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A skeptical feminist exploration of binary dystopias in Marion Zimmer Bradley's The mists of Avalon

Alexandra Elizabeth Anita Lindstrom

A SKEPTICAL FEMINIST EXPLORATION OF BINARY DYSTOPIAS IN MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S *THE MISTS OF AVALON*

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

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in

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Approved by:

[redacted]

David Carlson, Chair, English — 5/2/05 Date

[redacted]

Margaret Doane

[redacted]

Renée Pigeon

ABSTRACT

Marion Zimmer Bradley holds a place as a significant writer of sci fi utopian literature. In her retelling of the Arthurian legends, *The Mists of Avalon*, she departs drastically from her established cannon to create two dystopic cultures: Avalon and Camelot. Although many critics claim Avalon is utopic and keeps with Bradley's established works, by utilizing Marleen Barr's skeptical feminist theories to explore the gender roles, power structures and religions of the two, it becomes apparent that these dystopic cultures effectively mirror each other. Detailed explorations of the cultures and their main characters demonstrate that neither holds significantly more empowerment or freedom than the other. By contrasting Bradley's account of the legends with the traditional version, namely Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, it is clear that Bradley's sweeping revisions of the tradition do little to create the feminist ideal that her text is often lauded as. Nevertheless, a skeptical feminist questioning of the text's plot and characters with the Women's Movement in mind opens an interpretation of the text as a critique of feminism itself.

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CHAPTER ONE

AN OVERVIEW OF SKEPTICAL FEMINISM AND MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S MANIPULATION OF THE ARTHURIAN LEGENDS

Bradley's Rendition

The "Matter of Britain" or the Arthurian tradition has entertained people for centuries. Every telling of the story alters the events and characters somewhat, but Marion Zimmer Bradley created an exceptional and quite different text when she wrote *The Mists of Avalon*. Not only has Morgaine (who is, in the more well-known legends of Sir Thomas Malory and those who follow his version, normally the witch/seductress/murderess/betrayer of the story) now become the heroine and protagonist, but the established Christian subtext of the legends, such as the quest for the Holy Grail, has been underscored, with a pagan religion becoming preeminent and preferable to Christianity.

Although Bradley's version of the Arthurian legends begs comparison to the established Arthurian canon, I feel that the most interesting aspect of the text lies not in the plot points that Bradley alters, omits or invents, but

rather in the effects created by her retelling and selective preservation of the tradition. Specifically, although she takes the liberty to transform Morgaine into the protagonist, Bradley does not choose to idealize Morgaine's culture of Avalon. Conventional criticism acclaims Avalon as utopic in comparison to the patriarchal dystopia of her Camelot. I disagree with this interpretation and will demonstrate that Avalon is just as dystopic as Camelot. Although I will explore Camelot's culture as a foundation for further analysis, the core of my research concerns Bradley's depiction of the mythical island of Avalon. Furthermore, I will show that this view of the text reveals many interesting points regarding the dystopic state of Avalon and examine the conclusions drawn from comparing this binary dystopia. To do this, I will employ the critical theories of Marleen Barr, often called skeptical feminism, but also known as feminist fabulation.

Skeptical Feminism

Skeptical feminism provides and ideal lens to study Bradley's text and its created world of Avalon. Barr defines the critical approach of skeptical feminism as an exploration of women's place within the system of

patriarchy. In reference to fantasy literature and science fiction (speculative fiction), this approach calls particular attention to the awareness that patriarchy exists as a "contrived system, a meaning-making machine," that incorporates beliefs of female inferiority as core to human culture and history. Skeptical feminism delves into the roles of women in invented worlds that challenge the fiction of patriarchy to find questions and, more rarely, answers toward a goal of a truly egalitarian system (Barr, "Food for Postmodern Thought" 22). Barr has effectively analyzed several genres with this theory, including such non-fantastical works as Kate Chopin's *Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (*Feminist Fabulation* 98). These works, though not centered on invented worlds, still concern the role of women in a patriarchal society. Barr claims the theory applies most effectively to feminist fiction and concedes that, in the modern canon, some of the best feminist fiction is science fiction, although most feminist sci fi is rejected from the postmodern canon; she does not confine skeptical feminism to these genres.

The Mists of Avalon and other such feminist reinventions of established stories remind "us that, while

events did occur in the real empirical past [such as various political structures and gender roles], we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning" (Hutcheon, quoted in *Feminist Fabulation* 74). Not only does Bradley's text re-invent the past, but it does so through a unique interpretation. As *The Mists of Avalon* contains a patriarchal Camelot and a female-centered, arguably utopic Avalon, skeptical feminism becomes even more effective for this analysis, as it challenges the reinvention of female identity that traditional feminism focuses on. Skeptical feminism, instead, challenges and questions the goals of traditional feminism in the belief that asking the right questions and challenging all belief systems will reveal the paths that must be taken, in addition to those that must be avoided, if equality can ever be realized. In her skeptical feminist essay exploring feminist science fiction utopias, Ellen Peel states, "The thoroughly skeptical feminist directs suspicion not only toward patriarchy, but also toward the pat answers of utopian feminism" (35).

The Arthurian Legend

As this study must deal with the liberties Bradley takes with the traditional Arthurian legends in order to delineate the strictly invented portions of her text, a brief summation of the established plot is in order. The most widely known rendition, *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory, has served as the foundation for much of the modern canon of Arthurian films and retellings. The Malory-based Arthurian tales usually begin with Igraine and her husband, Gorlois. They live in a castle called Tintagel with Igraine's daughter, Morgaine (called Morgan le Faye in Malory's work), and Igraine's sister, Morgause. Uther, who will become High King of Britain, interrupts the relationship by falling in love with Igraine. A battle begins between the two men. At this point, the wizard Merlin transforms Uther to look like Gorlois; Uther now enters Tintagel and spends the night with Igraine, conceiving Arthur. That very night, Gorlois dies in battle, revealing Uther's identity. Uther and Igraine wed and send Arthur to be fostered elsewhere. Igraine never bears another child, so the questionably-parented Arthur remains heir to the throne upon Uther's death.

By this time, Morgause has married Lot, king of the northern land of Lothian. Arthur has gained the sword Excalibur; various versions have Arthur lift the sword from a stone, a boulder, or receive it from the mysterious Lady of the Lake, whose identity rarely bears elaboration. With this sword, Arthur wins the loyalty of the land and becomes High King. He marries Gwenhwyfar (spelled Guenever in Malory) and gathers the Knights of the Round Table, who, in this time of peace, do a great deal of questing and tourneying. Morgaine, usually portrayed as an evil woman and witch, tricks Arthur into having sex with her and conceives Mordred. This son proves that Arthur can father children, even though he and his wife, Gwenhwyfar, never have a child.

In the course of events, Arthur's best friend, the knight Lancelet (spelled Lancelot in Malory), falls in love with Gwenhwyfar and the two begin an affair. Later, Lancelet marries Elaine after being caught in bed with her. The two have a child, Galahad, who becomes successor to Arthur's throne, as Arthur and Gwenhwyfar have no child. Lancelet's marriage does not alter his affair with Gwenhwyfar, which eventually becomes known, to the disgrace of both.

Arthur, bereft of his wife and his best friend, finds himself at war for his lands. Mordred, his son, usually portrays the leader of the opposing party. The two battle and both sustain serious wounds. Arthur, however, does not die, but is taken by mysterious maidens, usually including a reformed and sympathetic Morgaine, to the island of Avalon, where he will stay until fully healed.

Morgaine Redeemed

Marion Zimmer Bradley has taken this tale, which centers on male exploits and adventures, while minimizing and vilifying the female characters, and rewritten it as a feminist tale, voiced by Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar. Most popular retellings of the Arthurian legends present Morgaine in a decidedly different light than Bradley does. Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* is "the acknowledged source for all the more serious-minded contemporary productions" (Sklar, 25). In it, Morgaine "represents all that is structurally subversive within Arthurian society as a whole," who, "obsessively devotes her not inconsiderable energies to opposing and attempting to sabotage all aspects of the structure, both social and political" (Sklar 26). Morgaine, a priestess and healer

in Bradley's text, instead becomes Malory's sorceress, "[e]nabled through her possession of the supernatural powers to violate 'natural' gender-boundaries and constraints; she is known to [the population of Arthur's court] as the 'wycche most that is now lyving' (327)" (Sklar 26). This vilified character becomes central to Bradley's text in a transformed state that keeps with her earliest identity.

This positive view of Morgaine did not originate with Bradley; in fact, the negative impression of Morgaine did not exist in the original legends upon which Malory based his text. In the earliest versions of the tales, she is portrayed as one of the nine sisters of the holy land of Avalon, gifted healers who care for the wounded Arthur (Sharpe 39). Subsequently, in various French verse romances based on the Matter of Britain, she stands as a benevolent figure; the greatest of the French romanciers, Chretien de Troyes, stresses her remarkable healing powers in his version of the legend (Spivack 18). Bradley's more positive portrayal of Morgaine not only exonerates her of the vilified actions of these versions, but also reemphasizes her benevolent talents for healing.

Nothing unique exists in Bradley's redeemed version of Morgaine; the character possesses a long and largely positive history in legend. Regarding the progression of the character of Morgaine, critic Victoria Sharpe chronicles the character and finds that, "She is known in earlier texts for her remarkable healing powers and is identified as a wise woman; she also has aspects of a queen/goddess" (36). This early positive portrayal did not survive the Renaissance. Beginning with Malory, "[Morgaine] is described as an evil seductress, and this characterization continues through the works of Alfred Tennyson and T. H. White into the middle twentieth century" (Sharpe 36). Aside from her portrayal as a sexually lascivious woman and a political underminer, she became "a malicious master of the black arts, using her magic both to harm others and somewhat pathetically, to conceal her own advancing age" (Spivack, quoted in Sharpe 39).

Critic Victoria Sharpe summarizes the prevalent opinion as to the origin of the negative shift in Morgaine's portrayals: "Unfortunately for women and the character of Morgaine, men's lives became the focus of things written" (43). This seems to have been exacerbated

by the strong influence of Christian thought in Medieval and Renaissance culture and writing. Sharpe further delineates the change in the depiction of Morgaine: "Because of the past view of Morgaine as wise, mystical, and a healer, she was seen as evil by the Catholic Church and portrayed as such" (43). This influence altered Morgaine from her early associations with the Celtic goddess, Morrigan, and her role as a healer to that of a witch (43); in the age that included the Inquisition, when even the hint of witchcraft resulted in torture, imprisonment, or execution, such an alteration seems logical, if regrettable.

Overview

Bradley's alterations from this established plot will be explored in the following chapters. Specifically, I will discuss the elements invented entirely by Bradley, such as the culture of Avalon, as well as details that she has altered significantly from the established plotline. These elements serve as stronger points to explore in this study than do the elements remain faithful to the tradition. In proving that Avalon is dystopic and drawing conclusions from the examination of the two dystopias, I

will also focus on the main themes in both the cultures of Camelot and Avalon as represented in the novel: gender roles, religion and politics. For each culture, I will center my analysis on the best-developed and most focal character for that culture. In the case of Camelot, Gwenhwyfar provides the best developed character for exploration; for Avalon, Morgaine fills this position. In chapter two of this thesis, I will explore the culture of Camelot, focusing on the above mentioned themes and the events key to the development of Gwenhwyfar's character. In chapter three, I will do the same for Avalon and Morgaine. Chapter four contains my conclusions and summaries.

I will not spend time in this thesis to validate Bradley as a feminist writer; no critical argument claims anything else. However, near the end of her literary career, indeed, within a decade of her death, Bradley deviated substantially from her established literary formula to pen *The Mists of Avalon*. In fact, in an earlier text than *Feminist Fabulation*, Marleen Barr herself cites Bradley as a pillar of, "feminist speculative fiction: the science fiction, fantasy and utopian literature created by such writers

as. . .Marion Zimmer Bradley" ("Food for Postmodern Thought" 21). Up to this point, Bradley's canon of works consisted almost entirely of science fiction; *The Mists of Avalon* represents the first significant departure from that genre. Such an evolution in the work of an acclaimed adherent of feminist sci fi requires exploration. In addition, her created worlds enjoy acclaim as utopic visions. In some cases, her works contain a dystopic world, but a utopic one also exists (Peel 45). In critical discussions of utopic science fiction, Bradley's name often appears at the forefront of the discussion. For this reason, her deviation in presenting two dystopias and no utopia in *The Mists of Avalon* begs examination. I will show the flaws of a utopic reading of Avalon; utopic interpretations may stem from a misreading based upon Bradley's earlier works, instead of critical interpretations of what must be seen as a stand-alone text in the canon of an author who, I will show, challenges the long-held beliefs of feminist utopias.

CHAPTER TWO

CAMELOT: THE LIVES OF WOMEN IN A MAN'S WORLD

Women, Patriarchy and Camelot

No critical argument exists to support a utopic view of Bradley's Camelot. Although she takes substantial liberty with many aspects of the plot, altering the legends to remove the patriarchal or feudal aspects of Camelot would prove difficult; in keeping these influences, Bradley maintains the structure's inherent oppression of women. This exploration concerns what the dystopia of Camelot reveals about the greater themes in *The Mists of Avalon*.

Bradley's depiction of the structures of patriarchal Camelot raises various questions about the role and functions of patriarchy; this leads to a questioning of the system itself and provides an interesting comparison with Avalon. To explore Bradley's depiction of patriarchy in Camelot, I will first examine her representation of gender roles. Obviously, a patriarchal structure like Camelot views the male gender as superior to the female. This manifests itself strongly in the portrayal of sexual relations. In this discussion, I will try to separate the

cultures, qualities and discussions of Avalon and Camelot as much as possible, although they will intersect at times.

Pregnancy, Children and Women

The society's extreme and often harshly imposed preference for male children demonstrates Camelot's exultation of men. Igraine, mother of Arthur, comments that her first husband, Gorlois, showed unusual kindness when he allowed her to keep her firstborn child, Morgaine, rather than demand that she give up the child to potentially produce a male child more quickly: "[H]e had yielded to her plea that she might continue to suckle the child through the summer season when so many little children died. She knew he was discontented because the baby had not been the son he craved" (Bradley 7). That the culture in question considers female children so inferior as to be expendable when they interfere with the possible creation of a male child provides a key to understanding the status of women in the society.

The view that procreation, and procreation of a male child at that, forms a woman's primary purpose stands as a suitable accompaniment to the patriarchal preference for

male children. Women's value in Camelot lies in their ability to produce children and little more. Even so, that ability must be stringently guarded, lest a child might be born to another man without the husband's knowledge. Nevertheless, the burden of childbearing falls upon the wife; barrenness discredits her, as we see with Gwenhwyfar. Gwenhwyfar herself refers to her barrenness as "failing the first duty of a queen" (Bradley 331). Once it became evident that Gwenhwyfar was barren, many in Camelot expected and encouraged Arthur to put her aside and take another wife. In *The Mists of Avalon*, the possibility exists, apparently, for a man to dispose of a failed wife and legally take another. In an argument with Gwenhwyfar, Arthur hurls the information: "If I had put you away from me -- aye, and I was counseled to do so, and would not because I loved you too well -- and taken another women" (Bradley 547). Had the fault for barrenness been Arthur's instead of Gwenhwyfar's, however, the text does not imply that it would be possible for her to gain another husband. Barbara Ann Gordon-Wise raises an interesting view of Gwenhwyfar's barrenness; she views the queen's childlessness as a metaphor for her inability to give birth to other aspects of personhood: strength,

independence, creativity or free thought (103). Regardless of this potential complicity in Gwenhwyfar's childlessness, the patriarchal culture views her to be a failure as a person because of her inability to have a child.

Ownership and Gender Roles in Camelot

The male protection of their perceived right to have exclusive access to their women and, thus, sole parentage of any children produced grows from this stress on child bearing. This idea reveals itself in the marriage contract, where, according to the social contract theories of Carole Pateman, "Not until a husband has exercised his conjugal right is the marriage contract complete" (164). By claiming his wife's sexuality, he claims her. Men, however, may engage in sexual relations without fault. Without shame, Arthur welcomes many women to his bed, including Morgaine and Niniane, through the course of the novel. The court's opinion that Lancelet fathered a bastard child becomes a source of quiet amusement and respect, not ridicule. Sex, for men, seems recreational, yet a woman's goodness stems almost exclusively from her chastity and fidelity; no other measure, such as

intelligence, skill in the arts or personality, enters into her worth in Camelot. Oddly, this worth can be compromised through no fault of the woman's own, as seen when Maleagrant abducts and rapes Gwenhwyfar. She must swear to Arthur that she was not, in fact, raped during her abduction and captivity, lest he consider her debased; in fact, after the assault, she thinks "Arthur would not have her back now, that she had been spoilt beyond redemption. . .if she were a man she would not want anything Meleagrant had used either" (Bradley 515). It should not be overlooked that, when thinking of her rape and subsequent debasement, Gwenhwyfar refers to herself with the term "anything" instead of "anyone." This reinforces the worthlessness of women. They cannot defend themselves and must rely upon men for protection; however, when that protection fails, men consider the woman lesser rather than blaming those men who did not adequately guard the woman or who violated her themselves. This demonstrates women's status as object in Camelot, where the actions of others determine a woman's worth. Noted feminist theorist Luce Irigaray claims this status creates a double-bind for women. Should a woman become the pinnacle of what such a society demands of her, she cannot

attain any role other than object; in fact, the more she seeks to become the feminine ideal, the more objectified she becomes by her lack of maleness, which stands as the quality of worth in the culture (Irigaray 114).

These instances reveal Camelot's view of women as not only objects, but objects which require ownership and governance; in a patriarchy, only a man can provide this governance. Feminist literary critic Karen E. Fuog examines gender roles in Bradley's work, stating "Arthurian legends are legends of a patriarchy. . . . The stories revolve around men and their deeds. . . . Women hold a lesser, but carefully defined place in this culture" (73-4). In this patriarchal structure, Fuog finds that so-called good women "support their men, obey promptly, maintain their chastity, and trust their lord's decisions" (74). These notably submissive and subordinate actions require women to assume the status of secondary citizens. This subordination leads to the pervasive idea that women need supervision or even ownership; they spend their lives being the possessions of first their fathers and then their husbands (Farwell 323-4). In fact, Luce Irigaray defines the marriage contract as "a purchase agreement for the body and sex of the wife" (121). This

status as property concerning sexuality forms a far-reaching attitude. In her study of female-centered religions, sociologist Susan Star Sered finds that male control of female sexuality "underlies all forms of patriarchal oppression -- political, economic, and religious" (496). In her text on patriarchy and social contract, Carole Pateman writes, "Once women [secured] their civil and political rights and were economically independent. . .they would have no reason to be subject to men in return for their subsistence and men would have no means to become women's sexual masters" (157). Therefore, by keeping women dependent sexually, economically and politically subordinate to and dependent on men, patriarchal structures maintain their domination.

Religion in Camelot

Christianity, the dominant religion in Camelot, fulfills a dual purpose; while many women turn to faith for comfort, Bradley depicts the religion as a harsh foundation for the enforcement and validation of patriarchal structures, including the subjugation of women. The role of Christianity in Camelot becomes another antagonist for women. The majority of the

controls on female sexuality and the devaluation of women remain couched in religious logic. In one of Bradley's harshest statements about Christianity, Igraine accuses her husband Gorlois of religiously supported persecution: "[Y]ou can take me to bed and force me to do your will; your Christian piety permits you to ravish your own wife!" (66). As Muriel Whitaker states in her essay on the roles of women in the middle ages, women "in medieval Christendom bore a double burden: the inferiority of having been created from Adam's rib and the guilt of having, through disobedience, lost Paradise and condemned the [human] race to pain, sin and death" (xi). The religious rulers, male priests, view women as the daughters of Eve and weak vessels of sin. This teaching leads to self-doubt among the women of Camelot, as when Gwenhwyfar thinks to herself, "Truly, the priests say, with woman came evil into this world, and then [Gwenhwyfar] was confused, for surely not all that is woman can be evil -- even God chose a woman to bear his son" (Bradley 774). As Bradley herself was a pagan with strong beliefs against Christianity, this theme in the text comes as no surprise. As such, spending a great deal of time on the subject seems needless, except to say that

Camelot's oppression of women finds religious justification and the Christian religion does not empower women in any way, unlike the religion of Avalon.

Women and Political Power in Camelot

Considering Queen Gwenhwyfar's central role in the text, logic might assume that she wields some degree of political power, even within a patriarchal power structure. In fact, the political roles of women reveal isolated instances of female agency, yet these women are clearly presented as cultural and social others, not welcomed into mainstream society. By exploring the attitudes regarding female political agency expressed throughout the text, it becomes clear that women with power seem aberrant and submissive queens like Gwenhwyfar stand as the preferred norm. Morgause reigned as co-regent with Lot, her husband, but that abnormal situation resulted from Lot's northern heritage and failed to comply with the norms of the larger society. Arthur invites Gwenhwyfar to be co-regent with him, but she, appalled, refuses (Bradley 273). Gwenhwyfar's appropriately submissive and retiring role enables Arthur to take on the designated role of possessor. Gwenhwyfar's attitude keeps

with the prevailing sentiments of the society; however, it demonstrates a deeper insight into the role of women in patriarchies. Camelot provides a society where women spin and weave and gossip, leaving the important matters to men. In fact, renowned Arthurian critic Maureen Fries effectively summarized the role of women in the society in "Female Heroes, Heroines and Counter-Heroes": "On a level of deep structure, Lancelet glorifies himself in his campaign to save the Queen. [Gwenhwyfar] exists, like other heroines of Arthurian. . .romance, to get into trouble the hero must get her out of" (63). This secondary role as helpless waif compounds the subordinate role of women in the society of Camelot and is reinforced by the subordinate status of women in the Christian religion.

The lack of political agency for women does not imply that they lack power entirely; women in Camelot may exercise some degree of power, yet they must resort to covert and even illicit actions to do so and are not permitted to counter male authority. While living in Camelot, Morgaine meets Accolon and falls in love with him. Uriens, Accolon's father, requests a marriage to Morgaine. He makes the request to Arthur. As her half-

brother, he is considered Morgaine's owner. The marriage politically benefits Arthur and Uriens. When Arthur asks Morgaine for her consent to the match (which is, in itself, unusual), she believes the offer concerns Accolon and agrees to the marriage. Once she finds that she has agreed to marry Uriens, she cannot back out of the match, as Arthur already publicly agreed to transfer the property of her person (Bradley 565-6). Her will remains secondary to a man's word.

Evidence of not only the powerlessness of women regarding major life decisions but also of the male denigration of women's mental faculties appears in the language of Uriens' offer of marriage to Morgaine. Arthur briefly proposes on Uriens' behalf: "I have had an offer of marriage for you. . . . How would you like to live in North Wales?" (Bradley 565). He skirts around the identity of the man. The heart of the offer revolves around the man's willingness to wed and his lands; compatibility, attraction and friendship do not enter into the equation. The only items of note are that the man finds the woman attractive politically and physically and that the woman finds security in the match. Arthur offers a watered-down version of Uriens' proposal; he does not

deem Morgaine capable or needful of more details. In fact, the language bears a similarity to that used with small children, providing only the key issues and omitting potentially confusing details, as the parent maintains control of the choices offered to the child.

Exploring Gwenhwyfar

Creating the Antagonist

The impact of patriarchy on women in Bradley's Camelot reveals itself more starkly when analyzing details of a single character's development. Among Camelot's women, Bradley most fully develops Gwenhwyfar and allows the reader access to her thoughts and struggles, providing a solid basis for this exploration. In contrast to Bradley's portrayal of Morgaine, the protagonist, Gwenhwyfar becomes a pitiable character, although she is enculturated to become the antagonist in the novel. In fact, literary critic Marilyn Farwell states "Gwenhwyfar becomes the patriarchal enforcer of Christianity's negative view of women [in the text]" (3). By delving more deeply into the progression of Gwenwhyfar, we will gain a greater understanding of the patriarchal structure of Camelot and how it affects a woman living in it. This

knowledge will provide a basis for analyzing comparisons and forming conclusions regarding similarities and differences between Camelot and Avalon.

The development of female characters, particularly Gwenhwyfar, marks an interesting difference between Malory's and Bradley's texts. In Malory, the queen's character develops only marginally; she serves as a plot device for male action. Her character development goes little beyond her betrayal of Arthur through adultery with Lancelet and her subsequent fall from grace. In *The Mists of Avalon*, Bradley imbues Gwenhwyfar with a true personality, agency and voice, though it seldom evokes sympathy from the reader. Bradley's Gwenhwyfar represents the Christian woman; therefore, she also represents a woman under patriarchy.

Gwenwyfar Before Arthur

We first meet Gwenhwyfar as a young girl living in the Glastonbury cloister. As Glastonbury and Avalon, by some ancient magic, exist simultaneously in the same place, Gwenwyfar happens to wander through the mists that separate the two locations. "The veil had thinned, as it did occasionally. . .and somehow this girl had had enough sensitivity to be aware of it. This happened,

sometimes. . .but to move through *into* the other world was rare" (Bradley 157). She gains the attentions of Morgaine and Lancelet; prior to her intrusion, Morgaine feels they have been falling in love, but the feeling would more applicably be termed lust. Gwenhwyfar's golden beauty and mild manner strike a chord with Lancelet, setting the stage for their life-long affair (Bradley 159).

That Lancelet feels overcome by Gwenhwyfar's beauty is not surprising; two surprising things should be gathered from this episode, though. First, to wander through the mists, Gwenhwyfar must have possessed some degree of Avalon's magic; not just anyone can find the way, as we see later in the text when Morgaine fails to find entry to Avalon, even though she knows the path. This lets us know that Gwenhwyfar can be a free, powerful woman. Perhaps she could not be as powerful as Morgaine, but she would have been able to enjoy the power of one of the lesser priestesses, such as Niniane. That she later becomes indoctrinated into the Christian and patriarchal ideologies demonstrates the extinguishing of her ability to be empowered instead of its never having been present. Thus, Gwenhwyfar, at some point, made a decision to forgo the path of personal strength and agency and follow the

teachings she was raised with; the attitudes we see later in her are revealed as not her own, but rather ones she was taught.

The second factor of interest here centers in Gwenhwyfar's attraction to Lancelet. On one level, this can be taken for granted. Lancelet's appearance is described as striking. Gwenhwyfar, however, expresses distaste for Morgaine's dark coloring; therefore, it seems unlikely that she finds Lancelet's similar coloring appealing (Bradley 158). Lancelet's kindness and care of her form the basis of her attraction; in short, she perceives that he takes control of her and the situation to rescue her. Having been raised in a convent, this represents, perhaps, her first significant contact with a male other than a priest or her father. Although Morgaine guides her back to the convent, Gwenhwyfar clings to Lancelet's hand and exclaims "'Thank you, oh, thank you!'" (Bradley 159). His care and guidance (which, in reality, are Morgaine's guidance, as Lancelet is unfamiliar with Avalon) in returning her safely to her convent win her affection. Lancelet, speaking in a fatherly way, tells her "'It is Morgaine you should thank. . . . It is she who knows the paths in and out of Avalon'" Gwenhwyfar

responds with a "little polite curtsey" after letting go of Lancelet's hand "reluctantly" (Bradley 159). This scene represents her first lesson in finding herself helpless; in her view, it cannot be a woman but only a man who rescues her.

Even at this young age, though, we see Gwenhwyfar stripped of a sense of personhood. She first identifies herself with "My father is King Leodegranz, but I am here at school in the convent" (Bradley 157). Only later does she provide her name. The young Gwenhwyfar has learned that her identity comes first from her male protector, then from her residence and only lastly from her person. This scene demonstrates that the convent, which, like Avalon, is a community of women, has not taught Gwenhwyfar self-sufficiency or agency. She seeks others for strength and guidance. She has been taught that, alone, she cannot stand or function; being alone becomes a source of fear. In addition, when she stumbles into a man and woman, she seeks aid from the man, having learned that the woman must be, like herself, helpless. On the subject of Gwenhwyfar's child-like helplessness in finding her way back to the convent, Hildebrand comments on the difference seen between Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar: "while [Gwenhwyfar]

is, admittedly, a child at the time, the reader never sees Morgaine, even when a child, helpless and lost. There is also an implication that Christian women in general are taught dependence rather than self-sufficiency" (103). Bradley uses this child-like trait to enhance the sympathetic portrayal of Gwenhwyfar's affair with Lancelet, which began with the consent of Arthur; this, coupled with her child-like lack of agency, removes the guilt from her and places it on Arthur and Lancelet. That small spark of magic that was needed for Gwenhwyfar to penetrate the mists was extinguished by the patriarchal teachings of the convent.

The Affair

The handling of the affair between Lancelet and Gwenhwyfar remains one of the more interesting deviations from the traditional legends, such as Malory's. Traditionally, Gwenhwyfar is portrayed as a scarlet woman who sneaks behind her husband's back to commit adultery. In Bradley's text, Arthur instigates the liaison between the lovers, who have, in spite of their fond feelings for each other, shunned a physical relationship as a betrayal of Arthur. Arthur, due to his mistaken belief that he has never fathered a child and is sterile, asks Gwenhwyfar and

Lancelet to act on their feelings in the hopes of conceiving a child that Arthur will acknowledge as his. The initial liaison takes the form of a ménage a trois between Gwenhwyfar, Arthur and Lancelet.

A few problems exist with this version of events. First, that Gwenhwyfar must have Arthur's permission reinforces her status as property. Arthur did not, in accordance with his ties to Avalon, state that she had full dominion over her body. He gives her the ability to bed one other person and only at his bidding; in essence, he acts as her pander to gain an heir. In addition, the permission granted extends only to excuse the affair among the three parties concerned; Gwenhwyfar remains an adultress to the court at large and eventually suffers exile from Camelot for the offense. Lastly, Bradley's giving permission in the matter of the affair actually strips Gwenhwyfar of her agency and personhood and reinforces her status as property, the patriarchal implications of which were discussed earlier. Imagine that he had chosen Cai rather than Lancelet to proxy father Gwenhwyfar's child. Even then, Gwenhwyfar would have had to comply and take Cai to her bed. The permission Bradley allows in the matter does nothing but

reinforce Gwenhwyfar's status as property; the patriarchal myth that women's sexuality is the property of their husbands finds strength in Bradley's attempt to free Gwenhwyfar from blame.

Gwenhwyfar Empowered

The key moment of Gwenhwyfar's character occurs when she and Lancelet are caught in their affair through Mordred's plotting. After the bloody conflict in her bed chamber, she and Lancelet escape Camelot, where they would be brought before the court as traitors to the throne (Bradley 855-7). To reinforce the emptiness of Arthur's permission for their affair, he would not be able to condone their liaison in such a trial. Counter to Lancelet's plan to ride off to far lands to make a life together, Gwenhwyfar experiences an awakening and decides to remove herself from the world where she exists as an object that goes to the winner like a prize(Bradley 862-3). She requests that Lancelet take her to a convent, where she will live out her days, while Lancelet might try to make his peace with Arthur and the court can forget about the scandal: "[B]y renouncing Lancelet's love and returning to the convent, Gwenhwyfar accepts patriarchal Christianity for the imperfect religion that it is when it

cannot accept the love of a woman for a man other than her husband" (Hughes 25). By taking a small degree of personal agency, she chooses to remove her status as item by playing into the patriarchal society's conventions and removing herself from male company and royal position and entering the respected service of the Church. In becoming a person, she loses her freedom. This scene again demonstrates female virtue as more sacred than male. Lancelet remains free to live in the world and make peace with Arthur and Camelot, but Gwenhwyfar must retire from public and live cloistered in a community of nuns. This demonstrates that Lancelet's immoral act is perceived as more understandable and excusable than hers.

Camelot and Avalon

Throughout *The Mists of Avalon*, Bradley clearly creates an oppressive Camelot for the marginalized women who live there. The attitudes toward women expressed in the text were largely accepted as the norm in our culture until fairly recently, with the rise of the Women's Rights Movement. As such, Camelot can be read as a portrayal of traditional Western society's view of women. As stated before, though the text exists as a work of fantasy, the

elements in it which concern this argument are based in reality. Patriarchy remains the prevailing form of hierarchical power structure in Western culture. Women's value remains predominantly linked to their sexual behavior and the role of women remains linked to that of homemaking and child rearing. As such, the text presents a powerful means of analysis of these shortcomings when countered with Camelot's rival, Avalon. Perhaps as a result of its juxtaposition against the obviously male-centered, patriarchal Camelot, Avalon gains status as a more ideal culture. Although it lacks many of the harsher forms of domination found in Camelot, a close reading of the text reveals more similarities than differences between the two cultures.

CHAPTER THREE

AVALON: THE WORLD APART

Avalon, Camelot and Dystopia

Although literary critics often cite Avalon as an example of a utopic society, I disagree. I will demonstrate that a minimal degree of personal freedom and agency exists, making the inhabitants just as oppressed as those of Camelot. While one culture takes the form of a patriarchy, the other presents a matriarchy; other than that, they exist as similarly structured hierarchies that reflect each other's oppressions. As such, if Camelot is dystopic, Avalon must be dystopic also.

Ownership and Gender Roles in Avalon

In exploring Avalon's culture, I will first examine gender roles, particularly concerning ownership of the body and attitudes regarding sexuality. A superficial overview of the novel seems to reveal a more enlightened and free sexuality and gender structure, but that fails to hold true on a deeper reading. For example, Avalon covets and guards female virginity as much as Camelot, although for different reasons. As demonstrated by Viviane's order

that Morgaine's virginity be kept for the Goddess, then mandating that it be offered in the Great Marriage, the women of Avalon often have little control over their own sexuality. They are offered with as little personal choice as are the women of Camelot. Examples of Avalon's women being sexually given by their ruler include Igraine's being given to Gorlois in marriage (Bradley 4), Nimue's duty to seduce Kevin the Harper (764), and Morgaine's assignment to the Great Marriage (182); all of these decisions were made by the Lady of the Lake and assigned to the women in question, just as women in Camelot obey their fathers' marriage wishes and not their own wills. The Lady's ownership of her subjects' sexual choices often lacks a substantial rationale. In the case of Morgaine maintaining her virginity for the Great Marriage, Bradley contradicts the requirement of virginity in the ritual. "'Ban. . .is being made High King of his land. . .his Druids have told him that he must make the Great Rite. I am sent to officiate in the Sacred Marriage'" states Viviane, who had already born children (Bradley 22). Morgaine maintains her virginity as an offering, though not her own, for its power to make a High King, Arthur.

The removal of personal agency in sexual matters creates an interesting effect on the relationship of Morgaine and Arthur. The contrasting accounts of Mordred's conception in Bradley and Malory center on agency. In Bradley, Morgaine does not make a choice to bed her brother; she has intercourse with an unknown man at the will of the Lady of the Lake. Only the next day does she discover his identity as Arthur, her half-brother. Morgaine's lack of choice in the matter removes the blame for the affair and its fallout and the stigma of incest, yet it also counters what many see as Bradley's strong, feminist characters by making Morgaine's sexuality subject the decree of others. In Malory, Arthur maintains innocence and "Morgan" (as Malory calls the character) enacts the role of the evil enchantress (Benko 24). In that instance, Morgan/Morgaine chooses her course of action, bringing upon herself the role of antagonist against the innocent Arthur, yet maintaining her personal agency. In giving Morgaine this innocence, though, Bradley simultaneously imbued the Lady of the Lake with a callous disregard for her foster daughter and an overwhelming power and decree over the lives of her subjects. Viviane did not even consider the emotional

impact of the sexual union inherent in the Great Marriage upon Morgaine; having been raised partially in a Christian home, Morgaine is devastated by having had sex with her half-brother. Even while consoling Arthur upon discovering their identities, Morgaine voices her inner turmoil and sense of betrayal: "Despair beat at her. Why did you do this to us? *Great Mother, Lady, why?* And she did not know whether she was calling to Viviane, or to the Goddess" (Bradley 181). After Morgaine confronts Viviane with these emotions, the answer rings hollow: "Well, there is nothing we can do about that now. . . . Done is done. And at this moment the hope of Britain is more important than your feelings" (Bradley 191). The repercussions Morgaine suffers do not merit consideration by the Lady of the Lake; personal sexual choice and happiness never factor into the ruler's decisions.

The Importance of Virginity

Bradley's Avalon considers a virgin superior in power and value to a non-virgin, thereby devaluing a woman's sexual choice and freedom even further. The role of "fallen woman" in Avalon takes on a twist; a woman who has had sexual relations with a man is not considered unclean in a moral sense, but still suffers a loss of her

spiritual powers of magic. Nimue's case provides evidence of this. She remains isolated during her upbringing in Avalon. Without being given a reason, she is denied the community of others "order[ed]. . .as a child into seclusion, so that when she came to womanhood, there would be one fully trained priestess in Avalon whom the Merlin would not know by sight" (Bradley 784). The will of the Goddess forms the only justification for this isolation. Obviously, this seclusion keeps Nimue a virgin; therefore, she possesses the power to cast a spell upon Kevin the Bard, the Merlin of Avalon, who has turned traitor. Only a virgin can, by the sacrifice of her maidenhead, cast a spell strong enough to bring him back to judgment on Avalon (Bradley 763-4). Only by working within the framework of patriarchy through this virgin seduction can Nimue perform the magic of the Goddess (Fuog 76). In the course of the spell, Nimue herself becomes bound, causing such emotional turmoil that she commits suicide upon delivering the Merlin to his judgment.

In a society that holds the Beltane festival, where people engage in sexual activity to celebrate the fertility of the Earth, it would seem that ownership of one's own sexuality would be taken for granted. Avalon is

seen by many critics and Bradley fans as a culture where a woman may choose her own lover, whether or not to bear a child, and when she shall remain without a sexual companion. Yet, while many inhabitants of Avalon enjoy these liberties, they fail to become universal truths in the culture; those who the Lady of the Lake destines for other plans are stripped of these freedoms. Igraine must give her virginity, person and future to Gorlois at the demand of Viviane: "A daughter of the Holy Isle must do as was best for her people, whether it meant going to death in sacrifice, or laying down her maidenhood in the Sacred Marriage, or marrying where it was thought meet to cement alliances; this Igraine had done" (Bradley 4). We have discussed the commanded sexual encounters of Morgaine and Nimue. Obviously, no norm of universal ownership of self exists in Avalon.

Sexual Difference and Acceptance

Sexual difference becomes another measure of inequality in Avalon. While Morgaine and Raven engage in a culturally accepted lesbian relationship (Bradley 639-40), male homosexuality is not accepted. This is clearly demonstrated by Lancelet's character. Bradley has altered the character of Lancelet considerably from Malory's

tradition by writing him as a homosexual. Lancelet's mother is Viviane, Lady of the Lake, a heritage which entitles him to live in Avalon. Bradley portrays his character as one who struggles with his own sexuality; he cannot, in Camelot, admit to his homosexuality. He reveals this turmoil in describing his night with Gwenhwyfar and Arthur: "'As we lay together. . .I--touched Arthur--I touched him. . .oh, I love her, mistake me not, but had she not been Arthur's wife, had it not been for--I doubt even *she*--' He choked and could not finish his sentence" (Bradley 482). Avalon, were it as enlightened as many critics would claim, would provide an accepting haven for Lancelet, but it fails to do so. When a conversation with Morgaine leads Lancelet to discuss his sexuality "that he has long suppressed and attempted to negate by entering into sexual relations with women, Morgaine's response is to shrink back from its implications in horror" (Noble 291). Rather than responding with acceptance or even friendship, Morgaine reinforces the isolation Lancelet has experienced in Camelot; she "put out her hand to stop him. There were things she could not bear to know" (Bradley 482). In face of this mentality, he denies the invitation to make a home

in Avalon; he does not feel he belongs there. In the end, he chooses to become a Christian priest, a position which requires the concealment of his sexual identity (Bradley 871).

Empowerment Through Religion

Bradley's text often contradicts itself in its attempt to create sympathetic and proactive female characters from those which Malory and others portrayed as antagonists. In some respects, Bradley does succeed in demonstrating female empowerment, yet even in this, she does not pursue the full potential of this power. The female-centered religion of Avalon represents such an attempt; the religion provides the women with a sense of personal empowerment and connectedness with their community. Goddess worship does elevate the perception of women and their position in society (Sered 288). Because women in such cultures enjoy the status of individuals with personal agency, they are free to develop psychologically, socially and sexually. Bradley's text works at "demythologizing the mystique of female sexuality by rendering its mysteries intelligible and by representing sexuality as a potential source of personal power and pride for women" (Noble 288). In her Avalon,

Bradley removed the shame from all aspects of being female; menstruation, sex, birth and menopause are discussed openly and without hesitation as natural events. Female friendships blossom to become the most formative interactions for those involved.

Social Implications of Goddess Worship

Susan Starr Sered, a sociologist, compiled an intensive study on the impact of various forms of religions on women and society. The religion of Avalon falls into what Sered terms Model 2 societies. Model 2 societies center around a religion which empowers and worships women; this results in a strong, tightly-knit community which improves the economic, social and sexual status of women. These religious models require the women to live in close proximity to each other (487). The rituals of Model 2 goddess-worship religions provide "women an alternative space that is not controlled by men. . .women meet to air common grievances, a mechanism that certainly enhances their political position in society" (491). Their religion, "gives women a great deal of power, both in the community and within the marital relationship" (491). Such religious groups not only serve to better the individual adherent, but also the status of

women as a whole in the community (493). Avalon's Goddess-centered religion follows this model fairly closely, providing a myriad of benefits to its adherents.

The Role of Men in Avalon

While this may seem utopic for women in Avalon, this system proves similar to that of Camelot in its lifting of one class while subjugating another; as the male-dominated Christian religion devalued women, this female-dominated Goddess-worship religion devalues men. In fact, it lacks a significant male element. Men are denied access to the highest and most powerful elements of the religion they serve. Important rituals, such as the drug-induced visionary states where Morgaine and Raven commune with the Goddess (Bradley 166, 761) and the creation of the magical scabbard (Bradley 197-8), remain accessible only to women. Men may participate in only the more minor religious rites, such as Beltane, the celebration of fertility; due to its sexual nature, this ritual requires the presence of men. The deities served are all female, as is the leader of the religious and political arenas, the Lady of the Lake. In addition, men lack the same sexual liberty as women in choosing a sexual partner; they cannot choose, but must be chosen. Even the Great Marriage demonstrates

the subordinate role of men. Only through sexual union with a priestess can a man obtain the loyalty of the common people of the land, who lived there prior to the Roman invasion and occupation. Hildebrand discusses the female authority over kingship in her exploration of Arthurian legends: "Thus, the power of the sacred kingship rests in the hands of those women who participate in the rituals and whose choice it is to give or withhold that power" (Hildebrand 104).

Unfortunately, only a select group of women enjoy the benefits of Avalon's religion. This also creates an environment where those admitted to the Goddess's privileged group feel justified in their superior status to others who lack these benefits. As Christine Hildebrand points out, the women of Avalon do not attempt to convert others to their religion, but covet the benefits for themselves. Hildebrand further notes that "[t]he Goddess religion. . .only empowers its adherents, who rarely attempt to help or encourage Christian women" (119). The women of Avalon feel animosity toward the Christian religion, yet overlook the oppression of these other women by that religion. By denying other women the benefits and knowledge of freedom found in their religion

to other women, Avalon's women become the empowered elite, just as the male warrior lords do in Camelot. Hildebrand comments further on the structure of Avalon's religious hierarchy and its foundation on lineage: "[T]he possibility of joining the Goddess's priestesses is limited to certain women. Morgaine has access to a religious vocation due to her parentage: the priestesses of Avalon are [the] elite of ancestry and education" (119). This lack of an egalitarian community reflects that Avalon is simply another power structure that provides benefits only for those lucky few born the right gender to the right family. This represents the religious equivalent of the male nobility in the patriarchal, feudal Camelot. The oppression experienced by those who are not of the privileged hierarchy is not of their own making; it is akin to a caste system where no ability to move from a lesser state to a more entitled one exists. This strict hierarchy by birth demonstrates another element of Avalon's dystopic nature.

Avalon's Religious Structure

The initial view of Avalon's religion as beneficial to its adherents does not prevail upon closer analysis;

the freedoms provided by the religion seem to be illusions. As their religion simultaneously empowers the priestesses and isolates them from the outside world, they have become largely self-sufficient as a community. The women enjoy the freedom to take their own paths in life, including strong oaths, such as Raven's oath of silence. Their word is considered valid and does not require corroboration. Unfortunately, these freedoms are offset by other controls. When Morgaine returns to Avalon and her role as priestess, "her conversation with Niniane reveals to her that she must sacrifice everything when she wants to serve the Goddess"; Morgaine's "personal interest is subjected to the interest of the community and religion to which she has sworn allegiance" (Volk-Birke 420).

These freedoms, such as they are, do not, however, seem to extend beyond the reaches of Avalon; they do not penetrate the psyches of the women deeply enough to withstand opposing views. In several instances, women raised in Avalon leave it, only to quickly appropriate other belief systems which contradict those that, ostensibly, granted them such personal liberation before. This demonstrates that the benefits gained by practicing Avalon's religion lack the strength to withstand the

trials of adhering to an unaccepted religious practice elsewhere. To use an analogy, Christian missionaries to the New World rarely adopted the social and religious beliefs of the culture they lived in; they held their belief systems too deeply. As a result, these missionaries conveyed the strength of their beliefs to others; Avalon's ambassadors to another culture fail to do this. Igraine, raised in Avalon, quickly forgets her freedom and agency to adopt the ways of her Christian husbands; she and Gwenhwyfar are referred to as "no more than two Christian ladies" at a Cornish convent where Igraine chose to spend her final days (Bradley 353). Morgause, also raised with the priestesses, turns to sexual self-abuse, forgetting the sacred, deeper significance of intimacy and denying the cyclical way of nature, which is worshipped on Avalon, to take part in black magic to gain lovers and sustain youthful beauty (Bradley 816-8). Morgaine, raised to be mistress of herself (except where the Goddess or Viviane, her messenger on Earth, decree), lets herself be married against her wishes to Uriens because Arthur wills it (Bradley 564-6). While the unifying, empowering aspects of Avalon's religion cannot be overlooked, the fact that

Morgaine leaves behind her personal empowerment to be given in marriage against her personal tastes demonstrates that this empowerment functions as an aspect of the society rather than as a deeply-held belief system; once Morgaine lacks the community of Avalon, she quickly deviates from her earlier beliefs. Had any of these women remained steadfast in their ideology once removed from Avalon, an argument could be made that the Goddess-worship religion practiced there provided strong benefits which shape the character of the women who practice it. That all of these women abandon their belief system in the absence of the community of priestesses demonstrates that the benefits of the religion are short-term and not deeply ingrained in the religion's practitioners.

Avalon's Power Structure

Politically, Avalon oppresses its citizens in the same fashion as Camelot does. The Lady of the Lake, largely a hereditary position, rules, much as the king does in Camelot. Other women do not seem to hold any political power. The Lady can order life-altering changes in her subjects without reproach or the ability to object to these decisions. Morgaine discovers that exile from

Avalon presents the only means of avoiding the Lady's will. Thus, we see that, although a woman rules Avalon, other women have little political activity open to them. In fact, when Viviane dies without formally naming Morgaine as Lady following her, Avalon's women have little power. Although Viviane was clear in her wish that Morgaine succeed her, no formal passing of authority took place, since Morgaine did not return to Avalon. Even after Morgaine claims "'Viviane chose me after her to be Lady of the Lake,'" Kevin retorts, "'Viviane died with no successor named to her place, and so it falls to me, as the Merlin of Britain, to declare what will be done'" (Bradley 503). The autocratic nature of the succession further demonstrates the powerlessness of the citizenry of Avalon. At Kevin's urging, Niniane becomes Lady, rather than Morgaine. Even though Niniane lacks the qualities to rule and is "a child half-fitted for that high office," no means of redress is available to the women of Avalon (Bradley 754). Again, the rule of a privileged few over a disenfranchised populace creates a dystopic power structure in Avalon, paralleling that of Camelot.

Morgaine As Representative of Avalon

Having examined these aspects of Avalon's culture, a more detailed analysis of the character of Morgaine will further illuminate various aspects of Avalon's dystopia and its implications.

We have already looked at the first important event in Morgaine's life: the Great Marriage. Morgaine, obeying Viviane's will by enacting this ritual, gives her virginity to the unknown man representing the King Stag. In the morning, she discovers that the man is, in fact, Arthur, her half-brother. Viviane was aware of the relationship before appointing Morgaine to the ceremony (Bradley 192). Viviane sought to strengthen the bloodline of the resulting child, Mordred, making him a child of Avalon on both sides of his parentage (Bradley 192). Additionally, Viviane wanted Morgaine and Avalon to have some manner of hold over Arthur, the High King; remaining true to form as an autocratic ruler, Viviane never shares this with Morgaine, but expects the young woman to blindly follow orders without independent thought.

Morgaine and Lancelet

After giving birth to her son and leaving him to be fostered by Morgause and Lot (Bradley 251), Morgaine goes

to Camelot to live. There, she again meets Lancelet, with whom she had begun to fall in love some years earlier. Although Lancelet is now in love with Gwenhwyfar, Morgaine is still willing to engage in a relationship with him. She pursues a tryst with Lancelet even though she knows that he will use her only as a substitute for Gwenhwyfar and will not be able to offer her a relationship of any depth. Just prior to seducing Lancelet, Morgaine knows "in her heart, hidden away so that she need not look at it, she knew that this was not what Lancelet wanted; in a moment of passion he might desire her indeed, but no more" (Bradley 323). Morgaine knows that she will be merely a replacement and not a truly desired woman to him, yet she has become so consumed by her desire for him that she accepts this objectification and lack of worth. Obviously, her training in Avalon did not provide her with adequate self-worth to shun such a one-sided and unhealthy relationship. Having been raised to see her sexuality as the property of others, Morgaine, separated from the Lady, who would normally exercise dominion over Morgaine's sexual relations, seeks to hand over possession of her body to another rather than hold it herself. In her exploration of gender and body knowledge, Muriel Dimen

effectively boils this issue down to its core: "Where is there, in this tale of power and sex, room for intimacy, for the knowledge and expansion of self achieved through knowledge of the other?" (*Gender/Body/Knowledge* 34). This self-destructive path does not speak well for her emotional health; having felt objectified by Viviane's command, which Morgaine views as a betrayal, Morgaine places herself in another objectifying position.

Morgaine's Sexual Philosophy

In a scene that calls to mind the conflicts of the free love attitude prevalent in the 1960s, when radical feminism gained much momentum, Morgaine and Lancelet meet for a tryst in the grove; he refuses to engage in full sexual relations with her, "'Morgaine, wait, no more now--I do not want to hurt or dishonor you'" (Bradley 324). She feels rebuffed by this; having lived in a culture that views sex as a sacred act and the woman as a vessel of sacred creation, Morgaine views Lancelet's refusal as tantamount to blasphemy. It is interesting that she refuses his attempt to respect her and adheres to an attitude that sharing her body represents the only way to value her sexual self. Morgaine feels used and personally slighted: "it was like being burnt with a hot iron of

shame; she had offered herself to him in all honesty, in the old way, and he had wanted nothing of her but childish toyings that made a mockery of her womanhood" (Bradley 397). Morgaine flees the court, seeking to return to Avalon. Once there, she finds that she has fallen so far from her religious training that she cannot raise the mists to enter her home: "No. . .the barge would not come for her. . . . It would not come for a runaway who had lived in secular courts and had done her own will for four years" (Bradley 399-400). Instead, she wanders into the world of the fairies, where she spends several years. There, she engages in sexual relations with both men and women (Bradley 405) and becomes oblivious to the passage of time (Bradley 407). The world of Fairie seems to offer healing for her, yet she eventually seeks to escape back to Camelot, not Avalon. It should be stressed that her healing occurs in Fairie, not in Avalon, which she cannot find her way back to. This implies that Avalon cannot offer Morgaine the healing and solace that she needs. Recall that Gwenhwyfar entered Avalon, even if it was by mistake, but Morgaine cannot do so at this point; her tenuous relation to her former self and the community with which she was raised has been broken by her perceived

betrayals, first by Viviane, then by Lancelet. Once she felt that the Lady of the Lake was faulty in her judgment, Morgaine lost the ability to rejoin the community. This demonstrates that Avalon also has the dystopic trait of requiring almost blind allegiance and denial of full freedom of thought. Morgaine's self-empowerment by the Goddess has not extended beyond the community of Avalon itself; thus, it does not prove to be a deeply held truth of Avalon, but rather a semblance of empowerment for those who obey and live according to the rules of the culture.

Morgaine in Exile

In Camelot, Morgaine no longer follows the religion of the Goddess, but does concoct various love potions and herbal medicines for people (Bradley 440). She lives in the community of Gwenhwyfar's women. This time signifies a sort of limbo or hibernation for Morgaine; she does not evolve as a person and simply exists without practicing any of the traits with which she was raised to give herself agency.

Morgaine, deprived of the rule of the Lady of the Lake, now seems to crave a subordinate role. Having been accustomed to being owned to some degree, she finds the relative freedom of an outsider in Camelot unsettling.

When Gwenhwyfar discovers Mordred's parentage, we see an ashamed Morgaine who stands in fear of Gwenhwyfar, a much weaker and more submissive woman. As Gwenhwyfar yells insults at her, Morgaine "shut her eyes, and her face looked as if she were about to weep" (Bradley 552). Morgaine does not rely upon her upbringing in Avalon to enlighten Gwenhwyfar as to the sanctity of the Great Marriage, but instead accepts the other woman's scorn. After this, Morgaine is deceived into marrying Uriens instead of Accolon, whom she desires (Bradley 564-6). She diligently gives up her independence and moves to a home with little to occupy her, save the customary women's work of spinning and weaving. While this may be seen as Morgaine's giving up her personal choice, it may also be viewed as a transfer of power over herself. Previously, Morgaine was Viviane's to give; now, she is Arthur's to give. The lie that she ever totally controlled her person or her sexuality is revealed; Avalon trained Morgaine to need outside ownership of her sexual relations. Although women in Avalon may choose their lovers at Beltane and other rituals, they do so only under permission from the Lady. Morgaine's marriage to Uriens reinforces her

Avalon-trained duty regarding sex; it is something that she is ordered to give, regardless of her will.

The Priestess Reemerges

When she begins her affair with Accolon, Morgaine emerges from her cocoon of personal stagnation. Following a Beltane sexual encounter with Accolon, Morgaine once again feels the power of the Goddess within herself. After her first liaison with him, she thinks "'I knew that what we had done was not so much lovemaking as a magical act of passionate power. . . . After all these years, after my own betrayal and my faithlessness, she [the Goddess] has come again to me and I am priestess once more'" (Bradley 588). She continues the affair and her reestablishment of her former ways of thought and action; notice that only through a willing and mutually desired relationship with a man does Morgaine begin to return to her former level of power and self. The enforced sexual relations which dominated her life before this failed to bring about the sense of wholeness and healing she finds in a mutual relationship. Conversely, though, Morgaine again stands stripped of her agency; she needs another person to restore her, instead of relying upon herself. However, she remains in the unhappy marriage to Uriens.

In fact, when Morgause asks her why she does not return to Avalon, Morgaine replies, "'I have been ordered to stay with Uriens'" although no one but Arthur has decreed this (Bradley 708). As Avalon teaches that no man may own a woman against her will, Morgaine denies her own reemerging beliefs by remaining in the marriage. These conflicting issues in Bradley's text reveal its flawed nature; however, it remains a text worth reading and analyzing for reasons we will soon explore.

Morgaine and Power

Confronted with the plotline of the power struggle between Morgaine and Arthur, Bradley chooses not to stress the central symbol of the Arthurian legends, Excalibur, in union with its female counterpoint, the scabbard. Instead, she turns to an all-or-nothing power struggle which seeks only to alter the gender and religion of power in Camelot. Arthur's continual turning away from the respect and preservation of Avalon, which he swore to uphold, and his deepening involvement with Christianity concerns Morgaine; she sees his actions as a betrayal (Bradley 716). She sets about to take Arthur's sword and scabbard from him, intending to, instead, give them to Accolon (Bradley 734). While she speaks one way, "'To the

Goddess, then, I leave the disposal of her sword [Excalibur],'" on her own, she institutes a plot to take the sword and the throne of Camelot herself with Accolon as her consort: "Accolon should rule for Avalon. . . . And behind the King, the Queen, ruling for the Goddess as in the days of old" (Bradley 720). This plotline reveals several flaws. First, while Morgaine cites matrilineal rights to the throne, Arthur holds it through his father, Uther. Gorlois is Morgaine's father; she lacks the proper lineage to claim Camelot, which does not recognize Avalon's holy line. Also, Morgaine never cites the will of the Goddess in her plans; they are self-serving and self-created. Third, Morgaine hesitates to leave Uriens, even though she plotted and murdered his son so that Accolon, Uriens' younger son, might inherit (Bradley 672). Faced with the prospect of ruling Camelot, she still refuses to leave her husband. This demonstrates the conditional nature of Morgaine's actions and morals. She recognizes her lies and manipulations and their corrupting influence, yet her pursuit of power and superiority over others has overwhelmed her priestess-taught morals against lying (Hughes 108). Lastly, Morgaine seeks to claim Camelot's throne, rather than the throne of the Lady of

the Lake, to which she has a sound claim. Note that Morgaine does not see one throne as preferable to the other; both offer equal power, prestige and attraction, reinforcing the parallel political structures of Avalon and Camelot.

The plot goes badly, resulting in Accolon's death. Morgaine retains the scabbard but not the sword (Bradley 739). Note that the sword is, obviously, a phallic symbol and the scabbard a symbol of the female. United, they provide the greatest strength. The sacred sword and the scabbard which prevents blood loss prove formidable when united, but, separately, the scabbard actually carries the greater power of sustaining life. The sword can only kill and maim, whereas the scabbard protects. In keeping the scabbard from Arthur, Morgaine assumes, according to Arthurian critic Debra Benko, liability for his death due to the wound given by Mordred (25). In her single-mindedness, Morgaine cannot realize that unity might be the key to saving Avalon and Camelot; she instead seeks to follow the single-headed rule that she is accustomed to. She cannot envision a joint rule, but only acknowledges the replacement of one ruler with another. She cannot see a difference between patriarchy and matriarchy beyond the

sex of the person sitting in the throne, nor can she envision a more egalitarian power structure, as she has never experienced one. Linda Hughes, in her comparison of lies between Malory's text and Bradley's, notes this point as the one when Morgaine has become "most thoroughly integrated into the patriarchal power structure" (107). This may be true in the sense that Morgaine functions within a male-dominated structure and seeks to overthrow it, but she seeks to impose an equally harsh rule. Having seen Arthur's shortcomings as ruler, Morgaine can only fall back on the lessons she learned from Viviane's rule and decides that the gender of the ruler decides the efficacy of that person's reign. In doing this, she again demonstrates the subordinate view of men in the mindset of Avalon; Morgaine believes a woman can rule better than a man, but never considers the fault of the system itself.

Morgaine as Lady of the Lake

After Kevin the Bard nurses Morgaine back to health, she returns to Avalon (Bradley 756-7). She does not take her place as Lady until the reigning Lady, Niniane, willingly leaves Avalon to journey to Camelot with Mordred (Bradley 761-2). As Lady of the Lake, Morgaine becomes as harsh a ruler as Viviane was in her time. Whereas she

viewed Viviane as unfair in earlier days, Morgaine now believes in the right of authority over the bodies and lives of her subjects; she does not believe, as she did in younger years, that authority should be questioned, but rather blindly obeyed. Evidence of this includes her order that Nimue give a greater sacrifice than she was herself asked to do in the Great Marriage; Morgaine acknowledges that Nimue's spell over Kevin the Harper will trap her, too, in its web, destroying her in the process (Bradley 790). Here, Morgaine orders Nimue into actions far more weighty than any ordered in the patriarchal culture of Camelot, demonstrating the power which the Lady of the Lake holds over her subjects. Once her decree is completed and Kevin is executed for treason and Nimue has committed suicide, Morgaine rules with the fruits of her choices, and she, "stunned with grief, could not find it in her heart to regret" (Bradley 802). She stands alone in a receding world, left with only bitterness and regrets until after Arthur's death, when she begins to see that all gods are, in fact, one and she has not failed to keep the Goddess in the world (Bradley 876).

Avalon in Review

The pessimistic years in Morgaine's life equally serve to discredit Avalon as a utopia. If Avalon truly represents a utopia that teaches personal freedom and self-ownership, then Morgaine would have held those beliefs more closely and not failed to govern herself in the absence of the Lady and the community of Avalon. The negative overtone of her years in Camelot demonstrates that her life was ruled by the Lady, not by herself; without that guidance, she floundered. Instead, Avalon represents a community subject to a single ruler with absolute power over the community. A social hierarchy exists that keeps the Lady isolated from companionship and leaves the other women with a lesser status, subject to the control of the Lady. Sexuality is somewhat liberated, yet still controlled by the decree of a higher power, a woman in Avalon and a man in Camelot. Virginity still holds extreme value, as losing one's virginity results in less power. Only religion stands as the saving grace for Avalon, yet the Goddess seems distant and vague. The unity and strength of the community seem to stem from the empowerment of worshipping a being like them, not from the morals and policies taught by the culture itself.

CHAPTER FOUR

FAILED TEXT OR EXPLORATION OF MISGUIDED GOALS?

The Importance of *The Mists of Avalon*

As Bradley's first major deviation from both the science fiction genre and a utopic feminist outlook, *The Mists of Avalon* deserves some regard in her canon of work. As we have seen, Avalon does not represent, as some claim, a utopic community, but rather a matriarchal mirror of the problems inherent in the patriarchal hierarchy of Camelot. The only major difference between the inhabitants of the cultures of Avalon and Camelot, aside from the gender of their rulers, lies in the empowerment granted to Avalon's women by their religion. Avalon does not offer what archaeologist Marija Gimbutas termed a "gylany" or "'a balanced nonpatriarchal and nonmatriarchal social system' with a goddess-centered religion" (quoted in Riggs 15).

Freedom and Empowerment

A logical interpretation of the problem of governance in this text reveals that a degree of personal empowerment within a type of caste system fails to create a utopic environment for its people; a culture cannot be viewed as

ideal when its people find empowerment in limited realms of life, such as religion, yet possess little control over life. Regardless of whether a matriarchy or patriarchy wields power, Bradley portrays it as flawed and confining for its inhabitants. By extending that thought, the book implies that the current Western world's hierarchical power structure will not be improved by simply having more women in the political system or granting more sources of empowerment to women, but must, instead, be reformed into a new system, not centering on the abuse and maintenance of power over others. As Karen Fuog, a feminist literary critic, states in her analysis of gender roles and power in *The Mists of Avalon*, "Power in the text is conceived of as limited, as something that must be fought for and hoarded. Because power is limited and everyone wants it, men and women are always already in conflict: there is no equality, only struggle" (Fuog 86).

Exploring the Preference for Avalon

Furthermore, this parallel of the seemingly utopic Avalon and the obviously dystopic Camelot raises a more interesting point via an analysis using skeptical feminism. In the skeptical feminist spirit of questioning

the established and seemingly natural trends of thought that our culture has inculcated into our collective psyche, the common reactions to Bradley's text raise many questions. Why do so many prefer the world of Avalon and even consider it to be utopic when, on closer examination, it simply represents a gender-altered version of the patriarchal system? Fuong questions this topic as she continues her exploration of power and gender to say, "Bradley does not even attempt to conceptualize how power relations and gender relations might change" (Fuog 86). Bradley's text fails to provide an alternate path to an egalitarian culture, yet this important question should be analyzed.

In short, it seems that the positive view many have of Avalon stems from female empowerment. Given that our hierarchical mindset overlooks the fact that many are disenfranchised by a power structure, the culture of Avalon seems idyllic essentially because it elevates those who are presently disempowered. Looking beyond this emotional response to the validation of many female readers and characters reveals deeper issues that skeptical feminism seeks to question. If a matriarchy holds all the flaws of a patriarchy, perhaps only the

development of an alternative power structure will provide the true equality that the feminist movement has sought since its foundation. Avalon does provide some sources of personal empowerment, which remain goal for many women; yet this cannot be the end goal, as the dystopic nature of the culture demonstrates.

Empowerment Within the Fishbowl

The empowerment of women through the religion of Avalon, which provides them with a degree of sexual and social liberation, demonstrates that women in Avalon have obtained some of that which some modern feminists claim to pursue: empowerment and equality within a world that they cannot change. This attitude mirrors what has been largely adopted by the popular female culture as being attainable in recent decades. This support of limited growth within an unchanging power dynamic does not represent an acceptable means to the larger feminist movement, but rather to the population at large. That many see such an outcome as the best possible one indicates that post-1970s feminists sought an answer to the wrong question and sought freedom within a faulty structure rather than seeking a structure which embodies

more freedom. Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* touches on a similar issue, stating that the historical focus of the feminist movement has centered around "issues that could easily be formulated in the language of ownership of the person, the predominant feminist argument was that women required civil freedom as women, not as pale reflections of men" (14). Thus, while certain feminist victories, whether linguistic or sexual, provide worthy examples of progress, such issues do not touch the central issues of inequality and disenfranchisement. The ability to choose one's own sexual partners, with some limits, to explore one's sexuality freely, to travel and live without an overwhelming sense of boundaries and ownership exist as the liberties enjoyed by the women of Avalon. They cannot, however, question the will of the Lady of the Lake, choose their own destinies (as demonstrated by the coerced marriage of Igraine, Nimue's destined seduction of Kevin Harper, and Morgaine's participation in the Great Marriage with her half-brother), or rise to higher levels than hereditary social rank permits. Indeed, the ability to govern one's own body and sexual rights remains central to the development of maturity and independence, according to the research of

feminist theorists Anne Woollett and Harriette Marshall (*Embodied Practices* 28). The plight of men in Avalon remains secondary to that of any women. This system of governance provides, at best, a compromise. Moving a goldfish from a bowl into a large aquarium still keeps the fish confined, though it might think itself liberated in comparison.

Power Structures and Utopias

Why does Bradley deviate from her utopic formula in *The Mists of Avalon*? If it presents two dystopias, why does the text fail to offer an alternative or solution? Although Kristina Hildebrand views Avalon as largely utopic, she nevertheless feels compelled to comment on the faulty power structures in the text: "while explicitly rejecting patriarchy and androcentrism, the text cannot fully free itself from the context in which it is written and on one level it remains a text which supports patriarchal values" (93). The reality of the cultures in which writers, such as Bradley, live and function seeps into their texts.

Envisioning a fair power structure that an author from our modern Western culture can fabulate remains a

challenging task; role models prove extremely difficult to find. Feminist Simone De Beauvoir argues that "it is doubtless impossible to approach any human problem with a mind free from bias" (*The Feminist Papers*, 687). Many even claim no fault exists in the current social structure. To again quote Pateman's text on feminism and social contract, "Feminists have also waged some long, and often very bitter, political campaigns against patriarchal subordination" (19). Pateman claims this struggle has not "been sufficient to convince all but the smallest minority. . .that patriarchal right still exists. . .and is as worthy an opponent as aristocratic, class or other forms of power" (19). As a society, we know what such a structure should include: equality and freedom. We do not, however, understand how to free ourselves from the fictions of patriarchy to enact these ideals. In her exploration of what she views as a cultural crisis stemming from the struggle between matriarchy and patriarchy in the text, critic Sallye Sheppeard quotes archaeologist Riane Eisler's findings on power structures. Eisler states that matriarchy does not offer the alternative to patriarchy, but only a variation of it (97). In fact, feminist writer Simone De Beauvoir

astutely noted in her work, *The Second Sex,* that when "two transcendences are face to face, instead of displaying mutual recognition, each free being wishes to dominate the other" (*The Feminist Papers* 691). Finding an egalitarian, non-hierarchical power structure challenges our very natures, it seems. The alternative to these hierarchical systems lies in a partnership society; this structure centers around a way of organizing human relations in which diversity, from male/female difference on up, "is not equated with inferiority of superiority" (Sheppeard 97).

Power and Power Over the Other

Prolific evidence of this perception of inferiority and superiority can be found in *The Mists of Avalon.* The women of Avalon view the women of Camelot with derision, due to their focus on spinning and their seemingly thoughtless lives which center on finding a husband and producing a male heir. In keeping with Simone De Beauvoir's theory, "no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other" (*The Feminist Papers* 676). Thus, the women of Avalon must find the Other to subordinate; they choose Christians and men as

their Other. Yet, they make no attempt to liberate the women of Camelot; the women of Avalon prefer to simply scorn their less fortunate and enlightened counterparts. The character of Lancelet is shunned for his homosexuality, while Morgaine actively engages in lesbian encounters without reproach; her sexual encounters with Raven are portrayed as natural outcomes of the close bond the women share. Morgaine, while participating herself in same-sex relationships with two women in the text, expresses distaste when Lancelet seeks to discuss his homosexual longings with her. Lancelet struggles to live in repression of his sexual identity. This heightens the level of subjugation of men in the culture of Avalon. Perhaps this plot structure exists to again define men as Other for Morgaine and Avalon or it might exist to enforce the feminist notion that "women [are] open to a critical examination of their lives, but men [are] closed to the counterpart analysis of their lives" (Rossi, 619). Regardless of the logic behind the decision, Bradley created an opportunity to explore sexual equality on another level in her text through these characters, yet she instead demonstrated the polarity between the worlds of men and women, even in Avalon's supposedly sexually

enlightened mindset. Critic James Noble sees this failure as a major source of dystopic inequality in the text: "Bradley might well have seen fit to carry through to its logical conclusion her attempt to demythologize his sexuality by having Lancelet. . .enter into an empowering sexual relationship with another man" (292). Instead, he chooses the Christian priesthood, itself hostile toward homosexuality, as an escape from the cultures that will not accept him; although his Avalon bloodline entitles him to a life in Avalon, his choice to enter the confines of the priesthood, in spite of his life-long religious ambivalence, demonstrates the shackles that Avalon's view of his sexuality would place upon him.

Excalibur, Symbol of Unity

The symbolism of Excalibur and the scabbard provides a powerful illustration of the fact that the women's movement cannot claim that personal empowerment within the confines of a patriarchal system is sufficient. Excalibur, the magical sword of Avalon's holy regalia and an obvious phallic symbol, was given to Arthur upon his taking a vow to defend the land for all people, including non-Christians. Morgaine and other priestesses created

the magical scabbard for Excalibur; the scabbard symbolizes the female. While wearing it, Arthur could not be mortally injured; the scabbard prevented significant blood loss. Only in unison are the two items most powerful: destroyer and sustainer. Separate, each contains only a fraction of their united power. Extending this symbolism to the prevalent gender war in the novel illustrates that the separation of genders only weakens; neither is greater than the other and only together can maximum strength be achieved. Bradley's text did not seek to remove Excalibur's phallic symbolism and replace it with a connotation of the power over life and death. Nor did the text transcend the scabbard's symbolism from femaleness into one of sustaining and healing abilities. As the symbols remain firmly gendered, so do the power structures.

On Denying Difference

To deny a sex difference seems impractical. Sociologist Susan Starr Sered, in her study of goddess worship and society, extends this thought to state that sex differences "seem to be so obviously 'true' that enhancing or reinterpreting those differences offers women

an ideology that is both believable and empowering" (500). Reinterpreting gender roles and empowering the person proves beneficial to both the individual and the culture. Some claim a solution can be found through absolute equality. In her study, Sered never found a religion "located in a truly nonsexist cultural context. In other words, if these religions were to claim that men and women were the same, no one would believe them anyway" (500). How should a culture move beyond a perceived obvious difference to a power structure not based on difference?

This conundrum seems to be without answer. Our culture sees men and women as different; society polarizes itself around this difference, offering varied benefits for varied genders in light of the belief that difference equals inequality. Masculine women succeed in business, but are viewed as unfeminine and "bitchy," while feminine men are simultaneously lauded as enlightened and derided as "sissies" or other derogatory terms. There seems to be no compromise; in fact, there is controversy over whether a problem exists. Again turning to Carole Pateman, we read that "feminists have persistently challenged masculine right; but, despite all the social changes and legal and political reforms. . .women's subordination is

still not seen as a matter of major importance" (219). Skeptical feminism holds that finding the questions is as important as finding the answers. Popular culture seems content with empowering women and minorities within cultural constraints, a policy which does produce significant benefits. Again citing Sered's study of cultures based on female empowerment, a culture of gender difference, including female strength and a "framework of an ongoing 'sisterhood' and coupled with women's control of sexuality, fertility, and significant economic resources does allow women to reap collective benefits" (503).

Difference As an Alternative

The argument raised by a skeptical feminist analysis of *The Mists of Avalon* does not diminish this empowerment, but instead urges the reader not to see it as a solution. The text does show some flaws and removes more agency from women than it gives. Yet, *The Mists of Avalon* remains worth reading and analyzing because its flaws point to the questions which must be asked and answered. Skeptical feminist Ellen Peel discerns four stages of feminist argument, stating that, first, a feminist utopia

represents an admirable end. Second, she states that even a patriarchal dystopia can expose the "static complacency" of a utopia by raising questions through the cultural acceptance of a patriarchal power structure. She goes on to state that the third stage of feminist argument demonstrates the fallacy of female/male and feminist/patriarchal polarization; seeing difference as inequality does not have to be a logical given. Lastly, she states that skeptical feminism and its questioning of established thinking and exploration of even traditional feminist goals opens up the possibility of "moving beyond oppositions altogether and opening oneself to extreme difference" by throwing off the chains of established thought and questioning the structures, theories and goals which have become the norm (Peel 38).

To return to Marleen Barr's text, *Feminist Fabulation*, we read that "Hierarchical and conflictful society turns to popular literature to reflect upon social alternatives" (104). Further exploring the cultural view of separation and conflict, Barr quotes Joanna Russ, who states that "separatism is primary, and [authors of separatist feminist utopias] are not subtle in their reasons for creating separatist utopias: if men are kept

out of these societies, it is because men are dangerous" (128). This, upon reflection, leads to an interesting and integral point. Postmodern feminist literature often manifests utopias as separatist; although Avalon is separatist, it fails as a utopia. By recasting the time frame of both Avalon's and Camelot's cultures, however, we find times during which each would be considered extremely utopic. In the early 1900s, Camelot, as represented by Bradley, would have been considered utopic and idealized; this period supported patriarchy and Christianity and viewed pagans and women as lesser beings and, therefore, less desirable. Accepted patriarchal power structures existed and worked effectively. Even a few decades ago, many would also have considered Avalon utopic. Although the matriarchal power structure leads to as many abuses as patriarchy does, the empowerment and control of the women would have been seen by many as a goal worth striving for.

That neither culture is now seen as utopic lends hope; culturally, we have evolved to seek a deeper goal than simply placing women in what have become thought of as men's roles. Additionally, we have evolved beyond looking to earlier, separatist utopias that define men as "dangerous, subhuman and alien" and have advanced to a

position where writers of fabulative texts seek to "confront the question of how to incorporate men within. . .feminist worlds" (Barr, *Feminist Fabluation* 153). The solution and ultimate goal may not be clear, but the debunking of older solutions aids in eventually finding such a path; this questioning of the establishment, even without clear solutions to the queries, represents the goal of skeptical feminism. However, having raised the question brings the quest for an answer; that neither Camelot nor Avalon represents a utopia must be seen as progress, particularly in light of past perceptions to the contrary. If our standards are being raised, then our solutions will be, too.

The lack of a solution to the faulty power structures in Bradley's text does not exempt us from analyzing the failures of the past and exploring the possibilities of the future to probe and seek a solution. While *The Mists of Avalon* fails to portray a utopic culture, it succeeds in pointing out many errors in our current path to equality and an egalitarian society. In doing that, it supercedes an empty portrayal of an impossible utopia.

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