

**BEYOND GENDER? IMAGINING UTOPIA IN URSULA K. LE  
GUIN'S *THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS***

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## **Abstract**

In my thesis I analyze the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) by Ursula K. Le Guin, focusing in particular on the representation of androgyny and the discussions of gender, sexual difference and humanness that it engenders. I argue that science fiction and utopia, as critical and potentially revolutionary genres, provide a fecund ground for a feminist critique of the present society and imagining possible alternatives. I also look at feminism's conflicted relationship with the myth or concept of androgyny and suggest that even today it can be a useful tool for questioning our ideas about gender and identity because it is an emblem of our inability to "solve" the problem of sexual difference. Finally, I am interested in Le Guin's vision of androgyny which is processual, non-essential, and rejects the idea of opposition as the driving force of progress. Her contribution, I contend, lies in the attempt to rethink dualism without hierarchy and to acknowledge the interdependence of the two principles (masculine/feminine) in creating wholeness.

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## Introduction

In my thesis I am going to analyze the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) by the American author Ursula K. Le Guin, which is one of the first feminist science fiction novels to depict an androgynous society. In the novel, Genly Ai, an Envoy of an intergalactic union of worlds, lands on the planet Gethen with the aim of convincing the nations of this world to join the union. However, his task turns out to be more challenging than expected since it is continually obstructed by his own confusion over the absence of gender and the peculiar physiognomy of Gethenians.

Even though it was published 45 years ago, at a time when the discussions of sex and gender were gaining ground and androgyny was just coming into vogue as a potentially feminist concept, Le Guin's novel does not feel dated nor have the issues it tackles have been resolved. In fact, *The Left Hand of Darkness* can be said to have anticipated some of the later developments in feminist theory, including gender performativity, homophobia and exclusionary strategies, or even transgenderism. Perhaps literature ages more slowly than theory does, and perhaps, at the same time, it responds to social anxieties more promptly. As Tom Moylan argues, "[w]hat in history cannot yet be worked out in the realm of theory and practice is provisionally organized and unknotted in the antinomies, or binary oppositions, produced in the formal operation and figures of the text" (47). In the framework of my thesis that means that feminist utopian science fiction in particular provided the space for addressing issues such as sexism and stereotypes; the construction and performance of gender; the relationship between sexuality, reproduction and family; social and political inequality; the encounter with the Other, and many more.

In the first chapter I illuminate the relationship between science fiction, utopia, and feminism. My aim is to point out some of the shared issues in these respective fields and show

why their union can be seen as unsurprising, productive, or even revolutionary: all of them imagine alternatives, are oppositional, creative and critical of the present society, and challenge our assumptions of what is normal, acceptable and just.

In the second chapter I outline a number of theories of androgyny that I consider helpful for a better understanding of my thesis topic. Starting from Plato's myth of primordial beings, I look at how his conception of androgyny affected future understandings of the nature of sexual difference. I proceed to map the conflicting views on androgyny during the second wave of feminism, whereby I situate Le Guin's novel in the context of a wider theoretical discussion of androgyny. Finally, I provide a psychoanalytic and a deconstructive interpretation, both of which look at androgyny not as a condition or an entity, but as a sign that disrupts the existing system of meaning.

The third chapter is entirely devoted to my reading of the novel. I am interested in the representation of androgyny in the novel and how it brings into play gender, sexual difference, and the human/alien boundary. The relationship between fiction and prediction, and the real and imaginary, is another issue that I find relevant. Further, I will look at the (im)possibility of encountering radically different human beings and the ethics of this encounter. Finally, I want to explore how androgyny relates to a specific conception of temporality, progress and utopia.

## 1. Likely Bedfellows: Science Fiction, Utopia, and Feminism

In this chapter I endeavor to illuminate the relationship between three fields that are so incredibly vast and heterogeneous – science fiction, utopia, and feminism – that the task might seem overly ambitious and finally unfeasible considering the amount of space I have at my disposal. However, my aim here is not to provide a wholesome overview of the scholarship on these subjects or to contribute to, or even reflect upon, the most influential theoretical works since I do not find that to be crucial for my analysis. I merely wish to point out some of the issues in these respective fields and offer a glimpse into their complexity, whereby I hope to demonstrate why their union can be seen as unsurprising, productive, and potentially revolutionary in that they all imagine alternatives, are oppositional, creative, and critical of the present society, challenging our assumptions of what is normal, acceptable and just.

### *1.1 Mrs. Brown on the Spaceship: Science Fiction as Paraliterature*

I would like to start by referring to an absorbing essay by Ursula K. Le Guin entitled “Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown”<sup>1</sup> (1975), from which this chapter borrows its title and in which she discusses the position of science fiction in relation to other, more *literary*, genres. Le Guin wonders whether SF can be considered literature, or whether it is merely literature’s ugly sibling who is unable to produce rounded and memorable characters that we find in realist fiction, for example.<sup>2</sup> In the following sections I try to provide some basic orientation points in the vast and contested field of SF and show why, as a non-serious and marginalized

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Brown is a reference to Virginia Woolf’s 1923 essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” in which she discusses the representation and importance of characters in modern fiction.

<sup>2</sup> And her answer is yes, science fiction can produce rounded characters and be literary: “if we can’t catch Mrs. Brown, if only for a moment, then all the beautiful faster-than-light ships, all the irony and imagination and knowledge are in vain . . . What good are all the objects in the universe, if there is no subject?” (110, 113).

genre – a bastard genre, so to speak – it has proven to be particularly fruitful for feminist writers.

It is stated by the authors of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* that “[t]here is really no good reason to expect that a workable definition of SF will ever be established,” and that “SF is arguably not a genre in the strict sense at all” (Clute and Nicholls 593). Patrick Parrinder opines that the “[d]efinitions of science fiction are not so much a series of logical approximations to an elusive ideal, as a small, parasitic sub-genre in themselves” (qtd. in Shaw 2). According to Farah Mendelsohn, SF “is less a genre – a body of writing from which one can expect certain plot elements and specific tropes – than an ongoing discussion,” and a mode that is “quite happy to extract its plot structures from any available genre” (1, 3). Joanna Russ similarly says that SF “includes (or is parasitic upon . . .) non-science fiction” (11). It can be concluded that SF is some kind of a parasite; a promiscuous, illegitimate genre that subsists on other genres, borrowing from them but at the same time defining itself against them.

Discussing the relationship between SF and “high literature,” Fredrick Jameson claims that it is precisely the paralysis of the latter that has provided “[t]he historical opportunities of SF as a literary form” (270). He continues,

[t]he officially ‘non-serious’ or pulp character of SF is an indispensable feature in its capacity to relax that tyrannical ‘reality principle’ which functions as a crippling censorship over high art, and to allow the ‘paraliterary’ form thereby to inherit the vocation of giving us alternate versions of a world that has elsewhere seemed to resist even imagined change (270).

According to Samuel R. Delany, this “paraliterary” or “non-serious” form can be distinguished from other genres based on subjunctivity, the work’s relationship to reality. So, for example, in realist fiction the subjunctivity is *this could have happened*; in fantasy it is *this could not have happened*; and in science fiction it is *this has not happened* (although it *might* happen, or it has not happened *yet*) (Bernardo and Murphy 13-14). But how, asks Russ, can

one write seriously about something that does not exist (16)? Jameson suggests a more complex temporal relationship between SF and reality: SF does not so much offer us images of the future as it “defamiliarize[s] and restructure[s] our experience of our own present (286). In this view, the “might happen” is not located in the future, but in fact refers to the present.<sup>3</sup>

In *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1977), the influential SF theorist Darko Suvin discusses the tension between reality and imagination, or between what is familiar and what is Unknown or Other, arguing that “SF is a developed oxymoron, a *realistic irreality*, with humanized nonhumans” (my emphasis, viii). “The presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition,” he writes, are “the necessary and sufficient conditions [for SF],” and their “main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (“Poetics” 375). Suvin uses the concept of the *novum*<sup>4</sup> to designate a “totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author’s reality” (64); it is a novelty or innovation validated by scientifically methodical cognition (66). Cognition for Suvin implies an active and creative approach to reality: it is not simply a mirroring of the author’s world, but an engagement and reflection on it (“Poetics” 372).

In that respect, the SF text can be perceived as a laboratory in which the writer creates a new world, “isolates one or a few variables . . . and performs an experiment, builds an imaginative paradigm, peoples it,” and sees what happens (Annas 143). It is precisely this “dialectical relationship between the world and its imaginative and ideational reconstructions in the creations of the mind” that makes SF “more useful than ‘mainstream’ fiction for exploring possibilities for social change” (Annas 145-6), and also the reason why it can be thought of as “revolutionary literature” (144).

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Baudrillard similarly writes that “science fiction is merely a reflection of our everyday universe, which is in thrall to a wild speculation on . . . otherness and difference” (124).

<sup>4</sup> In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the *novum* is the Gethenian body, subject to the cyclical alteration of *somer* and *kemmer*, and the resultant absence of gender as the social construction of sexual difference.



## 1.2 Gendering the Genre, Surfing the New Wave

Starting from the late 1960s, women writers have recognized and utilized the revolutionary potential of SF, using it as a platform for “feminist imaginative projects that are the necessary first steps in undertaking the cultural and social transformations,” as Veronica Hollinger suggests (128). “Given the limited political, economic and social clout of feminists,” writes Alessa Johns, feminists “have sought out cultural modes, especially artistic and literary representations, as the most eligible means of making a different future comprehensible to the largest possible audience” (175). Therefore, if, following Butler, we “consider literary narrative as a place where theory takes place” (*Bodies* 135), we will see that feminist fiction, just like theory and critical discourse, can “defamiliarize certain taken-for-granted aspects of ordinary human reality” and “[contest] the hegemonic representations of a patriarchal culture that does not recognize its ‘others’” (Hollinger 129).

In fact, (science) fiction of the late ‘60s and ‘70 anticipated the theoretical discourse on gender and discussions on issues such as gender roles, androgyny, or heteronormativity. Tom Moylan explains that literary texts can provide “imaginary resolutions to real social contradictions” and that they form “a significant part of the social process of discourse, debate, and conflict about power and social relations” (30). As a space for imagining new worlds, alternative societies and different humans, science fiction can serve as a playground for feminist considerations and criticism of gender, sexuality, social roles and oppression, reproduction, patriarchy, and much more. It can be said that the power of fantasy is that “is not the opposite of reality . . . [it] is part of the articulation of the possible; it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility . . . Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise (Butler, *Undoing* 28-9).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I should point out that Butler is not writing about science fiction in particular or even about literature here, but about fantasy in general, and the relationship between reality and imagination. However, I cannot help noticing

It was in the context of the social movements of the 1960s (the anti-war, gay rights, African-American civil rights and counterculture movements) and contemporaneous with the second wave of feminism (marked in the US by such events as the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the passing of the Equal Pay Act of 1963, and the approval of the contraceptive pill) that feminist SF authors started to reject the masculinism and sexism of the pulp era science fiction.<sup>6</sup> "The doors", writes Ursula K. Le Guin, "were getting thrown open to all kinds of more experimental writing, more literary writing, riskier writing . . . And of course, women were creeping in, infiltrating. Infesting the premises" (*The Paris Review*). The works of these authors challenged social inequality and went "further still into exploring new conceptions of power relations between men and women" (Higgins 77) through a form that, despite its misogyny and use of stereotypes, had historically been marginalized and excised from the domain of high culture, much like women's contributions have been. As Pamela Annas explains,

[t]hough SF writers have often sounded – and been – politically conservative, the form in which they have chosen to work shares with oppressed socioeconomic groups a perceptual technique: dual vision. For oppressed groups, dual vision means seeing the world and yourself through two sets of opposed values (144).

Feminist interventions had thus transformed the genre on several levels: by condemning the representation of female (and male) characters in SF, and by showing that SF can be more than low-quality, cliché-ridden entertainment. Jenny Wolmark states that women writers have "brought the politics of feminism into a genre with a solid tradition of ignoring or excluding

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that both she and Delany locate fantasy (not meant as a genre, but imagination) and science fiction in the realm of potentiality, the not yet actualized.

<sup>6</sup> The term "pulp era" refers to magazines published between 1896 and the 1950s, but more specifically to 1920s' and early 1930s' science fiction stories published in pulp magazines that were printed on cheap paper manufactured from chemically treated wood pulp. These stories paid little attention to "political matters, mostly taking it for granted . . . that technological progress was the real engine of social change" (*Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* 1752). Today the term is "associated primarily with stories written, usually rapidly, for the least intellectual segment of the sf market - packed with adventure but with little emphasis on character, which is usually stereotyped, or on ideas, which are frugally and constantly recycled (1814).

women writers” (qtd. in Shaw 3). Moreover, they have repudiated the popular belief that the subject matter of SF (science and technology) is inherently masculine by unmasking a number of self/other dichotomies suggested by ‘gender’ (for example, the idea of science as masculine and nature – the object of research – as feminine) that inform the scientific culture in general (Merrick 241).

This new movement in SF, called the New Wave, “sought to combine SF’s extrapolative power and sense of wonder with avant-garde literary experimentation” (Higgins 74), moving from hard to soft sciences and putting the characters, and not technology, center-stage. The writers were “no longer really [interested] in the gadget, or the size of the universe, or the laws of robotics, or the destiny of social classes, or anything describable in quantitative, or mechanical, or objective terms . . . Their subject is the subject, that which cannot be other than subject: ourselves (Le Guin, “Mrs Brown” 105).

The term “new wave” evolved around the SF magazine *New Worlds*, whose editor Michael Moorcock “demanded that stories for *New Worlds* be more literary and abandon the tired clichés of space travel, marauding aliens, and cowboys in outer space in favor of adult themes that explored the depths of human experience” (Bernardo and Murphy 16). The period was also marked by a transition from shorter formats written for magazines to novels which allowed for a more in-depth representation of both characters and their alien worlds. Among the most important feminist works of the period are Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975), Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and the short stories of James Tiptree Jr.<sup>7</sup> By taking up science fiction, these authors were able to “take the present position of women and use the metaphors of science fiction to illuminate it” (Green and Lefanu, qtd. in Shaw 3). For example, Le Guin

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<sup>7</sup> Tiptree was the pseudonym of Alice Bradley Sheldon, whose real identity was not known for a long time and who was generally presumed to be male. In his introduction to Tiptree’s short story collection *Warm Worlds and Otherwise* (1975), Robert Silverberg wrote that the author of these stories cannot possibly be a woman. He later added a postscript to correct himself.

depicts a world in which people have cyclical sexuality and no gender; Russ juxtaposes a utopian world without men to a dystopian world in which men and women are at war; Piercy writes about a poor Mexican-American woman in a mental hospital who meets an androgynous person from the future; and Tiptree's short story "The Women Men Don't See" deals with the (im)possibility of a woman's voice in SF.

In his short study of the New Wave (or "new utopian fiction," as he calls it) on the example of seven novels published in the 1970s, Peter Fitting provides a good overview of the changed approach to both science and utopian fiction during this time. According to him, these authors were interested in imagining a world without exploitation and how a change in the social structure might contribute to a more equal and fair world. "[I]n the hands of a newer generation of writers, the generic potential of these forms to describe other worlds and societies . . . has been richly developed," he claims, and their novels "portray non-hierarchical and non-oppressive social and sexual relationships and patterns of behavior," "imagin[ing] an alternate future grounded in a politics of hope" (156-7, 178).

One of the most important characteristics of the New Wave is the shift from systematic and planned utopias "to more open and ambiguous imaginary societies which focus instead on the forms and textures of everyday life" (157). In these works societies are constructed as being in process, "straining to come into being and open to change" (157). Moreover, we encounter "new social forms based on equality of the sexes and on alternative forms of love relationships, living patterns, and parenting" (159). There is an interest in interrogating the social construction of gender and an attempt to present a society that is no longer based on sex and hierarchy. In order to resolve inequality, some authors have displaced women's bodies as the sole site of reproduction and mothering, some have eliminated gender, while others have removed men altogether. Overall, the innovations of the New Wave are most evident in three interrelated areas: first, there are basic living units (usually communal in character) developed

as an alternative to the nuclear family (which is seen as the main unit for reproducing patriarchal relations); second, gender and the division of labor are no longer taken for granted (a full range of activities is open to everyone – people choose work according to interest, talent and ability); and third, sexuality itself is questioned, “both as an index to human fulfillment and in opposition to heterosexism and/or attempts to limit it to procreation” (165).

### ***1.3 “To Succeed by Failure:” Reinventing Utopia***

The word utopia comes from the Greek *ou* (“not”) and *topos* (“place”), meaning “no place,” and was coined by Thomas More in his book *Utopia* (1516). More created a tension between the meaning of utopia as a non-existing place (*outopia*) and a good place (*eutopia*). Gregory Claeys explains that even though today “[t]he term ‘utopia’ has come to imply so much that its meaning usually collapses under the weight of multiple associations,” it is not likely that this “common-language sense of the term . . . as an idealized future or past, or non-existent ideal society” is ever going to disappear (147). Nevertheless, Claeys insists that utopia “does not generically portray the perfect society,” but is concerned only with *perfectability* (149) since the idea of what is ideal or perfect in a given society is not universal but depends on the prevailing political ideology and a subjective conception of what is desirable (Vieira 6). Furthermore, utopia should not be taken literally, as a blueprint or a model, but as a strategy or a reaction to a deficient present and an aspiration to overcome problems by imagining possible alternatives (Vieira 7, 23; Claeys 150).<sup>8</sup> Thus, utopias can be seen as reactive – “supply[ing] in fiction what their authors believe society . . . lack[s] in the here-and-now” (Russ 144) – and as a critical tool for reflecting on the present by exploring different possibilities in another time and/or place.

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<sup>8</sup> Imagining alternatives and reflecting on the present is where utopia and science fiction come together. Jameson in fact considers utopia to be a socio-economic sub-genre of science fiction (xiv), but there is no agreement between theoreticians on the exact nature of the relationship of these two genres.

Jameson describes utopia as a diagnostic intervention, “the identification of a problem to be solved and the inventive ingenuity with which a series of solutions are proposed and tested” (11). Further, “[t]here is here some affinity with . . . the outsider’s gift for seeing overfamiliar realities in a fresh and unaccustomed way” (11). Interestingly, Jameson considers failure to be the structural necessity of utopia, inscribed in it from the start. As a matter of fact, utopia can only “succeed by failure” (289), because it is the failure that reveals something about the nature of utopia itself; namely, that “the effort to imagine utopia ends up betraying the impossibility of doing so” because it sheds light on our own absolute limits when it comes to imagining otherness (290). But in spite of that, utopia “must be concrete and ongoing” – the production of the unresolvable contradiction is its fundamental process, and, what is more, “we must imagine some form of gratification inherent in this very confrontation with pessimism and the impossible” (84). Therefore, utopia should not be seen as a frozen image or a definite ideal model to be followed, but as a desire which can never achieve its goal; it is always imperfect, but it is precisely imperfection that keeps it going and makes it productive.

The new utopianism of the 1960s and 1970s developed contemporaneously with and was influenced by feminist, ecological, and New Left thought (Vieira 21). Utopian thinking became incorporated in the construction of everyday life and started operating at a micro-level (22). The new “postdystopian utopias, or critical utopias, or open-ended utopias . . . [not only] overcome narrative stasis through ambiguity, contradiction, fragmentation, and hetero/*tropia*,” but “create, in their very form, an experience of change recognizable in its complexity and its pain” (Jacobs 110-1). The new utopias also resist “a reductive tendency [of traditional patriarchal utopias] to perfection that negates the utopian impulse that generated them” and opt instead for fluidity and processuality which is “never realized or complete, but always revolutionary, fill[ing] the gap between what exists and what could be” (Teslenko 169).

To describe the reinvented utopian genre, Tom Moylan uses the term “critical utopia.” In *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (1986), he argues that the critical utopian novel was made possible by the developments in the literary space of science fiction of the 1960s. He explains that both “utopia and science fiction are most concerned with the current moment in history, but they represent that moment in an estranged manner,” and it is in “the estranged vision of another society” that we can find “the seeds for changing the present society” (35). The critical utopia, according to Moylan, “present[s] the utopian society in a more critical light” and is not afraid to show faults, inconsistencies and problems (44). Furthermore, it is self-reflexive and resists closure, and “negates static ideals, preserves radical action, and creates a neutral space in which opposition can be articulated and received” (51). Even though it is critical of both the historical situation and the genre itself, the critical utopia manages to “keep the utopian impulse alive by challenging it and deconstructing it within its very pages” (46). We can also speak of the return of the subject in critical utopias: as a rule, they feature “a human subject in action” whose quest is presented as more interesting and important than the description of the society, which takes precedence in traditional utopias.

The complementarity of new utopianism and feminism is hard to miss. Alessa Johns emphasizes the importance of utopian imagination for feminism in spite of the fact that “classic works in the genre have treated women so poorly” (175) (much like science fiction works have). New feminist utopian and science fiction novels do not necessarily depict societies that are significantly better than our own nor provide a utopian *dénouement*. Nevertheless, as Tatiana Teslenko suggests, the new utopias have provided “the female subject with a possibility for a counter discourse” (163) and, more generally, they “reflect the recognition of the personal as political, as well as an open critique of the “normal” patriarchal discourse. They demystify biology, treating it as not destiny; not, at least, in social and

political terms. . . . They [offer] possibilities for transformation not only for the woman, but for the man as well” (165).

It can be inferred that both utopianism and feminism wish “to break with the status quo and open up a radical path to a not yet realized future” (Moynlan 50); both “embody two large, dialectically active principles: resistance to injustice and a sense of the possibility of change;” and both are “at once oppositional *and* creative” (Stimpson 2). Catherine Stimpson goes so far as to argue that the relationship between feminism and utopianism goes beyond mere compatibility: “[i]ndeed, I suggest that feminism is the primary Utopian movement in the West today and a primary influence on Utopian thinking and speculative fictions” (2). Whether we choose to agree with this strong statement or not, the fact remains that feminism, utopia, and science fiction had formed a fruitful marriage in this period, and it would be difficult (and quite unnecessary) to untangle their mutual influences.



## 2. Theorizing Androgyny

In the most general way, the androgyne can be defined as “a person who unites certain of the essential characteristics of both sexes, and who consequently, may be considered as both a man and a woman, or as neither a man nor a woman, or bisexual or asexual” (Busst, qtd. in Pacteau 73). But even such a straightforward and largely incontestable definition ends up telling us more about what androgyny is *not* rather than what it *is*. Historically, androgyny has proven to be elusive and difficult to pin down – despite the numerous attempts to do so – seeing as it is repeatedly produced and reproduced “in relation to the various requirements of history, culture and the literary imagination” (Hargreaves 3).

But why talk about this contested concept today, after it has been pronounced outdated and expunged from feminist theory? I wish to argue that even though the term may have been discarded, the idea of androgyny persists to this day, and will continue to persist for as long as the issues of sexual difference, gender and inequality remain unresolved. As Rita Felski points out, “[t]he erosion of gender remains indissolubly linked to the affirmation of particular gendered identities . . . Gender, in this sense, remains both essential and impossible for feminism” (347). It may even be argued that the androgyne has taken on a new life as a cyborg – finally, a thorough reinvention of the patriarchal myth so desired by second wave feminists! Unfortunately, I do not have space here to develop this argument; I only wish to stress that issues pertaining to androgyny continue to trouble us even if the term itself is no longer used. Indeed, the desire for overcoming gender and biological restraints (whether by means of abolishing difference or multiplying it in response to the binary model<sup>9</sup>) – as first articulated by Shulamith Firestone back in 1970 – is kept very much alive through

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough,” in *The Sciences* (March/April 1993): 20-24. She argues that hermaphrodites “challenge traditional beliefs about sexual difference” (24) and believes that the multiplication of the sexes beyond imaginable limits would lead to a just world of shared powers.

posthumanist and postgender discourses, and it is probably safe to assume it will only increase as biotechnology advances and promises to liberate us from biological determinism and social roles (that is not to say that it will actually do that).<sup>10</sup>

My aim is not to propose a new definition of androgyny nor to provide an extensive history of the concept (which is in itself incredibly interesting), but by outlining the select few approaches to show that the idea of androgyny serves as a repository for anxiety over the issues of gender, sexuality, reproduction, wholeness, and even immortality. Thus I hold that the way we respond to (the representations of) androgyny is much more interesting than its actual definitions, as I hope to show through my reading of Le Guin's 1969 novel, which will partly be guided by the said interpretations. The texts that I have found most useful for my reading of androgyny in the novel are those of Nancy Topping Bazin and Alma Freeman, and Francette Pacteau. Bazin's and Freeman's vision is akin to Le Guin's in that both understand the feminine and the masculine principles not as a hierarchy, but as a creative and balanced relationship in which both halves modify each other. They also posit a universal underlying androgyny (i.e., non-gendered humanness) of all human beings, which, if acknowledged and embraced, would lead to a radical change in society and ethics. Pacteau's text, on the other hand, was extremely insightful for me because of the distinction she makes between visibility

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<sup>10</sup> For example, in their book *The Last Sex: Feminism and Outlaw Bodies* (1993) Marilouise and Arthur Kroker talk about the new, post-male and post-female sexual horizon, and are calling for "the third sex" that would exist outside the male/female antinomies. The third sex is "a virtual sex floating in an elliptical orbit around the planet of gender that it has left behind" (18). Their work can be situated in the context of postmodernist discussions of transsexuality as a privileged trope of the de-differentiation of sexual difference, as Rita Felski points out (341). In *The Transparency of Evil* (1993) Jean Baudrillard bemoans the fact that today "sexuality is lost in the theatrical excess of its ambiguity" and that we have become "politically indifferent and undifferentiated beings, androgynous and hermaphroditic" (22, 25). According to Baudrillard, we are all already transsexual – "not in any anatomical sense, but rather in the more general sense of transvestitism, of playing with the commutability of the signs of sex (20). It follows that transsexuality, just like androgyny, can be described as a crisis of signification, or an irresponsible, playful, non-serious use of signs that ultimately leads to "sexual indifference" – a lack of differentiation between the sexual poles and privileging of *appearance* instead of *being* (20, 23). In that light, transsexuality can be seen as an overarching metaphor for "the dissolution of once stable polarities of male and female, the transfiguration of sexual nature into the artifice of those who play with the sartorial, morphological, or gestural signs of sex," as Felski concludes (337). It would appear, then, that in the postmodern world androgyny is very much alive; it has merely transformed into the more topical transsexuality.

(hermaphrodite) and invisibility (androgynous) of difference. I was impressed by her interpretation of androgyny as appearance, which was useful to me in looking at the way the outsider in the novel perceives androgynous aliens and keeps stumbling against his own preconceptions.

## ***2.1 The Origin of Love***

In Greek and Roman antiquity, relates Luc Brisson, people carefully examined their children for signs of dual sexuality,<sup>11</sup> a threatening mutation that made sexual reproduction impossible and undermined family life (7). In everyday life, dual sexuality was somewhat tolerated, but it was marginalized and feared since it represented a deviance from the norm. In myth, on the other hand, androgyny played an important role because it “expresse[d] the total coincidence of opposites that characterize the origin of all things” (Brisson 72).

Probably the most famous narrative about the primordial unity of human beings and the origin of sexual difference is presented in the speech of Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*. In the beginning, recounts Aristophanes, there were three kinds of dual, spherical human beings: men, women, and the union of the two – androgynes/hermaphrodites.<sup>12</sup> The latter pair was “a unity in form no less than name, composed of both sexes . . . whereas now it has come to be merely a name of reproach” (Plato 135). These creatures were round and had four hands, four feet, two faces, and the rest to correspond. They were very strong and fast and started scheming to attack the gods, which led Zeus to slice them in half and so reduce their strength. He also moved their genitals to the front so they can reproduce (before that, there was no reproduction – the beings would simply rise from the earth). Formerly double male beings became homosexuals, double female beings became lesbians, and the men-women became

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<sup>11</sup> Brisson uses the term to refer to the possession of both female and male genitalia.

<sup>12</sup> Terms *androgynous* and *hermaphrodite* are used interchangeably in different translations.

heterosexuals.<sup>13</sup> With our original form cut in two, each half would look for its fellow, longing to be reunited; thus anciently “is mutual love ingrained in mankind, reassembling our early estate and endeavoring to combine two in one and heal the human sore” (Plato 141).

In *The Metaphysics of Sex* (1983), Julius Evola warns that we should not take Aristophanes’s story literally; “instead, we should conceive of a *state*, a spiritual condition of origins, not so much in the historical sense as in the framework of an ontology” (43). He suggests that Plato’s myth is concerned with the state of absolute being which is neither divided nor dual; moreover, as a complete entity, it signifies the state of immortality (43). For Evola, sexual love is a quest for the elimination of duality, a desire to undo the distinction between self and not-self by participating in absolute being: flesh becomes a mere tool for “an ecstatic approximation of the achievement of unity (44).

In his book on androgyny and hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman antiquity (2002), Brisson similarly argues that “simultaneous dual sexuality”<sup>14</sup> can be seen as an archetype that signifies permanent fusion and thus ensures immortality: “it is because we are finite that we have but one sex” (82). The dual being, by containing both sexes, is in fact neither (it is asexual), and it does not reproduce since reproduction only comes after the split which marks the beginning of multiplicity and the fall from immortality. Thus for Aristophanes, Brisson writes, “this desire for fusion is a yearning to return to the past. But the coincidence of the two sexes could also be regarded as an expectation, an ultimate project” (82). If it is through recognition of our bisexual nature that we can hope to achieve fulfillment, then androgyny represents at the same time a lost state of origin and a utopian future time in which we will have regained this state (on some level, this is the main demand of postgenderism today: to

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<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that in Plato homosexuality is considered as “natural” as heterosexuality, because the three types of beings exist on equal terms. Further, reproduction was not the sole purpose of sexual encounters – there was also pleasure: “if male met with male [but no mention of two females!] they might have some satiety of their union and a relief” (Plato 141).

<sup>14</sup> Which he distinguishes from “successive dual sexuality” – the ability to shift from one sex to the other – which does not signify primordial unity, but is related to diviners and mediators.

imagine a future in which difference will once again become irrelevant). Since we all share “an archaic memory” which precedes our “apprenticeship to differences, we should be able to recognize our androgynous structure” (Badinter 169). In other words, in order to (once again) become androgynous, we have to *unlearn* sexual difference and learn how to express the stifled part of ourselves. “It is therefore not so much the ‘advent’ of an androgynous nature that we are becoming aware of but more its ‘return’ . . . ‘the return of the repressed,’” as Elisabeth Badinter puts it (167).

Badinter also reflects on how the complementarity of the sexes had been turned into a hierarchical relationship. In the beginning, she writes, man and woman completed each other so well that they were “almost all-powerful: the masters of life,” and there was nothing that *a priori* indicated “the supremacy of the One or the lesser necessity of the Other” (5). However, when the dualism of the sexes becomes rooted in the truth of the body (the view of women as emotional, frail and immobile due to their reproductive capability, and men as strong and rational), “ideology seizes upon this primary dichotomy . . . and extends it to all levels of life and all aspects of knowledge” (7). Not only are the two sexes assigned a superior and inferior position, but this binary thinking is then applied to all aspects of life. Having this in mind, Badinter believes it is possible to redeem androgyny for feminism since otherness need not presuppose opposition (173).

## ***2.2 The Rise and Fall of Androgyny in the 1970s***

It is not surprising that feminists would turn to androgyny, “a figure that, promising wholeness, appears to contest binarism” (MacLeod 11). Some have welcomed “the androgyne’s power to disrupt and disturb hetero-normative relationships” and “test the limits of the respectable and permissible in social and sexual life” (Hargreaves 9). Some have also acknowledged the fact that androgyny can question and subvert the origin of oppositions that

structure our reality, or, more specifically, social organization, the role of the family and the couple, and strict division of roles (Brisson 5, 7). But at the same time, feminists never stopped feeling suspicion towards it, being aware that androgyny is “always bounded by the binary categories it also seeks to challenge” (Hargreaves 9) and possibly “always already complicit in the cultural construction of gender” (Fayad 61). Some have completely rejected it and its Platonic heritage, claiming that it is “a product of a patriarchal desire for wholeness which excludes femininity rather than accepting it” and is only one more way of assimilating otherness (Fayad 60).

During the second wave of feminism in particular, the concept of androgyny gained a lot of traction, though it was by no means uncontroversial or universally embraced by feminist writers and critics. Notwithstanding, it was widely “integrated into a fight for psychological and sociopolitical equality between the sexes” (Weil 145), and in 1984 *Time* magazine even dubbed it the eleventh “megatrend” in American history (Weil 1). “Whether we choose to think about it or not,” wrote Cynthia Secor, “androgyny is in the air – it is pertinent, popular, seemingly possible now, and terrifying” (162).

So why did this concept become so important in this period? The androgynous myth, as Catriona MacLeod explains, “seems to hold particular fascination for those historical moments when cultures are actively engaged in rethinking the most basic assumptions about gender and sexuality” (13). Androgyny for some feminists provided a familiar but somewhat neglected figure that could be useful for feminist struggle against the tyranny of gender (Heilbrun; Gelpi; Bazin and Freeman), while for others it was merely a patriarchal myth that oppressed women, threatened to erase sexual difference to the detriment of women, and had no political value for feminism (Harris; Secor).

Furthermore, during this time androgyny became particularly protean, “serving as the expression of a range of sexual identities, social possibilities and imaginative freedoms”

(Hargreaves 10), containing a utopian wish for a better and fairer society. In *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) Shulamith Firestone warned that due to the natural division of labor – that is, women’s reproductive capabilities – both men and women developed only half of themselves, at the expense of the other half. Therefore, the end goal of feminist revolution would be the elimination of “the sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally” (11). Others went even further and argued that the elimination of gender inequality would abolish all other forms of inequality – economic, racial, sexual – and bring us closer to the realization of an ideal community because it would lead to a change in social attitudes more generally (Bazin and Freeman 186). In *Woman Hating* (1974) Andrea Dworkin tried to reclaim androgyny for feminism and stressed that myths are important because they affect our behavior in that they operate “as the substructure of the collective” (164). She criticized the patriarchal interpretations of androgyny for arbitrarily imposing hierarchical values onto what she saw as complementary forces. She was convinced that by creating the androgynous community, we could abandon power altogether as a social reality – “that is the final, and most important, implication of androgyny (191).

These theoretical debates had been significantly affected by two developments: the reception of Virginia Woolf in the Anglo-American academic feminism of the ‘60s, and the publication of Carolyn Heilbrun’s seminal book *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* in 1973 (MacLeod 13). Woolf’s famous call for an androgynous mind and the marriage of opposites in “A Room of One’s Own” (1929), in which she invoked Samuel T. Coleridge’s pronouncement that a great mind must be androgynous, provided the basis for a reevaluation of the concept and its liberatory potential during the Second Wave. In fact, numerous authors followed Woolf in conceiving of androgyny as a psychic unity. Androgyny was thus not located in the body, but signified behavior and social options. As Tracy Hargreaves explains,

sexual dissolution was never really under discussion, but whether or not we can function as men and women non-hierarchically (107).

Kari Weil in her book *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference* (1992) categorized the different attitudes toward androgyny in the period between 1960s and 1990s into three overlapping phases: androgyny, feminism, and the critical difference. The first phase called for a cooperation of the masculine and feminine on the individual as well as institutional level and included the Woolfian conception of androgyny as a psychological and poetic ideal as well as Heilbrun's plea for a recognition of androgyny. The second phase was marked by a critical attitude toward androgyny as a feminist concept, in specific by Elaine Showalter's severe critique of Woolf in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), and a forum on androgyny at the annual meeting of Modern Language Association and the subsequent publication of the second volume of the *Women's Studies* journal (1974) devoted to the said meeting. The third phase was represented by authors such as Toril Moi, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who were critical of essentialism and rejected the idea of the dichotomy man/woman as metaphysical.

In the following section I focus on what Weil calls the first and the second phase: Heilbrun's book and some of the texts published in "The Androgyny Papers" (*Women's Studies* 2.2, 1974) because I hold that they map a different range of attitudes to androgyny, from positive to negative, and also to a large extent correspond to the idea of androgyny as found in Le Guin's novel and inform many of its analyses and critiques.<sup>15</sup>

*Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (1973) by Carolyn Heilbrun (who was, not incidentally, a devoted Virginia Woolf scholar) represents one of the most influential feminist engagements with the concept of androgyny of the Second Wave. Heilbrun looks to "the vast world of myth and literature" (Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, the Judaeo-Christian tradition,

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Lem (1971), Annas (1978), Fitting (1985), and Fayad (1997).



medieval history, the English novel, the Bloomsbury Group, just to name a few) with the aim of unearthing “the hidden river of androgyny”, that is, the continuous presence of what she calls “the feminine impulse” or the presence of androgynous roles for female characters. Androgyny for her represents a liberatory ideal that suggests a reconciliation between the sexes – an act of balancing. She urges that we move away “from sexual polarization and the prison of gender” toward a world in which social roles and behavior can be freely chosen by individuals and in which a full range of experience is open to everyone (ix, x).

Since for her “a full range of experience” translates into a less rigid ascription of gender roles (for example, women may be aggressive and men tender), she does not undermine the “naturalness” of the roles themselves, but only the fact that they are not interchangeable between men and women. In fact, Heilbrun remains firmly grounded in binary thinking by exalting the feminine. She explains that since feminine traits have been drastically undervalued, it is now necessary to promote them more, and to use the term “masculine” pejoratively (xv). As Hargreaves points out, this particular vision of “androgyny offers to redeem masculinity by feminizing it” (100).<sup>16</sup> Although Heilbrun insists her position is “a reflection on our current values, not on the intrinsic virtues of either ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ impulses” (xvii), ultimately her androgyne turns out to be yet another example of masculinity perfected by femininity.<sup>17</sup> Or, perhaps more troublingly, it can be seen as a sort of travestism, in which case androgyny boils down to a reversal of roles: as she says, “it is in those works where the roles of the male and female protagonist can be reversed without appearing ludicrous or perverted that the androgynous ideal is present” (10). Speaking of perversion, Heilbrun also makes sure to keep androgyny on the level of representation (in fact, she sees it as a kind of aesthetics) and differentiates it from “an anomalous physical condition” of

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<sup>16</sup> See also Kari Weil, p. 148.

<sup>17</sup> In that sense, her vision is not that different from that of Romantic poets for whom androgyny represented a perfecting of the masculine by including the feminine. For a detailed discussion, see, for example, Warren Stevenson, *Romanticism and the Androgynous Sublime* (2010).

hermaphroditism (xii), fearing that her readers, like herself, might be uncomfortable with the idea of androgyny since it is sometimes linked to homosexuality and bisexuality (xiii).

A rethinking of androgyny and Heilbrun's contribution had taken a more critical turn in the early 1970, as evidenced by "The Androgyny Papers". The most negative position is represented by Daniel A. Harris who argues that the myth of androgyny is "the sexist myth in disguise" that has no positive value and is "retrograde and offensive" (175). Androgyny for him is a false image of liberation whose purpose has been "the co-optation, incorporation, or subjugation of women" (172). He points out that historically the term has been used to invoke a fear of homosexuals and discouraged people from embracing "normal homosexual impulses within themselves" (175). Thus "to seek our own regeneration through a myth so wholly suffused by the prejudices and limitations we seek to escape is folly" (181). Instead, we need to confront the problem which the discussion of androgyny had managed to conceal – the hostility of men towards men. According to Harris, we must address the position of feminist men and redefine "what it means, and may mean, to be male (183).

Cynthia Secor similarly sees androgyny as a limiting, reactionary, and essentially male concept which has no political use since it conjures up the image of a person devoid of social context (163). She famously proclaimed that "androgynes are rarer than unicorns" (163) and suggested that the image of an Amazon or a witch might be a more powerful one for feminist politics. Secor's main objection is that androgyny is rooted in "a static image of perfection, in eternity, an image which cannot take into account the rough going of historical process" and "in no way describes the reality of the foreseeable future" (164). Among her other objections is that androgyny conjures up images of the feminized male; takes femininity and masculinity as givens; places stress on genital differences; has heterosexual bias; and bypasses the male fear of the Mother. Finally, she concludes that "it is premature to unite with men" because

women need to meditate privately first and take up the means of power and aggressiveness (169).

I find this point somewhat contradictory in that it appears to call for an establishing of women's separate identity as a group before letting themselves be "alienated" into androgyny. If women have to stop being merely 'not-man' and become powerful in their own right (this seems to be the road to strong womanhood Secor is proposing), then this argument defeats her own criticism that androgyny perpetuates the categories of masculine and feminine because it suggests that we have to find our own identity as women before we can become androgynous (which would entail giving up on that identity). I further claim that Secor's understanding of the concept is misguided in that it posits androgyny as a blueprint for political action or a future society. She fails to consider androgyny as a myth or a metaphor, and in that sense, she takes it too *literally*. That is why her criticism that androgyny does not refer to reality<sup>18, 19</sup> misses the mark since myth cannot be evaluated in terms of its proximity to reality in the first place; myth may be ideological, but it is "neither false nor true" (Lincoln 242).

Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, on the other hand, approaches androgyny critically, but does not outright reject it. She uses the term to refer "to a psychic unity, either potential or actual, conceived as existing in all individuals" and, similarly to Heilbrun, distances herself from the discussion of physical bisexuality or homosexuality/lesbianism (151). She claims that there are two possible sorts of androgynes: the masculine one completed by the feminine, and the feminine one completed by the masculine. In her article she traces how the first kind of

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<sup>18</sup> The same criticism is made by D. Harris, who says that androgyny "corresponds to nothing we commonly observe in our experience" (173.)

<sup>19</sup> I am shamelessly misappropriating from Alenka Zupančič's discussion of sexual difference here, but perhaps androgyny can be better described not in terms of its "realness," but as "a *nonexistence* in the *real* that, paradoxically, leaves traces in the real" (my emphasis). In other words, androgyny may not be "in the real," but it symbolically registers the difficulty of arriving at the truth of sex(ual difference) by seemingly formulating as a solution something that is actually an impasse. See "Sexual Difference and Ontology," *e-flux* 32 (2012).

androgyny has persisted throughout different historical interpretations – from Greek myth and the Judaeo-Christian tradition, to Romantic poets and Saint-Simonians, and finally Freud and Jung. Nevertheless, she considers the theories of androgyny as potentially liberating, but warns that we ought to be careful not to “talk ourselves into a brave new world of male androgynes” (157). Interestingly, Gelpi fails to see the possibility of androgyny in which the masculine and the feminine are equally represented, and thus does not go beyond the binary view of androgyny in which the two opposites are hierarchical and antagonistic. She also does not mention Woolf’s idea of androgyny, but it can be safely assumed that she would likewise categorize it under the “masculine” tradition; in fact, according to her, there seem to be no examples of the feminine type of androgyny.

Finally, in “The Androgynous Vision” Nancy Topping Bazin and Alma Freeman argue that we should keep the concept, because just like concepts have roots in the past, “we too have been shaped by the past, but just as we must go beyond our own past, we must go beyond past definitions of androgyny” (185). However, our concept must be new; we must alter it and specify it in terms of our own historical situation. Bazin and Freeman define androgyny as “the experience of wholeness” that belongs to the domain of society and culture: “the child’s genitals will no longer determine what society expects in terms of personality, behavior, and work (185-6). Like Gelpi, they use androgyny as relating to gender, not sex, and it can be inferred that the stress on the psychic instead of the physical reflects the second wave preoccupation with gender as culturally constructed and separate from biological sex.

Moreover, according to them, the merging of the male and female principles would ultimately lead to an overcoming of sexual difference as well as gender inequality. If we can manage to perceive the interdependence of the two principles, then we can transcend the opposites, and then, having realized that “the whole or complete human being is

androgynous” (191), we will transcend duality. In contrast to Gelpi’s view of androgyny as either predominantly masculine or feminine, Bazin and Freeman believe that “each human being derives from male and female elements” and that “the two principles, although they appear to be conflicting opposites, define their existence through a creative relationship with each other” (190). Androgyny for them is an ideal that involves a radical change – “the injection of cooperative, non-hierarchical, non-elitist structures into our society” that will bring about “the Rebirth of the new human being” (211). This radical change also implies a change in ethics and the social order and is thus utopian in its structure.

### ***2.3 Androgyny as Appearance and the (In)visibility of Difference***

A psychoanalytic reading offered by Francette Pacteau (1989) locates androgyny in the domain of the imaginary and posits it as an entity, but a symptom of repressed desire. She theorizes that the androgynous-looking figure presents us with an impossibility of the erasure of the very difference that constructs us as subjects and thus represents a denial, or a transgression, of the gender divide (63). It also signals a nostalgic return to an original symbiotic state that does not involve division or separation (Hargreaves 19). Being linked to the pre-Oedipal domain of experience in which difference is unacknowledged, androgyny stands for a desire for the end of desire and contains the wish to return to the plentitude of the pre-Oedipal, “recall[ing] the auto-eroticism of early-infancy, or perhaps more accurately the earlier objectless stage at the dawn of consciousness” (Pacteau 68). The post-Oedipal subject, on the other hand, is a split desiring subject marked by a loss (of the other sex). In that sense, by disavowing difference the androgyne embodies the fantasy of regaining one’s ‘lost half’ and the power that comes with it, and resolves “the narcissistic desire for completeness and self-sufficiency” (70).

Pacteau argues that androgyny does not exist in the real; rather, it resides in the relation between look and appearance; it is “the object of a *searching* look” that “dwells in the distance” (77, 78). One cannot encounter an androgyne in the street, but only a figure that one sees as androgynous (62); androgyny thus belongs to the order of *appearing*, not *being*. Ultimately, a lack of being as expressed by the ambiguous sexual appearance suggests a non-sexual identity or a non-desiring, self-sufficient being (62, 70). As opposed to the hermaphrodite whose body is uncovered and flaunts its visibility, the androgyne is located on the side of the invisible and “appears at once formally impoverished and semantically overdetermined” (80). That is also why androgyny, as often criticized by some feminists, seems to preserve the gender binary while at the same time trying to overcome it. According to Pacteau, it is impossible to represent an “in-between” of genders since “the image does not exist outside the symbolic” and is necessarily “caught up between the feminine and the masculine” (81). The contradictory status of the androgyne – that of being neither male nor female, of being both male and female – positions it logically outside any system of signification; as a result, the androgynous representation is always a compromise, or even a failure: the impossible referent cannot be contained by the body.<sup>20</sup>

In *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* (2002), in the chapter on androgyny where he analyzes, among other novels, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Brian Attebery follows Pacteau in claiming that androgyny is the impossible referent. He rejects the criticism that androgyny refers to nothing real and is therefore useless and even inimical to feminism (Harris; Secor) because he believes this kind of thinking misses the point in that it posits androgyny as a condition to be aimed for or avoided. Instead, he proposes that we read it as a sign with shifting meaning (“a shifter”) that cannot be expressed directly, but only in relation to other

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<sup>20</sup> In *Tales of Love* (1987), Julia Kristeva reads androgyny as preceding the system of signification: it is a form of (masculine) narcissism in which “he admires himself in another androgyne and sees only himself, rounded, faultless, otherless” (70). The androgyne does not love, since love for Kristeva would be defined as the emergence of signs, “a *signification* that is undecipherable without its counterpart” (70).

signs. Since it is “nothing in itself,” but only “a place-marker standing for other things,” androgyny can in different contexts stand for a whole range of things: wholeness, bisexuality, decadence, fashion, balance, narcissism, and so on (133). The meaning slips from one sign to another without our noticing, and it is precisely that slippage where the real usefulness of the term lies because it invites us to challenge our assumptions and generates new expressions of identity and new ways of seeing ourselves (133, 150). Androgyny, then, according to Attebery, presents a challenge to the binary system that seeks to define its constituents through opposition and negation (woman as “not-man”) and establishes one of the constituents as the norm, resultantly questioning the neutrality and universality of the category of “man.”

### 3. The Left Hand of Darkness

#### 3.1 Situating The Left Hand of Darkness

Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* was published in 1969 and it belongs to the New Wave movement in science fiction of the 1960s and 1970s, which I have discussed in more detail in Ch. 1.2. To recapitulate, the New Wave coincided with what is commonly referred to as Second Wave Feminism and can be seen as an opening up of the field of science fiction to new voices and a reaction against sexist and racial stereotypes in the science fiction works of the 1930s. On this subject, in her scathing critique of male elitism in SF "American SF and the Other" (1975), Le Guin wrote that feminism helped shed light on the representation of women in science fiction, where they had been reduced to "squeaking dolls subject to instant rape by monsters – or old-maid scientists desexed by hypertrophy of the intellectual organs – or, at best, loyal little wives or mistresses of accomplished heroes" (208). She further condemned the absence of the cultural and racial Other and the proletariat from recent American SF, describing it as "brainless regressivism" and "a perfect baboon patriarchy" (210).

New Wave authors utilized science fiction's ability to envision alternative societies in order to find new tools for challenging the existing, primarily gender, assumptions. In "Is Gender Necessary?" Le Guin notes that in the mid-1960s she started to feel the need to "find and understand the meaning of sexuality and the meaning of gender," and for her this meant engaging with feminist thinking by writing a novel (155-6). Being a legitimate place of theory (Butler, *Bodies* 135), literature can induce a feeling of "surprise that comes from reading something that compels you to read differently (Christian 62). Le Guin's literary narrative about an androgynous society in *The Left Hand of Darkness* not only enabled her to articulate issues concerning gender much like theory does, but, because it features a *novum* (Suvín) in



the form of an androgynous people – it can help us approach the problem from fresh and multiple perspectives. In fact, literature was in the forefront of struggles against patriarchy and it served as a platform for articulating feminist ideas and criticism,<sup>21</sup> while androgyny was at the time a trendy as well as a transgressive, although not uncontested, tool for exploring the consequences of abolishing gender (Attebery 129).

*The Left Hand of Darkness* is part of Le Guin’s so-called Hainish Cycle that consists of a number of loosely connected novels and short stories<sup>22</sup> that take place in the universe populated by the Hainish who had, a long time ago, scattered different humanoid species across a number of habitable planets throughout the galaxy. They had “thus produced a humanoid universe that is single, expanding, and historically continuous, but at the same time marvelous in its variety . . . [It] is a universe full of ‘humans’ who display enough variety to provide for any number of alien encounters” (Barbour 164). Since it is a universe in which all beings are human (or at least humanoid), it would appear that the category of the alien does not exist; however, because of their often insurmountable differences, these beings are not all *equally* human. The definition of the human, as I hope to show in the following sections, becomes the matter of perspective whereby the domain of the “properly” and “fully” human is defined self-reflexively: only the self is truly human, while the other is perverse, deviant, and abnormal.

Before proceeding to discuss the structure of the novel, I shall briefly summarize the plot. The protagonist is Genly Ai, a native of the planet Terra, who is sent as an Envoy to the planet Gethen (also known as Winter because of its climate) to represent the intergalactic union of

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963), Monique Wittig’s *Les Guérillères* (1969), or Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* (1969).

<sup>22</sup> Namely, *Rocannon’s World* (1966), *Planet of Exile* (1966), *City of Illusions* (1967), *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), *The Dispossessed* (1974), *The Word for World Is Forest* (1976), *The Telling* (2000), and the collection of short stories *The Birthday of the World* (2002). It should be noted that the publication history of the books does not match the chronological history of the Hainish universe. For example, the device called the ansible that briefly appears in LHD is at the center of a later novel, *The Dispossessed*, which is concerned with the details of its invention and functioning.

83 worlds called the Ekumen. The most distinctive feature of the people of Gethen is that they have no gender roles that proceed from their biological sex. Most of the time they are in *somer* – sexually inactive or latent, but every 22 to 23 days they enter *kemmer* or estrus, a period of active and strong sexuality during which an individual assumes either male or female sexual characteristics. As a result of that particular physiognomy “both ‘sexes’ come with the same equipment and the same potential to penetrate and be penetrated” (Mendelsohn 8). Any Gethenian can bear a child and choose any social role; consequently, gender as a concept is absent since the social position of an individual is not determined by biology. As Kathy Rudy opines, if there is no single group of people that can “give birth, raise children, keep homes, and the like,” the category ‘woman’ as an object of exploitation becomes obsolete (35). Furthermore, there is very little sexual frustration on Gethen,<sup>23</sup> no nationalism, war or rape. Violence does exist, but never on a massive scale, and the absence of war is explained, among other things, by a lack of the capacity to mobilize (LHD 51) which Le Guin relates to what we recognize as masculine values of activity, dominance, and the desire for conquest.

Genly first lands in Karhide, a monarchy, where he spends two years trying to arrange a meeting with the mad King Argaven in order to persuade him to join the Ekumen. His cause is promoted by the Prime Minister Estraven whom Genly is distrustful of. Genly’s suspicion, as it turns out, is caused by Estraven’s lack of “a true sex” (I return to this issue in Ch. 3.5) and also by his own inability to master *shifgrethor*, “the untranslatable and all-important principle of social authority” (LHD 14), all of which leads to a number of misreadings of the situation by Genly. When Estraven is suddenly declared a traitor and forced to flee Karhide, Genly realizes his mission has been a failure and, fearing for his life, he too leaves Karhide and decides to try his luck in the other major nation, the bureaucratic Orgoreyn.

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<sup>23</sup> Partly because there are *kemmerhouses* in most towns and cities – places where people may come and have sex with other people in kemmer. It is a common practice.

Even though he seems to be warmly welcomed by the Orgota politicians, Genly is warned by Estraven not to let himself become a political tool. Gradually he realizes that the Orgota do not care about his cause and are in fact, much like Karhiders, afraid of him. He is suddenly arrested and sent to the Pulefen Voluntary Farm, a work camp where he is drugged and interrogated. Finally, Estraven comes to his rescue and they set on a journey across the Gobrin ice, a vast glacier, in order to get back to Karhide so that Genly can resume his mission. Against all odds, they succeed, and Genly manages to send out a signal to his ship to land, while Estraven who is still considered a traitor is shot to death while trying to cross the border. King Argaven finally agrees to join the Ekumen and is pleased that their rival Orgoreyn is put to shame for secretly trying to dispose of Genly and not being the first nation to accept the Ekumen's vision of intergalactic cooperation.

### ***3.2 The Use of Lies in Science Fiction***

In her introduction to the 1976 edition of the novel, Le Guin distances herself from extrapolation (taking a present trend and projecting it into the future) which she sees as a simplistic device insufficient for delineating the genre. Instead, she proposes that we read the book as a thought-experiment whose purpose is by no means to predict the future, but to reflect upon the present. According to Le Guin, “science fiction isn’t about the future;” it is not predictive, but descriptive (LHD xvii, xiv). Her position recalls that of Darko Suvin and his view of science fiction as “a specifically roundabout way of commenting on the author’s collective context” (*Metamorph.*, 84). Suvin warns that “ontologically, art is not pragmatic truth nor is fiction fact,” and that while SF can indeed sometimes function as “a handmaiden of futurological foresight,” this is merely its “secondary function” (28).

Le Guin draws a line between prophets, clairvoyants and futurologists on the one hand, and novelists on the other, claiming that the business of the latter is to tell the truth, but to do it in

“a peculiar and devious way” (LHD xv), that is, to tell lies in order to tell the truth. As I pointed out in Ch.1.1, since science fiction (as well as utopian) novels, belonging to the so-called “genre fiction,” are often (wrongly) judged not on the basis of their literary value, but on the accuracy of their predictions or the originality of ideas, the fact that these works nevertheless are *literary* artifacts and not blueprints or prophecies sometimes gets forgotten. When that happens, science fiction is seen as a failure: both if it claims to predict the future and fails, and also if it succeeds, because then it stops being fiction (Murray Walker 30). The purpose of “inventing persons, places, and events which never did and never will exist or occur” (LHD xv) is not to propose a new model for humanity, as Le Guin emphasizes in “Is Gender Necessary?” (1976), her commentary on *The Left Hand of Darkness*. She is insistent that she is not recommending the Gethenian sexual setup, but using it as a heuristic device, which means that the novel is an experiment that tries to see what happens when gender is eliminated; it is a question rather than an answer.

It would appear that Le Guin’s intention behind writing the 1976 introduction is to redeem science fiction as *fiction* and to urge the critics to study “its literary techniques and devices as well as its intellectual content” (Norton 25). Jeanne Murray Walker explains that “one specific purpose for self-commentary in literature is the highly practical one of defending itself against attack, particularly the attack that it fails to tell the truth” (30). But Le Guin’s position is precisely that relationship between truth and fiction is not straightforward and that there are multiple ways of telling the truth (one of which, paradoxically, is to lie). In another introduction – that to *The Norton Book of Science Fiction* (1997) – she writes that “human thinking is predicated on our capacity (related to our capacity for language?) to conceive of what is not true” – on our capacity for lying or imagining (29). This paradoxical and seemingly manipulative authorial position is not meant to disorient the reader, but provide a hint as to how a work of fiction is to be approached and what its function may be. A lie,

which is another word for a metaphor, is at the heart of all fiction; it is an essential maneuver that puts reality into question (*Norton* 31). The ultimate lesson of these “elaborately circumstantial lies” (LHD xviii) is that the truth is an artifact, a question of perspective, or “a matter of the imagination” (LHD xix).

Genly Ai makes a similar disclaimer at the beginning of his account, repeating Le Guin’s statement that truth is a matter of the imagination. In fact, in the very first sentence he collapses the distinction between truth and fiction: “I’ll make my report as if I told a story” (LHD 1). Moreover, Genly refuses the privileged authorship position (“The story is not all mine”) and underlines the multiplicity of voices the story consists of (“I am not sure whose story it is”) (LHD 1). It can be argued that “the novel achieves unity not in spite of, but because of its variety of voices and perspectives (Bickman 43). Even though the readers are free to choose the fact they like best (LHD 1), Genly insists that none of these facts are false and that together they make up one story – a story that is necessarily incomplete, fragmented and biased. Yet the position from which Genly writes is that of a person who has come to embrace the principle of uncertainty only after having been exposed to the Handdara teachings and the Gethenian way of life. Prior to that experience, he might have avouched that his position was neutral, objective and unproblematic.

His inability to abandon his preconceptions about gender and reconsider the validity and universal applicability of his categories points to the limitations of the scientific discourse and its lack of self-reflexivity when it comes to understanding radical difference. According to Jameson, these limitations are inherent to anthropology as a discipline, which is “necessarily normative, and reestablishes the model of the norm even there where it is unthinkable” (123). Mona Fayad, for example, reads the novel as providing a critique of cultural imperialism and the supposed neutrality of anthropology. By means of “mimicking male scientific objectivity in its dominant relation to its object,” that is, by Genly’s failure to read the intentions of those

around him accurately because of his prejudices and repeated assigning of masculine and feminine roles to genderless people, Le Guin invites us to consider “the fallibility of the supposed neutrality of the scientific eye” (65) and the dangers inherent in trying to interpret the Other as a mere image of oneself.

### **3.3 Generic Discontinuities**

Even though Genly seems to be “the structuring consciousness of the book” and in charge of selecting and ordering the various materials that appear in it (Bickman 42), he is not the sole narrative voice. The novel also contains Estraven’s account, field reports, Gethenian myths and history, and an appendix on the Gethenian calendar and clock. Six out of twenty chapters are not directly related to the plot: they are tales, myths, and the field notes of the first Investigator<sup>24</sup> concerning the issue of Gethenian sexuality. Further, four chapters are excerpts from Estraven’s notebook which provide his own perspective on some of the events also narrated by Genly. Some critics have argued that these different sections come together to form a seamless whole and that *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a good example of how “form and content can be wedded in SF in a functional, organic, and aesthetically meaningful way” (Bickman 42).

Others, however, have questioned the novel’s ultimate unity. Jameson, for example, suggests in *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005) that the novel is based on “generic discontinuities,” that is, “constructed from a heterogeneous group of narrative modes artfully imposed and intertwined, thereby constituting a virtual anthology of narrative strands of different kinds” (267). In the novel we find the travel narrative, the political novel, straight SF, Orwellian dystopia, adventure story, romance, and myth (267). But despite these

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<sup>24</sup> Investigators are sent by the Ekumen to study a world and its society and culture without revealing who they are to its inhabitants before an Envoy is sent to establish a connection and persuade the world to join.

discontinuities, Jameson contends, there is coherence which stems from an essential structural homology between the four types of material (themes) that he finds in the novel. The first is theme is the Gethenians' hermaphroditic sexuality,<sup>25</sup> the second is the political organization of Karhide, the third is the peculiar ecology, and the fourth is religion and mythology (267).

What ultimately brings these themes together is a “subterranean drive” towards utopia – a desire for a “‘no-place’ of a collectivity untormented by sex or history” (279). To start with, Gethenian sexuality for Jameson signifies a rejection of the kind of desire that he equates with “the inner dynamic of the market system” (277). Secondly, the novel’s pacifist bias (the lack of institutionalized violence on Gethen<sup>26</sup>) reveals a critique of growth-oriented power dynamics, just like Karhide’s indifference to technology implies a repudiation of the idea of linear progress: it is, basically, an unhistorical society (276). Thirdly, the cold climate ought to be understood as “a symbolic affirmation of the autonomy of the organism” in opposition to the reader’s own immersion in “the total system of late monopoly capital” (269-70). Lastly, the Handdara religious principles in Karhide stand for a refusal of positivism: their valorization of ignorance is opposed to the teachings of Meshe in Orgoreyn which Jameson links with commercial societies. In that sense, it can be said the novel’s greatest strength lies in its attempt to imagine the history of the West without capitalism. Even though it is not a traditional Utopia, it contains the utopian impulse which can be found in a vision of humanity “released from the multiple determinisms (economic, political, social) of history itself,” as Jameson concludes (275).

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<sup>25</sup> I would not characterize Gethenian sexuality as hermaphrodite because they do not exhibit the characteristics of both sexes at the same time (sexual difference is not inscribed in their bodies but rather the lack thereof), but can take on either sex only successively.

<sup>26</sup> There are instances of institutionalized violence on Gethen – for example, the secret police or the voluntary farms in Orgoreyn. But since Orgoreyn is shown in the novel as moving towards capitalism, nationalism, and a preparation for war, this is already a foreshadowing of the system that Jameson is critical of, and which in the end is not realized because it is interrupted by Karhide’s joining the Ekumen.

This interpretation is certainly impressive, and its greatest contribution lies in the deliberation on the structure and limitations of utopian thinking in general (after all, that is the main subject of Jameson's book). However, his strictly Marxist approach can be regarded as somewhat reductive when it comes to understanding the implications of Gethenian sexuality, which he reads exclusively in relation to the theme of (the absence of) war as "an ancient human fantasy" (274) in which freedom from sex<sup>27</sup> becomes equated with freedom from violence. In that framework, Jameson's reading simplifies Gethenian sexuality to fit his argument and posits desire as necessarily detrimental, which means he uses the notion of androgyny as ahistorical, or, in his terminology, as a desire for the end of history.

I, on the other hand, would like to read Le Guin's representation of androgyny as open-ended instead of closed; as a potentiality and relation rather than essence. I also suggest that the novel needs to maintain the distinction between sex (as related to biology) and gender (as related to the social interpretation of biology) in order to make the claim that the latter need not proceed from the former. In that sense, it can be said that androgyny as represented in the novel belongs to the order of gender and signifies its erasure by virtue of making gender identity indiscernible. This is also I want to draw the line between androgyny and hermaphroditism: the distinction "dwells in one gesture: the uncovering of the body" (Pacteau 74). While androgyny stands for the invisibility of gender and obliteration of difference, hermaphroditism belongs to the order of sex and signifies the absolute visibility of the body. As Hargreaves argues, the hermaphrodite body "doesn't leave all that much to the imagination," while the androgyne is disembodied and "leaves everything to the imagination" (6). Thus, if androgyny enacts the utopia of the disappearance of the body, or a flight from bodily determinism, hermaphroditism traces "the sad topology of the body" by presenting an

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<sup>27</sup> I would not say that Gethenians are free from sex (if by sex Jameson means "biological sex"), but from gender, or the view that either biology or sexuality have to determine one's social position and role.



overdetermined plentitude: the body as “the absolute place” from which I cannot escape (Foucault, “Utopian Body” 229-30).

Furthermore, rather than following Jameson in claiming that “Gethenian physiology solves the problem of sex” by doing away with sustained desire (274), I contend it articulates sexuality as a *problem* with no (easy) solutions. After all, sexuality is absent from the social life of Gethenians only during *somer*, while during *kemmer* it is overwhelmingly dominant. The notes of the first Investigator Ong Tot Oppong reveal this uneasy tension between *somer* and *kemmer*: in one place she states that the daily life is unaffected by sex and that there is plenty of *separate* room made for it, but in another she admits that Gethenians are ruled by *kemmer* and that the structure of the whole society is shaped to fit the cycle of active and inactive sexuality (LHD 99). So it can be said that sexuality is at the same time invisible (because it does not interfere with everyday life) and ubiquitous (because the whole society is arranged according to it). This seems to be the opposite image of own society, in which sex is completely visible, but also deeply disruptive and troublesome.<sup>28</sup>

### ***3.4 Men’s Only Galactic Freak-Show***

Some potential problems resulting from the Gethenian sexual set up are outlined by the Polish science fiction author Stanislaw Lem in his respectful but quite critical review of the novel (1971) in which he accuses Le Guin of failing to show “the cruel harshness of the individual’s destiny in such a system” (23). He wonders about the anxiety caused by sexual indeterminism: one never knows whether one will become male or female during *kemmer*, and he sees this as potentially leading to “a whole new set of psychic problems” (23). Lem definitely does not consider this kind of sexuality a solution, and imagines that these people

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<sup>28</sup> In *The Empire of Signs* (1982), Roland Barthes wrote that in the West “sex is everywhere, except in sexuality” (29).

must feel “a lot of unhappiness and grief” (23). In the end, he finds comfort in the conclusion that our own bodies “are not the worst possible development in the universe” and that fixedness in a single sex is actually “a blessing, and not a curse” (24). The ontological unease he obviously feels when thinking about the possibility of being androgynous/hermaphrodite not only “expresses some of the anxiety that accompanies the masculine viewpoint on androgyny” (Attebery 135), but also mirrors Genly’s own anxiety and fear of unruly sexuality and even homophobia (see Ch. 3.7).<sup>29</sup>

There are two Lem’s points which I would like to briefly reflect upon. The first is his pronouncement that the book is “about a planet where there are no women, but only men – not in the sexual but in the social sense” (24), and the second is his regret that Le Guin had not placed Man (!) at the center of the narrative. According to him, she had reduced the strangeness of Gethenians to little more than “a galactic freak-show” and used it merely as a background for her larger political plot about Gethen joining the Ekumen (which he deems not only uninteresting, but a weak caricature). Consequently, we do not learn enough about these people’s lives and so her psychological insight is insufficient (22).

Although not entirely without merit, these criticisms miss what I believe to be the point. Had Le Guin written only about the problems that Gethenians experience, from their own perspective, there would have been no alien encounter. The purpose of presenting the story from an outsider’s perspective is precisely to confront difference and engage with the issue of the Other; it is a conventional strategy used in utopian and science fiction in which a visitor not only arrives to a world radically different from his/her own, but is forced to reconsider his/her own preconceptions about what is “normal”. Had Estraven been the sole narrator, readers would have been deprived of having their ideas about gender reflected back to them.

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<sup>29</sup> Interestingly enough, Le Guin claims to have chosen a “normal” male Terran narrator - who is “our surrogate in the text” (Attebery 130) - precisely in order to avert such negative reactions on the part of male readers (*SFC* 92).

Estrangement here proceeds not only from the peculiarity of Gethenians, but the juxtaposition of the two worlds. In that sense I disagree with Lem's opinion that the strangeness and fate of Karhidiers fails to teach us something about our own lot (22), since I believe this to be one of the book's key lessons.

But is Lem entirely wrong about there being only men (in the social sense) in the novel? This is one of the most often criticized aspects of the book, and Le Guin admits it is one of her central failures. The impression that there are no women is created to a large extent by the choice of the masculine pronoun for referring to androgynes. In her notes Ong Tot Oppong explains:

Lacking the Karhidish "human pronoun" used for persons in somer, I must say "he," for the same reason as we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine. But the very use of the pronoun in my thoughts leads me continually to forget that the Karhider I am with is not a man, but a manwoman (LHD 101).

Le Guin has tried to justify her choice on several occasions. For example, in her response to Lem's review, she said that she did not want to deform English in order to make an ethical point, nor use the feminine pronoun which is "even more decisively 'sexifying' than the masculine" (*SFC* 91). In "Is Gender Necessary?" she similarly stresses that she had considered using an invented neuter pronoun, but finally decided against it, pleading that "'he' is the generic pronoun, damn it" (169). In the Redux version of the same text (1988), however, she added that she was aware that "he" as a generic pronoun is not neutral, but "an invention of male grammarians" (169).

It is understandable why such a position would stir controversy considering that the generic masculine, or "the male-as-norm bias," has been the focus of the feminist critique of language for a long time and that feminists have illuminated "the far-reaching consequences of the male/human-ambiguity inherent in masculine generics" (Braun 6). But instead of

admonishing Le Guin for failing to provide a satisfying solution (and is an invented pronoun really the best one?) I propose we look at what the use of the masculine pronoun does to our reading and perception of the characters and how it reflects Genly's masculine bias which goes beyond the issue of language use itself. As Christine Cornell argues,

Genly knows on some basic level that he is being inaccurate; we know he is being inaccurate, but both Genly and many readers quickly succumb to the misleading perceptions and misconceptions created by our language . . . There is no doubt that the pronouns are an additional burden on the reader, but they are a valuable part of our education (qtd. in Pearson, "Postcolonialism/s" 194).

What Le Guin's choice of pronoun can teach us is that if "the MAN principle is so much part of our lives and our thinking that mostly we don't realize its existence or its effects" (Braun 4), then its "misuse" in the novel reveals its insufficiency by inviting the reader to "perform androgyny" (Attebery 134) against the text, so to speak, and by making him/her aware of the constructedness of gender as implied by the use of masculine pronoun (Pearson, "Postcolonialism/s" 193).

By masculinizing Gethenians, both Genly and Ong Tot Oppong reveal their inability to think beyond the binaries and a tendency to subsume the feminine under the universal masculine. The readers have to try to resist this impulse and face their own limitations when it comes to imagining difference. But this also points to androgyny as a language problem in more general terms. As Francette Pacteau suggests, "any attempt to define androgyny reveals an ever evasive concept which takes us to the limits of language" (62). If androgyny stands for the denial of the gender divide – a divide which constructs us as subjects in the first place – then it represents "a threat to our given identity and to the system of social rules which define us" (63). If the Other is unintelligible, then my own position is endangered, and in that sense both Genly's and the reader's constant slippage into either the masculine or the feminine (depending on the situation) can be seen as a form of psychic defense and an attempt

to preserve one's identity when faced with "a space of confusion" (MacLeod 19) of identity and difference – an image of wholeness that reflects back to us our incompleteness.

In "Is Gender Necessary?" Le Guin also opined that the pronouns wouldn't matter that much if she had been wiser at "*showing* the 'female' component of the Gethenian characters in *action*" (170). I find it instructive to consider this statement in relation to the criticism that there are only men in the novel. According to Lem, "Karhider garments, manners of speech, mores, and behavior, are masculine" (24), and Brian Attebery similarly observes "the preponderance of masculine traits for the supposedly gender-free characters" (131). After all, Estraven is a politician whom we see in situations we normally associate with men: he is scheming, negotiating with other politicians, rescuing people by using great strength and pulling a sledge across a glacier, but we don't see him do any housework or take care of his child, for instance. Even his meticulous calculation and preparation of meals during their journey across the ice is not perceived by Genly as an entirely "feminine" activity, but as simultaneously "house-wifely" and "scientific" (LHD 259).

Although the above stated criticisms are valid and to some extent do speak to the author's failure to show a wider range of social activities, they also indicate the difficulty to think beyond the division into male and female roles. Instead of arguing whether or not Le Guin's representation of androgynes is flawed (which it necessarily is), we should ask why we think that any of these activities have to be gendered? Could a woman not do all of the things that Estraven does? "Is it possible," asks Le Guin, "that we tend to insist that Estraven and the other Gethenians are men, because most of us are unwilling or unable to imagine women as scheming prime ministers, haulers of sledges across icy wastes, etc.?" (SFC 91). She confesses that she "was privately delighted at watching, not a man, but a manwoman, do all these things" ("IGN" 170). But to see Gethenians as menwomen does require some effort on the part of the readers because it forces them to overcome their ideas of what constitutes (non-

)gendered behavior. Accordingly, the criticism such as that of Lem and Attebery shows their own reluctance to imagine a non-man perform typically “masculine” actions. Furthermore, it exemplifies the central problem of androgyny for feminism: can androgyny be envisioned except as a merging of the binaries which first need to be carefully delineated? In other words, does the true androgyne have to do politics *and* clean the house?

### ***3.5 Hanging out with Effeminate Deviants: Is Androgyny Feminine?***

As I have suggested, Genly’s masculinization of Estraven and other Gethenians is aided by, but not reducible to, his use of masculine pronouns. However, opting for an invented pronoun would not have provided much of a resolution since Genly imposes binary categories not only through language but through his understanding of behavior, appearance and psychological traits. His tendency to assign gendered characteristics in a hierarchical way demonstrates “the difficulty of translating the life-style of an alien species into a language and cultural experience that is comprehensible” (Fayad 61) and becomes particularly evident in situations when he finds the other person’s behavior incongruous with his expectations.

Judith Butler wonders if we can “encounter the difference that calls our grids of intelligibility into question without trying to foreclose the challenge that the difference delivers?” (*Undoing* 35). Genly certainly tries to resolve the challenge by placing the people of Gethen into rigid gender categories. Against Ong Tot Oppong’s advice to the Envoy, Genly does precisely “what a bisexual naturally does, which is to cast him [a Gethenian] in the role of Man or Woman, while adopting towards him a corresponding role dependent on your expectations” (LHD 100). He generally perceives Gethenians as men, except when he considers their actions inappropriate, confusing or despicable, in which case they become more woman-like. The ascription of femininity is Genly’s strategy of demarcation through

which the feminine part is devalued and deemed inferior, deceitful, weak and inauthentic. As Attebery explains, the shift from masculine to feminine indicates a loss of rank and purity, “for femaleness is nearly always coded as something messier and darker and more dangerous, as well as weaker, than maleness” (135). Paradoxically, androgyny becomes most manifest to Genly (and perhaps to the reader as well) precisely when the other characters appear to him most feminine; consequently, it can be said the absence of gender in the novel is expressed in gendered terms, as a contamination of the generic masculine by an eruption of femininity.

At the beginning of the novel Genly appears distrustful of Estraven, “whose motives are forever obscure” (LHD 7), but we soon discern that his suspicion stems from his own frustration at failing to read Estraven’s behavior. He is “annoyed by this sense of effeminate intrigue” and “effeminate deviousness,” and thinks Estraven acts womanly, “all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit” (LHD 8, 15, 13). At the same time, Genly finds it impossible to think of him as a woman, rightly asking himself whether “this soft supple femininity” was the source of his dislike. However, he cannot think of Estraven as a man either because when he tries to, he feels “a sense of falseness, of imposture” (LHD 13). A number of other characters appear feminine to Genly in situations where he finds them either despicable or opaque: King Argaven laughs like “like an angry woman pretending to be amused” (LHD 33), and his landlady has “fat buttocks” and “a soft fat face, and a prying, spying, ignoble kind nature” (LHD 50). The landlady’s feminine looks even entice Genly to ask him how many children he had had, only to find he had borne none (but fathered four).

The fact that to him Gethenians “do not appear properly gendered” (Butler, *Bodies* 8) espouses that what is at stake here is “the question of normativity and the problem of recognition” (Pearson, *Queer* 76). The sense of *falseness* or *insubstantiality* proceeding from what Genly sees as the Gethenians’ failure to perform gender properly can be related to what Michel Foucault terms “the true sex”. In his introduction to *Herculine Barbin: Being the*

*Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-century French Hermaphrodite* (1980),<sup>30</sup> Foucault discusses the 19<sup>th</sup> century juridical efforts to “limit the free choice of indeterminate individuals” (viii). At the time medicine was well on its way to rejecting the idea of an intermingling of the sexes in a single body, and the role of the doctor was to “strip the body of its anatomical deceptions and discover the one true sex” (viii). Since any mixture of the sexes was seen as a disguise of nature, the doctor had to decipher the body and determine which sex was the “true one”. The belief that “everybody was to have his or her primary, profound, determined and determining sexual identity” (viii) implied that “it is in the area of sex that we must search for the most secret and profound truth about individuals” (x). With “the phantasmagorias of nature” stripped away by the medico-juridical system, we shall arrive at the truth “at the bottom of sex” (xi). Consequently, when unable to determine Estraven’s true sex, Genly cannot decide what kind of a person he is, whether he can trust him or not, and what is “the truth” behind his ambiguous gender performance during somer. “I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man,” as he later admits (LHD 267). This alien encounter, then, “works as a reversal of the cultural expectation that sex reveals the truth of the self,” as Wendy Pearson argues (“Postcolonialism/s” 193).

Genly uses similar terminology when describing the Orgota people and their capital Mishnory. The streets appear to him “vague,” “fluid” and “insubstantial”, and his host Shusgis likewise “a little vague, a little, just a little bit unreal” around the edges (LHD 157). Other people, too, “lacked some quality, some dimension of being; and they failed to convince” (157). Although in the framework of the narrative these impressions are partly meant to signal to Genly that he should not trust the Orgota to help him with his mission, a

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<sup>30</sup> The English translation of the memoirs of Herculine Barbin, a famous nineteenth-century intersex person who was treated as female at birth but later court-ordered to live as a man. Foucault discovered the memoirs during his research about hermaphroditism for *The History of Sexuality* and helped republish them.



further implication is that their “insubstantiality” is a sign of their lack of being as lack of fixed gender. If their gender is unintelligible, who knows what else they may be hiding? Here androgyny reveals its unsettling side: is it merely a temporary state in which the body perfidiously hides its true character – that of a rapacious multifaceted desire? In any case, they are not to be trusted. As Foucault emphasizes, individuals are believed to be able to always dissemble their inmost knowledge of their true sex (ix) in order to profit from their deceit, whereby morality comes to be equated with the perfect intelligibility of the body, which Gethenians fail to provide.

### ***3.6 We, the Other Humans: Becoming Alien to Oneself***

The alien, explains Michael Beehler,

always positions itself somewhere between pure familiarity and pure otherness, between the speech of the same and the speech of the other. Taking its place on the border between identity and difference, it marks that border, articulating it while at the same time disarticulating and confusing the distinctions the border stands for (37).

In relation to the representation of aliens in science fiction, Jameson wonders “how we can possibly understand radical difference” without falling back onto our own categories, and “whether alien life, radically different sentient beings, can be imagined at all” (102, 106). He refers to what he calls Lem’s “unknowability thesis;” namely, his claim that the alien as radical otherness cannot be directly portrayed or grasped by any human categories, in order to emphasize that the representation of an alien world is always to some extent a reflection of the author’s own world. We are faced with our incapacity to imagine the unknown: the mind “finds itself irrevocably mired in the all-too-familiar, and thereby becomes unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits” (Jameson 289). Slusser and

Rabkin share this position and argue that aliens are necessarily anthropophilic since they provide “the point of comparison needed for man to begin even to think to study himself” (6).

The function of the alien as a constitutive exclusion is thus to refer back to *anthropos*; in other words, the alien is positional, not essential (Beehler 37). The radically other still belongs to the domain of the human in that it is only “radical” within the parameters of humanly imaginable (because otherwise it could not be represented at all). If we tried to strip away the anthropomorphism in an attempt to arrive at the knowledge about the alien *as such*, “we would do away with ourselves,” as Jameson opines (111). The alien is thus located at the border of intelligibility, not beyond it, and instead of marking the limit of human cognition it actually enables the production of knowledge about man. According to Beehler, “the alien is the pest that allows stories to be written, the parasite always engendered along with man’s tales of himself and his meaning” (37).

On Gethen, Genly is constantly aware of (the other people’s awareness of) his alien status. “Few foreigners are so foreign as I,” he tells Tibe, Argaven’s cousin (LHD 9). But Le Guin is careful to show that Genly is as foreign to Gethenians as they are to him, and their simultaneous being-alien-for-the-other brings into play the way the alien is used to produce a normative human subject. Butler’s claim that to withhold a recognition of humanity is to install recognition as “a site of power by which the human is differentially produced” (Undoing 2) is illustrated in the novel not by simply drawing a line between us and them, humans and aliens, but by introducing a situation in which everybody is equally alien, or equally human (after all, the Hainish universe is entirely anthropocentric), and then working out the subtle distinctions that are made between different forms and ways of life. Thus the main questions can be formulated as: “If I am a certain gender, will I still be regarded as part of the human? Will the ‘human’ expand to include me in its reach? If I desire in certain ways, will I be able to live?” (Butler, Undoing 3).

Consequently, the question of normative gender and sexuality becomes intimately linked to the definition of the human. In this particular case the main criterion for delineating between different types of humans is the duration of the state of active sexuality, or in Genly's terms, the visibility of gender.<sup>31</sup> When Genly tries to tell Argaven that "we are all men," the king is disinterested because he has already cast the Envoy into the position of "a sexual freak or an artificial monster or a visitor from the Domains of the Void" (LHD 34). Whichever of these he may be, he is definitely not normal in the Gethenian sense; after all, "it is always the 'aliens' who arrive and the 'humans' who are at home" (Pearson "Postcolonialism/s" 191). Wendy Pearson explains that "the ways in which Genly does gender – as a being in a state of permanent kemmer or potential sexual arousal, a state seen by Gethenians as a form of perversion – renders him less than human to most Gethenians" (*Queer* 76). Thus the same thing that makes Gethenians seem strange and inhuman to Genly in turn marks him as perverse to them. As he expounds,

Excessive prolongation of the kemmer period, with permanent hormonal imbalance towards the male or the female, causes what they call perversion; it is not rare; three or four percent of adults may be physiologically perverts or abnormal – normals, by our standards . . . The Karhidish slang for them is *halfdeads*. They are sterile (LHD 67).

The novel thus shows not only how the visitor or stranger (the alien) is expunged from the definition of "us" as the normative group of humans, but also the process by which the presence of the stranger makes our own experience of being normal increasingly *unheimlich* (Pearson, "Postcolonialism/s" 191). As Estraven comes to realize, Genly "is no more an oddity, a sexual freak, than I am" (LHD 250).

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<sup>31</sup> Potentially, it could also be race, since Genly is black and most Gethenians are "yellow-brown or red-brown" (LHD 37), which is a fact that very few critics have discussed. His height is above average, but generally he does not stand out too much, and his appearance does not immediately mark him as an outsider (his "permanent kemmer" is hidden under thick layers of clothing).

### 3.7 *Strange Encounters, or Adventures in Perversion*

As the story progresses, Genly gradually starts to overcome his presumptions and attempts to see Estraven on his own terms. During their pull across the glacier, Genly still finds himself offended when Estraven tells him to lie down and rest because he has trouble taking commands from someone who is shorter than him and “built more like a woman” (LHD 235). However, he immediately realizes that his friend is not patronizing, but genuinely trying to help him; “after all, he had no standards of manliness, of virility, to complicate his pride” (235). Genly’s “entire pattern of socio-sexual interaction is nonexistent” on Gethen because these people “cannot play the game,” as Oppong explains (LHD 101). For the same reason Estraven does not understand why Genly hides his face when he is crying; he ponders why showing tears would be considered “either evil or shameful” (LHD 247).

Butler has argued that gender is a kind of incessant collective activity whose rules are determined in advance, even though they allow for improvisation within a scene of constraint (*Undoing* 1). Gender is not a singular doing, but a reiteration of a set of norms whose “success” depends on mutual recognition (*Bodies* 12). She emphasizes that “one does not ‘do’ one’s gender alone. One is always ‘doing’ with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary” (*Undoing* 1). One of Genly’s main problems is that he performs his gender for no one, not even an imaginary other, and his “doing” is not recognized since his audience is not familiar with the rules and cannot acknowledge his performance. Oppong warns that the first Envoy needs to be alerted in advance that his pride will suffer – “unless he is very self-assured, or senile” (LHD 101) – because he will expect his virility to be regarded, which it will not be. On Gethen, “one is respected and judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience” (101).

Despite his inadvertent presumption of masculine superiority, Genly seems to exhibit a striking lack of agency and independence and does not seem to have much control over what

happens to him. As Mona Fayad points out, “one of the strongest ironies of the text, and one of which Ai is entirely unaware, is that his insistence on his masculinity as a privileged position of dominance is completely thwarted by the ridiculous absence of control, physical or otherwise, that he displays” (69). Namely, he can barely survive in the cold climate, he cannot arrange an audience with the King, he cannot enter Orgoreyn without Estraven’s help with the documents, he naively trusts the Orgota politicians, he is forcibly taken to the Pulefen Farm and abused and drugged, he cannot escape the Farm on his own, he cannot return to Karhide across the Gobrin ice alone, and, finally, he cannot accomplish his mission without Estraven’s sacrifice. “Textually speaking, then, Ai is reduced to a ‘wimp’ by his contact with the ‘effeminate intrigue’ (Ai’s term) of the natives;” in other words, he has been “contaminated” (Fayad 70). Having no femininity to define himself against, Genly is left without a grounds for identity which he is “constantly in danger of losing . . . through his symbiotic relationship with Estraven,” and “the more contact he has with the Gethenians, the more he loses his capacity to define himself as a masculine subject” (Fayad 70-71).

But even at the voluntary farm, where he is completely stripped of power, Genly still tries to uphold the difference between himself on the one hand, and the guards and other prisoners on the other, in order to distance himself from them and preserve his idea of active and virile masculinity. Both guards and prisoners appear to him *effeminate*: the guards are “stolid, slovenly, heavy,” defined by a sense of “a gross, bland fleshiness,” and the prisoners are equally “flabby” and “their talk trivial” (LHD 189). His attitude remains the same even after he learns that the reason the prisoners seem lifeless is because they are given drugs to keep them out of kemmer.

The question of embodiment and of reading the body is the site where literary narrative and gender theory come together in the novel and where “practices of instituting new modes of reality” (Butler, *Undoing* 29) are worked out. We are presented with an alien body, a

utopian body that is not marked by the social in the same way as our body is. The Gethenian body is an embodied contradiction: it is underdetermined, a pure potentiality (somer), but at the same time threateningly sexual because unpredictable, uncontainable, and self-contained (kemmer). It is also non-essentialist, because it entails a body which is “not understood as a static and accomplished fact,” but as “a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone” (Butler, *Undoing* 29). Gethenian sexuality can be seen as “a temporary state rather than a permanent identity” (Pearson, *Queer* 76), a state that is not reducible to organs but produced relationally, as a response to the other. As Attebery underlines, a Gethenian in kemmer “responds to her/his sexual partner by taking on whatever features complement those of the lover” (139).<sup>32</sup> Le Guin’s vision of androgyny thus opens up “a space of resistance that redefines the ways in which gender identity is constructed” (Fayad 59).

It is “this contingency of bodies, the possibility, if not the fact, of sexual contact,” that Genly finds troubling, because it situates his “disorientation as to who is and who is not human firmly in the corporeality of the sexed and sexualized body” (Pearson, *Queer* 78). Much like Ong Tot Oppong, he finds this kind of sexuality degrading because it resembles “the estrous cycle of lower animals” and requires the “subjection of human beings to the mechanical imperative of rut” (LHD 101). As Tracy Hargreaves explains, the dual-sexed figure is generally seen as “atavistic, a throwback to an earlier age when vertebrates appeared to be a mixture of both anatomical sexes” (3; see also: 21). Interestingly enough, Estraven

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<sup>32</sup> Le Guin has been criticized for maintaining the heteronormative model of sexuality. The basic social unit on Gethen is called a hearth, and it consists of a group of people (between 200 and 800) who live together primarily for economic convenience. Hearts are “more tribal than urban” and “communal, independent, and somewhat introverted” (Le Guin, “IGN” 161). However, even though marriage has no legal status on Gethen, there is the widely accepted practice of “vowing kemmering,” which is basically monogamous heterosexual coupling. Ong Tot Oppong writes that same-sex kemmer partners are so rare as to be ignored (LHD 96). In the Redux version of “Is Gender Necessary?” Le Guin expresses regret that she had “unnecessarily locked the Gethenians into heterosexuality” (“IGN” 169).

thinks that it is Genly's sexuality that is inferior: "A strange low-grade sort of desire it must be," he says, "to be spread out over every day of the year and never to know the choice of sex" (LHD 250).

Furthermore, Genly's initial attitude towards Gethenians and his reservation towards Estraven also invoke the specter of homosexuality, since Genly knows that Estraven's body can at any time transform into either a female or male form. The latter possibility seems particularly threatening to Genly, who, although not an outright homophobe, feels alarmed by this kind of sexual shiftiness and unpredictability. "What is a friend," wonders Genly, "in a world where any friend may be a lover at a new phase of the moon?" (LHD 229). This possibility becomes particularly disquieting during their time alone on the ice, when they spend the nights together in a small tent. Friendship is impossible where sexuality looms by and where the body may treacherously "metamorphos[e] under the hand's touch" (229). What the novel attempts to do is precisely to overcome this kind of homophobia and move towards a questioning of the domain of "normal" sexuality and humanness. Even though Genly says that "[t]hey were no flesh of mine, no friends; no love between us" (229), by the end of his adventure he will have been "interpellat[ed] into a form of 'hermaphronormativity'" (Pearson, *Queer* 78).

### 3.8 *Love Among the Glaciers*

Genly's gradual acceptance of Estraven takes place during their journey across the glacier.<sup>33</sup> It is only in that isolated, (anti)utopian space where "nothing grows and no beasts run" (LHD 25), cut off from their respective societies, that they can become "equals at last, equal, alien, alone" (LHD 251). Their emotional bond is established in two steps: first by their dealing with Estraven's coming into kemmer, and second through mindspeech.<sup>34</sup> The fear of sexual contact reaches its peak when Estraven enters kemmer one night. Genly is at first confused by his friend's taciturn behavior, but soon realizes what is happening. He confesses that until then he had rejected Estraven, refused him his reality, and finally acknowledges the sexual tension between them. It was from this recognition that "the great and sudden assurance of friendship between us rose . . . it might as well be called, now as later, *love*" (my emphasis, 267).

It is important to note that it was from the difference, not likeness, that love came: love was "the bridge" (267). Love here denotes not so much a deep connection or knowing the other, as one would traditionally assume, but recognition of hopeless and extreme disparity. Thus in the novel love is defined as a nonviolent answer to the question "Who are you?" posed to the Other. As Butler puts it, the ultimate ethical dilemma concerning the position towards the Other comes down to the violent and nonviolent response: while the violent response "does not ask, and does not seek to know," the nonviolent response "lives with its unknowingness about the Other in the face of the Other, since sustaining the bond that the question opens is finally more valuable than knowing in advance what holds us in common" (*Undoing* 35).

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<sup>33</sup> For more on the role of ice and landscape in the work of women writers, see Naomi Jacobs, "The Frozen Landscape," in *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference*. Eds. Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerten. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994.

<sup>34</sup> Mindspeech is a form of telepathic communication in which one cannot tell lies. It is an acquired skill, even though not all humanoid species have the same capacity to learn it.



Genly's and Estraven's love is never consummated physically: in this novel which is largely about sex, there is a surprising absence of sex.<sup>35</sup> However, their sexual union is achieved on another plane – through mindspeech, which not only substitutes the actual sexual act, but signifies a far more intimate kind of relationship. “[T]hat intimacy of mind established between us was a bond,” Genly observed, “but an obscure and austere one;” an intimacy that comes from realizing “the extent of the darkness” that separated them (LHD 274). As Attebery explains, the telepathic merging “is described in the book as closer than sexual union;” it is “a sort of marriage between unlike equals” (Attebery 138). The sexual nature of their mindspeaking is further intensified by the fact that instead of Genly's own voice Estraven hears the voice of his dead brother and lover Arek.

Genly believes that they had touched the only way they could touch, because had they consummated their relationship, they would have met “once more as aliens” (LHD 267). According to Pearson, this is because “in the terms of the novel, Genly can only be male and Estraven can only become female” (“Postcolonialism/s” 193). Of course, Estraven might also become male – and, indeed, Genly can be accused of eschewing homosexuality – but even if Estraven became male instead of female, ultimately “both possibilities [would] end up reifying gender: we can have only an encounter between a man and a woman or between two men” (“Postcolonialism/s” 194). Consequently, the non-sexual encounter is rejected in favor of a more intellectual and emotional one that recognizes the impossibility of a true merging of aliens (in this case, man and androgyne). But even this bond cannot persist outside of the idealized non-social space of the Gobrin ice, and the impossibility to turn their symbiosis into a permanent state can only be resolved by (in this case, Estraven's) death.

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<sup>35</sup> Intercourse is evaded on several occasions – not only between Estraven and Genly, but also between Estraven and the Orgota spy Gaum who attempts to seduce him in order to get information, and between Genly and another prisoner in the truck heading for the Pulefen Farm who enters kemmer and becomes a woman.

### 3.9 *Le Guin's Idealized Humanism: Is There Human beyond Gender?*

Following Wendy Pearson, I believe that the novel “tracks a kind of undoing of gender – or at least of Genly’s perception that gender is immutable and immanent – and an alteration in Genly’s perception of who is and is not human” (Pearson, *Queer* 77). In fact, the shift in perception is so extreme that in the end, when his spaceship lands, it is his own colleagues that appear to him alien: “They were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species; great apes with intelligent eyes, all of them in rut” (LHD 318). The novel manages to reconstruct the alien encounter in such a way that both Genly and the reader feel estranged from their own world. The contact with the alien can, and perhaps must, “result in man interacting with the alien to the point of altering his own shape in the process” (Slusser 8). As Butler contends,

The human, it seems, must become strange to itself, even monstrous, to reach the human on another plane. This human will not be ‘one,’ indeed, will have no ultimate form, but it will be one that is constantly negotiating sexual difference in a way that has no natural or necessary consequences for the social organization of sexuality” (Undoing 191).

Le Guin believes that it is the dualism of value inscribed in sexual difference that is destroying us – the separation of yang from yin, and the moralization of one as good and the other as bad – and is calling for a healthier model of integration (“IGN” 172). I would like to suggest that Le Guin’s contribution is not an outright rejection of duality or a wish for abolishing (sexual) difference, but precisely a reworking of binaries, an attempt to envision a dualism without hierarchy, a complementarity that acknowledges the interdependence and equality of yin and yang (or in terms of the novel, light and dark) which are not fixed and essential but constantly modified by each other while working together to create a wholeness. Le Guin here encounters an unlikely ally, Jean Baudrillard, who opines that the masculine and the feminine “are undoubtedly merely reversible moments, like night and day, following upon

one other and changing places with one another in an endless process of seduction” (127). For Baudrillard, sexual difference is “itself a utopia: the idea that such pairs of terms can be split up is a dream – and the idea of subsequently reuniting them is another” (127-8).

In the novel androgyny is the figure of that balanced and harmonious relationship in which power is not unequally distributed but emerges from the lack of the need to subjugate one part to the other. Barbara Brown explains that androgyny is not a prescription for a submerging of differences, but entails the kind of dynamics that is not based on “the opposition of male and female but rather an alternating thrust and withdrawal of the masculine and feminine principles within each individual psyche” (228). It is in this framework that the poem *Former’s Lay*, from which the novel takes its title, can be interpreted:

Light is the left hand of darkness  
and darkness the right hand of light.  
Two are one, life and death, lying  
together like lovers in kemmer,  
like hands joined together,  
like the end and the way (252).

When Estraven recites the poem, Genly comments on how isolated and undivided Gethenians are, and hence how obsessed with wholeness they must be, much like “we are with dualism” (LHD 252). But Estraven responds that they are dualists too: “duality is an essential, isn’t it? So long as there is *myself* and *the other*.” The two principles, as Bazin and Freeman have argued, “define their existence through a creative relationship with each other . . . death defines life, and life death; light gives rise to darkness, and darkness to light” (190).

The meaning of androgyny for Le Guin thus exceeds that of sex and/or gender and encompasses a whole new way of looking at the world: a new ethics, if you will. What is at stake is both “a radical change in the fabric of human consciousness and in styles of human behavior” (Daly, qtd. in Hargreaves 102) and “a radical change in our philosophical approach”

(Badinter 170). It is here that the utopian wish can be located and the implications of androgyny as a feminist project be grasped: not (only) to remove gender, but to imagine a new epistemology and a new ontology of the human.

However, what that human might be is not clear. Le Guin's vision is ultimately deeply humanistic, or "inhabited by a humanistic (or metaphysical) illusion," as Jameson says (99), and presumes that "human" as a category is always desirable, unconstructed, and universal. Ong Tot Oppong writes that on Gethen one is judged only as a human being, as if that category was entirely unpolitical. It is also supposed to precede all other identity categories. Le Guin explains that she had "eliminated gender, to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human" ("IGN" 160). Kathy Rudy wonders if we will ever be able to transcend our gender identities and think of ourselves not as men and women but *people* (34). What these idealized humanist positions fail to take into account is that the idea of some basic humanness beneath gender might be just as constructed as gender or even, as Butler has argued, sex itself. Since the subject, according to Butler, is produced through the matrix of gender relations, it cannot be claimed that gender comes into existence *after* the emergence of the "human" (*Bodies* 7). That is, perhaps, the final trap of androgyny for feminism: to posit a human prior to gendering – a universal human nature unspoiled by society.

### **3.10 "A Society of Eunuchs:" Sex, Progress and Utopia**

The final question that I want to ask is whether *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a utopian novel. The answer, as provided by Le Guin herself, is that it is not, because it "poses no practicable alternative to contemporary society, since it is based on an imaginary, radical change in human anatomy" ("IGN" 171). But in light of more recent theories of utopia (see Ch. 1.3), can it really be claimed that utopia is simply about "practicable alternatives"? Suvin

has proposed that we look at utopia not as a state that can or cannot be realized, but a method to be applied (*Metamorph.* 52). Having that in mind, should the feminist utopia not rather be seen as fluid and “never realized or complete, but always revolutionary” (Teslenko 169)? I would like to consider this issue by looking at the interrelation between the traditional idea of utopia as static, temporality and the lack of technological progress on Gethen, and the view of androgyny as sterile.

What these three have in common is the notion of completeness which is static, timeless, and unchangeable. As I already explained, traditional utopias were static and ahistorical and offered models of imagined societies as “frozen images that don’t allow for historical change” since there is no need for progress “after the ideal society has been established” (Vieira 9). The association of utopia with ahistorical (and unattainable) perfection survives to this day despite the more recent changes in the utopian genre. Similarly, androgyny as wholeness has been associated with a static and timeless existence in opposition to the Platonic “craving and pursuit” of the separated halves (Plato 145). It signifies a state that precedes sexual difference and reproduction and therefore promises unity but also immortality – where there is no reproduction, there is no death, but also no change. Heilbrun links androgyny with the fear of impotence and frigidity (xii), and Ong Tot Oppong describes Gethenians as “a society of eunuchs,” wondering if such a society could ever achieve anything (LHD 102). Unsure what to make of Gethenian cyclical sexuality, Oppong describes “the absence of continuous sexual drive in terms of a *lack*” (Fayad 67). It follows that the active and continuous sexual drive (or in Plato’s terms, love) is seen as productive, while androgyny is equated with impotence and sterility – lacking desire, how could it produce anything? In this context, androgyny is seen an impoverishing move to uniformity and represents “the zero state of social relations, a non-relation, and in a way the reverse of the union of differences that shows its fecundity in the

exemplary character attributed to the masculine and/feminine relationship,” as Georges Balandier states (qtd. in Badinter 179).

Jameson has observed that one of the most important features of Gethen is that nothing happens: “an immemorial social order remains exactly as it was” (276). Here it is always Year One, and people believe “that progress is less important than presence” (LHD 52). Despite the fact that “the mechanical-industrial Age of Invention in Karhide is at least three thousand years old” (29), people do not seem to care much about advancing the technology: Genly is confused as to why they do not use the excellent heating devices that they have invented (30) or why they do not make their vehicles go faster (52). There have been no great revolutions, and things happen very slowly – like evolution, or the movement of a glacier (105). The Gethenian society is both literally and symbolically frozen: it is an ice-covered world whose inhabitants lack the motivation that is supposed to proceed from sexual difference. Le Guin explains there is no myth of progress on Gethen because progress is associated with “the driving linearity of the ‘male’” which conquers and subjugates and which she wants to subvert by introducing “the circularity of the ‘female’” in order to achieve balance by combining the two principles (“IGN” 164). The rejection of progress along with the conception of sexuality as cyclical and transitory can thus be read not as a wish for stasis, but as criticism of the understanding of sexual difference as productive and androgyny as sterile. In the context of the novel, balance is not equated with the traditional utopian idea of perfection and fixedness, but is defined “as a process” (Vieira 22) – a continuous negotiation and mutual change based on uncertainty and complementarity.

## Conclusion

The body, explains Michel Foucault in one of his beautiful but abstruse lectures (“Le Corps utopique,” 1966), is the origin and the principal actor of all utopias. It is not the opposite of utopia – the place to which we are condemned, “the pitiless place” (229) – but the “zero point of the world” from which “all possible places, real or utopian, emerge and radiate” (233). Thinking the body is thus always tied up with thinking utopia, and vice versa. What would it mean, then, to conceive of the body itself as utopian, to locate utopia in the body? I believe the idea of androgyny represents such a utopia – the body from which all things proceed, the utopia of a body transfigured, beautiful, colossal, and infinite in its duration (229).

But androgyny need not be thought of only as an image of self-contained perfection which we should strive to achieve (or regain). The questioning of sexual difference, stresses Rita Felski, does not have to inevitably imply the end of history; “rather, it may help to generate powerful new feminist stories of possible futures, fueling imaginative projections of new worlds and alternative genealogies” (346). Perhaps it is more helpful to think of it not as a body without gender, but a body that tells us something about how gender is constructed. As MacLeod points out, “[t]o look at the androgyne is to look at how and why Western culture engenders fictions [and] narrates gender” (11). Ultimately, the androgyne does not so much signify the obliteration of sexual difference as it does our inability to stop thinking about sexual difference and what to do with it. But to say that gender is always inscribed in the androgyne is not the same as to claim, as critics like Harris and Secor have done, that it maintains and affirms the gender binary and is therefore incompatible with feminism. In that respect, Ursula K. Le Guin’s vision of an androgynous society in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is more revealing of our inability to move beyond thinking in gendered terms than of the nature of androgyny itself. In fact, androgyny as it is represented in the book is not essential

and eternal, but relational, processual and reactive: the Gethenian body is constantly becoming otherwise, transforming itself in response to the other, and as such it opens up a space of resistance to the idea of gender identity as fixed, but also to sex as a biological fact.

Le Guin's contribution, as I have suggested, lies in the fact that she does not reject binary thinking, but sets out to envision a dualism without hierarchy – a complementarity that acknowledges the interdependence of the two principles (light/dark, or male/female) – and to show that opposition need not be “the orchestrator of values” (Cixous 91). What is at stake is a difficulty of imagining the alien: being faced with our own limitations in doing that, we are forced to turn back upon ourselves and question our normative assumptions. Furthermore, the novel challenges us to see the characters as androgynous in spite of the linguistic and narratorial hints that would have us perceive them as men. As I have argued, for Genly, and possibly for the reader, androgyny becomes most evident precisely when the characters deviate from our expectations of gendered behavior: when we find their actions inappropriate, confusing or despicable, in which case they become more woman-like. This “intrusion” of femininity serves to remind us that we are applying our categories in a situation where they are meaningless – that is why, paradoxically, androgyny in the novel is expressed in gendered terms, as a contamination of the generic masculine, and subverts the expectation that sex can ever reveal the truth about the self.



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