

What Our Darkness Tells Us: Gendered Chthonic Imagery in Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book About Men* and Ursula Le Guin's *The Tombs of Atuan*

“This thing of darkness,
I acknowledge mine.”

Prospero
(*The Tempest*, Act V, Scene 1)

Cem Kılıçarslan*

Abstract

The Jungian concept of the *chthonic*, or the underground, is a recurrent element in fantasy literature. An analysis of two works—Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book About Men* and Ursula Le Guin's *The Tombs of Atuan*—the former with a male, the latter with a female protagonist, reveals that the imagery and themes of the chthonic have gendered connotations in fantastic narratives. Moreover, the chthonic functions differently for male and female characters in the formation of an individual Self. For males, the chthonic has a constructive function: it is necessary for the male psyche to experience the chthonic in order to be whole. For females, the chthonic has a destructive function: the female psyche has to undertake a destructive experience in order to save herself from domination as symbolized by the chthonic realm. Both experiences nevertheless result in a form of unification, or a wholeness of the Self, which is represented through coupling with a member of the opposite sex.

Key words: Chthonic, Carl G. Jung, fantasy literature, Iron John, Robert Bly, Ursula Le Guin, The Tombs of Atuan, gender, masculinity, femininity

* Lecturer, Hacettepe University, Faculty of Letters Department of American Culture and Literature

Özet

Jung psikolojisinin elementlerinden biri olan yeraltı (*chthonic*) teması ve ilintili imge ve kavramlar fantasti edebiyatının sıklıkla kullanılan öğelerindedir. Birisi erkek diğeri ise kadın ana karaktere sahip olan Robert Bly'ın *Iron John: A Book About Men* ve Ursula Le Guin'in *The Tombs of Atuan* adlı eserlerinin incelenmesi, bu yeraltı temasının cinsellik ve cinsel kimlik kavramlarıyla bağlantılı olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu inceleme aynı zamanda yeraltı kavramının erkek ve kadın karakterlerin kendi Benlik oluşumu sürecinde farklı bir işlev yerine getirdiğini de ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Erkek karakter için yeraltı deneyimi kendi kişiliğinin oluşumunda gerekli ve ruhsal bir bütünlüğe ulaşmada yapıcı bir etkiye sahip iken kadın karakter için yeraltı unsurları kendi bütünlüğüne ulaşma sürecinde kurtulması gereken egemen güçleri temsil etmektedir. Bu farklılığa karşın her iki deneyimin sonucunda bireyler bir ruhsal bütünlük ya da Benlik kavramına ulaşmaktadır. Bu bütünlük ise esasen sonuçta karşı cins ile kurulan birliktelik biçiminde ortaya çıkmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Chthonic, Carl G. Jung, fantasti edebiyatı, Iron John, Robert Bly, Ursula Le Guin, The Tombs of Atuan, cinsel kimlik, erkeklik, kadınlık

The chthonic, or the themes of darkness and the underground, is a recurring source of meaning and imagery in the genre of fantastic literature. Appearing in a multitude of forms, darkness and the underground form the narrative base in the fantasy genre and help construct a realm where such elements reflect the inner mechanisms of the human psyche through the utilization of various archetypes and symbols. A Jungian archetypal analysis of *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990), Robert Bly's reading and exposition of the Grimm Brothers' tale of "Iron John," and Ursula Le Guin's *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971), demonstrates that there is also a distinct gendered difference in the way darkness and the underground function for male and female characters. The chthonic functions in a *constructive* way for the male protagonist whereas the female protagonist must undergo a *destructive* chthonic experience in her path towards individuation.

The utilization of chthonic imagery in *Iron John* reveals that the male psyche has to overcome the challenges posed by the chthonic in order to achieve a higher and truer sense of selfhood and individual identity. On the other hand, in *The Tombs of Atuan*, the female psyche must escape from the diversion and domination that the chthonic has created. In both cases, the chthonic is the medium through which a Jungian process of individuation is accomplished, despite the marked dichotomy in the process of actuation. This analytic mode also reveals that the process of individuation is essentially an incorporative trait: it enables a merger of both sexes through a unification of the personal psyche. Thus the chthonic, as both a constructive and destructive force, leads male *and* female characters towards a higher sense of wholeness, as represented by the formation of couples (i.e., marriage) as the final stage of maturation.

The Chthonic: Fantasy and Gender

The analysis of fantastic literature and the deconstruction of a work of fantasy can be accomplished by considering the Jungian process of individuation which, in literature,

usually involves an identity-forming spiritual voyage that creates a totality among the archetypal elements of the unconscious. Jung's individuation process is based on the idea that a spiritual transformation and unification of the Self can only be achieved through discrete psychological phases. According to Jung, the Self or the human psyche can be delineated topographically, and consciousness resides at a level above the unconscious. A totality of the psyche is thus accomplished by traveling "inwards," or towards the "underground" of human consciousness—the *Chthonios*.¹ This stratified structure forms the basis of Jungian depth psychology (*Tiefenpsychologie*) which "yearns to apprehend, indeed to integrate, what is beyond our conscious grasp, the deeper meanings of soul as expressed in dreams, images, and metaphors of the unconscious" (Miller 2). The *Chthonios* is where archetypes reside and wait to be explored through a mythological descent into the underground (*Katabasis*) which begins with the persona and ends at the Self, the deepest layer of the psyche.

Hence, chthonic imagery, or the imagery and vocabulary pertaining to darkness and the underground, forms striking parallelisms with the voyage towards self-realization, especially within the genre of fantasy. Since the chthonic is associated with depth rather than the spatiality of the underground itself, any medium with depth represents chthonic imagery in the genre of fantasy: not only subterranean caverns, fissures, galleries, tunnels, labyrinths, mazes, vaults, basements, cellars, crypts, corpses, serpents, forests, but also underwater formations such as oceans, ponds, and lakes. Access to the underground can occur through various lacunae: slips, cracks, crevices, cavities, depressions, pits and holes. The individual enters chthonic realms through these openings and moves towards the "final destination" of the Self, or the deepest point of *Chthonios*. As Thomas Moore observed, "The crypt, the cave, the cairn, the well, and the kiva are among the few sacred earth sites that still remain as testimonies to [the] deep spirituality, sometimes called chthonic...The human soul has been compared to a cave—hidden, dark, mysterious. Its beauty often lies shrouded in emotional haze and mist" (qtd. in Moore, Vadge).

Apart from being a reflection of the unconscious, chthonic imagery also exhibits sexual and gendered subtexts (Monick 93). Jung first linked the chthonic to sexuality in his process of individuation: "[Sexuality] plays a large part in my psychology as an essential—though not the sole—expression of psychic wholeness...Sexuality is of the

1 The term Chthonios (from Greek *khthonios*) means "of the earth." The antonym of *Olympian* (related to the height of the sky), the chthonic refers to depth, darkness and the underground. According to *Archeology Dictionary*:

[Chthonic is,] literally meaning "belonging to the earth," a term used to describe a god or goddess of the earth or the underworld. Also extended to mean the divine creative force, and the source of fertility in crops, animals, and humans. The term is also used for underground deities connected with death. In ancient Greece, belief in the Olympian gods, under the sky god Zeus, succeeded the old belief in chthonian powers.

greatest importance as the expression of the chthonic spirit [which] is 'the other face of God,' the dark-side of the God-Image" (*Phenomenology* 168). In his commentary of Marquis De Sade's philosophy of life, Thomas Moore adds "we have an erotic attraction to the lower, darker places and to activities proper to that underground place" (qtd. in Moore, Vadge). The chthonic realm might assume phallic, vulval, vaginal, uterine or clitoral forms. Additionally, the characters encountered during *Katabasis* correspond to Jungian representations of the human psyche: the same sex shadow or the opposite sex anima-animus. Darkness reveals the hidden aspects of sex and how it functions beneath the visible.

As writer C. S. Lewis stated, fantasy and fairy tales, while seemingly addressing children, actually point to deeper and greater universal truths about human beings: "The whole association of the fairy tale and fantasy with childhood is local and accidental... [In] most places and times, the fairy tale has not been specially made for, nor exclusively enjoyed by, children" (24). Despite the fact that they have lost a great deal of their original content and form, classic fairy tales still contain various references to elements related to sex and the chthonic.² Characters who venture "underground" into enchanted forests which no one else dares to enter, or dive into ponds that conceal secrets hidden in their depths, usually undertake these chthonic journeys in order to face their true identity and reach a sense of wholeness.

Chthonic experiences usually take different forms for men and women. The male protagonist in "Iron John" as narrated by the Brothers Grimm, and analyzed by Robert Bly in *Iron John: A Book About Men*, serves as a valuable case study that elucidates the function of the chthonic in the formation of male psyche. On the other hand, Ursula Le Guin's *The Tombs of Atuan* compellingly demonstrates the mechanisms of the female psyche as it undergoes individuation. A comparison of the two works reveals the gendered similarities and differences of Jung's psychological process while illustrating how chthonic darkness can result in the unification of both sexes.

2 As Lewis Carl Seiffert states,

In fact, literary fairy tales *were* intended for adult readers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. More significantly, their classification as children's literature is at least in part a mimetic transposition of content onto intended readership since they depict, by and large, the conflicts of childhood or adolescence and its resolutions into adulthood. As such, fairy tales specify with extraordinary precision and economy a culture's prototypical quest for identity; they are par excellence narratives on initiation, becoming, and maturity. They are themselves susceptible to becoming (and have become) powerful instruments of socialization and acculturation (2).

The Male Psyche and the Chthonic in *Iron John*

A pre-Christian German folk tale originally articulated by the Grimm Brothers in the early 1800s under the title “Iron Hans,” the tale “Iron John” is based on the mysterious discovery of a hairy male character hiding in a pond located deep within a forest. The underlying mystery is a typical one: adjacent to a castle ruled by a noble king lies a thick forest from which no man has returned alive. After the disappearance of hunters, the king forbids entry into the forest until a brave and lonesome wanderer appears. The stranger enters the forest, locates the pond in its center, and drains its water only to find sitting in its depths a strange looking male creature, Iron John, covered with reddish hair from top to bottom. Iron John is captured and brought before the King, who locks him in a cage; the key is given to the Queen. The King’s only son drops his golden ball into the cage while playing, and in exchange for the ball, Iron John asks the Prince to steal the key from his mother and release him. Afraid that he will be punished by his parents after doing so, the Prince decides to follow Iron John into the forest. After a series of trials and ordeals, he leaves Iron John to live in a neighboring kingdom where he is employed as an assistant cook in an underground kitchen. However, he maintains contact with Iron John, whom he can call from the edge of the forest. After several more adventures in the new kingdom, he wins the heart of the Princess and eventually marries her at a banquet attended by his parents and Iron John.

The poet Robert Bly’s book *Iron John: A Book About Men* presents a detailed analysis of the tale accompanied by Bly’s own commentaries on the nature of manhood and the problems of the modern masculine psyche. Bly begins his interpretation of the fairy tale with his version of the contemporary masculine *problematique*: the modern male lacks the necessary initiation rites and rituals in order to become a full male in the spiritual and traditional sense of the term (x). Thus, to become a complete man, a chthonic journey must be taken to find one’s inner Self. Jung’s individuation cycle can be completed after the interior “wild man” is discovered and integrated into the psyche.

Bly’s analysis of the Prince’s chthonic experience via the mentorship of Iron John illuminates how the chthonic works in the formation of the male psyche. The work is both a call for the revival of the original male spirit, which Bly calls “the wild man,” and a therapy session which analyses the male psyche through stories and poems. Bly claims that men are wounded, both physically and psychologically, throughout their lives, and that these wounds accumulate to the point where a man’s soul can no longer function properly (26–32). According to Bly, a man’s soul should be liberated by a process of restoration to its natural wild state with the help of a mentor. Modern life, Bly asserts, has created men who lack a true father/mentor figure and thus roam aimlessly, seeking material wealth to fill in the gaps that human alienation have created (22–25).

The relationship between Bly’s masculine *problematique* and the chthonic is obvious. From the very onset, the story’s two central chthonic images continue to dominate the

narrative and illuminate a deeper layer of meaning. The thick forest, or the idiosyncratic domain of the unknown, and the depths of the human psyche are the loci where an explanation of the story's mystery resides. Not only is the tale a narrative of the formation of male-warrior identity with the assistance of a male mentor, but it is also a chthonic journey that culminates in self-realization: the forest, which is the most prominent chthonic element in "Iron John," is where the individual must enter if he is to reach a deeper understanding of the world. The chthonic forest here "is primarily meaningful as a threshold or liminal terrain between conscious and unconscious processes" (Crowther et al 221). Its depiction as *terra incognita* or more precisely "the land where man should not go" is parallel with the fact that the subconscious and unconscious domains threaten mental stability and social adaptation (Monick 96). The chthonic is the thick forest in whose depths lies an unknown which can potentially claim lives. Only after the emergence of a "brave" hunter can the forest be explored. Bravery, the first element associated with masculinity, is required to venture into the depths of the chthonic.

The second chthonic element, the pond or the "depth of depths," also elucidates the characteristics of the male psyche. The discovery of Iron John at the bottom of the pond is essentially a rediscovery of a man's true origins. As Bly states, "When a contemporary man looks down into his psyche, he may, if conditions are right, find under the water of his soul, lying in an area no one has visited for a long time, an ancient hairy man" (6). Moreover, "powerful energies inside men are lying, like Iron John, in ponds" (26). Iron John, the ultimate hairy masculine figure is the chthonic phallus, the emblem of the uncultivated nucleus of identity and the anti-thesis of civilization as symbolized by the kingdom near the forest (Monick 96). The dichotomy of the forest and the kingdom—that is of wildness and civilization—represents the binaries of the conscious and the subconscious. Iron John's presence in the King's castle represents the emergence of the wild man into consciousness. Iron John's wild masculinity thus needs to be tamed by enclosure: he is trapped in a cage because the conscious and subconscious cannot coexist. The wild man has to be kept barred; otherwise, his existence is a direct threat to civilized manhood.

As "Iron John" conveys, betraying one's mother is the first step a man has to take if he is to leave boyhood and the safety of parental protection and venture into manhood. Without this betrayal (obtaining his mother's key to free the beast), the Prince is to remain a boy forever (Bly 12). When the Prince releases Iron John from his cage, and pinches one of his fingers while doing so, he is faced with the dilemma of whether to stay behind with his golden ball, or follow Iron John into the forest—what Bly calls "the fundamental historical split in the psyche between the primitive man and the civilized man" (13). The Prince chooses to venture into the forest on the shoulders of Iron John. This entrance into the chthonic is thus a test of bravery for the male psyche as it travels on the path of maturation: the Prince "has to overcome...his fear of wildness, irrationality, hairiness, intuition, emotion, the body, and nature" (14). His break from

the civilized world and his journey into the chthonic with the wild man *is* his initiation into true manhood through the help of a mentor, who, according to Bly, is necessary for the formation of the male soul (36). The mentor guides the young initiate along the path to full manhood, yet he also inflicts wounds on the novice in order for him to be able to earn the “prize” at the end of the journey. The disappearance of the golden ball from the narrative following Iron John’s release is a sign that it has fulfilled its function as a device: the disappearance of boyish innocence is replaced by the scary but real existence of manhood as represented by Iron John. The Prince now must accomplish the feats assigned by Iron John if he wants to become a man. As he fails each of them, he is wounded, each wound representing a symbolic tie or bond among men, both living and dead (29).

In the forest, the Prince is given three tasks, each associated with protecting the purity of a Sacred Spring. Springs, and water in general, are also elements with chthonic qualities: their mysterious depths are attractive but must be avoided. Water imagery, which has traditionally been associated with the feminine, seems to be linked with the masculine in this tale. As Bly expresses, it represents ancient Celtic male water gods (43). Nevertheless, on the first day, the boy cannot help dipping his own wounded finger into the spring. On the second day a strand of his hair (which Bly also associates with sexual energy and man’s animalistic side), and on the third day all of his hair falls into the spring as he is admiring his own image on the surface of the water (45–46). His own reflection, or to put it in Jungian terms, his narcissistic shadow, enchants him: he sees his interior soul, or twin, and the man hidden inside of him. As Bly comments, “the twin, when he or she reenters the psyche, insists on intensity and seriousness” (52). Hence, even though failures or wounds are necessary elements in the journey towards individuation, when he touches the sacred water, the boy’s finger and hair turn into gold, a sign that his scars are being transformed into illuminated steps of maturity. The chthonic has provided the boy with the gifts of golden hair and a golden finger, rendering him what Jungians call *puer aeternus*, or the holy boy—the culmination of enlightenment (57).

Bly summarizes the whole chthonic experience as follows: “A young man is asked to descend into his own wounds, to climb up into the realm of ‘the twin,’ and to expand sideways into the consciousness that is in trees [and] water” (55). The pond and spring are representations of a sacred dimension which should not be crossed; they are pure and require protection. Nevertheless, the boy crosses into this sacred domain three times and fails Iron John’s tests. However, he is meant to fail these tasks: like the mythic Sisyphus, he is on a journey, and it is the trial, not the victorious destination or outcome, that is the “prize” (the formation of his masculine character). The chthonic thus heals the wounds of *immaturity* but opens new wounds of *maturity*, all of which contribute to his whole identity.

The Prince's return to civilization and consciousness as an assistant cook is followed by a further descent into the underground. As Bly elucidates, "the fall from being a King's son to being a cook is the step the story asks for" (69). In other words, a descent into humiliation is necessary if one is to achieve the grandiosity and glory of wholeness. Here, the chthonic teaches the male psyche one more element necessary for maturity: humility. The *Katabasis*, or drop from "superior to inferior," or topographically-speaking "high to low," bestows upon the young boy certain qualities which are generally associated with the wisdom of old age (Bly 69–70). Despite having a noble background and golden hair, the boy is forced to serve food at the palace. However, after his first meeting with the King, the cook removes him from the kitchen and the Prince begins to work in the palace garden. This time, his tasks are associated with soil and plants. This "promotion" from the basement to "soil level" symbolizes his slow but gradual elevation.

One day, the Princess spots him in the garden and asks him to bring her some flowers. After covering his golden hair, which represents his noble origins, he gathers a bunch of wild flowers, informing the cook that "wild flowers have [a] stronger fragrance and will please her more" (Bly 254). Despite his youth, he exhibits a profound sense of wisdom with respect to the opposite sex and seems to possess deep knowledge about the feminine soul. The true feminine soul, as the Prince conveys, is attracted more by a sense of masculine wild(er)ness than the trappings of nobility. Although the Princess tries to remove the boy's hat to reveal his noble golden hair, he resists, even rejecting the "prize" of gold coins she offers.

The next time the chthonic appears in the story is when the country enters a war. The Prince asks for a horse to join the battle, only to be mocked by the other men who do not consider him manly enough to fight. However, the Prince steals a "lame horse," travels into the forest, and finds Iron John, who provides the boy with a war-horse and a battalion of warriors. The chthonic guides the Prince in this case, and the masculine underground provides him with his warrior spirit. In the guise of a gallant knight, he wins the war and returns the battalion to Iron John in exchange for his lame horse, thereby suppressing, at least for the time being, his dual identity. The Prince may be humble in appearance but deep down inside, in the chthonic realm of the male psyche, lies hidden a noble masculine warrior.

Eventually, through additional masculine feats of bravery, he captures the Princess' heart and becomes eligible for marriage. Thus, sexuality, or union with the opposite sex, becomes the final absolute proof of masculinity. While his wounds represent experiences of maturity which will serve him throughout his life, the male psyche cannot live in "the wild." After discovering the warrior within himself, the Prince must rejoin civilization, for the chthonic is only where the initiation into manhood takes place, not a permanent state of being. Nevertheless, the chthonic will always remain a hidden part of him, for it carries his twin, or shadow, and other archetypal elements of his psyche. Without this *constructive* chthonic component, the male psyche is incomplete and immature.

The final wedding scene also has other implications. The Prince's parents reappear, and thus he is able to complete his journey from boyhood to manhood. Moreover the mother, the female figure who must be betrayed on the journey to manhood, has been replaced by another female figure, the Princess. The Prince also receives the proverbial "pot of gold at the end of the rainbow" when a baronial King who attends the wedding reveals "I am Iron John, who through an enchantment became turned into a Wild Man. You have freed me from that enchantment. All the treasure that I own will from now on belong to you" (259). Clearly, the wild man cannot continue to exist after the Prince's unification with the female; otherwise, the separation of the civilized city and the wild forest would pose a threat to the unity of his psyche. Because the chthonic has been internalized by the Prince, the wild man is no longer needed as an external source of masculine power. The Prince's psychological development is now complete and a perfect and self-consistent masculinity has been attained.

Female Psyche and the Chthonic in *Tombs of Atuan*

Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea cycle also exhibits imagery directly influenced by Jungian psychology and chthonic symbolism.³ Ged is the male protagonist of the Earthsea cycle and the whole Earthsea cycle can be considered his initiation journey. Nevertheless, among the six works that comprise the collection, *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971), the second book, and *Tehanu* (1990), the fourth book, feature a central character, Tenar, who is the female representative of Le Guin's vision of sexual wholeness. While the other books follow the maturation of Ged and the formation of his male psyche, *The Tombs of Atuan* and *Tehanu* focus on the feminine aspect of the soul and the stages it encounters on the path towards maturity. Chthonic elements are most visible in *The Tombs of Atuan*, which transpires on an island governed by a female cult. In the novel, the chthonic appears in the form of underground gods, the substructure of the "tomb" temples, and the Labyrinth itself.

The chthonic has a direct impact on Tenar's female identity. She is the virgin protector of a cult composed of priestesses, young initiates and eunuchs located in the arid desert of an island. The mysterious origins of the enclave is linked to the worship of the Nameless Ones—entities that are long gone but have left behind "the Labyrinth," an underground world of tunnels. When the chosen one, Tenar, turns five, she participates in an initiation ritual or rite of passage and becomes Arha, the "Eaten One" (15). The rite is, both in practice and symbolic terms, a transition from her former self to a High Priestess, a figure whose *raison d'être* is the worship of the nameless powers of the earth. As she is informed, "You are Arha. There was nothing left. All is eaten" (15). Although the cult

³ The Earthsea cycle is composed of six books: *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971), *The Farthest Shore* (1972), *Tehanu*, *The Last Book of the Earthsea* (1990), *Tales from Earthsea* (2001) and *The Other Wind* (2001).

of chthonic deities seemingly adore and exalt Tenar/Arha, they actually deprive her of her individuality and identity, turning her into a glorified non-being whose existence has been eaten into nothingness.

Despite the fact that they are above ground level, the nine stone pillars or tombs represent the Labyrinth below and have roots that reach the unknown. Their nature, origin and meaning are ambiguous and are based on hearsay: "They stood there full of meaning, and yet there was no saying what they meant" (Le Guin, *Tombs* 10), and only the High Priestess can approach them. Interestingly, these chthonic pillars or tombs, which are representations of subterranean goddesses and ancient feminine knowledge, are presented in the form of phallic protractions: "They had stood there, it was said, since the time of the first men, since Earthsea was created. They had been planted in the darkness when the lands were raised up from the ocean's depths...[They are the tombs of] those who ruled before the world of men came to be, the ones not named" (11). The tombs are representations of feminine chthonic deities who once ruled the world as the eunuch bellwether Manan explains to Arha:

Long ago...before our four lands joined together into an empire, before there was a Godking over us all, there were a lot of lesser kings, princes, chiefs. They were always quarreling with each other. And they'd come here to settle their quarrels...they'd ask you what to do. And you'd go before the Empty Throne, and give them the counsel of the Nameless Ones. Well, that was long ago. After a while the Priest-Kings came to rule all of Karego-At, and soon they were ruling Atuan; and now for four or five lifetimes of men the Godkings have ruled all the four lands together, and made them an empire. And so things are changed. The Godking can put down the unruly chiefs, and settle all the quarrels himself. And being a god, you see, he doesn't have to consult the Nameless Ones very often.
(17)

They do not speak but are there and must be revered and served by women without a feminine identity (priestesses), sexless eunuchs and the sexually immature (prepubescent girls).

Le Guin's understanding of the human past is thus partly in line with the Jungian idea of the ancient world, where the feminine was the source of wisdom behind the masculine exterior. This equilibrium was later replaced by the hegemony of the patriarchal world. As Jung explains, "the primordial matriarchal world...[was] overthrown by the masculine world of the father. The historical shift in the world's consciousness towards the masculine is compensated by the chthonic femininity of the unconscious" (Schwartz-Salant 147). In other words, the chthonic became the protector of ancient feminine knowledge after it had been driven underground by the patriarchy. However, in *The Tombs of Atuan* these chthonic powers do not exhibit the life-giving qualities of the feminine. Instead, they drain energy and as the desert surrounding the tombs reveals, have a life-taking influence on the individuals inhabiting the island. The central *problematique* of the novel becomes the very imbalance of this world.

According to Jung, the labyrinth, which is the most significant chthonic element in *The Tombs of Atuan*, is the universal symbol of transformation (1968: 176-177). In the novel, it is an immensely complicated network made up of the Undertomb as well as tunnels, vaults, crevasses, pits, domes, cul-de-sacs and spirals that are meant to hide, not reveal, its qualities. It represents, as Marie-Louise von Franz, claims, the “unconscious” (177). The Labyrinth also serves as a unifying element; therefore a walk towards the center of labyrinth symbolizes a spiritual journey to wholeness (Storr 171). Other scholars, such as Sylvia Senensky, have associated labyrinthine forms with ancient female power.⁴ As Kelley Ross explains, the labyrinth “is, in more recent feminist terminology, a ‘sacralization of the feminine’ with a vengeance: A cult of female priests resting, literally, on a vast chthonic metaphor for the female body, entered through the sacred darkness of a stone vagina” (1).

Nevertheless, the Labyrinth in *The Tombs of Atuan* does not quite conform to the traditional Jungian definition. It is not a welcoming place and can hardly be associated with feminine concepts such as fertility and life-creation. It is more appropriately associated with death than life or “a place less sacred though perhaps more dreadful” (Le Guin, *Tombs* 31). Tenar can only enter the Labyrinth after she loses her identity by becoming Arha, the eaten one. A representation of the female subconscious in the form of subterranean pathways, the Labyrinth is accessed through the Undertomb, where light is not allowed: “The air was dead. Before her and behind her the tunnel stretched off into darkness” (31).⁵ The chthonic tombs, the Nameless Ones and the underground do not seem to have qualities that can help the female psyche establish a sense of wholeness. On the contrary, they are eternally static, as Arha herself observes: “Time did not mean very much, here in the desert land, under the unchanging Stones, leading a life that had been led in the same way since the beginning of the world” (17–18). The value system of the ancient feminine tradition seems to have created a state of inertia.

Since Arha’s Labyrinth is not a maze with a meaning-laden center, the chthonic in *The Tombs of Atuan* is not an element that will lead to maturity for the female psyche. There is no experience to be gained by venturing into the chthonic: “One could go, and go, and go, and still get nowhere, for there was nowhere to get to. There was no center, no heart of the maze. And once the door was locked, there was no end to it. No direction was right” (45–46). Because the chthonic has no deeper sense of meaning for the female, her subconscious is presented as a world of chaos. Therefore, the agent of change must be external.

4 For more information, please see Part 2 of Sylvia Senensky’s *Healing and Empowering the Feminine: A Labyrinth Journey*.

5 In the Earthsea cycle of fantasy novels, light is generally associated with wisdom and masculinity. Magic is a central theme and magicians are all male. Light illuminated by their staffs shatter darkness or ignorance.

The central complication of the plot is the wizard Ged's search for a long-lost half of a sacred Bond-Rune, which is considered to be the element that will unite the archipelago and symbolically restore equilibrium. He enters the protected and sacred Labyrinth to find the Bond-Rune, and the appearance of a male figure in a sacred feminine domain is perceived to be an act of intrusion—an unlawful entry and invasion of privacy, or a symbolic assault on the female *Chthonos*. Ged, with his phallic symbolism, brings light to darkness: "The light burned at the end of a staff of wood, smokeless, unconsuming. The staff was held by a human hand. Arha saw the face beside the light; the dark face: the face of a man" (40). The shocking intrusion, because it is not welcome, results in greater confusion for Arha: "He had entered in. He had made light where light was forbidden, where it had never been since world's beginning. Why did the Nameless Ones not strike him down?" (42) The narrative presents the intrusion of the male into the chthonic as the first step for the sexual awakening of the female psyche. The symbolic light that illuminates the Undertomb causes Arha to address the mystery of sexual experience and her womanhood: "To have seen the Undertomb confused her; she was bewildered. She had seen it, and the mystery had given place, not to horror, but to beauty, a mystery deeper even than that of the dark" (41–42). Although the cult she leads values the protection of female virginity, while sacred, it must be sacrificed or betrayed in order to achieve personal liberation. The ancient feminine world Arha represents is psychologically unhealthy because it rejects all associations with sex. All the inhabitants of the island are either virgins (the priestesses) or non-sexual males (eunuchs). Thus in one way or another, they are asexual. The issue of sex, or the unification with the other, is forbidden. Therefore the liberation of the female psyche becomes directly linked to sexual experience.

Arha tolerates Ged's abominable intrusion into the Labyrinth and Undertomb because he symbolizes the key to her sexual awakening. In this case, the primary agent of change for the female psyche is the external male figure, not the chthonic. Arha's silence about Ged's existence soon takes the form of protection, another sign that she is more interested in her psychological change than respecting the Nameless Ones. She regains her name, her true self and identity, with Ged's assistance: "I am Tenar," she recites waking from a dream, shakes with "cold, and terror, and exultation," and declares, "I have my name back. I am Tenar!" (67). A male restores the female identity which the chthonic had attempted to repress and destroy.

As the relationship between Ged and Arha becomes more intimate, she develops a bond with him and helps recover the Bond-Rune. This leads to the disintegration of Atuan, as symbolized by the collapse of the Labyrinth and the associated underground complex. The chthonic is thus destroyed by its very owner and protector with the efforts of a symbolic mate. Sexual unification with the other has a catastrophic effect on the chthonic, whose disintegration is the end of a reign of darkness, silence and passivity. The female psyche is restrained in a world of bondage inflicted upon women by women,

and she reaches maturity by destroying her feminine prison. Like the Prince in “Iron John,” who has to betray his mother to find himself, Arha has to kill her feminine world to retrieve her identity.

As *The Tombs of Atuan* suggests, for women there is no *Katabasis* towards wholeness. Unlike men, who travel deep into the chthonic to reveal their true identity, women find their *Chthonos* and come of age in their immediate environment. Moreover, the female psyche must confront the established value system in order to become an individual. As Annis V. Pratt explains,

[A woman's] ego, or persona, her social being, exists from day to day in a world not only deaf to . . . buried messages but filled with contrary materials...[W]hen she wants to describe her unconscious world, she cannot adapt material from culture but must delve into a region whose patterns are less likely to conform to socially available myths, religions, and rituals than to seem puzzling, encoded, and hieroglyphic. Rarely brought to consciousness in any socially acceptable form, these materials are...full of potential for celebration and growth but also, because they are so strongly repressed, for explosion. (368)

For Arha/Tenar, this “explosion” is the demise of *Chthonos*: the tombs of Atuan, the Labyrinth, the Nameless Ones and the structure upon which they exist. Once left and destroyed, the female chthonic cannot be restored, nor is it needed as in the male case. However, Tenar realizes that her wholeness depends on further experience, not sexual awakening or personal independence. Ged and Tenar part before a more stable unification (marriage) occurs. Tenar completes her coupling with the opposite sex only after years of adventure—in old age, she and Ged are reunited.

Although female experience with the chthonic requires a member of the opposite sex to function as the primary transformative agent, as the final section of *Tombs of Atuan* elucidates, a male is not the only element necessary for female maturity. A traumatic chthonic experience (e.g., rape or any other form of sexual/spiritual disillusionment) can also lead a woman towards independence. Tenar’s trauma comes when she is abandoned by Ged. Left alone in a world where she has no associates and status, Tenar has to survive on her own. Her wholeness can only be achieved after the gradual realization of an alternative female legacy which sustains an archetypal female identity. This stage does not take place within the chthonic either. Rather, it is a conscious process in which the female understands the wisdom offered by different members of her own sex. This stage of development is addressed in *Tehanu*, in which Tenar encounters female mentors after having raised her children.

Conclusion

In fantastic narratives, the chthonic appears as the medium through which a character’s subconscious desires and motivations are exposed. It is a transformative agent which

catalyzes a character along his or her process of individuation. The chthonic experience as conveyed in such narratives turns boys into men and girls into women. However, the chthonic experience in *The Tombs of Atuan* does not resemble the masculine chthonic psyche in "Iron John." For the male, the chthonic unearths and completes the psyche by uniting the civilized and the wild, as well as members of the opposite sex. Masculinity must be demonstrated through chthonic experiences and "proven" before coupling can occur. The chthonic becomes an integral part of the psyche—a reservoir of manhood. On the other hand, for the female, the chthonic is an obstacle on the path to maturity, a symbol of traditional and oppressive value systems. The chthonic is an inhumane and hostile element that serves as a roadblock to the development of the feminine psyche. To become whole, the female must save herself from the dark depths of the chthonic through a traumatic experience. Female spiritual wholeness is possible only through gender and sexual equality; it is a conscious process that, in contrast with men, usually occurs later in life.

As Bly suggests, the modern man lacks chthonic experience and a wise male mentor who will teach him the ways of masculinity. Le Guin conveys a similar vision in that she illustrates that equilibrium can only be achieved with the help of feminine elements. According to Le Guin, the liberated female will act as a catalyst who will restore ancient order based on balance and feminine wisdom. In both cases, the chthonic is offered as a solution for the modern *problematique*: "one problem we encounter in the spirituality of this contemporary Western world is a distinct lack of depth or of darkness" (Moore, Vadge 1). As Schwartz-Salant confirms, "throughout the centuries, the impulse in patriarchal Western culture has been to ascent and transcend, whereas the deficiency in the culture involves a lack from below—from underneath—from realms considered more base, primitive, and unformed. In these chthonic realms, a hitherto unknown, unintegrated, and unformed aspect of humanity lies waiting for a consciousness that is its equal" (148).

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