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## Speculative Bill

Tess Grogan  
*Smith College*, [tgrogan@smith.edu](mailto:tgrogan@smith.edu)

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TESS GROGAN

## Speculative Bill

This essay discusses some difficulties of teaching Renaissance engagements with race, class, and gender in diverse twenty-first-century classrooms and looks to contemporary romance—science fiction and fantasy—for examples of humane and reparative pedagogy. Ursula K. Le Guin’s feminist revisioning of her *Earthsea* trilogy in the late story “Dragonfly” both models the humility required to make change and stages a teaching practice that welcomes the disruptive and uncomfortable questions posed by a university’s first female student.

I recently had a conversation with Bill Oram about how Renaissance literature contrives to teach us things. He said that what he admires about works like *King Lear* or *The Faerie Queene* is their fondness for dilemmas that force the reader to take a moral stand, guiding her toward greater knowledge—not of any solution but of her own priorities and heart. This is a radiant vision of early modern pedagogy, and I intend to carry it with me.

Yet these astonishing teaching moments often emerge out of texts riddled with politically fraught commonplaces, trafficking in the seemingly casual denigration of women, people of color, foreigners, and the lower classes. Relentless exposure to this bitter procession can be draining for many twenty-first-century readers, even if the same material also raises provocative questions. Sometimes when I read, a passage plumbs so deep that it leaves me shivering. Other times, I find myself incapable of responding to or even seeing these pockets of sublimity because I am so exhausted by all the whores, savages, and vulgar poor that inhabit the surrounding pages. These cursory

portraits often escape notice; taken together, however, they stock the reservoir that supplies the Renaissance with its elaborate similes and apparently inexhaustible figures of speech.<sup>1</sup>

For a long time, Renaissance instructors were expected to insist on the timelessness of the period's thought and on its literature's supposed transcendence of such narrow-minded categories as "woman" or "Moor." More recently, it has become customary instead to historicize rigorously and to draw attention to the period's many subversions, its anxieties and antinarratives, the polyvocality of its writers. These latter approaches are more accommodating but can likewise demand that a student inure herself to the routine brutality of a text, setting aside its casualties as mere background noise void of real literary significance. This is harder for some students than for others. Today's undergraduates enter a community still struggling to acknowledge that embodied differences have consequences, both in the classroom and in scholarship. We are still learning to honor how our bodies, and what each of us has been told about our place in the world, direct how we read and what we see there. What is the teacher's job? Is it to persuade her students to love the Renaissance unconditionally? Bill does love the Renaissance, but he has also never minded when I quarrel with material that he cherishes. Admiration and anger are both educators. He has always made space for me to be enraged, or exhausted, or irritated by things that he hadn't paid much attention to (e.g., gender or class), even when he ultimately disagrees with my interpretation. He understands that this is teaching, too.

\* \* \*

Bill Oram regularly taught Spenser, Milton, and Shakespeare but was known instead to many of his students as the instructor of English 208: Science Fiction. Some pupils were in fact blithely unaware of "Renaissance Bill." That a career spent teaching both canonical literary fiction and paperbacks euphemistically styled "genre fiction" can still feel faintly dissonant testifies to the hardness of anxieties expressed in Renaissance antiromance polemic. Yet there has always been an instinctive alliance between these two areas, perhaps best exemplified by the bravura career of C. S. Lewis, who spent decades teaching and producing influential scholarship on medieval and Renaissance literature, writing popular fantasy and science fiction, and thinking seriously about both. Clearly he saw no contradiction between these commitments. Likewise Philip Pullman, who spent his young adult fantasy trilogy in extended agon with Milton.

Bill's career differs from Lewis's in a crucial way, however. Lewis (and Tolkien, and Pullman for that matter) taught at Oxford, an institution that not only witnessed the advent of Renaissance humanism but played an instrumental role in its development and dissemination. Bill taught for over forty years at Smith College, an institution that was not even a gleam in the Renaissance's eye. While liberal arts colleges are in meaningful ways direct heirs to the humanist mission, many of the movement's founders had expressed ambivalence about the intellectual and moral capacities of the scholarship boys, immigrants, and women who sought to improve their prospects via access to this radical program.<sup>2</sup> The straightforward mandate that Smith defiantly claims, to furnish "means and facilities for education equal to those which are afforded . . . to young men" simply did not exist—and perhaps could not be imagined—five hundred years ago.<sup>3</sup> In a sense, Smith as it exists today was equally unfathomable at the moment of its own founding. The 1870s could not fully imagine the postwar enfranchisement of the 1920s, which were likewise unprepared for feminist waves that broke across the 1970s and 1980s. One scandalized 1980s alumna recently expressed her distaste for the 2010s, specifically for the school's abandonment of a "white, wealthy, upper-class" majority population in favor of admitting more lesbians and "low-income women of color."<sup>4</sup> Yet amid these near-constant changes—as the American men's colleges grudgingly embraced coeducation, as the Seven Sisters faced admitting male students or absorption into male counterparts, as the meaning of the word "woman" was profoundly redefined—Smith has maintained that its core purpose as a women's college is worth standing ground for.

Teaching the Renaissance in this setting is a peculiar challenge. Presenting humanist thought as transcendent and universal seems intolerable when its monuments appear not to include anyone in your classroom in its universe. Yet the great labor of the humanist reformers was putting into motion a project with consequences beyond what they were able to conceive. The frenetic misogyny of a Juan Luis Vives or the anxious xenophobia of a Roger Ascham was in some ways a response to the visible success of the movement and to the changes humanism had already wrought in their lifetimes. The humanists were certainly aware that nothing is timeless—"all that moueth, doth in *Change* delight"—but their writing struggled with this awareness.<sup>5</sup>

At Smith, Bill chose to combine instruction in Renaissance literature with something that Renaissance literature itself perpetually fretted over—namely, teaching women to read popular romances.<sup>6</sup> Science fiction and fantasy are the modern successors of this contested form, inheriting much of its

machinery along with its uncertain status. While many thoughtful pages have been devoted to tracing the genesis of contemporary science fiction in works like *Paradise Lost*, *The Blazing World*, *New Atlantis*, *Utopia*, and *The Tempest*, these accounts have, for the most part, taxonomized the genre's many extraordinary inheritances: optic glasses, the experimental method, shape-shifting seraphim, protorobots. The sturdiest link between the Renaissance and these contemporary romances may, however, be deceptively plain. Many humanists considered romances dangerous rivals to their own pedagogical program, condemning them as "bold bawdry" or "firebrondes."<sup>7</sup> Implicit in these conflicted invectives is concern that romance might contain the same animating capacity as the Latin orators and Greek poets, the same incendiary potential to educate and move to action.<sup>8</sup> In teaching Renaissance literature and sci-fi, Bill emphasized the educational impulses and speculative nature of both, their shared concern with inciting futures beyond their capacity to imagine. It is impossible to say what Erasmus or More might think walking in on a spirited session on *Dhalgren* or the procreative rituals of Planet O, but it is tempting to speculate that some part of them would recognize this strange part of their enduring legacy.

Bill has dedicated himself to studying the works of these latter-day romancers with joy and unusual seriousness of purpose. His conviction elicited similar devotion in his students, who hacked away at their reading with the full array of New Critical implements placed at their disposal. The stories Bill loves best to teach stage the education of a callow protagonist, a reluctant society, or both. Octavia Butler's *Dawn/Rites/Imago* trilogy deposits its human heroine unceremoniously on the mothership of tentacled genetic-engineer overlords, where her survival is contingent on the successful conquest of xenophobia. But it is the alien race's education that ultimately concerns Butler, who shows the "paternalistic" Oankali "gradually allowing themselves to be taught" by their unruly captive.<sup>9</sup> This characteristic insistence that instruction must go both ways might be seen as a late fruit of the broadened classroom access cultivated by humanists. For many early modern aristocrats, there was little more alarming or more fascinating than popular uprising, the demos seizing an opportunity to turn society upside down. Popular education was haunted by this prospect of inverted discipline, even as it held out opportunities for social advancement through the grammar schools to scholarship boys like Edmund Spenser. Science fiction positively revels in disruptive educators who emerge from below or outside centers of power—a brazenly democratic vision of pedagogy that sweeps characters, intergalactic federations, and even authors along in its wake.<sup>10</sup>

Besides his sci-fi survey, Bill taught rare and remarkable single-author seminars on the substantial oeuvre of Ursula K. Le Guin. Perhaps more than any other writer in the field, Le Guin performed her own gradual education, returning to and revising earlier work through a sustained public practice of introspection. A particularly startling product of this unusual candor is “Is Gender Necessary? Redux” (1988), a marginally annotated republication of a snippy 1976 apologia for her Hainish cycle novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in which the author admits accusations of flawed world-building that she had refuted a decade earlier.<sup>11</sup> But it is in the realm of fantasy that she took her sharpest turn. The acclaimed *Earthsea* trilogy had stood complete for nearly two decades when its creator unexpectedly released a fourth installment, followed in 1992 by the explosive lecture that came to be known as “Earthsea Revisioned.” In blunt terms, Le Guin exposed the flaws of her Archipelago and tasked herself with mending them. Fantasy is in some ways a great deal harder to repair than malfunctioning science fiction. Upon discovery of a serious design flaw, the author is unable to terraform a new planet, crank a time machine, or open a portal to a parallel multiverse; the genre’s stricter narrative expectations demand that any revision be internally consistent and usually linear, justified in the story’s own language and by its laws.

This demand creates a great deal of narrative legwork, as characters are dragged through the author’s own hard-earned education by proxy. It requires an astounding degree of humility to let both versions of the story stand, the earlier exposed and rebuked by the presence of the latter. Le Guin’s anthropological background placed strangers at the center of many of her novels, such as the earthling Genly Ai, whose account of time spent with the androgynous residents of the planet Gethen guides the reader through his gradual accommodation to their strangeness, and theirs to his. In Le Guin’s fantasies as in her science fictions, the stranger is the consummate representative of difference and the necessary stimulus to change. Her magnum opus foundered because the hero Ged turned out to be no stranger after all, nor particularly different from the elite company he entered—for all his provincial bafflement at the mysteries of the wizard school Roke, his was ultimately a family romance, a prodigal tale. His triumphant return and assumption of the patriarchal mantle was expected. When she retold this story, she substituted new strangers and infused all the hostility that the academy, at its worst, can summon to its reactionary defense. Le Guin borrowed Adrienne Rich’s “re-visioning” for this project, in acknowledgment that work is never finished, that change is urgent and overdue. Her resulting education—of herself,

of her characters—is founded in the recognition that the admission of failure is an obligatory step in making something new. She presents a pedagogy that takes seriously what it has failed to teach, who it has failed to teach, and those things that it is still struggling to learn.

The *bildung* of Earthsea's Ged is standard fare, tracing the hero's journey from cocksure apprentice to sober archmage, youthful ego tempered by years of pain and error. His education begins with the mage Ogion, who lifts Ged out of the herd of village boys on the island of Gont to be "schooled as fits his gifts."<sup>12</sup> This is itself a meritocratic fantasy: worth recognizes worth. "You are no common man," Ged's father humbly observes to Ogion. "Nor will this boy be a common man," the mage replies, confirming the succession (14). Yet in Ogion, Ged finds none of the grandiose initiation he seeks. The master is fond of "long, listening silence[s]" and of the proper names of weeds with no known medicinal virtue (19). He converses with spiders and trees and prefers sleeping in the rain to weather spells or even tents. When a frustrated Ged bursts out "I haven't learned anything yet!" Ogion calmly responds: "You haven't found out what I'm teaching" (17). Ogion's manner is a product of Le Guin's lifelong dialogue with Lao-Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*; however, this gnomic approach proves a poor fit for the hotheaded adolescent, who exchanges his master for the famous School of Roke at the earliest opportunity. There, he encounters the boundaries of his technical ability and the perils conjured by his reckless pride. Weary, battered, pursued by his own chthonic shadow, he seeks safe harbor in Ogion's cottage. The mage receives the prodigal without judgment, only recognition. For his part, Ged admits that he has "come back . . . as [he] left: a fool" (126). Having made trial of his own limits, he is finally ready to understand what the quiet master offers.

This educational experience is not for everyone. Ged, prodigal and prodigy, finds himself unable to explain Le Guinian metaphysics to a friend's younger sister, Yarrow: "I wish I could truly understand what you tell me. I am too stupid," she laments (164). This episode of failed instruction is mentioned only in passing, since the teacher has an appointment to keep. The next time Yarrow appears, she is a "house-carpenter's wife, mother of three girls, ignorant of all sorcery but wise in other things."<sup>13</sup> *A Wizard of Earthsea* is not concerned with teaching girls. At the close of the sequel *Tombs of Atuan*, Le Guin's early attempt at female *bildung*, Ged sends his rescued damsel Tenar to the cottage on Gont.<sup>14</sup> Ogion has coped deftly with his first pupil, letting Ged fall on his premature wings, gentling his wildness, fueling his certainty of future greatness ("You will be my master, in the

end”).<sup>15</sup> What does he make of this new charge? Where Ogion’s tutelage laid the foundation for Ged’s formal instruction, the mage must guide Tenar to a different kind of maturity. The reader never sees the years during which the woman lives as Ogion’s ward. She says merely that “he looked after me and tried to teach me what I needed to know.”<sup>16</sup> Did the mage offer Tenar what he taught Ged? The 1970s and 1980s prompted sea change in Le Guin’s work, and the Ogion that Tenar sailed toward at the end of *Tombs* (1971) is not precisely the Ogion she looks back on from the vantage point of *Tehanu* (1990). In early *Earthsea*, women are unequivocally excluded from the kind of learning peddled on Roke—it takes an act of authorial “re-visioning” to acknowledge the inadequacy of that model. “Weak as women’s magic, wicked as women’s magic,” they say in the islands.<sup>17</sup> If Ogion indeed “tried” to teach Tenar magecraft after the ending of *Tombs*, he offered instruction in an art that still inscribed her subjection. She chose another way to follow, and no wonder.

For the next generation, this is not enough. In the late *Earthsea* story “Dragonfly,” the author makes a connection that hovers latent in her earlier books painfully overt: Roke, with its rich and ambitious boys, its arcane masters, and its exclusive rules of entry, can be read as an extended allegory of the twentieth-century university.

A man comes when you knock, an ordinary looking man. And he gives you a test. You have to say a certain word, a password, before he’ll let you in. If you don’t know it, you can never go in. But if he lets you in, then from inside you see that the door is entirely different.<sup>18</sup>

Irian is a provincial farm girl, blunt-spoken, hungry for a knowledge that has heretofore remained the domain of males. Her first encounter with Roke is through the predatory student Ivory, who leverages his insider knowledge of the school in an attempt to coerce her into sexual compliance. To Ivory, the idea of a “she-mage” is titillating, and entertaining Irian’s ambition allows him to indulge his magnanimity (215). He conveys the nubile coed to Roke in disguise, anticipating the delicious chaos her attempt at entry and subsequent exposure will create within the staid college. At this point, the mage loses control of his hoax. Rather than attempting the door in her male guise, Irian gives the Doorkeeper her true, female name. And instead of barring her entry, the Doorkeeper welcomes her inside.

This lapse prompts an emergency faculty meeting. The learned masters of Roke face off over Irian, a five-man cadre of traditionalists harrying four



progressives. After accusing Doorkeeper of nursing a sexual interest in the applicant, the conservative faction defends equally well-worn philosophical ground: "Everything not in its place does harm. A note sung, however well sung, wrecks the tune it isn't part of" (235). ("For at the first they all created were / In goodly measure . . . And weighed out in ballaunces so nere / That not a dram was missing of their right.")<sup>19</sup> Against this dogma, Doorkeeper maintains that Irian's disruptive presence is not only permissible but essential: she "come[s] to us seeking not only what she needs to know, but also what we need to know" (231). She arrives at Roke with the venerably adolescent aim of learning who she is, to which the answer of at least one master is "Learn your place . . . !" (19).

Irian stays. Through the spring and summer she lives near the Master Patterner in the Immanent Grove, outside the walls of Roke but close enough for discomfort. At times, her presence strains the capacities of even her radically inclusive host:

"Maybe I came to destroy Roke."  
His pale eyes blazed then. "Try!"  
(255)

I've mulled over this brief passage since I first read it. Is the Patterner's response defiance? A challenge? An invitation? Over the course of the novella, Irian transmutes naïve gratitude at being allowed into the hallowed halls of Roke into a far more dangerous skepticism of the school's account of its mandate. She brings a reckoning, long due.

Tenar arrives unlooked for at Ogion's cottage. I would imagine that the mage faces the woman deposited unceremoniously by his wandering protégé with some initial perplexity. What would he have made of Irian?

\* \* \*

This essay has raised questions about the very real difficulties of teaching the Renaissance outside of its own pedagogical frameworks. What happens when literature is hostile? When it demands a student's denigration, exclusion, or capitulation? What can a teacher tell young women about how to experience Milton's Eve or even Duessa? How should an instructor navigate *Othello* with her Black students? How do you teach a book to women, fools, boys, and paynims who come to it as strangers or as fodder?<sup>20</sup> These are the most important questions that teachers of canonical texts face today, I think. They are questions that our humanist predecessors can't answer for us. They

were extant in 1971, when Tenar reached Gont and Bill began teaching. They are no more resolved in 2019.

How do we teach with integrity? Specifically, what does it mean to teach eloquent, astonishing, subversive, racist, misogynistic masterpieces to “big, strong, awkward, ignorant, innocent, angry” girls (and boys, etc.)?<sup>21</sup> There are a certain number of doors that still need to be opened from inside. There is urgent demand for long and ruminative listening. There is a need to welcome difference and to sit with its hunger and its rage. Bill would certainly not think of himself as being at the forefront of change in the Renaissance classroom. He is doggedly fond of its canonical books, of their place in the curriculum, of the eminent men who taught them to him. But he loves another kind of book, too, which sets difference, with all its provocations and possibilities, at the center of the educational project. Science fiction and fantasy have never been secondary to him, never a plus-one. Their intimacy with doubt and insistence on the mind’s right to change are at the core of his educational practice. Bill is interested in teaching what he doesn’t yet know and bluntly willing to make himself vulnerable in doing so. He meets the unexpected and even the frivolous with pensive honesty. He is perpetually aware that he may be the one in the wrong and is nourished rather than debilitated by this knowledge. He knows that his students are probably not coming from the same place as he does and responds to these dissimilarities not with hostility but with unwavering hospitality. I’m not sure he has ever fully grasped what a gift this is.

*Yale University*

#### NOTES

1. Erasmus is, of course, the foremost proponent of this model, as articulated in his *De copia*. For discussion of the politics of rhetorical figuration see Patricia Parker’s *Literary Fat Ladies* (New York: Methuen, 1987) in general, and her chapter “Motivated Rhetorics: Gender, Order, Rule,” 97–125, in particular.

2. Richard Mulcaster and Juan Luis Vives both argued for increased female literacy, but this vision was limited to biblical and moral education in the service of chastity; the exemplary students on which Roger Ascham’s *Schoolmaster* lingers are Jane Grey and, of course, Elizabeth I.

3. The last will and testament of Miss Sophia Smith (1870), accessed via Smith College Libraries, <https://libex.smith.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/smith-sophia/who-was-sophia-smith-/sophia-smith-s-last-will-and-t>.

4. Anne Spurzem, letter to the editor, *The Sophian*, February 22, 2012.

5. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), VII.viii.2.6. Reading programs such as those proposed by Erasmus and Milton laid the foundation for contemporary Great Books curricula and undergird many major requirements precisely by asserting the timelessness of certain material. Erasmus, "On the Method of Study," in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 24, trans. Brian McGregor, ed. Craig Thompson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 678–82; and Milton, "Of Education," in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey, 1957), 637; for discussion, see Jeff Dolven, "Telling Learning," in *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), esp. 49.

6. For the particular associations between maidservants, print romance, and promiscuity, see Lori Newcomb on "scenes of consumption" in *Reading Popular Romance in Early Modern England* (New York: Columbia, 2001), 89–108; for a material perspective, see Heidi Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material in Early Modern England: Print, Gender, and Literacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), esp. 11–12 and 96–155.

7. Roger Ascham, *The Schoolmaster* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 69; Juan Luis Vives, "What bokes be to be redde, and what nat," in *The Instruction of a Christen Woman*, ed. Virginia Walcott Beauchamp, Elizabeth H. Hageman, and Margaret Mikesell (ca. 1529; repr., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 24. For Milton's complicated response to this position, see "An Apology for Smectymnus," in *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrick, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 851.

8. This concern is pushed to its logical terminus (and perhaps beyond) in *Don Quixote*.

9. William A. Oram, personal communication with the author, October 2016.

10. Early speculative fiction is notoriously chauvinistic, but the late midcentury erupted with stories asking discomfiting questions about social structures, systemic violence, belonging, and alienation. Ursula K. Le Guin and Brian Attebery celebrate this demographic and topical broadening while acknowledging that many voices remain unrepresented in their introduction to *The Norton Book of Science Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1993), 17.

11. Ursula K. Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove, 1989), 7–16.

12. Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (New York: Bantam, 1975), 14. Subsequent quotes are cited parenthetically in the text.

13. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Farthest Shore* (New York: Bantam, 1975), 8.

14. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Tombs of Atuan* (New York: Bantam, 1975), 145.
15. Le Guin, *Wizard*, 126, 129.
16. Ursula K. Le Guin, *Tehanu* (New York: Bantam, 1991), 8.
17. Ursula K. Le Guin, *Earthsea Revisioned* (Cambridge, MA: Children's Literature New England; Cambridge: Green Bay Publications, 1993), 10.
18. Ursula K. Le Guin, "Dragonfly," in *Tales from Earthsea* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), 210. Subsequent quotes are cited parenthetically in the text.
19. Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, V.ii.30, Artegall rebuking the Egalitarian Giant.
20. *Ibid.* The Giant's followers love the "idle Toyes" of the egalitarian sects but also, implicitly and provocatively, romance itself.
21. Le Guin, "Dragonfly," 212.