

“What is not owned”: feminist strategies in Ursula K. Le Guin’s poetry

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In *Coyote’s Song: The Teaching Stories of Ursula K. Le Guin*, Richard D. Erlich, who is one of only a handful of critics to comment on Le Guin’s poetry, says that “Dealing with the poetry is important”,¹ as though issuing a challenge to all the critics who have not devoted much attention to it. He finds that the poetry is characterised by an element of feminism, “anger, a sexual theme or two and, related to that, Le Guin’s interest in Shiva, Shakti, and Kali in the Hindu pantheon”.² Chapter 18 of *Coyote’s Song* is, idiosyncratically, divided between tracing these themes in selected poems and an extended discussion of *King Dog*, a little-known radio screenplay by Le Guin. Patrick D. Murphy, another critic, finds that Le Guin writes “three very distinctive types [of poetry]: high fantasy, low fantasy and revisionist mythopoeia”.³ Murphy perceptively broadens the conventional understanding of myth when he describes revisionist mythopoeia as “defining as fiction, as ‘myth’, once-sacred beliefs and assurances”,⁴ so that myth encompasses narratives of origin, fiction (as opposed to truth) and deeply held beliefs. All three of these concepts of myth are relevant to my exploration of Le Guin’s poetry, since her poems reverse the discursive and social mechanisms that subjugate women. This enterprise involves undoing some of the most deeply embedded linguistic devices of patriarchal discourse through metadiscursive reflection on the ways a woman writer can be “a power in her own work, but an artifact in most of the traditions of meaning on which she draws”.⁵ Despite Murphy’s pertinent identification of “revisionist mythopoeia” as one of Le Guin’s dominant poetic strategies, his focus in the main is on generic taxonomy.

In another strange omission, Le Guin’s poetry has not been mentioned by theorists and critics who write about women’s poetry in general. Alicia Ostriker and Liz Yorke are two of the foremost exponents of this field, and they both identify revisionist myth-making as a central strategy in feminist poetics. Yorke sees this project as having a double focus:

Women poets have concerned themselves with the making of new mythic constructs, constructs which I have wanted to see as informing the making of new subjectivities for women, *that is, as working to produce a new status for the female subject-in-process* within discourse. But women poets are more and less consciously engaged in an even larger project,

that of constructing a new symbolic which would re-organise the social socio-symbolic systems of patriarchy.⁶

Strangely, these critics do not mention the way Le Guin's poetic revisioning of myth creates "new subjectivities for women" by re-organising the "socio-symbolic systems of patriarchy". Le Guin's contribution to what feminist critics, such as Yorke and Ostriker, describe as a groundswell of women's poetry in the latter part of the twentieth century is, consequently, neglected. My article aims to remedy this neglect by introducing Le Guin's poetry to the wider critical examination of women's poetry and by turning an appreciative critical spotlight on her representation of women. In order to achieve this, I have explored the ways in which Le Guin's poetry engages in a thoroughgoing revision of the myths (that is, the accepted beliefs) about gender and, in particular, about women, which are used to keep women in inferior positions to men. In Ostriker's terms, this involves "Stealing the Language",⁷ preventing men from owning or domesticating women's language, and working, Prometheus-like, towards forging a new way of articulating women's identities.

Anger

As Ostriker notes, a driving force behind much women's poetry in the late twentieth century is anger: "for many writers, the overwhelming sensation to be gotten from contemporary women's poetry is the smell of camouflage burning, the crackle of spite, free at last, the whirl and rush of flamelike rage that has so often swept the soul, and as often been damped down".⁸ In a similar vein, Carolyn Heilbrun writes that anger is a taboo for women: "above all prohibitions, what has been forbidden to women is anger".⁹ Both Ostriker and Heilbrun go on to explore the ways in which women writers mobilise anger against the patriarchal forces that have dominated and disempowered them. Much of Le Guin's poetry is also motivated by feminist anger against the way women are disempowered and victimised, and she weaves this emotion into her revisioned myths, while steering clear of generalised hatred of men.

In Le Guin's fantasy, anger and wildness crystallise in the figure of the dragon, one of her best-known imaginative creations.¹⁰ When describing the dragons in the first three books of *Earthsea*, Le Guin writes that they are "above all, wildness. What is *not owned*".¹¹ Of the fourth book, *Tehanu*, she writes that:

The dragon Kalessin in the last book¹² is wildness seen not only as dangerous beauty but as dangerous anger. The fire of the dragon runs right through the book. It meets the fire of human rage, the cruel anger of the weak ...¹³

In characterising Kalessin by anger, Le Guin links the dragon's fire to a rebellious resistance against being owned. When Therru calls Kalessin "Segoy,"

or creator, in *Tehanu* (249),¹⁴ she hails the dragon's angry insistence on its own agency as the source of the entire fantasy world of Earthsea. In a strikingly different tone, Le Guin also describes herself as angry in her essay, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction", where she writes: "I am an aging, angry woman laying mightily about me with my handbag, fighting hoodlums off" (1989a:168).¹⁵ This ironic self-description playfully subverts the myths that serve as ideological foundation for contemporary society. The desire to fight off "hoodlums" is motivated by the poet's anger at the injustices and inequalities around her, but the quasi-knightly image of the woman as an avenger is subverted by the handbag she wields. This may play into stereotypes concerning women and handbags: but, in my view, reversing the expectations associated with heroic fiction is not only appropriate for a mature woman, but also brings the speaker down to earth, ensuring that the reader will take her more seriously than they would a mythological knight. In this phrase, Le Guin fuses the conventionally disparate genres of myth and social realism in a way that is typical of her poetry.

An early expression of poetic anger can be discerned in the poem "Song", from *Wild Angels*, Le Guin's first collection of poetry:

O when I was a dirty little virgin
I'd sit and pick my scabby knees
and dream about some man of thirty
and doing nothing did what I pleased.

A woman gets and is begotten on:
have and receive is feminine for live.
I knew it, I knew it even then:
what, after all, did I have to give?

A flowing cup, a horn of plenty
fulfilled with more than she can hold:
but the milk and honey will be emptied,
emptied out, as she grows old.

More inward than sex or even womb,
inmost in woman is the girl intact,
the dirty little virgin who sits and dreams
and has nothing to do with fact.¹⁶

By placing a "dirty little virgin" at the centre of this poem, Le Guin cleverly highlights the way a woman's status as either "dirty" or "clean" is a matter of system and symbol, not of essence, as Mary Douglas notes when she reminds her readers of "the old definition of dirt as matter out of place".¹⁷ A virgin must be sexually "clean" in order to ensure purity of patrilineal descent: she must be

chaste until marriage and monogamous afterwards. Dirt, whether it originates from sexual awareness or dust, has no place in this image. The virgin's dirt, and her "scabby knees", imply that she is too young to have internalised the male-centred demand for women to be free of sexual pollution. In all these ways, the figure of a "dirty little virgin" contradicts the unrealistic expectation that women must be pure and "clean", and shows up the internal contradictions of this demand.

The grave, incantatory tone of the prescription that "Have and receive is feminine for live", with its implied opposite that "Give and achieve is masculine for live", reinforces the passivity that has kept women inactive and disempowered for centuries by elevating this injunction to the level of a commandment. As the "dirty little virgin" dreams about a "man of thirty" who would be older, presumably stronger or more experienced, and would take care of her in some way, she strays further and further into socially promulgated romantic ideas about gender relations. These ideologies can only lead the virgin into being "emptied, / emptied out, as she grows old". The poem's ultimate subversion appears in the final stanza, which positions "the girl intact" (that is, before sexual experience) as "inmost in woman", flying in the face of essentialist notions of women's so-called innate dependency on men. For Le Guin, the virgin, who experiences creativity through her dreams and who represents a phase of womanhood before sexual (power-)relations, is genuine, not the dependent woman who believes the myth that she is incomplete without a man.

"Song's" angry rebellion against ownership by the patriarchal script is more implicit than overt, but *Wild Angels* also includes a poem entitled "The Anger", which positions (feminist) anger, paradoxically, as "the exile / waiting in long anger / outside my home"¹⁸ and ready to be invited in, to become a part of the woman speaker's inner landscape. "Song" exemplifies revisionist mythopoeia in the way it highlights "as fiction, as 'myth', once-sacred beliefs and assurances":¹⁹ here, the idea that women need men. Its focus on this notion as *untruth* (paradoxically through portraying it as "fact") contains the seed of feminist rebellion. In later poems, Le Guin waters this seed and nurtures it into fully-fledged subversion, building on her angry desire to have "nothing to do" with the norm that assigns women an inferior place in patriarchal culture. Le Guin shares this refusal with several other women poets, but her articulation of it is uniquely playful and devoid of hatred towards men.

Wildness

Wildness is figured in Le Guin's poetry as the counterpart of anger against patriarchal attempts to own women. Her poem, "Read at the Award Dinner, May 1996" (in *Sixty Odd: New Poems*)²⁰ portrays wildness as a bid for freedom:

Beware when you honor an artist.
You are praising danger.

You are holding out your hand
to the dead and the unborn.
You are counting on what cannot be counted.

The poet's measures serve anarchic joy.
The story-teller tells one story: freedom.

Above all beware of honoring women artists.
For the housewife will fill the house with lions
and in with the grandmother
come bears, wild horses, great horned owls, coyotes.²¹

This poem pivots on a number of finely-tuned ironic reversals. The title sets up expectations of a conventional response by the poet to receiving artistic recognition: but the poem subverts and extends the conventional meaning of art. Art is a dangerous activity, characterised by stringent social critique, which, if taken seriously, could overturn established epistemic and political regimes. Its anarchic potential for social subversion is reframed here within a specifically feminist and ecological paradigm.

In the poem's middle stanza, Le Guin acknowledges that artistic critiques (including revolutionary poetry) may call for the complete restructuring of society, and often aid in the achievement of their goals. She writes: "The poet's measures [which are regulated and ordered] serve anarchic joy". She has repeatedly celebrated anarchy in her fiction, most notably in *The Dispossessed* (1974), where she depicts Anarres as an anarchist utopia, but also in *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (1995).²² In "Read at the Award Dinner", in a rhetorically anarchic move, Le Guin identifies anarchy with women. Since women have traditionally been viewed as seductive transgressors whose impulse is to disrupt male order and hierarchy, Le Guin is reclaiming and revaluing anarchy here. This is in keeping with her discussion in "Is Gender Necessary? Redux", where she argues:

The 'female principle' has historically been anarchic; that is, anarchy has historically been identified as female. The domain allotted to women 'the family,' for example is the area of order without coercion.²³

The family Le Guin assigns to women is notably different from patriarchal social control because it functions by co-operation a traditionally female approach to tasks rather than the more typically masculine and potentially violent "coercion". By connecting women to the respected political and philosophical tradition of anarchy, Le Guin asserts that the faults they have stereotypically been blamed for, such as refusing to acknowledge hierarchies of power and authority, are sources of strength. Indeed, in "Read at the Award Dinner," Le Guin daringly asserts that women artists are the most dangerous of all *because*

they are women. The poem reinvests historically disempowered female familial roles (such as the "housewife" and "grandmother") with subversive power. The poem revises the masculine-authored myth of incarcerating women in houses, which confines their sphere of influence to that which is denigrated as "merely domestic."²⁴ For Le Guin, the family is much more important than is usually recognised, as expressed in her describing it as anarchically free of coercion. In "Read at the Award Dinner," the wildness possessed by the housewife and grandmother allows them to invite into the apparently tame domestic sphere a host of predatory and dangerous animals (lions, bears, wild horses, great horned owls, coyotes). These animals are not randomly chosen, but are also found in Le Guin's other works. The lion is probably the visionary feline that Le Guin depicts as a source of artistic vision in "Puma Dance" (1986:403);²⁵ the coyote evokes Le Guin's unpredictable trickster in *Buffalo Gals Won't You Come Out Tonight*, affiliated to the mythical Coyote of Native American folklore; the owl has traditional and mythological access to metaphysical realities and is frequently depicted as a witch's familiar;²⁶ and the bear is a creature of absolute otherness, who brings knowledge of death, as in the poem "The Bear's Gift".²⁷ Together with the wild horses, these animals could transport the confined housewife and grandmother to a more spacious domain of freedom, where they have access to the qualities of wildness, such as instinct, destabilisation, mischief, magic, the unknown and freedom: in short, the irrational, newly conceived as a liberating force, destructive not of society as a whole but of regimes of male oppression.

Deflating men

"Read at the Award Dinner", like "Song", demonstrates how women can escape from the mental, emotional and discursive clutches of patriarchy. In writing angrily about the way women have been positioned in and by patriarchal culture (as "only" virgins, housewives or grandmothers), Le Guin participates in the feminist poetic project of reversing women's disempowerment by expressing negative feelings towards men. "In the House of the Spider: A Spell to Weave By" uses the same strategy, but from a slightly different angle. Initially, the poem appears to deal mainly with a love of language, as its title evokes the poet's love of words in calling up a "spell" as the correct arrangement of letters in a word as well as an incantation. However, "weaving" revises a traditionally feminine activity and has appeared as a central metaphor for feminine creativity in various texts. Joanne Mulcahy, for example, uses "weave and mend" as the motto for her work on healing women's trauma through writing in her article "Weave and Mend";²⁸ Jane Hirshfield's poem "Completing the Weave"²⁹ depicts a woman carefully "weaving" her family narratives into a poetic memento; and "WEAVE" has been used as an acronym to mean "Women's Energy Against Violence" (huard 1995:4).³⁰ In the light of these intertextual resonances with other feminists' writing, "weaving" takes on connotations of feminist healing that are entirely appropriate for the sheltering spider who offers a woman

sanctuary from male violence. Le Guin fashions these representations of women as weavers into the figure of a spider, who uses her spinning talents to frustrate male aggression while nurturing solidarity among women.

The poem is carefully crafted to subvert gender norms by deflating men:

He rides by, the rider,
the hunter,
the cunter.
Grandmother, hide her.

He rides past, the master,
has passed her,
has lost her.
Hang quiet, spider.

Good riddance the rider!
The spinster,
the sister,
live here beside her.

They are together,
the brother,
no other.
Here at the center.³¹

The short second and third lines in each stanza of this poem lend extra prominence to the insistently repeated -er rhymes and force the reader's attention to the collocation of meanings that is produced by the juxtaposition of the final words. In the first stanza, the nouns used for the male — "rider ... hunter ... cunter" — stand out. These are verbal nouns, in keeping with the convention that codes masculinity as active, so that they simultaneously represent and revision stereotypically masculine qualities and activities: the "hunter" displays predatory agency in "hunting" down a woman for his own sexual purposes; "cunter" evokes an informal meaning of "rider" to reinforce its vulgarisation and objectification of the woman's sexuality. "Master", in the second stanza, ironically acknowledges the way men are positioned as superior in patriarchal culture. The man sees himself in these roles, but the rescued maiden and the spider, in hiding from such violent attitudes and responses to women, turn an ironic, revisionist and sceptical eye on his posturing.

Spiders are usually scorned or even feared in human-centred economies of value and yet, in a typical reversal of conventional notions, Le Guin gives a spider pride of place in the poem, making her more powerful than the self-aggrandising man. The third stanza brings the spider to the poem's forefront by invoking

the etymological connection between spiders as spinning literal webs and the negative connotations of an unmarried woman or "spinster". Le Guin teases out these connotations: being unmarried is often scorned, but the sheltering spider is another kind of "spinster" entirely. She is, in fact, mythically connected to the figure of "Grandmother Spider" in Native American myth. Paula Gunn Allen describes this goddess as follows: "Grandmother Spider, Thought Woman, thought the earth, the sky, the galaxy, and all that is into being, and as she thinks, we are".³² Grandmother Spider is an omnipotent deity, whose cognitive actions create the world in a similar, but less (phal)logocentric, manner to the Judeo-Christian god who created the cosmos through the spoken word. Her gender, age and the fact that she is also a spider are significant deviations from the biblical model. Mary Daly's subversive *Intergalactic Wickedary* (re-)defines an unmarried "Spinster" as:

a woman whose occupation is to Spin, to participate in the whirling movement of creation; one who has chosen her Self, who defines her Self by choice neither in relation to children nor to men; one who is Self-identified; a whirling dervish, Spiraling in New Time/Space.³³

Daly's project in the *Intergalactic Wickedary* is "a process of freeing words from the cages and prisons of patriarchal patterns" (3).³⁴ Her intention is to re-vision and redefine words that have been used to denigrate or degrade women. This aspect of Daly's writing has creative affinities with Le Guin's poetic subversion of patriarchal ideas about women.³⁵

The first three stanzas of the poem follow the conflict inherent in the gender binary by positioning the male as a perpetrator of violence and the female spider as a saviour. After presenting such a negative view of men, one might expect the poet to suggest that women, such as the maiden and spinster, should avoid them altogether in a separatist society. But the final stanza offers a surprising and unexpected solution to the problem of male violence by introducing "the brother," who is "no other", into the all-female haven of the spider and maiden. The "brother/other" rhyme violently brings together previously incompatible ideas of difference and brotherhood. This particular "brother" could have been an "other" at one time, as the previous stanzas depict him, but has been brought into the spider's haven because of his kinship with the woman and the spider. This stanza reminds us of Le Guin's maxim, "about 53 per cent of the Brotherhood of Man is the Sisterhood of Woman",³⁶ while the preceding stanzas caution women, via the rider figure, that not all males are brothers.

By including a "brother" in her women's sanctuary, Le Guin opens up the possibility of replacing male aggression and violence with relations of equality and filiation between the genders. This is in keeping with her statement in "Introduction to *Planet of Exile*" that the "central, constant theme of her work" is "Marriage".³⁷ "Introduction to *Planet of Exile*" and "The House of the

Spider” make it clear that feminist anger is not a reason to exclude men from a separatist society. In this way, Le Guin’s vision of gender relations differs from Daly’s stridently subversive wish for women to usurp male authority and power. For Le Guin, anger can co-exist with a utopian vision of egalitarian relations between men and women. The image of men and women in peaceful co-existence, presided over by the grandmotherly spider, is consonant with what Amy M. Clarke describes as Le Guin’s “return and reconciliation”,³⁸ which brings men and women together as equals within a female-centred community.

Revisionist myth

“The House of the Spider” invokes two myths: the Native American founding narrative of Grandmother Spider, and the “myth” or false idea that unmarried women, who are “spinsters” (like spiders), are excluded from significant action. Adrienne Rich’s founding article on the necessity for women to revise and rewrite existing patriarchal myths, tellingly entitled “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”, asserts that to enquire about the status of women in society “cuts deep into the myth-making tradition, the romantic tradition” (1976).³⁹ Rich’s argument engages our attention for two reasons: first, through its unambiguous characterisation of “the romantic tradition” as “myth-making”, and second, because of her urgent call for the social and discursive construct of women as inferior to be dismantled, disrupted and revisioned at its source, by disrupting the myths that concern women’s existence and nature. Yorke expresses this drive in stronger terms than Rich:

... re-visionary mythmaking, as a poetic of disruption, involves a thoroughgoing critique of established definitions, values and ethics relating to the representation of women — in theory, as in artistic representation. Through its pleasurable rehabilitation of what is heterogeneous to patriarchal systems of meaning, poetry can be thoroughly undermining to the logic of the social contract.⁴⁰

In “Song” and in “In the House of the Spider: A Spell to Weave”, Le Guin rehabilitates “what is heterogeneous to patriarchal systems of meaning”: the central figures of these poems are females who do not conform to a male-centred system of values and meanings. Her revisioning of these characters, positions and roles is aimed to revalue women-figures who have been seen as inferior, objectified and scorned by the social order.

The category of “myth” includes narratives of origin (such as the Biblical tale of the serpent’s temptation of Adam and Eve and their subsequent fall from grace), and the notion of fiction as untruth, distinguished from “reality”. Many male-centred stories about gender, particularly in the Christian tradition, are myths in all senses: they position women falsely as lacking and therefore inferior, and they hold founding cultural power. According to Ostriker, feminist

revisionist poems by women poets "dismantle the literary conventions to reveal the social ones, and reverse both, usually by the simple device of making Other into Subject."⁴¹

This approach to revisionist mythopoesis is exemplified in works such as Le Guin's 2008 novel, *Lavinia*, where Lavinia, who is silenced and "Othered" in Virgil's *Aeneid*, becomes the narrator and Subject of the text. Similarly, Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* uses Penelope, who is portrayed in *The Odyssey* as the stay-at-home wife or "Other" of Odysseus's wandering persona, as the Subject of the narrative.⁴² Ostriker goes on to say that "revisionist poems do not necessarily confine themselves to defiance and reversal strategies",⁴³ but also reconceptualise myth in other ways, by drawing on the figure of "the female creatrix",⁴⁴ for example. Le Guin's revisionist myth-poems mobilise all the resources of poetry in the service of "disruption" and "critique" of "the logic of the social contract", which, as Kristeva notes, generally entails sacrifice for women.⁴⁵ In some instances, she turns "Other into Subject",⁴⁶ while in others, she uses myth to imagine entirely different ways of being for women outside the patriarchal order, and some of her poems use both techniques.

"Apples" is a poem that exemplifies Le Guin's thoroughly revisionist approach to myth, using a playful, mocking tone to contest both mythic narratives of origin and "mythical" falsehoods about women:

Judeochristian men should
not be allowed
to eat apples, they
have been bellyaching
for millennia
that my mother made
them eat an apple
that gave them a bellyache.⁴⁷

When narrated ironically from a woman's perspective, as here by one who identifies herself as the daughter of Eve, the myth of the Fall is demystified. Its claim to cosmic truth is secularised and de-universalised: the epic Fall becomes simply an annoyance or bellyache. In Le Guin's sardonic rewriting of the myth, the correct response is to refuse "judeochristian men" access to apples, which result in "bellyache," so that the malaise that follows the loss of Eden becomes a mere peevish discomfort. Le Guin's use of the lower case for "judeochristian" in the second stanza conflates Judaic and Christian men in their fall from Eden and explodes the self-bestowed universal sanctity and particularity of those religions.

Later in the poem Le Guin restores sexual and corporeal freedom to women, drawing on the myth of Medusa and using the *Snow White* fairytale as a child-like extension of myth. The tone is direct and simple, as though to suggest that

women's innocence may be restored through revisioning the narratives in which they are disempowered:

And if a woman wants
 she is to wear snakes
 for bracelets
 and her hair
 is to hiss at any man
 who cannot resist her
 and strike him so he falls
 stone stiff and gets stuck
 into a glass coffin
 like a bank
 and nobody will come to kiss him.
 But the snakes
 coiling down from round arms
 across the baby's head
 and the milky nipples,
 will be fed
 with apples.⁴⁸

The central figure in "Apples" is a revised version of the classical Greek mythological monster, Medusa, the guardian of sacred and terrifying places, who, like the basilisk, kills with her gaze. Ostriker notes pertinently that several feminist revisionist poems centre on the Medusa myth: "Inactivity is also a motif in several poems written by women about classic female monsters. Of Medusa, a perennial figure in male poetry and iconography, Ann Stanford's sequence 'Women of Perseus' and Rachel Blau DuPlessis' 'Medusa' both remind us of the key event in this female's life ...: her rape by Poseidon".⁴⁹ While Stanford's and Blau DuPlessis's poems focus on Medusa as a victim of gendered violence, "Apples", like "The House of the Spider", uses myth to protect the woman at its centre from such invasions by male aggressors.

In the classical myth, Perseus avoids looking directly at Medusa's face, focusing on his shield while cutting off her head,⁵⁰ which he can take back in triumph to Polydectes. The snakes on the head of Le Guin's revisioned Medusa⁵¹ are faithful to the tradition of having Medusa guard sacred places, but here the sacred place is reconfigured in a gynocentric manner as the woman's own body. Le Guin's Medusa, not Perseus, is the aggressor, striking at the suitor before he has had a chance to approach her. This man does not possess Perseus's superhuman skills, and so he falls, ironically, not into death, but into another myth-like tale, this time into a feminised passivity that is reminiscent of *Snow White*, in a glass coffin "like a bank." Erlich relates this to "a piggy bank",⁵² but I read it as both a feminist reversal of the fate of Snow White, who ate a

poisoned apple and fell into a death-like sleep until she was awakened by a kiss from her true love, and an allusion to Le Guin's dislike of the stasis engendered by the capitalist economy. The coffin in "Apples," as in *Snow White*, allows no movement, especially of a desiring nature, so the impertinent suitor is as good as dead in the absence of a woman to kiss him. But the revised Medusa, whose snakes are corporeal ornaments, partakes of the fruits of desire, in the form of the baby she has borne and the apples that feed the snakes on her head, which are no longer threatening since they have been demystified as guardians of the woman's desires. By conflating the myth of Perseus and Medusa with that of the forbidden fruit in Eden, and revisioning both, Le Guin creates an outcome that is satisfying for a woman in a way that neither founding narrative could be.

Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers point out in the introduction to *The Medusa Reader*: "What is most compelling in the long history of the myth and its retellings is Medusa's intrinsic doubleness: at once monster and beauty, disease and cure, poison and remedy. The woman with snaky locks who could turn the unwary into stone has come to stand for all that is obdurate and irresistible".⁵³ Le Guin's revision retains the double nature that Medusa possesses in Greek myth: she is simultaneously irresistible and fatal to anyone who looks at her, possessing the same wild and untameable quality as Le Guin's dragons. The poem's central reversal resides in the fact that "Apples" restores power to Medusa instead of to the man who overcomes her. The poem reverses all the negative associations that cluster around women in myth. The woman is no longer the source of sin, as in the myth of Eden, where she was seen in company with apples and snakes; and she is no longer the passive, though intensely feared, object of male desire as Medusa was in her rape by Poseidon. At the end of the poem, the snake-haired woman is armoured against unwelcome attentions, fully gratified, the author of her own revisioned myth and self-nurtured by the forbidden fruit, which causes her no distress. Her *jouissance* in her still-monstrous, yet creative, sensuous and desirable being is echoed by the poem's joyful reversal of the narratives of male domination over women.

This reversal of mythic meanings is also present in "To St George", which opens with the line "Woman is worm". This poem engages in an extended ludic play on "worm" as a euphemism for the penis and, in Biblical terms, the lowliest form of life on Earth. The worm that is associated with woman in this poem is transformed from a despised "earthworm" to a masculine "cockworm" and then to an inward-directed "heartworm". The poem's final image bestows on women a privileged knowledge of "the oneworm, the roundworm / unending, hollow, all, egg".⁵⁴ This is the snake *ouroboros*, which circles the world in the Nordic myth of Jormungandr and symbolises eternity in many cultures. The poem ends with an ironic warning directed towards men who, in order to dominate women, want to silence them or define them as inferior to the masculine standard of humanity: "Saint, better get her / before she talks".⁵⁵

Reclaiming language

Ostriker pertinently advances the idea that women poets have to become “*voleuses de langue*, thieves of language, female Prometheuses”⁵⁶ in order for their poetry to find purchase and effectively subvert male domination. In “Epiphany”, Le Guin metadiscursively “steals” the language and mythology of poetic creativity from the men who have controlled it for centuries:

Did you hear?

Mrs. Le Guin has found God.

Yes, but she found the wrong one.
Absolutely typical.

Look, there they go together.
Mercy! It’s a colored woman!

Yes, it’s one of those relationships.
They call her Mama Linga.⁵⁷

“Epiphany” is a polysemous poem with both textual and metatextual resonances. On a textual level, it mockingly deflates and parodies conservative heterosexual outrage at an interracial lesbian relationship. The gossip who opens the poem affirms, in tones of offended conformity, that a married woman (the “dangerous” poet, Mrs. Le Guin, tellingly labelled by her marital title) has finally found “God” in a lesbian relationship. The rumour-monger finds the relationship “wrong,” despised and deviant, because it is extra-marital, homosexual and because the poet has “typically” found divinity in the wrong place. This relationship disdains “the only narrative available to [women],” namely “the conventional marriage”⁵⁸ and traditional patriarchal religion as well. In this way the poem also dethrones the idea that heterosexual union, as ordained by God, is the sole source of women’s emotional and spiritual fulfilment. At the same time, it refigures the idea of “divinity” by revisioning “God” in terms that evoke Ostriker’s “female creatrix”⁵⁹ rather than the exclusively male connotations of the divinity in Judeo-Christianity.

Beyond its critique of heteronormativity, the poem metatextually points to the speaker’s sexual attraction to “Mama Linga” (the “lingam” or phallic function of language, which is, here, attributed to a woman) as the source of her poetry. “Mama Linga” puns on the resonances of the words “linguistics” and “language”, indicating that the married poet is involved in an adulterous love relationship with language itself. This constitutes disloyalty to the male-centred canon and is tantamount to marital infidelity. Deviating from this forced “marriage” is empowering for Le Guin, who has, as “Song” indicates, developed her creativity

in the context of patriarchal and heteronormative ideas of women's destiny and permitted social roles. Reading "Epiphany" intertextually alongside "Song" strengthens the contrast between the earlier poem and the later one and allows us to discern significant shifts in Le Guin's poetic understanding of women's role and creativity. Here, she revises the Symbolic function of language (in Kristeva's terms, the Law of the Father) so that the lesbian union of the woman poet with a newly feminised language-deity "steals" discursive power from the logocentric male deity and restores it to the woman poet.

The poem offers metatextual commentary on the enabling mechanism of this shift in perspective through its title: "Epiphany" or "revelation of the divine". As Erlich notes, divinities feature prominently in Le Guin's poetry: he identifies Chinese Taoism and the Indian gods Shiva, Shakti and Kali as occupying prominent roles in the poetry of this "atheist" author.⁶⁰ In keeping with Le Guin's consistently unconventional response to religion and gods, the divinity that makes herself known in "Epiphany" is language itself, imaged as a subversively homosexual woman of colour. This creative move, as in "Apples", denies the supposed omniscience of the masculine Judeo-Christian deity, supplanting it with a thoroughly revisioned vehicle of divine inspiration for the woman poet who finds "Mama Linga" a more satisfying object of devotion.

The final lines of the poem turn its revisionist mythopoetic impetus to Jesus:

Why does Jesus always wear a rag?

I don't know; ask his mother.⁶¹

These lines demythologise Jesus by stressing his dependency on a woman, his mother and the ordinary processes of life, to which he is subject, like everyone else. His scanty rag alludes to spiritual enlightenment through the denial of fleshly adornment and the espousing of poverty, but also calls to mind a menstrual rag. When these lines are read in this way, they become an audacious revisioning of Jesus' sex (and sexuality) as female, in the same way as the deity was found, earlier in the poem, to be a woman. A Messiah who could menstruate would partake of both male and female attributes and would owe more to "his mother", Mama Linga, than to any image of "God the Father". Le Guin's apparently light conversational tone in "Epiphany" enables her satire to extend beyond the level of myth: the gossip-mongering at the heart of the poem locates the mythology of women's inferiority at the level of casual conversation between people in a street, thus implying that it is a matter of absolutely common knowledge. "Epiphany" intervenes at this level to revise conventional gender relations so that fulfilment, enlightenment and protection do not come from Jesus (a man), or from heterosexual relations with men, but from women taking control of and revisioning conventional male deployments of the Symbolic functions of language.

“Epiphany” implies that formal innovation is part of the project of “stealing the language”, and indeed, this is a significant feature of Le Guin’s poetry. In a recent collection, *Incredible Good Fortune*, she writes that “Rhyme and meter were my native poetic tongue”.⁶² This claim can usefully be juxtaposed with her “Bryn Mawr Commencement Address”, in which she distinguishes between the “father tongue” and the “mother tongue” in terms that reverse the usual value judgements associated with male-centred and female-centred language:

The language of the fathers, of Man Ascending, Man the Conqueror, Civilized Man, is not your native tongue. It isn’t anybody’s native tongue.

Using the father tongue, I can speak of the mother tongue only, inevitably, to distance it – to exclude it. It is the other, inferior. It is primitive: inaccurate, unclear, coarse, limited, trivial, banal. It’s the same over and over, like the work called women’s work; earthbound, housebound.⁶³

Here Le Guin uses derogatory terms to lay the conceptual foundation for revaluing “the mother tongue” or women’s language. This definition (which is a non-definition, defining “the mother tongue” by its deconstructed representation) seems to contradict the assertion that “Rhyme and meter were my native poetic tongue”,⁶⁴ since the formal features of poetry generally carry masculine connotations of control and regularity. But these statements should be read in light of the poetic manifesto in “Read at the Award Dinner, May 1996”: “the poet’s measures serve anarchic joy”.⁶⁵ Bearing in mind, too, that Le Guin sees anarchy as feminine, it emerges that the “mother tongue” can harness the apparently masculine regularity of “[r]hyme and meter” to bring about a removal of hierarchies of power – specifically those that disempower women. Formal order and conceptual anarchy meet in the first section of *Incredible Good Fortune*, entitled “A Book of Songs”, which consists entirely of revised myths about women. The first poem is “The Old Lady”:

I have dreed my dree, I have wooed my wyrd,
and now I shall grow a five-foot beard
and braid it into tiny braids
and wander where the webfoot wades
among the water’s shining blades.
I will fear nothing I have feared.
I’m the queen of spades, the jack of trades,
braiding my knives into my beard.

Why should I know what I have known?
Once was enough to make it my own.
The things I got I will forget.

I'll knot my beard into a net
 and cast the net and catch a fish
 who will ungrant my every wish
 and leave me nothing but a stone
 on the riverbed alone,
 leave me nothing but a rock
 where the feet of herons walk.⁶⁶

The speaker of this poem revels in and exploits the interface between the sound-effects and semantic fields of words. For example, the first line, "I have dreed my dree, I have wooed my wyrd", celebrates multivalency and alliteration. According to the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, "dree" is archaic, used in the phrase "To dree one's weird: to suffer one's destiny. Mostly a mod. archaism".⁶⁷ In this line, the alliterative utterance subordinates semantic cogency to its play with the notion of "affronting one's destiny" (as Henry James's Isabel Archer in *A Portrait of a Lady* is known for).⁶⁸ The verb "wooed" in this line, echoed in the archaic "wyrd", alludes to what Rich calls "the romantic tradition".⁶⁹ "Dree" and "wyrd" are archaic terms — appropriately for an "Old Lady" — for the common but male-centred destiny of women: subservience to men in the social and domestic arenas. The "Old Lady", like the grandmother in "Read at the Award Dinner", has passed out of the reach of patriarchal usage as a valued unit of exchange. She is thus free to engage in gender-crossing activities, like growing a beard, as a witch would do, and — in an even more transgressive revisioning of a fairytale — taking on the canonically male role of the fisherman in Grimm's tale of "The Fisherman and His Wife".⁷⁰ The renowned Grimm brothers version is a cautionary tale against female greed and acquisitiveness. But, in Le Guin's poem, the repetition of words denoting cutting (such as "blades" and "knives") allows the enchanted fish to strip away possessions and "ungrant my every wish" so that the old lady may lose what is unnecessary and attain elemental simplicity and intimacy with "the feet of herons". The "ungranting" of wishes here emphasises the need to strip away the male-centred mis(in)forming of women's desires (shown by the Grimm brothers' tale) so that the old lady may return to the solidity of the "stone" and natural life.

By following the same route of refusal of male discursive ownership as the "housewife and grandmother" in "Read at the Award Dinner, May 1996", "The Old Lady" in this poem reaches a commensurate level of wildness and kinship with natural elements. The poem deploys the strategies of revisionist mythopoeia (in its refiguring of "The Fisherman's Wife"), and also harnesses linguistic experimentation by combining "wyrd", "wish" and the nature of ageing womanhood. It draws on poetry's capacity for condensing meaning into brief units of language to reconfigure the myth of "The Fisherman's Tale". The woman in this poem, armed with knives braided into her transvestite's beard, has the subversive power of negating, forgetting and removing the male-centred

conditioning that induces women to believe that they are dependent on men. If that were removed, the poem implies, “The Old Lady” would be free to pursue her kinship with the natural elements.

Conclusion

Despite their surprising neglect in feminist studies, Le Guin’s poems contribute significantly to feminist practice in women’s poetry of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Her strategies for representing women include giving voice to women’s anger at their representation as objects in patriarchal discourse; reversal and subversion of received stereotypes about men and women; taking control of the discourses of canonical literature and sexual/gender identities; and, perhaps most importantly, the revision of myth. As Ostriker notes, revisionist mythmaking invades “the sanctuaries of language where our meanings for ‘male’ and ‘female’ are stored; to rewrite them from a female point of view is to discover new possibilities for meaning”.⁷¹ Le Guin’s poetry is a significant voice in an extensive poetic conversation about the meanings that cluster around gender, identity and social relationships. By turning a critical eye on accepted beliefs and myths, her poems consistently refigure women’s identities as the subjects, not objects, of their own narratives of empowerment and freedom. Her poetry is surprisingly free of prejudice towards individual men even as it subverts the patriarchal system, as in “The House of the Spider: A Spell to Weave By”, where she distinguishes between “the rider”, an enemy of women, and “the brother”, who can share the maiden’s home with the nurturing spider. Le Guin’s lack of misandry distinguishes her poetry from the expressions of anti-male anger in some versions of feminism and articulates a unique impulse to refashion current gender arrangements along more egalitarian lines.

ENDNOTES

¹ Richard D. Erlich, *Coyote’s Song: The Teaching Stories of Ursula K. Le Guin* (Science Fiction Research Association e-book, 2000), archived online at <http://www.sfra.org/Coyote/poems.htm> (first accessed 20 February 2012), n.p.

² Erlich, op. cit., n.p.

³ Patrick D. Murphy, “The Left Hand of Fabulation: The Poetry of Ursula K. LeGuin” in Patrick D. Murphy and Vernon Hyles, eds, *The Poetic Fantastic: Studies in an Evolving Genre* (New York; Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. 123.

⁴ Patrick D. Murphy, “Foreword” in Patrick D. Murphy and Vernon Hyles, eds, *The Poetic Fantastic: Studies in an Evolving Genre* (New York; Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. xviii.

⁵ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (New York:

Routledge, 1990), pp. vii-viii.

⁶ Liz Yorke, *Impertinent Voices: Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Women's Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 3, original emphasis.

⁷ Alicia Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (London: The Women's Press, 1986).

⁸ Ostriker, op. cit., p. 126.

⁹ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1989), p. 13.

¹⁰ The prominence of dragons in Le Guin's writing is discussed by various critics: for example, in my article (Deirdre Byrne, "Woman Dragon: Ursula K. Le Guin's transformations in *Tehanu*, *The Other Wind* and *Tales from Earthsea*", *Mousaion* 29.3 (2011), pp. 154-165). Darko Suvin also comments that "there are the dragons, unexplainable away" in his article (Darko Suvin, "On U. K. Le Guin's 'Second Earthsea Trilogy' and its Cognitions: A Commentary" *Extrapolation* 22.12 (2006), p. 495).

¹¹ Ursula K. Le Guin, *Earthsea Revisioned* (Cambridge: Children's Literature New England, 1993a), p. 22, original emphasis.

¹² *Tehanu* is subtitled *The Last Book of Earthsea*, but was followed in 2000 by *Tales of Earthsea* and in 2001 by *The Other Wind*, both set in Earthsea.

¹³ Le Guin, *Earthsea Revisioned*, p. 23.

¹⁴ Ursula K. Le Guin, *Tehanu: The Last Book of Earthsea* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), "Tehanu", p. 249.

¹⁵ Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1989a), p. 168.

¹⁶ Ursula K. Le Guin, *Wild Angels* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1975), p. 21.

¹⁷ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 35.

¹⁸ Le Guin, *Wild Angels*, p. 28.

¹⁹ Murphy, "Foreword", p. xviii.

²⁰ Le Guin received two awards in 1996: the Locus Readers Award for *Four Ways to Forgiveness* and the James Tiptree Jr. Retrospective Award for *The Left Hand of Darkness* (<http://www.ursulaklequin.com/MenuContentsList.html#Awards>, accessed 4 March 2010).

²¹ Ursula K. Le Guin, *Sixty Odd: New Poems* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), p. 11.

²² Le Guin's depiction of anarchy is documented by Lewis Call, who labels it "postmodern anarchism" (Lewis Call, "Postmodern Anarchism in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin", *SubStance* 36.2 (2007), pp. 87-105) because of the discursive qualifications Le Guin inserts into her anarchist politics.

²³ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science*

Fiction, ed. Susan Wood; revised edition ed. Ursula K. Le Guin (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), p. 164.

²⁴ In the poem "Housewife" in *Blue Moon over Thurman Street*, Le Guin similarly re-vision the housewifely role as "Woman house / Lifeholder / Household / Stronghold" (Ursula K. Le Guin, *Blue Moon over Thurman Street*, Portland: NewSage Press, 1994, p. 94).

²⁵ Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1986), p. 403.

²⁶ Owls in Mythology and Culture, <http://www.owlpages.com/articles.php?section=Owl+Mythology&title=Myth+and+Culture>, accessed 20 April 2012.

²⁷ Le Guin, *Always Coming Home*, pp. 400-1.

²⁸ Joanne Mulcahy, "Weave and Mend", *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 21.3 (2000), pp. 197-209.

²⁹ Jane Hirshfield, "Completing the Weave", *American Poetry Review* 12.4 (1983), p. 4.

³⁰ kate huard, "WEAVE: Activism against Violence Against Women", *Off our Backs* 25.11 (1995), p. 4.

³¹ Ursula K. Le Guin, *Wild Oats and Fireweed: New Poems* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 43.

³² Paula Gunn Allen, ed., *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1991), p. 28.

³³ Mary Daly (with Jane Caputi), *Webster's First Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (London: The Women's Press, 1988), p. 167.

³⁴ Daly, op. cit., p. 3.

³⁵ Daly and Le Guin are almost exact contemporaries, born in 1928 and 1927 respectively (Margalit Fox, "Mary Daly, a Leader in Feminist Theology, dies at 81" *New York Times*, 7 January 2010, (http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/07/education/07daly.html?_r=1, accessed 28 April 2012).

³⁶ Le Guin, *The Language of the Night*, p. 96.

³⁷ Le Guin, *The Language of the Night*, p. 139.

³⁸ Amy M. Clarke, *Ursula K. Le Guin's Journey to Post-Feminism* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), p. 14.

³⁹ Adrienne Rich, "When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1976), archived online at <http://www.nbu.bg/webs/amb/american/5/rich/writing.htm> (first accessed on 20 January 2012).

⁴⁰ Yorke, op. cit., p. 2.

⁴¹ Ostriker, op. cit., p. 216.

⁴² *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* (London: Virago, 2005), Christa Wolf's

Medea: A Modern Retelling (Trans. John Cullen, London: Virago, 1999) and Jeanette Winterson's *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles* (Canada: Knopf, 2005) are some other examples of feminist reworkings of classical myth.

⁴³ Ostriker, op. cit., p. 217.

⁴⁴ Ostriker, op. cit., p. 219.

⁴⁵ Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 200.

⁴⁶ Ostriker, op. cit., p. 216.

⁴⁷ Le Guin, *Wild Oats and Fireweed*, p. 34.

⁴⁸ Le Guin, *Wild Oats and Fireweed*, pp. 34-5.

⁴⁹ Ostriker, op. cit., p. 221.

⁵⁰ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (London: Penguin, 1955 (rpt. 1960)), p. 239.

⁵¹ Medusa's hair was her crowning glory until Poseidon made advances to her in Athena's temple, after which Athena punished Medusa by turning her hair into snakes (Graves, op. cit., p. 239).

⁵² Erlich, op. cit., n.p.

⁵³ Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers, *The Medusa Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. xx.

⁵⁴ Le Guin, *Wild Oats and Fireweed*, p. 36.

⁵⁵ Le Guin, *Wild Oats and Fireweed*, p. 36.

⁵⁶ Ostriker, op. cit., p. 211. In using the idea of "female Prometheuses", Ostriker herself revises the classical Greek myth in which Prometheus was chained to a rock and sentenced to have his liver eaten daily as a punishment for having given language to human beings.

⁵⁷ Ursula K. Le Guin, *Hard Words and Other Poems*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 19.

⁵⁸ Heilbrun, op. cit., p. 48.

⁵⁹ Ostriker, op. cit., p. 219.

⁶⁰ Erlich, op. cit., n.p.

⁶¹ Le Guin, *Hard Words*, p. 19.

⁶² Ursula K. Le Guin, *Incredible Good Fortune: New Poems* (Boston: Shambhala, 2007), p. xi.

⁶³ Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1989a), p. 149.

⁶⁴ Le Guin, *Incredible Good Fortune*, p. xi.

⁶⁵ Le Guin, *Sixty Odd*, p. 11.

⁶⁶ Le Guin, *Incredible Good Fortune*, p. 3.

⁶⁷ C.T. Onions (ed.), *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 562.

⁶⁸ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (Rockville, Maryland: Serenity Publishers, 2009), p. 12.

⁶⁹ Rich, op. cit., n.p.

⁷⁰ Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, "The Fisherman and his Wife" (2004), archived online at <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm019.html> (first accessed on 5 March 2012).

⁷¹ Ostriker, op. cit., p. 21.

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