces him to put his abilities into practice”<sup>22</sup> (Rancière 29).

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20 Original text: “Il savait comme eux qu’il ne s’agit point de gaver les élèves de connaissances et de les faire répéter comme des perroquets”.

21 Original text: “L’élève doit tout voir par lui-même, comparer sans cesse et toujours répondre à la triple question: que vois-tu ? Qu’en penses-tu ? Qu’en fais-tu ?”

22 Original text: “L’ignorant apprendra seul ce que le maître ignora si le maître croit qu’il le peut et oblige à actualiser sa capacité.”

In *Earthsea*, we recall Ogion letting Ged choose between Re Albi and Roke, or Tenar finally embracing individuality and becoming able to learn on her own after escaping from her former masters. Yet, even Roke is no stranger to such values. Fittingly, the Master Doorkeeper, in charge of the threshold of Roke, is the one who embodies this leniency, as Ged must leave the school to face his shadow:

At first Ged did not know him, and then putting his mind to it recalled him as the one who had let him into the School on the day of his coming, five years ago. The old man smiled, greeting him by name, and asked, "Do you know who I am?" [...]

"I think you are the Master Doorkeeper," said Ged.

"I am. Ged, you won entrance to Roke by saying your name. Now you may win your freedom of it by saying mine." (73)

Retrospectively, this separation is revealed to be merely temporary, as Ged later becomes the leader of the institution he leaves as a young man, but also necessary, as it is an important step in his personal journey. Due to this, in accordance with the series and *Le maître ignorant*, knowledge, in the shape of the Doorkeeper's name, is the key for Ged's emancipation.

### I.3. Women and sorcery: dissonance and harmony.

Ogion's teaching methods are groundbreaking in the context of the setting, due to their intersection with emotional guidance, but also partly due to his students. Indeed, we recall that female practitioners of magic are seen in a negative light by the inhabitants of Earthsea, leading to the creation of the oft-mentioned sayings "Weak as a woman's magic" and "Wicked as a woman's magic" (16) which have already been referred to in this dissertation. Moreover, in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, it is said that "it was seldom that any woman sat in the halls of the Great House" (53) of Roke, therefore confirming that the vilification of women regarding knowledge and magic is not the product of the author's values, but rather a cultural aspect of the Earthsea archipelago. My objective in this part is not merely to expose the dynamics of gendered segregation and domination, in the series, as it would consist of a repetition of several detailed articles and essays on those topics. Instead, I intend to use such scholarly works as supports for an interpretation and analysis of these themes through the lens of duality, synergy, and opposition: as far as the female characters of *Earthsea* and sorcery are concerned, what kind of dichotomies are established by the narration, and how are said links treated?

#### I.3.a. Obscurantism and Enlightenment as a yin-yang paradigm.

In *Earthsea*, then, the ignorance in which women are forcibly and systemically maintained is usually made apparent, as shown in the sayings related to a woman's magic. A woman's knowledge, compared to masculine erudition, is inferior in both potency and morality, as it is "weak" and "wicked". This perception can be seen as an extrapolation of the connotations behind the terms employed for the practitioners of magic of each gender, both in the archipelago and in popular culture.

Indeed, while a witch is defined as "a person, [typically a woman], who practices magic, [especially] of a malevolent or harmful nature", a wizard is "a man who is skilled in occult arts; in later use, a man who practises witchcraft (the male counterpart of witch *n.*)"<sup>23</sup>. Despite the latter definition's claim that witches and wizards are counterparts, emphasis is placed on a wizard's complete mastery of his art, while a witch is mostly defined by her morality, or lack thereof, with no mention of her skill in the matter.

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23 Both definitions are taken from the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary, in the "wizard" and "witch" entry, found at this address: <https://www.oed.com/>. Accessed March 7<sup>th</sup> 2024.

This dichotomy persists in *The Tombs of Atuan*, where masculinity, enlightenment, and goodness are linked on the one hand, and womanhood, ignorance, and darkness on the other. The Place of the Tombs is mostly populated with “old women and half-men” (191), and apart from the guards, “no other men set foot upon the inner ground of the place” (188). We recall that travel and interpersonal relationships are keys to intellectual enlightenment, yet such behaviors are forbidden within the Place, therefore shaping the Tombs into a sterile environment on several scales. Quoting “The Night in Her Own Country” again, “the aridity and austerity of the setting are appropriate for the women who will bear no children and who worship dark and negative powers” (Sobat 26). Furthermore, even though it is “half fallen down in many places”, it is said that “a massive wall of rock” (187) circles the Place, trapping Tenar within its limits. As her proximity with Ged is transgressive in nature, even relationships that are allowed to Tenar are tainted by some form of control: her closest friend Penthe, “a soft, comfortable-looking girl” (189) is “whipped with a bundle of reed canes” (192) when she is found climbing the wall with Tenar, and her confidant, the eunuch Manan is excluded due to his partly masculine nature: “[Tenar, Kossil, and Thar] sat by a tiny fire of sage on the hearth in [...] Kossil’s bedroom. Outside the doorway, in the hall, Manan and [Kossil’s eunuch] played a game with sticks and counters” (215). In addition to physical mobility and meaningful social interactions being forbidden, we know that reading and writing are considered to be “black arts” (271), thus depriving Tenar of any possibility of having a critical outlook on the environment in which she is brought up.

Ironically, despite the fact that literacy is qualified as “black”, the cult of the “Nameless Ones” is closely associated with darkness. Tenar, as Arha, is mistress of “the silence, and the dark” (196), “prisoners are brought at night, secretly” (197) to the temple, and “light is forbidden” (200) in the Undertomb, as it is the anathema of the Nameless Ones. “The Night in Her Own Country” thus claims that “The Labyrinth and the Undertomb in the novel are a blend of the Taoist notions of yang and yin, with dual perspectives of masculine and feminine, light and dark, good and evil, safety and entrapment, death and birth” (Sobat 27) and that “the physicality of the Tombs, which suggest womb and birth canal, accentuates the maternal nature of Le Guin's underworld” (Sobat 29), strengthening the connection within the triad of notions previously mentioned: ignorance, darkness, and womanhood.

As far as the opposite triad is concerned, wizardry practiced by men is closely associated with light, especially in *The Tombs of Atuan*. The most blatant instance of this link occurs as Tenar first meets Ged, in the appropriately-named chapter “Light under the Hill”, after the glow coming from his staff, as he “made light where light was forbidden” (225), in

this womb-like underground. Through this analogy, the irruption of a male intruder in this almost-exclusively female environment is even more striking, and scholars have already drawn analogies between this schism and Taoist philosophy: “The Labyrinth and the Undertomb in the novel are a blend of the Taoist notions of yang and yin, with dual perspectives of masculine and feminine, light and dark, good and evil” (Sobat 27). This tradition is often cited as a core inspiration for Ursula Le Guin, even in her other novels: for instance, the Hainish cycle is said to embody “Le Guin's artistic vision” in its “multiplex, dualistic, and holistic” (Barbour 167) aspects with a similar focus on “the interdependence of light and darkness” (Barbour 165). When it comes to the *Earthsea* series as a whole, the overarching theme of a balance which must be maintained is commonly cited as an example of the Taoist influences in Le Guin’s works:

Le Guin’s careful navigation of the idea of death is a core problem; death becomes automatically juxtaposed with life, and the balance between the two is a recurring theme. [...] The very nature of the Earthsea storyworld is constructed in such a way that it implicitly engages readers in philosophical thought, specifically Taoist reflections on equilibrium, balance, and personal wholeness. (Friedrichsen 14)

Following this line of thought, Sobat’s analysis of *The Tombs of Atuan* through the lens of the Taoist yin-yang can be pushed even further, as more dualities can be observed. According to the definition:

Yin is a symbol of earth, femaleness, darkness, passivity, and absorption. It is present in even numbers, in valleys and streams, and is represented by the tiger, the colour orange, and a broken line. Yang is conceived of as heaven, maleness, light, activity, and penetration. It is present in odd numbers, in mountains, and is represented by the dragon, the colour azure, and an unbroken line<sup>24</sup>.

In addition to the previously seen oppositions of activeness and passiveness, maleness and femaleness, the elements of Earth and Heaven are especially noteworthy: just as Tenar and the Nameless Ones are linked to the depths of the earth and an underground labyrinth, witches as a whole are said to generally “meddle with the high arts of traffic with Old Powers” (16), later referred to as “Old Powers of the Earth” (242). Even though she is not one of those sorceresses, Ged’s aunt, “an ignorant woman among ignorant folks”, lives in a dimly-lit and stuffy hut filled with earthly elements:

She let no child enter there usually, and the children feared the place. It was low and dusky, windowless, fragrant with herbs that hung drying from the crosspole of the roof, mint and moly and thyme, yarrow and rushwash and paramal, kingsfoil, clovenfoot, tansy and bay. (15)

By contrast, although not quite heavenly, Ged’s powers are tied with aerial elements: the aforementioned light produced by his staff is one of those attributes, but the first spells

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24 According to the “Yinyang” entry on the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* website, accessible here: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/yinyang>. Accessed February 12<sup>th</sup> 2024.

cast by the young “wizard of Earthsea” also bring to mind the air and the sky: he employs “fogweaving, a binding-spell that gathers the mists together” (19) to protect his village from the Kargs, and some of his first lessons at Roke are spent “[practicing] with Master Windkey at arts of wind and weather” (47), and more evidently, “seeing him in the high pastures often with a bird of prey about him, the other children called him Sparrowhawk, and so he came by the name that he kept in later life as his use-name” (17).

### I.3.b. Intuition and rationality: gendered forms of knowledge?

Although the former section was dedicated to the systemic ignorance forced upon women, it should be noted that even female holders of knowledge are associated with darkness and the subterranean world. Indeed, erudition in *Earthsea* is gendered not only in terms of morality and scale, but also when their sources are taken into account. Although Rawls mistakenly conflates the character of Ged’s aunt with the sorceress Aunt Moss who appears in *Tehanu*, claiming that “Moss first appears as Ged’s scheming aunt in *Wizard*”, she accurately points out that the fourth book of the series is largely concerned with the questions “What is a woman’s magic?” and “What is a man’s?” (Rawls 141).

This is partly answered during the conversation between Tenar and Auntie Moss, as a peculiar friendship has developed between the two women. In the words of Moss herself:

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.” [...] “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? (528)

Moss’ description of her magic as earthly, ancient and intuitive, brings to mind the dangerous slope of gender essentialism some modern paganist ideologies, such as Wicca, may follow under the guise of female empowerment. Indeed, researches on how gender is perceived in such groups have shown that “when asked directly about sexual relations, many of the women still made heteronormative assumptions: they spoke of women as identifying with the receptive earth Goddess and men identifying with the active Horned God” (Kraemer 396). Even the UK-based Pagan Federation claims that “Drawing upon the inspiration of the image of the Goddess, women explore their own feminine mysteries”, whereas “Men are questioning the roles given them by society and are looking within for a new understanding of the male spirit”<sup>25</sup>. Combined with Moss’ closing question “Who dares ask questions of the

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25 Both quotes are taken from the online version of The Pagan Federation’s website, from the “Female Spirit” and “Male Spirit” entries respectively. <https://web.archive.org/web/20190923181742/https://paganfed.org/index.php/paganism/pf-female-spirit>

dark”, such interpretations of sorcery paint women as anti-intellectual beings who draw their power from an irrational, innate and unquestionable source. By contrast, men are in full control of their actions and actively seek knowledge, as shown in *Earthsea* through the School of Roke, from which women are excluded yet most male wizards, including Ged, are linked to: “The Mages of Roke are men— their power is the power of men, their knowledge is the knowledge of men” (664).

Without questioning this binary perspective, “From Master to Brother” praises the beneficial influence of the “full expressions of the mother tongue” (Hatfield 61):

By linking the Language of the Making with the values associated with the mother tongue, Le Guin has revised the Old Speech from its previous role as a tool of the patriarchal order to a language of Being and Naming which focuses upon the ancestral and hitherto hidden realm of the female Other. (Hatfield 59).

Indeed, as *Tehanu* progresses and Ged is incapacitated, “There is now no archmage of Roke.” (610), and the Masters of Roke are looking for “woman on Gont” to “guide [them], show [them] the way, lead the way, somehow, to [their] archmage” (612). While the possibility of her being such a mage is excluded, since “No woman can be archmage” (664), Tenar still plays a pivotal role as a dragonlord, that is to say “a man dragons will talk to”, or “a woman dragons will talk to” (538). Indeed, Tenar is able to understand Khalessin as it speaks in the “Language of the Making” (516) and is the one who summons it at the end of *Tehanu*, calling it by its true name as it comes down in a “roar of fire” (688).

The article “From Masters to Brothers” argues that “now [Tenar] has the magical and, importantly, entirely untrained capacity to use the language of true names” (Hatfield 59), and equates the otherness of the dragons with the innate alterity of women, a parallelism which applies both to Tenar and Therru, her foster daughter, who is equally able to speak with Khalessin:

The thematic parallels between the dragons' unity of being and the hitherto hidden power of woman blend mimetically and diegetically in the book's ending and in the transformation of little burned Therru into the dragon-child, Tehanu. To human perception in *Earthsea* so far, dragons have been wild, fearsome, wonderful, dangerously Other – yet just as they need not learn the Language of the Making, so Tehanu demonstrates at the novel's climax a similarly immediate oneness of mind and language. (Hatfield 59)

Hatfield describes these actions as “subversions of patriarchy” and an improvement as far as the “marginalized [...] mothers and sisters” are concerned, but I believe that considering Tenar’s and Therru’s transgressions solely as the result of a mysteriously hidden, innate nature, is detrimental to these characters and to Le Guin’s views on knowledge and

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<https://web.archive.org/web/20191207174355/https://paganfed.org/index.php/paganism/pf-male-spirit>  
Accessed March 12<sup>th</sup> 2024.

gender. As read in the essay “What Women Know” in the collection *Words Are My Matter*, she explicitly defies such stereotypes:

But I didn't and still don't like making a cult of women's knowledge, preening ourselves on knowing things men don't know, women's deep irrational wisdom, women's instinctive knowledge of Nature, and so on. All that all too often merely reinforces the masculinist idea of women as primitive and inferior – women's knowledge as elementary, primitive, always down below at the dark roots, while men get to cultivate and own the flowers and crops that come up into the light. But why should women keep talking baby talk while men get to grow up? Why should women feel blindly while men get to think? (Le Guin, *Words Are My Matter*)

The kind of “irrational wisdom” Le Guin alludes to mirrors Aunt Moss' intuition-based perception of magic, which Tenar regards with uncertainty. Still, in the article “Ursula K. Le Guin, Thinking in SF Mode”, Isabelle Stengers argues that “Neither she nor Le Guin holds ideas to oppose Aunt Moss. What they share is a refusal to leave words to men [...]. Tenar refuses the imaginary, she is that realist of a larger reality” (Robinson et al. 132). She also accurately highlights that Tenar's answer is a testament of her practical outlook on life, with an emphasis on her past experiences as a logical tool: “I will [ask the dark its name]”, she says, “I lived long enough in the dark” (529).

Earlier, Tenar points out that Ogion's education was especially transgressive as he “taught her. As if [she] weren't a girl. As if [she] had been his prentice, like Sparrowhawk” (527), and Tenar herself transgresses a *status quo* which is even supported by aunt Moss: “A man gives out, dearie. A woman takes in” (572). As her status as a prentice was already unconventional, she goes beyond another boundary as she becomes a teacher to Therru, just as Ogion was to her, as he “taught her some of the language dragons speak” (545). In the process, she also makes Therru a part of this cycle of intellectual transmission:

"Therru, maybe it's time you began to learn the true names of things [...] The child listened, silent. Tenar laid down her carding combs and picked up a small stone from the ground. "In that tongue," she said, "this is *tolk*." Therru watched what she did and repeated the word, *tolk*, but without voice, only forming it with her lips, which were drawn back a little on the right side by the scarring." (591).

I.3.c. Applying Donna Haraway's theory: *Tehanu's* girls and women as fantastic cyborgs.

Hence, Therru is also a being of knowledge, albeit still one in-training. Although her role in *Tehanu* is mostly defined by her status as Tenar's foster daughter, and, at the end of the book, as a dragon-child. She is also defined by her mutilated body and her wounds, both physical and mental, which are intrinsically linked to her gender and her age:

[The wizard Aspen] was one of the people who crippled her. He and her parents. They raped her and beat her and burned her. These things happen, my lord. These things happen to children. And he keeps following her, to get at her" (603)

As a result of this burning, Therru is permanently crippled, but also visually disfigured. The narration often highlights the contrast between the burnt parts of her body and the undamaged ones, such as when Tenar is observing Therru as she is asleep:

She laid her narrow, light-skinned hand along the side of the child's face where eye and cheek had been eaten away by fire, leaving slabbed, bald scar. Under her touch all that was gone. The flesh was whole, a child's round, soft, sleeping face. It was as if her touch restored the truth. Lightly, reluctantly, she lifted her palm, and saw the irremediable loss, the healing that would never be whole. (542)

Along with the mentions of "the right side of the face and head and the right hand, which had been charred to the bone" (486), a strong duality motif is present in the characterization of Therru. Due to this, it is possible to view her, as well as Tenar to a lesser extent, as a fantasy variation of a cyborg, according to Donna Haraway's theory in *A Cyborg Manifesto*. In this essay, Haraway exploits the archetype of the cyborg, "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway 5) and analyzes it through a feminist and self-determining lens, in order to highlight its potential as a manifestation of the refusal of dichotomies and of defiance. Although it is best applicable to science-fiction and its "modern machines", its main principles can still be transferable to the genre of fantasy. To better understand Haraway's theory, a few key passages of her essay must be mentioned, such as the reasoning behind the her theory:

The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion. (Haraway 6)

Further details about the characteristics of the cyborg are later given by the author, who places emphasis on its past-less nature which allows it to obtain freedom from obsolete structures and forms of domination:

The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the *oikos*, the household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. [...] the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden—that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and cosmos. The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time with out the oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of re turning to dust. (Haraway 9)

These qualities, especially the "oppositional" traits of the cyborg and its emancipation from the household, will be explained in detail as I will attempt to apply Haraway's theory to

Therru and Tenar Another important aspect, which is especially relevant to our analysis of *Earthsea*'s two main female characters, is the refusal of nature-related constraints due to its partly mechanical aspect:

There is nothing about teeing 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism. (Haraway 16)

Considering this, the cyborg is a product of self-definition, and is both emancipatory and transgressive in essence as it is able to free itself from the patriarchy-enforced traditions of sexuality and reproduction which are exerted under the guise of biological imperatives.

Finally, just like Le Guin does in "What Women Know", Haraway questions the deliberate exclusion of women from instances of knowledge and intellectualism, as well as the supposedly innate ignorance into which they are thrust, contrasting with men's innate association with knowledge and means of creation:

What about all the ignorance of women, all the exclusions and failures of knowledge and skill? What about men's access to daily competence, to knowing how to build things, to take them apart, to play? (Haraway 66)

A similarly rigid contrast can be observed in *Earthsea*, with magic serving as a stand-in for technology, as it is the highest embodiment of knowledge within the series' setting. The "exclusions and failures" of women can be seen, again, in the recurring saying "Weak as a woman's magic, wicked as a woman's magic", whereas men detain the monopoly of high sorcery. Borrowing from my earlier section: "The Mages of Roke are men— their power is the power of men, their knowledge is the knowledge of men" (664). Even in *Tehanu*, when all hope is lost and the Masters of Roke must find a new Archmage as Ged is incapacitated, and when a vision guides them to "a woman on Gont" (612), the thought that she could be the first "[she-archmage]" (665), as Tenar calls her, does not even cross their minds. Instead, she has to be an intermediary to their savior, a tool: "Evidently this woman is to guide us, show us the way, somehow, to our archmage" (612). The Masters' line of thought, akin to a syllogism, seems to be ingrained in the islanders' minds, effectively making it an ideological status quo: Knowledge and magic are the property of men ; women, as un-men, are incompatible with knowledge.

In *Tehanu*, both Therru and Tenar are victims of such male-dominated ways of thinking, as seen in how their bodies and genders are subjugated by their abusers, thus depriving them of their autonomy. In the case of Therru, we have seen that the men who pursue her, including her father, have "raped" (603) her, and she is overall treated as a

property devoid of free will, an object to be controlled by the men in her family. Her alleged uncle, Handy, even uses the impersonal pronoun “it” to refer to her, as he tries to get Therru away from Tenar: “She took my kid. My niece. It’s mine” (600). To a lesser extent, insults directed towards Tenar are both gendered and rooted in dehumanization: “Up, Bitch! Up! [...] All the way up! You’re a clever bitch, you can walk on your hind legs, can’t you?” (687).

Ultimately, Therru’s hybrid nature, which extends not only to her appearance but also to her status as a dragon of human form, leads to said men being punished, as the genderless dragon Kalessin, part of “[her] people” incinerates them. In doing so, Therru is emancipated from her male abusers and her body is hers once more. It is especially noteworthy that the source of Therru’s pain consists of the incestual rapes and familial violence she went through. With the death of her abusers, she is freed from the constraints of the “household” and, just like the cyborg, shows that she “does not dream of community on the model of the organic family”, but rather embraces her chosen brethren. This interpretation may be nuanced by the emphasis placed on her draconic ancestry, which allows her to understand and speak the Old Speech, given that she instinctively knows Moss’ true name, “Hatha” (686). Yet, it would be a mistake to consider that Therru’s knowledge is solely innate and a product of her bloodline, as it would contradict the principles embodied by the cyborg.

As alluded to before, the draconic cyborg Therru is also an active acquirer of knowledge, as seen when Tenar teaches her the “true name of things”, including the word “talk” for stone, which Therru “[repeats]” (591). Retroactively, this dynamic between a teacher and her student, in addition to that of a mother and her foster daughter, serves as an answer to Tenar and Ged’s conversation on gender, knowledge, and social constructs later in the novel:

"Yes; but women seem to fear their own strength, to be afraid of themselves." "Are they ever taught to trust themselves?" Ged asked, and as he spoke Therru came in on her work again. His eyes and Tenar's met. "No," she said. "Trust is not what we're taught." She watched the child stack the wood in the box. "If power were trust," she said. "I like that word. If it weren't all these arrangements-one above the other-kings and masters and mages and owners- It all seems so unnecessary. Real power, real freedom, would lie in trust, not force." (665).

Once again, transmission and transgression and intertwined, as the intellectual emancipation of both Tenar and Therru is made possible when the two interact outside of masculine influence, and despite the fact that such pursuits are deemed unfeminine in the archipelago.

Finally, the *Cyborg Manifesto* argues that “Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves”

(Haraway 67). For instance, Therru is able to conciliate her draconic ancestry with mundane pursuits out of her own choosing, as shown when she opts to stay with the humans Tenar and Ged, rather than to follow a much more grandiose destiny with Kalessin, although the dichotomy between these two fates is not so clear-cut:

“Would you leave these?”

“No,” said the child; “Can they not come?”

“They cannot come. Their life is here”.

“I will stay with them,” she said, with a little catch of breath. [...]

“I will come back for thee,” Kalessin said, “in time.” And to Ged and Tenar, “I give you my child, as you will give me yours.”

“In time,” Tenar said. (689)

Even though Therru’s attempt at bringing together both her human and draconic parental figures is rejected by Khalessin, she is still explicitly referred to as a child of both worlds, and she will, “in time”, join her other people.

Tenar also contributes to the blurring of rigid boundaries and to finding “a way out of the maze of dualisms” introduced by Haraway, since she is both Goha, the “widow” of Flint and “mistress of a flock of sheep” (485), and Tenar, the female student and protege of Ogion, hence a living transgression. The conflict between these two identities is shown, for instance, during the inner conversation she has with herself, as she attempts to control her anger towards Ged:

And when his power was gone, still it was all he could think about: that it was gone, lost, leaving him only himself, his shame, his emptiness.

"You aren't being fair," Goha said to Tenar.

"Fair!" said Tenar. "Did he play fair?"

"Yes," said Goha. "He did. Or tried to".

"Well, then, he can play fair with the goats he's herding; it's nothing to me," said Tenar. (633)

A third identity, mostly dormant in *Tehanu*, also contributes to Tenar’s inner conflict: “the girl Arha, who she had been long ago”, who “had not known a great deal of what Tenar and Goha knew, but [...] had known how to curse, how to live in the dark, how to be silent” (594). Subjugation and knowledge, or lack thereof, are closely tied here, echoing Haraway’s cyborg. When Tenar recalls this past identity, she has a “spell on her”, which binds her mind and which is cast on her by the wizard Aspen. In an attempt to resist the charm, Tenar musters the resolve not to “think in Hardic”, and forces herself to think in Kargish, her native tongue and the language she used throughout *The Tombs of Atuan*. Since knowledge, magic, and language are often interwoven in *Earthsea*, one cannot ignore the fact that Tenar resorts to her

past identity, which was defined by her ignorance and a lack of freedom of any kind, at a time in which a man attempts to impose his will upon her. Later on, Tenar recalls her time as a priestess with anger: “I remember when I first learned that! Kossil threatened me, the One Priestess of the Tombs. And I realized that I was helpless. I had the honor; but she had the power, from the God-king, the man.” (664). Indeed, in the afterword of *The Tombs of Atuan*, Le Guin declares her intention to make this entry an exploration of gendered forms of power:

The word *power* has two different meanings. There is *power to*: strength, gift, skill, art, the mastery of a craft, the authority of knowledge. And there is *power over*: rule, dominion, supremacy, might, mastery of slaves, authority over others. Ged was offered both kinds of power. Tenar was offered only one. (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 283)

Hence, just like the cyborg was confined to the household, Arha lived the illusion of both knowledge and power within a place codified by womanhood, from which she frees herself at the end of *The Tombs of Atuan*. Yet, despite this major transgressive act, her past clings to her, and it is only years later that Tenar can truly emancipate herself from the name “Arha” and all of its implications.

Ultimately, as the novel ends, she is able to make her own decision regarding her several identities. She conciliates “Goha” and “Tenar”, just like Therru did with her, when she hopefully muses about a simple life, like that she had as Goha with her husband Flint, but standing on an equal footing with Ged this time, with the freedom to make her own choices: “She could go down herself, come autumn, to see her son, and visit with Lark, and stay a while with Apple” (691). At the same time, her past as the priestess Arha. Accordingly, as she is both the mentor and the surrogate mother of Therru; she also extends this dismantling of the past and rigid boundaries to her perception of her ward. She is indeed the one who tells her that she is far more than what men define her as, that is to say a monstrous, dichotomous, and passive being:

You are beautiful [...]. Listen to me, Therru. Come here. You have scars, ugly scars, because an ugly, evil thing was done to you. People see the scars. But they see you, too, and you aren't the scars. You aren't ugly. You aren't evil. You are Therru, and beautiful. You are Therru who can work, and walk, and run, and dance, beautifully, in a red dress. (624)

In this first section, I have exposed the dynamics of knowledge, growth, education, and segregation while making a point to avoid, for a while, discussing the generic dimension of *Earthsea*. As the story spans over several books, with temporal ellipses between each entry, allowing for unseen deeds to occur, Le Guin weaves together erudition and personal evolution: from the first words of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, to the last pages of *Tehanu*, each

protagonist has learned much and has grown tremendously. Despite the obstacles, antagonists, and constraining societal conventions that have stood in their way, the main characters have managed to push through, partly due to the bonds they have with one another: Therru, who went from an abhorred and mute child to a beloved and serene daughter, has learnt from Ged and Tenar as much as the latter two have learnt from her. In *Earthsea*, the roles of master and student are often interchangeable, thus leading to fruitful relationships that develop outside of hierarchical structures. More importantly, this section's focus on the content of the series itself has allowed me to broadly cover its lore. The following section, centered around Ursula Le Guin's way of dealing with the fantasy genre, will therefore partly rely on examples that have been cited in the last few pages.

## II) Subverting fantasy: *Earthsea* as a groundbreaking work of the genre

In the introduction, I have mentioned the *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy*, and exploited its definition of the word “wizard”. As this section is dedicated to the ways Le Guin interprets, bends, and sometimes transgresses the conventions of the fantasy genre, I must once again make use of Stableford’s dictionary, in order to lay important definitions as a stable foundation for later analyses. The dictionary argues that “fantasy literature is as old as literature itself” (Stableford xlii), yet that the label of “Fantasy” became firmly established as the label for a popular commercial genre of adult fiction in the 1970s” (Stableford xxxix), that is to say around the time the first *Earthsea* novels were published. Staples of the fantasy genre as a whole include “magic, divination, fairies, witches, ghosts, legendary heroes, or mythical gods” (Stableford xlii), which have been present in several ancestral myths and tales. Among others, one might think of the Arthurian cycle and its supernatural occurrences and characters, such as the wizard Merlin, whose “own magic is the product of his rich and varied knowledge”, and his female student, “the enchanting Nimue [...], who favors the dark powers” (Spivack 117). Another canonical example would be the Shakespearean play *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*, in which Titania and Oberon, the “Queen” and “King of Fairies” appear, and employ a magical “love juice” which sows chaos among the young Demetrius, Lysander, Helena, and Hermia (Shakespeare).

Other relevant terms mentioned by Stableford, especially when analyzing *Earthsea*, are the notions of “epic fantasy” and “sword and sorcery”, sub-categories of the all-encompassing genre of fantasy. The former refers to grandiose stories, often “multivolume works— usually insistent immersive fantasies” (Stableford 131) which feature “legendary heroes” and draw inspiration from “Homer’s *Illiad* and *Odyssey*” (Stableford 130), which both bring to mind the perilous journey of Ged in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, one of the most important steps in his transformation from a fledgling sorcerer to a mythical Archmage. The “Sword and Sorcery” genre, on the other hand, is also “reliant on a mythical past”, albeit a more “brutal and cynical” one (Stableford lxi). Again, parallels may be drawn with the *Earthsea* cycle, particularly the dark gods of the Place of Atuan, the Nameless Ones, who are as ancient as they are cruel, to the point that the eunuch Manan claims that “There’s no mortal that doesn’t fear the Nameless Ones” (197).

These sub-genres, and fantasy as a whole, will be further explored in the following pages, as well as their connections with Ursula Le Guin and her cycle. For comparative purposes, works pertaining to these literary traditions will also be cited, all in the goal to answer a specific question: Knowing the norms of fantasy, to which extent does Ursula Le Guin borrow from the old and contemporary masters, making herself the recipient of their literary transmission, and how much is she willing to cross former boundaries, turning *Earthsea* into a tool for transgression?

## II.1. Conforming to and transgressing fantasy's codes

Although a few examples of works of fantasy will be mentioned in the following pages, such quotes will mostly be used for illustrative purposes, as archetypal representatives of the genre's most common tropes. This will also allow me to introduce some of the concepts that have been codified by canonical fantasy works, such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, (2009) which will be analyzed after this general approach.

### II.1.a. The dangers of fantastic racial profilings.

In the afterword of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Le Guin evokes how the majority of her past as a reader has been shaped by fantasy: claiming that "All [her] life, [she had] been reading about wizards, dragons, magic spells..." (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version]), staple characteristics of the genre which are all present Le Guin's cycle. The single sentence "Ged worked a spell of Changing, and between one breath and the next he flew from his boat in dragon form" (86), as the young wizard confronts the dragon of Pendor, combine all three elements mentioned above. In addition to the reliance on a "mythical past" introduced by Stableford, the series then firmly stand in fantasy territory, as the events of *Earthsea* follow a rich diegetic historical timeline. The ring of Erreth-Akbe, for example, symbol of a renewed hope and of the link between Ged and Tenar, is described as such by the wizard to the priestess:

No man knows who it was made for. Elfarran the Fair wore it once, before the Isle of Soléa was lost beneath the sea; and it was old when she wore it. [...] The half you have bears four runes and a bit of another; and mine likewise. [...] It was the Bond-Rune, the sign of dominion, the sign of peace. [...]. Since it was lost there have been no great kings in Havnor. (268)

Despite similar instances of conformity regarding the fantasy genre, Le Guin's series transgresses several generic traditions, an objective she announces outside the text itself, in the foreword of the complete edition. As written earlier in the introduction of this paper, she

first slowly and subtly makes her case, as she reflects upon the stereotype of wizards as “Old men, peaked hats, white beards” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 155), and intends to showcase how young mages become such wizards through the story of Ged.

Later on, she makes explicit her will to subvert the usual inherent qualities of fantasy protagonists, in contrast with the uniform tradition she is accustomed to:

The part of the tradition that I knew best was mostly written (or rewritten for children) in England and northern Europe. The principal characters were men. If the story was heroic, the hero was a white man; most dark-skinned people were inferior or evil. If there was a woman in the story, she was a passive object of desire and rescue (a beautiful blond princess); active women (dark, witches) usually caused destruction or tragedy. (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 157).

In the section dedicated to women and knowledge within the series, I have already exposed how the author subverts such themes by not only granting her female characters central, proactive roles, but also by explaining that women are excluded from magical institutions not because of a literary choice on the author’s part, but because of cultural norms in-universe which are addressed by the characters, namely Ged and Tenar again:

The Mages of Roke are men – their power is the power of men, their knowledge is the knowledge of men. Both manhood and magery are built on one rock: power belongs to men. If women had power, what would men be but women who can't bear children? And what would women be but men who can? (664)

In this line, then, Ged’ highlights that the foundations of magic are “built” by its practitioners, instead of being inherent to mystical forces, and that they are more specifically rooted in a collective sense of masculine insecurity: without their magic, they perceive themselves as an inferior version of women, their knowledge, or at the very least the demonstration of it, compensating for their inability to bear children. On this matter, Ged even highlights that “If your strength is only the other’s weakness, you live in fear” (665). In the previous extracts indeed, both genders are defined in a subtractive manner: women are un-men, as they cannot access high forms of knowledge, and men are un-women, unable to bear children.

As far as race is concerned, Le Guin later explains that “in other ways”, “[her] story didn’t follow traditions”, and that the skin color of her characters and the roles they fulfill within *Earthsea* were very much intentional:

[Ged’s] people, the Archipelagans, are various shades of copper and brown, shading into black in the South and East Reaches. The light-skinned people among them have far-northern or Kargish ancestors. The Kargish raiders in the first chapter are white. [...] Ged is copper-brown and his friend Vetch is black. I was bucking the racist tradition, “making a statement”—but I made it quietly, and it went almost unnoticed. (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 157)

When it comes to Le Guin’s “statement”, the reason it went “almost unnoticed” is partly due to the later editions of the cycle. As she explains, “the results could be ghastly” with some covers depicting Ged as a “droopy, lily-white wizard” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 6). Still, these aspects of the cycle will be further scrutinized in the third and final section of this paper, and I must ignore the relationship between *Earthsea* and the publishing world for the moment. Meanwhile, as far as the “racist tradition” is concerned, the fantasy genre has indeed a tumultuous relationship with both race and cultural diversity, to the point that viewers and readers of color often feel under-represented, or even portrayed in an overly negative light, by works pertaining to this tradition. Jamaican author Nalo Hopkinson is one of such affected people, and recounts her own experience as a black child reading and watching sci-fi and fantasy in *Maybe They’re Phasing Us In*:

I didn't wonder much about the fact that the overwhelming majority of people I saw on the screen were white, even though whiteness, worldwide, is in the minority. [...] Still, the first time that someone said to me, when I was well into my 30s, that the aliens and fairies and what-have-you in science fiction and fantasy could be seen as stand-ins for people of color, I didn't know what they were talking about. [...] But eventually I did begin to figure it out. You could see blue aliens, green mermaids, aliens that looked like they had trilobites stuck to their foreheads. But black people? South Asian people? Aboriginal people? There were a few Asian people, but only a few. (Hopkinson 100)

Although her analysis mostly applies to sci-fi stories such as the *Star Trek* franchise, Hopkinson’s arguments can also be transposed to fantasy:

The color coding was definitely there, and definitely prejudiced: Ferengis as the Shylocks of the galaxy; Vulcans and Romulans as the inscrutable, intellectual—and in the case of the Romulans, merciless—Asians with near-magical powers; Klingons as the hoodies who loved nothing more than a good fight. In *ST:TNG*, at first most of the Klingons were black men. (Hopkinson 101)

Therefore, as far as *Star Trek* is concerned, characters of color seem to be either absent for the most part, or vilified through the presence of humanoid subspecies whose characteristics are mostly determined by racial stereotypes. When it comes to fantasy, it is possible to apply Hopkinson’s ideas to the races of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson), also known as *D&D*, a popular tabletop role-playing game which was first published in 1974 by Tactical Studies Rules and which is heavily shaped by standard fantasy tropes. As the game has been re-published several times, I will study here the fifth edition, which came out in 2014 and which is now published by Wizards of the Coast, through its *Player’s Handbook* (Wizards RPG Team, 2014). Indeed, the handbook provides advice and information on the setting’s lore to new players. I will particularly draw attention to the dichotomy between the good-aligned elves and the evil-aligned drows, or dark elves. Indeed, in *D&D*’s setting, “Most races have tendencies toward certain alignments” (Wizards RPG Team 17). Although traditional elves’ skin color “encompasses the normal human range”, they

are still associated with white-centric features: “eyes like pools of liquid gold or silver”, “no facial and little body hair”, “fine features” (Wyatt et al. 21). When it comes to their moral inclinations, it is said that “they value and protect others’ freedom as well as their own, and they are more often good than not” (Wyatt et al. 23). On the other hand, drows are “descended from an earlier subrace of dark-skinned elves”, and “were banished from the surface world for following the goddess Lolth down the path to evil and corruption”. It should also be noted that their “black skin that resembles polished obsidian” directly contributes to their fearsome appearance, since “to most, they are a race of demon-worshipping marauders dwelling in the subterranean depths of the Underdark” (Wyatt et al.23).

*D&D*, then, is prone to make and to diffuse dangerous mental shortcuts, as it correlates race and culture with moral qualities, which are mostly inherent to individuals: despite the fact that “humans, dwarves, elves, and other humanoid races can choose whether to follow the paths of good or evil, law or chaos”, it is also said that evil “races have strong inborn tendencies that match the nature of their gods” (Wyatt et al. 122). Parallels can be made with real-world pseudosciences rooted in racism, such as physiognomy and phrenology:

Developed from the research of John Caspar Lavater, Franz Joseph Gall, and many other prominent mind the day, these two sciences, while rather quickly debunked by the medical establishment, became quite popular with the public. Physiognomy used facial features to judge individual character, while phrenology attempted to probe the character of an individual by mapping parts of the skull. (Marshall 161)

Hence, not only does Ursula Le Guin avoid such dangerous tropes by making all of her *Earthsea* characters humans, except for the dragons, instead of using humanoid races with pre-determined morals, she also points out that the genre is prone to dichotomous depictions of ethical conflicts: “a heroic fantasy is good guys fighting bad guys, the War of Good Against Evil” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 158), she writes.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Le Guin should subvert both the potential racist implications of fantasy, and its “puerile, infantile, and degrading” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 158) treatments of good and evil, which are both intertwined. We have already highlighted how the barbaric Kargs have “white faces” (19), while the reader is first introduced to dark-skinned, “goat-thieves, sea pirates, and wizards”. Nevertheless, the author does not stop at a mere inversion of racial stereotypes, which would depict black people as “hoodies who [love] nothing more than a good fight”, to borrow Hopkinson’s words above. Instead, she places emphasis on individual moral complexity, regardless of skin color, even though it is, of course, mostly the case for the protagonist Ged, who has “red-brown” (44) skin. Still, as she says in “The Child of the Shadow”, from the collection of essays *The*

*Language of the Night*, “human beings all look roughly alike; they also think and feel alike. And they are all part of the universe” (Le Guin and Wood 58). Hence, the struggles of the protagonists of the first four books are defined by their young age, rather than their skin color. Furthermore, as she quotes psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, “Jung himself said, ‘Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is’<sup>26</sup>” (Le Guin and Wood 59) the parallels with Ged’s dynamic with his shadow become obvious:

The only way for a youngster to get past the paralyzing self-blame and self-disgust of this stage is really to look at that shadow, to face it, warts and fangs and pimples and claws and all – to accept it as the self – as part of the self. The ugliest part, but not the weakest. For the shadow is the guide. The guide inward and out again; downward and up again. (Le Guin and Wood 61)

We have already explored how Ged’s choice to merge with his shadow was a demonstration of his newfound maturity, but the other characters also display darker traits, which they learn to accept and overcome. Arren, who has “dark skin” (400) just like Ged, comes to term with his inner cowardice and treacherous nature when he temporarily betrays the Archmage, an important step of his heroic journey. “I failed you”, he says, “I will fail you again. I have not strength enough” (410), he says, thus acknowledging his flaws, and overcomes them by ultimately staying with Ged until the end: When Cob is finally defeated and Ged is depleted of his energy: “Arren [lifts] him in his arms and [carries] him up that high slope” (468). On the other hand, Tenar differs in that she is a woman, and is Kargish, a people of “white-skinned barbarians, pirates, untrustworthy folk” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 282), but her struggles are fundamentally similar to those of Ged and Arren. After escaping from the Tombs, she also admits her flaws to Ged:

He was looking straight at her.

“What evil have you done, Tenar?”

“I ordered that three men be shut into a room beneath the Throne, and starved to death. They died of hunger and thirst. They died, and are buried there in the Undertomb. The Tombstones fell on their graves.” She stopped.

“Is there more?”

“Manan.”

“That death is on my soul.”

“No. He died because he loved me, and was faithful. (298)

Just like Arren, she also has a moment of mistrust towards Ged and contemplates killing him while his back is turned:

She turned upon the man, the knife held back in her right hand behind her hip. As she did so he raised his face slowly and looked at her. He had the look of one come from a long way

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26 From *Psychology and Religion: West and East* (Jung, 1975)

off, one who has seen terrible things. His face was calm but full of pain. As he gazed up at her and seemed to see her more and more clearly, his expression cleared. (294)

Again, similarly to Arren, Tenar makes peace with this part of herself and overcomes the stage of self-hatred as she arrives to the “many-coloured shore”, to “the palaces and the high towers” of Havnor, and the narration optimistically describes her situation as one of “a child coming home” (299).

To put it in a nutshell, Le Guin thus transgresses fantasy’s tendencies to resort to the importance of race, whether it is imaginary, as we have seen with elves and drows, or otherwise. Instead, her novels feature widely different human characters, although she intentionally places dark-skinned people on the foreground of her narrative, while white populations are a minority. Despite these distinctions, the stakes of the characters’ journeys are largely personal and unrelated to the question of race, and mainly linked with emotional and moral complexity, as well as growth and redemption. Due to this, both black and white *Earthsea* protagonists are linked together thanks to their similar narrative arcs, which in turn paves the way for their interactions in the novels, and defy the essentialist and dichotomous tradition of fantasy.

### II.1.b. Politics and fantasy: an inherently reactionary genre?

As I have alluded to in the introduction as I brushed upon Anne Besson’s work *Les Pouvoirs de l’Enchantement*, fiction is able to shape reality whether for good and bad, as the principles conveyed by works of fantasy, as well as science-fiction, may transcend fiction and be exploited in the real world, due to “the strong link between this cultural area and political and ethical uses abound and are seldom new”<sup>27</sup> (Besson, *Les pouvoirs de l’enchantement* 9). Yet, even before delving into such bridges between the fictional and real worlds, it is relevant to analyze the depictions of politics within fantasy works. Indeed, in *Constellations*, which deals with the relations between modern fiction and our collective imagination, Besson highlights how entire new realities can be crafted by a few hundred pages, or in the two-hour span of a movie:

For products of the human imagination to draw states of potential entities so vast that they must be considered as worlds: this promise of the powers of fictional creation, which joyfully makes us transcend the limits of our existential finitude, is literally so marvelous that it is, undoubtedly, no wonder that it should inspire such ancient and perennial fascination, in shapes that are perpetually renewed.<sup>28</sup> (Besson, *Constellations* 29)

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27 My translation. Original text: “une forte association de ce domaine culturel et d’usages éthiques et politiques”.

28 My translation. Original text: “Que les produits de l’imagination humaine dessinent des états de choses possibles si vastes qu’il faille les concevoir comme des mondes: cette promesse de pouvoirs de la création fictionnelle, nous faisant allégrement franchir les limites de notre finitude existentielle, est si littéralement

Throughout this section, then, our sense of fascination will be directed towards the potentials of worldbuilding, the task of “developing a coherent imaginary world with its own ecology, geography, history, and so forth” (Stableford, *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction Literature* 397). Although the term is usually applied to science-fiction works, it may also be considered when analyzing fantasy. Indeed, even though “HF<sup>29</sup>, as a branch of Fantasy, makes assumptions which disregard scientific knowledge or contradict it in frankly unscientific ways”, “the system must be logically coherent within itself” (Alpers et al. 21). For instance, as far as the series under study is concerned, a full map of the Earthsea archipelago can be seen on the pages 6 and 7 of the Puffin Books edition of *The Earthsea Quartet*. Similarly, maps of the Place of the Tombs and of its underground Labyrinth can be found on pages 172 and 173, with details about their infrastructure, and so on.

Le Guin’s care for such worldbuilding, whether on the large or small scale, is expressed in her introduction for the *Books of Earthsea* as a whole, as she explains her method which combines both careful planning and intuitive spontaneity:

I saw and named Earthsea and all its islands. I knew almost nothing about them, but I knew their names. In the name is the magic. The original map was on a very large sheet—probably butcher paper, which I had rolls of for my kids to draw on. [...] Its use to me was practical. A navigator needs a chart. As my characters sailed about, I needed to know how far apart the islands lay and in which direction one from another. (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 5)

My intent here is to highlight how important worldbuilding is to Le Guin and how she consciously weaves the various parts of an imagined and complex reality together, which thus paves the way for the following passages of this section. Indeed, even without acknowledging the potential political impact a fictional world may have on reality, such universes, especially those of the fantasy genre, tend to depict intricate political systems and conflicts. If we consider popular culture, the book series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, whose publication still goes on at the time of writing, by G.R.R Martin, comes to mind, due to its well-known representations of dynamics of power and intrigue. For instance, in the first volume, *A Game of Thrones*, published in 1996, Princess Daenerys Targaryen finds herself thrust in a political marriage with the warrior Khal Drogo, whose face is “hard and cruel” (Martin 38), while other chapters focus on the relationship between “Lady Catelyn” (Martin 67) and her daughters Arya and Sansa. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, as it is the case in several other fantasy works, those who influence the world within the fictional universe and who affect the plot on the scale of the narrative are usually nobles of various fashion: lords, ladies, or even royalty in

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merveilleuse qu’il ne faut pas s’étonner de la fascination ancienne et durable qu’elle exerce, sous des formes toujours renouvelées.”

29 High fantasy.

the case of Daenerys. Commoners are often relegated to secondary roles, and serve as helpers to the noble protagonists, as hierarchy demands it. Again, looking at modern works of fantasy, the 1992 video-game *Fire Emblem Gaiden*, directed by Shouzou Kaga and Intelligent Systems, first seems to subvert this trope, as it introduces two protagonists: the brave and humble commoner Alm, and the kind-hearted princess in disguise Celica. The former, despite his humble origins, becomes the leader of a rebellion army against the oppressive empire of Rigel. Yet, it is ultimately revealed that, unknown to him and to the player, Alm is the legitimate prince of Rigel, and his royal blood allows him to reform the nation, but also to wield the Royal Sword, which, in Arthurian fashion, no other than the true heir may wield (Kaga and Intelligent Systems).

Even though race is not directly concerned, and individual initiatives are still prevalent, we thus find ourselves confronted to similar cases of a reliance on birthright and essentialism. Due to this, criticism about the foundations of the fantasy genre abounds, especially in the article “Loincloth, Double Ax, and Magic” aforementioned. Hans Joachim Alpers argues that heroic fantasy “defends rigid structures of dream worlds”, “cannot be reconciled with either democracy or socialism” (Alpers et al. 22), and ultimately “[provides] ideological preparation for the road to a new fascism” (Alpers et al. 31), due to the genre’s resorts to violence and misogynistic representations of “women [used] as consumer goods to be thrown away after service” (Alpers et al. 25).

Although Alpers appears to be categorical in his definition, are all works of fantasy truly as regressive as he suggests? Is the *Earthsea* cycle really so reactionary when it comes to the political systems it depicts and the ideas it embodies? When it comes to the representation of minorities, I have already demonstrated how Le Guin intentionally subverts the usual reductive tropes that usually apply to women and characters of color. Racism is a reality in the archipelago, as shown when the fanatical priestess Kossil calls wizards and outsiders “black and vile”, but the narration frames this statement as close-minded and ignorant, as Kossil immediately follows with “I have never never seen one” with “satisfaction” (219), and people of color are a majority both on the fictional demographic scale and on the scale of narrative importance. Furthermore, as it can be observed in *Tehanu*, violence and disrespect are exerted towards women by men who are also clearly shown to be wrong: we recall Tenar and Ged’s conversation about the facts that “both manhood and magery are built on one rock” (664), and that domineering men such as the evil wizard Aspen are punished by the narrative as they are incinerated by Kalessin, only leaving “scorched rags of cloth and leather, and other things” (689).

According to *Loincloth, Double Ax, and Magic*, another defining feature of fantasy is its reliance on unalterable *status quos* which are intertwined with domination and hierarchy, since such fictional realities are defined by “ideology of the power of man over man” and “the structures of those barbaric worlds are virtually never questioned” (Alpers et al. 30). Once again, such ideals seem to differ greatly from Le Guin’s own principles. In an interview with fantasy specialist Brian Attebery, she stated that she “can’t handle the kind of violence that people take absolutely for granted” and would hate for an artist to “[force her] head into blood, gore, and torture” (Le Guin and Attebery 379). *Earthsea* indeed places emphasis on the joys of adventure and freedom rather than the pleasure derived from violence, a preference which is noticeable through the uses of magic throughout the novels: In other fantasy settings, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, wizards and sorcerers are mostly known for their offensive prowess: “Acid Splash”, “Ice Storm”, and the popular “Fireball” (Wizards RPG Team 210), are only a small array of spells among the many which are intended to wound and destroy in one way or another. By contrast, magic in *Earthsea* is largely concerned with practicality and utility, and duels of sorcery are scarce. One of the only notable exceptions would be the test Ged challenges Jasper to in the first tome, and even this confrontation ultimately consists in an indirect battle of magical showmanship, in which Ged “[calls] a woman’s spirit” (62). Other usages of magic include “healing cataracts that were in the way of blinding” (140) an old man, or the emanation of light to project a “soft gleam” (224). The tremendous power magic holds is therefore partly linked to its usefulness on a day-to-day basis. Of course, it may very well be argued this aspect of magic is due to the fact that fireballs and lightning bolts would do little to serve the plot of the novels: Ged’s story mostly consists of an inner conflict, while Tenar’s arc mostly deals with her forgotten past and with institutionalized religion.

The latter leads us to the question of structures of power and leaders in *Earthsea*: are such issues explored by Le Guin through a conservative, regressive lens, as Alpers might suggest? In November 2014, when the author accepted the National Book Foundation’s Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, she delivered a speech in which she expressed her thoughts regarding the power of literature and the state of contemporary society: “We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable — but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings”<sup>30</sup>. More than forty years separate this speech from the first tome of the *Earthsea* series, and Le Guin may not have held these ideals for all those years, but it still provides a useful angle of

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30 Quote taken from the transcript of Ursula Le Guin’s Speech in Acceptance of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, accessible at: <https://www.ursulakleguin.com/nbf-medal>. Accessed April 14<sup>th</sup> 2024.

analysis for the cycle. Furthermore, the article *Postmodern Anarchism in the novels of Ursula Le Guin*, which can be found on the official Ursula K. Le Guin website<sup>31</sup>, details how her science fiction novels are laden with “frequent critiques of state power, coupled with [a] rejection of capitalism and [an] obvious fascination with alternative systems of political economy” (Call 87). Even though the novels Call analyses do not belong to the fantasy genre, and have all been published after *Earthsea*, they still cover a large period of time, from 1973 with *The Lathe of Heaven* to 1994 with *The Dispossessed*. Hence, as Lewis Call puts it: “The themes of postmodern anarchism are clearly present in her work. So far these themes have remained largely hidden, but it is time to bring them to the surface” (Call 104).

First of all, it is important to point out that the *Earthsea* cycle, like many other fantasy works, still relies on monarchy as a form of government, which is supported by mystical principles, mainly the broken Ring of Erreth-Akbe. Ged explicitly claims that “No King could rule well if he did not rule beneath that sign” (269), which echoes our medieval divine right of kings. Ged is gifted one half of the ring from an “old woman” (132), the former “[child] of some royal house of the Kargad Empire” (133), and mends it with the other half he finds in Atuan, making it “whole [...] as if it had never been broken” (274), which ultimately allows Arren to be renamed Lebannen and crowned “King of All the Isles in the Tower of the Sword in Havnor at the world’s heart” (477). It therefore appears that the entire archipelago, which in the context of the series amounts to the whole world.

Nevertheless, despite this alleged importance, royalty plays a secondary role throughout the series. Arren has indeed been taught a wide array of skills due to his princely education: “I can fence with the short sword and the noble sword. I can sail a boat. I know the court-dances and the country-dances.” (326). Apart from his sailing expertise, then, his talents are ill-suited for an epic journey across the seas, and it is thus Ged who takes the lead, despite Arren’s status as a narrative focalizer. Furthermore, he is only crowned in the epilogue, and details of the coronation are unknown to the reader, and when he finally appears as King in *Tehanu*, it is only for a few pages, and he also fulfills the role of a helper, as he is the one who transports Tenar across the sea back to her home: “We’ll take you there”, he says, “with delight in being able to offer it, to do it” (602). The importance of Arren’s royal lineage is diminished, and even attempts to “bow or even kneel” (602) to Tenar before she stops him. Emphasis is rather placed on his and Tenar’s shared connection with Ged, as well as his sailing abilities, which echo his Odyssey-like adventure from the previous tome.

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31 <https://www.ursulakleguin.com/postmodern-anarchism>. Accessed April 14<sup>th</sup> 2024.

As a whole, apart from Havnor, the workings of the other islands' local governments are rather vague: nobles, such as the "Lord of Re Albi" (585), or the "Lord of O" (53), have some form of control, and the remote Kargish Lands are under the jurisdiction of a "Godking" (183). Still, wizards, especially the Archmage, whose political influence rivals the King's, are the ones who have the most power. Tenar and Ged also acknowledge that their authority differs from that of the kings: "Kings are given power by other men. A mage's power is his own" (665). Hence, although wizards can be compared and contrasted with kings, the nature of their power also places them in a sphere distinct from traditional political institutions. Due to its mystical and spiritually higher aspect, the world of sorcerers exempts itself from the usual laws and customs and are able to establish their own traditions, such as their narrow perception and treatment of women when it comes to learning.

Still, just as the aforementioned gendered segregation of knowledge is established within the novel by archaic norms, the inherent right of kings to rule appears to be a societal matter, a set of dynamics of transmission between individuals, but which is also dependent on esoteric traditions such as the Ring of Erreth-Akbe. The power relations between royals and wizards thus seem to be one-sided: the kings' right to rule is effectively determined by a magical artifact, and mages have immense political influence, yet at the same time are able to distance themselves from traditional laws, to such a degree that the story, which focuses on the magical world, seldom mentions more mundane forms of Government. In fact, even the aforementioned Godking, who rules over the Kargish lands where magic is illegal, has ties with otherworldly entities, since he has a temple dedicated to his name at the Place of the Tombs, the "Temple of the Godking", right next to the "Temple of the Twin Gods" and which has a "high portico and a row of thick white columns with painted capitals" (187). We recall, of course, that just below the Place of the Tombs lies the Labyrinth ruled by the Nameless Ones, the "ancient and holy Powers of the Earth" (266). Furthermore, we have seen that iconoclastic characters, that is to say the protagonists of the stories, instigate change in these systems at various scales. Hence, although calling *Earthsea* an embodiment of Le Guin's anarchist beliefs might be a stretch, the cycle could be qualified as politically progressive: in addition to its commentaries on gender and education, it subtly subverts the fantasy genre's reliance on monarchist structures by downplaying their background presence in the characters' arcs and granting its main representative, Arren, several other traits, such as humility, and deep bonds with Ged and Tenar that transcend hierarchy. Ged's statement "A mage's power is his own" may then mislead the reader as it does not translate Ged's sentiment on the matter. Although wizards may believe that they earned their power is self-earned, this

paper has repeatedly shown that knowledge and power are acquired through cooperation and interactions between disciples and masters, as Ged does during his years at Roke as well as under the tutelage of Ogion the Silent.

## II.2. *Earthsea* and *The Lords of the Rings*: a deviation from “commodified fantasy”

Just as Ged benefits from his old masters’ expertise, which in turn allows him to become a world-renowned Archmage, so does Ursula Le Guin acknowledge that her strong interest in writing fantasy comes from her own experiences as an avid reader when she was a child: “All my life I’d been reading about wizards, dragons, magic spells...” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 155). Most specifically, she refers to the “tradition of fantastic tales” as “a great river from sources high in the mountains of Myth—a confluence of folk and fairy tale, classical epic, medieval and Renaissance and Eastern romance, romantic ballad, Victorian imaginative tale, and twentieth-century book of fantastic adventure such as T. H. White’s Arthurian cycle and Tolkien’s great book”. This interpretation of fantasy literature as a continuous stream of works that all come from the same source, “high in the mountains of Myth”, but which also borrow from the previous generations align perfectly with this paper’s notion of transmission, as Le Guin also contributes to this “marvelous flood of literature” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 156–57) with the *Earthsea* cycle. Furthermore, the final example she mentions, “Tolkien’s great book” is especially noteworthy. The periphrasis of the “great book”, no doubt an allusion to either *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 2012) or *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, brings to mind similar appellation for the Bible itself, the “Good Book”<sup>32</sup>. Although this parallel may have not been intentional on Le Guin’s part, the iconicity of Tolkien’s work, is not to be denied: the simple mention of a “great book” by Tolkien is enough for the reader to picture Middle-Earth and its complex protagonists. Le Guin also admits the quasi-synonymous relationship between the trilogy and the fantasy genre:

Fantasy is now a branch of the publishing industry, with many titles, many sequels, great expectations of monster successes and movie tie-ins. In 1967 it was pretty much nowhere. Kid stuff. The only adult fantasy novel most people had even heard of was *The Lord of the Rings*. (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 156)

*The Hobbit* was first published in 1937, while the three tomes of *The Lord of the Rings* were published over two years: *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers* in 1954, and *The Return of the King* the following year. Hence, as a work of the fantasy genre which “was pretty much nowhere” at the time of *A Wizard of Earthsea*’s publication, the *Earthsea* cycle must inevitably face heavy competition. This sub-section therefore aims at studying how Le Guin manages to make the best of the implicit presence of Tolkien’s work in her own writing,

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<sup>32</sup> According to the “the Good Book” entry on the Cambridge Dictionary website, accessible here: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/good-book>. Accessed May 21<sup>st</sup> 2024.

and how she challenges its hegemony within the genre by subverting the codes *The Lord of the Ring* established.

## II.2.a. Introducing Tolkien: a genre-shaping world-builder

Indeed, the *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature*, Stableford attributes a specific definition to Ursula Le Guin's works. Indeed, he borrows from the principles she exposes in the foreword of *Tales of Earthsea* for his "Commodified Fantasy" entry: the term applies to "stereotypical and imitative genre fantasy devoid of intellectual and moral complexity" and which resorts to common formulas such as "the epic trilogy and the sword and sorcery action/adventure story, with the former dominating the market place by sheer mass as well as sales potential" (Stableford, *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature* 84). Indeed, although the fifth tome of the *Earthsea* cycle is not part of the corpus under study, its foreword provides too much valuable information about the cycle as a whole for it to be ignored. The author thus writes about absence of imagination in some modern works of fantasy:

Fantasy becomes a commodity, an industry. Commodified fantasy takes no risks: it invents nothing, but imitates and trivializes. It proceeds by depriving the old stories of their intellectual and ethical complexity, turning their action to violence, their actors to dolls, and their truth telling to sentimental platitude. Heroes brandish their swords, lasers, wands, as mechanically as combine harvesters, reaping profits. Profoundly disturbing moral choices are sanitized, made cute, made safe. The passionately conceived ideas of the great storytellers are copied, stereotyped, reduced to toys, molded in bright colored plastic, advertised, sold, broken, junked, replaceable, interchangeable. (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 638)

While this quote will also prove useful when analyzing the book and its economy in the third section of this paper, and it only applies to a small selection of fantasy works, it serves as the perfect example of Le Guin's perception of the modern state of the genre, as well as her willingness to challenge such norms. Up to this point, our analysis of the cycle has shown that the author is determined to explore the "intellectual and ethical complexity" of her characters and the "profoundly disturbing moral choices" that they make, and further examples of her commitment to elaborate plots and character arcs will therefore not be needed. Nevertheless, one may wonder what, Le Guin alludes to when mentioning "the passionately conceived ideas of the great storytellers". Just a few lines earlier, she links the aforementioned lack of imagination with the escapism of fantasy, tainted with a yearning for stasis:

We cherish the old stories for their changelessness. Arthur dreams eternally in Avalon. Bilbo can go "there and back again," and "there" is always the beloved familiar Shire. Don Quixote sets out forever to kill a windmill. So people turn to the realms of fantasy for stability, ancient truths, immutable simplicities. (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 638)

“Arthur” and Avalon refer to the Arthurian Cycle, part of the Matter of Britain, which is the product of “numerous gifted and innovative writers in the twelfth century” (Smith 2) . Meanwhile, Don Quixote refers to the eponymous 17th-century novel, which is now considered a staple of Spanish literature and even the reason behind the appellation “la lengua de Cervantes” for the Spanish language. Alongside these two classics that have shaped the literary sphere as we know it today, Le Guin also refers to Bilbo, the protagonist of *The Hobbit*, the predecessor of *The Lord of the Rings* series of novels written by J.R.R Tolkien. One cannot ignore the tremendous impact of this series on fantasy and literature as a whole, “often considered one of the most striking works of our time”, even dubbed “a literary myth in itself” which has been “translated in more than thirty languages” and which “sold more than fifty million copies in the entire world”<sup>33</sup> (Ferré 9). Just like Le Guin, Tolkien is famed for his world-building expertise and Vincent Ferré highlights its remoteness from our world:

“The topography, toponymy, fauna and flora, different from ours, turn this universe into an apparently autonomous whole, from which an atlas can be drawn, languages and species classified: *mallorn*, *elanor*, *nihpredil*, and other variants have no equivalent in the real world, and neither is the case for Ents or Hobbits” (Ferré 89)

Despite Tolkien’s will to distance his work as much as possible from reality, *The Lord of the Rings* shaped both the real world and the fantasy genre to such a degree that it actually became the trendsetter for several of its tropes. For instance, the *Player’s Handbook* for *Dungeons & Dragons* mentioned above provides several descriptions of its races that align with Tolkien’s depictions: his dwarves are said to have a strong affinity with the mineral world, as they have “mines in the Blue Mountains” (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 57). They also are experts with “anvils and furnaces” (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 80) while those present in the aforementioned tabletop game are similarly “bold and hardy” and reside in “kingdoms rich in ancient grandeur, halls carved into the roots of mountains” (Wizards RPG Team 20). In a looser sense, the halflings from *Dungeons & Dragons* are heavily inspired from Tolkien’s hobbits. Indeed, the latter are described as a diminutive people who “love peace and quiet and good tilled earth” (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 1), and who make great artisans with their “long and skillful fingers” (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 2), whereas the former have similar characteristics: they “appear relatively harmless” and “have a knack for finding the most straightforward solution to a problem” (Wizards RPG Team 26). Although only *Dungeons & Dragons* has been dealt with in detail through its informative *Player’s Handbook*, it is merely one of the many works that

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33 All four previous quotes are taken from Vincent Ferré’s *Sur les Rivages de la Terre du Milieu*, and translated by me. Original text: “souvent considéré comme une des oeuvres les plus marquantes de notre époque” ; “un mythe littéraire en soi” ; “traduit en plus de trente langues” ; “vendus à plus de cinquante millions d’exemplaires dans le monde entier”.

have been influenced by Tolkien's writings. For instance, other depictions of dwarves as stout warriors versed in weaponry include the red and black dwarves from the now-acclaimed series *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Lewis, 2000), or, more recently, Senshi and Namari from the more recent manga series *Delicious in Dungeon* (Kui, 2017).

Apart from these similarities, we notice that "epic trilogy format" and the "sword and sorcery action/adventure story" mentioned by Stableford may also originate from *The Lord of the Rings*' success: the cycle spans over three books, *The Fellowship of the Rings*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*. By contrast, when it comes to the organization of the *Earthsea* series, Le Guin has expressed both her awareness of Tolkien's influence and her willingness to transcend it:

The reason people don't believe that I didn't plan a trilogy from the start is that fantasy now suffers from endemic trilogitis (or the even more serious form of the disease, incurable seriesism). Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is largely responsible for this epidemic, since its six books were printed in three volumes, a trilogy. (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 282)

Furthermore, the *Lord of the Rings*, due to its "sword and sorcery" aspects, features iconic feats of both armed combat and magic. The Battle of Helm's Deep, with its vivid descriptions, found in *The Two Towers*, is one such example:

Then at last an answer came: a storm of arrows met them, and a hail of stones. They wavered, broke, and fled back; and then charged again, broke and charged again; and each time, like the incoming sea, they halted at a higher point. Again trumpets rang, and a press of roaring men leaped forth. (Tolkien, *The Two Towers* 695)

As far as magic is concerned, Gandalf's confrontation with the monstrous Balrog ends with a spectacular display of sorcery:

'You cannot pass!' he said. With a bound the Balrog leaped full upon the bridge. Its whip whirled and hissed[...]. At that moment Gandalf lifted his staff, and crying aloud he smote the bridge before him. The staff broke asunder and fell from his hand. A blinding sheet of white flame sprang up. The bridge cracked. Right at the Balrog's feet it broke, and the stone upon which it stood crashed into the gulf, while the rest remained, poised, quivering like a tongue of rock thrust out into emptiness. With a terrible cry the Balrog fell forward, and its shadow plunged down and vanished. (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 431)

We recall that Le Guin, when talking about the archetypal wizards she wished to emancipate herself from, cited "Merlin and Gandalf" as the only two mages present in popular culture. Up to this point, we have seen how Ged subverts the "old men, peaked hats, white beards" (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 155) criteria, through his initial youth and his dynamic arcs, during which the reader can observe this growth. This initial subversion lead us to wonder: how does Le Guin distance herself from works like *The Lord of the Ring*, which has become a staple for the fantasy genre? How does she avoid falling into

“commodified fantasy” and prove herself a “great storyteller”, rather than the mere copy of one who already exists?

## II.2.b. The contrasting universes of Earthsea and Middle-Earth

This sub-section will thus be dedicated to the differences between *Earthsea* and *The Lord of the Rings*, whose main tropes are now used in several works of fantasy. Some of these differences have already been brushed upon in earlier sections of this paper. For instance, Le Guin’s refusal to depict humanoid species other than humans contrast with Tolkien’s elves, hobbits, and dwarves, who each have strong racial traits associated with them. Again, as seen above, dwarves are almost all brutish and content to live in their mountains, and most hobbits share an easygoing approach towards life. Other obvious contrasts include the fictional worlds themselves, which are thankfully illustrated through maps present in each tome of both series: Middle-Earth is shown to be a Europe-based continent (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 535), with the sea being found in the West and the East consisting of desolate lands, including the terrifying “Mordor”, where the protagonist Frodo and his companions must destroy the One Ring. On the other hand, *Earthsea*, as the name suggests, is both terrestrial and marine, and the archipelago has a strong sailing culture. Ships thus appear in each book of the trilogy, and are even granted the honor of serving as chapter titles in some cases: “The Shadow” (25) refers both to the embarkation that leads Ged to Roke, and to the transitory chapter between his tutelage under Ogion and that under the Masters of the School ; “The Dolphin” is the vessel used by Arren on which Tenar and Tehanu embark. Furthermore, Le Guin herself states that “delicate medieval persons on twee islands with castles with pointy towers had nothing to do with [her] earthy, salty Earthsea” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 6). By contrast, the maritime section of Middle-Earth, as its continent-based name suggests, is seldom explored in *The Lord of the Rings*, and the most memorable example of a sailing excursion is to be found with of Frodo’s final journey, as he is emotionally and mentally “wounded” from an injury that “will never truly heal” (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 1342), and thus opts to sail “to the Havens” (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 1346). These “Undying Lands”, which appear as otherworldly due to their association with the elves and their afterlife, are “removed for ever from the circles of the world” (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 1357), and the sea thus serves the role of an uncrossable border, rather than a realm to explore in itself as it is the case in *Earthsea*.

Another particular issue is ethnicity, which is a contentious topic in Tolkienist studies. Scholar Helen Young argues that “*Lord of the Rings* and Middle Earth are structurally racist,

but because Tolkien doesn't appear to have been personally an extremist, that racism is denied, ignored, and dismissed". Furthermore, she claims that such ideas "got built into the conventions of High Fantasy" and "contemporary popular culture", due to the fact that "race is objectively real rather than socially constructed" (Young) in both *The Lord of the Rings* and several other works of fantasy, as seen in the various examples already mentioned. Nevertheless, research highlighting evidence of Tolkien's anti-racism, or at the very least absence of racism in his works, also abounds. For instance, fantasy specialist Dimitra Fimi discusses the different applications of the term "race" depending on one's temporal point of view: "When Tolkien started composing his mythology, it was still entirely legitimate and scientifically acceptable to divide humankind into races with fixed physical characteristics and mental abilities". This is not to say, of course, that Tolkien himself supported such ideas, and the author makes a point to clarify that she studies here the "views about 'race' during Tolkien's lifetime (Fimi 132), not necessarily those he shares. However, she also notes that The Elves' supremacy over the other anthropomorphic Middle-earth beings is taken for granted", "their awe-inspiring and even supernatural presence is constantly underlined", and that the Elves cannot be described as a 'naturally' higher race in the nineteenth-century sense of the term. They are, strictly speaking, by nature not comparable to Men, because their main difference to Men is spiritual" (Fimi 142). Nevertheless, drawing from the contents of his letters, she adds that "Tolkien was fully aware of the political developments in Germany at the time and strongly objected to the ideological propaganda associated with Aryanism" and that he considered Nazi antisemitic theories, supposedly rooted in rationality, to be "wholly pernicious and unscientific" (Fimi 136).

Overall, the question of race in Tolkien's works is a complex topic, and it has already garnered much scholarly attention, but my aim here is not to delve into its details, but rather to highlight the contentious nature of this aspect of Tolkien's work. The aforementioned works, as well as *Tolkien, Race and Racism in Middle Earth* (Stuart, 2022), or *Myth, Late Roman History, and Multiculturalism in Tolkien's Middle-Earth* (Straubhaar, 2004), for instance, provide insightful lines of thought on the matter. Still, we can notice some dangerous associations between skin color, morality, and narrative importance in the trilogy. For instance, the firmly heroic protagonist Aragorn is described as having "a pale stern face" with "a pair of keen grey eyes" (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 205), while geographically othered populations are portrayed under a rather negative light: the wild Easterlings or the cruel Haradrim" (Tolkien, *The Two Towers* 886) from the South are among the many enemies of the western Fellowship of the Ring. The Haradrim, in particular, are described as a

warmongering people and are allied with the Dark Lord Sauron all while being said to have “swarthy” skin (Tolkien, *The Two Towers* 863). Furthermore, this process of othering, on the scales of geography, appearance, and morality, is further heightened and even tainted with dehumanization, since the warriors of “Far Harad” are “black men like half-trolls with white eyes and red tongues” (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 1107). Apart from these instances, the skin color of other characters are seldom mentioned, and could theoretically be up to the interpretation of the reader. Nevertheless, due to the West-centric aesthetics of the cycle, most extratextual apparitions of its characters depict them as white. The most glaring example, as well as the most famous, would be the film adaptation of the cycle, which also takes the form of a trilogy, and which features exclusively white actors portraying white characters, such as Elijah Wood as Frodo or Cate Blanchett as Lady Galadriel (*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Rings*). More recently, some depictions of the characters exploit Tolkien’s lack of skin color mentions in order to subvert the race-related tropes of the genre, as well as its overwhelming presence of white characters. The fantasy card game *Magic: The Gathering* (Garfield), created in 1993 and published by Wizards of the Coast, in an expansion centered around Middle Earth, opts to portray the aforementioned Lady Galadriel as a black woman<sup>34</sup>, and even Aragorn, whom Tolkien describes as “pale”, appears as a black man<sup>35</sup>.

Meanwhile, Le Guin’s world strongly contrasts with that of Tolkien on this aspect. We have already seen that most stories of *Earthsea* focus on characters of color, and that white-skinned people are not only a demographic minority, but also constitute a nation of barbaric and obscurantist Kargs. Furthermore, she avoided the “colorblind” approach used by Tolkien as she gave the reader precise descriptions about many of her characters’ skin color. Again, quoting from earlier examples, there is the “red-brown like Ged and [his classmate] Jasper and most folk of the Archipelago” (44)”, and Tenar is called the “White Lady” (509) due to her fair complexion. As she explains in the afterword of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, this clarification is firmly intentional, although she also makes the conscious choice to omit Ged’s skin color in the first few pages of the novel, as seen when she expresses the transgressive intentions behind her story:

Its subversive elements attracted little attention, no doubt because I was deliberately sneaky about them. A great many white readers in 1967 were not ready to accept a brown-skinned

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34 As seen in her card (Galadriel of Lothlorien) in the official database of the *Magic: The Gathering* website, accessible here: <https://gatherer.wizards.com/Pages/Card/Details.aspx?multiverseid=617819>. Accessed May 1<sup>st</sup> 2024.

35 As seen in his card (Aragorn, King of Gondor) in the official database of the *Magic: The Gathering* website, accessible here: <https://gatherer.wizards.com/Pages/Card/Details.aspx?multiverseid=620675>. Accessed May 1<sup>st</sup> 2024.

hero. But they weren't expecting one. I didn't make an issue of it, and you have to be well into the book before you realize that Ged, like most of the characters, isn't white. (157)

Still, despite Le Guin's precise descriptions and willingness to challenge the overwhelmingly white majority of white fantasy protagonists, extratextual portrayals of the islanders rarely respected her vision. To quote her words about various book covers of the series, "Earthsea was bathed in bleach" (6). Although we will dedicate a later section to the treatment of skin color in supplementary material, the miniseries and movie adaptations of *Earthsea* can already be mentioned again and contrasted with the extratextual portrayals of *The Lord of the Rings*, due to the similar "bleaching" process of its characters, the most jarring case being Ged himself.

### II.2.c. The pair Serret and Galadriel: two variations of the archetype of the sorceress

Although the comparative analysis above is broad and non-exhaustive, I hope to have highlighted with enough precision the parallels between *Earthsea* and *The Lord of the Rings*, whether through the differences between the two works or their similarities. Indeed, despite the disparities I have highlighted, both cycles deviate from the genre's emphasis on combat and place adventure itself under the spotlight, as well as character development. Just as Le Guin's protagonists travel around the islands and oceans of the archipelago, the quest to destroy the ring takes Frodo and his companions through a variety of landscapes within Middle-Earth, from the "golden" floor and "silver" pillars of the forest of Lothlorien, or the grandiose city of Minas Tirith, "built on seven levels, each delved into the hill, and about each was set a wall, and in each wall was a gate" (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 983). Tenar goes from a cruel and ignorant priestess who sentences three prisoners to starvation as she commands "Let them not bring any more food or water" (203) to a patient and knowledgeable woman who takes Tehanu under her wing ; Frodo is a naive hobbit who is "quite happy and [does] not worry much about the future" (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 56) at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*, and, again, his adventure ends with him shell-shocked, "wounded" in a state that "will never truly heal" (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 1342).

My aim here is to go beyond such broad comparisons and to analyze jointly two characters, each one from a different cycle: The sorceress Serret from *Earthsea* and the elven ruler Galadriel from *The Lord of the Rings*. First of all, both characters stand apart due to their gender, especially in comparison with the other characters of the tomes they appear in. Indeed, apart from Arwen, another elf, Galadriel stands as the only major female character in

*The Fellowship of the Ring*, a particularity which has led to several attacks regarding Tolkien's treatment of women in his writings: "For years, Tolkien has been criticized, attacked, explained, forgiven, and mainly misunderstood when it comes to the matter of women" (Michel 56). In a similar fashion, Serret, "who both as girl and woman betrays Ged" (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 157), in the author's words, also distinguishes herself as a rare female presence in *A Wizard of Earthsea* as well as within the world and places explored in the first tome of the series: she first appears in the early pages of the novel as "the daughter of the Lord of Re Albi", and while Ged has at first "a desire to please her, to win her admiration" (28) Ogion advises Ged to stay far away from her, as she is "half a witch already" (31). As I will explain afterwards, she continues to inspire such paradoxical feelings as an adult. Hence, whether it is through disdain or fascination, the male characters of *Earthsea* perceive Serret solely through the lens of her gender, more specifically how she is seen as the "woman of" the Lord of O, defined by her relationship with a man, supporting the choice of analyzing Serret and Galadriel through their status as female practitioners of magic and how they subvert the expectations thrust upon them by both the other characters and the readers.

Indeed, apart from their presence in an otherwise almost-exclusively masculine story, the most crucial similarity shared by the two enchantresses lies in their introductory passages and how they are first perceived by both the narrative voice and the other characters present. At first, Galadriel is always announced jointly with her male companion Celeborn the wise, and the two are always referred to as "Celeborn and Galadriel" (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 488), the Lord before his Lady. Furthermore, her outward presence and interventions are seemingly lessened, as her partner is the one who takes on a speaking role, while Galadriel is silent at first: "the Lord welcomed [Frodo] in his own tongue. The Lady Galadriel said no word but looked long upon his face" (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 461). One must also make note of the emphasis on her appearance and physical beauty, as Frodo perceives her as "tall beyond measurement, and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful" (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 476), and as the dwarf Gimli requests a part of her body when asked what gift he desires, namely "a single strand of [Galadriel's] hair, which surpasses the gold of the earth as the stars surpass the gems of the mine]" (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 490).

Similarly, while Serret is no longer the mere "daughter of the Lord of Re Albi" in her second appearance, she is at first referred to as the "Lady of the Keep", who must submit to the authority of her companion Bendersk, "Lord and Inheritor of the Terrenon" (111). Just like

Galadriel, her beauty, akin to the “white new moon” (105) strikes both readers and characters, and she is directly compared to the Lady of O, who had previously charmed the male students of Roke: “For such a one”, Vetch says to Ged, “I could work vast enchantments” (54). Her attractiveness even seems to have supernatural properties, as it later “[confuses Ged’s] mind” (107), similarly to Galadriel’s mystical allure which entrances the companions of the Fellowship.

Hence, both characters seem to align with the way women are portrayed in fantasy according to Hans Joachim Alpers, that is to say “exceedingly beautiful women (by preference queens, princesses, daughters of other VIPs)” (Alpers et al. 25) whose beauty stands as their most defining trait. Nevertheless, both works subvert these expectations, in both differing and similar manners. Indeed, in addition to the way Serret and Galadriel are introduced, their association with subtle forms of authority and divination and more particularly the words employed to refer to such powers are almost identical, which can make one wonder if Le Guin drew inspiration from Tolkien’s enchantress to write her own sorceress. Firstly, Galadriel, despite her lessened importance in her first apparition, has the honor of having a chapter dedicated to her, “The Mirror of Galadriel”, in which she uses the eponymous artifact to show Frodo his fate:

Many things I can command the Mirror to reveal, [...] and to some I can show what they desire to see. But the Mirror will also show things unbidden, and those are often stranger and more profitable than things which we wish to behold. What you will see, if you leave the Mirror work, I cannot tell. For it shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be. But which it is that he sees, even the wisest cannot always tell. Do you wish to look? (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 470–71)

Galadriel’s mystical and quiet authority, as shown in Frodo’s aforementioned perception of her as “terrible and worshipful”, can easily be compared with Serret’s behavior towards Ged. Not only is her commanding presence noticeable through her gaze that “[pierces Ged] so that he [trembles] as if with cold” (111), her association with artifacts that reveal the past, present, and future reinforces the parallels between her and Galadriel. As seen in her words about the magical stone of her castle, the Terrenon:

It was made when the world itself was made, and will endure until the end of the world. Time is nothing to it. If you lay your hand upon it and ask a question of it, it will answer, according to the power that is in you. It has a voice, if you know how to listen. It will speak of things that were, and are, and will be. It told of your coming, long before you came to this land. Will you ask a question of it now? (109).

When looking at the two previous passages, one cannot ignore the numerous similarities between the two magicians’ shared lexical fields of time, potentiality, and magic, as well as their inquisitive manners of speech, due to both of their speeches ending in questions about the protagonists’ desires. Nevertheless, such similarities only serve to

heighten how sharply the two women contrast one another, especially regarding the traditional archetype of the sorceress.

We have already alluded to the Arthurian cycle's codifying influence on the fantasy's genre, due to its emphasis on epic quests, and impressive feats of both magic and armed combat. As Carolyne Larrington argues, many of the women appearing in Arthurian texts practice magic, and these sorceresses share many similarities while also sharply contrasting one another:

“Enchantresses are not witches; they are sexually attractive women who employ their magic for their own ends, not in the service of Satan. Always alluring, intelligent and independent, sometimes they support the aims of Arthurian chivalry, at other times they can be hostile and petty-minded” (Larrington 2)

The “alluring, intelligent, and independent” characteristics of Serret and Galadriel have already been explored, but the duality proposed by Larrington provides an interesting angle of analysis for the two characters. The Lady of Lothlorien can clearly be seen as a member of the first category, since she supports the Fellowship through the guidance she offers to Frodo as well as the gifts she bestows upon him and his companions, such as a sheath “overlaid with a tracery of flowers and leaves wrought of silver and gold” for the warrior Aragorn or “earth from [her] orchard” (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 488–89) for the gardener Sam. This status as a gift-bestower makes her similar to the Arthurian Lady of the Lake, who entrusts the sword Excalibur to Arthur, as seen in *La Morte d'Arthur*: “That is the Lady of the Lake, said Merlin; and within that lake is a rock, and therein is as fair a place as any on earth, and richly beseen; and this damosel will come to you anon, and then speak ye fair to her that she will give you that sword” (Malory 65–66). This is further heightened with Galadriel's elemental connection with water, as shown when she fills a “basin of silver” with “water from [a] stream” (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 470) in order to create the Mirror of Galadriel, or that the gift-giving ceremony seen above occurs by the water, which “[glitters] with silver” (Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring* 491). All in all, Galadriel mostly “[wields] conventionally feminine powers”, impressive but mostly “mysterious, hidden under the eaves of the woods of Lorien” (Miller 146) and usually supportive in nature, akin to the Arthurian Lady who is equally hidden under the billows of her lake.

These traits make the contrast with Serret even more striking, as the latter is more in line with the “hostile and petty-minded” variation of enchantress proposed by Larrington, more particularly “the falsehood of Morgan Le Fay” (Malory 123), the most well-known Arthurian sorceress, whose moral compass often varies from source to source. Still, just as

Morgan is unfaithful towards her husband King Uriens in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, manipulating Accolon “as a paramour” (Malory 118), so is Serret referred to as a “disloyal wife” by Benderesk as she tries to “trick both [Ged] and [her husband]” (113) in the hopes to seize the powers of the Terrenon for herself. Besides her treachery and ambition, her practice of magic greatly differs from that of Galadriel, or even the other wizards of *Earthsea*. We have seen that the most commonly used spells in the archipelago are utilitarian in nature, dedicated to shaping the wind or producing light, and yet, akin to Morgan Le Fay who proves herself to be “a great clerk of necromancy” (Malory 35), Serret employs surprisingly offensive magic as she “[runs] hot lead in the marrow” of the bones of two guards who stand in her way, leaving them “crouched down to the ground, writhing” (114).

Serret’s magic thus serves as a foil to Galadriel’s powers and motifs not only in their purpose, but also in their elemental associations: her heat-centered witchcraft, similar to fire, is the complete opposite of her counterpart’s affinity with water. In the section dedicated to the gender-based segregation in *The Tombs of Atuan*, we have studied the earth and air’s respective associations with femininity and masculinity, as part of the yin and yang duality. It may also be added that fire and water fall under a similar division, as “the active can be represented by the elements of air and fire and the passive by water and earth” (Cooper 14).

To conclude on Galadriel and Serret, the characteristics shared by both sorceresses create a strong link between the two, and the many parallels may lead us to interpret the Lady of O as an intentional foil to the Lady of Lothlorien. Le Guin therefore challenges the precedent set by Galadriel by making her own enchantress a selfish yet independent female practitioner of magic, who in turn transgresses several gender-based norms both within and without the universe of *Earthsea*, whether it is through her actions or the symbolism behind her powers. Nevertheless, both sorceresses’ traits and role can be traced back to the mythological archetype of the Arthurian enchantress, whose variants are also numerous, as highlighted by Carolyne Larrington.

Overall, Le Guin is able to reference, exploit, play with, and subvert the themes, motifs, and tropes laid down by Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, and, in doing so, shows that her novels fit into the notions of transmission and transgression. The tremendous impact of Tolkien’s “great book” does not deter her from writing her own original fantasy story and from shaping the genre in her own way. Furthermore, this comparative analysis has revealed that both works are part of larger stream of literary connections, embodying Le Guin’s statement regarding the “great river from sources high in the mountains of Myth” (Le Guin,

*The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 156), which constitutes the flow of literature and the various interactions between texts through time and space: in this case, as seen above, and despite *The Lord of the Rings*'s status as a pioneer of fantasy, it has been shown that even this canonical work draws inspiration from *Le Morte d'Arthur*, and by extension, from the Arthurian myths and their resort to magic, heroism, and mystery. All of these characteristics, as I will explore in the following section, contribute to making fantasy stories such as *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Earthsea Cycle* invitations to daydreaming and bewilderment, as their readers are led to transcend the limits of reality and imagine entirely new worlds to be explored.

### II.3. The fantasy genre as an ode to daydreaming and imagination

In order to tackle the final part of this section dedicated to the uses of fantasy, we must first quote, again, Brian Stableford's *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature*. In his introduction, Stableford highlights the negative prejudice on the genre under study in modern society:

Any dalliance with “fantasy” in the Chaucerian sense tends to be regarded as self-indulgent folly, whether it is a purely psychological phenomenon (a fanciful aspect of “daydreaming”) or a literary one. This attitude is peculiar, if not paradoxical. There is no thought without fantasy, and the faculty of fantasizing may well be the evolutionary *raison d'être* of consciousness—and yet, the notion of “fantasy” comes ready tainted with implications of unworthiness, of a failure of some alleged duty of the human mind to concentrate on the realities of existence. (Stableford, *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature* xxxv)

Fortunately, despite such pejorative opinions, various scholars have also pointed out the tremendous potential and variety of uses for the genre, apart from mere escapism. Of course, one cannot dismiss entirely the short-term benefits of escapism either: the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien himself, argues that the term “escapism” should not be used in a negative light, as it is one of the inherent qualities of the genre:

Though fairy-stories are of course by no means the only medium of Escape, they are today one of the most obvious and (to some) outrageous forms of 'escapist' literature; and it is thus reasonable to attach to a consideration of them some considerations of this term 'escape\*' in criticism generally. I have claimed that Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which 'Escape\*' is now so often used: a tone for which the uses of the word outside literary criticism give no warrant at all. (Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories* 69)

The danger regarding this aspect lies rather in the overindulgence of escapism, as well as considering it to be its sole function. Yet, as pointed out above, studies highlighting its many other uses abound, and “A Case for Fantasy”, for instance, points out that “good fantasy encourages imagination and creativity. [...] Fantasy literature tells of the rearranging of real qualities, develops the idea and sense of the absurd, and allows the mind to try out new combinations of information and events in a non-threatening form” (Poskanzer 473–74).

Ursula Le Guin herself defends similar positions in the collection *The Language of the Night*, especially in the essay “Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons” which has already been cited in the introduction of this thesis. Hence, apart from the aforementioned passage where she notes the seemingly paradoxical nature of fantasy, which is “true”, but not “factual” (Le Guin and Wood 40), she also remarks that something “goes very deep in the American character: moral disapproval of fantasy, a disapproval so intense, and often so aggressive, that

I cannot help but see it as arising, fundamentally, from fear.” (Le Guin and Wood 34-35). Given that the author believes that “the power of imagination” is a crucial “human” and “humane” component of life, literature, and more specifically fantasy (Le Guin and Wood 39-40), I will attempt to showcase how the *Earthsea* cycle serves as an embodiment of such values, advocating for the free use of imagination and the refusal of the reactionary American “fear” of dragons.

### II.3.a. The magic of imagination, at a crossroads between art and science

First of all, the most visible instance of Le Guin’s commitment to the stimulation and nurturing of imagination, and freedom as a whole, lies again in her own words. The introductory quote which can be found at the very beginning of this paper, for instance, accurately summarizes the author’s ideals and what *Earthsea* represents: “To be free, after all, is not to be undisciplined. I should say that the discipline of the imagination may in fact be the essential method or technique of both art and science” (Le Guin and Wood 36–37). In order to be understood wholly, this quote must be completed with the following passage, where Le Guin clarifies the implications of this statement: “To discipline something, in the proper sense of the word, does not mean to repress it, but to train it – to encourage it to grow, and act, and be fruitful, whether it is a peach tree or a human mind” (Le Guin and Wood 37).

Hence, the key elements to keep in mind here are the interpretation of imagination as a skill that must be both unshackled and trained, and a nuanced concept which does not fully consist of relentless daydreaming, but also carries elements of a “method or technique”, which can be applied to both “art and science”. Le Guin’s vision of the creative aspect of fantasy thus carries core notions that have already been explored in earlier sections: ambivalence, balance, and the blurring of rigid dichotomies.

For instance, parallels between sorcery and art, as well as praises of creativity and spontaneity, are rather numerous in the *Earthsea* cycle, fitting Le Guin’s nuanced interpretation of imagination. For instance, in *The Farthest Shore*, when the world starts “[losing] the arts of wizardry” (305) as a result of Cob’s transgressions, arts and craftsmanship are equally impacted. For example, the villagers of Lorbanery complain that “there’s no more proper singing” and that “nothing goes right anymore” (374), but the most noteworthy example of this association occurs a few pages later, with the mad dyer, whom Ged refers to as “a woman of power” “a woman of art and skill, using her craft for the making of the beautiful, a proud woman, and honorable”, although she is “no mere witch or potion-maker”

(378). Just like mages, the woman places emphasis on the mastery of language and links it to the mastery of her own craft, as seen in her wailing monologue:

I lost [my power]. I lost all the things I knew, all the words and names. They came by little strings like spiderwebs out of my eyes and mouth. There is a hole in the world, and the light is running out of it. And the words go with the light. Did you know that? My son sits staring all day at the dark, looking for the hole in the world. He says he would see better if he were blind. He has lost his hand as a dyer. We were the Dyers of Lorbanery. Look!" [...] [The paint] never comes off the skin, [...] "but the mind washes clean. It won't hold the colors. (377)

Ultimately, it should also be noted that these parallels come full circle since, just as craftsmanship is akin to sorcery, so are the wizards' mastery of the arcane referred to as artistic endeavors, or at the very least handicraft practices: "My arts do not avail me" (323), Ged says, as Archmage of Roke, "where all high arts are taught" (32).

Furthermore, the way magic is treated in *Earthsea* echoes Immanuel Kant's interpretation of art as the product of an innate genial gift and with originality as "its primary characteristic": "Genius is the talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art. Since the talent, as an inborn productive faculty of the artist, itself belongs to nature, this could also be expressed thus: "Genius is the inborn predisposition of the mind (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art" (Kant 186). At the very beginning of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ged exhibits impressive untrained potential in magic, to the point that he is "very quick at it" (17) and his aunt is even "a little afraid of his strength" (16). Moreover, Ged displays his creative and original approach of magic several times throughout the novels, such as when he conjures a dense fog to protect his hometown in his early years, "blurring the world till a man could hardly see his own hands before him" (20), or when he appears as a "radiant man", "clothed in [the] majesty of light", (356) to intimidate a group of slavers and save Arren. Finally, as Archmage, Ged certainly stands out as an "exemplary" sorcerer, another crucial trait according to Kant: "while [true artistic creations are not] the result of imitation, they must yet serve others in that way, i.e., as a standard or a rule for judging." (Kant 186–87).

Still, the mastery of the arcane is not entirely reliant on innate gifts, just as Kant's interpretation of art is challenged by other philosophers. Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, strongly opposed the Kantian perception of art as the product of genius:

Genius too does nothing except learn first how to lay bricks then how to build, except continually seek for material and continually form itself around it. Every activity of man is amazingly complicated, not only that of the genius: but none is a "miracle". [...] Do not talk about giftedness, inborn talents! One can name great men of all kinds who were very little gifted. They acquired greatness, became "geniuses" (as we put it). (Nietzsche 86)

We can thus apply Nietzsche's warnings against gifts being taken for granted, and his deconstruction of Kantian definitions of art, to Ursula Le Guin's work and its depiction of

magic. Of course, we cannot entirely dismiss Ged's tremendous natural talent, but it would be detrimental to him and to the author to completely ignore how he "acquired greatness", in Nietzsche's words, and even Ged himself therefore claims that he has "both skill and power" (45) when Jasper taunts him. His long apprenticeship is condensed in two chapters of *A Wizard of Earthsea*: "Ged's first months at Roke went by fast, full of passions and wonders" (49). Over these few pages, Ged proves himself to be a fast learner, as "at all these studies Ged was apt, and within a month was bettering lads who had been a year at Roke before him" (47). Still, it should be noted that he does not accomplish this on his own, and that Ged greatly benefited from the teachings of his Masters, which brings us again to the social dimension of learning and the notion of transmission. Throughout his apprenticeship, following Nietzschean principles, Ged also "learns first how to lay bricks then how to build" before becoming an experienced sorcerer, studiously honing his skills and applying the lessons he is granted by his mentors: Master Chanter teaches him the "Deeds of heroes and the Lays of Wisdom", Master Hand the "properties of things that grow" (47), and even the young Master Changer begins "to do more than merely tell him of [the great mysteries of transformation], "drawn on by the boy's sureness of understanding", "little by little". Hence, Ged's rise from a novice to an accomplished mage, although supported by his innate magical abilities, is slow and steady, since it is mostly the result of cooperation, hard work, and academic dedication.

*Earthsea's* portrayal of sorcery can then be seen as an amalgamation of rigorous applications of knowledge and out-of-the-box thinking. As seen above, Roke's academic dimension, the relationship between arcane power and language, as well as the important duties thrust upon mages, such as "the equilibrium of life and death" (460), bring to mind the stakes that accompany modern technological developments. Indeed, similar comparisons have already been made, such as in *Orlando: A Biography*, (Woolf, 2018) in which the eponymous protagonist perceives an elevator as a technological prowess so important that it borders on mysticism: "The very fabric of life now, she thought as she rose, is magic. In the eighteenth century we knew how everything was done; but here I rise through the air; I listen to voices in America; I see men flying — but how it's done I can't even begin to wonder. So my belief in magic returns" (Woolf 169). Essays and works of fiction warning against the dangers of unrestrained technical progress abound, such as the aforementioned examples of *Frankenstein* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, in which both protagonists' scientific breakthroughs lead to the losses of several innocent lives. Likewise, unforeseen consequences may occur due to seemingly wholly positive technical progress, including, for instance, the pollution caused by motorized means of transportation, which induces "Lung irritation,

decreased lung function and increased chance of respiratory infection” (Emden and Murphy 8). In the archipelago, “rain on Roke may be drought in Osskil [...] and a calm in the East Reach may be storm and ruin in the West, unless you know what you are about” (57).

In the end, the very presence of magic, marvelous in essence, and the myriad of journeys *Earthsea* characters go on, serve as a testament to Le Guin’s dedication to imagination. We have also seen that the potency of one’s magic is proportional to both one’s knowledge of names and its rigorous applications, but also one’s imagination, in accordance with the author’s ideals. Although the story itself weaves sorcery, science, and art in both its Kantian and Nietzschean interpretations, it is again the author herself who best embodies the merging of these many concepts: quoting once more the general introduction for the cycle where Le Guin describes how she envisions worldbuilding:

A navigator needs a chart. As my characters sailed about, I needed to know how far apart the islands lay and in which direction one from another. The first book followed a kind of spiral from Gont to Roke and on round again to Astowell, all within the Archipelago. For the second book, the map gave me the Kargish land of Atuan. And after that, there was always an island or place I hadn’t visited yet, and a story in it. (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 5)

Although planning and “charts” are involved, Le Guin’s writing style is heavily reliant on her unbridled imagination and spontaneity, which may sometimes lead to chaotic, albeit fruitful results, as she humorously reports in the essay “Dreams Must Explain Themselves” from *The Language of the Night*:

I do have notebooks, in which I worry at plot ideas as if they were old bones [...]. Also, during the writing of a piece, I often make notes concerning a character, particularly if it’s a novel. My memory is very poor and if there’s something I just noticed about the character, but this is not the right point to put it into the book, then I make a note for future reference. Something like:

W. d not appr H’s ing. —Repr!!

Then I lose the note. (Le Guin and Wood 43)

### II.3.b. Childlike wonder transcending age-related barriers

In *The Language of the Night*, then, Le Guin explicitly conveys her desire to instill the joys of imagination in her young readership, sarcastically claiming that “if you truly eradicated [imagination] in a child, that child would grow up to be an eggplant” (Le Guin and Wood 37). Yet, should daydreaming and fantasy be solely the privilege of the youth? “Fairy stories are for kids” (Le Guin and Wood 35), Le Guin quotes as one of the most common misconceptions related to the genre. Of course, based on what we have seen so far, it comes as no surprise that the author stands firmly against such fixed delimitations, as shown a few

pages later: although she believes that we should “trust our children”, but also that “maturity is not an outgrowing, but a growing up”, “that all the best faculties of a mature human being exist in the child, and that if these faculties are encouraged in youth they will act well and wisely in the adult, but if they are repressed and denied in the child they will stunt and cripple the adult personality” (Le Guin and Wood 39–40). Since the essay “Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?” was published in 1974, two years after *The Farthest Shore*, one might wonder how such ideals are communicated in the three books before the publication of the essay, as well as in *Tehanu*, which was published fifteen years later.

An important aspect of this objective is the “*Bildungcycle*” dimension of the series that I have introduced in the early pages of this paper. Although the reader is able to watch Ged grow from a young shepherd to a middle-aged humble farmer, the titular wizard of Earthsea remains an imaginative and passionate soul throughout both years and tomes, perfectly embodying the idea that “an adult is not a dead child, but a child who survived” (Le Guin and Wood 39). This is not to say that his personality is wholly static over the course of the novels: we have seen, for instance, how he lets go of his hubristic tendencies after acknowledging the mistakes he made in the first tome, and later defeats the sorcerer Cob who was equally consumed by his ambition. Still, even though Ged grows immensely throughout the books, some aspects of his personality remain. As a child, in the early chapters of the first tome, he is said to be “loud and proud and full of temper” (13), and he also has a mischievous streak, as he recklessly abuses “the rhyme that gave him power over the goats” (14) and Ogion, who knew him as a child, later claims that “there was always some hawk in him” (551). Finally, in his adolescence, he is also torn between contrasting desires, two paths to explore his potential: “he yearned to stay with Ogion, to go wandering through the forests with him, long and far, learning how to be silent. Yet other cravings were in him that would not be stilled, the wish for glory, the will to act” (32).

As an adult, though Ged has matured, he did not “outgrow” the passions and playfulness of his youth, and the child in him can thus be said to have “survived”. In *The Tombs of Atuan*, when Tenar asks him to do a magic trick, he opts to marvel her, to dazzle her with light while she has only known darkness beforehand:

The wool rustled strangely as she moved. She looked down at herself, and stood up in startlement. The heavy black she had worn for years was gone; her dress was of turquoise colored silk, bright and soft as the evening sky. It belled out full from her hips, and all the skirt was embroidered with thin silver threads and seed pearls and tiny crumbs of crystal, so that it glittered softly, like rain in April.[...]

“It’s like a gown I saw a princess wear once, at the Feast of Sunreturn in the New Palace in Havnor,” he said, looking at it with satisfaction. “You told me to show you something worth seeing. I show you yourself. (250-251)

During his time at Roke, Ged is already an expert in such “tricks of illusion” (47), but he quickly thinks of them as “childish”, not only because they pale in comparison with “the true arts of Summoning and Change” (48), but also because they are the specialty of his rival Jasper, who is able to effortlessly conjure “a little thread of water” (45). As a result, as we have seen earlier, Ged becomes overcome with envy and magic becomes for him a tool to prove his worth, and more importantly, to crush Jasper. We can interpret this behavior as Ged’s attempt to “outgrow” what he deems to be childish spells, especially since the first major magic he casts, at a young age to boot, is the illusion of a dense fog in “Warriors in the Mist”. Although this progression is not as obvious as the lessons about the balance of the world he learns and internalizes, the evolution of his magic, in both nature and purpose, is rather striking, as the illusory dress he conjures for Tenar is meant to make her happy, rather than elevate his own status. One could argue of course, that by the time of *The Tombs of Atuan*, Ged is still a young adult, and may thus naturally retain some of his childlike wonder. Nevertheless, in *The Farthest Shore*, the now-Archmage still displays his playfulness and his dedication to use magic to bring happiness, as seen in how Arren perceives him:

There was indeed a kind of lightheartedness in him now, a pure pleasure in his skill, which Arren, seeing him always so careful, had not guessed. The mind of the magician takes delight in tricks; a mage is a trickster. Sparrowhawk’s disguise in Hort Town, which has so troubled Arren, had been a game to him” (420).

This aspect of his personality is further reinforced by Ged’s claim that he “[desires] nothing beyond [his] art” (420), therefore firmly dedicating his life to the practice that best embodies the limitless potential of imagination.

Several studies often praise the benefits of such childlike wonder and playfulness, highlighting that “children who had high levels of play with literacy materials in preschool were likely to be spontaneous readers of place signs and have greater pretend verbalizations in a “town-building” activity at age 5” (Bergen 7), for instance. When it comes to adults, however, the positive aspects of such activities are seldom studied, as if playful childhood and serious adulthood were two diametrically opposed worlds. Sociologist Roger Callois, for instance, highlights the social dimension of games, claiming that they “suggest company, rather than solitude”<sup>36</sup> (Callois 71), even when adults are involved, but imagination mostly appears as a tool to bring more entertainment, rather than to expand one’s mind and creativity through play. By contrast, research regarding the fantasy and science fiction genres argue

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36 My translation: Original text: “les différentes catégories de jeu [...] supposent, non la solitude, mais la compagnie.”

even adults indulge in forms of “make-believe” or “pretend play”. Such aspects of literature transcend the texts themselves, including the cycle of *Earthsea*, and border on the themes that will be tackled in the third section of this paper, namely the publishing sphere and its strategies. Indeed, according to writer Madeline L’Engle, “Only recently have fantasy and science fiction been published with age levels in mind, and readers seem to be ignoring such labels. Science fiction and fantasy appeal to a certain kind of mind and not to specific stages of development” (L’Engle 102). Similar to Le Guin, L’Engle, claims that fiction and reality are intertwined and that “any story, whether myth, fantasy, fairy tale, or science fiction, explores and moves beyond daily concerns to wonder. A story, instead of taking a child away from real life, prepares him to live in real life with courage and expectancy” (L’Engle 105)”. According to her, although “[children] are aware of what most adults have forgotten” (L’Engle 110), not everyone has outgrown their sense of childlike wonder: “The teacher who, with the child, enjoys this stretching (and the stretching of muscles causes healthy growing pains) is aware of human potential. Such a teacher does not neglect the child who does not “fit in” or who cannot come to grips with the curriculum” (L’Engle 105).

In *Tehanu*, Ged also lets go of the curriculum as his status as Archmage, leader of the most important educational institution in the archipelago, is revoked along with his magical ability. We have seen earlier that the fourth tome “[*Tehanu*] seems hardly to be a children's story at all. (Hatfield 54), due to its shift in tone and stakes when compared with the three previous tomes, as well as the advanced age of both Ged and Tenar. Nevertheless, the novel is still reliant on magic, journeys, dragons, and “cosmic questions and riddles” (L’Engle 102), marvelous elements that are inherent to the fantasy genre. Such grandiose characteristics that stimulate the imagination of the reader include Kalessin and Therru’s presence, or the nature of the primary antagonist Aspen, an evil wizard who is, incidentally, “hired from the school of Roke” (537). Furthermore, as this sub-section is centered around Ged’s passionate and creative dispositions, it must be highlighted that such aspects of his personality are also put to the test in *Tehanu*. Magic, as it has been explained earlier, can be associated with imagination itself, and it is Ged’s most precious possession. Hence, when he loses his gift, he finds himself at his darkest hour, pushes Tenar away, and becomes a “goatherd sick with grief and shame” (666). It is only after coming to terms that his powers being gone do not equate with his life becoming meaningless that Ged recovers his playful side, as seen when he sarcastically echoes the time he stabbed Tenar’s opponent with a pitchfork:

He stroked [Tenar’s] hair, and seemed to be considering.

"I suppose we might," he said. "There were a couple of families up there sheep-herding, above Lissu. But then comes the winter..."

"Maybe some farmer would take us on. I know the work-and sheep-and you know goats-and you're quick at everything-"

"Useful with pitchforks," he murmured, and got a little sob of a laugh from her. (675)

Finally, as explored in earlier sections, Ged truly comes to accept his loss at the end of the novel, when he, Tenar, and Therru, are set on living a humble life together. Despite the apparent simplicity of this prospect, it is said that there will be "new things to be learned, no doubt" (691), therefore satisfying Ged's thirst for knowledge and novelty. Besides, as seen in his cheerful interactions with the other characters, the novel ends on the confirmation that imagination and true magic are nurtured by social bonds and transmission.

Therefore, although the *Earthsea* cycle undoubtedly belongs to the fantasy tradition, and could even be considered an essential work of the genre, Ursula Le Guin is still able to exploit and transgress such norms, as her unique world and the evolution of her characters can attest. She also sets new precedents for what is expected of the genre as a whole, and dismisses several preconceived ideas associated with it, as her *Earthsea* series is an ode to imagination for all age categories. As she writes in the introduction of the complete edition of the cycle, "The notion that fantasy is only for the immature rises from an obstinate misunderstanding of both maturity and the imagination" (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 9). As announced in the analysis of Madeleine L'Engle's statements on imagination, however, it is impossible to truly tackle the author's relationship with the fantasy genre without stepping outside the cycle itself and delving into the details of its publishing history, its readers and their own impact on the novels. It is also necessary to tackle the various adaptations that were born out of Ursula Le Guin's most famous series.

### III) Beyond the novel, delving into cultural studies: the role of time and of various actors in the evolution of *Earthsea*

Literary analysis, especially when a text is as fruitful as the *Earthsea* cycle, may lead us to restrict ourselves to the texts themselves, and forget that any work of art exists within a context which it also affects. Hence, the *International Encyclopedia of Information and Library Science* refers to the word “book” as such:

The book has come to have an iconic status, having become a symbol for religious traditions (the ‘people of the book’) and even for civilization itself. In the late twentieth century, the word was used in such contexts as ‘talking book’ (sound recordings to provide services for the visually impaired) and electronic books. These multimedia formats are fundamentally different objects from the book, but the use of the word in this context reinforces its perceived cultural significance. (Feather and Sturges 41)

Although, through its iconicity, the very concept of “book” transcends its physical aspects, as it is able to exist in the intangible digital plane, it cannot escape its status as a financial product, which must submit to certain market criteria and rules:

Although publishers and editors are deeply involved in the transmission of knowledge and perform invaluable gatekeeping functions, publishing has been, is, and is likely to remain a business, albeit a business that supplies readers with printed or electronic books that educate, inform, and entertain. The business’s basic goal is to satisfy the wants and needs of readers, end- users to our colleagues in economics. If these goals are fulfilled, ideas circulate in the market-place of ideas, profits are made, taxes are rendered, and editors and publishers (and indeed everyone else in this rather complex value chain) are paid a decent wage. (Greco 2–3)

The importance of the publishing sphere is such that Le Guin often references the book industry in her various works’ prefaces. For instance, in the introduction of the cycle as a whole, she claims that “in the PR-driven world of publishing, [addressing a work of fantasy to children and adults alike] constituted a real risk, and [that she is] very grateful to the editors who took that risk with [her]” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 9). Similarly, although in a more scathing fashion, she shows herself to be conscious about the money-driven aspect of the literary sphere:

Competition for big advances, the best-seller mentality, a kind of degraded professionalism, the reduction of book to product or commodity, the replacement of editors by PR teams, has demoralized many writers in the past decade, and science fiction writers seem particularly vulnerable. (Le Guin and Wood 4)

Along with the publishing world, books could not exist without their readers, since according to reception theorist Wolfgang Iser, “the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence” (Iser, “The Reading Process” 279). In the context of this paper, it is also important to note that Iser highlights the plurality of readers as well as their active role:

The reader often feels involved in events which, at the time of reading, seem real to him, even though in fact they are very far from his own reality. The fact that completely different readers can be differently affected by the "reality" of a particular text is ample evidence of the degree to which literary texts transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written. The literary text activates our faculties, enabling us to recreate our own world it presents. The product of this creative activity is what we might call the virtual dimension of the text, which endows it with its reality. (Iser, "The Reading Process" 283)

Evidence of Le Guin's awareness of the importance of readers abounds in several of her essays and prefaces, and I echo the words employed in the introduction to elevate this consciousness to a strong faith in her readership. Again, in *The Language of the Night*, Le Guin argues that "we should trust our children", who "do not confuse reality and fantasy", "but also know that books about unicorns, if they are good books, are good books" (Le Guin and Wood 40). Just before the aforementioned quote regarding the PR-driven aspect of publishing, she also acknowledges that readers form a diverse and dynamic whole, and that reading is an activity which involves conscious choices from its participants: "So, as my protagonists grew older, I trusted my younger readers to follow them or not, as and when they chose" (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 9).

All of these examples aim to display how Ursula Le Guin, and, to some extent, the cycle of *Earthsea*, are not mere cogs in the complex machine of the literary world. Instead, the author displays a keen awareness of its workings and of its actors. Hence, it is relevant to delve into the relationships between author, publishers and readers, and how *Earthsea* is affected by these links. Furthermore, given the plurality of participants involved, all with different interests, can we expect conflicts to arise? And, if so, how are they resolved?

### III.1. The publishing history of *Earthsea*

Before tackling the impact of the series after it was published, including its various adaptations, it is important to study how it was written and published, especially given the serial nature of the work under study. Not counting *Tales from Earthsea* and *The Other Wind*, both published in 2001, the rest of the cycle was published between 1968 and 1990, a large period of time during which *Earthsea*, as well as its author, may have evolved tremendously and faced several obstacles inherent to the "PR-driven world of publishing".

#### III.1.a. Transcending both time and text

Indeed, I have not yet exploited the collection *The Legacies of Ursula Le Guin: Science, Fiction, Ethics* to its full extent. I have already briefly mentioned the essay "The Earthsea Books as a Helix of Time". As mentioned earlier, the essay highlights Le Guin's

tendency to “[return] to and [rewrite] her own narratives”. As an example of this “returning by moving forward, progressing by turning back” (Stone et al. 97), Katie Stone analyzes the parallels between two tomes of the series. On the one hand, *The Farthest Shore*’s “central crisis” of “individual moral choice” and the “doomy intimations of ecosystem destruction” is caused by Cob’s meddling with the barrier between life and death. On the other hand, *The Other Wind*’s reveals that “the wall of stones which divides the dead from the living was made by the Rune Makers” and that “the archipelegan understanding of Earthsea’s making is one which excludes dragons as animals and which disregards Kargish culture and beliefs” (Stone et al. 98–101). To sum it up, what was thought to be a universal, natural delimitation between two realms, to the point that Cob’s transgression was seen as going against natural order, is ultimately revealed by the narrative, and, by extension, Le Guin, to be the work of a select group of individuals, therefore completely subverting what was established in *The Farthest Shore*.

Other instances of Le Guin returning to previous works in order to provide new reading experiences for her audience occur in her collection of essays which aims at bringing her novels under a new light, as she explains in the preface of *The Language of the Night*. Indeed, she informs the reader that the 1989 edition of the collection presents several changes, mainly those related to “the so-called “generic pronoun” *he*. It has been changed, [...] to *they*, *she*, *one*, *I*, *you* or *we*. This is, of course, a political change [...]” which was, in the words of the author, born of “a moral and intellectual urgency” (Le Guin and Wood 1–2).

I could also mention the 1976 essay “Is Gender Necessary” (Le Guin and Wood 155), also present in the collection, in which she tackles, among others, the notions of androgyny and sexuality present in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Le Guin, 1994), which causes her “intense embarrassment”, as “within a few years [she] came to disagree completely with some of the things [she] said in it” (Le Guin and Wood 2). Still, I believe the examples already mentioned suffice to demonstrate Le Guin’s perception of her own writings and literature as a whole: she is not simply content with publishing her works and abandoning them to the interpretations of the readers. Instead, she makes an effort to actualize the format, as read in the inclusive change of pronouns within *The Language of the Night*, as well as the topics tackled by her fiction and non-fiction. In the case of *Earthsea*, such involvement on the author’s part is supported by the serial format, as well as the various subsequent editions which may include introductions, prefaces, and afterwords that grant the reader a glimpse into Le Guin’s thinking process.

As Katie Stone explains in “The Earthsea Books as a Helix of Time”, the “returning by moving forward, progressing by turning back” pattern that occurs between the third and fifth tome brings the events of *The Farthest Shore* under a whole new light, but there are several other examples of such parallels between the novels that constitute *Earthsea*. Although such phenomenon is unavoidable due to the serial format of the books under study, it is still relevant to put Le Guin’s treatment of the cycle in relation with Gérard Genette’s concept of transtextuality: in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, he coins the concept and defines it as “the textual transcendence of the text”, that is to say “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (Genette 1). The notion of transfictionality is also noteworthy: Richard Saint-Gelais, in *Fictions transfuges*, defines it as “the phenomenon by which at least two texts, whether written by the same author or not, relate jointly to the same fiction, whether it is through reusing characters, extending a previous plot, or sharing a fictional universe”<sup>37</sup> (Saint-Gelais 7). All three criteria perfectly apply to the cycle, since it follows Ged’s rise and fall and his adventures through the archipelago of Earthsea. The relationship between *Earthsea* and these notions should be nuanced, however, as its serial format makes the validation of such criteria a given. Saint-Gelais himself argues that “a series is clearly transfictional although the first episode cannot be said to be the hypotext<sup>38</sup> from which the other are derived”<sup>39</sup> (Saint-Gelais 10). However, *Fictions transfuges* is especially relevant to this paper due to how it analyzes the prefix “trans-”, found in both “transtextuality and transfictionality”. The prefix, as we recall, forms the very basis of this thesis’ argument:

By definition, transfictionality implies a crossing, hence both a rupture and a contact, with the latter mending what the former has separated, although never quite perfectly. But what exactly must be crossed? The boundaries of the book? Those of an author’s work? And how, to extend the metaphor, can we make sure that the fictional elements made it safely to the harbor?<sup>40</sup> (Saint-Gelais 23–24)

As Saint-Gelais’ sailing-related metaphor seems to perfectly align with the themes and setting of *Earthsea*, it appears imperative to study how Ursula Le Guin indirectly answers the aforementioned questions. In the afterword of *The Tombs of Atuan*, she shows that even the

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37 My translation. Original text: “Le phénomène par lequel au moins deux textes, du même auteur ou non, se rapportent conjointement à une même fiction, que ce soit par reprise de personnages, prolongement d’une intrigue préalable ou partage d’univers fictionnel”.

38 In the contexts of transtextuality and transfictionality, an earlier text which leads to, through parody, seriality, among others, the creation of other texts, known as hypertexts.

39 My translation. Original text: “Une série est clairement transfictionnelle sans que l’on puisse dire du premier épisode qu’il serait l’hypotexte dont les autres seraient dérivés”.

40 My translation. Original text: “La transfictionnalité implique par définition une traversée, et donc à la fois une rupture et un contact, le second venant suturer, mais jamais parfaitement, ce que la première a séparé. Mais que faut-il traverser au juste ? Les frontières du livre ? Celles de l’œuvre d’un auteur ? Et comment, pour filer la métaphore, s’assurer que les éléments fictifs sont arrivés indemnes à bon port ?”

author of a work is not immune to being unable to identify a work of fiction as a “hypotext from which [other] texts are derived”, to quote Saint-Gelais. Le Guin describes the thinking process behind this second tome as an impulse, a desire to feature “a change of gender”, effectively making Tenar a foil, a mirrored version of Ged:

Ged would play a part in it, but the person whose story it was would be a girl. A girl who lived far from the cities of the Archipelago, in a remote desert land. A girl who could not seek power, as young Ged could, or find training in the use of it as he did, but who had power forced upon her. A girl whose name was not given to her by a kind teacher, but taken from her by a masked executioner. The boy Ged, offered wisdom, refused it through his own pride and willfulness; the girl Tenar, given the arbitrary power of a goddess, was taught nothing about living her life as a human being. (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 282)

This change of gender, as seen in the introduction of the cycle, finds its roots in Ursula’s experience as a reader, more specifically a female reader of male-dominated stories:

Why was I, a woman, writing almost entirely about what men did? Why because I was a reader who read, loved, and learned from the books my culture provided me; and they were almost entirely about what men did. The women in them were seen in relation to men, essentially having no existence unrelated to male existence. I knew what men did, in books, and how one wrote about them. But when it came to what women did, or how to write about it, all I had to call on was my own experiences—uncertified, unapproved by the great Consensus of Criticism, lacking the imprimatur of the Canon of Literature, piping up solo against the universally dominant and almost unison chorus of the voices of men talking about men. (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 8)

Hence, many parallels can be drawn between Le Guin’s voluntary contrast between the first two books of the series and the prefix “trans-”, according to the interpretation of Genette and Saint-Gelais. The idea of transmission is clearly visible here, since Ursula Le Guin weaves together her dual identity as a reader and as writer, the cycle and her readership. This form of transmission is also tainted with transgressive aspects, since the author challenges the norms of “the books [her] culture provided [her]” in her childhood and brings a voluntarily discordant voice to the chorus of “men talking about men”, as seen in her tackling gender-based discrimination in *Earthsea*, as well as with her complex female characters who are just as important to the plot as her male heroes. For instance, as explored in her comparison with Lady Galadriel, the sorceress Serret, underestimated by Ged and her Lord, proves herself to be a force to be reckoned with, and almost strays Ged away from his quest, offering him to become “mightier than all men, a king among men” (112), therefore exploiting the fact that men are mostly concerned “about what men did”, as Le Guin puts it. This transgression, this crossing, is also related to the setting of both novels. Although Ged travels through most of *Earthsea* in the first tome, the “remote desert land” of Atuan that Le Guin mentions in the afterword of the second book is not seen by Ged nor by the readers. Therefore, the location of *The Tombs of Atuan* effectively transcends “the boundaries of the book”, in Saint-Gelais’ words, as more elements of the map of Earthsea are charted in this

second entry. Furthermore, when Tenar and Ged's actions lead to "the earthquake, the anger of the dark" (281) which destroys the titular Tombs which served a symbol of Tenar's restrained upbringing, it could be argued that another boundary is shattered, since this destruction paves the way for the writing of other entries for the series, as well as a new beginning for Tenar, who is finally able to see the "crowded, many-coloured shore and the palaces of high towers" (300) of Havnor.

This intertwining of transmission and transgression also extends to the other novels of the cycle. Although *The Tombs of Atuan* strongly contrasts *A Wizard of Earthsea* and could be seen as more progressive in the depiction of its characters, Le Guin still admits that the second tome has its own limits: "I had had no problem in 1970 writing out of my own experience of what it is to be a girl-child, an adolescent girl. What I couldn't do then, and hadn't yet done in 1990, was write a fully mature woman at the center of a novel" (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 8). *Tehanu*, which features Tenar as an older, more experienced widow who faces different struggles from her younger self, manages to achieve what *The Tombs of Atuan* could not, despite its already transgressive aspects. This echo-like relationship between the novels is acknowledged by the author and embodies once again the "helical" aspect of the series introduced by Katie Stone, as she explains her initial thoughts for *Tehanu*'s synopsis: "The central character was Tenar again, of course, to balance it out. I knew she hadn't stayed and studied wizardry with Ogion, but had married a farmer and had children, and that the story was going to bring her and Ged back together" (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 7).

The notions of balance and reunion, as well as the rotation between male and female protagonists for the first four books, bring to mind the image of an artfully-woven thread. Each book both echoes and contrasts its predecessors, while at the same time providing new elements for the following entries to explore. Furthermore, each volume reflects both Le Guin's opinions and their evolutions, as well as the state of the collective mind at the time of writing, which she seeks to challenge through her writings. In addition, in light the author's concern for and faith in her readers, we can partially answer Saint-Gelais' question "What must be crossed?", when it comes to transtextuality, although perhaps only as far as Ursula Le Guin and *Earthsea* are concerned. Ultimately, the answer must comprise several other words containing the "trans-" prefix, since the author exploits the serial format of *Earthsea* to turn it into a dynamic whole and to constantly transform as an author. As the themes tackled in her books evolve alongside her and in accordance with the literary landscapes of the time, the novels form a thread of opinions and values that the author attempts to instill in her readers.

Due to the progressive nature of such ideas, such as the advocacy for women's better accessibility to high forms of knowledge, the notions of transmission and transgression are inevitably involved. Le Guin thus transcends, or "crosses", the "boundaries" of each book, as Saint-Gelais suggests, but also her own limits and those set by the writers that preceded her.

### III.1.b. To judge a book by its cover: the contrasting expectations held by the "PR-driven world of publishing", readers, and Ursula Le Guin

Although Le Guin is apt at crafting a relationship based on faith and empathy towards her readers, other instances of transmission do not go as smoothly. As reflected in the aforementioned quote, which I have used several times throughout this paper, Le Guin's ideals and values sometimes clashed with the "the reduction of book to product or commodity" (Le Guin and Wood 4). In fact, when explaining the reasons behind the more mature direction for *Tehanu*, which I have explored above, she claims the following: "Though *Tehanu* is named for the child character, neither it nor the two books after it are books "for children" or definable as "young adult." I had abandoned any attempt to suit my vision of Earthsea to a publisher's category or a critic's prejudice" (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 9). In *Tout n'est pas littérature !*, Bertrand Ferrier also tackles the complex relations between literature and the publishing sphere, and even wonders on the back cover if "the quest for profit will destroy literature"<sup>41</sup>. In his introduction, he also advocates for the appellation "literature for the youth", rather than "youth literature" or "literature of youth", so as to convey the presence of an "expected audience unique to this production"<sup>42</sup> (Ferrier 15). This notion of expectation is especially relevant for this sub-section, and will be explored in further detail.

It is also important to recall the concept of "commodified fantasy", which I have mentioned in the comparative analysis between *The Lord of the Rings* and *Earthsea*. We recall her harsh criticism of this subgenre, which "takes no risks, [...] invents nothing, but imitates and trivializes" (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 638) the characteristics of fantasy. Rather than a mere detached writer's opinion about the current state of her field, this commodification seems to greatly shake the author to her core: "Fantasy is now a branch of the publishing industry, with many titles, many sequels, great expectations of monster successes and movie tie-ins. [...] Fantasy as an assembly-line commodity leaves me cold". (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 156). In the *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy*

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41 My translation. Original text: "la quête du profit ne va-t-elle pas détruire la littérature?"

42 My translation. Original text: "littérature pour la jeunesse"; "littérature jeunesse"; "littérature de la jeunesse"; "un horizon de réception spécifique" à cette production.

*Literature*, commodified fantasy is also said to be reliant on its warped perception of children: “the [sword and sorcery adventure story dominates] the market place by sheer mass as well as sales potential; children’s fiction tends to employ simpler formulas but has reduced more subgenres to commodifiable entities” (Stableford, *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature* 84). The use of “simpler formulas” for a younger audience directly contrasts Le Guin’s high expectations and respect for children who read fantasy, and more specifically those who read her works, as exemplified repeatedly throughout this paper, most notably in her “we should trust our children” (Le Guin and Wood 40) statement. She even argues that such tactics of simplification are testaments to their reader’s comprehension and cognitive skills: “What the commodifiers of fantasy count on and exploit is the insuperable imagination of the reader, child or adult, which gives even these dead things life” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 638). Hence, rather than numbing their creative abilities with narratives devoid of complexity, she opts to fully embrace the capacity of children to learn and to adapt to novelty: “So, as my protagonists grew older, I trusted my younger readers to follow them or not, as and when they chose”. (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 9).

Works such as *Earthsea*, then, are directly impacted by the expectations publishers and authors, including Ursula Le Guin, place on their readers. In addition, Ferrier’s mention of an “expected audience”, or “*horizon de réception*” in French, lead us to put in relation the cycle with Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss’ respective theories of the “implied reader” and the “horizon of expectations”. The former refers to a “‘hypothetical’ reader, upon whom all possible actualizations of the text may be projected” (Iser, *The Act of Reading* 27). Said reader exists solely in the writer’s mind, although this definition may also be applied to the publishing sphere:

“The concept of the implied reader is therefore a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him: this concept prestructures the role to be assumed by each recipient, and this holds true even when texts deliberately appear to ignore their possible recipient or actively exclude him. Thus the concept of the implied reader designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text. (Iser, *The Act of Reading* 34)

Meanwhile, the second notion, the concept of “horizon of expectations”, is related to “the triangle of author, work, and reading public”, in which “the latter is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions”, to the point that “the historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its audience” (Jauss and Benzinger 4). Said horizon then comprises “the expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, changed or just reproduced”, which differ depending on “the subjectivity of the interpretation and the taste of different readers or levels of readers” (Jauss and Benzinger 13).

When expectations and rules are subverted in some manner, the concept of “aesthetic distance” comes into play, which “is considered as the distance between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work, whose reception results in a “horizon change” because it negates familiar experience or articulates an experience for the first time” (Jauss and Benzinger 14).

To sum it up, Jauss’ “horizon of expectations” and Iser’s “implied reader” are to be understood jointly for this sub-section, since both the author and publisher, in a *mise en abyme* fashion, expect readers to have specific expectations about a work or a genre. The implied reader becomes an entity that must be considered during the processes of writing of publishing, which offers new reading experiences for the actual audience. In the afterword of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, we have seen that Le Guin displays how aware she is of what readers expect of a fantasy story, namely epic quests, wars with high stakes, and, of course, “old men, peaked hats, white beards” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 155). As such, many characteristics of *Earthsea* are said to willingly contrast such expectations, resulting in a stark “horizon change”, to borrow Jauss’ words: she admits that she was “deliberately sneaky” about Ged’s skin color, relying on the assumption that “a great many white readers in 1967 were not ready to accept a brown-skinned hero” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 157).

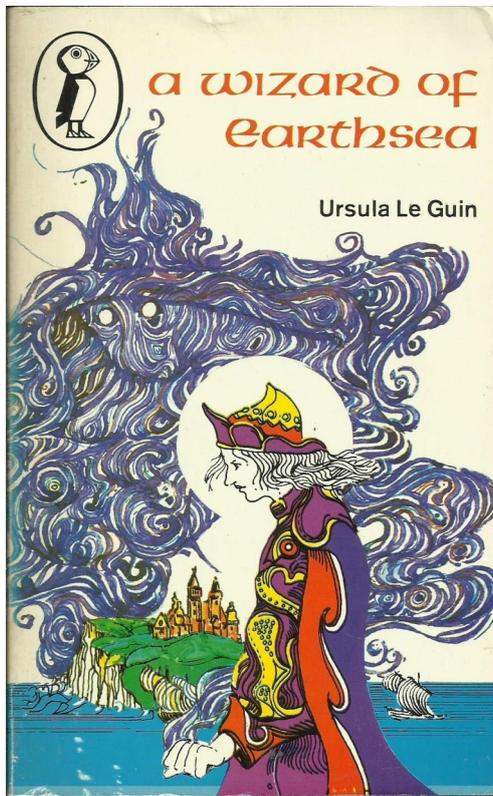
Only with the knowledge of her readership’s horizon of expectations can Le Guin allow herself to be “sneaky” about her subversive message, finding the perfect balance between subtlety and transgression. An intratextual example of Le Guin’s awareness of her readers’ knowledge can be found, for instance, in *The Tombs of Atuan*. Since the novel uses Tenar as its focalizer, the reader and the protagonist have access to different degrees of information. In the prologue, her parents call her “Tenar”, despite the fact that “[the cult of the Tombs is] coming to take her away” (173) soon, stripping their daughter of her identity in the process. In the following chapters, however, Tenar has completely forgotten about her early childhood, and only responds to the name “Arha”. As the author provides the readers with more information than she does with the protagonist, the themes of loss and memory, the core of this volume, are therefore emphasized. Likewise, she also relies on her readers’ knowledge of the previous tome during the first encounters between Tenar and Ged. Due to her upbringing, the priestess is wary of the mage, and the reader may also share her distress, if it was not for the few characteristics which clearly identify him as the protagonist of the previous tome. Due to the description of his face, “scarred in some way” (235), one can identify Ged’s most distinctive feature, his “scarred cheek” (82) mentioned several times

throughout the first tome, a consequence of his summoning of the Shadow. Since the reader, unlike Tenar, knows of Ged's heroic nature, they know the wizard of the labyrinth is to be trusted, despite the fact that neither Ged nor the narrative voice have explicitly disclosed his name.

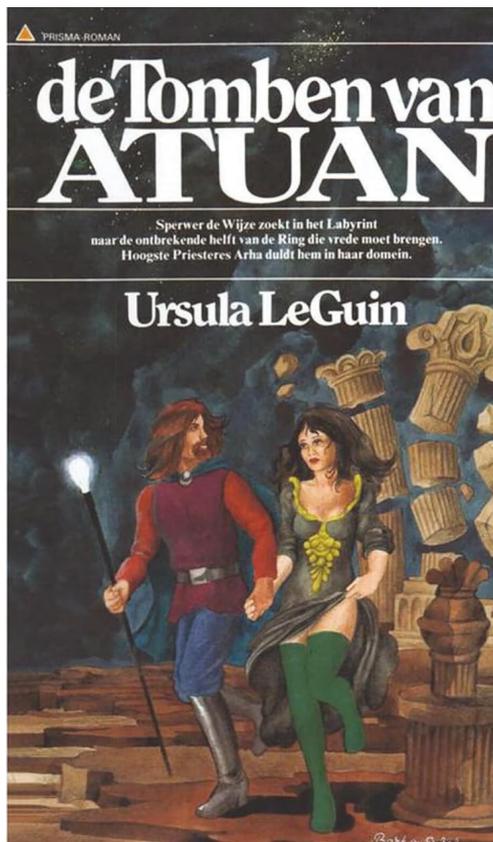
However, unfortunately for Ursula Le Guin, the publishing world's strategies did not always align with her wishes, and said tactics capitalized on other "horizon of expectations". In the introduction, the author therefore alludes to her lack of agency regarding one of the most important features of a book: its front cover:

"After Ruth's unique wraparound jacket for the first edition of *A Wizard of Earthsea*—with its splendidly stylized, copper-brown portrait face—cover art for the books mostly went out of my control. The results could be ghastly—the droopy, lily-white wizard of the first Puffin UK paperback; the silly man with sparks shooting out of his fingers that replaced him." (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 6).

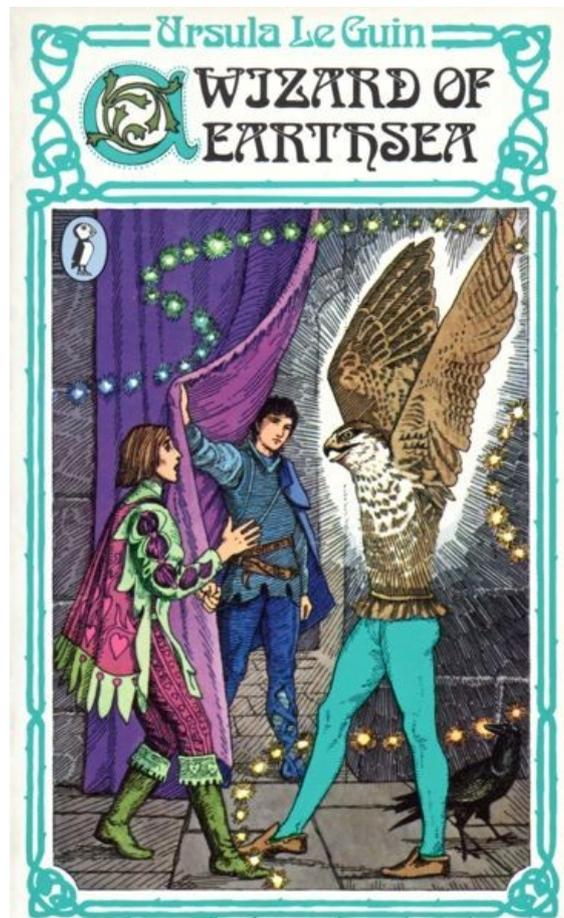
Due to this, as alluded to in the section dedicated to Le Guin's transgression of the fantasy genre's usual norms, her subversive statement "went almost unnoticed" (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 157). Indeed, as shown below the illustration for the 1974 Puffin Books edition that Le Guin mentions, features a scar-less wizard with white skin and fair hair, a complete opposite of Ged. Other noteworthy examples include: the 1974 Dutch Het Spectrum edition of *The Tombs of Atuan*, which depicts Ged as a white man sporting red hair and a mustache, as well as a supposedly teenage Tenar wearing thigh-high boots and a low-neckline dress complete with a slit, a stark contrast with the "heavy black" (250) woolen robe adorned with an equally "heavy collar" (241) described in the books; the 1975 Puffin Books edition of the first tome, where two unidentifiable white mages, although supposedly depictions of Ged and Vetch, are dressed in colorful outfits.



*Front cover of A Wizard of Earthsea, Le Guin, Ursula. Puffin Books, 1974. Illustration by Brian Hampton.*



*Front cover of de Tomben van Atuan, Le Guin, Ursula. Het Spectrum, 1974. Illustration by Bart van Erkel.*



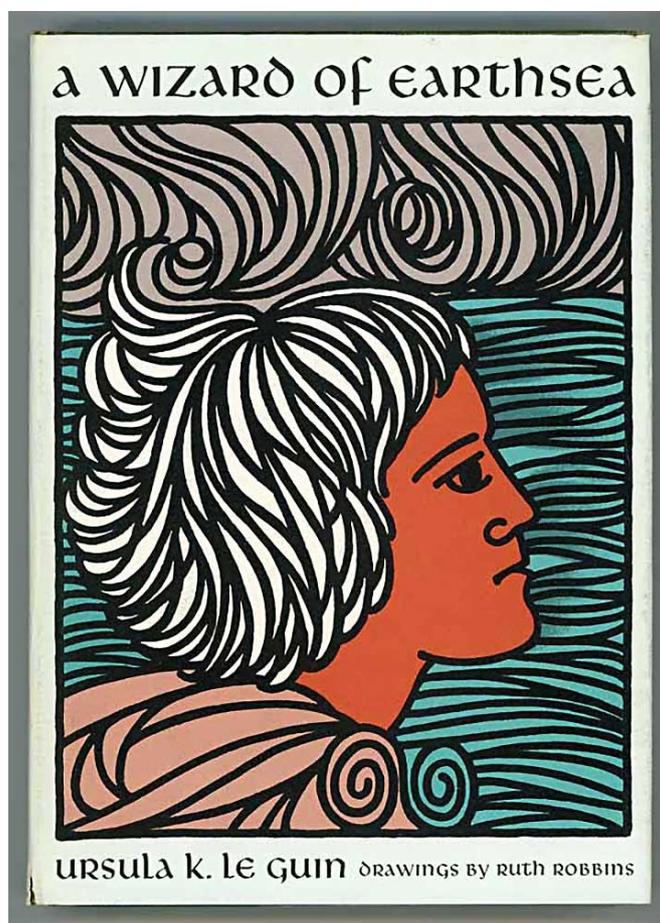
Front cover of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Le Guin, Ursula. Puffin Books, 1975.  
Illustration by David Smee.

Although the phenomenon usually applies to the film industry, the term “whitewashing” can appropriately be used to refer to the situation described above. Indeed, it is defined as “the practice of using only white actors, models, or performers, especially the practice of using a white actor to play a character who is not white”<sup>43</sup>. This is caused by “leukocentrism, a commercial determinism operating under the false belief that a film requires whitewashing to make it more profitable, universal, popular and socially meaningful”, a reasoning usually exerted by Hollywood, which perceives it as “a convenient conceptual convergence where past box-office accolades, profit-enhancing formulas and highly popular A-list stars all ‘naturalize’ whiteness as the common denominator that secures repeating financial returns on entertainment investment” (Magnan-Park 134). In the case of *Earthsea*, the publishers’ search for the “repeating financial returns” is noticeable through the use of white characters the various covers, a safer and more profitable strategy than Le Guin’s outwardly unconventional story which “didn’t follow the tradition” (Le Guin, *The Books of*

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43 According to the “whitewashing” entry on the Cambridge Dictionary website, accessible here: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/whitewashing>. Accessed May 25<sup>th</sup> 2024.

*Earthsea* [PDF Version] 157), as well as the “unique wraparound jacket for the first edition of *A Wizard of Earthsea*—with its splendidly stylized, copper-brown portrait face” mentioned earlier, an illustration by Ruth Robbins for the 1968 Parnassus Press edition of *A Wizard of Earthsea*.

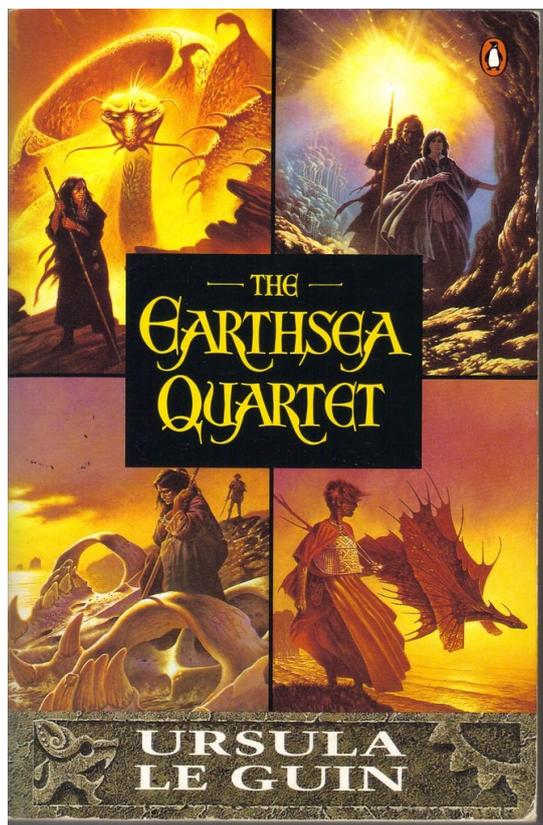


*Front cover of A Wizard of Earthsea, Le Guin, Ursula. Parnassus Press, 1968. Illustration by Ruth Robbins.*

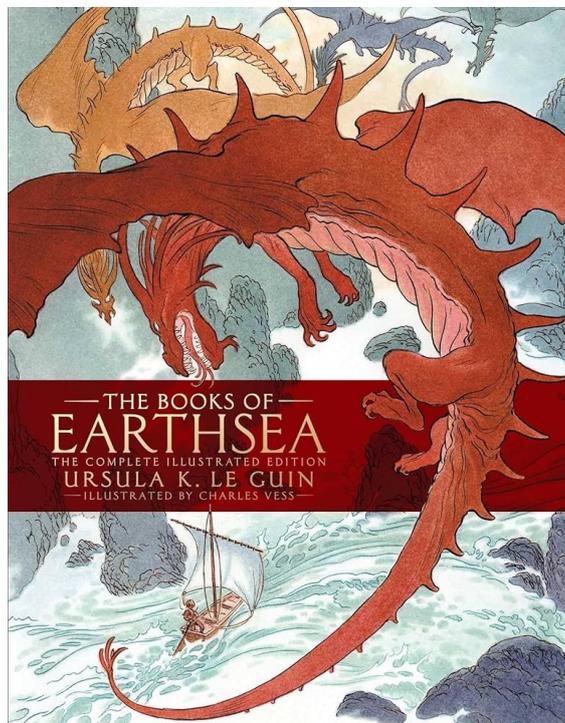
Apart from the protagonists’ skin color, Le Guin notes that other aspects of her story were not always conveyed by the illustrations on some front covers: “Some covers were quite pretty in themselves, but delicate medieval persons on twee islands with castles with pointy towers had nothing to do with my earthy, salty Earthsea” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 6). The 1974 and 1975 covers for the Puffin Books edition of the first tome present these characteristics, with such a castle being depicted on the former, while “delicate medieval persons” wearing ornate stockings and capes can be seen on the latter. Again, this reliance on medieval elements contrast strongly with Le Guin’s intentions and what is explicitly depicted in the cycle: as opposed to *The Lord of the Rings*, *Earthsea* does not take

place on a continent stuck in a medieval stasis, but rather an archipelago with only a small selection of temporal markers. Yet, the degree of technology of the setting, as seen with Ged's father being a "bronze-smith" (18) rather than an iron-smith, or the mention of "pottery and fine weaving and vessels of bronze and brass on carven shelves and chests" (145), seem to indicate that the series is set during the equivalent of the Bronze Age.

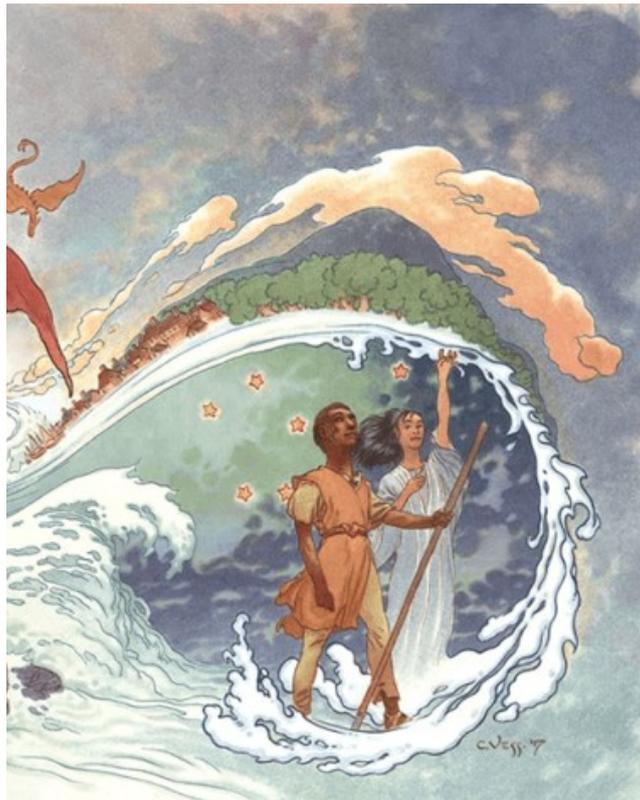
On a more positive note, recent editions of the cycle are generally more faithful to the author's wishes. For instance, the front cover of the edition under study, the 1993 Puffin Books version, is divided into four parts, and depicts characters from the first four books of the series. Although an orange-red coloration is employed here, Ged is still clearly identifiable as a person of color, especially when compared with Tenar, whose skin is much lighter. Other covers, such that of *The Complete Illustrated Edition* published by Gollancz, opt to forego detailed depictions of any character. In this case, the focal element of the cover is a group of dragons flying above a tumultuous sea and a boat steered by a small figure. Emphasis is therefore placed on the traditional elements of the fantasy genre and the epic dimension of the protagonist's quest, which are sure to draw in a child or teenager with a thirst for adventure. Furthermore, the nondescript representation of Ged actually aligns with Le Guin's aforementioned intention to be "sneaky" about the statement she wishes to make regarding her characters' skin color. The illustrator Charles Vess therefore manages to maintain the element of surprise and the goal of making the reader wait for the revelation that Ged is not white is still partially fulfilled. This is indeed only partial, since the illustration drawn by Charles Vess is actually a wrap-around cover. On the back cover, a reader turning around the book may find a drawing of Ged and Tenar who are surrounded by water and earth, and who are clearly depicted as dark-skinned and white respectively. Despite this, Vess' illustration differs from previous examples as it is the result of a collaboration between illustrator and author, rather than a forceful and one-sided relationship. In the words of Charles Vess himself: "I didn't want to do portraits. I wanted to focus on the environment, the landscape, the poetry of where [the characters] were. Ursula was quite happy about that" (Moher).



*Front cover of The Earthsea Quartet, Le Guin, Ursula. Puffin Books, 1993. Illustrations by David Bergen.*



*Front cover of The Books of Earthsea: The Complete Illustrated Edition, Le Guin, Ursula. Saga Press, 2018. Illustration by Charles Vess.*



*Back cover of The Books of Earthsea: The Complete Illustrated Edition. Le Guin Ursula. Safa Press 2018. Illustration by Charles Vess*

Throughout this sub-section, I have attempted to analyze several examples of processes that may occur before a work such as *Earthsea* reaches its readers. With the support of Genette and Saint-Gelais' theories, we have seen that transmission and transgression are involved on an internal, self-contained scale, given Ursula Le Guin's commitment to self-reinvention and exploitation of the connections between the several entries of the cycle. Nevertheless, "the triangle of author, work, and reading public" proposed by Jauss actually involves other actors, most importantly publishers, who may affect how a work is received by its audience. To sum it up rather abstractly, transmission therefore directly leads to transgression, and vice-versa: both parties may hold different expectations for the readers, as well as contrasting objectives when it comes to fulfill or subvert these prospects, which leads to conflicts of interest that provide new experiences for the readers.

## III.2. After the publication: the impact of *Earthsea* and its derivations

Indeed, when both author and publishers succeed in reaching their goals of making a work of fiction both profitable and committed to the ambitions of the author, a novel may be adapted on stage, on screen, or as a video game, among other supports. Thus, scholar Linda Hutcheon argues that “there is an obvious financial appeal to adaptation” and that even “nineteenth-century Italian composers of that notoriously expensive art form, opera, usually chose to adapt reliable—that is, already financially successful—stage plays or novels in order to avoid financial risks” (Hutcheon 5). In the case of *Earthsea*, two notable examples of adaptation stand out: the 2004 miniseries *Legend of Earthsea*, directed by Robert Lieberman, and the 2006 animated movie *Tales from Earthsea*, directed by Goro Miyazaki. By the time of these two adaptations, the success of the cycle is well established, since it has already been awarded, for instance, the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award in 1979 for *A Wizard of Earthsea*, or the Locus Award for Best Fantasy Novel in 1991 for *Tehanu*<sup>44</sup>. Furthermore, with such success, a strong involvement from readers, often resulting in the creation of “fandoms”, communities centered around “a particular star, celebrity, film, TV programme, band”, or, as far as this paper is concerned, a book series. The status of “fan” or “fandom” is both self-determined and attributed by external entities: “Fans find their identities wrapped up with the pleasures connected to popular culture. They inhabit social roles marked out as fandom” (Duffett 49). A fan of a specific work of fiction, then, may proudly refer to themselves as an aficionado of a medium, or their behavior may lead an observer to identify them as such. Some may even reject the label, as “such media enthusiasts may be ashamed to admit the direction or depth of their interest. They may love an object that is considered taboo (like porn), ‘uncool’ (like *Star Trek*) or just not usually seen by others as appropriate” (Duffett 66). The definitions and particularities of “fandom” will be explained and studied in further detail afterwards, as I will attempt to study how *Earthsea* was received by its readers and how they appropriate the cycle for themselves.

### III.2.a. A new vision for *Earthsea*: two faithful adaptations?

As seen in the previous sub-section, the relationship between Ursula Le Guin and the publishers of *Earthsea* was tense throughout the history of *Earthsea*, as the author was

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44 According the “Selected Awards and Honors” page on the official Ursula K. Le Guin website, accessible here: <https://www.ursulaklequin.com/awards-honors>. Accessed May 28<sup>th</sup> 2024.

deprived of her agency when it came to the illustrations found on the covers of several editions, resulting in visuals that differ completely from Le Guin's depiction of *Earthsea*. It may therefore be relevant to begin the analysis of the two *Earthsea* adaptations with the author's involvement in their creative process, especially when taking into account her negative opinion of the "many titles, many sequels, great expectations of monster successes and movie tie-ins" (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 156) which are staples of the current state of the fantasy genre.

Unfortunately, Le Guin's participation in the development of these adaptations was minimal at best. When it comes to the miniseries, director Robert Lieberman admitted that "Miss Le Guin was not involved in the development" but that an attempt was made to be "very, very honest to the books" (Le Guin, "A Reply to Some Statements Made by the Film-Makers of the *Earthsea* Miniseries Before It Was Shown"). Meanwhile, the author was slightly more involved in the development of the animated movie, as she received the synopsis of the film in advance (Le Guin, "Gedo Senki (Tales from *Earthsea*) Synopsis"), though Le Guin still warns the viewers of authors' lack of agency in the case of adaptations, including the 2006 *Tales of Earthsea* movie: "Please do not hold any writer except the script-writer responsible for anything in a film. Don't ask the book's author "Why did they... ?" She is wondering too" (Le Guin, "A First Response to 'Gedo Senki'").

As a foreword, to put it in a nutshell, both adaptations greatly differ from the original cycle written by Le Guin, in terms of plot, characters, and messages, due to the original author being put aside. In both cases, Le Guin delivered responses which can accurately be described as scathing, as she lamented the stark differences between her vision and those of the two directors involved. As her words mostly speak for themselves and cover many aspects of the miniseries and the movie, I will here attempt to briefly summarize Le Guin's statements, before completing with my own comparative analysis, with the support of Linda Hutcheon's words on adaptation studies. Indeed, Hutcheon highlights that "the idea of 'fidelity' to [a] prior text is often what drives any directly comparative method of study", although according to her "many and varied motives [exist] behind adaptation and few involve faithfulness" (Hutcheon xiii). Instead, "Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (Hutcheon 7). Still, an adaptation could alternatively be defined as "an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works" or "a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging". A few concepts can here be isolated due to their relevance regarding this sub-section: "transposition", "recognizable", and "appropriation/salvaging" (Hutcheon 8). Even though the two adaptations must therefore not be analyzed in terms of how accurately

they replicate the original cycle, Hutcheon's words provide the basis for a few guiding questions: is *Earthsea* "recognizable" in the miniseries of the adaptation? Which aspects of the cycle are appropriated, salvaged, or erased by the filmmakers, and what impact does each of these choices have?

The most striking difference between Le Guin's original work and the two adaptations lies in the treatment of its protagonists' skin color. In the case of the miniseries, out of the main characters, only Ogion, played by Danny Glover, is black. Most of the other characters, including the majority of the students of Roke, are played by white actors. Of course, Ged, "a boy with red-brown" skin in the book, is a "petulant white kid" (Le Guin, "A Whitewashed Earthsea"). The Ghibli movie is slightly more nuanced in that regard: although none of the characters are visibly dark-skinned, the most glaring examples being Ged and Arren, Le Guin acknowledges that cultural differences must be taken into account:

"The issue is different in Japan. I cannot address the issue of race in Japan because I know too little about it. But I know that an anime film runs smack into the almost immutable conventions of its genre. Most of the people in anime films look — to the American/European eye — white. I am told that the Japanese audience perceives them differently. I am told that they may perceive this Ged as darker than my eye does. I hope so. Most of the characters look white to me, but there is at least a nice variation of tans and beiges. (Le Guin, "A First Response to 'Gedo Senki'")

Still, the aforementioned term of "whitewashing" can accurately be applied to the situations under study, especially in the case of the miniseries, given that actual actors are involved. Therefore, although *Earthsea*'s financial and cultural success is already confirmed at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it seems that "'Hurts sales, hurts sales' is the mantra" (Le Guin, "A Whitewashed Earthsea"), just as it was the case for the front covers of the books.

The themes and morals that constitute the core of the cycle were also largely dismissed: regarding the movie, Le Guin considers that "the statements about life and death, the balance, etc., don't follow from character and action as they do in the books". In addition, she notes that evil has been comfortably externalized in a villain, the wizard Kumo/Cob, who can simply be killed, thus solving all problems" (Le Guin, "A First Response to 'Gedo Senki'"). Indeed, we recall that *The Farthest Shore*'s conclusion led the protagonists and the reader to reflect on death, and the ability to accept it as a part of life. In the movie, Cob similarly disrupts the world's balance through his attempts to gain immortality, and the message is seemingly maintained. However, after she is thought to have been killed by the sorcerer, Therru is revealed to be a dragon, resurrects, and transforms into her true form before burning Cob to ashes. In addition with the moral dichotomy mentioned above, the movie appears to end on the note that "good" individuals are allowed to transcend the cycle of

life and death and kill their opponents, while “evil” people cannot. Such a conclusion directly contradicts *The Farthest Shore*’s message, as well as that of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, in which Ged is confronted to the shadow within himself, rather than embodied by an external entity: “To be the man he can be, Ged has to find out who and what his real enemy is. [...] The discovery brings him victory, the kind of victory that isn’t the end of a battle but the beginning of a life” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 158). Overall, Le Guin’s words to Goro Miyazaki are once again the best way to summarize the situation: “It is not my book. It is your movie. It is a good movie.” (Le Guin, “A First Response to ‘Gedo Senki’”)

Meanwhile, the miniseries also earned itself harsh words from Le Guin due to its deviations from the author’s works. Her response could even be considered more mordant than the one mentioned above, as she bluntly expresses her desire “to curse the filmmakers, to mourn the chance lost” (Le Guin, “Frankenstein’s Earthsea”). As a brief summary, the miniseries’ plot is centered around evil and Kargish King Tygath’s plan to release the Nameless Ones and subsequently lead the world with their aid, rather than Ged’s own inner conflict. Although Ged’s shadow appears, the conflict it causes is much more physical, as the author highlights it: “in the first book, Ged meets his Shadow and they speak each other's true name, it's the climax of the book. In the film, the scene is a pointless wrestling match with a standard-issue monster. It makes no sense. How could it? The world, the events, the values of the film are arbitrary and incoherent.” (Le Guin, “Frankenstein’s Earthsea”). Finally, since the dark-aligned, desert-dwelling Kargs are the source of the conflict in the miniseries, and that they oppose light-aligned people who live in luscious green meadows, Le Guin points out how dangerous such associations can be due to how they could be interpreted:

In the books, the wizardry of the Archipelago and the ritualism of the Kargs are opposed and united, like the yang and yin. [...] This has absolutely nothing to do with "people who believe and people who do not believe." That terrible division into Believers and Unbelievers (itself a matter not of reason but of belief) is one which bedevils Christianity and Islam and drives their wars. (Le Guin, “A Reply to Some Statements Made by the Film-Makers of the Earthsea Miniseries Before It Was Shown”)

As war is heavily emphasized throughout the movie, given the numerous battle scenes which even include fireball-casting wizards, we can once again contrast this adaptation with Le Guin’s statements in the afterword of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, as she writes about the reductive simplicity of war as a narrative device:

There are no wars in Earthsea. [...] War as a moral metaphor is limited, limiting, and dangerous. By reducing the choices of action to “a war against” whatever-it-is, you divide the world into Me or Us (good) and Them or It (bad) and reduce the ethical complexity and moral richness of our life to Yes/No, On/Off. This is puerile, misleading, and degrading. (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 158)

In order to echo the previous comparison between the movie adaptation and the books, I will also end this one with an instance of Le Guin's dry wit: "I can only admire [executive producer Robert Halmi's] imagination, but I wish he'd left mine alone" (Le Guin, "A Reply to Some Statements Made by the Film-Makers of the *Earthsea* Miniseries Before It Was Shown").

As explained before, the goal of this sub-section is not to merely repeat Le Guin's words about the two *Earthsea* adaptations and a few insights of my own, though a summary of her opinion on the matter was necessary to pursue the analysis. I advise any reader who wishes to know more about the author's comparison between her original works, the miniseries, and the movie to consult in detail the articles I have partially quoted, as Le Guin's self-awareness and critical outlook shine through in all of these sources. Nevertheless, this is not to say her word as creator should be taken for granted. One could argue, as Roland Barthes does through his concept of "the death of the author", that is to say considering a work of fiction not as "a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Barthe 146). The interpretation of a text would therefore not be found in the words of the author in an afterword or a blog post, but rather in the reader, since "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthe 148). It is therefore necessary to remember Linda Hutcheon's words on adaptations and to nuance the idea that such transpositions must be completely "faithful" to the original source. I have deliberately used this adjective to introduce this subsection in order to answer the questions this word raises: although it may be irrelevant to judge the miniseries and the film solely on the basis of their faithfulness to the cycle, one must also keep in mind what is at stake when an element of a story is retained or deleted. In short, an adaptation should be analyzed as "a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary" (Hutcheon 9). Even Le Guin herself admits that expecting an adaptation to be a replica of the original work is unreasonable, and that changes are inevitable. "I knew some of the difficulties in carrying this story over to film. And some of the possibilities, too — the kind of thing a movie can do that a book can't" (Le Guin, "Frankenstein's *Earthsea*").

Therefore, it may be relevant to slightly nuance Le Guin's words in her responses. Some changes, such as the miniseries' emphasis on war and direct confrontations, may therefore be welcomed. After all, one of *The Lord of the Rings*'s most memorable passages is the Battle of Helm's Deep, with its "storm of arrows", its "press of roaring men", and its "trumpets" (Tolkien, *The Two Towers* 695), and the trilogy, as we recall, is nowadays hailed as

“a literary myth in itself” (Ferré 9). Still, it may also be argued that *Earthsea* is more than a merely enjoyable and well-written story about wizards traveling around an archipelago, as it also embodies the political statement she wished to make regarding the crushing majority of white fantasy protagonists. She therefore highlights how the question of representation may appear as an unimportant issue for white readers and viewers, and confronts such biased opinions:

*Oh, come on, it isn't real. It's just a fantasy. It's just a movie. It doesn't matter. It does matter. It matters a whole lot. I live in a racially bigoted country. From the start, I saw my Earthsea as a deliberate refusal to go along with the prejudice that sees white as the norm, and the fantasy tradition that accepts the prejudice. If you're white, ask a colored reader of fantasy whether it matters. Ask them how often they found themselves in fantasy books or movies when they were growing up, and how they felt about it. (Le Guin, “Frankenstein’s Earthsea”)*

In addition, although the author herself largely ignores it in her reactions to both adaptations, the movie and the miniseries thwart her attempts at portraying women in fantasy as something else than “tender beautiful females” (Alpers et al. 24) to be saved or possessed by male characters. For instance, throughout this paper, we have seen how she challenges male-dominated institutions of knowledge, and that her choice to have Tenar as a deuteragonist throughout the cycle stems from her desire to “to place [a] heroine in a situation that led her to question the nature and value of power itself” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 283). However, Ged stands as the primary protagonist of the miniseries, although Tenar still holds considerable narrative importance, as she knows the incantation to release the Nameless Ones. He also shares the role of main character with Arren in the animated movie. In both cases, emphasis is also placed on the romantic bond between Tenar and Ged. As the Ring of Erreth-Akbe is reforged and the tyrannical king Tygath defeated, peace is restored to the land, and the two protagonists kiss: Tenar, as priestess, therefore fulfills the literary trope of “the virginal bride who is the object of [the male protagonist’s] quest and the reward for his heroism” (Mains 180). In the animated movie, Tenar’s romantic tension with Ged is subtler, though it should be noted that she is kidnapped and held in captivity by Cob in order to lure his true prey: Ged. Although not a princess, though her change of hair color supports this claim, Tenar is relegated to the position of “passive object of desire and rescue (a beautiful blond princess)” (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 157), which the author sought to challenge.

Overall, the question of whether the miniseries *Legend of Earthsea* by Lieberman and the movie *Tales from Earthsea* by Miyazaki can be qualified as “good” adaptations is contentious. Although the publication of a novel is not solely the product of a single writer, as

publishers and editors also play a part, an adaptation to the screen still requires “a shift from a solo model of creation to a collaborative one” (Hutcheon 80). Therefore, harmonious transmissions between each party are necessary in order to create “a work that is second without being secondary”, to quote Hutcheon’s previous words. In *Earthsea*’s case, however, it is rather the lack of such transmissions that governed the development of the miniseries and the movie, given how Le Guin was excluded from their creative process. Due to this unilateral situation, transgressions were made regarding ideals and values the author wished to advocate for throughout her cycle. In the end, perhaps Barthe’s vision is to be followed in such cases, and readers should be granted the responsibility of judging the cycle and its adaptations, as they are “the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost” (Barthe 148).

### III.2.b. The online fanbase of *Earthsea*: interconnections beyond the author’s reach.

Regarding the two adaptations studied above, and the cycle in a broader sense Tumblr user @ladymacbethisagirlboss, writes:

More and more I wish Earthsea had got the adaptation it deserved. An adaptation that loved and valued the incredible power of these books. An adaptation that captured the heart of Earthsea, it's [*sic*] gentle, stern atmosphere, it's [*sic*] passion and it's [*sic*] fire. And most importantly, an adaptation NOT JUST FULL OF WHITE PEOPLE. It's insulting. Nowadays, fantasy adaptations are so key to bringing a fanbase and attention to older works. So this is my plea – read them!<sup>45</sup>

Under the post, several tags can be found, which make it easier for other users on the website to find posts related to their areas of interests: “#earthsea”, “#a wizard of earthsea”, “#ursula k le guin”, “#fantasy”. Such markers are useful for fans on social media websites such as Tumblr, in order to identify one another and to share their thoughts with other readers of the cycle. This phenomenon brings us back to Mark Duffett’s *Understanding Fandom*, in which he notes that “fans often participate in public communities that share celebrated text. Because their connection to particular series and performers suggests something in common, fans can form communities of mutual care” (Duffett 355). Posts on Tumblr can indeed be interacted with by other users, as seen in the “notes” below each one, which comprise comments, “likes”, and “reposts”. Therefore, it may be relevant to wonder if @ladymacbethisagirlboss is a lone fan of the cycle, or if an actual fandom dedicated to *Earthsea* exists, due to the otherwise tremendous success of the series.

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45 Tumblr post published by @ladymacbethisagirlboss on August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2023, accessible here: <https://www.tumblr.com/ladymacbethisagirlboss/726997771785306112/>. Accessed May 31<sup>st</sup> 2024. This post and the others that will follow are all reproduced with their users’ respective consent.

At the time of writing, fandom spaces often sprout from and thrive in online spaces, as Anne Besson summarizes:

The extension of participatory culture since the late 1990's, which was possible on a very large scale due to the important role digital networks now play in our daily life, the mass circulation of logics and practices related to appropriation of fictions (from commenting to archiving, from the creation of fictions in the same universe to the replication of its codes in daily life – cosplay, reenactments), all of this leads to the beloved work belonging more and more to those who keep it alive.<sup>46</sup> (Besson, *Les pouvoirs de l'enchantement* 151)

In order to better understand the workings of fandom and how they apply to *Earthsea*, another comparative analysis is required. One of the most prominent contemporary fandoms would be the *Harry Potter* (Rowling) fandom, known as “Potterheads” (Gray et al. 2). The very fact that a name exists for the community, akin to the “Trekkies” or “Trekkers” for *Star Trek* fans (Pearson 98), is already an indicator of the sheer presence of these fandoms, which *Earthsea* lacks. Furthermore, another important aspect of fandom culture is materialistic and commercial, as fans also “buy tickets, merchandise, recordings” (Duffett 56). Although physical copies of the books, including re-editions, another stark difference can be observed once more regarding items that can be bought via the e-commerce website Amazon: a query for “Harry Potter” gives more than 90,000 results: water bottles adorned with the symbol of Hogwarts, the setting’s school of wizardry; miniature figurines of the protagonists; jewelry referencing some key artifacts from the saga... By contrast, merchandise related to Le Guin’s cycle is practically non-existent: out of the 159 results given when searching the word “Earthsea”, almost only physical copies of the books or DVDs of the aforementioned adaptations can be bought<sup>47</sup>. Outside of scholarly works that deal with the series, which also appear in the results, a few exceptions include posters of the animated movie and the miniseries, as well as a small number of photo books for Lieberman’s *Legend of Earthsea*. Hence, although the cycle itself has attained financial and cultural success, it appears that the consumptive dimension of the *Earthsea* fanbase, if there is one, is extremely minimal.

Perhaps, then, instances of fan activity can be observed through criteria more intangible than the acquisition of material goods pertaining to *Earthsea*. For instance, “collaborative encyclopedias” known as “wikis” allow for a “roughly hierarchized

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46 My translation. Original text: “L’extension de la culture participative depuis la fin des années 1990, permise à très grande échelle par l’importance prise dans notre quotidien par les réseaux numériques, la diffusion massive des logiques et pratiques d’appropriation des fictions (du commentaire à l’archivage, de la création de fictions dans le même univers à la reproduction de ses coordonnées dans le quotidien – cosplay, reconstitutions), tout cela fait que l’oeuvre appartient de plus en plus à ceux qui la font vivre.”

47 The numbers for both “Harry Potter” and “Earthsea” queries on the Amazon website (<https://www.amazon.com/>) correspond to a search conducted on June 1<sup>st</sup> 2024.

organization of knowledge”<sup>48</sup> (Besson, “De l’ensemble à la totalité” 3) provide a new reading experience:

The experience of the fictional world becomes global and complete: [...] everything happens as if the instruction manual and the novelist’s preliminary works were accessible, and as if the mental encyclopedia created and exploited by each reader would be written and left available for all. In this way, the imaginary world appears to exist in many other places than solely our minds.<sup>49</sup> (Besson, “De l’ensemble à la totalité” 4)

Again, comparisons between the wikis of Le Guin’s cycle and J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* are telling: although both universes are complex and feature a large number of characters and locations, the former only has 251 pages<sup>50</sup>, while the latter reaches 20,939 pages, more than eighty times the *Earthsea* number<sup>51</sup>. Despite this disparity, which may be interpreted as another indicator of the lack of an actual *Earthsea* fandom, it should be noted that wikis such as those I have mentioned are not the only fan-created sources of information for fictional works. Blogs or websites, which may be contributed to by individuals or groups of fans, can also gather considerable knowledge. Among these, the fan site The Isolate Tower presents itself as “An Earthsea Compendium” and its creator, under the alias of The Espresso Addict, claims that “the site was created out of a deep love & respect for the works of Ursula Le Guin”<sup>52</sup>. Even though the website has not been updated since 2011<sup>53</sup>, it is still a remarkable source of considerable quantities of information on the cycle, seemingly held together by one person alone. The Isolate Tower’s most notable features include: a glossary of people, places, and items pertaining to the *Earthsea* universe, ranging from biographies for characters like Ged or Therru to the portrayal of women’s clothing in Le Guin’s fictional universe; a dictionary showcasing the translations of words pertaining to the Kargish and Hardic languages and the Old Speech, among others; a timeline which records most of the events of the series in chronological order, including the ones that are merely mentioned by the characters within the text. In the case of the glossary, The Espresso Addict takes care to specify which chapters were used as sources. For instance, the entry for Kossil, one of the

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48 My translation. Original text: “encyclopédies participatives”; “organisation plus ou moins hiérarchisée de connaissances”.

49 My translation. Original text: “L’expérience du monde fictionnel se fait englobante et complète : [...], tout se passe comme si on avait accès au « mode d’emploi » et aux travaux préparatoires d’un romancier, et que l’encyclopédie mentale construite et sollicitée par chaque lecteur se trouvait rédigée et mise à disposition de tous. De cette façon, le monde imaginaire apparaît comme existant bien autre part que seulement dans nos têtes...”

50 According to the *Earthsea* wiki, accessible here: [https://earthsea.fandom.com/wiki/Earthsea\\_Wiki](https://earthsea.fandom.com/wiki/Earthsea_Wiki). Accessed June 1<sup>st</sup> 2024

51 According to the *Harry Potter* wiki, accessible here: [https://harrypotter.fandom.com/wiki/Main\\_Page](https://harrypotter.fandom.com/wiki/Main_Page). Accessed June 1<sup>st</sup> 2024.

52 According to the “About” section of the website The Isolate Tower, accessible here: <http://www.tavia.co.uk/earthsea/about.htm>. Accessed June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2024.

53 According to the “Updates” section of the website The Isolate Tower, accessible here: <http://www.tavia.co.uk/earthsea/new.htm>. Accessed June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2024.

antagonists from *The Tombs of Atuan*, mentions her title as “Priestess of the Godking”, describes her physical appearance as “stout and heavy”, and her personality as “cruel”, information which is taken from the chapters “The Prisoners”, “Light Under the Hill”, and “Names”<sup>54</sup>.

Although not part of the website The Isolate Tower itself, The Espresso Addict also contributes to the expansion of *Earthsea*’s influence among readers with the *Earthsea* Fanfiction Masterlist, which comprises 117 works<sup>55</sup>. Fanfiction, or fanfic, refers to any “fictional writing created by the fans inspired by the objects of their interest”. Like other aspects of fandom, since their creation and diffusion mainly occur in online spaces, “many are labeled by specific terms” (Duffett 283). On her website, The Espresso Addict uses a similar system in order to allow readers to find fanfictions that suit their needs, as it is possible to sort the fanfics by length, author, or fictional characters involved, among other factors. Each entry comes with a hyperlink which allows a quick access to the fanfic’s original website of publication, as well as several other crucial information. In order to provide a visual example of what I am abstractly describing here, one of these entries reads as such:

The Last Haven, by Elynross (teen)

Summary: On his way to confront fate, Ged learns of destiny and choice, light and dark, and faith. (Ged/Vetch)

Available at: Livejournal, Dreamwidth<sup>56</sup>

Length: medium story

Main characters: Ged, Vetch

Pairing: m/m

Source: A Wizard of Earthsea

Time set: During Earthsea Quartet

Date published: 2003

Although most terms are easily understandable, some of them can only be truly recognized within the context of the fanfiction sphere: “teen” signifies that the fanfic is suited for teenage audiences and older, while “m/m” informs the reader that the story features a romance between two men, that is to say Ged and Vetch. Such creative liberties, which differ from what is depicted in the original books, are referred to as “Slash: a form of fiction created by fans that takes pairs of same sex (usually male) characters who are portrayed as

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54 According to the “Kossil” entry in the glossary of the website The Isolate Tower, accessible here: [www.tavia.co.uk/earthsea/getref.asp?ID=131](http://www.tavia.co.uk/earthsea/getref.asp?ID=131). Accessed June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2024.

55 According to the *Earthsea* Fanfiction Masterlist, accessible here: <http://www.tavia.co.uk/eseafic/eseafic.asp>. Accessed June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2024.

56 Although the hyperlink for the LiveJournal website is now obsolete, the fanfiction can still be accessed through the Dreamwidth website: <https://elynross.dreamwidth.org/63451.html>. Accessed June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2024.

heterosexual in their film and TV shows and then charts how they negotiate intimate relationships with each other” (Duffett 486–87). These changes are especially relevant to this paper as they completely align with some of the concepts studied in the previous sub-section, and the notion of transgression. Barthes’ metaphorical “death of the author” comes to mind, as it paves the way for “the birth of the reader”, who is now able to appropriate the fictional work for themselves.

Finally, a crucial aspect of fandom, fan art or fan artwork, must also be considered. Just like fanfics, they are mostly shared through social media thanks to the support of tags which users can browse through in order to find illustrations about their favorite fictional works. In the case of *Earthsea*, fan art is especially relevant given Ursula Le Guin’s strong opinions regarding the visual representation of her protagonists and their skin color. When browsing through the “Earthsea” tag on Tumblr, we notice that in many, if not all fan arts, Ged appears as a dark-skinned man as Le Guin intended: user @schripscapi, for instance, depicts him as disheveled and brown-skinned young wizard, while @aesethiel represents him and Tenar together, his complexion and warm-colored clothing contrasting with the priestess’ fair skin and dark robes. In these two illustrations, among several others, Ged’s most distinguishing characteristics, such as his facial scar and his staff, are faithfully incorporated.



*Fan art by Tumblr user @shripscapi, accessible here: <https://www.tumblr.com/shripscapi/721744093475127296/>. Published on July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2023. Accessed June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2024.*



Fan art by Tumblr user @asaethiel, accessible here:  
<https://www.tumblr.com/asaethiel/712012503071195136/>.  
Published on March 17<sup>th</sup> 2023. Accessed June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2024.

As explored in earlier sections, Ursula Le Guin repeatedly expresses her faith in her readers, no matter their age, trusting them to understand the complexity of her setting and characters. A study dedicated to the behaviors of *Earthsea*'s readership therefore appears to be a fitting end for this paper, as the continuation of the bond that unites writer and reader. Ultimately, this bond takes on a helical aspect just as the series itself does, as a cycle of reciprocal transmissions links Le Guin and *Earthsea* fans together. In this final sub-section, I have exposed how the *Earthsea* fandom, in terms of sheer numbers, pale in comparison with other well-known fanbases such as the Potterheads: although assessing the number of people who consider themselves fans of the cycle would be a difficult task, there is next to no merchandise related to the series, and the *Earthsea* Wiki can only boast a small number of pages. Nevertheless, there are also several instances of contemporary readers who keep *Earthsea* "alive", in Besson's words. The thoroughly-documented website The Isolate Tower, the words of praise professed on Tumblr and the fan arts which attempt to depict the islanders of *Earthsea* as faithfully as possible are proof of a "deep love & respect for the works of Ursula Le Guin", which The Espresso Addict cites as the reason behind the creation of her website. Although some fanfics deviate from the original story, such as the aforementioned

fanfic *The Last Haven*, the transgressions performed by the readers actually align with Le Guin's opposition to "commodified fantasy" and its "best-seller mentality", and of course, the whitewashing conducted by the "PR-driven world of publishing" and the two adaptations on screen. The author herself admits that "[her] wizard never got on the bestseller lists, but he kept on finding readers, year after year" (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 156). Hence, although the future of the cycle in the publishing and adaptation spheres may be uncertain at the time of writing, the series will assuredly keep gathering readers, young and old, who will believe in *Earthsea* as much as its author believed in them.

## Conclusion

In the introduction, I expressed this paper's intent to answer the following question: "given Ursula Le Guin's status as a well-known fantasy writer, a genre defined by its stable archetypes as well as its potentially transformative power, to which extent does the *Earthsea* cycle offer a platform for the author's beliefs regarding the role of literature as far as knowledge and imagination are concerned? In short, which processes of transgression and transmission can be observed between the author, her work and those of other authors, her readership and other potential actors?"

In order to find a possible answer to this question, the first four novels were analyzed under a plurality of angles, which required different theoretical tools and which founded the very structure of this paper.

First of all, I attempted to study the cycle itself and its portrayal of knowledge, transmission, and transgression. We have seen that although the universe Le Guin depicts in her novels may seem conservative and restrictive in that regard, as seen with Roke's exclusion of women from its institutions, this status quo exists to be challenged by *Earthsea's* iconoclastic characters. Tenar and Therru, with their hybrid behaviors aligning with some aspects of *The Cyborg Manifesto* by Donna Haraway, disrupt the dichotomies that define *Earthsea's* traditions regarding sorcery: they reject the idea that "a queen is only a she-king" (664) or that a witch's power can only be "weak" and "wicked" (16) when compared with that of a male wizard. Although their transgressions are mostly related to the gender-based discrimination existing within the archipelago, their actions are in complete accordance with the broader messages of the series regarding knowledge and education. Indeed, rather than through isolation and sectarianism, it is thanks to open-mindedness and social bonds that one's magical abilities grow, and that magic itself takes on new definitions. Due to his meaningful relationships with Ogion, Vetch, and Arren, for instance, Ged realizes that sorcery must serve others rather than oneself, and that the knowledge of a true name, although a formidable weapon, is most significantly "the proof of unshaken, unshakable trust" (70). Tenar, who previously knew solely an asocial life shaped by ignorance and hierarchy, is able to grow and learn immensely thanks to the people she meets, especially characters such as Ged and Therru. Finally, both protagonists, who are first known as fledgling novices and who are both taken under Ogion's wing, ultimately complete the circle of learning as they become mentors in their own fashion towards the young Arren and Therru.

We have also seen that Ursula Le Guin's "intellectual project", which gives this paper its title, does not limit itself to the notion of education and transcends the boundaries of the series itself. *Earthsea* inscribes itself in the literary tradition of fantasy, a genre that is heavily codified and with many exploitable tropes, such as those defined in Brian Stableford's *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature*, which I have quoted several times. With her series, Le Guin subverts several of the tropes established by her predecessors and which influence the genre at the time of *The Wizard of Earthsea's* publication, such the predominance of white protagonists and the vilification of characters of color, if there are any. Her portrayal of women, which we explored above, also defies many reductive archetypes such as that of the passive and "tender beautiful [female]" (Alpers et al. 24). Through a comparative analysis with J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, easily one of the most influential works ever written, Le Guin has been shown to do more than purely subverting the norms set in place by fantasy authors before her: while some elements of her story do heavily contrast with Middle-Earth, she also references *The Lord of the Rings* through the similarities and disparities between two sorceresses, Serret, and Lady Galadriel, therefore weaving together transmission and transgression. Lastly, we have seen that Le Guin conforms to what she considers to be one of the main functions of the fantasy genre, that is to say encouraging to cultivate one's imagination and creativity. In this case, then, she transgresses preconceived and reductive ideas towards fantasy, as she nuances dichotomies that oppose imagination and rational thinking, young and adult readers. Ultimately, she urges both those dismissive of the genre and her beloved readers to understand that "maturity is not an outgrowing, but a growing up" (Le Guin and Wood 39), a maxim that her own characters also come to internalize through the course of the story.

Finally, as the two previous sections have highlighted Le Guin's awareness of the "the triangle of author, work, and reading public" (Jauss and Benzinger 4), to which the various participants of the publishing world must be added, I attempted to study *Earthsea* within its context, and how it interacts with a plurality of actors, therefore linking it with the notions of transmission and transgression from another standpoint. Although the author is undeniably behind several of the elements of a novel as a finished product, publishers also have a say in the matter. Hence, Le Guin's transgressive intent to make the protagonist of her series "copper-brown" (Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* [PDF Version] 157), was, at first, heavily undermined by the publishers' decisions to whitewash Ged on several front covers, prioritizing marketability over the author's vision. Even after the publication of *Earthsea* and its consolidation as a major work of the fantasy genre, other participants became involved,

leading to both harmonious and dissonant transmissions. Although the two adaptations under study, that is to say the miniseries *Legend of Earthsea* by Robert Lieberman and the animated movie *Tales from Earthsea* by Goro Miyazaki were poorly received by the author due to similar differences between the messages she intended to deliver her readership and the plots of said adaptations, Le Guin's faith in her readers was rewarded. Indeed, while the movie and the miniseries' characters are almost exclusively white, several fans have drawn, and keep drawing to this day, illustrations that faithfully depict Ged, Tenar, and other characters in accordance with their descriptions in the books. Therefore, the fanbase of *Earthsea* differs from other fandoms, like that of the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling: the latter has had a tremendous impact on the real world, to the point of having had "a French student organization", "L'Armée de Dumbledore" of "Université Rennes 2"<sup>57</sup> (Besson, *Les pouvoirs de l'enchantement* 5–6) named after it, and well-known adaptations on screen such as *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, directed by Chris Columbus in 2001, a feat *Earthsea* cannot boast of. However, this third section has shown that readers of the cycle have taken its messages at heart, interacting with one another in online spaces and thoroughly documenting the names of each fictional place and individual, as mages do.

The answer to the question asked in the introduction therefore seems to be threefold, although it is possible to synthesize it. On all levels, in the aspects I have analyzed in detail throughout this paper, Ursula Le Guin intends to share several values related to knowledge and other intellectual abilities such as the nurturing of imagination, open-mindedness, and the thirst for knowledge itself. Although the ideals she advocates for may seem simple and easily attainable at first glance, her "intellectual project" is not driven by naivete. Within and without her cycle, Le Guin takes into account the fact that creativity can be supported by rationality, and that open-mindedness, whether intellectual or social, is not an isolate state of mind one can experience blissfully without facing potential constraints. Therefore, as she attempts to show her readers, the publishing world, and the literary sphere as a whole, intellectual and creative growth is supported by meaningful transmissions, and must sometimes transgress various hindrances in order to flourish. Such behaviors are rewarding, as they allow readers and authors, children and adults, to experience true magic.

As mentioned before, this paper broadly covered several fields of research, ranging from reception theory to genre studies. Hence, the cycle of *Earthsea*, while still keeping in mind the notions of transmission and transgression, could greatly benefit from an in-depth

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57 My translation, partially taken from Besson's original text: "L'armée de Dumbledore, une organisation française de représentants étudiants, est arrivée en deuxième aux élections de 2015 dans la très politisée Université Rennes 2".

study of some of its aspects. For instance, when studying *Earthsea* and *The Lord of the Rings* jointly, we have seen that both texts have connections with mythical stories, such as *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Although this association was discovered through a comparative analysis, it should be noted that *Earthsea*'s mythical dimension has already been explored in some scholarly works. *On a Far Shore* tackles the parallels between *The Farthest Shore* and the poems of Theodore Roethke, and their shared "mythlike [patterns]" (Attebery 277) regarding life and death, while *Le Guin's Earthsea: Voyages in Consciousness* studies the similarities between Ged and the "American Indian trickster figure" (Barrow and Barrow 22) of mythology. Still, following this line of thought could lead to fruitful results: I have already alluded to the parallels between Ged's journey across the seas and the *Odyssey*, but other similar inspirations can be found. For instance, in *The Tombs of Atuan*'s underground labyrinth, Tenar's role shifts from that of the Minotaur to Ariadne's, as she knows the "turnings of a ruined maze" (291), given that she ultimately appears before her captive as his potential executioner while ultimately guiding him out of the Tombs. Likewise, in addition to Morgan Le Fay, Serret can also be compared with Lady Bertilak from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, given that both ladies hold considerable influence within their respective household and that they actively attempt to pursue the hero and make him lose sight of his quest, displaying the power of their "cunning tricks" (The Gawain Poet 181). With all of these similarities in mind, it may be worthwhile to explore *Earthsea* through the lens of transgression and transmission again, this time with a focus on myths and the ways in which Le Guin exploits, subverts and transcends the texts of the past.

Finally, another comparative analysis, this time between *Earthsea* and Diana Wynne Jones' *Howl's Moving Castle*, first published in 1986, could also be relevant. Not only does Le Guin claim that "there's a lot of Diana Wynne Jones that [she hasn't] read yet that [she looks forward] to reading" (Le Guin and Attebery 378), but various angles of analysis can be considered in order to study the two fantasy works jointly. Both stories have paved the way for a literary cycle, as *Howl's Moving Castle* is followed by *Castle in the Air* and *House of Many Ways*, published in 1990 and 2008 respectively. It would therefore be rewarding to pay particular attention to the evolution of each series throughout the years, especially since both have been adapted to the screen by Studio Ghibli. The most striking difference between the two lies in that *Tales from Earthsea* by Goro Miyazaki merges together the plot of several *Earthsea* tomes, while the movie *Howl's Moving Castle* by Hayao Miyazaki, Goro's father, limits itself to the events of the first volume of Jones' trilogy. Last but not least, akin to *Earthsea*, scholarly works detailing the transgressive aspects of Diana Wynne Jones have also

been published, such as *Building Castles in the Air*, which describes the author as “most consistently deconstructive in her confounding of the patriarchal basis of the fairy tale” (Rudd 267), which serves as the foundation of her trilogy.

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