

DISEMPOWERED WOMEN? A FEMINIST RESPONSE TO FEMALE
CHARACTERS IN MALORY, TENNYSON AND BRADLEY

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Summary

Disempowered Women? A Feminist Response to female Characters in Malory, Tennyson and Bradley takes an in-depth look at Elayne, Gwenyvere and Morgan of the Arthurian legend. The characters are examined within their contemporary context and from our modern perspective as portrayed in Malory, Tennyson, and Marion Zimmer Bradley. Patriarchy, closely connected with the Christian doctrines, is singled out as the main means of propagating women's disempowerment. The inquiry considers different ways in which fictional texts have contributed to creating false perceptions amongst our contemporary audience, about the reality of women's lives in the Middle Ages. It further examines the validity of the assumption that literary women are not real, but mere representations of male ideals about women's role and place in society. Issues of gender equality are raised and the author concludes that the literature studied assigns definite, gender-specific roles to men and women. The work also debates the perceived misogyny of the male authors: is it a conscious act or a reflection of their contemporary society's concerns?

Key Terms

Arthurian women; Christian doctrine; class and gender; disempowerment; feminism; historicity; marginalisation; middle ages; patriarchy; chivalry.

Disempowered Women? A Feminist Response to Female Characters in Malory, Tennyson and Bradley

Introduction

The last decades of the twentieth century have witnessed an upsurge in critical matter dealing with the treatment of female characters in various literary works. It is predominantly the feminist critic, such as for instance Mary Eagleton or Sheila Delany, who has been hard at work in unravelling abundant instances of what has collectively been termed *disempowerment* of the literary female characters. During this process much male-written and therefore male-orientated literature has come under scrutiny and been pronounced as anti-feminist. But what does disempowerment mean? To disempower is, according to the Oxford Dictionary, 'to remove the power to act from a person or group'.¹ This is a simple definition, but when applied to the feminine context it has had tremendous and far-reaching repercussions. Disempowerment of the female can be seen in denial of equality, dignity and most importantly the suppression of truth about what it is to be a woman. Women, in the male-authored texts, are seen by the feminist critic, such as Sheila Delany for example,² as deprived of not only the right but also the ability to speak for themselves, with their own minds and voices.

Feminism in itself is not a new concept. Although the term 'feminism' was first coined at the end of the 19th century,³ its origins date back to the late-eighteenth century. The feminist enquiry predominantly concerns itself with issues of women's marginalized position in society but the modern feminist critic is no longer bound within the totality of the early doctrines of the feminist movement such as liberation and emancipation from and condemnation of all matters patriarchal. Elements of New Historicism as well as Marxism are frequently being incorporated into the feminist approach to aid the feminist critic in exposing instances of misrepresentation or omission of women from literary works. The current trend in the feminist approach is to investigate the effects that patriarchal oppression has had on women, and how it has

¹ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (9th ed.) Thompson, Della (Ed.) Pg.387.

² See Delany, Sheila. 'Strategies of Silence in the Wife of Bath's Recital' Pg.50-56.

³ De Gay, Jane. 'Feminism' (online article).

used literature to propagate itself from generation to generation. Simultaneously the feminist critic seeks viable solutions to remedy the past injustices, by proposing either re-writing of old texts or creating an entirely new literature, one which will portray emancipated and empowered women, freed once and for all of the oppressive male doctrines of the past.

New Historicism asserts that a text need not necessarily be bound to the era whence it stems and that the writer may indeed have created a text which transcends itself and acquires different significance for varying audiences.⁴ The theory therefore delves not only into the past but examines the effectiveness of an old text on the subsequent audiences. This aspect of New Historicism is very pertinent to the feminist enquiry, as it allows for renewed inspection of texts, which may have previously been considered as finite and unalterable. Furthermore the feminist critic finds New Historicism a useful tool as it looks to unveil the true purpose of the author in producing the text and seeks to understand the number of roles that same text has played in the cultures where it circulated.

What makes the Marxist Critical Theory attractive for the feminist critic is its struggle to expose the inequalities of various social groups through close inspection of social structures of the society. Through the process of scrutinising, the critic hopes to gain understanding of how and at the same time why particular societies functioned in the way they did. Marxism's concern with ideology makes it applicable to the feminist as it guides the critic through his/her enquiry into the effects of patriarchy, in itself an ideology, on the feminine. Marxists consider the ideology of each particular era to have been instrumental in shaping the production as well as reception of literature by the author's contemporary audience and the modern reader.

Despite much feminist enquiry having been applied to various literary periods and themes (Victorian literature for instance has come under some serious scrutiny), until recently relatively little attention has been given to the female characters of the Arthurian legend. Most discussions on the subject have been devoted to the predominantly male-centred action in the majority of the works, leaving the women

⁴ See Rider, Jeff. 'Other Voices: Historicism and the Interpretation of Medieval Texts' Pg.298.

safely at its margins. This has prompted me to apply a feminist approach to three works dealing with the saga of King Arthur and Camelot. Feminism, New Historicism and Marxism share an awareness of their own subjectivity and the possibility that an answer to the questions we hold about the past, the meaning of literature and the authorial intentions might never be found. My response therefore incorporates some Marxist and New Historicist thought, especially when dealing with the issues of women's position in their society, in order to avoid blind absolutisms such as those which have controlled these texts in the past. With this in mind, I offer only 'a perspective', one possible way of looking at the subject, keeping the boundaries open for possibly a further debate.

It is perhaps with an author like Marion Bradley that one notices a definite break from the traditional values and trends in the way she portrays the characters in her work. No longer is the focus on the male hero and his actions. In fact the foundations of his perfectly defined world begin to crumble as the approach to the story leaves the beaten track. Instead of the focus being on the men, we are now presented with female protagonists who are ready to command and dominate the action. Female characters previously peripheral to the action, such as Morgaine and Morgause (and to a degree Elaine) for instance, initiate self-action rather than prompt men to act on their behalf. Women who often in the medieval texts had been represented as mute, sometimes fulfilling no more than decorative functions, appear empowered by the more definite voices given to them by Bradley. It is important then to consider these voices and examine whether the women now centrally positioned in the story indeed are autonomous from men in their actions and thoughts.

In view of this we need to question earlier Arthurian texts with regard to the placement of the female characters in the story, examine how their authors chose to portray (or ignore) these characters, and consider what significance this has not only to our perception of the characters but also to our understanding of the authors and the times in which they were creative. At the same time it is important to remain aware of the fact that the: 'Female characters are not real people at all, ... but symbols,

aspects of philosophical and psychological problems that trouble the male world.’⁵ Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley infer that: ‘the representation of women does not merely distort or interpret but can altogether ignore the historical existence of *real women* and their experience of selfhood’ (italics mine).⁶ It is therefore necessary to not only base our conclusions on the literary characters, but to delve into the historical accounts of the lives of real women. Once we have these differences, if any, clearly in mind we can determine whether there indeed exists a discrepancy between the historically factual women and their literary representations.

Although Arthurian stories are populated with various female characters, it would be impossible to discuss them all within the scope of this work. I have therefore selected the prominent figures of Elayne, Gwenyvere and Morgan, and will consider their changing characterization through the works of Sir Thomas Malory, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Marion Bradley. Rather than concentrating on a particular period and how it is reflected in the three separate characters, I have chosen to discuss the changing face of each character through the ages. This allows for a better perspective and understanding of how each epoch reacted to and dealt with central concerns of the times of Malory, Tennyson and Bradley and how these concerns influenced the very different approaches to the issue of women and their place in contemporary societies.

More than five hundred years, of turbulent history, separate us from Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, yet the stories of the King of Camelot, in various forms, continue to fascinate diverse audiences to this day. Although the basic ingredients of the story have permeated into our times virtually unchanged, what have altered are the attitudes to certain elements of the tale. Malory’s world of lofty chivalric ideals for example, to a modern reader appears to be very deterministic about women and their position in society. The women often emerge as no more than fragments of what s/he expects from the characters; they lack substance, either through being denied a voice or through scant and inadequate representation by the poet. Yet actual medieval women fulfilled a far greater than merely ornamental role in their society. They often

⁵ MacCurdy, Marian. ‘Bitch or Goddess: Polarised Images of Women in Arthurian Literature and Films’ Pg.4.

⁶ Fisher, Sheila. and Halley, Janet E. ‘The Lady Vanishes: The Problem of Women’s Absence in Late Medieval and Renaissance Texts’ Pg.6.

held regular jobs⁷ apart from their duties as wives. It has been documented that amongst the peasantry of the Middle Ages there was no definite division of labour according to gender and that husbands and wives often worked side by side as full partners. One of the most favoured occupations amongst women was ale brewing. A famous example of an ale-wife was Margery Kempe, who before abandoning the ways of the world, ran a successful business in her native town of Lynn.⁸

Because the little that is written about medieval women predominantly concerns itself with aristocratic women, whose involvement in everyday chores was indeed limited, one tends to generalise that all medieval women led idle lives of frivolity. It is once again necessary to recollect that the literary female characters were not true reflections of real contemporary women. Women often had to be resourceful and strong-willed: 'some women were literally called upon to defend hearth and home when their menfolk were away.'⁹ The historically authentic women such as Eleanor of Aquitaine, who often acted as her husband's regent, or Margery Kempe, a mystic who lived and wrote in the fifteenth century, are documented proof of that. We therefore as a modern audience need to recognise that the literary representations of women in the medieval texts are stereotypes of what the contemporary society perceived as 'ideal' women or ideal roles for women. One also needs to bear in mind that literacy was a luxury limited to few and the written matter was intended for a particular audience, who perhaps indeed preferred to hear of ideal aristocratic women rather than peasants weaving and brewing ale.

In Malory, Gwenyvere is the closest to that 'ideal', for the author succeeds in keeping the vague as to whether Gwenyvere and Launcelot indeed consummate their relationship, though he does drop the occasional reluctant hint.¹⁰ He seals the image of Gwenyvere as the perfect medieval lady by ironically insisting 'that whyle she lyved she was a trew lover'¹¹, for it is to her lover that she was true and not to her

⁷ See Leyser, Henrietta. *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500*. Pg.142-167 for an excellent discussion of women at work in the Middle Ages.

⁸ Leyser, Henrietta. *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500* Pg.164.

⁹ Leyser, Henrietta. *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500* Pg.165.

¹⁰ 'Sir Launcelot wente to bedde with the queen and toke no force of hys hurte honed, but toke hys plesaunce and hys lykyng untyll hit was the dawning of the day' Malory, Thomas *The Works* Pg.657 l.33-35.

¹¹ Malory, Thomas *The Works* Pg.649 l.34.

husband, as she ought to have been. The maid of Astolat best befits the modern role of a 'victim', though she is 'unconventional in her premeditated and calculated self-destruction.'¹² Morgan in turn represents the unleashed power of self-determination and independence in a woman.¹³ She is perhaps the closest representation of a real woman. We need to give serious consideration to the possibility that the disempowerment of medieval women through their contemporary texts lies not only in how they are represented, but also in how the majority are ignored.

In the nineteenth century Tennyson resurrected Arthur from the ashes of an almost forgotten Camelot. Tennyson's is a depiction, which greatly deviates from anything written about the Matter of Britain before or after his time and is in fact an interesting reflection of the prevailing sentiments of an era in decline and how they linger on in a society facing enormous social and economic upheaval. The beauty of Tennyson's poetry and the romantic ideals of the work met with keen approval from his contemporary audience. Modern critics mostly agree that in his re-telling Tennyson did unpardonable injustice to the story of Arthur and his Kingdom in presenting a fragmented and one-sided picture of the traditional events. His portrayal of women is 'most notable for conforming to egregious stereotypes',¹⁴ yet at the same time one cannot deny that, with *Idylls of the King*, Victoria's Poet Laureate rekindled the subsequent interest in the Matter of Britain.

Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* were first published in the mid-Victorian period, an age which saw an increasing involvement of women in all walks of life. Both the Brontë sisters and Elizabeth Gaskell had already published a number of works dealing with emancipated female characters, and two years prior to publication of *Idylls of the*

¹² Wynne-Davies, Marion. *Women and Arthurian Literature: Seizing the Sword* Pg.75.

¹³ 'This conflict became projected onto the image of woman: she was the temptress, the seductress, the destroyer of the flowering of chivalry, as well as the source of the power of the fellowship of the Round Table. She is either a spiritual guide (the source of all worth) or the demonic temptress who can cause the ruin of an entire civilisation. What began in the twelfth century as an attempt to marry masculine and feminine, conscious and unconscious, reality and mystery, ended in almost total rejection of the feminine, a rejection that saw its most potent exemplification in the Inquisition and the witchcraft trials. In Malory's 1485 work this nearly complete rejection has not yet occurred, and we still see evidence of the power, grace, and love that the feminine characters can bring to their worlds, as well as the conflicts these offerings can bring' (MacCurdy, Marian. 'Bitch or Goddess: Polarized Images of Women in Arthurian Literature and Films' Pg.5).

¹⁴ Hughes, Linda K. 'Tennyson's Urban Arthurians: Victorian Audiences and the "City Built to Music"' Pg.45.

King, Elizabeth Barrett Browning published the famous *Aurora Leigh*. Women were struggling to achieve some degree of political power with their efforts to be granted the right to vote for women in forming 'the London Society for Women's Suffrage.'¹⁵ Tennyson could hardly have been completely oblivious of these vast transformations that were taking place in his world. His disregard for the current events, in adhering to the dated early-Victorian perceptions about women and their place in society, reflects his and possibly the contemporary male inability to cope with and accept the inevitable changes.

The popularity of *Idylls of the King*, despite the rapidly changing social climate in mid-Victorian years, may well be attributed to the fact that people needed an anchor of old values in a world changing and slipping away from their grasp, where they were no longer capable of comprehending a reality that was fast becoming not their own. Tennyson offered a (male) nostalgic vision of a world gone by, when men were men and women knew their place as obedient wives and custodians of the family unit. Linda K. Hughes correctly states that: 'the 1859 *Idylls* made the characters more human and accessible, less grand and remote, the effect was indeed to make Arthur a "modern gentleman of stateliest port" whose ethical imperatives to "speak no slander, no, nor listen to it" or "To lead sweet lives in purest chastity" . . . could be imitated by ordinary urban citizens of the mid-nineteenth century.'¹⁶ The early Victorian values, which Tennyson was promulgating however, were no more than mere escapism for they were fast becoming as foreign and obsolete to the people as was the 'real' Arthurian world of the Middle Ages.

The same year that Tennyson published the first *Idylls*, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, went into print.¹⁷ The book proved highly popular, and Darwin's theories were quickly accepted in most scientific circles. A part of Darwin's work dealt with sexual selection, which placed the female in a superior position as far as selection of the male partner was concerned, affording her the freedom of choice. As

¹⁵ Wojtczak, Helena. 'The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies' (online article).

¹⁶ Hughes, Linda K. 'Tennyson's Urban Arthurians: Victorian Audiences and the "City Built to Music"' Pg.44.

¹⁷ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 'Charles Darwin' (CD Rom).

far as the application of his theories to everyday life went, however, Darwin found it as difficult to break free of stereotypes as did Tennyson. It is said that he held his own family in the tight grip of the early Victorian sentiment about women.¹⁸ It appears that there existed a very definite dichotomy between what went on in the world and what even the most influential men wanted to preserve of the old ways.

Marion Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* is perhaps the best-known piece of Arthurian literature of the late-twentieth century. The novel has met with quite a degree of controversy since its publication in the late nineteen-seventies. First it was hailed as brilliant and 'emancipating' only to be reduced by the critics to 'inconsequential' and dismissed as Bradley's personal quest for something quite unrelated to the empowerment of women.¹⁹ The initial reaction was due to Bradley's characterisation of her women as independent, outspoken and self-determining. The late twentieth century audience, itself going through the paces of the women's movement and greater awareness of women's role in the society, saw in *The Mists of Avalon* a reflection of women's own objectives. The critics however have questioned the degree of empowerment the story brings to the female characters. It has been inferred that although the women are no longer mute in *The Mists of Avalon*, their voices are rarely more than echoes of those of their fathers and forefathers and are wrought with the truth of their female author, who fails to shake off her own patriarchal subjectivity. Although in a far more subtle fashion, men are still in control of the society created by Bradley, for by imposing their voices and sentiments upon the female characters they render the women powerless to assert their true place in that society. Though Bradley does bestow some degree of empowerment on her women, one needs to tread lightly when assessing her effectiveness as a feminist writer, which incidentally she never proclaimed herself to be.

By her own admission, Bradley never intended the novel as a feminist piece.²⁰ She had been, until the time of writing *The Mists of Avalon*, a fantasy and science fiction writer and planned the novel to be no more, than a fantastical re-telling of an

¹⁸ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 'Charles Darwin' (CD Rom).

¹⁹ See discussions about the validity of *The Mists of Avalon* on Arthurnet: Archives; December 1999-January 2000.

²⁰ See Paxson, Diana L. 'Marion Zimmer Bradley and The Mists of Avalon' Pg.113.

old tale. The subsequent infamy of the book may be attributed to the period of its creation. Bradley completed the novel in the late nineteen-seventies, an era marked by great upheaval and change. The hippie movement brought about the ideals of free love and spirituality, in an attempt at rejecting the old order, an order which has time and time again proven imperfect. The decade had seen man conquer outer space, walk on the moon and go further than it had ever been imagined possible. This newly found sense of freedom was profoundly affecting women who were finding themselves benefiting from the advancements in science and technology. Birth control was ever more readily available. The Pill had been accessible since the early sixties, and this played a major role in the women's liberation movement, by allowing women to make personal choices previously unavailable to them, such as in family planning or in greater sexual freedom, traditionally available only to men. The early seventies saw the first demonstrations for gay rights, taking the sexual revolution even a step further. In 1975 Margaret Thatcher was elected as first female leader of the Conservative Party in Britain and four years later became Britain's first woman prime minister.

It would have been impossible for Bradley to evade her own historicity and not to somehow incorporate the prevailing atmosphere of the day into her work. The unconscious and subtle empowerment of Arthur's women in *The Mists of Avalon* seems only natural, when in the real world women were proving that they could be strong, self-determining and independent. By the same token it can be argued that neither Malory nor Tennyson intended to appear as misogynistic as they do in their work, and were merely reflecting in their work the prevailing sentiments of their day. Hughes notes that: 'The contrast between Victorian and twentieth-century response suggests not merely that each age tends to interpret a literary work through its own preoccupations, but that Tennyson's first audiences responded to cues no longer recognizable to many readers.'²¹ Finally, the reader needs to remain aware of the fact that writing for most authors is not merely an aesthetic process but a means of earning a livelihood and in order to sell their work it has to be made palatable to as wide a readership as possible. It is the modern critic's challenge to scrutinize the elements

²¹ Hughes, Linda K. 'Tennyson's Urban Arthurians: Victorian Audiences and the "City Built to Music"' Pg.39.

that have made these texts popular in their own time and to re-examine their validity in our present-day context.

It is with the character of Elayne that I begin my discussion. By far not the most glamorous of the Arthuriad's ladies, and although not entirely ignored by modern writers, Elaine does not enjoy as revered a position in the contemporary work as she has in the older texts. Let us examine what it is that has made this lady a popular figure in the past and why her character has been shifted to the fringe by the post-modern Arthurian literature.

Chapter One: Elayne

Elayne certainly is not the most popular of Arthurian females, her fame overshadowed by the seemingly virtuous Queen Gwenyvere or the evil, scheming Morgan. She is however one character, which most writers seem to be unable to discard or do away with, and she is time and time again re-written into new work. Elayne's function as the mother of Galahad, at times the most revered Arthurian knight, makes her indispensable to the story. Yet Elayne is not just a simple mother figure. In Malory for instance, we find two different Elaynes. The repetition of names makes Elayne of Corbenic (Galahad's mother) blend with the character of Elaine of Astolat (who dies of unrequited love for Launcelot), to such an extent that the reader, looking from the perspective of time, is almost unable to distinguish between the two. But different they are indeed. Because the former Elayne plays a more significant role in Malory, I am going to focus my discussion on her character, rather than her more peripheral counterpart, who will be examined more closely in the discussion of Tennyson's Elaine.

The reader first meets Malory's Elayne of Corbenic in the penultimate tale of the *Book of Sir Tristram De Lyones*.²² This positioning is significant in that it makes Elayne an essential element for the continuity of the story of Camelot. Her tale is a link to the *Tale of The Sankgreal* in that through prophecy Elayne is fated to become the mother of the greatest Grail knight, Galahad.²³ Elayne is different from many other fleeting female characters in the stories of Arthur. First of all by the force of the prophecy she is given a history, a parentage (she is the daughter of King Pelles) and she escapes the fate of being reduced to merely a nameless mother of a great knight, as is the fate of Perceval's mother for instance. These are empowering factors in a legend where women are usually very much peripheral to the story. Although at first glance Elayne appears to have been treated better by her poet than other women, we need to take a closer look at the circumstances under which she appears in Malory.

²² Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.477.

²³ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.478, l.40-44.

Upon a brief examination of Malory's world, the modern reader might notice that different values are applied to male and female characters. What passes for acceptable behaviour in men certainly is frowned upon in women. King Pellès for instance is instrumental in contriving the union between his daughter Elayne and Launcelot, virtually prostituting her, yet is never blamed for any transgressions towards his child. Dame Brusen, however, one of young Elayne's maids, who at the King's command brings about the actual coming together of the couple, is cursed by Launcelot for her trickery. Launcelot's misogynistic views prevent him from blaming King Pellès for thrusting Elayne upon him; instead the woman who has no choice but to obey the King's will is held responsible.

Malory portrays Elayne as the perfect medieval daughter, believing it an honour to be destined to bring to the world the greatest knight that has ever lived. She submits to her fate without a word of protest and is presented by Malory as actually happy to follow her destiny and become one of a number of silent mothers of the Grail heroes.²⁴ Her unquestioning compliance stresses her submission to her father's will and the entire patriarchal system of which she is a subject. Elayne's calm and happy obedience, in unquestioningly laying down her virginity at her father's bidding, reflects the blinding effect of the controlling force, which the patriarchal system exerts upon her. This is analogous with the Marxist teachings, which would consider the patriarchal system an ideology and therefore an opiate that numbs the senses to the point where the human subject begins to live the lie and considers it to be the only possible truth.

The Medieval patriarchy subdued the women under the male authority, where as a young girl she possessed no legal rights and later as wife fell under 'total domination by her husband and, for all practical purposes, the extinguishing of her legal rights during the term of the marriage'.²⁵ This, it is argued, is based on the male-dominated, Christian teachings and interpretation of the Bible, whereby women are seen as inferior to men through Eve's disobedience to God. Certain clerical reforms of the

²⁴ See Mc Cracken, Peggy. 'Mothers in the Grail Quest: Desire, Pleasure, and Conception' (Pg.35-46) for a discussion on the role of mothers in the Arthurian legend.

²⁵ Wade Labarge, Margaret. *Women in Medieval Life* Pg.27. The author further observes that 'the law recognised the right of men of all classes to beat their wives, so long as they did not kill them or do excessive damage' (Pg.26).

early Middle Ages have further contributed to perpetuating the distorted image of women, who were seen as 'seducers and temptresses.'²⁶ The patriarchal system in the absence of a tangible God on earth elevates the male to a God-like position of supremacy whereby the woman must unquestioningly submit to and obey his decrees, and furthermore know that because of her Biblically-predetermined fallibility, she is incapable of thinking or acting for herself. Elayne's silent and willing submission to her patriarchally determined and dominated fate makes her 'wyse as ony was that tyme lyvyng',²⁷ in Malory. Unlike Eve, Elayne does obey, which earns her respect, from at least her medieval author, for she does indeed fit the mould of a medieval maiden.

A modern reader perceives a total lack of her own will on Elayne's part, her wisdom extending only as far as subconsciously knowing that she has to abide by what a dominant male figure dictates. What is strongly apparent in Malory's account is that no one seems to consider it tragic that Elayne loses her innocence through her blind submission to a system, which controls her as a woman. In a predominantly pious society, where mystics and other religious people were accepted as the order of the day and their visions received as truth,²⁸ the prophecy of Elayne's prospective motherhood is likely to have been viewed as an unquestionable fact. Her singling out would have been considered a privilege and an honour. To our contemporary reader her submissiveness is a reflection of a marginalizing force at work, and she appears a weakened, sorry figure, rather than the triumphant winner of a coveted prize.

No sooner than the union has been made does Launcelot depart, leaving Elayne to bear her child alone. Launcelot is free to gallop away to his next adventure without the author having burdened him with any feelings of duty towards Elayne or at least his forthcoming child. Malory goes as far as abandoning Elayne in the story for some 360 lines in his pursuit of Launcelot's adventures and re-introducing her back into the train of thought in the Launcelot context, as 'dame Elayne . . . , that bare Galahad, sir Launcelot's sonne'.²⁹ However when the time comes Launcelot will be revered for his

²⁶ See Wade Labarge, Margaret. *Women in Medieval Life* Pg.29.

²⁷ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.481, l.3-4.

²⁸ See Wade Labarge, Margaret. *Women in Medieval Life* Pg.98-142.

²⁹ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.498, l.42-43.

great son Galahad, whilst no mention of Elayne will be made. This is in keeping with the patriarchal trend of inflating the masculine role as the procreator and to disregard the part of a woman as a mother and nurturer. Britton J Harwood identifies this as a sign of the diminished social position of women in the fourteenth century and their exclusion from the socio-economic system, by which amongst other aspects, the child no longer would inherit from the mother's side as had been the case previously.³⁰

It would seem that separate standards also ruled the medieval writer's and presumably audience's view on the issues of class and gender, although this may not have been conscious on the part of a society, the leaders of which were caught up in the ideals of courtly love. Only the modern reader perceives gender and class as definite determining factors in the medieval fictional portrayal of men and women. Malory on more than one occasion avoids commenting on Launcelot's dubious reputation, as is the case when he proclaims that he has no precise knowledge of the exact nature of the relationship between Launcelot and Gwenyvere, for:

..as the Freynshhe booke seyth, the quene and sir Launcelot were togydirs and whether they were abed other at other maner of disportis, me lyste nat thereof make mencion, for love that tyme was nat as love ys nowadayes.³¹

Elayne's pre-requisite to be Galahad's mother on the other hand is that she not only be of noble stock (Launcelot is only half of noble blood), but a virgin as well. Malory's men are able to prove their worthiness and nobility through their chivalrous deeds alone, whereas women have to be born noble, often be beautiful and retain their chastity in order to prove theirs. Elayne's nobility would have been further apparent to the medieval audience in her steadfast, unrequited love for Launcelot.

When Elayne rides to Camelot to the celebration of Arthur's victorious return from battles in France, her father insists that she be richly apparelled and she is said in court to be 'the fayrest and the best beseyne lady that ever was seyne in the courte.'³² She is well received and honoured by great knights, including King Arthur himself.

³⁰ Harwood, Britton J. and Overing, Gillian R. (Eds.) *Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections* Pg.100-101.

³¹ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.676, l.1-5.

³² Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.485, l.37-38.

Their admiration however does not stem from the fact that she is the mother of Launcelot's son Galahad, but because she is fortunate to be beautiful and her father has seen to it that her apparel and entourage appear noble. This indicates that to the medieval audience appearance was of great importance and the social status of nobility was very much demarcated if not determined by dress and looks.³³ None of the female characters' personalities, inner values or dreams is ever commented on or taken into consideration, as a modern reader would be likely to do. The medieval writer and his audience are happy to judge on the basis of that which they can see, and so Elayne, Gwenyvere and Morgan become marginalized by the sheer fact that they are not developed as thinking, feeling individuals and are therefore merely ornaments/instruments in Malory's great pageant.

Elayne is only once said to feel sorrow, when Launcelot ignores her at Arthur's feast.³⁴ She bears her pain in silence, silence inflicted upon her by ages of patriarchal subjection and authorial omission. Yet perhaps this silence indeed might enable the modern audience to begin to understand the true circumstances of Elayne's existence, as they subjectively read into it a whole heretofore-unimagined world.³⁵ The modern reader is equipped with many valuable tools with which to decipher the encoded truths about the Middle Ages and the circumstances which determined the lives of women. It has been shown³⁶ that the literary texts do not necessarily reflect the reality of everyday lives of medieval women. We are therefore able to consider the discrepancies and translate the portrayal of an ideal into what a real person's experience may have been.

In his attempt to qualify the love between the queen and her champion (Dame Brusen tells it very plainly that Launcelot 'lovyth no lady in the whole worlde but

³³ Peggy Mc Cracken infers in 'Mothers in the Grail Quest: Desire, Pleasure, and Conception' Pg.39, that women's value is believed to lie more in their exterior appearance than in internal attributes and that physical 'beauty is the outward sign of honour and worth'. In the case of Gwenyvere however the aspect of her beauty takes on another meaning as Peter Korrel suggests in *An Arthurian Triangle* Pg.269, for it is Merlin who prophesies that her very beauty will cause Arthur grief and destruction.

³⁴ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.486, 1.4-6.

³⁵ See Delany Sheila. 'Strategies of Silence in the Wife of Bath's Recital' Pg.49-67.

³⁶ See Weir, Alison. *Eleanor of Aquitaine: By the Wrath of God Queen of England*; Wade Labarge, Margaret. *Women in Medieval Life*; Leyser, Henrietta. *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500*; Cantor, Norman F. *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*.

only quene Gwenyver'),³⁷ Malory marginalizes Elayne even further. Despite her having to stoop twice to magic in order to come together with Launcelot, the knight remains steady in his devotion to the queen. Elayne is not alone in her inability to dissuade Launcelot, for Morgan also fails in her attempt to woo the knight at her castle. The outward show of riches and beauty are of no great value to Elayne, or any other lady, as long as Launcelot or the medieval audience fail to appreciate their inner qualities. Despite Launcelot's numerous accusations of Elayne as being responsible for his ill fortunes, she remains devoted to him.³⁸ Not only is there no comment made on his discourtesy (which suggests that Malory condones such behaviour in a man), but he is further compensated by Elayne's pledge to lay her life down for him, should he require her to do so. She even goes on to live with Launcelot, following his request that Pelles grant him land and protection.

Launcelot's ingratitude and discourtesy to Elayne are thus once again rewarded; 'twenty of the fayrest yonge ladyes that bene in thys contrey, and they shall be all of the grettyst blood in this contry'³⁹ are given him in addition to poor Elayne, who embraces this tragic situation for the only happiness that she might ever know with Launcelot. All these concessions seem to fall in Launcelot's lap because of his gender and despite what is apparent to the modern reader as rather questionable gentillesse. Pelles once again betrays his daughter, by supporting Launcelot who not only continues longing for his Queen but eventually departs for Logres to probably be reunited with Gwenyvere, leaving Elayne behind.

Once again Elayne is left silent and alone with her sorrow, as Galahad follows his father. She is excluded from further action at this point having fulfilled her role as a catalyst for the story. She has borne the next great hero, nurtured him to adulthood and propelled Launcelot to great deeds. She has also been instrumental in providing motives for Launcelot's numerous acts of bravery as well as been burdened with being the cause of his misery. These are no mean feats indeed, yet Malory so cleverly manipulates the story that these elements marginalize rather than empower Elayne. Had she been a man, her author would most certainly not have glossed over her so

³⁷ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.479, l.35-36.

³⁸ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.501, l.11-13.

³⁹ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.501, l.22-23.

casually. In the medieval sense Elayne fits in with the scenario of mothers who appear in the text for the sole purpose of producing a son and who are subsequently marginalized through exclusion and thus obliteration of their potential power which 'motherhood could offer to women in medieval Europe'.⁴⁰ The one consolation for her as the mother of a hero is that at least Malory gave her a name, unlike Perceval's mother, who is remembered only by that description and not by an actual name.

Malory momentarily acknowledges Elayne's importance to the story in calling the tale *Launcelot and Elayne*, yet paints a picture of a marginalised female figure, doomed to re-affirm the traditional order of male/female relations in the medieval society. He is unable to present a balanced account of an equal partnership, which a modern reader for instance would expect from the title. Instead Malory's tale is one of cause and effect, where Elayne is the cause of whatever befalls Launcelot and the effect is his glory. Elayne's role is merely supportive, a backdrop for Launcelot's actions. She does not escape the fate of numerous female Arthurian characters, who simply fulfil the roles of catalysts in male orientated stories. Women are almost never (Morgan possibly being the one exception) presented as men's equals and the separate roles that they play are very much gender precise and therefore restrictive. Malory's tale can thus never be of Launcelot and Elayne, but will always remain of LAUNCELOT and Elayne.

Tennyson models his Elaine on Malory's unspoilt and pure Elayne of Astolat. Throughout the *Idylls of the King* great emphasis is put on Elaine's innocence; she is the Lily Maid of Astolat, not the licentious mother of Galahad.⁴¹ Tennyson's Elaine lives locked away from reality, observing the world go by in almost a child-like manner, without having any first hand experiences of it. 'She lived in fantasy',⁴² isolated and motherless. Her only companions her brothers and father, perhaps unwittingly, disempower Elaine through overprotecting her. Her seclusion leaves her unprepared for what life may throw her way. Like Malory's Elayne, Elaine of the *Idylls of the King* appears to be an ornament to be viewed and admired, but never

⁴⁰ Mc Cracken, Peggy. 'Mothers in the Grail Quest: Desire, Pleasure, and Conception' Pg.36.

⁴¹ In a society pre-occupied with chastity and sanctity of marriage, a woman bearing a child out of wedlock would have been considered as scandalous and very likely an ill subject to speak of.

⁴² Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.168, l.27.

known or understood. The only dialogue in which Elaine takes part in the story is during interaction with Lancelot, giving away very little about who she is and what she thinks about things other than knights in shining armour. This position of isolation precipitates her romantic dreams and fantasies. She has no female role model and her well-natured, Victorian-moulded father is of little help in educating her in the ways of the world.

Elaine is introduced in the first paragraph, guarding the shield of Lancelot.⁴³ No sooner do we learn of the identity of its owner than the writing turns away from Elaine, and Tennyson in Malory-like fashion spends some 150 lines talking about Lancelot. Like his medieval predecessor Tennyson is set on keeping up the tradition of fragmenting the female characters and elements through frequent omission from the text in favour of pursuing the adventures of a male hero instead. It appears that despite the passage of almost five centuries the popular attitudes about women's importance in society had little changed. Although, as discussed in my introduction, women were taking an ever more active part in the everyday life of the Victorian period, the Poet Laureate still chose to defy this fact and stubbornly continued to portray them in an idealistic, romanticised context.

Elaine's dream of a slippery diamond,⁴⁴ which she loses, is a parable about her relationship with Lancelot and her inability to hold onto him. It is as a diamond, the most precious of gems, that Elaine views Lancelot. Its dual qualities of hardness and slipperiness however make an ironic comment on Lancelot's nature. He may shine and appear precious, but his soul is hard and his will unbreakable. Furthermore, the slippery quality of this stone echoes that of a snake, which will slither away. I feel that the metaphor is precipitated by Tennyson's discomfort about Lancelot's duality of character. Unlike the women whom Tennyson depicts as either good or bad, Lancelot is both. He is like Bradley's Elaine, both virgin and whore, a concept which Tennyson succeeds in suppressing in some of his women, yet fails to do away with in Lancelot, and it clearly bothers the author.

⁴³ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.168, l.4.

⁴⁴ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.173, l.210-217.

It is important to note that throughout the story Tennyson ensures that his hero remains without reproach in his relations with Elaine. Lancelot 'looking at her, Full courtly, yet not falsely'⁴⁵ is at pains not to encourage the girl in any way. Elaine's fancy is supposedly all her own doing. Tennyson would have us believe that it has nothing to do with the way the girl has been conditioned to think about magnificent knights, having no doubt heard tales of chivalry and bravery since childhood. The poet goes to great pains to convince his audience that Lancelot's fine talk is misinterpreted by the innocent and naïve Elaine, rather than that Lancelot leads the girl on by that same talk. Where Tennyson departs from the tradition is in making Lancelot's appearance less than perfect, perhaps to stress even further Elaine's blind devotion to an ideal. Elaine is said to dote on him:

Marr'd as he was, he *seemed* the goodliest man
That ever among ladies ate at hall,
And noblest,⁴⁶ (*italics mine*)

Here we have another instance of Tennyson's very subtle and perhaps unconscious comment on the less than perfect nature of Lancelot and the play between appearance and reality.

Lancelot does very little to avert Elaine's obvious attentions as 'She stood, Rapt on his face as if it were a God's.'⁴⁷ When he agrees to wear her token at the tournament he stresses to her that he is doing this as a special favour, one he has never done for any other lady. To say such things to a clearly enamoured maiden and still expect nothing but sisterly affection in return is deceptive if not downright naïve on Lancelot's part. He is making a mockery of the game of courtly love, for the expectation that goes with accepting the token from Elaine, that he remain true to her, can not be fulfilled. Lancelot never intends to wear the token for any other reason but to save his own skin.⁴⁸ What the Victorian audience could still have interpreted as romantic, to the modern reader appears as no more than hypocrisy. Lancelot's behaviour and Tennyson's expectation that the audience side with his male hero, can

⁴⁵ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.174, l.234-235.

⁴⁶ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.174, l.253-255.

⁴⁷ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.177, l.354.

⁴⁸ This is in keeping with Malory, where Launcelot also accepts to wear the token as a disguise (Pg.623 l.33-37); there however he does not profess brotherly devotion to the maiden.

only meet with rejection from a feminist or any other open-minded contemporary scholar.

At this point Tennyson once again puts Elaine aside, to pursue Lancelot's deeds at the tournament. Whilst the hero is away, Elaine's innocence is tried by the advances of the lecherous Gawain. She steadfastly dismisses Gawain's suggestions about the improper relationship between Lancelot and Queen Guinevere as slander and lies. Elaine's firm devotion is juxtaposed with Lancelot's deceitfulness, and Gawain's inconstancy as he abandons his quest to seek Lancelot and deliver the prize he has won. Elaine continues living in what appear to the modern reader as naive hopes of Lancelot developing affection for her. Tennyson makes a martyr out of Lancelot, leading his audience to believe that the knight's chances of loving Elaine are stifled by his love for the Queen.⁴⁹ With this assertion, Tennyson once again succeeds in shifting the blame away from Lancelot and onto a female character, this time Guinevere:

And peradventure had he *seen* her first
 She might have made this and that other world
 Another world for the sick man: but now
 The shackles of an old love straiten'd him,
 His honour rooted in dishonour stood,
 And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.⁵⁰ (Italics mine)

The fact that Tennyson uses the word *seen* rather than *known* here is a direct comment not only on the quality of Lancelot's love and attitude to women; but perhaps on Tennyson's personal outlook on the matter. As is the case in Malory, here the women are also mostly regarded only as visual artefacts to be looked at but remain unknown as feeling and thinking people. The Victorian poet appears to have progressed little beyond the restrictive sentiments of the medieval period and its patriarchal system, where as has been noted, the female characters in literature mostly served the role of ornamental catalysts for the actions of male heroes.

As soon as Elaine comes to understand that Lancelot's love is beyond her reach, she begins to contemplate her death. Lancelot's attempts to bribe Elaine⁵¹ to turn her

⁴⁹ In Malory Launcelot's behaviour is never mitigated by the writer.

⁵⁰ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.190, 1.867-872.

attentions away from him and look elsewhere for love have quite the opposite effect and Elaine's emotions intensify. He slights her desperate confession of love by categorising it as a passing fancy and 'love's first flash in youth.'⁵² His final rejection of Elaine convinces the girl of the hopelessness of her situation and she determines to end her life, which she considers as not worth living without the love of Lancelot.

Elaine's father rightfully blames Lancelot's (doubtful in our modern view) courtesy for Elaine's passions and suggests that the knight should act discourteously to ward off her feelings. Lancelot selfishly denies even this to the desperate father, claiming that it would be against his nature to act in such a way. As Elaine plans her final passage to Camelot down to the last detail there is an air of uneasiness about her profound determination. A maiden so subjectivised by the patriarchal system could not possibly be acting out her own will here, but would rather be fulfilling the expectations of the society. Failing to secure the love of the great knight Elaine is condemned to death by her author, rather than to be allowed to seek happiness elsewhere. Despite constant rejection, she remains devoted to Lancelot and her death is the romanticised final proof of that steadfast devotion. This spiritual and fatalistic characterisation of Elaine is very far removed from the modern realities, where the strong women are not expected to will their own destruction when rejected by a man. She represents an improbable and therefore weak (to the modern Western audience) Victorian ideal of how a perfect woman should meekly submit to the patriarchal system's machinations.

Tennyson has Elaine blame herself for Lancelot's lack of love, and implies that it is as little Lancelot's fault that he does not love her as it is hers that she loves him. Ironically she believes herself to have loved: 'One peerless, without stain'.⁵³ She will one more time refer to Lancelot as unequalled in her letter of parting to be read at court upon her final arrival.⁵⁴ What stresses the irony is that Tennyson has Galahad and Percivale, not the great Lancelot, bear her body into Arthur's hall. They are the two pure knights, who will achieve the Grail and not Lancelot who could have (and

⁵¹ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.192, 1.949-958.

⁵² Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.192, 1.944.

⁵³ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.196, 1.1084.

⁵⁴ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.201, 1.1274.

had) done worse than love the lovely Elaine. Elaine's arrival in the barge disrupts yet another Lancelot scene where he is in a tête-à-tête with Guinevere. This is Elaine's one moment of glory, where she has undeniably asserted her presence. Previously she was being dismissed as a rumour at Camelot, with the courtiers loath even to allow a thought of any transgression on Lancelot's part. In her death she is a solid proof of his discourtesy and ill doing. She is admired for her beauty and courage and mourned by all present, even Guinevere herself. Her final triumph lies in the fact that she can never again be abandoned by Lancelot, for her death will have made a permanent mark on his conscience. It is also through this adventure that Lancelot comes to know that 'he should die a holy man'.⁵⁵ Thus Elaine succeeds where no other damsel had succeeded before and that is in temporarily upsetting the seemingly unshakeable relationship with the Queen. Arthur orders that a costly tomb be erected for Elaine, a reminder of the Lily Maid of Astolat and surely a thorn in Lancelot's side.

The tale leaves off with Lancelot pondering alone upon his glories and his fate; the final moment is once again his and not Elaine's, where even in her death the triumph of the virgin's tragic defiance is overshadowed by the glory of Lancelot. As in Malory this is not the tale of Lancelot and Elaine, but indeed of LANCELOT and Elaine. As is the case with numerous female characters in Malory, Tennyson's Elaine remains a synchronic episode,⁵⁶ an isolated incident in Lancelot's life and unconnected with the hero's future.

Unlike her predecessors, Bradley does not limit Elaine's presence to one particular incident. She is woven into the story long before her marriage to Lancelot. Bradley chose to model her Elaine on Malory's Elayne of Corbyn, the mother of Galahad, rather than the, somewhat unrealistic in our modern view, virginal Lady of Astolat, upon whose chastity Tennyson doted. Elaine is first introduced to the action as far back as Arthur and Gwenwhyfar's wedding⁵⁷ in *The Mists of Avalon*, when King

⁵⁵ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.205, l.1418.

⁵⁶ See Wynne-Davies, Marion. *Women and Arthurian Literature: Seizing the Sword* (Pg.53) for a discussion on the concepts of synchronicity and diachronicity. The author identifies diachronic elements as those, which stem from the past and dynamically continue along the lines of history. Synchronic elements are bound to moments in time, having no past and no future and are therefore fixed.

⁵⁷ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.330-331.

Pellinore presents his thirteen-year-old daughter to the queen's service. Some years will have passed before Elaine is torn by her unrequited love for Lancelot. When the time comes for the queen to have been safely returned from her abduction by Melegrant, the vivacious and bubbly Elaine will have become, as Gwenwhyfar's cousin and companion, an inseparable part of the story and a steadfast friend to the lonely and friendless Morgaine. Thus Bradley departs radically from Malory who presented most women as synchronic elements existing solely as moments in time, in other words lacking a history, future or both. He achieves this end through either authorial omission or through exclusion from the continuum of the text. In the case of most of the women in medieval Arthurian texts, their parentage is unspecified and most remain nameless.⁵⁸ Bradley empowers her Elaine by introducing the lady into the story at a much earlier point, thus allowing ample time for the development of her character. By making Elaine the recognised mother of Galahad and the wife of Lancelot, Bradley not only creates a richer and more developed character, but also changes the status of her heroine from static to active, therefore synchronic to diachronic. She secures Elaine's connection to the future through the prophecy that she would bring to the world the next Lady of Avalon.⁵⁹ The concrete past and future and the large portion of the text devoted to her make Elaine (at least in this one aspect) equal with the male heroes, whereas Malory's and Tennyson's heroines merely fulfil the function of necessary linking elements in primarily male-focused narratives.

Bradley however, disempowers as quickly as she empowers. Where Malory's Elayne was at least not afraid to follow a prophesied fate, Elaine of the *Mists of Avalon* despairs at the thought of having her daughter reared on the enchanted isle. This sentiment of course provides further opportunity for Bradley to develop and explore the themes of paganism, women's spirituality and the Goddess religion, all close to the author's heart through her association with various Neo-Pagan circles and organisations.⁶⁰ Elaine can be considered by the modern reader as the voice of public

⁵⁸ See Fries, Maureen. 'Gender and the Grail' (Pg.67-79) for a discussion of the namelessness of women on the Grail Quest.

⁵⁹ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.604-605.

⁶⁰ See Paxson, Diana L. 'Marion Zimmer Bradley and *The Mists of Avalon*' Pg.114-116.

consciousness, its fear and scepticism of things non-Christian. She provides a contrast to Morgaine through whom vicariously Bradley attempts to dispel these fears.

Bradley's Elaine, with her sober and rational mind, initially appears stronger than Malory's timid and submissive Elayne.⁶¹ Elaine's original naïve reactions, both to the thought of an incestuous relationship between Melegrant and Gwenwhyfar and to the suggested affair between Lancelot and Gwenwhyfar, soon give way to what seems like genuine concern for the honour of the King. If there be any truth to the rumours of the affair, Arthur is being made a cuckold and is in danger of losing his throne; for a King who cannot rule his wife will surely sooner or later be seen unfit to rule a kingdom, Elaine argues. Although Bradley seems to be empowering Elaine by saving her from muteness, we need to be careful in presuming that Elaine's voice here is indeed her own. The chances are that her reasoning is strongly influenced by the domination of that patriarchal system over her author's gender, who creates Elaine's voice. Although Bradley may have meant to empower Elaine, she may have inadvertently given her a voice wrought with male sentiment. Furthermore, despite giving Elaine a history, Bradley does not allow her to personally benefit from this privilege. Apart from her initial flashes of initiative, Elaine does not grow any wiser during the remainder of the novel. In a similar fashion to Malory's Elaynes and Tennyson's Elaine, the modern Elaine remains stuck in the static role of a backdrop to someone else's actions. Quite unlike her predecessors however, she is designed to set off the wisdom of Morgaine and not that of a male character. This in a way could have been an empowering position for Elaine, if Morgaine was a characteristically feminine character, but this issue will be explored more fully in the last chapter of this work.

Ultimately in her version of the story of 'Lancelot and Elaine', Bradley creates a further opportunity for her true heroine Morgaine to exercise her power.⁶² Bradley empowers women through the Elaine/Lancelot episode, by assigning them an active role in precipitating the happenings; a contrast to Malory where King Pellis sets the wheels into motion. It is after all Morgaine's fairly casual remark that Arthur should

⁶¹ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.602-604.

⁶² Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.605.

put his queen aside and take another in order to obtain an heir to his throne, that plants the seed of intention in Elaine.⁶³ Bradley manipulates the female voice of Morgaine so as to induce Elaine to conclude shrewdly that Arthur's claim to the throne could be in jeopardy if the scandal of his wife's indiscretions with Lancelot became public knowledge. Elaine feels that if Lancelot cannot resist the queen he must rather be removed from his temptation and that she should act as a diversion. Bradley appears to allow Elaine to precipitate her own fate, when she has Elaine ask Morgaine for a charm to make Lancelot love her.⁶⁴ Once again she stands in contrast to Malory's Elayne who submits to a prophecy, rather than (as Bradley would have the audience believe) freely chooses to bed Launcelot for love.

As strong and determined as Elaine may appear, she nevertheless remains a naïve young woman in thinking that she stands any chance of happiness with a man caught up in love, which is as pre-ordained a fact as is Elayne's fate to be the mother of Galahad in Malory.⁶⁵ Despite being warned by Morgaine of the realities of her union with Lancelot, Elaine stubbornly resolves to go through with the plan. She says at the start that she does not expect much happiness from marriage, and indeed she ultimately bears the burden of her unfulfilling one bravely. She does gain the upper hand over Malory's Elayne as far as her union with Lancelot is concerned, but it remains as unhappy a circumstance as was the lack of it in *Le Morte Darthur*. Unless Bradley considers the silent bearing of her fate on the part of Elaine a sign of strength, then I fail to see how her Elaine has been empowered by the marriage to Lancelot. Most modern readers would expect a happy marriage to be built on trust, love and closeness. Elaine finds none of it with Lancelot. Although she is legally his wife, she never truly participates in his life,⁶⁶ as Gwenhwyfar does for instance. Elaine shares her fate with Malory's Elayne as a traditionally silent, all-bearing and obedient wife, definitely not her husband's equal or partner as twentieth-century audiences would expect her to be.

⁶³ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.601.

⁶⁴ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.617.

⁶⁵ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.479, l.29-32.

⁶⁶ See Noble, James. 'Feminism, Homosexuality, and Homophobia in *The Mists of Avalon*' Pg.294.

Nowhere in Bradley is Elaine openly said to be wise as she is in Malory, or as Morgaine; yet there are instances where she certainly appears to be acting with wisdom. She demonstrates this earlier in the novel with her resolve to stay with Gwenwhyfar who stubbornly refused to move to Camelot. She is wise in her steadfast friendship with Morgaine, whom she loves despite rumours of sorcery and un-Christian sentiments, for which she is shunned by others. But Elaine is more than just wise; she is astute, and this is demonstrated in her resolution to allegedly save Arthur's honour, by removing Lancelot from court using the only means available to her. Although it is Elaine who first suggests her marriage to Lancelot, Bradley ensures that the true heroine of her novel remains very much in charge of the situation and stays the controlling force of the Lancelot/Elaine saga. Ultimately it is Morgaine who carries full responsibility for the union and not Elaine, whom Bradley denies even this limited degree of empowerment.

But Bradley disempowers not only her women characters, for we find at least one instance where a male hero meets with a similar fate. Where at Pellinore's court Malory makes the healing powers of the Grail readily available to the ailing Lancelot, Bradley allows Lancelot to come into the presence of the Grail only in his madness, incompletely and a broken man. The sinful Launcelet is denied complete access to the holy vessel and is thus prevented from benefiting from its powers. In her version of the story only the truly deserving, irrespective of their gender or social status, are allowed into the Grail's presence, Morgaine unsurprisingly being one of them. In *The Mists of Avalon* Morgaine takes on the attributes of what Maureen Fries qualifies as a Hero, i.e. someone 'able to undertake journeys to knowledge in which they encounter with that which is Other [and which] lead[s] ultimately to the decisive encounter with the Self. If completely successful, female [like male] heroes return to their original societies with the prized gift of renewal'.⁶⁷ Bradley has liberated Morgaine from the stereotyped role of a *Heroine*, excluded from the Grail quest in Malory, where the *disruptive feminine element* is 'forbidden . . . to go on this ultimate adventure'.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Fries, Maureen. 'Female Heroes, Heroines and Counter-Heroes: Images of Women in Arthurian Tradition' Pg.6.

⁶⁸ Fries, Maureen. 'Gender and the Grail' Pg.73.

Following her marriage to Lancelot, Elaine leaves centre stage but remains an integral part of the narrative for almost half of *The Mists of Avalon*, unlike the situation in Malory where Elayne is confined to the tale of *Launcelot and Elayne*. Elayne shares the fate many of Malory's heroines who are forgotten once they have served their role in the text, but Bradley is careful not to exclude Elaine entirely from the story. In contrast to Malory who inflates the masculine part in the act of conception, Bradley empowers Elaine by putting great emphasis on her role as the mother of Galahad by ensuring that Elaine is either present or at least made mention of each time Galahad is spoken of.⁶⁹ Bradley reveres her mothers for their part in the births of their sons. They are allowed to participate in the sons' upbringing and are never forgotten. As a modern reader I suspect that if Malory could, he would have written women entirely out of the story and concentrated on his mighty knights instead. Stories of male valour and prowess inevitably captivated the imagination of the male-conditioned medieval audiences more than the domestic roles, which women were entrapped in, ever could. Women therefore play a supportive if not peripheral role in Malory, who had to satisfy the consumer demand. Bradley, writing from the twentieth-century perspective, is able to do the opposite; where Malory omits she accentuates. Gwenhwyfar, for example, plays a far greater role in Bradley than she does in Malory within the Elaine/Lancelot episode. More emphasis is put on her feelings; she is described as wrathful, jealous and irrational towards Elaine, none of which mitigates her position within the context of the story, yet does contribute to creating a richer, more substantial and complete character.

Apart from the already discussed instance, where he does not benefit by Bradley's pen, Bradley contributes a great deal to empowering Lancelot. In defending Elaine's innocence to Gwenwhyfar,⁷⁰ he appears almost saint-like. This goodness and tenderness is an aspect largely absent from Malory and Tennyson, where Launcelot in relation to Elayne appears as an abrupt and aloof hero of the romance, unswayed by her beauty and charm. It is difficult to determine whether Bradley does this consciously or whether the sympathetic treatment of Lancelot stems from her own subconscious patriarchally shaped subjectivity and admiration of a romantic

⁶⁹ See Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* eg. Pg.626, 704, 722-724, 788.

⁷⁰ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.697-698.

stereotype. As much as one would hope it possible, no woman can write from a position devoid of the patriarchal sentiment, for she has no experience of a world where men are not in control. Even though she writes of stronger women, ones seemingly able to make decisions for themselves, Bradley also reflects the prevailing sentiments of her society. The empowerment of Lancelot, although it appears unfortunate in the eyes of this feminist reader, is therefore inevitable. Its repercussions are the foregrounding of Morgaine's guilt in the treachery of Lancelot and Elaine's union. Although on the one hand Morgaine appears empowered by the ability to mete out fates, on the other, one need ask oneself whether being despised, feared and rejected can possibly empower anyone, let alone a woman as sensitive, intelligent and powerful as Morgaine.

Another point in Bradley worth looking at in the comparison of the two texts is the emphasis she puts on the looks of the women and on the process of ageing. Where Malory often describes his ladies as simply beautiful (and characterless), as the time passes Morgaine frequently alludes to her own appearance with growing dissatisfaction. This is also shown when after years of separation she meets Elaine again. She notices that the younger woman 'had grown softer, her body rounded, her breasts sagging'⁷¹ or when Gwenhwyfar and Morgaine meet: 'Gwenhwyfar could indeed see the small traces of time in Morgaine's face; . . . there were tiny creases around her eyes and the eyelids drooped a little'.⁷² This reflects Bradley's twentieth-century subjectivity, our ever-mounting obsession with physical beauty, and the growing insecurity amongst women about their own appearance. As a woman she has a more intimate understanding of the feminine and is able to successfully tackle the issue of women's fears and concerns. This in turn makes her story more appealing to her female audience, which is perhaps the reason why the novel has been so positively received by its female readership. One need look no further than the Internet for numerous sites,⁷³ set up by women, as a tribute to *The Mists of Avalon*. It is a pity however, that Bradley's strongest female character, Morgaine, has to succumb to the fears and insecurities of a woman still caught up in a world of patriarchal values,

⁷¹ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.723.

⁷² Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.787.

⁷³ See Bibliography: Internet Sites.

where the woman's appearance to a large degree determines not so much her material worth as commodity but certainly her self-worth.

Despite her larger presence in the story, Elaine appears overshadowed by her medieval version. Due to the concise nature of her encounter with Launcelot in the story, Malory's Elayne is more striking than her counterpart in *The Mists of Avalon*. Bradley stretches out Elaine's sojourn in the tale, which in itself may to some appear empowering, yet it has quite the opposite effect. Because she *does* marry the hero, bear him children and continues her life being recognized as Lancelot's wife, she somehow strikes less of a tragic figure and appears ordinary, in comparison with the medieval Elayne, who is left to suffer pangs of unrequited love. Elaine's unglamorous exit from *The Mists of Avalon* (it is mentioned in passing that she dies in childbirth)⁷⁴ further devalues her. She is but another woman who has lived the full circle of life; been a virgin, wife and a mother.

The characters of Bradley's novel, although more developed than those in previous works, are only marginally more empowered. By providing scope for the often-disillusioned modern reader to identify with the key figures of a colourful, magical story, Bradley succeeds in captivating a certain audience. One needs to remember however, that various readers respond differently and that the sales of a novel do not necessarily indicate the success of the characters in it. In a world where there are only anti-heroes and great leaders tumble from glory on a daily basis, many of today's readers, myself included, are disillusioned with the grim aspects of the twentieth century and sometimes yearn for a little beguilement, which one can still find in the romantic vision of Malory's Elayne.

Whether marginalized by Tennyson or feebly empowered by Bradley, Elayne's somewhat lacklustre character certainly serves well to set off the greatest Arthurian heroine Gwenyvere who, although at different times has enjoyed (or suffered) varying degrees of infamy, could never be ignored, for her story constitutes the very foundations upon which the magical kingdom of Arthur was and is still being

⁷⁴ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.783.

constructed. Its magic lies in the remarkable ability of this story to transcend the limitations of a work of fiction and acquire historical status.

Chapter Two: Gwenyvere⁷⁵

The complex and often tragic character of the Queen of Camelot has been intriguing audiences from the early Middle Ages until the present day. New authors continue to re-tell her story in ever different ways, hoping to capture the essence of the famous heroine, and critics are ever ready to re-examine Gwenyvere's role in the story of the Fall of Arthur's kingdom. Owing to the vastness of *Le Morte Darthur*, I am going to focus my discussion of Gwenyvere on the last two books of Malory's work, where her presence is most prominent and thus more convenient for analysis.⁷⁶ Although she appears or is referred to at odd intervals throughout *Le Morte Darthur*, the story definitely focuses on her in *The Book of Launcelot and Gwenyvere* and *Morte Arthur*. This may be a deliberate effort on Malory's part to foreground Gwenyvere's guilt in the collapse of Arthur's kingdom. Unlike Tennyson who places great emphasis on Guinevere's physical relationship with Lancelot, Malory is somewhat more vague about the actual nature of their relationship, as has been suggested by Peter Korrel: 'Just to make sure that we do not get the wrong ideas'⁷⁷ nor is the reader led by example to engage in any untoward activities. The passage about the nature of love in the days gone by is perhaps an attempt at distancing himself from any incriminating truths, attempt which is short-lived however, for he soon tells the story of Launcelot and Gwenyvere at Mellyagaunte's castle,⁷⁸ which leaves little doubt as to what exactly transpires between the knight and the Queen.

Initially the Queen is shown in positive terms, fulfilling the duties of a wife and Arthur's queen, courageous and just. Her courage is evident on more than one occasion, such as for instance in her defiance of Mellyagaunce and her holding off Mordred's threats in the Tower of London. She is empowered by being allowed to mete out justice to recreant knights sent to, her on more than one occasion, by the ever-conquering Launcelot. It is Launcelot's arrival at court that heralds a change in Gwenyvere. From this point onwards Malory's attitude to Gwenyvere's character

⁷⁵ Malory uses a number of different spellings of Gwenyvere's name in *Le Morte Darthur*. For a more clear reading, when referring to this character in Malory I am going to use the spelling 'Gwenyvere'.

⁷⁶ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* 'The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere' Pg.611-669. and 'The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon' Pg.673-726.

⁷⁷ Korrel, Peter. *An Arthurian Triangle* Pg.271.

⁷⁸ Malory, Thomas *The Works* Pg.657 l.33-35.

changes and she is shown as more intense, suspicious and jealous in her feelings for Launcelot, rebuking him for things he may or may not have done.

The modern reader understands that her jealousy stems from her quest for love and her need to be cherished. The medieval view of the Queen would not have considered the woman's feelings as sufficient to justify her actions. In his portrayal of the relationship of Launcelot and Gwenyvere, Malory juggles Launcelot's love of God and his love for a woman. The latter suffers defeat in a society dominated by Christian doctrine, where women are seen as intrinsically sinful and bad. Launcelot's rebuke of the Queen serves as proof of this and stresses the belief that human love has to be sacrificed to a Christian's love for God. Gwenyvere thus appears as the proverbial wicked woman descended from the sinful Eve, who is set on turning the man from his spiritual need; the only need, as Christianity would have it, that is of any consequence in man's life. She is the only temptation which stands between Launcelot and the Grail, Malory would have us believe, and perhaps he suggests that it is Launcelot's personal grail to find the strength to finally renounce Gwenyvere and lead a holy life.

Although this is intended as a disempowering touch by Malory, the modern audience should recognise Gwenyvere's humanity when in a furious rage she sends Launcelot packing yet again, having accused him of falsehood.⁷⁹ Tradition often links women to nature,⁸⁰ as mothers and nurturers, and Gwenyvere strives to quench her natural needs and desires. Nature of course is also volatile and unstable, and Gwenyvere's portrayal in Malory is in keeping with this premise. She suffers now, feels rejection - NOW. She understands the world in terms of synchronic immediacy and is right in questioning Launcelot's devotion and rebuking him for the falseness to his love and thus indeed to his self. The modern reader/ feminist reader needs to recognise that although Gwenyvere's later characterisation may at first appear disempowering, Malory through portraying the Queen as hot-tempered and shrewish in her treatment of Launcelot, succeeds in showing a little bit of the human side of Gwenyvere.

⁷⁹ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.487 l.27-29.

⁸⁰ See Gilbert, Elliot L. 'The Female King: Tennyson's Arthurian Apocalypse' Pg.871-872.

During some of the times when Launcelot and the queen are presented together she is the aggressor, thus displaying masculine attributes.⁸¹ His meekness and gentleness are what probably makes him the favourite of the medieval audience; he acts as a woman is expected to behave. In fact throughout *Le Morte Darthur* Malory often sustains this reversal of roles in presenting various women as self-absorbed, seeking self gratification and hot-tempered, as opposed to the ever righteous and temperate men: 'And women in their hastynesse wolle do oftyntymes that aftir hem sore repentith'.⁸² This reversal of roles in fact exemplifies the tenets of chivalric code, which required of the knight to be meek and gentle. The episode of the poisoned apple⁸³ however, throws very definite light on the treatment of women by medieval texts. The literary ideals of chivalry and courtly love unfortunately obliterate the position of real women in the society of the Middle Ages. The modern reader is left with a warped vision of what the life was like for actual women. In the text male characters are depicted as having the option of proving their innocence in battle, but Gwenyvere's gender prevents her from being able to defend herself against the accusations of the poisoning of Sir Patryse. Unless some knight takes up the challenge to fight in her name and wins, the woman will be condemned to death. It is therefore not the lady's innocence which will exonerate her, but the prowess her knight shows in fighting for her. The worst of it is that her husband, the High King of Britain, according to law can do nothing to spare her from being condemned for her supposed transgression. This shows that in this medieval romance matters are taken legalistically and in-depth considerations are not undertaken. Thus ironically Gwenyvere might perish at the stake because no one bothers to enquire the truth and all rely on supposition and hearsay,⁸⁴ and not because she is proven as guilty. The chivalric ideal becomes the medieval woman's most disempowering enemy, for it strips her of her strength, determination, and takes away the option to stand up and defend herself.

⁸¹ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.612, l.19-25.

⁸² Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.612, l.34-5.

⁸³ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.611-621.

⁸⁴ See Harris, E. Kay. 'Evidence against Lancelot and Guinevere in Malory's *Morte Darthur*: Treason by Imagination' (Pg.180-208) for an excellent discussion of legal and political aspects of high treason in the fifteenth-century England.

The queen is scorned by Sir Bors, for her request to him to fight in her name in the absence of Sir Launcelot. One would think it an honour for Sir Bors to be able to defend the name of the Queen, but he thinks differently when he says: 'Madam, ye do me grete dishonoure'⁸⁵ and yet Arthur calls him 'one of the nobelyst knyghtes of the worlde, and moste perfitist man.'⁸⁶ It seems very un-knightly conduct indeed to deny a Lady in need of his service, yet Bors does so without flinching. Instances like these make the whole ideal of chivalry appear as inconstant as the generalised image of women it strives to promote. As soon as the men's feudal obligation comes into question, as does Bors's to Arthur in this case, the chivalric ideals take second place and of course it is the lady who suffers. What becomes apparent is that men are rather swift to condemn assertive women in the Arthuriad, as Launcelot also proves when he curses the nameless huntress of the forest as the devil's beneficiary for accidentally wounding him.⁸⁷ This brief scene clearly illuminates the medieval attitude towards women with jobs other than those *traditionally* assigned to them.⁸⁸ Launcelot's conduct here is very much in keeping with the Christian traditions within the medieval society, where men were to act as guides to women so as to 'curb their *pride* and *insubordination* in order to make them *pure, humble, and submissive*' (italics mine).⁸⁹ As far as contravention of traditional gender roles in the work place goes, it is only in the past three decades that women in the western society have begun to penetrate the traditionally male-held domains, and against no small resistance one might add. So the modern reader can hardly wonder at the outrage the medieval man might have felt at a woman in breeches. Joan of Arc is a fine example as she 'led armies, shocking the Middle Ages not so much by her mysticism as by cutting off her hair and wearing men's clothes'.⁹⁰

The misfortune of this whole system for the woman is that she is marginalized through her denied/suppressed capacity to answer for herself. She is utterly helpless

⁸⁵ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.616, l.16.

⁸⁶ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.617, l.43-44.

⁸⁷ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.643 l.39-40.

⁸⁸ See Leyser, Henrietta. *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500* (Pg.5) for well documented accounts of medieval women from all strata of Medieval society at work.

⁸⁹ Fries, Maureen. 'Female Heroes, Heroines, and Counter Heroes: Images of Women in Arthurian Tradition' Pg.5.

⁹⁰ Fries, Maureen. 'Female Heroes, Heroines, and Counter Heroes: Images of Women in Arthurian Tradition' Pg.5.

and indeed at men's mercy, for they, in a God-like manner, have the power to determine and control the fates of women. The episode of the poisoned apple shows that this position is not restricted to the mere relegation of women to childbearing and household chores, but takes on a more sinister flavour when we consider that women's lives literally lay in men's hands. Although Launcelot successfully defends Gwenyvere one shudders to think what would have occurred if he had not arrived in time. Arthur is made impotent by the system, which prevents him from actively defending his Queen if justice (whose justice, one might ask?) is to be served. At the same time, however, I wonder whether this at all perturbs him. He does not seem to value his Queen a great deal, for as he states himself in the infamous passage of Book XX:

quenys he [I] might have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company⁹¹

The ties between men are thus shown again to surpass the values of marriage or any relationship between man and woman. Here the hypocrisy of the courtly love is clearly apparent, for the knights and kings definitely do not practice what they preach. Arthur shows none of the gentillesse one would expect from him when he rebukes Gwenyvere for sending Launcelot away.⁹² This feeling of uneasiness about Arthur's attitude towards his wife as being *something* he can do with or without is strengthened when upon Gawayne's deathbed, Arthur reveals once again that:

in youre person and sir Launcelot I moste had my joy and myne affyaunce. And now have I loste my joy of you bothe, wherefore all myne erthely joy ys gone fro me!⁹³

This places Gwenyvere (and other women in *Le Morte Darthur*) in the precarious position of disposable commodities, which are as in a capitalist system, exchangeable, when need or necessity dictates.

The concept of exchangeability appears most prominently in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, where Alisoun finds herself time and time again a subject of the system of exchange, when first she is traded off by her parents at the age of twelve

⁹¹ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.685, l.30-31.

⁹² Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.615 l.35-40.

⁹³ Malory, Thomas *The Works* Pg.709, l.26-29.

and later trades her sexuality for material gain, a concept which Sheila Delany terms 'sexual economics'.⁹⁴ Alisoun is no weak damsel and successfully takes care of herself in the best way available to her. In the real world, however, this system appears flawed and restricted to literary characters, for it has been documented by the very real Margery Kempe, that she saw no return or profit on her 'investment' and instead struggled against her conscience and private moral values within her marriage.⁹⁵ Her profits came by labour of her own hands, as she indeed was a successful merchant in her day. Of course Margery manages to assert herself to some degree when she perseveres in her determination to abstain from the temptations of the flesh and by remaining a pious Christian, although at the same time one cannot forget that through these same acts she is merely further entrapped within the obsessed-with-chastity, patriarchal system of her day.

Gwenyvere however, as literary character, remains mostly at the mercy of what the men determine to do with or to her. Towards the end, when she enters the nunnery,⁹⁶ out of penance for her illicit love with Launcelot, she takes responsibility for her actions and becomes the mistress of her own fate for a brief moment. She is even able to defy her weakness for Launcelot in denying him a final kiss upon their parting, which Tennyson's Guinevere for instance is unable to do. The fact that in becoming a pious Christian, she merely complies with what medieval society expects her to do is further proof of how deeply she and other women are entrapped by their social system, which prevents them from fulfilling the most human desires and from truly living the only life they have.

Malory, in making his Gwenyvere see the guilt for the dissolution of Camelot as shared by herself and her lover,⁹⁷ does not disempower her as does Tennyson, who has Guinevere accept all responsibility for the tragedy of the fairytale kingdom. Furthermore, one also feels that the medieval Arthur does not solely blame his Queen as does his Victorian namesake, who condemns Guinevere as unworthy of bearing

⁹⁴ Delany, Sheila. *Writing Woman: Women Writers and Women in Literature Medieval to Modern* Pg.76.

⁹⁵ Wade Labarge, Margaret. *Women in Medieval Life* Pg.139-142.

⁹⁶ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.717.

⁹⁷ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.720 l.29-30.

children.⁹⁸ In Tennyson of course, the affair being an open fact, there is a possibility that the child born of her might have been a bastard, therefore a cause of even greater trepidation for the 'peerless without stain' Victorian Arthur where in the first tale of *Idylls of the King* he himself is suspected to be the 'child of shamefulnes'.⁹⁹ Bradley's Arthur who would welcome a child, *any* child of Gwenhwyfar, stands in total antithesis to all his predecessors. He empowers Gwenhwyfar to choose for herself how she brings a child to the world rather than to ostracise her for her barrenness. Sadly Gwenhwyfar's blind devoutness, spiced by personal bitterness, prevents her from realising the true potential of such a *carte blanche*, which Morgaine would no doubt have appreciated. Where Morgaine is sure to have understood Arthur's proposal as the will of the Goddess, Gwenhwyfar contemplates this as a sin and the work of the devil.¹⁰⁰

The greatest instance where Malory empowers Gwenyvere lies in making her the instrument by which Launcelot finally comes to his ultimate salvation, as observed by Edward D. Kennedy.¹⁰¹ Kennedy correctly identifies the irony in the fact that Gwenyvere, Launcelot's greatest weakness, rather than his perfect son Galahad, succeeds in delivering Launcelot from the sins of this world. Her denial of the parting kiss to her lover sends him seeking refuge in a monastery, where he finally attains solace and peace of spirit. There is no such empowerment for Tennyson's Guinevere, who unlike her vivacious predecessor is presented as tired, worn and shamed. The difference between the two can be compared to the pre-and post-lapsarian Eve. The reader meets Malory's unspoilt, innocent Gwenyvere in her days preceding the *fall* and is able to witness the events contributing to that event. The medieval author presents a more objective picture of Gwenyvere than Tennyson, who provides nothing but a cruel static image of a shamed woman, grovelling at her husband's feet.

Guinevere is the penultimate tale in the *Idylls of the King*.¹⁰² She is introduced as a solitary, penitent woman weeping in the nunnery at Almesbury. Earlier on in the

⁹⁸ Refer to footnote 17.

⁹⁹ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.27, l.237.

¹⁰⁰ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.512.

¹⁰¹ Kennedy, Edward D. 'Malory's Guenevere: "A Woman Who Had Grown a Soul"' Pg.42.

¹⁰² Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.269-287.

work her presence is the strongest in the tale of *Lancelot and Elayne*,¹⁰³ where her characterisation somewhat resembles that of Malory, who shows Gwenyvere as irrational and inconstant in her emotions. In *Le Morte Darthur*, Gwenyvere is wroth¹⁰⁴ with Launcelot for his infidelity to her, but swiftly forgives him, once he has explained the circumstances and makes it clear to the Queen that he had been tricked into the deed. She once again flies into a rage when Launcelot is deceived for the second time,¹⁰⁵ and equally swiftly feels remorse for undoing him. This unflattering portrayal of the Queen is juxtaposed with the picture of perfection we find in Elayne. Tennyson picks up on this image of a bickering woman in his characterisation of Guinevere in the tale of *Lancelot and Elayne*, showing a lack of understanding of real women and instead models his Queen on an exhausted stereotype.

In her own Idyll, Guinevere is shown as having matured and as struggling with her conscience about her relationship with Lancelot, yet unable at the same time to break it off. Tennyson goes to great pains to emphasise that Guinevere is a broken-down, weak and sinful woman in this tale. ‘With what a hate the people and the King must hate me’,¹⁰⁶ mourns the Queen. Repeated, the word *hate* creates a strong resonance and introduces an atmosphere of doom and sad resignation. Although Lancelot is equally a guilty party in the illicit love with the Queen, Tennyson has Guinevere accept the sole blame and guilt for the affair. Guinevere blames herself as the responsible participant, saying that she was the one married, not Lancelot. In breaking her marriage vows, Guinevere disobeyed her husband, where obedience was a moral obligation towards him. By the end of the fourteenth century the wedding liturgies would have been standard, and the nineteenth-century audience would have been well familiar with the vows prescribing that the wife obey her husband, submit to him, etc. This prescriptive Victorian obedience is best portrayed in the relationship between Geraint and Enid, where the husband commands the wife to obey him: ‘I charge thee, ask not, but obey’,¹⁰⁷ and she struggles between her duty and her love for him. Lancelot is equally guilty in his relationship with the Queen which, seen from his side, was also adulterous in that he broke the Christian laws and the values held

¹⁰³ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.187, l.720-739.

¹⁰⁴ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.485 l.14-19.

¹⁰⁵ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.487, l.27-29; Pg.488, l.17-18.

¹⁰⁶ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.273, l.55-6.

¹⁰⁷ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.79, l.133.

dear by himself and his society. He betrayed the King's trust and friendship, as well as his feudal obligation to Arthur, when he acted out the tenets of courtly love.¹⁰⁸ Numerous characters in *Idylls of the King* seem to be aware of the unchaste relationship between Lancelot and the Queen, as the rumours, whispers and allegations circulate throughout the *Idylls of the King*, with perhaps only the oblivious Arthur and poor *Lilly Maid* being blissfully unaware of Lancelot's true nature, for she thinks him ever to be 'one peerless, without stain'.¹⁰⁹

In the Victorian sense, Guinevere's guilt involves not only her conscience but spills over into the social realm. As Queen she is a public figure if not public property and is therefore supposed to lead by example; meanwhile she has transgressed the laws of the Christian society and thus alienated herself from all those who mattered.¹¹⁰ This is stressed in one of the earlier *Idylls of the King*, 'The Marriage of Geraint', where Geraint worries about the rumours already circulating about Guinevere's relationship with Lancelot:

...lest his gentle wife,
Through that great tenderness for Guinevere,
Had suffer'd, or should suffer any taint
In nature¹¹¹

he chooses to remove Enid from the court instead.

Craftily, through the mouth of the little serving maiden, Tennyson utters his own judgement on Guinevere. Here again lies a parallel with the fall of Eve, 'This is all

¹⁰⁸ Courtly love was a code of behaviour which developed in France in the 11th century. 'The ideals of courtly love stressed that a knight should devote himself completely to a married or betrothed woman at court. . . . trying to win her favor. . . . despite the fact that the ideals ran counter to the Christian ideals of chivalry.' Soergel, Philip M. 'Chivalry' (online article). This potentially put the knight in a precarious position, as is the case with Launcelot, who by adhering to the tenets of courtly love betrays his duty to his feudal lord and King.

¹⁰⁹ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.196, l.1084.

¹¹⁰ Maureen Fries observes that 'Queens, . . . presented a special case . . . , in the recognition that their symbolic status required the most irreproachable conduct. Adultery with the wife of one's feudal lord was equated with treason in French and English law before the twelfth century, adultery with a queen becoming more than "breach of trust compounded by secrecy and surprise" (Kratins 665) as it encompasses either attempted or real harm to the king or the safety of the commonwealth.' ('Women, Power, and [the Undermining of] Order in Lawman's *Brut*' Pg. 29.

¹¹¹ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.76, l.29-32.

woman's grief, That *she* [Guinevere] is woman',¹¹² says the little handmaiden. Guinevere is portrayed as the worst fiend, as one solely responsible for the dissolution of Camelot. Unlike his predecessors, Tennyson chooses not to divide the cause for the fall of Arthur's kingdom amongst Arthur's court. In fact, Arthur stresses to the hot-headed Gareth that the:

..knights are sworn to vows
Of utter hardihood, utter gentleness,
And, loving, utter faithfulness in love,
And uttermost obedience to the King.¹¹³

Not one of his philandering knights in the earlier stories is incriminated or held responsible as they are in Bradley for instance or even in Malory. The image of the perfect knights is of course undermined by the Red Knight of the Last Tournament, who considers his own adulterous knights as worthier than those at Camelot, for they at least profess to be none other than what they are, unlike the hypocritical fellowship of Arthur.

In *Le Morte Darthur* more than merely the infidelity of the Queen and Launcelot is said to contribute to the fall of Camelot. Mordred's incestuous parenting is one of these factors, but Tennyson very skilfully makes no mention of it and goes as far as having Arthur stress that Modred is not related to him in any way.¹¹⁴ Instead the Victorian author justifies Modred's revolt in the *Idylls of the King* as being the rightful consequence of the heinous transgression of Guinevere against her society. Arthur blames Guinevere for having 'spoilt the purpose of his [my] life'.¹¹⁵ It is the Queen's conduct, Tennyson would have the reader believe, which results in the dissolution of the concept of the family circle, with the passive woman at its nucleus, which was so dear to the Victorian society.¹¹⁶

Tennyson's concentrating of blame throws very clear light on the nineteenth-century prescriptive attitudes towards women's position at home and in their

¹¹² Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.274, l.217.

¹¹³ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.51, l.541-4.

¹¹⁴ Fries, Maureen. 'What Tennyson Really did to Malory's Women' Pg.52-53.

¹¹⁵ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.281, l.450.

¹¹⁶ See Fenster, Thelma S. *Arthurian Women: A Casebook* Pg.217.

society.¹¹⁷ The Victorian women, both real and literary, suffer more extensively under the yoke of what are seen as inflexible Christian rules of chastity and sanctity of marriage, than do the women in either Malory or Bradley. The scene of Guinevere's confrontation with Arthur is very poignant. She grovels with her face against the floor like a serpent, an image once again reminiscent of the *Fall from Eden*, where the tempting devil appears in the form of a snake. Arthur curses her as being unfit to be the procreator of children:

Well is it that no child is born of thee.
The children born of thee are sword and fire,
Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws,
The craft of kindred and the Godless hosts
Of heathen swarming o'er the Northern Sea.¹¹⁸

In the nineteenth-century context this is a grave insult, considering the importance that society placed on: 'the sanctity of marriage and the family as prime civilizing factors'¹¹⁹ where the role of a woman as nurturer and protector of the family unit, in that family circle was undisputed. Guinevere is not only guilty of the break-up of her family but of Arthur's precious family of Knights of the Round Table.

Although Tennyson never supplies a direct cause for why Guinevere is childless, it is rather apparent from the way the text navigates around the issues of adultery that this is the very reason why the Queen remains barren, quite unlike Bradley who shifts the blame for her barrenness onto her constricting Christian values and overzealous piety. Not only by not supplying an heir but by being unable to sustain the life of a baby given to her care, she is the weak link in the family clan and the root of the fall of Camelot in Tennyson's version of the story. Because of her, *the centre cannot hold and things fall apart* and the King must 'leave [her], woman to [her] shame' (italics mine).¹²⁰ In Tennyson Guinevere's guilt seems to be fatally pre-determined by her gender.

¹¹⁷ See Rees, Barbara. *The Victorian Lady* (Pg.146-156) for an extensive discussion of Victorian women.

¹¹⁸ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.280, l.421-425.

¹¹⁹ Goodman, Jennifer R. *The Legend of Arthur in British and American Literature* Pg.83.

¹²⁰ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.282, l.508.

Arthur goes on to describe this adulterous woman in most repulsive terms comparing her to a venereal disease,¹²¹ a witch affiliated to the devil and his instrument amongst men. Tennyson sustains the metaphor of the serpent throughout Arthur's speech, describing Guinevere as creeping about his feet, and yet despite all this negative imagery Arthur dares to assert that he did not come to curse her. This is consistent with the fact that: 'The Victorian lady for much of the era was without legal status, but for the sake of public opinion, she was not likely to be beaten senseless by her husband.'¹²² Arthur remains the seemingly perfect husband when he forgives her and his struggle to leave her, whilst exulting in her beauty, is very theatrical indeed.

One cannot help but wonder whether Arthur, or Tennyson for that matter, knows the person behind the beautiful face at all or whether as in a medieval pageant she is but a trophy and a symbol of his social status.¹²³ Maureen Fries rightly describes *Idylls of the King* as a 'contrastive analysis of female virtue and vice, which . . . permeate(s) the entire work.'¹²⁴ Guinevere has sinned against Arthur's own flesh for as man and woman they are one in marriage, which Arthur pledged on their wedding day:

...Behold thy doom is mine.
Let chance what will, I love thee to the death.¹²⁵

He talks of his own purity and devotion to Guinevere throughout that same marriage and bewails the fact that he loves her still. It is interesting to note that Tennyson's Arthur has on occasion been referred to by critics as *female*,¹²⁶ and that the comparisons of female virtue and vice in this particular Idyll take place in the characterisation of Guinevere and Arthur, where she represents the vice and he becomes the paragon of integrity. Bradley explores the issue of Arthur's sexuality a step further in suggesting a homosexual inclination in his relationship with Lancelot. Her attempt, however, has generally been criticised for being awkward and ill

¹²¹ Fries, Maureen. 'What Tennyson really did to Malory's Women' Pg.51.

¹²² Rees, Barbara. *The Victorian Lady* Pg.146.

¹²³ See Rees, Barbara, *The Victorian Lady* (Pg.139) in which the author asserts that 'The Victorian lady was, after all, the showcase of the Victorian gentleman and one way for the gentleman to demonstrate his affluence was in the variety and quality of his wife's apparel.'

¹²⁴ Fries, Maureen. 'What Tennyson really did to Malory's Women' Pg.47.

¹²⁵ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.33, l.466-467.

¹²⁶ See Gilbert, Elliot L. 'The Female King: Tennyson's Arthurian Apocalypse' Pg.863.

placed,¹²⁷ suggesting perhaps that certain subjects will remain taboo even though the modern readership may profess itself as liberated and liberal. Tennyson's tragic Queen is left to ponder on and lament over her doom that:

The years will roll into the centuries,
And mine will ever be a name of scorn.¹²⁸

Fortunately for Guinevere, in less than one century the attitudes towards her have changed dramatically, and recent Arthurian works by predominantly female writers have shown a trend towards redeeming previously disempowered female characters. Wendy Mnookin and Jane Yolen,¹²⁹ for instance, have both done a great deal to rehabilitate Gwenyvere's character from the crippling position to which Tennyson so brutally consigned her in the nineteenth century. It is through Guinevere's mouth that Tennyson propagates his society's values:

It was [her] duty to have loved the highest:
It surely was [her] profit had I known:¹³⁰

It is interesting to consider the irony of the word 'highest' in this quotation. In human terms she has sinned three-fold, against God who is the highest in the Christian's life, against her King, the highest in her society, and against her husband, the head of the family circle. Her retreat to the nunnery at Almesbury in *Idylls of the King* is a move taken in repentance for her sins. Having removed the paternity of Modred from the story, Tennyson feels no obligation to include Modred's abduction of the Queen either, both morally unsound issues and such as could incriminate Modred-the-man. Mordred's parenting in Malory is incestuous and any sexual relations with the Queen would signify the perpetuation of that incest, in that Guinevere is his father's and uncle's wife, and therefore under medieval laws although no blood relation, nevertheless a relation too close to wed.¹³¹ For Guinevere there is no triumphant exit from the *Idylls of the King*, as was afforded her by Malory, and all that the reader is

¹²⁷ Noble, James. 'Feminism, Homosexuality, and Homophobia in *The Mists of Avalon*' Pg.288-296.

¹²⁸ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.285, l.621-622.

¹²⁹ See Alama, Pauline J. 'A Woman in King Arthur's Court: Wendy Mnookin's *Guenever Speaks*' Pg.86., also Howey, Ann F. 'Queens, Ladies and Saints: Arthurian Women in Contemporary Short Fiction' Pg.25-28.

¹³⁰ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.286, l.652-654.

¹³¹ See Weir, Alison. *Eleanor of Aquitaine: By the Wrath of God Queen of England* Pg.69-70, 160, 182.

left with in *Guinevere* the Idyll, as Maureen Fries correctly sums up, is: 'a stereotyped representation of female capacity for evil.'¹³²

Gwenhwyfar's depiction in *The Mists of Avalon* is also not devoid of stereotyped imagery. She is a problematic character, because unlike the characters of Elaine or Morgaine, which represent a clear break from their previous representations, Gwenhwyfar is a complex blend of old and modern attitudes. Furthermore, one can hardly talk of Gwenhwyfar without the constant reference to Morgaine, her antithesis in *The Mists of Avalon*. Bradley initially appears to be sympathetic towards her, but it soon becomes apparent that she is merely creating a backdrop for her main heroine, Morgaine. Gwenhwyfar first appears on the scene as a little girl who accidentally wanders into the marshland of Avalon,¹³³ which borders the convent she attends. Her ability to physically permeate the fine line between the two worlds however does not buy her the sensitivity to understand or to accept that world. As she becomes older and more subject to the rigidity of her Christian conditioning, so does she ever further reject the old ways of Avalon.

When we next encounter Gwenhwyfar she is shown as a solitary figure, sitting on a wall of her father's castle overwhelmed by the world outside her sheltered spot.¹³⁴ She continues to be plagued by feelings of fear of that world throughout the novel. Her agoraphobia signifies Gwenhwyfar's imprisonment within the confines of her restrictive faith. She feels comfortable and safe only when surrounded or bound by the constraints of her Christianity. In fact her entire existence in *The Mists of Avalon* is defined by her struggle to uphold and propagate 'her' moral values, and she is unable to embrace, understand or accept the imperfect world. She stands in complete contrast to Morgaine's seemingly free spirituality. I say seemingly because despite Bradley's attempts at promoting the anti-Christian values of her own faith, one needs to keep in mind that no set of values is free of ideology, which in turn most certainly leads its subject into some sort of bondage within and subjugation to those values. In numerous debates¹³⁵ Bradley has been ostracised for her attack on Christianity, but if

¹³² Fries, Maureen. 'What Tennyson really did to Malory's Women' Pg.53.

¹³³ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.181-183.

¹³⁴ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.289-290.

¹³⁵ See Discussions on *The Mists of Avalon* on Arthurnet.

seen in the light of her wanting to expose the patriarchal injustices which the Christian faith propagates, then Bradley's stand is justifiable.

Gwenhwyfar, however, is not as blind a follower of her faith as she would like to be and throughout the novel struggles greatly to uphold her Christian values. This struggle is Bradley's way of commenting on the unnatural constraints of Gwenhwyfar's faith, when applied to the real world of human emotions and desires. By creating a vivid picture of the world of Avalon, so much more permissive and embracing of the human condition, Bradley strives to expose the rigidity of the religion, which according to her, has held its subjects in its clutches since medieval times. Although not her primary concern when writing *The Mists of Avalon* (she set out to write another fantasy novel), Bradley succeeds in exposing the patriarchal subjectivities within the Arthurian world, and although herself as a woman inevitably a subject of patriarchal dominance, she almost instinctively, albeit marginally, empowers some of her women.

Upon Lancelot's first visit to Leodegranz's house Gwenhwyfar's father dismisses her like a little child, to run along and leave the men to discuss important matters.¹³⁶ It is obvious however that some time had passed since their first meeting in the marshes, which is apparent in her awe of Lancelot and the great deal of attention she is paying to her dress and looks in expectation of his arrival. Although she has physically grown up, her fears will always remain those of a child, conditioned by her Christianity. Yet Gwenhwyfar is not stupid; she has sense enough to realise her limitations, when she tells Lancelot:

I am not wise; I am very stupid. Even among the sisters, I learned only enough to read my way through the mass book, which they said was all I needed of learning, and then such things as women learn-cookery and herbs and simples and the binding of wounds-¹³⁷

Where Gwenhwyfar is conditioned to be a representation of the perfect medieval lady, schooled to serve and be at men's bidding, real medieval women definitely filled an important niche in their pre-industrial society. Not only did they actively participate

¹³⁶ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.293.

¹³⁷ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.294.

in the economy as spinners and weavers, but also tended to household chores, and raised numerous children.¹³⁸ Men could not have gone to war if women had not been there to make provisions for their journeys, such as clothes and food or tend to the wounded. Bradley detracts from and perhaps belittles this real importance of medieval women in her attempts to promote Morgaine's old ways, which are synonymous with Bradley's New Age Ideology. Gwenhwyfar's excellence at needlework seems to be treated with a degree of scorn by Bradley, who appears to consider this traditionally feminine occupation as inconsequential. This is a trap of which the modern reader needs to beware. It is at times almost too easy to ascribe disempowerment and subjectivisation, to chores, which may in fact have been done by women out of choice. There is a trend amongst the twentieth-century audiences to presume that medieval women were always forced into actions against their own will, especially when it came to their sexuality and religious choices.¹³⁹ Once again Margery Kempe stands as proof that women could be in charge in these spheres and in fact often chose celibacy out of (what seemed to them anyway) their own free will, rather than as a result of any pressure from the men.

As much as Bradley tries to show off the superiority of Morgaine's freedom over the domesticity of Gwenhwyfar, the heroine is only able to truly become a complete woman once she is also constrained within the boundaries of marriage as wife and experiences motherhood as foster mother to Uriens' children. As long as she remains the priestess of Avalon her existence seems incomplete. It has been said that for woman to be fulfilled she needs to have been the four figure Goddess, in other words, to have been the 'maiden, mother, wise woman, and warrior.'¹⁴⁰ Until such time as she marries, Morgaine cannot fully assume that position and remains unfulfilled as a woman. Through marriage, however, she assumes some of the duties expected of an ordinary Christian woman, such as the running of a household and rearing of children and caring for her aged husband, which unsurprisingly she performs very well and through which she finds personal satisfaction, which can be seen as empowering.

¹³⁸ Leyser, Henrietta. *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500* Pg.122-167.

¹³⁹ Murray, Jacqueline. 'A Symposium on Women, History, and Literature' Pg.703-704.

¹⁴⁰ Spivak, Charlotte. 'Morgan Le Fay: Goddess or Witch?' Pg.21.

The Christian women in *The Mists of Avalon* are usually defined by their dependence on the men. Leodegranz asserts that Gwenhwyfar 'need(s) a man to take care of [her]' and she must trust him 'to know what's best for [her]',¹⁴¹ which she interprets only as her father's goodness. What she does not realise is that this seeming kindness binds her within a system which makes her incapable of looking after herself, as she is shut away from the realities of life and worldly living. She prefers to suffocate in her litter with curtains shut, rather than breathe the air of freedom. But then she is on the way to be married off to a man she has never met, which overwhelms her to the extent that she is unable to deal with the rest of the evils of the world. This reflects Bradley's twentieth century sentiment, for in the medieval context women were being married off to complete strangers as the order of the day. For economic reasons, noble children grew up having already been betrothed in infancy, and very rarely married for love.¹⁴²

On the eve of her marriage to Arthur, Gwenhwyfar contemplates whether her feelings for Lancelot are the workings of the devil to beguile her; 'from [her] *duty* to [her] *father* and to [her] husband?' (italics mine).¹⁴³ This sense of duty might appear admirable to a medieval, and probably to Tennyson's, audience, but in modern terms the reader feels saddened by Gwenhwyfar's obligation towards a parent rather than to her own happiness. From her wedding day onwards Gwenhwyfar fights feelings of remorse and guilt. Even on her wedding night she feels that she is not true to Arthur because of her love for Lancelot.¹⁴⁴ Her patriarchal entrapment both makes her feel this way and prevents her from acting on her true feelings. It is the disquiet of the guilt of her love for Lancelot, which causes Gwenhwyfar to be given to pangs of jealousy and to fall into the pit of despair at other times. This is Bradley's way of commenting on what she sees as the corrosive nature of Christianity on the natural human feelings and emotions.

The more Gwenhwyfar tries to be a good Christian the more she falls prey to the un-Christian feelings of hatred, resentment and disdain. She takes her revenge in

¹⁴¹ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg. 295.

¹⁴² See: Weir, Alison. *Eleanor of Aquitaine: By the Wrath of God Queen of England* (Pg.154, 158) for examples of instances of infant betrothals.

¹⁴³ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.320.

¹⁴⁴ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.349-350.

orchestrating Morgaine's marriage to Uriens. In her attempt to save souls Gwenhwyfar loses sight of what truly Christian values are supposed to be: love, acceptance and benevolence, attributes which the folk of Avalon are far better at dispensing than many an intolerant Christian in the novel. Elaine for instance, although equally distrustful of the magical Avalon, is able to show and truly feel the Christian values and show her benevolence. She defends Morgaine on numerous occasions:

'But she is my friend', Elaine said, 'and no matter how bad a Christian she may be, I love her and I will pray for her.'¹⁴⁵

Gwenhwyfar is so blinded by her own hurt and distrust of others that she can in the end only hate those around her who include Elaine as well. Throughout the novel Bradley characterises Gwenhwyfar as a wilful child. In fact many of the Christian women in *The Mists of Avalon* are disempowered through their entrapment in this sustained state of childhood. Gwenhwyfar is unable to come to peace with her fate and a life which, frankly speaking, is not that awful after all within the context which Bradley creates for her. She has a loving husband, a faithful soul mate in Lancelot, yet she rejects all these in a selfish and wilful way, and is therefore ultimately stripped of all the dignity and happiness that she may have experienced.

Unlike Tennyson, who lays the blame for the fall of Camelot solely on Guinevere, disempowering as this may be, Bradley denies her even that moment of infamy, by shifting the blame for the fall of Arthur's kingdom onto Morgaine. No longer is it the affair of Lancelot and Gwenhwyfar, but rather Morgaine's inability to exercise her powers over Arthur, which causes all ruin. Gwenhwyfar's one triumph of the novel is her growing control over her husband. In fact *The Mists of Avalon* is teeming with women manipulating their husbands. Morgause, Elaine, Morgaine, to name but a few, are fine examples. Morgaine is unable to prevail, despite all her learning of Avalon, as Gwenhwyfar manipulates Arthur ever closer to her Christianity and further away from his vows to Avalon. The reversal of values here, however, is that Arthur is led towards what Tennyson and Malory would view as the righteous path, whereas Bradley is critical of his inability to uphold a promise he had given to the Holy Isle at

¹⁴⁵ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.645-6.

the Great Marriage, to allow for the two worlds to merge and two religions to work side by side.¹⁴⁶ Instead Arthur chooses the easier path, according to Bradley in any case, and thus ultimately loses his kingdom, which was not meant to function in the Christian context and in the ordinary sense of the word, for in the words of Tennyson:

the city is built
To music, therefore never built at all,
And therefore built for ever.¹⁴⁷

There is no doubt that Bradley is conscious of the limitations Christianity places on women. Through the mouth of the dying Igraine she tells the ever-pious Gwenhwyfar: 'the black priests would teach her [Morgaine] to think that she was evil because she was a woman'.¹⁴⁸

Where it is not really an issue in Malory, Bradley really explores the potential reasons for Gwenhwyfar's barrenness. What becomes apparent from the way that Bradley manipulates the text, however, is that she once again blames Christianity with its suffocating values and prescriptions for Gwenhwyfar's childlessness. She has Gwenhwyfar reproach the evil ways of everyone, including herself, for the curse of her barrenness. The Queen blames Kevin for cursing her baby, the Merlin for leading Arthur away from the righteous path of Christianity, she blames Morgaine for causing her to fall prey to shameful thoughts and deeds, yet time and time again in her desperation asks Morgaine for some sort of charm or spell to aid her cause. Gwenhwyfar's problem is that she does not embrace the world and life but sees herself as removed from it, starting from her earliest days spent in preferred solitude. Gwenhwyfar's attempts at asserting herself mostly amount to nothing and sometimes have disastrous consequences, as for instance in the case of her insisting on staying at Caerleon and refusing to join other women at Camelot; wilfulness which ultimately results in her miscarriage of her baby.

Although Bradley strives to liberate Morgaine, it is a pity that in order to achieve that end, the author has to sacrifice Gwenhwyfar to what Stephen Heath calls the

¹⁴⁶ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.777-778.

¹⁴⁷ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.43, l.272-274.

¹⁴⁸ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.413.

'historical fatality'¹⁴⁹ of her Eve-like state. Gwenhwyfar's childlessness keeps her unfulfilled as a woman and wife. Her fears of Arthur's displeasure with her are evidence of this insecurity. She considers her inability to give Arthur a son as a grave inadequacy. Silently she rebels against certain restrictions in being a woman and is frustrated with not being able to penetrate the men's world. This is apparent in her regret at being kept away from the centre of the action: 'yet she, his wife, must lurk here out of sight, although she bore the hope of his kingdom!'¹⁵⁰ Gwenhwyfar becomes more and more unreasonable as her desperation to bear a child increases. Even though she blames everyone around her for her barrenness, in a rare moment of lucidity she shifts the blame upon herself, realising that 'Could anything take root and grow in such bitterness?'¹⁵¹ This is a brief moment indeed, for as soon as she learns of the incestuous relationship between Morgaine and Arthur, Gwenhwyfar turns monstrous and destructive. Her hate becomes consummate as the Christian conditioning takes over and this knowledge surpasses all reason. She is finally able to justify her loss to herself, and it is clear in her mind who the true cause of her misery is. She no longer needs to blame herself, and can allow herself to hate someone else with every fibre of her being.

Another interesting matter to consider in *The Mists of Avalon* is Gwenhwyfar's reaction to rape.¹⁵² Her shame at this act of violence against her indicates the patriarchal conditioning, which makes her believe herself a guilty party instead of realising that she in fact is a victim. She sees the rape as punishment for her infidelity with Lancelot. And yet despite these feelings of guilt she is unable to stay away from this same Lancelot when he comes to her rescue. Sadly with the passing of time, Gwenhwyfar learns little of life and instead of learning to embrace it, rejects its most fundamental tenets, becoming ever more imprisoned by the restrictive morals of her faith. Her inflexibility and hate certainly contribute to the dissolution of the Round Table and destruction of Camelot, yet she is not an independent agent, and only a puppet in the grip of her and her author's beliefs. As a literary character, Gwenhwyfar has no control over her actions, but is entirely at the mercy of what her author

¹⁴⁹ See Heath, Stephen. 'The Sexual Fix' Pg.311-316.

¹⁵⁰ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.449.

¹⁵¹ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.633.

¹⁵² Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.594-595.

appropriates for her. Hers is not an independent thought, but that which Bradley has devised for her. Bradley in turn is a subject to the system of beliefs, which has been inflicted on her by her society. Although Bradley was fearful that she would be criticised for this,¹⁵³ nevertheless, as one re-reads the story of *The Mists of Avalon*, it becomes ever clearer that it is Gwenhwyfar's Christian conditioning or rather the hold of Christianity over her, which greatly contributes to the final tragedy of Bradley's Camelot.

Arthur's half-sister Morgan, often depicted as the evil-doer of the legend, is the other female character who shares the blame for the dissolution of the idyllic state with Gwenyvere. She is usually presented as the antithesis of the fair Queen, not only in looks but also in her bold and open actions. Unlike Elayne whom it is easy to forget or ignore, the fey Morgan constitutes as intrinsic an element of the story as is the Round Table or the fateful affair of Launcelot and Gwenyvere.

¹⁵³ Zimmer Bradley, Marion 'Thoughts on Avalon' (online article).

Chapter Three: Morgan

Of all Arthurian women Morgan is perhaps the most captivating. Over the ages, writers have dealt with her character very differently. Whether she is Malory's instrument, by means of which he discloses certain truths about Arthur's court, or whether she is omitted entirely from the text, as is the case in Tennyson; physically absent or present, Morgan is an undeniable feature of the Matter of Britain. In Malory Morgan is fragmented: she appears only fifteen times in the entire vast *Le Morte Darthur*, yet at the same time is perhaps the most independent female character in Malory. Morgan stands out from the archetypal ideals of good or bad women. Her intelligence and education, which she is said to have received, tear her away from the pattern of passivity and helplessness expected of good women and instead she enters a truly new realm. 'In the romance context, difference acquires the status of magic and Morgan becomes, within the narrative, a dangerous threat to the person of Arthur and to his court, while within the allegory she challenges the values that the king and Camelot represent.'¹⁵⁴ Yet despite her said ability to perform magic and tricks, Morgan is not as powerful as her brother. She fails in all her attempts at destroying the harmony of the court and hurting Arthur. Ironically, instead of the seemingly evil Morgan, it is the central and much admired figure of Gwenyvere that is ultimately responsible for the destruction of Malory's Camelot.

Morgan is first introduced to the audience very early in the *Book of Merlin*, as one of the three daughters of Igrayne. She is said to have been schooled at a convent where she 'lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye'¹⁵⁵ and was later married to King Uryens. Although brief, this account of Morgan is rather charged. Malory distinguishes her from her sisters in providing an inkling of her history for her through this brief glimpse into her childhood. He also immediately introduces a note of *dis*-ease with the news that Morgan learned witchcraft in a convent, considering that the church of Malory's day would have rejected any supernatural powers or knowledge as evil and heresy.¹⁵⁶ One need only to look to the

¹⁵⁴ Wynne-Davies, Marion. *Women and Arthurian Literature: Seizing the Sword* Pg.67.

¹⁵⁵ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.5, l.28.

¹⁵⁶ As Charlotte Spivak notes, 'although scholars do not agree on the exact number of witch burnings . . . it was probably in the range of four to nine million.' (Morgan Le Fey: Goddess or Witch?' Pg.23).

history of Joan of Arc and other supposed heretics of the Middle Ages who had been condemned to be burnt at the stake. Malory may indeed be alluding to this when Morgan is said to be hated by many knights who wish her 'brente'¹⁵⁷ for her treachery against Arthur. Her magical powers are clearly apparent when after throwing the scabbard in the lake she turns herself and her party into stones to escape the pursuit of Arthur. Morgan is fearless in her determination not to let the scabbard go to Arthur again, regardless of what happens to her as a result of her actions. She further defies the King in sending the knight with a message to Arthur, that she has saved that same knight for the love of Accolon and not Arthur whom she does not fear, for she relies on her magical powers for protection.¹⁵⁸ The allusion to learning magic at the convent, therefore, may be Malory's attempt at distancing the action of the story from his immediate reality of the late Middle Ages, to a time more permissive and altogether different, as he habitually does throughout *Le Morte Darthur*.

When Malory next makes a brief mention of Morgan some thirty pages later, he talks of her appearance and she is said to be 'a fayre lady as ony might be'.¹⁵⁹ Once again emphasis is laid on the lady's outer attributes, as I have already discussed with regard to Guinevere and Elayne. Having thus described her in a primarily positive manner, as far as her appearance and intelligence are concerned, Malory surprises the reader with the sudden shift from his initially positive stance when Morgan suddenly becomes the evil-doer later in the text. This could very well be intentional and designed to point out that one should not deem all that shines to be made of gold. Although something, or in this case someone, may seem pleasing to the eye, this does not mean that it is necessarily equally pleasant and good when considered from a different angle.

Further in the *Book of King Arthur*, Morgan is defined in terms of her affiliation to various male characters, rather than as a self-substantiated person.¹⁶⁰ Her relationships with Uryens and Arthur define Morgan's position in the society. Not only is she a sister of the High King but she is also a Queen by her own right through

¹⁵⁷ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.95, l.18.

¹⁵⁸ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.95, l.6-9.

¹⁵⁹ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.30, l.9-10.

¹⁶⁰ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.48, l.5.

marriage to her husband. Morgan's social status is thus affirmed. This familial link also affirms her as human and not a supernatural deity. Little if anything is said of her as a person. As with all Arthurian women in Malory and other medieval sources, we never know them through their thoughts and feelings, only through their actions and relationships with men. Morgan betrays Arthur's trust as well as her moral and domestic obligations for the love of another knight whom she is said to revere more than her husband or brother. To the modern reader this signifies independent thought and determination to break away from the prescriptive patriarchal limitations that her status as a woman inflicts on her. Yet her constant plotting against Arthur's life, orchestrating his imprisonment and treacherously sending Arthur a fake sword and scabbard to go into battle with,¹⁶¹ makes Morgan into a debonair villain (which is in keeping with the concept of female Hero discussed earlier in Chapter One, pg.26), as the contemporary audience would probably perceive her. Her transgression may appear that much greater in the eyes of the contemporary audience in that she is a woman, who breaks the rules of being a woman. In fact her actions make her into the most masculine of all female characters in Malory. The irony here is that Malory wants to present us with a picture of an inconstant *woman* swayed by her passion, who succumbs to haste over reason; but this woman is no ordinary blushing maiden.

Morgan sends her lover Accolon Arthur's sword and scabbard for the battle, further breaking her brother's trust.¹⁶² Malory presents her passion for Accolon as a destructive element, which clouds her reason as to where her loyalty should lie. A modern feminist audience would see a triumph in Morgan's defiance of the stifling conventions imposed on women in the past, but the medieval heroine is cursed for her rebelliousness and is branded as the work of the fiend. Morgan's inner strength is apparent when she hears of Accolon's death, for though her heart is said to nearly break for sorrow she pretends to be unmoved and holds her composure. Although she is the villain, who has to flee from her brother's wrath, she is still feared and, I would like to think, respected by Arthur's watchmen, who 'durst not disobey your sistyrs

¹⁶¹ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.85, l.23-28.

¹⁶² Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.84, l.20-26.

commaundement¹⁶³. She is respected not only as the sister of the King but as a powerful person, who will not take lightly to being disobeyed.

Morgan never stops scheming, and when we next encounter her she is plotting against Launcelot, whom she imprisons in the castle Chariot, offering him a choice of a lover from amongst the four queens present. Naturally Launcelot refuses, preferring death to disgrace, 'I woll none of you, for ye be false enchaunters'.¹⁶⁴ Morgan's designs on Launcelot however are meant to expose his love for Gwennyvere, whose worthiness (note: *not innocence*) Launcelot *valiantly* offers to prove upon Morgan's head. Worthiness has a masculine connotation and indicates the male inability of Launcelot to relate to a woman in feminine terms. Herein perhaps lies the crux of much literature about women in general; that it is written from a masculine perspective, which is devoid of the understanding of the female. Once again Launcelot's discourtesy goes unmarked by Malory and therefore the contemporary audience, for the best knight can do no wrong; instead, a woman has to take the brunt of his transgressions.

Morgan appears most frequently in the largest book of *Le Morte Darthur*, the *Book of Sir Trystram De Lyones*. Here she continues to break the bonds of medieval tradition inflicted on women. Instead of fulfilling the traditionally female function of an agent who impels men to perform one deed or another, Morgan inverts the roles when she uses a nameless knight as her agent to send a message to Arthur. He bears her tidings and a magical horn, which is to prove or determine whether Gwennyvere is indeed true to Arthur or not.¹⁶⁵ This Morgan is said to do to spite Launcelot, which we can only assume she does for his having rejected her advances of some 120 pages earlier. Further in the text Malory refers back to the famous 'Freynshe booke',¹⁶⁶ which allegedly tells of Morgan's passion for Launcelot, which is so great that she will stop at nothing to possess him even if she has to do so by force.

¹⁶³ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.91, l.37.

¹⁶⁴ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.152, l.17.

¹⁶⁵ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.270, l.6-16.

¹⁶⁶ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.340, l.32-39.

At King Mark's court Morgan takes on the persona of Justicia, as she exposes the truth and falsehood, by whatever means available to her. She proves once again to be independent, strong and unthwarted by her femaleness. As a result Morgan is pronounced an enemy to 'all trew lovers'¹⁶⁷ for exposing more than a good share of infidelity at Mark's court and is said to be despised by many knights. One cannot help but infer that if the knights had nothing to hide they would not be so quick to condemn her actions. She is pronounced a *false* sorceress (though she uncovers the truth) and her magic is rejected as spiteful and designed to create strife amongst friends and spouses. Thus Morgan consciously precipitates the end of King Mark's court and the tragedy of Trystram and Isode, certainly no small achievement for a woman. The ambiguity here lies in the fact that for once Morgan as a woman is not at the source of the tragedy but instead its exposing element. In this instance Morgan becomes a Mordred analogue in the parallel story of deception and fall of a kingdom. The immediate earthly terms of the tragedy are enormous, but therein lies a triumph, in that it is a woman who for once judges instead of being judged.

Both the Court of Arthur and of Mark seem to prefer to dwell in the ideal of courtly love rather than admit that their state is anything but perfect and that they are living in a dream world, which does not exist. Arthur's incestuous son Mordred, Launcelot's affair with the Queen, Trystram's love for Isode are all proof of the decay, which is underlying their seemingly faultless and idyllic existence. Morgan is Arthur's and the audience's window to the real world. She moves between the magical world and the brutal reality of medieval life, which the fantasy of fin amour and chivalry attempts to camouflage or negate. Morgan in fact becomes Malory's agent, by means of whom he exposes the guilty without implicating himself directly in any judgement. The author once again chooses a woman, albeit a powerful one, to be the bearer of perceived evil, who through her machinations will ultimately be blamed for bringing on the apocalyptic fall of two kingdoms, though the real reason for the downfall of Camelot is the subliminal decay of its very foundations.

Morgan is the antithesis of what woman was expected to be in the medieval romance. She opposes her Lord Arthur instead of submitting to him; she takes charge

¹⁶⁷ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.270, l.33.

and is proactive. She is severely criticised, for 'this is a shameful and a vylance usage for a Queen to use, and namely to make suche warre upon her owne lorde that is called the floure of chivalry'.¹⁶⁸ This statement reasserts her rightful place as Arthur's possession; not only as a subject but as a woman she is expected to submit to the will of a man. Yet Morgan acts out her own mind, is assertive, strong, independent and capable. She is reminiscent of the great Eleanor of Aquitane, who on many an occasion stepped into her husband's shoes as his regent during his extensive periods of absence from England, and ruled very capably on his behalf.¹⁶⁹ Like Eleanor, Morgan defies the limitations imposed on the medieval women by their society.

Morgan fares better at Mark's court where she enjoys at least a degree of empowerment¹⁷⁰ as opposed to being completely rejected by the *righteous* knights of the Round Table. Mark summons her together with the Queen of Northe Galys to wield battle on his behalf. Morgan at Mark's court is shown as commanding knights to perform deeds for her, not out of duty to find amour but because she is powerful.¹⁷¹ She heals the apparently mortally wounded knight Alexander by her craft, extracting out of him a promise not to leave the constraints of his castle for a year.¹⁷² As seemingly generously as Malory throws these empowering morsels at Morgan, so does he snatch them away at a whim. (In this he appears no less fickle than he would have us believe Morgan to be.) Morgan is only able to wield power over the man as long as the knight remains unaware of being manipulated by her/woman. Once this is discovered the man's heart turns against her and she once again becomes the villain.

As is the case with other female figures in the Arthurian saga, unfortunately Morgan's presence on many an occasion is also designed to merely create fertile ground for the knight to show off his prowess or send him into further adventure. Morgan's imprisonment of the lady in the tub¹⁷³ of boiling water not only stresses her

¹⁶⁸ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.367, l.30-32.

¹⁶⁹ Wade Labarge, Margaret. *Women in Medieval Life* Pg.51.

¹⁷⁰ King Mark sends for Morgan and the Queen of Northe Galys to ensure the successful capture of an enemy. (Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.392, l.19-26).

¹⁷¹ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.315, l.17-23.

¹⁷² Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.395, l.8-15.

¹⁷³ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.478, l.17-23.

villainy, but creates a perfect opportunity for Launcelot to prove once again that he is the greatest knight of all. This also provides a chance for Malory to reiterate once again that to Launcelot Queen Gwenyvere still remained the fairer, lest the audience forget how strong his resolve is and where his loyalties lie. This adventure is the last opportunity Morgan has of making mischief in Malory's great work. When we meet her next she is one of the three death-crone Queens, come to bear the body of Arthur away.¹⁷⁴ She stands together with the Queens of North Galis and the Queen of the Waste Londis, who epitomise death and destruction, counterbalanced by the benevolent presence of the life-giving and life-preserving Lady of the Lake. The women here act as representations of the reality of life, where at the final reckoning good meets bad, and life meets death. They are the female symbols of mother, nurturer, protector and finally the death crone. Unmistakably, the female element is seen as an intrinsic part of every aspect of life, no matter how fragmented it may have become by patriarchy and the codes of chivalry and courtly love. The women proudly escorting Arthur on his final voyage certainly are a lasting and powerful final image in *Le Morte Darthur*.

In Malory Morgan no longer is the Grail bearer or one of the Maidens of Avalon as were her predecessors in the legends. Women are in fact 'forbidden . . . to go on this ultimate adventure'.¹⁷⁵ This treatment of literary women is probably a result of the true-to-life situation of the times of King Louis VII, where women proved to be a disruptive element on the second crusade with Queen Eleanor allegedly involved in a serious scandal involving her uncle.¹⁷⁶ According to the French traditions Morgan is a healer and at times a benevolent figure. Malory does not seem clear on his attitude towards her and appears to struggle with the depiction of her good and evil sides, so that sometimes the Morgan he presents appears no less than schizophrenic. Confusing as this may be, it nevertheless provides a complexity to her character, making it certainly far more interesting than Tennyson's one-sided view of women, Vivien being the closest to a Morgan-type character in the *Idylls of the King*.

¹⁷⁴ Malory, Thomas. *The Works* Pg.717, l.14-19.

¹⁷⁵ Fries, Maureen. 'Gender and the Grail' Pg.73.

¹⁷⁶ See Weir, Alison. *Eleanor of Aquitaine: By the Wrath of God Queen of England* Pg.55-56; 63-69.

Tennyson by complete omission succeeds in producing the most blatant case of marginalisation of a female Arthurian character yet. At the same time however, the power of Morgan's absence speaks for the magnitude of the character masterfully strung together from snatches of folklore by Malory. Although scanty in her number of appearances in *Le Morte Darthur*, the medieval Morgan is a forceful presence; very much self-substantiated and independent, and by no means limited to Malory's text, for she appears in numerous other works, such as for example *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where she is as crafty and powerful as ever. No one can mistake her trickery, her mockery and exposé of the court, or her skills as magician/healer.

It is initially difficult to understand why Tennyson intentionally ignored Morgan, exchanging her complex character for a flat, one-sided Vivien, who is but a fragment of her complex and rich predecessor. By the time that the first Idylls were published in 1859, amongst them Vivien (then appearing under that individual title), the ideals of Tennyson's society about women and their place therein were changing. Although 'three features were of particular importance in influencing the lives of middle-class women born in the mid-Victorian decades, the values of *domesticity*, the *sanctification of family life and of femininity* (italics mine) were at their most pervasive during these years', says Deborah Gorham, 'yet the period also witnessed the birth of the Women's Movement; moreover it provided a woman born during the mid-Victorian decades with the possibility of benefiting from the educational and professional opportunities that became available to middle-class women in the 1860s.'¹⁷⁷ It seems peculiar then that Tennyson obstinately clung onto fast-waning ideals in his fragmented portrayal of Arthurian women, not affording them the autonomy that the mid-Victorian period was allowing the real women of the period.

'Tennyson's portrait of Vivien reduces an archetype to a stereotype',¹⁷⁸ infers Maureen Fries, who sees Tennyson's characterisation of Vivien as totally negative, whereas her predecessors in Malory show positive traits and conduct Arthur on his final passage. Vivien is only one aspect of the combined characters of Morgan, the Lady of the Lake and Nimue of Malory's story, all of which have benevolent traits.

¹⁷⁷ Gorham, Deborah. *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* Pg.153.

¹⁷⁸ Fries, Maureen. 'What Tennyson Really did to Malory's Women' Pg.48.

The Lady of the Lake is Arthur's benefactress, as she saves him from Morgan's treachery. 'Nimue follows her entombment of Merlin with her own service as his successor as Arthurian advisor, saving first both king and knights and then Queen in different episodes.'¹⁷⁹ Morgan, despite her seemingly malevolent conduct throughout the tales, is in the end one of the three Queens who conduct Arthur to his resting place. Malory's characters are rich and multifaceted, whereas Tennyson's Vivien is but a single negative aspect of these. Vivien is nothing but a scheming, all-knowing ill-doer: 'sowing one ill hint from ear to ear.'¹⁸⁰ She spreads slander and is a disruptive force, but unlike Morgan who exposes the underlying tensions and decay within Arthur's court through her tricks and schemes, Vivien's malevolence is hedonistic in nature. There seems to be no other reason for her conduct than personal pleasure and triumph. Because she is so self absorbed she fails to touch the readers in the way that Morgan does in Malory. Tennyson's Vivien is a synchronic figure, a moment in time, not only without past¹⁸¹ but also without consequence. The flatness of her character reduces her credibility to that of a caricature of the once-powerful and definitely human character, which Malory gave his audience and which Bradley tried to revive almost 120 years after Tennyson's disastrous portrayal of Morgan's avatar.

Tennyson presents the audience with a Merlin, powerless against the impending doom of the woman's evil.¹⁸² Vivien's sexual power over him is so overwhelming that he becomes enslaved against his will by her carnal appetite. This portrait of an assertive and predatory female clashes strongly with Victorian values about female sexuality, where women were expected to be submissive and meek; men the stronger, dominant sex. As in Guinevere, Tennyson uses serpentine imagery, to describe Vivien.¹⁸³ The extended metaphor is particularly effective as it re-kindles the image of the original sin and the fallen state of women. Vivien's saucy smile, when Merlin finally softens to her sugary words, seals the image of a licentious woman. Elizabeth Lee makes interesting observations regarding Victorian women's sexuality:

¹⁷⁹ Fries, Maureen. 'What Tennyson Really did to Malory's Women' Pg.48.

¹⁸⁰ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.146, l.141.

¹⁸¹ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.144, l.70.

¹⁸² Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.146, l.163-194.

¹⁸³ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.148, l.237-241.

Earlier on in the century, women were considered the weaker, more innocent sex. She had little to no sexual appetite, often capturing all the sympathy and none of the blame over indiscretions. Men represented the fallen, sinful, and lustful creatures, wrongfully taking advantage of the fragility of women. However, this situation switched in the later half of the period; women had to be held accountable, while the men, slaves to their katabolic purposes and sexual appetites, could not really be blamed. Therefore, women were portrayed either frigid or else insatiable. A young lady was only worth as much as her chastity and appearance of complete innocence, for women were time bombs just waiting to be set off. Once led astray, she was the fallen woman, and nothing could reconcile that till she died.¹⁸⁴

In keeping with this view Tennyson's Vivien is a perfect example of what the Victorian patriarchal society viewed as the consequence of female sexual emancipation. Vivien is not real, but rather a personification of what the Victorian man must have feared was latent in every woman.

Tennyson lays great emphasis on Vivien being a slanderer and a gossipmonger. It is obvious that language is her greatest weapon for she manipulates more deftly with words rather than with actions. Herein lies a bitter irony as Vivien's words are not her own, but Tennyson's. She is but a female character the existence of which is at the mercy of its male creator, who forces a specific, ideologically determined language upon her. This is what the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin argued in his work on the significance of the word in discourse in the early-twentieth century. Bakhtin viewed the speaking subject as being defined through its language and therefore dialogically formed. At the same time he views that same language as a possible constraining means of understanding of the world and our reality. By this token, minorities and oppressed groups are being rendered mute and powerless, for their spoken word has always fallen subject to the indoctrination of some specific system or ideology. The female voices have also traditionally been determined and controlled by the patriarchal society, which has pre-determined the *female* perception of the world.

Although Bakhtin sees language as unfixed and that within utterances there is always the possibility for renewed meaning and understanding,¹⁸⁵ Vivien's language

¹⁸⁴ Lee, Elizabeth. 'Victorian Theories of Sex and Sexuality' (online article).

¹⁸⁵ See Groden, Michael. & Kreiswirth, Martin. (Eds.) *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Pg.65), where Bakhtin is said to have inferred that: 'Nothing conclusive has yet taken

can hardly be re-interpreted as anything else than a product of her author's inability to part with the fast-waning misogynistic views of his era. Vivien also defines her limitations as a woman in terms of language by saying: 'were I not woman I could tell a tale'.¹⁸⁶ Vivien stands no chance against the male, controlling poet who determines her very existence through the language he appropriates for her. Because Vivien's characterisation, apart from the language, is otherwise so scant, there is little for the modern reader to fall back on in order to reconstruct a more positive picture of her. Although language is a creation *in perpetuum mobile* with potential for alternate meanings in the future, Tennyson has very skillfully fixed the language and thus entrapped the character of Vivien in the Victorian mould of a bad woman. It becomes the responsibility of the reader to confront and closely scrutinize Tennyson's work, and in doing so to see through the veil of his misogyny. Only then will it become clear that the author's true purpose was to create a fictional character with a focus on a single fallibility and pass it off for a real and complete woman.

Whereas in both Malory and Bradley Morgan's story remains a thread throughout the respective works, Tennyson binds Vivien by and to the tale which he affords her. Nothing is heard of her before or after the Tale of *Vivien and Merlin*. This constraint seems to diminish her character more than Malory's infrequent reference to Morgan. In the *Le Morte Darthur* she remains alive and very much a part of the story, be it through direct reference or through allusion. Tennyson, while allowing her the space of an entire tale, succeeds in pushing her to the margins of not only her society but also of the *Idylls of the King*, for though she dominates for a brief moment hers is a completely negative presence and she is therefore overshadowed by the greater and more complex stature of the other characters. Vivien remains nothing but a figment of Tennyson's imagination.

Tennyson denies Vivien even the final right of accompanying Arthur on his last voyage, for she most certainly is not included amongst the three Queens who come for the King in the black barge. 'Morgan's role in Malory is to test Arthur's power and his judgement. But even when he and his chivalric culture fail, she comes, his

place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future'.

¹⁸⁶ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.160, 1.694.

feminine sister/soul to heal him. Although her earlier behavior is hostile and threatening, she is the epitome of the woman alone, the powerful female, goddess-like in her autonomy, who is independent of male power and can therefore offer it to or withhold it from men, depending on her purposes'.¹⁸⁷ But Vivien's power ends at the tip of her tongue and at the end of the tale of *Merlin and Vivien*. Tennyson reserves no final triumph of benevolence for her. We have to conclude that the reason why Tennyson chose to ignore Morgan in his *Idylls of the King* is because the character was too multifaceted, and many of the aspects of her persona went against the grain of what early and mid-Victorian society prescribed as suitable roles and behaviours for women. Rather than dealing with the excessively interesting and complex female character, Tennyson chose to concentrate on a singular aspect of Malory's Morgan, and expand his didactical tirade about the dire consequences of independence and self-determination in women. Tennyson's characterisation of Vivian is an exposé of the 'Victorian treatment of female sexual experience, in which the fetish of female virtue and the cataclysm of a sexual fall are unquestioned'.¹⁸⁸

In the character of Morgaine, Bradley certainly succeeds in creating the most human Morgan to date. Where Malory gave an incomplete account of Morgan's history and Tennyson utterly disregarded the character, Bradley's heroine is almost larger than life, one with a past and a definite possibility for a future. Morgaine to a large degree is a product of modern-day expectations. Just as Tennyson and Malory wrote for specific audiences, so does Bradley. The success of the novel can largely be attributed to the long history of its characters, Morgaine included, which makes for a story compelling to the modern readership. In an age of film and television, not much is left to the imagination and almost everything is out in the open. The modern audience is used to being presented with a detailed picture of the world around it and *The Mists of Avalon* certainly satisfies this expectation.

Bradley creates a modern-age Morgaine; a character caught between the rigours and limitations of Christianity and the Old/New age religion of the Goddess. 'Morgan

¹⁸⁷ MacCurdy, Marian. 'Bitch or Goddess: Polarized Images of Women In Arthurian Literature and Films' Pg.14.

¹⁸⁸ Bayuk Rosenman, Ellen. 'Spectacular Women: The Mysteries of London and the Female Body' Pg.34.

Le Fay: Goddess or Witch?', asks Charlotte Spivack in the title of her article on Arthurian women. Over the ages Morgan has certainly come to be associated with magic and trickery, and many of the earlier texts present her as a witch-like figure and a shape-shifter. As already mentioned, Malory gave us a Morgan schooled in 'nygromancye' and able to turn herself into stone, not to mention the hag-Morgan of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* playing tricks on the unsuspecting Gawain and Arthur's court. In the *Mists of Avalon* Morgaine's power does not lie in magical acts and superstition. These elements, which beguiled earlier audiences, are explained by the modern text in terms of superior learning on the part of Morgaine and the folk of Avalon, and superstition and fear on the part of the common people. The supernatural is done away with and Morgaine's powers are attributed to what Bradley considers an intrinsic and basic wisdom of woman. Where in the previous works Morgan was either a one-sided character or a fleeting force, necessary for the perpetuation of the *male* action, much time is devoted to development of the *female* character of Morgaine in *The Mists of Avalon*. Yet Bradley does not present an entirely empowered Morgaine, as one would expect from a modern female writer. Instead, the Morgaine she creates is a complex-ridden and often dependent character, one which reflects centuries of the patriarchal dominancy and control over her and her author's sex. The heroine's continued worries about her lacking beauty and her need to be reaffirmed as needed and desired stand as proof of this.

This may not have been the author's initial intention, for Bradley herself states that, rather than making an anti-Christian statement with the novel, her aim was to attack 'the enormous bigotry and anti-feminism that have become grafted on to Christianity',¹⁸⁹ nevertheless, Bradley's characterisation in *The Mists of Avalon*, not only of Morgaine, but also of Gwenhwyfar, clearly presents a debate about the advantages and disadvantages of both Christianity and the Goddess cult. Morgaine is obviously disempowered by the lingering effect of the values that were infused in her in early childhood. As Morgaine was first brought up in a Christian household, before Viviane¹⁹⁰ came to claim her for Avalon,¹⁹¹ despite her supposed pre-ordaining for the

¹⁸⁹ Zimmer Bradley, Marion. 'Thoughts on Avalon' (online article).

¹⁹⁰ In Bradley, Viviane is the Lady of the Lake; sister to Morgause and Igraine, and Morgaine's aunt. She should not be confused with Tennyson's Vivien, who is Morgan's avatar in *Idylls of the King*.

¹⁹¹ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.146.

role of a priestess of Avalon, Morgaine remains unable to completely shake off the yoke of her early learning. She is too intelligent to have survived unscathed her early-instilled Christian conscience.

The main concern of Bradley in the novel appears to be to convey to her readership that paganism is a means of empowerment for women, through the freedom it affords women to be sexually independent and assertive, freedom that has been denied to real women virtually since the beginning of humanity. She shows the character of Morgaine as torn between the stifling values and constraints of Christianity versus what seems to be its polar opposite, the religion of the Goddess. Although Morgaine is a priestess of Avalon, therefore seemingly at liberty to choose her mate, her relationships are disastrous as a result of the haunting effects of the values instilled in her in early childhood. Morgaine's determination to be in charge of her sexuality fails time and time again. Not even in the world of Avalon is she able to determine for herself and is unwittingly manipulated by Viviane, the Lady of the Lake, into an act, which spells disaster to her peace of mind and shapes the rest of her life.¹⁹² The system of Avalon has her as tightly in its grip, as does Christianity. She is merely an object in a game of sorts and has no control over her first sexual encounter, the incestuous union with her brother, orchestrated by her Aunt, supposedly for the greater good of all. The well-being of a woman is once again disregarded, and the *greater good* is of little solace to the broken Morgaine.

For most of the novel Morgaine unrequitedly loves Lancelet. In their first erotic encounter, she is unable to break free of the constraints of her training and vows as a priestess and her chance of happiness passes. Even within her own religion she is still a subject of an ideology, and is, therefore in Marxist terms, imprisoned within a set of rules, which determine the way she thinks and acts. Marxist thought presumes that the dominated classes always fall under the ideology of their ruling class, which that same class uses to propagate itself.¹⁹³ Therefore, as a priestess, every action which Morgaine undertakes is aimed at preserving the existence of Avalon. This learning was designed to make her a subject of a doctrine, which she is to apply to her life and

¹⁹² Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.209; 263-264.

¹⁹³ Larrain, Jorge. *Marxism and Ideology* Pg.25.

pass it further. Morgaine's situation is made unique by the fact that she is caught between two ideologies, which simultaneously hold her in their grip.¹⁹⁴ Bradley ensures that fate is not on Morgaine's side either, for at a moment when she could have once again had an opportunity to consummate her relationship with Lancelot at Arthur's wedding, his accident thwarts her plans. She has to be satisfied with assuming the traditional role of a woman in tending to the seriously wounded Lancelot,¹⁹⁵ rather than being the dominatrix of the sex act. When at a later stage opportunity presents itself once more it is Lancelot's Christian restraint, which puts paid to her plans once again. Here he is unable to transcend the bonds of his religion and/or the added impediment of his love for Gwenhwyfar.

Apart from Kevin the Bard, Morgaine's other consummated relationship is with Accolon, her husband's son.¹⁹⁶ In itself this relationship can have no future, for the lovers can never be open about their incestuous union.¹⁹⁷ Bradley attempts to lend an air of superior importance to this relationship in making Accolon a supposed incarnation of a high priest from some time gone by and implying that the purpose of their coming together is greater than merely achieving earthly bliss. Maureen Fries sees Bradley's 'Morgaine, [as] the most assertive of all . . . strong women, [yet still] at the mercy of traditional, male-centred events.'¹⁹⁸ To a large extent this is true in *The Mists of Avalon*, yet here Morgaine is momentarily in charge of the events, where she presumes to set Accolon alongside her as the High Priest of Avalon.¹⁹⁹

Morgaine fails as a mother to her own son Mordred, whom she rejects, and is in turn rejected by him.²⁰⁰ This is in keeping with Bradley's representation of the relationships of the women of Avalon with their children. Igraine, to whom Viviane

¹⁹⁴ It is interesting to consider for instance why Bradley makes the birth of Mordred such an ordeal for Morgaine. One cannot help but wonder whether she is not purposefully unleashing the full force of supposed Christian punishment for Morgaine and Arthur's sin. Morgaine's priestess training absolves her of the guilt of incest, yet Morgaine suffers pangs of conscience following the event. According to the Bible (Genesis 3:16) women 'in sorrow . . . shalt bring forth children', as punishment for Eve's transgression in paradise. Morgaine certainly bears the brunt twofold, suffering for the original sin and her own guilt of incest. The all-powerful Mother Goddess is of no help to her High Priestess in this instance. Morgaine's disempowering Christian conscience has an upper hand here once again.

¹⁹⁵ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.348-349.

¹⁹⁶ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.763-764.

¹⁹⁷ Refer to footnote 125.

¹⁹⁸ Fries, Maureen. 'Trends in Modern Arthurian Novel' Pg.220.

¹⁹⁹ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.779.

²⁰⁰ Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.749.

was like a mother, rejects the Lady of the Lake and her world. So does Viviane's own son Lancelot who instead of feeling love for his mother fears Viviane, as Mordred fears Morgaine. It appears that Bradley creates a pattern here, to liberate women from the bonds of motherhood. Yet this freedom from the maternal bond certainly does not make the women in question happy, for each and every one of them at some stage regrets not being loved by her child. Only in her marriage, an institution which only exists in the Christian world of *The Mists of Avalon*, is Morgaine able to achieve some sort of normality in her life. At Uriens's court, more than ever before, Morgaine is at peace with herself and the world, successfully fulfilling the role of a wife and mother to her husband's children. Thus we deduce that in submitting to what has over millennia been traditionally perceived as the natural role for women, as wife and mother, Morgaine is able to function normally. We need to infer therefore that to Morgaine Christianity as a culture, can be an empowering experience indeed.

Bradley presents her Avalon as a Utopia, in which the real world becomes a Dystopia. Both are incapable of functioning successfully as independent entities, and are in fact two sides of the same coin. Morgaine also, as a subject of *The Mists of Avalon*, can only be happy once she accepts both these systems of thinking as an intrinsic part of her. As a Priestess of Avalon she longs for the worldliness with its *simple* rules, even though they may be restrictive and subjugating. Simultaneously, once she escapes Avalon, she yearns for it over again. This ambiguity in her character is what makes her such a compelling heroine. She is as imperfect as the twentieth-century, female readership of *The Mists of Avalon* find themselves to be. She is torn by life's changing currents, makes mistakes, suffers and lets us feel her triumphs and her pains. Yet the uncomplicated 'reality' of the *real* world in the end prevails. After all as the saying goes, only ignorance is bliss. Morgaine's intelligence and capability cause her to be torn in different directions. Christianity, despite its prescriptiveness, is easier to succumb to, and Bradley shows that it is far easier to be happy when constrained and defined by narrow rules and limitations such as Christianity advocates.

Although it may not appear so, Bradley does achieve a degree of empowerment for Morgaine.²⁰¹ Despite the fact that the action still mostly navigates around the male characters, Morgaine does to an extent influence the events in a new and irrevocable way. Enslavement by whatever name, be it Christianity, Patriarchy or the Goddess, is for the ignorant, and Bradley liberates Morgaine from ignorance. The intelligent, however, find it too difficult to conform, and they come short, and miss the limited happiness which the systems are able to provide. This is why Morgaine suffers such trials during the course of the novel. The price of the freedom, which she receives at the hands of her author, i.e. her intelligence and independent thought, is indeed high. Perhaps her ultimate empowerment lies in her eventual realisation and acceptance of the Grail as a universal symbol and the Virgin Mary as a parallel of the Great Mother.²⁰² In this knowledge the torn heroine is finally able to find solace and peace of mind.

Most importantly, where many other literary characters have been forgotten and no longer inspire new authors or audiences, alongside Elayne and Gwenyvere, Morgan stands the test of time and stands as proof that Arthur's kingdom, no matter which century rekindles its spirit, cannot do away with the great women of Camelot.

²⁰¹ Charlotte Spivak sees Morgaine come the full circle of life and achieve the status of the Goddess having been the maiden, the mother, warrior and wise woman ('Morgan Le Fay: Goddess or Witch?' Pg.22).

²⁰² Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon* Pg.1007-1009.

Conclusion

Having considered the Arthurian women in some depth, it becomes apparent that 'every minstrel [does sing] it differently'²⁰³ and that the female characters do not remain consistent. Although some basic ingredients of the Arthurian story stay unchanged, with the fates of the characters (male and female) seemingly pre-determined and fixed in a pseudo-historical bind since Medieval times, the depiction of these characters largely depends on the unique sociological and historical conditioning of each author and his/her connectedness to their specific period of creation. Objectivity on the part of the author is near impossible as he/she is caught up in his/her subjectivity, and therefore imposes its tenets, albeit unwittingly, onto the characters he/she creates. The specific ideology, which is said to have most contributed to the disempowerment of female characters, has been identified as patriarchy. The reader/critic is also a subjective element in the interpretation of the text, for he/she is often him/herself unconsciously burdened by the yoke of patriarchal subjectivity.

It is extremely important that the reader remains aware that one cannot escape one's unique knowledge of the world and that this understanding permeates into the way authors write and readers interpret the text. The 'historical entrapment', or the control which the contemporary socio-political climate has over the writer, conditions and shapes the author's view of the world, therefore also the way the subsequent audiences perceive and interpret the texts. Because these conditions are in a constant state of flux, the meaning of the text is also non-permanent. Each new audience has to appropriate its own understanding to the text and interpret it anew. This process of new understanding changes the meaning of the text.

The female characters in *Le Morte Darthur* are imbued with what the contemporary society perceived as important qualities a lady should possess. However, because these tenets of the medieval courtly code are no longer applied and understood in their original sense, the modern audience perceives the characters as

²⁰³ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *Idylls of the King* Pg.154, l.455-456.

disempowered and subjectivised by the elements of courtly love, which in Malory's time may have served to elevate their social status for example.

Tennyson simplifies the characters to the point where they become paragons of either vice or virtue and nothing in-between, reflecting his era's preoccupation with what it perceives to be the 'correct' place and behaviour for a woman. He 'stresses the contrast between the young and innocent Elaine's adoration of Lancelot and the bitter guilt of the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere'²⁰⁴ in a game of absolute opposites. Such reasoning is no longer accepted as valid, and the modern audience perceives Tennyson's effort as no more than a misogynistic tirade. What may have made perfect sense to his contemporary audience is thus rejected as the worst case of disempowerment, the Arthurian women have been subjected to.

Bradley too shows characters which reflect our twentieth-century contemporaneity. Her own historical limitation largely determines the manner and degree to which the female characters in *The Mists of Avalon* are marginalized. This might not be as blatantly apparent to us however, because we ourselves are also entrapped by the same social conditioning as is Bradley. She presents women, which only *appear* empowered by their seemingly autonomic voices, but are far from such a position. Upon closer examination their voices prove to be resonant with the patriarchal sentiment that determines Bradley's entire creative process. She has definitely not succeeded at liberating her women, as the feminist critic would have wanted her to do. Their existence is still being determined by the male characters, in whose shadows the post-modern women of Avalon continue to subsist.

It is no longer possible to determine with any degree of certainty whether empowerment or disempowerment were the authors' actual conscious intention, for all three writers belong to history as much as their work does. We can only strive to establish what effect these texts have on the modern reader in the present context. Having said that, Malory, Tennyson and Bradley all suffer under the scrutiny of twentieth-century feminism, which continues to expose what it perceives as ever-new instances of disempowerment in their portrayal of Arthurian women.

²⁰⁴ Goodman, Jennifer R. *The Legend of Arthur in British and American Literature* Pg.80.

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