SHIFTING MYTHOLOGY: THE TRANSFORMATION OF

GENDER IN MODERN ARTHURIAN RETELLINGS

A Report of a Senior Study

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ABSTRACT

Although most people think of mythology as a stable source of meaning for a

given culture, legends are in fact quite fluid. For the West, few myths illustrate this

capacity more effectively than that of King Arthur. The large-scale progression of

modern Arthurian retellings has echoed the growing respect for women's experiences and

voices in recent history. The earliest Arthurian tale used by modern writers as source

material is Thomas Malory's medieval *Le Morte d'Arthur*, which emphasizes masculine

chivalry and battle and refuses women the ability to gain power except through men.

Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, written in the Victorian era, in some ways supports

doctrines of female domesticity, but also subverts them with a more egalitarian stance.

The Once and Future King, composed from the 1930s to the 1950s by T. H. White, is

actually less tolerant of women's rights; it allows men to overcome the false idealization

of war as heroic, but reinforces domestic ideals for women. Finally, Marion Zimmer

Bradley's 1982 *The Mists of Avalon* brings women's lives to the forefront of the legend

in a reflection of gains made by the second wave of feminism. Overall, although the

Arthurian saga's progress toward recognizing women's experiences has been uneven, it

has transformed along with other cultural norms from gender stereotypes to respect.

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INTRODUCTION

GENDERED PATHS TO POWER IN *LE MORTE D'ARTHUR*

People of all times and places have looked to the myths and legends of their

homelands to provide cultural continuity. The transmission of myths, whether orally or in

writing, allows generations to connect over a common worldview embedded in characters

and plots. However, many emphasize the stability of myths to such an extent that they

overlook how such myths adapt to changing cultural circumstances. As Joseph Campbell

points out in *The Power of Myth*, the foundational substance of myths is "message," not

"facts" (5), and it is not difficult to see how this message might change over time. For the

Western world, there is perhaps no better example of this phenomenon than the legend of

King Arthur. Some scholars, such as Martin Shichtman and James Carley, argue that the

"ability to be transformed" is its major source of vitality ("Introduction" 4); the legend

gains this capability both in terms of its larger-than-life mythical qualities and its

transference from one language to another (Bo 2). More specifically, Yekaterina

Zimmerman thinks the many reinterpretations of the Arthurian legend reflect "changing

perceptions of morality" on behalf of the audience at the time of composition (6).

Representations of gender, especially in the modern Arthurian retellings, are perhaps

some of the most intriguing and complex facets of this change. To establish a baseline for

comparison, it is important to analyze how Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, written in the fifteenth century but still the major source material for modern Arthurian writers, often supports the gendered power relations of the late Middle Ages.

Of course, Malory's text is not the first appearance of King Arthur. In fact, part of what makes the legend so adaptable is the fact that its multilayered composition history created numerous strands, each available for future authors to emphasize or ignore. Some of the earliest sources of the legend are Celtic myths like the Welsh *Mabinogion* and the Irish hero Finn Mac Cumhail (*Celtic Mythology*). In the 1100s, though, Arthur emerged as a "national hero" instead of a mythical one, starting with Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin text *History of the Kings of Britain* (*Arthurian Legends*). Geoffrey's history was so influential that scholar Mary Williams considers him the "consummate artist [who] has woven together all these strands into a precious fabric" (88). However, Geoffrey's version still lacks many of the Arthurian narratives that modern readers so cherish. French and German romances, for instance, "developed the character of Merlin and the romantic entanglement of Lancelot and Guinevere" (*Arthurian Legends*). Thus, it is Malory's text, bringing together an even greater number of materials, which emerges most frequently as the foundational "representation of Arthurian literature" to the modern world (Squire 355). Considering the vast number of texts and Malory's own originalities that he sought to include in his retelling, it is not surprising that *Le Morte d'Arthur* contains complex notions of gender.

Many readers and early gender critics have focused on Malory's evaluation of the Launcelot-Guenever affair. Indeed, it is not surprising that this theme is a major focus for

Malory when one considers the importance of courtly love in the late Middle Ages.

Georges Duby describes the common model of courtly love in which the "female figure stands at the center" of a young bachelor's attention, who seeks to "capture" her in a "full [sexual] surrender" (251). Critics have long debated Malory's stance on Launcelot and Guenever's fulfillment of this model. Some think that *Le Morte d'Arthur*, especially in its knightly books, condones their relationship. Zimmerman, for instance, argues that the constancy of "Lancelot's love for Guinevere allows him to prove himself worthy of his status of the most noble knight" (76). On the other end of the spectrum, scholars like Charles Moorman think that "the adulterous courtly love of [Malory's] sources was an evil" that "contributes to the destruction of the Round Table civilization" (15). Others think Launcelot and Guenever become desexualized in Malory, appearing "less fleshly" and "less adulterous" to preserve their love while avoiding the issue of its sinfulness (Hanks, "Malory" 84). Still others, attempting to skirt the poles of the argument altogether, propose that the many layers of Malory's text allow him to remain ambivalent on whether Launcelot and Guenever should be admired or despised (Bryan xii).

Despite the importance this relationship holds to Malory's evaluation of gender roles, it will be fruitful to examine *Le Morte d'Arthur* in more general terms. First, Malory's text contains an enormous social world full of characters, relationships, and complexities that have the potential to further illuminate his stance on gender. Adopting critical tunnel-vision by focusing exclusively on Launcelot and Guenever will lead to an interpretation that is limited at best and skewed at worst. Second, an examination of the history of gender in the late medieval period reveals that the sexual relations between

men and women often had broader implications in terms of power struggles. Thus, analyzing Malory's text more generally and with an eye toward its depictions of masculine and feminine power is perhaps just as useful and insightful a strategy as those employed in earlier criticism. In fact, many more recent critical theorists have already begun to emphasize this very type of analysis. From this perspective, it is clear that Malory's depictions of men and women parallel and support the culture of his time. His male characters gain honor through formal and official power; his female characters, in contrast, are only able to achieve informal influence and can only do so honorably if they work with, not against, the patriarchal structure.

Overall, the late medieval period was a male-focused society in which men held the official positions of power and influence. According to Ruth Karras, men of various social classes learned that they alone had access to official power, whether through the "[p]hysical aggression and military success" of knights (21) or the logical debates "in the single-sex environment of the university" (67). In both of these realms, women could not participate directly; knights used women only as a form of currency, collecting them and displaying their love to gain honor and prestige among other knights (Karras 60), and universities excluded them altogether (85). On top of these indirect contributors to female disempowerment, late medieval men also directly asserted their authority over women. Wives were especially devalued, having been taught that "[a] husband was by definition the center of a married woman's universe," the source of her "attitudes" and "values" (Vecchio 109). Even single women suffered a similar fate. Legally, women "were treated as wards of male family members," incapable of citizenship or leadership (Oplitz 269).

Spiritually, women had to attach themselves to "a male protector . . . to ward off accusations of heresy" that female independence provoked (Bolton 143). Learned treatises, written and maintained by men, often justified this misogyny that was so widespread in practice. According to Michelle Perrot and Duby, texts of the late medieval "patristic tradition" reinforced biblical interpretations of women as creatures "dominated by their sex" and in need of male "control" ("Enforcing Order" 13).

In many ways, *Le Morte d'Arthur* prioritizes official masculine power and the role of male-male relations in maintaining social order. This is perhaps not surprising when one considers that much of Malory's audience consisted of male gentry who were concerned with such masculine issues as combat and lineage (Radulescu 17, 69). Indeed, numerous critics argue that honorable combat is perhaps one of the most important and pervasive themes in *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Malory's text is full of knightly duels that serve a multitude of positive purposes, from appealing to "the pleasure of witnessing to the great deeds themselves" (Lynch 29), to showing how "lesser fighters" constantly "suffer from the disparity" between their noble birth and mediocre deeds (93), to connecting "the display of blood" to "genealogy" (62). Linked to the notion of blood in combat is Kenneth Hodges's insightful realization that "injuries," through their ability to display courage and bind individuals together in healing, "are often a key part of becoming a mature knight and a member of community" (19). Indeed, it is quite clear that the fundamental purpose of Malory's almost exhaustive recounting of jousts and tournaments is to illustrate the vitality of male relationships in preserving social order.

Two relevant passages further illustrate the importance of healthy, masculine, combat-focused, kin relationships by showing the negative consequences that result when they become skewed. The first passage is the duel between the brothers Balin and Balan. The notion of two knights fighting with prowess and "great wounds" (Malory 75), which should be an honorable image, becomes complicated by the fighters' identity as brothers; the two "swoon" and "moan" for sadness when they discover each other during their last moments of life, saying "the wide world shall speak of us both" in great pity and mourning (75-76). Indeed, when Arthur hears news of their battle, he calls it "the greatest pity that ever I heard tell of two knights" (78). The second relevant passage occurs when Mordred threatens his father, Arthur. Similar to the Balin and Balan episode, in this case a potentially honorable male relationship becomes severely twisted. A son should succeed his father in a respectful and orderly fashion; Mordred does so through treachery and threatens adultery (912). Battles should be fields in which to test male prowess; carnage and butchery characterize Arthur's final battle against his son (920). According to Cory Rushton, both of these passages, among others, illustrate how vital healthy male kinship is to the preservation of order; when brothers and fathers and sons fight, combat shifts from honor to "alienation" (148).

Of course, *Le Morte d'Arthur* provides illustrations of the importance of masculine power not only apart from women, but over them as well. In general, Malory's male characters are both more sexually dominant and more sexually free than his female characters. First, Zimmerman argues that Malory's men often engage in many types of powerful "sexual misbehavior": Uther "seduces" Igraine, Meliagrance attempts to rape

Guenever, Mark gives a man's wife to another man (70). It is interesting to note that while Malory distinctly judges some of these actions—Meliagrance and Mark are some of the most negatively assessed characters in *Le Morte d'Arthur*—Uther's sexual sin has a positive outcome in Arthur's birth. Second, in terms of male sexual freedom, scholar Maureen Fries proposes that Malory actually prioritizes such sexual sins over marriage. She points to evidence in Malory's characterization of individual knights, arguing that the married knights (Gareth, La Cote Male Taile, and Alisander) never reach the level of prowess attained by single knights or knights with mistresses (Bleoberis, Lamorak, and Launcelot) (Fries 200). Similarly, Edward Kennedy argues that the progression of Malory's tale illustrates a notable shift in Arthur's character from "the devotion of a loving husband to the indifference of a king whose primary concerns are his realm and the knights of the Round Table" (qtd. in Fries 201). It would seem, then, that Malory values male independence over marital devotion in his knights; this enables them to support a national agenda, embark on adventures, and take part in the courtly love model.

On the other hand, although the history of gender in the late Middle Ages implies that women were powerless, they often navigated paths to informal power and influence. Many late medieval women did, of course, accept the male treatises that affirmed their inferiority (Klapisch-Zuber 10). However, women made up for their lack of official power by employing "a wide variety of strategies" to gain unofficial influence within and outside of the family (Erler and Kowaleski, "Introduction" 10). Undermining the masculine hold on learning and culture, many noblewomen in the late Middle Ages gained "literary education" in nunneries or wealthy households (Power 80). This

education enabled them to write their own subversive texts (Ferrante 221) and influence the nascent publishing industry through patronage (Bell 167). Noblewomen also accrued extensive female networks of kin and friends that influenced the male world through "the small political world of the domestic sphere" (Hanawalt 203). Finally, these wealthy wives used their identity as "as representations of absent husbands" as a way to gain entrance into patriarchal power (Power 42). On the lower end of the social scale, women in the burgeoning medieval marketplace also held positions of power and influence. Eileen Power argues that in "the give and take of daily life" in the market, the sexes actually experienced a "rough and ready equality" (34). According to Karras, craftsmen, unlike knights and students who excluded women, often relied on their wives to run successful workshops and industries (145). Many market wives, in addition to being essential to their husbands' success, also experienced relative sexual freedom; not as constrained by the concern for legitimate heirs so prevalent among nobles, they often sought "affection and pleasure outside the marital bed" (Oplitz 278). Overall, then, it is clear that medieval women of various classes were by no means powerless; their names might not have appeared on political and military roles, but they adapted to their individual setbacks and influenced their world both through and underneath male power.

Malory's women illustrate an entire range of degrees of power, but they are not always successful even at attempts to gain influence. Some of Malory's women exhibit formulaic feminine weaknesses that prevent them from attaining power within the masculine system. Zimmerman argues that these figures appear in some of the earliest passages of *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Arthur's mother Igraine, for instance, demonstrates "a

conflict avoidance style" that reflects "the stereotype of weak women victimized by powerful men and obedient to their will" (Zimmerman 38-39). A vivid example of Igraine's accepting a position of powerlessness occurs when Ulfius accuses her of treason for keeping Arthur's identity a secret for many years (Malory 38). Igraine responds, "I am a woman and I may not fight, but rather than I should be dishonoured, there would some good man take my quarrel" (Malory 39). Zimmerman rightly interprets this response as an instance of the "role of the damsel in distress" (38); Igraine openly confesses her inability to defend herself and her reliance upon the surrounding men. In addition, Guenever, although she is a far more complex and developed character than Igraine, still exhibits feminine weakness at certain points in *Le Morte d'Arthur.* In one instance, Guenever in her jealousy orders Launcelot to leave the court, but instead of powerfully commanding him in a composed manner, she flits between "a-weeping" and angry verbal assaults (Malory 787). As if this unstable behavior were not enough to degrade her power, in the following passage Bors convinces Launcelot that Guenever is simply acting out of hastiness and that he should remain near the court so as to return when she changes her mind (Malory 787-88). This conclusion is true, of course, but it also represents an interesting judgment of female power. Zimmerman argues that "[o]nce the Queen loses some of her power by showing weakness (her tears), her speech is perceived as insignificant and *trivial*" (52). Indeed, it seems that when Malory's women make outward displays of weakness—either verbally in Igraine's case or bodily in Guenever's—the men immediately disregard them as having destroyed their "powerful status" (Zimmerman 52).

On the other end of the spectrum, women who seek too much independence also cannot attain power and are judged as too masculine in Malory. When Malory's women speak out directly, the men often ignore them, essentially consolidating the male power structure and resisting the women's attempts at influence. Zimmerman argues that such an instance occurs when Isoud seeks to give Tristram advice about Palomides's treachery after one of their battles (47). In this passage, not only does Tristram initially dismiss Isoud for not being congratulatory enough in her demeanor, but after her long tirade and Palomides's brief reply, Tristram immediately sides with his fellow knight (Malory 585). According to Zimmerman, because "women's speech is expected to be trivial" (47), women are more likely to be ignored than accepted when they seek to participate in knightly debates. Scholar Erin Moore points out a similar passage with regard to Guenever. When Guenever is "on trial" for the poison apple mishap, she has "no recourse . . . because she faces a group of men all opposed to her" (Moore 11-12). Overall, then, these descriptions of Isoud and Guenever illustrate that women's direct involvement in male affairs is simply not permitted in *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

Of course, one must remember that Isoud and Guenever are incidental examples of women judged for their masculine independence; two other characters—Morgan le Fay and a huntress—are more extreme examples, and Malory judges them more harshly. Morgan's "threats, directives, and ultimatums" to her brother, while not quite successful, illustrate the very forceful, almost manly manner in which she seeks power (Zimmerman 62). Most readers of *Le Morte d'Arthur* will agree with Moorman's assertion that Malory's "answer" to Morgan's direct attempts at power "was to blacken her character as

much as he could" (84-85). Malory constantly characterizes her as "deceitful" and "violent" (Moorman 85), linking her to male traitors and, thus, rebuking her seeking political influence. A more isolated but still vivid example of Malory's judging masculine women occurs when Lancelot encounters a huntress in a grove (Malory 828-29). Although Zimmerman argues that this passage signifies misogyny only when it is taken out of context (30), the fact that one of the few instances of a woman engaged in a pseudo-military act in *Le Morte d'Arthur* is accompanied by feminine failure and apology and masculine displeasure creates a significant impression.

Clearly, Malory's women gain little power on the extremes of feminine weakness and masculine assertiveness. The weaker women fail simply because they are unable to acquire internal strength; the exceedingly strong women, according to Andrew Lynch, both fail and appear "dishonourable" (149). In contrast to these opposing poles, however, many of Malory's women actually gain power by working with and through the patriarchal system. According to Moore, Malory implies that when "feminine desire is achieved through the exploitation of masculine desire," it is both more successful and more acceptable (6). It would seem, then, that Malory's women can gain influence only by finding the perfect balance between feminine weakness and near-masculine strength, acquiescing to the patriarchal system but permitting themselves to subvert it, just as women in the Middle Ages were most likely to gain influence by befriending yet undermining men. The critical work of numerous scholars has helped to further categorize Malory's subordinate yet subversive women into those who use non-magical or magical tactics. The non-magical women, according to Zimmerman, express their

power primarily through "verbal interactions" with men (82). In contrast, the supernatural women employ varieties of "body language," including "gestures, looks, beauty, seduction, or magic" (Moore 2).

As it turns out, the passages of Guenever's failure as too weak in sobbing and too masculine in disputing an all-male council are rather unusual; in general, she is the most successful of Malory's women in manipulating men and patriarchal power to attain influence and meet her desires. According to Moore, Guenever constantly uses "verbal tactics to retain" Launcelot and "manipulate him into doing what she wants him to do" (9). A consideration of a couple pertinent passages further illuminates Guenever's strong female presence in these instances. The first passage, referred to as the "Knight of the Cart" episode, involves Meliagrance's capture and attempted rape of Guenever (Malory 838-53). In this rather lengthy and complex excerpt, Guenever takes a situation that should have been disempowering—her capture by Meliagrance and rescue by Launcelot—and turns it into an expression of female power. First, Guenever in her dealings with Meliagrance always adopts the role of the diplomat, not the damsel in distress. Guenever initially appeals to Meliagrance's reason, telling him that he will "shamest all knighthood and thyself" if he dishonors her (Malory 840). When that tactic fails, Guenever still keeps control of the situation; she barters with Meliagrance, offering her company for the lives of her unarmed knights (Malory 841). It is when Launcelot begins to ride to Guenever's rescue, however, that her powerful verbal messages become most poignant. Before Laucelot even arrives at the castle, Meliagrance, in fear for his life, yields to Guenever (Malory 845); however, rather than giving Launcelot the satisfaction

of having saved her, Guenever remains entirely calm, even asking Launcelot "why be ye so moved?" (846). Zimmerman's analysis of this episode is quite apt; she argues that it represents Guenever's "control" of herself and her situation, as well has her ability to "use . . . her power to the uttermost" (41). Perhaps an even more famous passage that illustrates Malory's characterization of Guenever's power occurs when the Knights of the Round Table catch her and Launcelot in her bedchamber (Malory 869-70). Although Guenever in this instance does not seem extraordinarily powerful, scholar D. Hanks, Jr., argues that considering Malory's revisions of previous sources can shed new light on this excerpt. Compared to the *Mort Artu* and the stanzaic *Morte*, he argues, Malory's Guenever is far more outspoken; her speech changes from a simple assertion that "our love is at an end" to more constant speech and longer, more sympathetic declarations of love for Launcelot (Hanks, "Malory" 81). Overall, then, Guenever is clearly quite able to use verbal tactics to gain control.

Scholars have identified two lesser female characters in *Le Morte d'Arthur* who also illustrate successful, verbal female power: the Fair Maid of Astolat and Percivale's sister. Upon first glance, one might be surprised to find the Fair Maid grouped as an instance of female power. After all, she "shriek[s]" and "swoon[s]" when Launcelot does not return her love and expresses his plans to leave her presence (Malory 822). Nonetheless, Zimmerman proposes that the Fair Maid's very requests to Launcelot, although they show her dependence on male attention, also show how little she heeds patriarchal ideals for women. The fact that she can ask Launcelot whether he will be her "paramour" if not her spouse and his "shock" at her request illustrate her ability to be

verbally "direct and strait-forward" in a way that many of Malory's women cannot be (Zimmerman 76-77). Compared to the Fair Maid, Percivale's sister is perhaps an even stronger example of non-magical female power. According to Ginger Thornton and Krista May, Malory revises his Arthurian sources to give her the power to "choose her fate" when she, rather than the men who accompany her, decides to sacrifice herself to save an ailing queen (43). Even beyond this action, the sister's purity, ability to heal, and renowned burial actually place her on the same level of spiritual prowess and respect as Galahad, perhaps one of the most idealized and honorable knights in the entirety of Malory's text (Thornton and May 48). Clearly, a number of Malory's women are able to gain control simply by using persuasive speech.

For the most part, Malory's depictions of positive and successful power acquisition among magical women are less frequent than those of women who use verbal tactics alone. Perhaps this is because magic and body language tend to be more threatening to the male social order and more apt to make women independent than speech, which always seems to rely on men. Indeed, Malory's primary magical woman— Morgan le Fay—consistently appears in a negative light. Nonetheless, Moore has identified two magical women whose power seems to remain acceptable to both Malory and his knights. Perhaps the most obvious embodiment of successful and tolerable female power is Elaine's sexual conquest of Launcelot (Malory 610-13). Although Launcelot is certainly "displeased" to discover that his tryst with Guenever was actually with Elaine under the power of a glamour spell, Malory hardly judges this trickery (612). Not only does their sexual encounter realize the prophecy of Galahad (611), but according to

Moore, it is also relatively benign because it seeks to "fulfill" both Launcelot's and Elaine's desires (12). In other words, because Elaine's cunning supports rather than undermines male society and desire, it becomes acceptable. The second of Malory's women that Moore thinks effectively gains power through magic is Nimue. Like Elaine, although Nimue has selfish interests in using her charms (she desires power from Merlin and love from Pelleas), Malory depicts her magic as "beneficial" when she helps Pelleas escape his plight with Ettard (Moore 14-16). It would seem that the potentially threatening power of female magic becomes justified in Malory when it works to serve the greater good of the male knights themselves.

Engaging in a more general, power-focused analysis of gender in *Le Morte d'Arthur* reveals that Malory basically supports a system (which was, in fact, the system of his time) in which men are dominant and women are able to gain informal influence as long as they do so through men. On the one hand, Malory appeals to the male gentry of his time by providing images of powerful male combat that support patriarchy and exclude women. On the other hand, many of Malory's women are quite able to secure power and influence for themselves. Although a number of them fail, either being too stereotypically weak or too unacceptably masculine, the vast majority of them have no trouble navigating a middle path that both supports and manipulates men. Of course, one must not deemphasize the fact that these women must work through men to receive Malory's approval, effectively denying them total autonomy. When Malory's Arthurian women seek to gain true independence (Morgan le Fay is perhaps the best example), he

judges them harshly and remorselessly. Thus, while Malory is clearly open to women's power, he does not encourage their power on their own.

Many modern writers of Arthurian myth, realizing that Malory's text contains a rich complexity of materials, have used it as their primary source for interpreting the legend. Although gaining inspiration from Malory, none of them left the story of Arthur wholly unchanged; instead, they saturate their versions with their own cultural influences. This tendency is quite evident, for instance, in Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, published beginning in 1859 (*Arthurian Legends*). Just as *Le Morte d'Arthur* comments on gendered power relations in the late medieval period, so *Idylls of the King* reflects Victorian debates on gender. Although Tennyson's text largely agrees with Victorian assumptions about women (they are either moral angels or horrid sinners), his text also contains subversive details that should not be minimized. This trend of reflecting culturally specific gender expectations continues into some of the most recent Arthurian renditions, as well. T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* focuses on redefinitions of masculine leadership and retrenchments feminine domesticity applicable to the World War II era, and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* completely transforms the structure of the legend to appeal to feminists at the turn of the twenty-first century (*Arthurian Legends*). Overall, the richness of the Arthurian legend and its capacity for reflecting shifting gender roles emerge from the writers' abilities to transform it into new forms that appeal to new generations.

CHAPTER I

AMBIVALENCE ON VICTORIAN GENDER

IN *IDYLLS OF THE KING*

The Victorian period is most commonly described as an age of transition for its

growth of new developments and expectations that expanded at an exceedingly rapid

pace. New intellectual and scientific movements, the expansion of empire, and shifting

cultural norms were but a few of the novel contributions of this period. In such a time of

change, it is not surprising that fierce debates often erupted. The "great confidences and

certainties" of the period, while very conventional and prevalent, were "attended by

constant doubts" and "by shakings of the foundations" (Cunningham, "Introduction"

xliv). The conflict between these certainties and doubts played out in a variety of realms,

from everyday conversation to the massive number of periodicals (Cunningham,

"Introduction" xviii). One of the most frequently discussed debates from this period is the

"Woman Question" (Mundhenk and Fletcher, "Introduction" xxi). Victorian thinkers and

writers, both male and female, applied this question "to all aspects of Victorian culture"

and exhibited a "divergence of positions" on the essential and ideal nature of the sexes

(Mundhenk and Fletcher, "Introduction" xxi). According to Elizabeth Helsinger, there

were four common "myths" about the nature of woman that characterized this debate (et

al., 1: xiv). On a spectrum from most conventional to most radical, Victorian thinkers envisioned woman as the domestic "Angel in the House," as the "Angel out of the House" who helps others through charities, as the "female savior" whose morality leads to a "new era of community and love," and as a person deserving complete equality with men (Helsinger et al., 1: xiv-xv). Although the equality model was the rarest of the four, all of these myths and their variations contributed to Victorian debates and social changes. Keeping in mind the tendency of myth to adapt to changing historical circumstances, it is not surprising that the major Arthurian text of this period, Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, uses the "materials of epic as a means of articulating, and adorning, culturally current issues" like the Woman Question (Tucker 703). The text's composition history illustrates that gender was always a central issue in Tennyson's plans for its development. The first idylls to be written and published sought to juxtapose moral and immoral women; in 1857, they appeared as *Enid and Nimue: The True and the False*, and by 1858, *The True and the False. Four Idylls of the King* included the characters Guinevere and Elaine (Haight 554). Although Tennyson's text has certainly developed in complexity since that point, the question of female nature remains the germ and core of the project. This is clearly a significant departure from Malory. Whereas Malory emphasizes women's roles only through or dominated by men, Tennyson gives his women more "power to shape men, homes, nations, and empires" (L. Peterson 41). This focus, as well as the specifically Victorian characteristics of Tennyson's female characters, illustrates that *Idylls of the King* is more a reflection of its own context than Malory's materials. A truly Victorian text, the character descriptions and relationships in

Idylls of the King seem to both reflect conventional Victorian ideologies and give voice to subverting critiques against them.

To adequately analyze *Idylls of the King* in terms of its cultural context, one must first develop a deeper understanding of the complex gender ideologies that Victorian individuals embraced. One of the most prevalent ideologies for women and men was the "separate spheres" doctrine in which men played public roles and women accepted domestic duties (Coontz 170). For men, while supporting one's family economically was vital (Coontz 168), roles in the public sphere defined their gender. According to Mark Girouard, these roles often employed strikingly Arthurian terms: the Victorian "gentleman" was inextricably linked with the idea of the "chivalrous man" (61-62). The ideal man, according to this concept, should exhibit such public virtues as "independence," "loyalty to friends and leaders," and "hardihood" (Girouard 61-62). Major Victorian thinkers sought to develop the implications of this ideal. Thomas Carlyle, for instance, argues that men in leadership positions should become heroic through a focus on abstract justice (Girouard 130). Charles Kingsley idealizes bodily strength and vigor as primary factors in the development and identity of chivalrous men (Girouard 136). Considering these masculine ideals of public loyalty, disinterestedness, and strength, is it not surprising that imperialism "developed into a mass cult" (N. Rich 73). The ideal of British gentlemen leading yeomen and British people leading the world is clearly linked to the importance Victorians placed on masculine leadership (Girouard 224). Whereas the ideal masculine role encouraged such public involvement, its feminine counterpart sought to limit women to the private or domestic sphere. The growth of the

"celebration of married womanhood" led to immense transformations in the lives of Victorian females (Gillis 238). Women's entire lives came to be defined by "dependence" on a masculine figure, and female adulthood simply became the transference from fatherly to husbandly dominance (238). Women's education sought only to reinforce their "submission to authority and innate maternal instincts" (Vicinus, "Introduction" x). This ideology, which seems stifling to most modern women, was actually quite common in Victorian verse and prose. Poets like Eliza Cook (435-36), Martin Tupper (306-10), Janet Hamilton (41), and especially Coventry Patmore (1724) idealize the domestic realm and women as wives and mothers. Victorian essayists also emphasized the importance of women's private, familial role. Margaret Oliphant, although she worked as a writer, professes in her autobiography that she would have been happier to have been entirely domestic rather than partially professional (392). William Greg similarly argues in favor of the female ideal as marital devotion by describing the "excess of single women in Great Britain" as an "evil" to be cured by female emigration to the colonies (160-2). Clearly, the notion that the ideal male and female worlds should barely touch each other, men defined by public leadership and women by private submission, was prevalent among the Victorians.

Despite the widespread appeal of this ideology, it did not adequately describe many individuals and often led to their marginalization. Men who did not embrace leadership, heroism, and toughness as primary ideals came to be seen as "girlish" and "effeminate" (Girouard 136). As regards women, those who did not conform to the ideology of female domesticity were often considered anomalies at best and insane at

worst (Showalter, "Victorian" 167). One might expect those women on the extremes of society, such as prostitutes, to have been marginalized the most. However, many of these women had little exposure to the domestic ideals of the upper class and "no pretensions to gentility" (Wojtczak). In actuality, middle-class women endured more suffering due to a disjoint between the ideals they received in childhood and the practical decisions they had to make in their lives. Many middle-class women with the identical "moral values" of their upper-class counterparts found they "could not keep up the appearances of respectability," such as staying at home with their children, because they had to work for wages to supplement their husbands' incomes (Gillis 248). Despite the fact that Victorian women's work was rather common (Burnett), it became "the center of an ideological battle" for those women taught to view paid work as incompatible with female nature (C. Stevenson). Most middle-class Victorian women answered this conundrum by becoming governesses: they thought working in the home, even if not living there, could keep them in their "proper environment" and give them a little more respectability than female factory workers (M. Peterson 11). Unfortunately, these women were mistaken if they thought working as governesses would provide a solution to their problem. Not only was that career "dreary" in its hard labor and long hours (Allingham), but it also forced the governesses themselves to confront on a daily basis their inability to live up to the domestic ideal their mistresses embodied (M. Peterson 11). Clearly, the Victorian ideologies of the strong male leader and submissive female wife did not address the complexities of reality and, as a result, caused considerable anxiety in excluded groups.

The relationship between, rather than the separation of, men and women became the focus of a second, equally important gender ideology of the Victorian period. Another essentialist notion of the genders, this ideology argued that women have a higher capacity for morality than men and, thus, that it is their duty to control men's animalistic violence and lust. First focusing on the men, a number of historians of the Victorian period have sought to describe how the idea of men as animalistic came to qualify the ideal of men as heroic, rational leaders. Andrew Smith argues that Victorians thought the "supposedly biological demands of the male body" were extremely difficult to control (22) and would lead to "degeneration and perversity" if allowed to develop unchecked (1). Stephen Marcus highlights the fact that sexual immorality or "aggressive potency" was the major concern for these Victorian masculinity theorists (179). Because men apparently could not be expected to control these strong drives, Victorians proposed that such a duty must fall to women. Despite women's being taught that they had "weaker natures" that made them "inferior" to men, they also learned that their supposed "lack of sexual drive" allowed them to remain chaste and become "all-pervasive moral influence[s] within the home" (Vicinus, "Introduction" xiv). From an early age, the education of girls sought to help them become "guardians of temperance and public morality" by shielding them from immoral influences (Landale and Guest 154). Of course, the notion of female morality did help Victorian women gain independence in some ways. When women saw themselves as the vessels of morality in the world, they began to use that position as bargaining power against sexually demanding husbands (Coontz 170), an appeal for additional education (173), and leverage for gaining rights in the public and political

realm (182). On the other hand, this expectation brought with it an immense, unrealistic responsibility. Not only did Victorian women have to live up to a nearly asexual ideal for themselves, but they also had to face blame if their husbands and sons did not achieve such an ideal. If women were "angels" and men were "animals," every instance of male lust and violence became a glaring example of female failure (Cominos 165).

Although the separate spheres and female morality doctrines were exceedingly common in Victorian thought, there were also many critics of such ideologies. Though few and far between, some Victorian writers campaigned forcefully for complete and total gender equality. The most outspoken of these advocates was John Stuart Mill, who argues that "a principle of perfect equality" is the best and only way for the sexes to interact (122). According to Mill, the notion of women as subordinate but morally superior to men is "an eminently artificial thing" and women should be given the freedom to develop their authentic natures in any way they see fit (127-28). What is most striking about Mill's argument is that his notion of equality includes a realization of the cultural construction of gender roles. George Eliot, the famous female Victorian author, illustrates a similar but less totalizing argument when she describes her belief that men's and women's literature should be evaluated according to the same standards (292). Of course, most Victorian thinkers were even less extreme than Mill and Eliot, campaigning for specific women's rights rather than total equality, realizing that the latter might be too ambitious. Indeed, even female suffrage proved a far too equalizing right for women in the Victorian era to achieve (N. Rich 22). Some of the smaller but more successful reforms were inclusions of women in the public sphere through philanthropic and

aesthetic work (Ruskin 264), increases in female education (Young 91), reforms in marriage laws that enabled women to keep their property (Helsinger et al., 2: 21), and campaigns for women's sexual freedom and decision-making (Vicinus, "Introduction" xiv).

Many aspects of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* favor the more conventional Victorian ideologies of gender relationships over their relatively radical counterparts. Like most Arthurian legends, the structure of *Idylls of the King* involves the establishment of Camelot as an ideal civilization and its eventual downfall. Where Tennyson departs from Malory and other renditions of the legend is in his emphasis on what exactly precipitates this fall. For Tennyson, characterization, rather than abstract forces, is the primary means by which he establishes both the ideal and decline of Camelot, and gender is central to this characterization. Tennyson's Arthur is clearly at the center of ideals not only for an effective ruler of Camelot, but also for a well-rounded Victorian gentleman. On top of this, Arthur provides some of the text's most pointed doctrines of woman's nature that would have resonated well with conventional Victorian thinkers. Some of the early and middle idylls of Tennyson's text, including "Gareth and Lynette" and "Lancelot and Elaine," serve to reinforce such idealized and traditional male and female gender roles. In analyzing how *Idylls of the King* supports Victorian myths about gender, it is vital to consider how these more optimistic idylls support such ideologies before analyzing how Tennyson's depiction of the fall of Camelot heaps blame on more unconventional women characters who depart from their expected roles and duties.

Throughout the entire development of *Idylls of the King*, Arthur is essentially an embodiment of the idealized male who directly and implicitly supports myths of gender roles. As regards Arthur's idealization, the words "blameless" and "faultless" describe him numerous times in the text, and he is almost always depicted in lofty and abstract terms. According to Glenn Everett, the major plot alteration Tennyson made to Malory to emphasize Arthur's goodness is that he "is never bewitched by his sister Morgan le Fay" (xv). Indeed, Arthur describes himself as "ever virgin save for" Guinevere (Tennyson line 12.554). This detail creates an Arthur who is a true and almost superhuman "hero," someone entirely free from blame for Camelot's fall, a ruler undermined and "betrayed by knights, friends, and family" (Everett viii). Of course, Arthur remains a powerful male leader with the capacity for defensive aggression, but more important to his character is "the repression of spontaneous maleness" (Machann 209) seen, for instance, in his refusal to hold onto Excalibur beyond its usefulness in necessary military exploits (Tennyson 13.204-6). In "The Coming of Arthur," the second idyll in the text, one can clearly see that the innocence and idealization of Arthur's personality expand to become the primary organizing principles for Camelot. John Rosenberg argues that this idyll functions to describe "Arthur imposing order upon temporal as well as political chaos" (45). More specifically, the earliest stanzas illustrate how Arthur literally and metaphorically "slew the beast" that inhabited the region and "made / [b]road pathways for the hunter and the knight," the more civilized aspects of mankind (Tennyson 2.59-61). Thus far, this characterization of Arthur and Camelot seems in line with Victorian perceptions of the importance of male power and instinct control. However, this idea, both among

Victorians and in *Idylls of the King*, is incomplete without the realization of women's

central role in promoting male morality. According to Clinton Machann, "a code which

assumes the moral superiority of women" and their "enormous power" in "ameliorating

the corrosive effects of male insensitivity" is a constant theme throughout *Idylls of the*

King and an explicit facet of Arthur's agenda in controlling the bestial violence and lust

of men (212-15). Illustrations of Arthur's recognizing this system occur at the beginning

and end of the text. In "The Coming of Arthur," he argues that he "cannot will my will or

work my work" unless Guinevere joins him in a perfect balance of male aggressive

strength and female domestic morality (Tennyson 2.87-90). Later on, in "Guinevere,"

Arthur states even more explicitly that "the maiden passion for a maid" is the primary

force "to keep down the base in man" and help him develop a higher quality of life and

thought "that makes a man" (Tennyson 12.476-80). Examples of this ideology in

practice, rather than in Arthur's voice, also abound in *Idylls of the King.* For example,

literary critic J. Sparer points out that while "pure women" support the courtliness of

Camelot (Tennyson qtd. in 125), the ladies of Earl Doorm's castle exemplify

"primitivism" and materialism in their "many-hued dresses" (125). Apparently, despite

the fact that Arthur is idealized to a far greater extent than many of the female characters

in the poem, he considers women a major force in leading men away from the paths of

lust, violence, and animalistic instinct. From the earliest sections of the text, which

idealize the royal family of Victorian England, and continuing to its completion, the

chivalrous, gentlemanly Arthur wholeheartedly supports the Victorian doctrine that

women are "to be held responsible for an adult sexuality" that men cannot be expected to control (Knoepflmacher 356).

The third idyll, "Gareth and Lynette," reflects Arthur's idealized and very Victorian plan for the genders by having its central male and female characters learn that they must embody such values. Gareth and Lynette begin as apparently unconventional opposites of the gender roles they are expected to play. Gareth, rather than being a strong male leader, is in a submissive position when he yields to his mother's request that he enter Camelot as a lowly "kitchen-knave" (Tennyson 3.151). Lynette, rather than being the submissive and moral female force, is loud and boastful, upbraiding Arthur for sending such a lowly "scullion" (Tennyson 3.746) to help her on her quest against violent knights and being continually consumed with "shame, pride, [and] wrath" (3.641). However, the lighthearted and fairytale-like tone of this idyll foreshadows the fact that such gender roles will be set right and the plot will reach a happy conclusion. Indeed, one of the most significant aspects of this idyll is the dynamic nature of Gareth's and Lynette's characters as they come to embrace more conventional gender roles. Gareth, through his challenges with Kay and the knights along the river, embarks on "a progressive development away from childhood and toward manhood" (A. Roberts 183), gaining confidence in himself, his prowess, and his ability to rescue the traditional damsel in distress, Lyonors. Lynette, as she watches Gareth's development, comes not only to respect him, but also to entirely change her manner of speaking. Once "rebuked" by her miscalculation of Gareth's character (Tennyson 3.1135), she loses the sharpness of her tongue and becomes entirely a figure of support for Gareth. This happy and idealized

gender relationship gives "fulfillment" to both characters and enables them to embody "a careful avoidance of all the sexually charged relations that are so pronounced in the other idylls" (Knopeflmacher 347). Although some scholars have argued that the "continuous flux" of water imagery in the idyll subverts its linear and ideal plot (A. Roberts 187), it is clear that such imagery in no way affects the clear-cut nature of the characters at this point in the text. In the end, Gareth the powerful man and Lynette the supportive woman seem to live up fairly well to the ideals for which Arthur and many Victorians aimed.

Similar to Lynette, Elaine provides an illustration of ideal female subservience and dedication to men toward the middle of *Idylls of the King*. Tennyson makes significant departures from Malory in this idyll. Malory's Fair Maid of Astolat, whom Tennyson used as his primary inspiration for Elaine, is characterized by an acceptance of sexual immorality, "self-induced madness, starvation, and dehydration" when Lancelot does not return her love (Hares-Stryker 129). Tennyson's Elaine, in contrast, exhibits very few of these negative qualities. Instead, she is "an Elaine of grace and gentleness" (Hares-Stryker 129). The idyll reads more like an "original chivalric romance" than a supernatural tale (L. Stevenson 242), with "courtly grace" being one of Elaine's most obvious character traits (Rosenberg 122). She illustrates the ideal of female submissiveness when she orients her entire life around Lancelot, nurses him back to health, delivers his diamond to him, and generally acts as a "meek maid" (Tennyson 8.850). Perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than when she becomes resolved to have "[h]im or death" (Tennyson 8.898). Her conviction that she must be his wife or at least be able to "serve" him to live a full and happy life is very much in line with Victorian ideals

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of domesticity (Tennyson 8.934). Even her death is idealized; she dies in apparent peace after "sweetly" singing (Tennyson 8.999) and appears as a beautiful "sleeping woman" in her barge for the people of Camelot to love and mourn (Hares-Stryker 130). To qualify, some scholars argue that the tradition of Elaine as mad and self-centered appears even in Tennyson's text. Arthur Simpson, Jr., for instance, thinks this idyll's characters' "conventional beliefs," rather than being idealized, are implicated as contributing to Elaine's madness (341). It is clear, however, that Tennyson sought as best he could to remove these aspects of Elaine's personality that are so prevalent in Malory. *Idylls of the King* implies that the party at fault in this idyll is not Elaine's conventionality, but Lancelot's refusal to meet her "fairness" and "pureness" with the proper acceptance because of his complicit participation in adultery (Tennyson 8.1365-66).

Idylls of the King, while it clearly justifies Victorian gender roles through its support of the ideals themselves, does so even more forcefully through its depiction of how unorthodox relationships can contribute to the collapse of civilization. The traditional interpretation of Camelot's fall in *Idylls of the King* blames women who do not live up to their domestic, morally pure duties and thus do not control the animalistic drives of men. Arthur's "obsession with the woman's role as preserver of morality," established earlier, is clearly a Victorian idea and the primary plot device in the text (Umland 276). According to Dino Felluga, the two women who act as "spurs to erotic desire" and "the beast in man" are doubtlessly Vivien and Guinevere (792). Vivien embodies the figure of the whore, and Guinevere, that of the adulteress. Although scholars weigh the negative effects of these characters differently, some thinking Vivien

more destructive and others finding Guinevere "*most* culpable" (Umland 282), many

agree that the falling together of "man and beast" and the collapse of Arthur's civilizing

impulse result from a combination of their influences (Engelberg 288). Further

illustrating Tennyson's debt to his own time rather than Malory in developing this

scheme is the fact that both female characters embody Victorian stereotypes of the

immoral or "fallen woman." Malory's depictions are strikingly different. His "Vivien"

figure, called only a damsel of the lake, is girlish rather than whorish; she tricks Merlin so

as to protect her virginity and piety, rather than using her body to gain power (Malory

102-3). In addition, the whole encounter between Malory's Merlin and the damsel exudes

a prophetic, rather than a sexual, tone. Malory's Guenever is similarly quite distinct from

Tennyson's; she is a fairly sympathetic figure who, rather than simply contributing to

civilization's fall through immorality, gains power both verbally and sexually. Such

power in Malory is actually sanctioned compared to that of his magical female

characters; even if Guenever sins, at least she does so within the context of male

dominance and desire, rather than seeking total independence through spells and charms.

Prostitutes were definitely part of the image of the fallen woman during the

Victorian era. Of course, injunctions and judgments against whores were not original to

the Victorian period. People of this time, however, felt an increased anxiety about

prostitution for a number of reasons. First, they thought industrial society was prompting

rapid increases in the selling of sex, for "female employment" in factories supposedly

created a supply of prostitutes and the "deferment of marriage" created a demand among

young adult men (Sigsworth 80-85). Second, whores embodied reversals of multiple

feminine ideals, including domesticity, chastity, and especially a moral influence on men. To qualify, not all individuals saw prostitutes as simply an evil influence. Some institutions, like all-women convents, "worked directly with prostitutes" and sought to uplift them by helping to ease their poverty and economic suffering (Mumm 528-36). However, humanized or not, prostitutes were always seen as "separated from respectable society by a moral abyss" (Helsinger et al., 2: 151). Nowhere is this notion more obvious than in the legal sanctions against Victorian streetwalkers. The Contagious Diseases Acts, passed between 1865 and 1869 but eventually repealed, sought to control prostitution not to help the women themselves, but "with the aim of curtailing venereal disease among the armed forces" (Sigsworth 92-98). The idea that the influence of whores rendered men unable to control their desires and protect their bodies (and, consequently, the empire) led to legislation "directed at women in order to protect the health of men" ("Contagious Diseases"). Clearly, images of the evil whore far outnumbered those of the sympathetic fallen woman in need of redirection and salvation.

Throughout *Idylls of the King*, but especially in the "Merlin and Vivien" idyll, Vivien embodies the figure of the prostitute and is judged quite harshly. According to Rebecca Umland, Viven's identification with the whore is made clear by the vast recurrence of the word "harlot" in connection with her; half of the instances of this word in *Idylls of the King* occur in her idyll (280). This word does not even occur in Malory's depiction of the damsel of the lake; instead, she is actually concerned about guarding her "maidenhood" (103). In addition, Umland thinks Vivien's dialogue with Merlin, while not linking her to harlotry as explicitly as Tennyson's diction, serves a similar purpose.

Throughout the idyll, the nature of their dialogue is an exchange of Merlin's intellect for

her sensuality. In an "analogy to prostitution," Vivien uses her sensuality to "purchase"

Merlin's magical charm for its high "market value" (Umland 278). Although Merlin does

not seem to take pleasure in her feminine charms, her sensuality is depicted as that of the

"archetypal temptress" and is nearly irresistible (Umland 277). An extensive amount of

"animal imagery" describes her as a snake (Engelberg 290), "writh[ing]" toward Merlin

(Tennyson 7.237) and coiling around him in an ever-constricting embrace (7.612-13). In

taking from him the "phallic power" to dominate others (McGuire 395), she gains the

ability not only to imprison him for good, but also to "snare" other knights (Tennyson

7.809). Of course, it is interesting to note that Vivien's ability to undermine Arthur and

Camelot is not purely sexual. Just as the image of the serpentine devil has long been

associated with a forked or false tongue, so Vivien's intimate relations with men allow

her to use words to pollute their minds. According to James Adams, Vivien embodies

"rumor," "gossip," and "scandal" that Victorians both despised as a violation of privacy

and reveled in through "open publication" (422). There are two main excerpts from

Vivien's idyll that illustrate this other subversive aspect of her personality. The first is her

explicit "pearl-necklace" metaphor: just as the pearls of the Queen's broken necklace

scatter over the floor, "so is it with this rhyme" that is told and retold "differently"

(Tennyson 7.449-56). This analogy then plays out in the stories Vivien tells to Merlin

about the sinfulness, sexual immorality, and hypocrisy of Camelot. Most of her tales

Merlin immediately dismisses as "vague" and "proofless" (Tennyson 7.699-700),

products of her own insecurity rather than observations of the truth. However, he seems

more concerned that her accusations of Guinevere's adultery are disrespectfully prying, even if they are true (Adams 427). In the end, although Tennyson does give Vivien a relatively sympathetic back-story of becoming an orphan and being corrupted by the evil King Mark (Umland 282), the harsh imagery of her animalistic whorishness and uncontrollable tongue give her "very little redeeming social value" (Everett xii). It is partially her "black villainy" and eagerness to betray others that lead to Camelot's downfall and the knights' disillusionment (Kellman 105).

Perhaps even more important than the harlot or gossiper to the image of the Victorian fallen woman was that of the adulteress. These women were seen as perhaps even harsher violations of feminine ideals because they contributed to the downfall of Victorian family and society from the inside. Instead of fulfilling their role of being a moral influence on their husbands, they became intoxicated with the very sensuality they were meant to repudiate. Perhaps some of the most interesting representations of adulteresses in the Victorian period occurred in visual art. Although Victorian painters spent much time idealizing the "cozy hearth of the home where the wife, sweet, passive and long-suffering, waited patiently for the return of her husband" (H. Roberts 48), some of them began to depict what might happen to such an idealistic world if the wife deviates from such a submissive role. Augustus Egg's three-panel series *Past and Present*, displayed in 1858, is perhaps the most famous example (Lee). In these paintings, Egg depicts "the wife and mother who betrays her family" with absolutely no forgiveness, sympathy, or mercy; instead, "her punishment is death" and the destruction of everything she once held dear (Lee). Of course, some artists were "advocates" for the adulterous

woman once they learned to appreciate "the complex issues surrounding her" (Lee).

Similarly, religious orders sought to transform these "female outcasts," unable to gain

respect in most sectors of society, "into 'honest' women" (Mumm 527). Nonetheless, it is

clear that these more tolerant and accepting attitudes were the exception rather than the

rule. For the most part, adultery was not tolerated for women: men might fall prey to their

baser instincts, but women, whose responsibility to preserve morality extended not only

to themselves but to men as well, had no excuse.

Guinevere is clearly the embodiment of the adulteress in *Idylls of the King*, and

much like Vivien, she is often judged as having failed to control her and men's baser

natures and thus contributed to the fall of Camelot. Although many of Guinevere's

statements throughout the text depict her as nothing more than a woman with natural

sexual desires, these desires are seen in a negative light as a violation of Arthur's ideals.

According to Gordon Haight, Guinevere's sexuality, culminating in her adultery with

Lancelot, is a "deadly moral weakness" that destroys Camelot and, by analogy, could

"disrupt nineteenth-century society" (555). Indeed, her inability to resist Lancelot's

physical appeal in favor of her husband depicts her as an unorthodox Victorian woman.

She prefers the "warmth and color" of the sensual lover (Tennyson 12.642) to the "self-

contain'd" and ideal king who, in the Victorian mindset, not only is the rightful choice as

her husband, but also the best choice as a man who exhibits unparalleled morality

(12.403). Failing as an adulterous wife and barren woman, Guinevere loses all claim to

respectability. Not only does Arthur directly indict Guinevere for her misdeeds, saying

the only "children" she ever birthed are "sword and fire, / [r]ed ruin, and the breaking up

of laws" (Tennyson 12.422-23), but Guinevere herself eventually "sees Arthur's truth" (Dillon 151). Appearing as a "groveling beast" in her idyll (Engelberg 291), she indicts herself for choosing flesh over spirit and vows to remain in the nunnery to overcome her bodily lusts and become Arthur's "mate hereafter in the heavens" (Tennyson 12.632). Unfortunately, Guinevere's personal revelation of salvation does not undo the negative effects her infidelity has wrought on the Round Table. According to Girouard, "the main theme is how Arthur's achievements as king are brought to nothing as a result of Guenevere's guilty love for Lancelot" (182). She really does cause many knights to become disillusioned and break away from Arthur and his civilization.

The character of Pelleas, who eventually becomes the Red Knight, provides an especially poignant illustration of how women's failures to live up to Victorian ideals lead to the resurgence of male bestiality and act as a precursor to the fall of Camelot. In many ways, Pelleas represents a complete fall or reversal from an Arthurian, romantic idealism about women to bitter cynicism. Before the failures of Vivien and Guinevere even reach him, he learns this lesson on a microcosmic scale through his interactions with Ettarre. Initially, Pelleas is characterized by innocence, devotion to women, and "idealistic illusion" (Rosenberg 71). When he meets Ettarre, he sees the "beauty of her flesh" and assumes that it corresponds to the "beauty of her soul" (Tennyson 10.74-75), thus willingly devoting himself to fighting for her in the Tournament of Youth. When he wins the title for her, however, his fortune begins to turn. Not only does Ettarre refuse to take Pelleas as her courtly knight, but she also goes to bed with Gawain. Pelleas finds the gates of her castle, usually barred to him, "wide open" and discovers that Ettarre has also

opened herself to sexual sin (Tennsyon 10.405). This turning point marks the beginning

of Pelleas's despair. However, the true "savage disillusion" that eventually consumes

Pelleas emerges when he realizes that Ettarre's immorality is not an isolated case

(Rosenberg 71). When Percivale reveals rumors (presumably spread through Vivien's

influence) about Guinevere's trysts with Lancelot, bestial anger immediately rises in

Pelleas: he suffers from pain, begins to "wail," compares people to "wolves," and flees

into the forest (Tennyson 10.518-39). Pelleas, "irreparably damaged by the cynicism he

found," undergoes a literal and terrible transformation into the Red Knight (Purton 357).

He retreats to his own castle in the wilderness, surrounded by the corpses of knights, to

establish a disillusioned, cynical, hedonistic, and materialistic order that, as he sees it, is

the exact image of everything Arthur's Camelot embodies but hypocritically seeks to

conceal. When Arthur arrives at the castle to rebuke the Red Knight for his crimes, the

Red Knight emerges as an animal with a "shriek" and roaring diatribe against a court

whose female morality has been tainted (Tennyson 11.440). When the drunken Red

Knight collapses and Arthur's knights, unable to be constrained, "trample" him and

"massacre" his castle (Tennyson 11.469-76), it is clear that violence uncontrolled by

female morality will inevitably and dangerously spread throughout the kingdom. Female

immorality has led Arthur's knights, albeit indirectly, to "fight like wild beasts" and

"reveal themselves to be no better than uncivilized madmen" (Machann 214).

Thus far, it seems that *Idylls of the King* acts largely in support of conventional

Victorian gender idealisms. The early idylls, describing Arthur, Gareth, Lynette, and

Elaine, illustrate a preference for traditional gender roles. The women are seen as

domestic and moral, the men as rational and subdued by women, and this scheme seems a hopeful one for the development of Camelot's civilization. As the text progresses and the idylls become more cynical, Tennyson heaps more of the blame for Camelot's fall on women's transgression of boundaries, which causes men, with the exception of the heroic Arthur, to revert to their bestial state. Despite this fact, *Idylls of the King* also reveals a striking ambivalence by revealing subtle criticisms of such gendered ideals. According to Stephen Ahern, "Tennyson does not mirror uncritically the sexual politics of his culture," but intersperses his support for it with depictions of the "problems" it creates (89). Tennyson implies rather early in the text that Victorian gender roles could be extremely stifling and have negative consequences; they might be effective on an ideological or allegorical level, but in the real world of complex "human psychology," they fail utterly (Phillips 252). According to Catherine Phillips, Tennyson was always "reluctant to accept the allegorical interpretations" of his work, preferring instead to use open-ended and complex characterization to envision a "whole range of moral response to human relationships" (251). First, the characterization in the "Balin and Balan" idyll suggests that men, rather than women, are responsible for controlling their own violence and bestiality. Second, the character of Enid enables Tennyson to question "the binary structure" of gender roles and propose a more natural and equalizing flexibility (Linley 377). Finally, and most surprisingly, the characterization of Arthur himself at certain points in the text undermines the validity of gender idealizations. Although these instances are perhaps less central to the development of plot in *Idylls of the King* than the

conventional gender ideologies, they nonetheless illustrate profound critiques that cannot

be left out of any holistic reading of Tennyson's Arthurian rendition.

The "Balin and Balan" idyll represents a complication of the general scheme of

Camelot's fall, for Balin succumbs to bestiality and madness primarily because of a lack

of male rationality, not female morality. Of all the characters in the *Idylls of the King*,

Balin is probably the best example of the savage man; he does not simply become savage

due to disillusionment, but is from his first appearance "homicidal" and full of "fury"

(Engelberg 289). Balin initially seems to overcome his violent tendencies through the

help of others. Although some scholars, like Linda Shires, think Balin needs the morality

of "femaleness" in the figure of Guinevere to control his outbursts (415), his primary

need is actually for his brother, Balan. Balin and Balan function as two halves of a

balanced whole; whereas Balin is violent and unruly, Balan is "older," "more

sophisticated" (Machann 210), "controlled," and "self-disciplined" (Purton 357). It is

initially Balan's influence that helps Balin control his bestial side. Balin always considers

his brother the "worthier" and "better" of the pair (Tennyson 6.52-66), and once they are

together at Arthur's court, Balin seems genuinely to overcome his violence. Balan makes

his positive effects clear when he gives a warning speech to Balin before he departs on a

quest to kill the "demon of the woods" (Tennyson 6.134). He advises Balin to "[l]et not

thy moods prevail" but to "shake them aside," for they are entirely incompatible with the

knightly and chivalrous "fellowship" at Arthur's court (Tennyson 6.137-44). Once Balan

departs, however, Balin almost immediately takes a turn for the worse. Without the

"restraining influence" of Balan to guide him on the proper path, Balin becomes

dependent successively on Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere, eventually perceiving that the men of Arthur's court look to her as a model of morality (Tennyson 6.175). Unfortunately for Balin, his early exposure to Guinevere's affair with Lancelot causes him to lose control of his anger, and he flees into the woods. Becoming "the living emblem of the rough beast" (Rosenberg 81), Balin tramples on Guinevere's shield and roars like an animal when Vivien reminds him of the adultery (Tennyson 6.529-35). Balan, who has always had the "job" of controlling Balin's violence (Purton 357), destroys the disguised and demonic Balin and perishes himself. In all reality, Balin has indeed become the demon of the woods. The development of this idyll's plot clearly implies that the presence of Balan as the rational male, not Guinevere as the moral female, is that which can hold "violent nature in check" (Machann 210). Ultimately, men are responsible for their own actions and gain only disappointment from expecting women to provide all that is ideal in their personalities. Of course, the implication that women might be inherently irrational and immoral is perhaps no more sympathetic to them than the idea that they are inherently restrained and moral. Nonetheless, the idyll does undermine the prevalent ideology in *Idylls of the King* that views women as angels meant to control animalistic men.

Although the two idylls of Geraint and Enid in some ways appear to support conventional Victorian marital and gender roles, they similarly contain enormous questionings of such roles as stilted and unrealistic. The idylls appear traditional because they illustrate a loving marriage as the primary relationship for the genders and focus on masculine dominance and feminine subservience. Geraint, although he becomes

effeminate in his devotion to and focus on Enid, eventually overcompensates by becoming very aggressive and controlling on their quest together. Although Enid's "sweet voice of a bird" in song initially charms Geraint (Tennyson 4.329), she rarely speaks to him directly. From the point at which Geraint and her father work out their engagement to the beginning of their marriage, she maintains the role of the silent, subservient, wifely companion. At this point in the idylls, the two characters appear to support traditional gender ideologies. However, although Geraint remains in the realm of conventionality, Enid learns as the marriage progresses that she must overcome "insufficient conceptions of gender roles" and communicate with her husband in relative equality if she is to make the marriage work (L. Hughes 420). The problem begins when Enid is unable to openly tell Geraint that his effeminacy is ruining his reputation. Instead, she keeps silent, confessing her sadness only at night when she thinks he cannot hear (Tennyson 4.86-108). Unfortunately, he hears only bits and pieces of what she says, and assumes quite wrongly that she has been sexually unfaithful (Tennyson 4.114). In an effort to remove her from the immoral influence of Guinevere and the court, Geraint forces Enid to ride with him into the woods, subjecting both of them to numerous hazards, all the while preventing her from speaking (Tennyson 4.126-33). The scheme he orchestrates seems "to stage a fantasy of female helplessness and male power" (Zietlow 740). This journey, however, becomes a "pilgrimage" for both Geraint and Enid in which they develop their notions of marriage (Poston 270). Geraint, on the one hand, learns that he must balance his masculine and feminine impulses, neither being completely dedicated to Enid in the domestic realm nor being incredibly jealous and forcing her to endure his

verbal and physical abuses. He discovers that he can "find a way to be both a loving and involved husband and a respected, productive public figure" (Ranum 241). Overall, then, Geraint's transformation seems to be one that confirms conventionality, for the ideal Victorian gentleman constantly sought to achieve this balance between strength in leadership positions and tenderness at home. On the other hand, Enid learns that she must communicate more directly with Geraint to avoid misunderstandings. Female subservience, while apparently a good idea in theory, does not play out well for those seeking to create healthy relationships in which mutual communication is essential. Enid transforms from hiding "the truth she clearly sees" out of insecurity (Zietlow 737) to learning to communicate in ways that will "uplift" her and Geraint alike (Ranum 241). Throughout her journey with Geraint, she seeks to communicate with him both verbally and through body language and learns that a marriage of relative equals will be less likely to encounter such misinterpretations as they did. Overall, it is clear that Enid's character implies that black-and-white gender roles simply do not function in real life.

Finally, complications in the characterization of Arthur present perhaps the most profound subversion of Victorian gender roles. Many recent, revisionist scholars maintain that although Arthur is idealized throughout *Idylls of the King*, his propensity to force others into idealized roles is depicted negatively. According to Clyde Ryals, Arthur's very scheme for Camelot's development fails because he seeks to turn real individuals into moral and "pale facsimiles of the King" who thus develop in limited and unnatural ways (58). Nowhere is this more obvious than in Arthur's relationship with Guinevere. Although the traditional reading of *Idylls of the King* accepts Arthur's idealism and

blames Guinevere for failing to live up to it, one might argue that Arthur is to blame for seeking to turn her into "an abstract ideal presence" when she is, instead, a "real woman" (Ryals 59). In many instances in the text, Guinevere actually seems very aware of this discrepancy and "denies responsibility for this failure" (Ahern 97). In "The Coming of Arthur," Guinevere does not recognize her future husband because he is not wearing the worldly gear that sets him apart as king (Tennyson 2.53); already she seems to gravitate toward the material over the abstract. Eventually, Guinevere gives voice to this aspect of her personality, telling Lancelot that she far prefers him as the real and physical "garden rose" or "hyacinth" to the "spiritual lily" of Arthur (Tennyson 6.259-66). These statements make Guinevere seem not like an immoral and evil adulteress, but a real woman whose bodily needs have not been met by a husband so lofty that he "neglect[s]" her (Ahern 107). With this context in mind, Arthur's reprobation of Guinevere in the convent becomes not the necessary response to her immorality but the harsh misjudgment of a "prig" (Ryals 64). His description of Guinevere as the single most destructive "disease" of Camelot illustrates how little he understands her and the complexity of the forces that contribute to his civilization's downfall (Tennyson 12.515). Essentially, Arthur devalues Guinevere's humanity by seeking to mold her complex womanhood into a single, ideal role. Thus, readers might interpret Arthur's words as the mistaken assumption of a man fraught with hubris, and the ideology of female morality as a set of "false images that are projected upon [individuals] by the King" (Machann 217). Of course, one must remember that this reading is not necessarily supported by the entirety of the text. Arthur remains idealized as the prime Victorian gentleman, and Guinevere,

despite her knowledge of the sexual needs of women, in the end repents of her adultery in favor of Arthur's higher ideals. In fact, many Victorian thinkers embarked on projects similar to Arthur's when they sought to limit and simplify the roles deemed acceptable for women. It could be that Tennyson's Arthur is primarily a reflection or support of such trends, rather than a judgment against them. Nonetheless, the subtle complication of Arthur's character in the convent scene, in which he appears at his most distant and judgmental, illustrates a questioning and destabilizing of the entire system of Camelot. Perhaps Camelot's fall occurs not because of female failure, but because its creation was unrealistic from the beginning.

Although *Idylls of the King* is largely traditional in its references to Victorian gender roles, setting women up to be ideals and criticizing them for failing, readers should not ignore those moments in the text in which those ideals are subverted. However few and far between the subversions are, they remain powerful and emphatic. Tennyson seems to be in line with Victorian gender roles, but also exhibits awareness that they might be culturally constructed and stifling, not natural and productive. Overall, this ambivalence seems to reflect the climate of Victorian conversation. In this era of transition, strong gender stereotypes persisted, but the few complaints against them were becoming more common in an environment of ever-increasing debate and argument. It is inevitable that in a period of such conflict Tennyson's text would come to embody or at least represent various opinions and poles on the issues at hand. His subversions illustrate that even the staunchest advocates for conventionality were beginning to be affected by complaints against convention. The fact that idealizing and subversive idylls are evenly

interspersed throughout the text illustrates that these debates are quite poignant. Tennyson's major contributions to the Arthurian saga—Arthur as the blameless king and female sexual sin as the ultimate cause of the fall—become slightly but constantly destabilized by the notion that idealism itself is at fault.

CHAPTER II

MASCULINE REDEFINITION AND FEMININE RETRENCHMENT IN

THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING

Around the start of the twentieth century, fantasy literature began to gain

popularity as a means of exploring sensitive issues in a more distant and, at times,

idealized manner. Previously considered little more than a means to "unlock" the

"imagination" of children (Mathews xi), this century saw the emergence of the perception

of fantasy as "an established mode for serious adult literature" (20). It is not surprising,

then, that many Arthurian retellings in this century show the influence of the fantasy

genre. According to Ken Slater, T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, written

between the early 1930s and late 1950s, operates within "the very best fantasy tradition."

Although many consider fantasy to be inherently more distant and abstract than realistic

fiction, White's Arthurian rendition makes use of certain plot devices to render his text

particularly relevant to the issues of his time. According to M. Irwin, "White makes a

method of anachronism," the process of describing historical plots and themes from a

modern perspective (qtd. in Thomas 81). Through a "contemporary" narrator, a Merlyn

who lives "backward in time" (Thomas 80-81), and characters who exhibit modern

personalities (Ross 361), White crafts a tale that appears fantastic but actually makes

rather poignant analyses of twentieth century issues. Scholar Nathan Latil is correct when he describes *The Once and Future King* as a "search for answers to the problems of the modern world." One of the central modern questions that the text examines is that of gender roles. This is not surprising when one considers that White's period of composition—the decades immediately preceding, during, and after World War II—saw both the establishment of gendered ideals and the fracturing of those ideals by their respective realities. Herma Kay describes the gendered ideals as the "glory of battle" for men and the "cult of motherhood" for women (83). Kay is careful in her description of these ideals to emphasize that they often functioned as little more than a "veil of glamour" to cloak both the dangers of wartime and the possibilities of female autonomy (83). The fact that White's Arthurian retelling has such a "long and complex gestation" period enables it to make profound comments on the evolution of these gender roles over a relatively lengthy span of time (Shippey 312). Although *The Once and Future King* is exceedingly sympathetic toward redefinitions of the masculine ideal, it repeatedly strives to limit women to the domestic sphere.

The masculine ideal of the heroic soldier predominated during the Second World War. It is not hard to understand why many Western men felt they needed such a myth to boost their confidence. The economic crises of the 1930s proved a "devastating blow" to many men's egos, forcing them to confront the failure of a masculine ideal based on "employment and financial success" in the public sphere (Grandstaff). Many citizens and policymakers actually felt relief at the onset of World War II, for it enabled men to become "magnificently male again" and reclaim their traditional virtues of strength,

honor, and power (Jonathan Daniels qtd. in Grandstaff). One need only examine the

multitude of militaristic advertisements of this period to see how the myth was

perpetuated so effectively. Such advertisements depicted the Western war effort as the

means by which "the young boy" could be "transformed into the masculine image of the

soldier-hero" (Grandstaff). The trials of combat and battle became less of an emphasis as

the notion of the "rite of passage into heroic adulthood" came to the fore (Grandstaff).

What is perhaps most interesting and relevant to this study is the fact that many of these

advertisements described their heroic themes in a specifically Arthurian manner. The

imagery of the Percivale myth, of the youthful knight whose maturation into intelligence

and strength enables him to achieve the Grail and "make the wasteland fertile and

productive again," was apparently quite common in these military ads (Grandstaff).

Without a doubt, the prevalence of this mythology that likened war to heroism and

soldiers to ideal men had many repercussions on society. Boys learned from an early age

that to adopt the "violence" characteristic of "young warriors" was to ensure their

participation in the combat that would mold them into heroes (Gillis 269).

However, many soldiers who experienced the horrors of the Second World War

realized that emotional disintegration, rather than heroism, was its primary result. Even

before the outbreak of World War II, veterans from World War I were starting to

understand that the realities of war were hardship and suffering, not heroic ideals. By

1916, psychological disturbance and shell-shock "accounted for as much as 40 percent of

the casualties in the fighting zones" (Showalter, *Female* 168); between then and 1929,

nearly 115,000 veterans sought "pensions for shell-shock-related disorders" (190).

Considering the fact that such debilitating responses were "a shocking contrast to the heroic visions" of the male soldier (169), it is not surprising that many military officials treated shell-shock patients with disdain. Leaders sought to prevent reports of shell-shock from leaking to the press, to refuse pensions to shell-shocked veterans, and even to shoot them "for malingering or cowardice" (170). Eventually, however, military officials realized that "emotional disturbance" was not only to be expected during war (170), but that it was the responsibility of the government to "treat mental casualties" (Wake 466). Needless to say, the realization that the experience of war did not match its ideal continued to spread among soldiers in World War II. In 1942, 25 percent of soldiers in hospitals had to be treated for "neuropsychiatric disorders" (Wake 492). By the end of the war and culminating in the 1960s, the entire notion of combat as an "initiation rite" into heroic manhood "backfired" as veterans sought to "unmask the true face of war" (Harani 48). Overall, it is clear that the ideal of man as heroic, militaristic, and violent was constructed upon shaky foundations that were completely incapable of remaining relevant in the face of reality.

These opposing messages of heroism and disintegration informed White's personal response to war, and his increasingly realistic, negative attitude toward the soldier-hero ideal emerges forcefully in *The Once and Future King*. White himself, a citizen of Great Britain but a resident of Ireland during World War II, "vacillated over whether or not he should join the fight" (Thomas 57). On the one hand, "White was deeply concerned about Hitler's rise to power" and wanted to defend the individualism and capitalism of the West to the best of his ability (Boyle 48). On the other hand, White,

likely influenced by his knowledge of emotional disturbance among soldiers, unapologetically embraced pacifism and believed war to be "vicious and futile" (Ross 302). In the end, White resolved his dilemma by shifting his priorities. He decided, after much hesitation and internal conflict, that writing an Arthurian rendition with the power to shape the world for the better "would be a greater contribution to civilization than any he could make in fighting Hitler" (Kellman 177). It is to be expected, then, that *The Once and Future King* clearly reflects White's increasingly pacifistic ideology and negative feelings toward the war and its false idealization as a heroic rite of passage. Many scholars have argued that the text's primary preoccupation is finding "an antidote to war" (Thomas 46). White himself states that the "epic theme" of *The Once and Future King* "is [w]ar and how to stop it" (qtd. in Gallix 283). At numerous points in the text, White "belittles medieval warfare" (Ross 353), strangely yet effectively converting "Malory's story of warlike adventure . . . into a plea for pacifism" (385). The text uses the vocabulary of "Might" and "Right" to reflect these opposing ideologies, the former in support of the ideal of masculine heroic violence, the latter in repudiation of such an ideal as both inadequate and dangerous (Slater).

  The Once and Future King clearly espouses pacifism over violence as a male ideal in its initial segments of natural education. Early in the text, Merlyn creates a lighthearted scenario in which the young Arthur (delightfully nicknamed the Wart) can learn pacifism from animals immediately surrounding his home castle. In a lengthy segment "almost entirely original" to White (Ross 312), Merlyn magically transforms Arthur into a variety of animals to help him learn how to best form "a world without war"

(Gallix 284). Nancy Merrell provides an exceedingly apt analysis of the progress of these educational transformations. First, "Merlin changes Arthur" into some type of animal; next, Arthur listens to and participates in "debates" about political philosophy specifically applicable to the species he is visiting; and finally, Arthur "emerges with new information" that contributes to the development of his own ideology (Merrell 107). As each educational experience builds on the previous one, Arthur comes to gain an "awareness of the problem of Might and Right" (Ross 312) that will come to develop into a sense of his duty as king to dispel the former and promote the latter. It is interesting to note that this education does not simply teach Arthur to value Right over Might; by virtue of being an "academic education" rather than an "athletic" one, it instills in Arthur the greater importance of "knowledge" and "sensitivity" over knightly violence (Barker).

One of the most obvious ways in which Arthur learns that Might should not be a masculine, political ideal is through the negative example of the pike, hawks, and ants. The pike is the first negative example of Might that Arthur encounters. This pike, who is described as "tyrannical," "remorseless," "predatory," and "fierce," physically and verbally illustrates a political philosophy based entirely on physical strength (White 52-53). Physically, the pike is enormous, muscular, cold-faced, and capable of destroying smaller individuals with its multiple rows of "teeth like thorns" (White 52). The pike's violence is even more explicit in its verbal profession that "[t]here is only power. . . . Power of the body decides everything in the end, and only Might is Right" (White 52). Arthur's simple response, "that he did not care" for the pike, illustrates that his pacifistic views are not yet formed but have established a germ from which to develop. The hawks

serve as a similarly negative example that elicits a similarly negative response from Arthur. According to Richard Mathews, the hawks represent "an even more lethal and literal pecking order than that which he observed as a perch" (102). Not only does the test of Arthur's bravery and courage come in the form of his ability to withstand the onslaught of the deranged and violent Colonel Cully (White 84), but the songs of the hawks explicitly support the ideology of Might. They chant such violent phrases as "[l]ife is blood, shed and offered" (White 82); "[s]trength to the strong and the lordly and lonely" (83); and "woe to the weak one" (83). It is quite ironic, and even foreshadowing, that such an aggressive and brutal crew considers itself "an order of knighthood" (White 75) capable of "gentlemanly" acts (84). Arthur's admission that the hawks might be "grand" but are also "horrible" illustrates his nascent grasping of this paradox and developing judgment against it (White 85). Finally, the last but most vivid negative example of Might as a political philosophy is the society of ants. Without a doubt, the ants are a horrifying illustration of a society in which individual questioning does not exist and, thus, all of the individuals are easily convinced to war against their own kind. Living "mindlessly," the ants lose all sense of decision-making and become engulfed by the "propaganda they constantly hear" (Thomas 57). Dominated by the "voice" in their heads, the ants perform exceedingly limited and dull tasks like the cogs of a machine and do not possess the language capacity to "ask . . . questions" (White 122-24). In this social situation, it is not difficult for the ants to be persuaded to go to war, for their susceptibility to "brainwashing" renders "patriotic courage" entirely unnecessary (Sly). Indeed, nothing more than a shift in the "broadcasts" the ants receive through their

antennae is needed for them to accept irrational war against their own species (White

128). Whereas Arthur's negative responses to the pike and hawks are simple and

undeveloped, here they have become full-fledged in an illustration of the ants' extremity

and Arthur's development. Arthur views the ants' society with "dislike," begins to "feel

sick inside" in their presence, comes to see their way of life as a "nightmare," and even

says that the ants "had begun to kill the joy of life which belonged to his boyhood"

(White 122-30). The extremity of this segment of animal education becomes

understandable when one learns that White added it to a revised version of *The Once and

Future King* published after World War II had taken place (Kellman 122). Indeed, the

violence, chants, salutes, and notions of superiority among the ants have frequently been

interpreted as satirical parallels to Hitler's Germany (Gallix 288-89).

In contrast to these negative examples, Arthur's educational experiences with the

geese and badger encourage him to embrace a more pacifistic, Right-focused political

philosophy. The geese, in a segment also added by White after World War II, clearly

illustrate "an ideal society" through their embodiment of such virtues as "freedom" and

"happiness" (Gallix 290). The way the geese achieve these virtues is through pacifism.

When Arthur questions his goose guide, Lyo-lyok, about war, first she does not

understand the concept and then she develops such a profound "distaste" for it that she

can hardly endure Arthur's presence (White 169). When Arthur, still clearly a youth

despite his education, pronounces that "[i]t would be fun to watch" an army of geese in

heated battle, Lyo-lyok finds it an "obscene suggestion" (White 169). As Arthur grows in

sensitivity to the geese, he realizes that their combination of individuality and lack of

national boundaries enables them to attain such a peaceable existence (White 171). As Martin Kellman skillfully summarizes, "[t]hese pacific but organized creatures fly so high that they do not understand what Arthur means by boundaries or by war and think all fighting is childish behavior" (123). Arthur, elated during the migration of the geese and finding only "delight" in their society, finally seems to grasp the ideal of pacifism over that of violence (White 176). However, it takes one final animal encounter to solidify this position in Arthur's mind. Even after Arthur has had such formative experiences with multiple animals, he seems unable to overcome the boyish impulse toward violence so encouraged during World War II. He tells the badger toward the end of their meeting that he "should have liked to go to war . . . to do great deeds, and be brave, and conquer my own fears" (White 194). The badger, knowing the flaws of Arthur's ideal but being too wise to correct him directly, "poses a question" of whether Arthur prefers the ants or the geese (Mathews 107). Although Arthur's answer remains unstated, the implication is clear: he has received all the signals necessary to establish a concept of masculine leadership in which Right, not Might, is central.

Although Arthur's magical experiences with these animals make up the bulk of his youthful education, White also undermines the notion of violent masculinity as heroic by describing many of the knights surrounding young Arthur with humorous but biting satire. According to Jimmie Thomas, "White is one of the earliest writers to inject humor into the Arthurian story" with the general effect of a "light satire on chivalry and knighthood" as superficial at best and violent at worst (143-51). Meredith Ross agrees that this satire is meant to provoke a "tension between reverence and irony" for the

knightly ideal, which further encourages Arthur to question the validity of war (76). One

of the first and most recurring of these satirical moments occurs in connection with King

Pellinore and the Questing Beast. Very early in *The Once and Future King*, even before

Merlyn's appearance, Arthur encounters Pellinore in the woods (White 21-26). As Ross

points out, Pellinore's first appearance in a beautiful "moonlit clearing" suggests that he

will be developed as a romantic, chivalrous figure, but this naïve perception (which is

actually Arthur's) very quickly becomes subverted (340). As soon as Pellinore speaks, his

complaint about the petty struggles of knighthood and discussion of tracking the Questing

Beast via its "fewmets" are far from a heroic ideal and rather humorous (White 23). As

Pellinore reappears throughout *The Once and Future King*, he becomes even more a

parody of idealized knighthood. Slater is correct to emphasize the scene in which

Pellinore's woes over his loss of love and the Questing Beast encourage Grummore and

Palomides—two of the other comedic characters—to dress in a Questing Beast costume

and accidentally woo the Beast herself. This "hilarious adventure," while providing

laughs and entertainment for readers, clearly has a subtle purpose of undermining the

validity of chivalric ideals (Slater). The relationship between Pellinore and Grummore

becomes the means for another of White's satirical jabs at knighthood when the two joust

for Arthur and Merlyn (White 62-72). The joust—supposedly the most honorable,

chivalric, masculine, and physical means by which knights prove their honor—becomes

for these characters either an "empty ritual" (Boyle 156) or a dishonorable display of

escalating tempers (173). Early in the joust, the knights' strength is secondary to their

difficulty of maneuvering in their armor and "complicated stations" (White 66). As the

fight progresses, the battle becomes more earnest, but only in the sense that Pellinore and Grummore begin to insult each other in a very non-chivalric fashion, calling each other names like "cheat" and "cad" (White 69). Throughout the entirety of the scene, Pellinore and Grummore remain "mechanical toys" who illustrate that chivalry is actually rather superficial (Ross 341). The final knightly character in Arthur's youth who serves to subvert the validity of his order is Twyti, King Uther's huntsman. Similar to Pellinore and Grummore, Twyti highly values his hunting skills (White 142), but Ector and his household do not share this opinion (139), and the death of the dog required for the success of the boar hunt leaves Twyti scarred and unable to maintain his cheerful, self-emphasizing outlook (150). Overall, then, if Arthur's episodic experiences among the animals are not enough to give him knowledge of the limitations of masculine violence, the very disappointing examples of the knights around him should be enough to make a convincing case.

As Arthur matures as king, the novel focuses on how he transforms his youthful lessons into the philosophical question of Might versus Right. Indeed, after learning from the animals and observing the knights, the adult Arthur develops his youthful favoring of Right into a more mature question of how such an ideology can be put into practice through politics. This transformation essentially begins when Merlyn advises Arthur on the particularities of war. Merlyn tries to convey the complex decision-making that Arthur must endure as a ruler, at times refusing to make war due to its "wickedness," at other times warring in the hope of stopping an even more wicked individual (White 232). Arthur's rule over England can be summarized in terms of his attempts to navigate this

crucial balance. Because Arthur "inherits an anarchic England where the strongest rule"

(Ross 310), his entire reign is characterized by his attempts to bridle the force of Might—

also referred to as "Fort Mayne" (Sprague)—and emphasize that of Right. Unfortunately,

all of Arthur's attempts to establish an "arrangement" in England like that of his idealized

childhood fail utterly (Manlove 74). Arthur moves from using Might to support Right

through his battle at Bedegraine and the Round Table, to focusing on a "*spiritual* goal"

(author's emphasis), to establishing Right by justice alone (Manlove 74-75), each time to

be confronted with "the violence of the human heart" (Ross 310). It will be fruitful to

examine each of Arthur's steps in detail, as they comprise a vital "experiment" in

redefining masculine virtue and ultimately lead to the question of whether such

redefinitions are possible for all or only a select few (Manlove 76).

Arthur's first attempt at solving the problem of Might is to use it only for Right.

In fact, Arthur begins his earliest assertion of his right to rule with this ideology in mind.

The nobles Arthur contends with for his succession are quite invested in the Might is

Right structure. For them, "warfare is a game" in which the knights themselves use the

leverage of their socioeconomic influence to keep themselves physically safe while

endangering the lives of serfs, who are easy to manipulate into war due to their "racial

hatred" (Boyle 161). Thus manipulated, the serfs fight for the nobles only to provide

"scenic" violence for a "good war" (White 297). Arthur senses that there is something

inherently cruel in this process and decides in a bold move not to participate in it. In an

explicit illustration of the Might for Right philosophy, he decides to do something

"hateful and dangerous"—ordering his knights to fight the nobles directly—"for the sake

of decency" (White 298). Luckily, Arthur's "unusual tactics" not only offend the nobles,

but also catch them by surprise, affording him a victory (Boyle 162). Emboldened by the

apparent success of his scheme, Arthur decides to establish the Round Table "to harness

Might into the service of Right" (Ross 310). He describes his plan as recruiting knights to

be members of his prestigious order, then making "the oath of the order that Might is

only to be used for Right" (White 248). Still an idealist, Arthur has broad visions of

knights who will use their strength, otherwise turned toward violence, "to defend virgins

. . . and to help the oppressed" (White 248). It is the ultimate irony that the success of

Arthur's plan is what precipitates its failure. Once the many "social ills" that plague

England "are eradicated" by the Round Table (Ross 310), the knights lose focus on their

ideals and interpret their violent yet honorable deeds as "sportsmanship" (White 365).

Arthur laments that the violence of mankind tends toward competition and "Games-

Mania," symptoms of an emotional and social perversity (White 365). It would seem,

then, that the very notion that Might can be channeled for Right—thus the very

foundation of the Round Table—is flawed.

Convinced that Might cannot be channeled into Right through secular, political

means, Arthur decides to encourage the quest for the Holy Grail. His premise is that if

"we have used up the worldly objects for our Might . . . there is nothing left but the

spiritual ones" (White 433). The knights initially appear excited about searching for lost

relics and fighting for God; Lancelot even calls the quest "the most splendid idea" of

Arthur's court (White 435). Unfortunately, the quest for the Holy Grail, which is never

described directly in *The Once and Future King*, ends up being quite "destructive"

(Manlove 81). As the knights return from their adventures, they illustrate that both failure

and success on the quest are devastating to Arthur's court and the promotion of Right.

The clearest representative of failure is Gawaine, who returns from the quest with little

positive result. Not only does Gawaine's seemingly unlimited violence continue after his

quest, but his anger even intensifies with the knowledge of his failure (White 440). On

the other hand, the knights who succeed or grow on the quest—Bors, Galahad, and

Percivale—simply "disappear" from the earth into a spiritual realm (Ross 311). It is with

growing anxiety that Arthur listens to the adventure stories of the knights and realizes,

yet again, that his aim to bind Might to Right has failed.

Arthur's final attempt at controlling Might is to banish it, establishing Right alone

as the force of his kingdom. Arthur does this by setting up a system of objective justice or

civil law. Having failed in his attempts to use Might for Right, Arthur embraces the

opinion that Right must stand alone. He begins to formulate the notion "that when Law is

so perfected that everyone, even the ruler himself, is subject to it, then the world may

have a chance for peace" (Thomas 48). Again, much like his other attempts at

establishing Right, the early stages of Arthur's legal plan seem to work. Ambitious as

always, Arthur spends much time distilling previous laws into his and hearing complaints

in his new "Justice Room" (White 552). As can be expected, however, Arthur's plan does

not succeed for long. The seemingly inherent violence of Might emerges yet again when

Mordred and Agravaine, despising Arthur for personal reasons, decide to "use Arthur's

new civil law to destroy the Round Table" (Kellman 146). By this point in *The Once and

Future King*, the affair between Lancelot and Guenever is well-known at court, but

Lancelot's prowess in combat hitherto made a dishonorable exposure impossible under a system that accepted the importance of Might. In a system based entirely on Right, however, Mordred and Agravaine only need to gather proof of the affair to justify its exposure and punishment. Mordred, at least, is keenly aware of this change of events. While he seems, like Arthur, to have only the repudiation of "unfair justice" in mind, his true intent is to manipulate the legal system for personal gain (White 556). Although it costs many lives to complete the plan, Mordred succeeds in exposing the affair, creating a rift in Camelot and staging a coup for himself. Arthur is horrified to realize that violence, even only in the form of a wicked will and not the brute strength of "thugs" (White 556), has again subverted his high ideals.

In the final scene before Arthur's battle against Mordred, he ponders the meaning of his failure to diminish Might and establish Right. At first, Arthur feels dejected and pessimistic, for his continual failings imply that human nature is too violent to be contained. He begins to question his childhood assumption, distilled from Merlyn's education, "that man was decent"; he fears, deeply and penetratingly, that "original sin" might be man's natural state (White 628-29). If this is so, Arthur realizes, his goal of perfecting mankind "has been nothing more than a struggle with futility" against the Might and violence that will always resurface (Thomas 56). However, Arthur gradually convinces himself that the spread of education and culture can enable Right to spread in the world. This remarkably swift transformation in tone entails a shift in the focus of Arthur's reflection from the nature of mankind to the nature of war. Describing the causes of war as "[s]uspicion and fear: possessiveness and greed: resentment for ancestral

wrong" (White 634), Arthur decides that the ultimate solution to the problem of Might is to "unimagine" individual boundaries and enmities through "culture" and learning (White 639). The final image of the text, in which Arthur presents his story to a young Thomas Malory, implies that a "small number of men" might be able to overcome the masculine propensity toward violence and spread that knowledge to others (Thomas 179). It is through this image that the title of the fourth book—*The Candle in the Wind*—gains its significance. The flickering of learning might seem insignificant, but, to Arthur, it can withstand the billowing storm of Might so common among men. Of course, many scholars have interpreted Arthur's statements with a more critical and skeptical lens, questioning his epiphany as "perfunctory" and another illustration of an ideal doomed to failure (Manlove 73). Nonetheless, the text at least uses Arthur's hopeful perspective to suggest that the presence of the violent man need not be so pervasive.

The issue of masculine heroism during the Second World War was clearly not the same for all men, however. Male homosexual soldiers found it particularly difficult to reconcile their sexual orientation with the military's perception of it. As early as the 1920s, homophobia was a common phenomenon in Western society. Men of this time period who did not display aggressive behavior confronted the "stigma of being labeled 'homosexual'" or effeminate (Coontz 206). With the beginning of World War II, this homophobia became even more entrenched through military conscription policy. Military officials borrowed the notion of homosexuality as "a form of mental illness" from psychiatrists during the 1930s and 1940s (Wake 464). Eventually, homosexuality came to be defined in even more severe terms as a "deviation" (481) that could cause

"unquestionable harm to 'normal' soldiers" through its supposed spread and sapping of courage (490). Although many homosexual men served in the military, large numbers of them were screened out early in the conscription process, leading to stark feelings of inadequacy. Even accepted and trained soldiers had to confront "rumors" and slander against their units as having rampant homosexuality (Yellin 322).

As a closet homosexual, White was undoubtedly concerned by the widespread homophobia in the West during World War II. While White may not have fought in World War II and thus did not suffer from the direct discrimination that homosexual soldiers endured, social taboos against his sexual orientation still reached him. Numerous scholars have emphasized the degree to which his homosexuality in such an era contributed to profound psychological trauma. White came to feel a deep and abiding "insecurity" at his realization of the conflict between his sexual identity and the widespread cultural aversion to it (Boyle 32). According to Kellman, White's obsession to "excel in any other area he took up"—and he took up many—derives in part from his "frustration" at not being able to locate a socially acceptable outlet for his sexuality (74). It is not surprising, then, that subtle hints of masculinity issues for gay men emerge in *The Once and Future King*. Leslie Mittleman even calls White's homosexuality one of the "hidden keys" to understanding many of his preoccupations in the novel (168).

Although Lancelot is never directly mentioned as a homosexual male, this aspect of his personality emerges faintly in White's Arthurian retelling. Of course, this interpretation might seem at odds with Lancelot as the quintessentially heterosexual, adulterous lover of Guenever. Indeed, not only does White refuse to "condemn" the

affair, but he depicts it very sympathetically by turning the lovers into "the most convincing portrait of a heterosexual love-relation in all his work" (Manlove 77). White provides vivid illustrations of the pair when their youthful ardor is blossoming, but perhaps the most striking love scenes occur when the couple has aged yet retains the flame of devotion. The very moment before Lancelot and Guenever are caught in their affair, White provides a heart-warming image of the old knight's "brushing her grey hair" (White 564). Many scholars have argued, however, that it is not difficult to reconcile Lancelot the heterosexual lover with Lancelot the plagued homosexual. According to Kellman, the first individual whom Lancelot loves is Arthur (145). Indeed, Lancelot centers his entire childhood on perfecting himself for Arthur's presence. This homosexual love leads to jealousy of Guenever, which transforms, however paradoxically, into heterosexual love filled with remorse at having treated her with disdain (Kellman 145). Although White includes no explicit mention of Lancelot's homosexuality in *The Once and Future King*, his personal letters and journals reveal that he unconsciously perceived Lancelot as his "self-character" (Thomas 93) and interpreted him as "bisexual" (Ross 329). It makes sense that White, writing about homosexuality during a time in which it was not accepted, would cloak such aspects of Lancelot's character. Nonetheless, the development of Lancelot's complex personality suggests, at the very least, that he suffered an immense internal tension similar to that which White felt as a result of his love for men. Struggling to accept himself and find an outlet for his desires, Lancelot becomes the embodiment of "earthly versus human ideals or the incongruence between trying to obtain earthly humanity and heavenly perfection" (Thomas 123). In this sense,

Lancelot appears to embody White's obsession to succeed in all of his endeavors to make up for frustrated desires. From Lancelot's intense youthful training (White 315) to his strong religious convictions (463), it remains clear that he is fundamentally unstable due to his trying to function in a society in which he has no place. White calls him "[t]he boy [who] thought that there was something wrong with him" (315), but it is clear that what is truly wrong is an intolerant society's inflicting turmoil upon deviant individuals. Of course, the fact that White cloaks Lancelot's sexuality to make him palatable for a homophobic era precludes any illustration of an open rejection of queerness by the Arthurian court. Hints of sexual deviance are half-formed in Lancelot's character, but they are mere shadows in the rest of the text. These shadows, however, can be interpreted not simply as omissions, but rather as traumatizing denials of acceptance for Lancelot. White states quite explicitly about Lancelot that "[w]e do not have to dabble in a place which he preferred to keep secret" (315), and his Arthurian court seems to embody this maxim. Merlyn's response of confusion to Lancelot's jealousy of Guenever and the other knights is common among numerous characters and indicates either an inability or an unwillingness to acknowledge Lancelot's nearly consuming affection for Arthur (White 326). By coupling such descriptions with those that depict Lancelot's suffering with sympathy and without blame, White implies that the knight could have developed into a balanced person if only his world had been open and accepting enough to free him from the burden of concealing genuine love.

Although the World War II era was a time of great upheaval for male gender roles, it was perhaps even more so for women. During this time, women in vast numbers

began to adopt traditionally male professional roles. This was hardly the case during the 1930s in the West. Sherna Gluck describes how that decade was characterized by an ideal of feminine domesticity, very similar to that of the Victorian era, in which women of the middle and upper classes "were expected to stay at home." The fact that the 1930s brought economic crises throughout the West led to the buttressing of this ideal, for the working woman became an even greater threat to a male ego already demoralized by unemployment (Deck 80). However, as the men left their homes to fight as soldiers in World War II, adopting the myth of the heroic soldier to regain their masculinity, many women found paid work. Although often not paid the same wages as male workers (Yellin 64), at least six million women entered the professions in America alone (39), responding to government encouragement (Gluck). Women were even permitted to officially join the military for the first time during this period (Yellin 112), although stigmas and quotas kept their numbers low until the 1970s (Rhode, "Definitions" 200-1). Overall, women were beginning to learn that "they could accomplish things they had never been allowed or asked to try before" (Yellin xiv), and this prompted remarkable shifts in their idea of gender roles.

Toward the end of World War II and after, however, working women faced a backlash from those who steadfastly embraced the domestic ideal of womanhood. According to historian Stephanie Coontz, "[t]he cultural consensus that everyone should marry and form a male breadwinner family was like a steamroller that crushed every alternative view" during the 1950s (229). Women were encouraged by "experts" to choose starting a family over the "selfish" goal of pursuing a career (Kay 82). Kitchen

imagery was perhaps the most widespread means of encouraging women to remain in their socially acceptable role. Guidebooks applicable to women's entire lifespan, from children's cookbooks to marital sex manuals, declared food preparation and nurturing a woman's "'natural' propensity" (Inness, "Introduction" 128) and warned that "activities outside the home" would immediately destroy it (Neuhaus 98-99). Even if women chose not to heed such advice, their choice was often made for them by bosses who deliberately fired or refused to hire women in favor of the returning soldiers (Gluck). Of course, not all women returned to the domestic sphere, and those who did often found ways to be politically and publically active outside of wage labor (Weiss 214). It became clear, however, that the mobilization of female professionalism during the war was seen by most people as a "temporary solution" (Gluck).

White's personal life mirrors his culture's preoccupation with the importance of motherhood. His mother, Constance, proved to be an exceedingly "dominant" figure (Kellman 4) who "jealously guarded her son's affection" (Boyle 41). In one of his letters, White describes Constance as a "strong-willed, imaginative, selfish, beautiful, malingering," and ultimately nightmarish mother (qtd. in Ross 301). White considered his misogyny and homosexuality symptoms of his mother's negative influence (Kellman 4). Of course, these personal issues were doubtlessly compounded by White's historical climate, which came to value the feminine ideal of the nurturing, balanced mother. This culture is almost certainly part of what encouraged White to gravitate toward Freudian psychology. Essentially, White came to believe that "the influence of childhood experiences" is essential in developing healthy, balanced adults (Thomas 91). This is

actually one of the widest and most unifying structures White employs in *The Once and Future King*: each character's identity and values are strongly influenced by childhood situations (Ross 325). The fact that White's Arthur pinpoints "[s]isters, mothers, [and] grandmothers" as the formative forces in childhood illustrates how central mother figures and the cult of domesticity are in this Arthurian rendition (631).

Upon first glance, it seems that Arthur's childhood provides little opportunity for an analysis of mother figures, for the first book is "almost exclusively masculine" and the only highly developed guide is Merlyn (Sly). However, closer analysis indicates that both Merlyn's inadequacies as a tutor and the women who intermittently appear provide illustrations of the importance of an idealized mother. Beginning with a consideration of Merlyn, one must qualify any assertion of his inadequacy as a tutor with the admission that he is a relatively "positive influence on Arthur's later life" (Thomas 99). Merlyn provides Arthur with a hands-on education that aids the development of his philosophy. On the other hand, this philosophy, as mentioned earlier, is largely inadequate for Arthur as a ruler. The idealistic "faith in human goodness" that Arthur embraces through Merlyn's tutelage might be appropriate for a youth, but it is hardly adequate for a king who must deal with scheming and untrustworthy individuals (Ross 313). Arthur is actually "entirely unsuited to the dark world of the later books" (313), and Merlyn, if anyone, is to blame for that character flaw. On the other hand, the female characters who appear in this book illustrate through relatively deviant examples the importance of domesticated mothers. The female character who opens the book—Arthur's nurse—is depicted as possibly abusive and definitely a "lunatic" (White 9). Her very rapid

"dismissal" from the text is cause for relief, not lamentation (Sly). However, it is important to note the extent to which the nurse's depiction is grounded in patriarchy. It is the male head of household who describes her in such negative terms, which is not surprising when one considers how her insistent and strong personality conflicts with the ideal of a domestic, merely physical mother. The tendency of privileged males to define strong women as insane is hardly unprecedented in history. Maid Marian, although she is a much more sympathetic example of a woman who can be both strong in her own right and an effective nurturer, is also refused prominence in the novel. First, Marian illustrates her independent strength both verbally and physically. Verbally, she is willing to contradict and qualify Robin Wood's statements about Morgan le Fay, for she is confident in her own knowledge (White 101). Physically, Marian is one of the most capable soldiers of Robin Wood's group, leading a party of men through the wilderness and being one of the fastest and fiercest among them (White 107). However, these strong aspects of her personality do not detract from her ability to be an effective nurturer. In fact, quite the opposite is true; her extensive life experience gives her a firm grasp of the practical knowledge needed for youths to grow into sturdy, healthy, and intelligent adults. Whereas Merlyn's lessons for Arthur are geared toward abstract theory, Marian's are focused on how to overcome the obstacles of life. Her physical illustration of how to work through the brush and brambles of the woods clearly illustrates that she values preparedness for real-life difficulties (White 106). It is hardly coincidental that this lesson is precisely the one Arthur needs to function as a king and the one he least gains from Merlyn. Perhaps White is suggesting in Marian's brief yet vivid appearance that a

practical mother figure, a woman who can couple individual strength with profound

tenderness (98), would have better prepared Arthur for a successful adulthood and

kingship. It is more likely, however, that White judges Marian in a similar manner as he

judges the nurse. Marian might seem to be an ideal figure, but she never escapes the label

of subversive outlaw. The text gives no indication that Marian's strength and

independence would or could be accepted in the real world; it is only because she resides

within a fringe group in the wilderness that she is able to be both an individual and a

nurturer. Overall, then, the first book of *The Once and Future King* seems to value the

importance of a maternal figure that remains very rigidly limited to her domestic role.

If Arthur's childhood illustrates White's emphasis on maternity through the need

of a positive mother figure, the childhood of the Orkney clan shows the same emphasis

through a warning about the devastating influence of bad mothers. White's personal

commentary on Morgause illustrates that she is meant to reflect the negative

characteristics of his own mother (Kellman 132). Unlike previous renditions of the

Arthurian legend that emphasize the Lancelot-Guinevere affair as the primary cause of

Arthur's fall, White focuses on Morgause's negative maternal influence. Indeed, Ross

calls Morgause the "fulcrum" of the fall of the Round Table (310). Not only is she the

"seducer" of Arthur in incest, but she also seduces her children into violence (Kellman

135). In this way, the feud between Arthur, the Orkney clan, and Mordred has its start not

in the Orkney sons, but in their fiendish mother (Ross 376). Indeed, there are numerous

scenes in the childhood of the Orkneys that illustrate how Morgause's ineffective

mothering leads to the development of harsh and violent men. The earliest depictions of

the Orkney castle highlight Morgause's "maternal neglect" (Ross 339); whereas the children suffer in a cold room with no beds, Morgause keeps a comfortable and stately chamber for herself (White 213-17). What Morgause does to pass her time in her chamber makes her appear even harsher. Out of sheer boredom, she participates in a "gory" magic spell in which she disinterestedly and cruelly boils a live cat (Boyle 187). In this scene, sensitive readers understand that the optimistic "animal imagery wrought in Arthur's childhood now suddenly turns horrid" (Mathews 108). Perhaps the most telling scene with regard to Morgause's negative influence, however, involves her children's unicorn hunt. Learning that Morgause is unable to capture the unicorn because she is not a virgin, her children, in "a pathetic attempt to gain attention," decide to capture it for her (Thomas 96). Illustrating how Morgause's influence has harmed her children, the scene ends in a gruesome fashion: while the unicorn sits in "trustfulness" on a maiden's lap (White 258), Agravaine brutally murders it, "hacking through its neck" to bring its head home to Morgause (261). In another sign of Morgause's continual neglect, she does not even notice what the boys have done (White 263). Overall, if Agravaine and Mordred are the forces of the fall of the Round Table, Morgause is the ultimate source.

Morgan le Fay, although a less pervasively negative female character, also illustrates a violation of domestic ideals in *The Once and Future King*. One of the most obvious ways in which she violates this ideal is through her open and unapologetic promiscuity. When she traps and imprisons Lancelot in the Castle Chariot, the only question she and her ladies pose is "which of us you will have for your mistress" (White 344). Knowing that Lancelot and Guenever are lovers, Morgan le Fay assumes that he

will have no qualms about gratifying her in exchange for his release or, at the very least, for better treatment than a "cold, bare chamber" (White 344). The more interesting of Morgan le Fay's domestic violations, however, involves the imagery that accompanies her earliest appearances in the novel. When young Arthur and Kay venture into the Castle Chariot to save their kidnapped friends, they find the castle in its "fairy aspect," which happens to be one of food (White 111). It is interesting to note that while the castle's appearance is designed to "tempt" the children with the nourishment they should find desirable, in reality they find it "sickly and pungent" (White 111). It would seem that Morgan le Fay's smothering with grease, butter, lard, and pork is much more "filthy" than desirable (White 111). Although this food imagery associated with Morgan le Fay might not seem to connote a violation of domesticity, when one considers the importance of kitchen imagery to women in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it appears strangely apt. Morgan le Fay is, in her own way, another example of the negative mother image in the text.

As *The Once and Future King* progresses, a more developed example of a positive mother figure emerges in Elaine, but she remains exceedingly unpalatable to modern-day women concerned with their independence and rights as individuals. Of course, Elaine is not an entirely powerless figure in the text. Not only does she trick Lancelot into copulating with her (twice), but she also nurses him back to health after his fit of madness (White 408) and establishes herself as the head of her castle. Nonetheless, Elaine is a far cry from a full-bodied, full-spirited woman. Her entire life revolves around the domestic sphere to the point that she is willing to suffer Lancelot's indignities only

for the sake of her son and the surface completion of her domestic ideal (White 410).

Elaine becomes more and more "desperate" as she realizes that she will never be able to

force Lancelot to love her (Kellman 145). Although she tends to hide her emotional

distress under a calm exterior (White 406), her suicide is explicitly attributed to

Lancelot's rejection (494). It is interesting to note that this mother who lacks any

semblance of personal self-fulfillment and suffers from a reliance on male affection is

able to produce one of the most honorable of Arthur's knights: Galahad. Galahad

transforms in *The Once and Future King* from a child "holding hands" with his mother

(White 405) to the most spiritual knight who achieves the Holy Grail (460). When

delving deeper into White's notion of parenting through the characters of Lancelot and

Elaine, however, it is easy to see how such an insecure woman can also be an ideal

mother. White suggests that Galahad's spiritual focus comes from Lancelot's influence

(412), and Elaine need only contribute a secure domestic environment. With this

interpretation in mind, it is clear that White's notion of the importance of motherhood,

rather than uplifting women as individuals, actually degrades them. The fact that Elaine,

the emotionally insecure woman, is so much more developed as a successful maternal

ideal than Marian, the independent woman, implies a rather misogynistic ideology.

Marian is minimalized in *The Once and Future King* precisely because her combination

of strength and caring is too radically subversive for White's time period. White seems

able to envision a good woman only in terms of her ability to create domestic

environments for children, not in her propensity for developing herself as a unique human

being in her own right.

The major qualification of this misogynistic outlook in which women must be good mothers to be good people is, of course, Guenever. White is often quite explicit in treating Guenever's character with "discretion and sympathy" (Dunn 365). This does not imply, of course, that Guenever is a flawless female character. On the contrary, she is "unfaithful" in her affair with Lancelot and often quite "temperamental" (Serrano 13). However, White effectively develops Guenever's character to justify her actions and render her sympathetic. Her affair is justified when one considers that her marriage with Arthur was an arranged treaty (Boyle 45), and her hysteria is certainly understandable when one reflects on the neglect of Arthur, the betrayal of Lancelot (though inadvertently) through Elaine, and Guenever's inability to provide a male heir for her kingdom (Serrano 10-11). On top of humanizing Guenever's flaws, White also illustrates her many good characteristics. White explicitly lists Guenever's positive traits as "[g]enerosity, courage, honesty, pity, the faculty to look short life in the face—certainly comradeship and tenderness" (472). In addition, Guenever's actions often speak for themselves in conveying these attributes. For instance, her willingness to halt the conflict between Arthur and Lancelot is a sign of generosity, and her locking herself in the Tower of London in protection from Mordred illustrates cleverness and courage (Serrano 9-10). Overall, White's response to Guenever's complexity is to call her a "real" person with both strengths and weaknesses (471). Of course, one must consider the possibility that White's inability to define Guenever's character is a symptom not of his respect for her complexity, but of his difficulty of picturing women in any guise except as mothers. Guenever, barren and not a significant maternal influence on any character, does not fit

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into the paradigm of maternity that White uses to classify the other women. Even if Guenever does emerge as a sympathetic figure in this text, this does "not imply that the misogyny has completely disappeared from White's Arthurian story" (Boyle 48). Guenever might be a realistic and sympathetic female figure, but she is far outnumbered by women defined solely by their capacity for mothering.

White's Arthurian rendition is, if nothing else, an expansive work in its response to the gender roles of its time. It will be helpful, then, to consider how White's attitudes toward masculine and feminine gender are closely linked in the character of Mordred. In terms of masculinity, Mordred is clearly an epitome of the negative force of violent Might that Arthur seeks to oppose. Mordred seeks to build a "New Order" to displace Arthur's (White 620), one characterized by cunning and the aggressive use of new technology (621). Even more specifically, Mordred appears as a Hitlerian character in *The Once and Future King*. As "Hitler will destroy civilization," says Thomas, "Mordred destroyed chivalry" with intellectual and physical tactics that privilege power and strength above honor and dignity (50). It remains clear, however, that Mordred's negative masculinity is ultimately not his fault. The true blame lies with the negative influence of Morgause that permeates his childhood. Much like the Orkneys, Mordred does not escape from his fosterage unscathed. As the youngest member of the clan, Mordred is for many years Morgause's "sole audience" to whom she consistently flings "perpetual ranting against Arthur" (Thomas 97). Although many of Arthur's actions indeed deserve Mordred's hatred, especially the father's attempt to murder the son as an infant (White 519), most of Mordred's violence stems from Morgause as he becomes a "hideous copy"

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of her (Ross 326). Overall, then, *The Once and Future King* directly relates its commentaries on the male and female genders. For men to overcome the false ideology of violence, it seems that women must wholeheartedly embrace their respective ideology of domesticity. In this sense, White's text provides echoes strikingly similar to *Idylls of the King*, in which it is the moral duty of woman to keep down the base in man.

The Once and Future King, while it clearly criticizes the masculine ideals of Might and violence, does not provide its female characters with the same opportunity to question their prescribed domesticity. Although Arthur's quest to replace Might with Right is unrealistic, it emerges in *The Once and Future King* as a positive ideal for future generations to adopt through learning. The majority of White's female characters, on the other hand, illustrate the importance of motherhood through negative and positive examples. However, it is important to realize that White's depiction of Guenever as a more complex character, though it is the exception in *The Once and Future King*, becomes the rule in later Arthurian retellings. According to Amanda Serrano, contemporary Arthurian novelists have taken the "intelligence, emotions and motivations" of a "real" Guenever as a starting point from which to develop narratives that are more sensitive to men's and women's issues alike. Overall, it is abundantly clear that *The Once and Future King* served to popularize the Arthurian legend in its time and prepared the way for a "new wave of interest" in the myth and its relevance to modern life (Goodman). The text might be stilted in its sympathy toward the genders, allowing only men the ability to question their roles, but most scholars still interpret *The Once and Future King* as a vital stepping stone toward greater gender equality in Arthurian myth.

CHAPTER III

WOMEN'S VOICE, COMMUNITY, AND IDEOLOGY

IN *THE MISTS OF AVALON*

In many ways, the 1960s and 1970s represent a true watershed moment for both women's roles in society and the development of the Arthurian legend. Regarding the former, these decades marked the beginning and growth of what is now called the second wave of feminism. This movement, comprised of many groups of diverse women and men, focused on issues as various as women's health, economic equality, and the very nature of gender. Interestingly enough, these decades, especially the 1970s, also saw a "real explosion of interest in Arthur" both in the United Kingdom and the United States (Goodman). Although the production of Arthurian novels decreased somewhat in the 1980s, it is not surprising that those few that were published reflect quite clearly the overlap of the Round Table and gender issues (Goodman). The eminent Arthurian text of this decade is without a doubt Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, published in 1982 (Goodman). Bradley, an author of science fiction and fantasy for nearly forty years before the novel's release and until her death in 1999, certainly understood the usefulness of her chosen sub-genre in addressing questions of womanhood and gender (Arbur 21). Although Bradley rejected the feminist label, abhorring "literature as

propaganda," many of her fantasy series demonstrate fierce "enthusiasm for women's rights and gay rights" (J. Smith). *The Mists of Avalon*, deemed her "masterpiece" by readers, critics, and fans, is certainly no exception to this thematic focus (Chauvette). The novel, which is set during the Roman withdrawal from Britain around the year 500 (Ross 403), revises the traditional Arthurian legend with a specific focus on "the viewpoint of the women of the saga," including Arthur's mother, Igraine; sister, Morgaine; aunts, Morgause and Viviane; wife, Gwenhwyfar; and several others (Lacy 50). This woman-centered perspective effectively develops two central themes: "the reconciliation of [the] conflicting or opposing forces" of the Goddess religion and patriarchal Christianity, and "alienation or exile" in the continually exploring, prominent character of Morgaine ("Marion"). Throughout the novel, Bradley not only reflects upon, but also imagines points of future possibility and growth for, the increasing scope of women's rights in the 1960s and 1970s. By featuring only women as narrative voices, providing constructive illustrations of female relationships and communities, and pronouncing religious sentiments that embrace the feminine experience, the novel both mirrors women's realities during the second wave and "stimulate[s] philosophical inquiry" (Cox 35).

Of course, it might seem strange that this discussion of 1970s gender and Bradley's novel seems to focus on women's issues to the exclusion of men. Numerous scholars have noted the paradox that just as women suffer in a male-dominated system, "patriarchal masculinity cripples men" (Horrocks 25). According to Robald Levant, twentieth-century men have suffered from numerous impossible expectations, such as "the requirement to avoid all things feminine," "the emphasis on achieving status above

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all else," and "objectifying attitudes toward sexuality" (722). At the same time, the natural strengths of masculinity—from dedication to the protection of one's family, to incredible self-reliance, to logical "stick-to-it-iveness"—have mostly remained unappreciated among modern-day feminists (Levant 727). Bradley's decision to illuminate the female psyche in particular by no means suggests that the male side of the 1970s gender debate is unimportant. On the contrary, *The Mists of Avalon* contains numerous insightful illustrations and comments on male roles, especially as they pertain to homosexuality. One must keep in mind, however, that Bradley's context for writing contains both historical and textual background. By elevating her female characters to such central roles in the novel, Bradley is in direct opposition to centuries of Arthurian tradition that value masculine chivalry, bravery, and warfare above all else. Although Bradley respects the male perspective in *The Mists of Avalon*, the novel represents the women's turn to guide the narrative.

Turning back to the historical background, it is important to gain a basic understanding of the development and concerns of second-wave feminists before examining in more detail how *The Mists of Avalon* echoes the movement. Perhaps the most obvious factor that set the second wave of feminism apart from its predecessors was its increasing focus on diversity. First, women found diverse roles that suited them within the movement. Women could work to support their sex in communal, egalitarian groups or in large-scale "women's rights organizations" (Kravetz and Marecek 460-61). Women belonging to ethnic minorities experienced a "growing sense of ethnic pride" (Howard, "Women's Rights" 648), while Western women "challenged the priorities" of their

culture (McPherson 209). Women made their voices heard either through social activism or the "new cultural/educational renaissance" (Fine 938) that encouraged academic research and scholarship on women's often-ignored histories and writings (Warhol 310-11). Secondly, these female activists and scholars concentrated on an immense number of overlapping gender issues. They learned to "distinguish gender from sex" (Yanagisako and Collier 131), supported sexual freedom, valued motherhood (McPherson 209), fought against professional and educational discrimination (Howard, "Women's Rights" 647-48), and sought more direct responsibility in political positions (Warhol 308). Essentially, the early 1960s and 1970s represent a time in which women's roles in society and willingness to articulate their goals perfectly coincided. As women experienced new freedoms through a demand for service jobs, the birth control pill, and the civil rights movement, they began to understand and shake free from years of forced and internalized oppression (Collins 105).

Although feminists during this time were certainly optimistic, that does not imply a lack of challenges or the fulfillment of all major goals. Oftentimes, the areas of incomplete success were more cultural than political in nature. For instance, although second-wave feminists championed women's equal rights on many fronts, advertisements for young women continued to encourage an objectified and limited portrait of ideal womanhood. Advertisements have discouraged young women from healthy self-esteem through the use of "sexually explicit posing" (Baldwin 77), excessively thin and digitally altered models (Hitchson and Reaves 65), and subtle suggestions of menstruation as unclean and humiliating (Merskin 104). Second-wave feminists also faced more dire

political setbacks, however. During the mid-1980s, an emerging "conservative and antifeminist backlash" blamed earlier feminists for such social ills as divorce and economic decline (Howard, "Women's Rights" 648). The Reagan administration encouraged cutbacks in abortion access and employment equality regulations (Kravetz and Marecek 467). In addition to these problems external to the second-wave feminists, the very organization of the movement proved to be too limiting. Young adult women during the 1990s began to voice criticisms of their second-wave counterparts as "inflexible," "dogmatic," and prone to label only a select group of women as feminists (Enns and Sinacore 479). Overall, then, although it is certainly correct to view the second wave of the 1970s as a crucial development in modern feminism, its rise did not herald a utopia or answer all the problems of its age.

Despite these historical setbacks to women's rights, however, the second wave did make grand and lasting contributions to the academic and theoretical branch of feminism. Feminist literary criticism, beginning in the 1960s and maturing in the 1970s, focused on two main issues: "woman as reader" and "woman as writer" (Showalter qtd. in Howard, "Feminist Literary" 195). The first issue seeks to pinpoint and critique the misogyny of the male canon, while the second rediscovers women writers of the past and formulates theories of female storytelling in the present (Howard, "Feminist Literary" 195). Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* clearly functions within this tradition of women's literature. Realizing that modern feminine stories often depict women through the negative stereotypes of the whore and manipulator, Bradley shifts the focus of her Arthurian retelling toward the female characters (Alden 3). According to Lee Ann Tobin,

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Bradley's main strategies are to "reinterpret" Morgaine in terms of "female power," to describe her women in their human complexity, and to "decenter" the cultural and religious presuppositions of the male Knights of the Round Table (147). Essentially, *The Mists of Avalon* is a reversal of the traditional Arthur story, replacing men's chivalry and military conflict with women's relationships and life cycles. Bradley, writing and publishing at a time when second-wave feminism had made significant strides but was beginning to be challenged, found an exceedingly effective means of representing women's experience through myth. To analyze the effectiveness of Bradley's technique, one must examine her three main focuses—the female narrative voice, supportive community, and spiritual ideology—in conjunction with more detailed historical background from the second wave of feminism.

The first historical development among second-wave feminists that resonates with Bradley's focus on women's narrative voice is the growing notion of woman as whole in herself and capable of self-determination. The main arena in which these notions appeared was that of freedom in sexual relationships. By the late 1970s, many feminists felt that women should not feel compelled to spend the entirety of their adult lives in a romantic partnership; in other words, women might benefit from and even enjoy being single. Compared to the 1950s, the 1970s saw a drastic decline in Americans who believed single women were "sick," "neurotic," or "immoral" (Coontz 258). Many of these women learned the importance of "self-blessing," of gaining satisfaction and a sense of purpose from internal sources, rather than seeking the approval or guidance of a male head of household (Plaskow and Christ et al., 271). This sense of the freedom to

remain single and delay marriage and children encouraged increasing numbers of women

to attain higher education and professional success (Petchesky 103-4). Obviously, most,

if not all, of this freedom would have dissipated without women's access to reproductive

health and abortion resources in the 1970s. These resources enabled women not only to

control their childbearing schedule (Kravetz and Marecek 463), but also to think of sex in

new ways. The notion of sex as enjoyment rather than procreation—something already

tolerated, if not encouraged, for men—suddenly became a possibility for women (Collins

167). In short, women's increased willingness to delay romantic relationships and to see

those relationships in more egalitarian terms encouraged them to attach increasing value

to their own internal voices.

The second historical development of 1970s feminism that enabled women to

value their voices was the notion of the category of woman as socially constructed and

complex. Second-wave feminists were some of the first to clearly, forcibly, and

collectively articulate the inadequacy of gender stereotypes. Although there are, indeed,

statistical differences between men and women, stereotypes tend to fixate on a select

number of these differences and exaggerate them into "absolute" binaries (Birke 320). It

became increasingly clear to 1970s feminist thinkers that these binaries derived not from

nature, but primarily from politics (Gagnier 28). Finding "no biological basis for gender

categories" (Dupré 50), these women thus felt an immense freedom at being able to

determine definitions of woman based on their own experiences. As women began to

share their experiences in supportive and open environments, they discovered just how

much diversity there exists within their sex. Women who were also members of a

minority—including women of color, lesbians, and the poor (Tong 202)—began to demand a more inclusive definition of feminism (Kravetz and Marecek 466). This has been an ongoing and vital trend in feminism ever since; women have come to realize that the very notion of female oppression often glosses over the additional limitations faced by minority women (Enns and Sinacore 475). This concept of the real-life woman as exceedingly complex clearly encouraged women from all walks of life to value their personal experiences over stereotyped definitions in discovering what it means to be female.

The combination of these developments in women's individuality—the notion of woman as whole in herself and complex—persuaded many feminists to enter social spheres previously limited to men. As housewives discovered they did not feel satisfied with their domestic duties, they began to explore alternative options made more readily available through anti-discrimination legislation (Collins 56). Thanks to the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, women were free to apply for any type of job without discrimination in hiring or pay (Kravetz and Marecek 459). The early 1970s even saw the removal of quotas for the number of women allowed into the armed forces, which had been as low as two percent in previous decades (Rhode, "Definitions" 200-1). Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 enabled women to be better prepared for such professions through increased educational opportunities, including the ability to participate in sports leagues (Collins 249). These legislative changes enabled women to rethink the responsibilities and duties they might successfully adopt. No longer limited to a single sphere, women began to expect and desire "both children and a career," both

"assertive qualities" and "expressive ones" (Basow 562). In short, the ongoing trend in 1970s feminism was the expansion, rather than reduction, of women's roles and options.

Bradley's novel clearly echoes the 1970s notion of woman as individually whole through her use of an entirely feminine narrative voice. By telling the Arthurian women's stories directly, through the lens of their own experiences, Bradley suggests that women do not need male vantage points and priorities to feel valuable. Ross describes the point of view illustrated in *The Mists of Avalon* as an "accumulation of third-person narrative perspectives" of multiple generations of women with central roles in the Arthurian court (417). There are two major effects besides the pure affirmation of women's stories and experiences that this narrative perspective creates. Perhaps the most obvious is that the women of the story are placed in an active, rather than a passive, position. Rather than being the "passive objects" of Malory's Arthurian tale, they become "active participants, observers, and judges of the novel's action" (Ross 419). To use a more explicit term, the women become the genuine heroes of Bradley's Arthurian rendition. By being given the ability to speak directly, the female characters are able to describe and reflect on "their own quests" and gain "a large amount of power" (Owen 3-4). Each female character's perspective illustrates a genuine embarking on a journey of personal transformation. For instance, Viviane learns the important lesson of distinguishing the power of her rank and the personal manipulation embodied by Morgause. Even Gwenhwyfar, the Christian queen whose world is often narrowed to either convent walls or obedience to her husband, learns both the art of influencing the throne and the importance of accepting others who are different from her. The second major effect of this female narrative voice

is that the very actions and conflicts of the story change from those treated in more traditional Arthurian myths. Because the women's stories are true to their daily lives, Malory's long descriptions of jousts and tournaments give way to "domestic events," thereby privileging the latter (Sullivan 288). The prominence of the women's voices also highlights the larger cultural transition away from a matrilineal, pagan belief system (Sullivan 288-89). This conflict not only provides a major framework in the novel, but also illustrates Arthur's failure to understand women's lives and thereby justifies their attempts to challenge him. Overall, then, the female narrative perspective of *The Mists of Avalon* illustrates that women's experiences and stories can provide affirmation with or without male approval.

Related to the narrative perspective of Bradley's novel is her consistent determination to create female characters out of human complexity, not gendered stereotypes. Echoing the second wave of feminism's focus on gender as socially constructed, Bradley populates her novel with women whose lives, beliefs, and convictions are exceptionally diverse. Essentially, Bradley seeks to "rewrite" Malory's "simplistic idea of women" (Bucciaglia 63) by transforming the Arthurian women from "wicked witches and adulteresses" to "real flesh-and-blood human beings" caught up in the desires and circumstances that every individual faces (Urrutia 39). *The Mists of Avalon* highlights women's complexity both in their individual growth and their relationships to one another. In terms of the female characters as individuals, Bradley places them each on a dynamic journey from psychologically defining childhoods to the wisdom of experience (Ross 420). Scholar Dannell Zeavin eloquently sums up the

questions each woman faces: Igraine must come to terms with the marriages that

preceded Arthur's birth; Viviane must balance her determination to support the pagan

beliefs with her tendency to manipulate those around her; and Morgaine, the most highly

developed character, must sort through her complex feelings of love and guilt toward her

brother (68-69). Similarly, Gwenhwyfar struggles "between her needs" for emotional

connection "and her training" to be a pious wife (Paxson, "Marion" 119), and Niniane

confronts her fear of inadequacy in her role as a pagan priestess (Owen 109). Bradley

also depicts her female characters' complexity through their interpersonal relationships.

The characters have an unbelievable "variety of attitudes" that put them in conflict more

often than they are in accord (Taylor 42). The women become polarized on many fronts.

Viviane, Morgaine, and Niniane come to represent the older Goddess religion, whereas

Igraine and Gwenhwyfar support Christianity. All of the women have very different

opinions on the proper degree of sexual freedom. Only some experience motherhood, and

those that do range in their childrearing attitudes from devotion to abandonment. The

women make their homes in as diverse locations as Arthur's court, the mysterious

Avalon, various nunneries, and even the land of fairy. All the women oppose, in one way

or another, the manipulative influence of Morgause. Overall, then, the women of *The

Mists of Avalon*, with a combination of narrative voice and realistic characterization,

successfully expel many of the stereotypes prevalent in older Arthurian retellings.

Of course, this realistic characterization so central to *The Mists of Avalon* implies

not only that its women experience triumphs, but also that they suffer from failure and

defeat. Considering that feminism in the 1970s contained both optimistic fervor and

disheartening setbacks, it is not surprising that Bradley's novel would depict its female

characters in similar circumstances. The main scholar to articulate criticisms of Bradley's

female characters is Heather Bennett. Bennett thinks the women—especially Morgaine,

Gwenhwyfar, and Nimue—actually "strengthen the patriarchy" of Arthur's Christian

court by dedicating themselves so wholly to their respective causes (11). In some ways,

Bennett's thesis does describe the setbacks experienced by these three characters.

Morgaine spends the majority of her life supporting the religion of the "Great Goddess"

(Bradley ix) to such an extent that she forgets her love for her brother, what she has in

common with the Christians who do not embrace "persecution and bigotry" (756), and

even the lesson against manipulating others that she claimed to learn from Viviane's

example. Similarly, it takes Gwenhwyfar years to learn that dedicating her entire self to

"being Arthur's wife and queen and being a good Christian" does not fulfill her intense

personal desire for Lancelet's love and her own self-acceptance, nor does it console her

in the face of barrenness (Bennett 86). Nimue, the young priestess called upon to seduce

Kevin, the second Merlin of the book, realizes only after her "act of betrayal" that her

guilt and remorse will inevitably lead to her suicide (Bennett 11). Clearly, much like the

budding feminists of the 1970s, Bradley's female characters embark on journeys of

transformation and renewal only after spending years within patriarchal and controlling

systems that encourage them to "ignore their hearts" (Bennett 40). One of the novel's

ultimate tragedies is that these systems influence some of the women into internalizing

their oppression, giving the external conflict psychological dimensions. Although

Morgaine is largely spared this fate, the women who come more directly under the influence of Christianity, including Igraine and Gwenhwyfar, suffer from it intensely.

On the other hand, Bennett significantly misreads the transformation of at least Morgaine's character. Although Morgaine certainly spends much of the novel struggling with her identity and how to give her life meaning, the ultimate tone produced by this struggle is one of hopefulness, not distress at its limitations. Any reader who follows Morgaine's path of discovery and does not consider her to be a positive role model is clearly overlooking a number of significant details about her character. Indeed, many scholars have argued that the character of Morgaine, despite her limitations, is the ultimate illustration of Bradley's altering Arthurian imagery from that of an "evil witch" (Alden 8) to a woman with "dualities" and "inner conflicts" (25). By making her the central consciousness through which the novel's story is told, and by providing eleven first-person "speeches" from her perspective, Bradley gives Morgaine the ability to redefine her character in ways that justify her faults and highlight her accomplishments (Hopson 106-7). This technique makes many of Morgaine's conflicts with Arthur become understandable rather than shocking. Not only is Morgaine innocent of his seduction through Viviane's manipulations (Tobin 150), but she also defends her disagreement with his increasingly Christian focus because it is a direct flouting of his vow to support religious freedom in Britain (Hopson 128). In the last of Morgaine's first-person speeches, she describes her lifelong duty as caring for Arthur, "my baby, my brother, my love" (Bradley 868), and in the epilogue, Morgaine finally accepts that genuine spiritual inspiration might exist among all religious traditions. All in all, Bradley's depiction of

Morgaine is one of both intense sympathy for her human weaknesses and deep appreciation for her growth as a woman. Considering the spectrum of this growth, it is quite appropriate to describe Morgaine as the single most important "female hero" of the novel (Ross 411).

Transitioning from a singular to a broader focus, Bradley's novel also reflects various developments in women's relationships that occurred around the 1970s. During this time and continuing through the 1990s, many scholars of women's psychology began to emphasize the importance of personal relationships, sympathy, and empathy to women's sense of self and morality. According to Susan Okin, a prominent theory in human psychology stressed for decades that moral "impartiality"—or an abstract, absolute concept of "justice"—was the most developed and desirable form of ethical decision-making (151). Second-wave feminists were some of the first to challenge this widely held assumption. These women argued that the linking of ethics and abstraction was actually a sexist theory, for it discounts the importance of personal relationships and "particular context" to women's decision-making (Okin 151). Of course, many second-wave feminists did not consider ethical decision-making a gendered issue; because they saw gender as socially constructed, it followed that men and women might reason differently within their own genders, as well as that some men and women might reason in a very similar fashion. Nonetheless, new theories began to arise that specified how the familial development of girls might lead them to become, on a whole, more relationship-minded than concept-minded. The upbringing of boys tends to focus on separation from the mother, home, and family, leading these youths to define themselves and their

morality in "the larger public world" and its more removed, lofty concepts (Scarboro 556). Girls, on the other hand, often compare themselves to their mothers, consciously or unconsciously embrace the "nurturing" and "intimacy" experienced in this relationship, and thus solve problems as "a web of relationships" that must be encountered "empathically," not abstractly (Scarboro 556). Modern feminists' discussion of the relatively common relational focus among women serves not only to shed light on its origins, but also to reclaim its value. Taken in light of this psychology, men's accusations of femininity as clouded with emotion can actually become a point of pride. Women who view the world in terms of relationships need not fear being criticized for a lack of vision. Instead, they can seek to discover the ways in which their impulses toward sympathy and caring can be realized in a positive manner among both female friends and the wider world.

It is interesting to note, though, that although late twentieth-century feminists elevated the mother-daughter relationship to a crucial status in the formation of girls' ethics, they also realized that motherhood is an incredibly complex and individualized relationship. Before the second wave of feminism, motherhood was often seen in a "prescriptive" light (Caplan 783). In other words, mothers learned early on that their role was quite specific, consisting only of domestic duties and familial comforts (Caplan 783). This exceedingly limited notion of the possibilities of motherhood lost ground starting in the early 1960s. The singular catalyst of this change in perspective was Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963 (Caplan 748). In this text, Friedan argues that stay-at-home mothers often feel "bored, frustrated, and unappreciated," rather

than intensely fulfilled in their work (Caplan 784). Other second-wave feminists became interested in this issue, encouraging a number of paradigm shifts in notions of what it means to be a real-life, rather than idealized, mother. Throughout the 1970s until the dawn of the twenty-first century, increasing numbers of scholars have realized that women's fulfillment depends upon much more than a maternal role. Not only are women who choose to remain childless less stigmatized today than before the second wave, but many mothers are also realizing that they can be effective nurturers even if they somehow violate the "idealized picture" of childrearing (Caplan 786-87). Resonating with the second wave's notion of women as self-determining and complex, many mothers are quite happy to balance their caretaking roles with wage-earning professions or even without husbands.

Related to this exploration of familial relationships around the 1970s is the explosion of interest and demand for recognition among gay and lesbian couples around this time. Although a few homosexual groups emerged in the 1950s (Bullough 69), none of them were lasting or able to articulate a large-scale critique of the privileging of heterosexuality (Gillis 307). This "almost apologetic" homosexuality underwent a complete reversal in the 1960s and 1970s, during which gays and lesbians "were ready to come out publicly" with hundreds of groups and organizations (Hogan and Hudson 232). A chain of events starting with the decriminalization of homosexuality in multiple Western countries (Naphy 210) culminated in the warm acceptance of gays and lesbians among increasing numbers of people (Collins 349). Of course, homosexuals still faced many challenges in this initial coming out process. The mid-1970s saw a "conservative

backlash" against alternative sexualities that included violent arson, political campaigns (Hogan and Hudson 233), and repudiation among the Abrahamic religions (Naphy 267). In many ways, although lesbians in particular have not faced the same degree of cultural scorn as their male counterparts (Bullough 126), they suffered a unique type of discrimination and sought to combat it in very specific ways. Lesbians during the 1970s often tried to make their voices heard among feminist organizations, but found their issues and concerns "excluded and marginalized" by women whose personal and political lives expressed a preference for heterosexuality (Enns and Sinacore 476-77). Unable to find sympathy among gays or heterosexual women, many lesbians responded with an emphasis on complete sociopolitical separatism. These lesbians saw their sexual preference and "emotional commitment to women" as inherently linked to "political resistance to patriarchal domination" (Rupp 492). As a result of this combined form of separatism, a new "women's culture" emerged that encouraged and celebrated women's relationships through institutions as diverse as restaurants (Murray 255), bookstores, domestic abuse shelters, and women's music companies (Rupp 493).

Perhaps the most central female relationship in *The Mists of Avalon*—and the one with the most thematic importance—is that between Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar. This relationship affirms not only the value of women's bonds based on sympathy rather than abstraction, but also illustrates the tragic consequences when such bonds seem to fail. In many ways, the pairing of these characters is counterintuitive, for in terms of their appearances and beliefs, they are rather more like opposites than friends. Melinda Hughes describes them as a complicated but obvious rendering of the "Dark Lady/Pale Maiden

antagonism" (24). Physically, Morgaine is small and dark, and Gwenhwyfar is conventionally beautiful and blonde; in terms of their beliefs, Morgaine is dedicated to the worship of the pagan Goddess, whereas Gwenhwyfar is a pious Christian. Although the two women are similar in being equally devoted to their causes, they mostly experience polarization because of it. Morgaine describes Christianity as having "an evil-minded old man" for a God (Bradley 551), and Gwenhwyfar sees Morgaine as a "sorceress" whose influence leaves Arthur and his kingdom "tainted" (544). Of course, the women also carry more personal grudges; Morgaine envies Gwenhwyfar for her looks (Bradley 158), and Gwenhwyfar envies Morgaine's ability to have children (549). The two women let these religious and personal vendettas become so consuming that they even seek to ruin each other's love lives; Morgaine tricks Lancelet, Gwenhwyfar's romantic interest, into marrying Elaine, and Gwenhwyfar tricks Morgaine into marrying the father of the man she loves. However, Melinda Hughes's interpretation of Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar's relationship as never growing past this animosity is quite oblivious to the way in which both women mature as individuals and come to embrace each other as fellow women. At numerous points in the text, but increasingly as the women age, both Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar come to reflect on their relationship in terms of its subtle yet abiding love. Morgaine thinks "that in spite of all old enmities, there was love too" between her and Gwenhwyfar (Bradley 725); similarly, Gwenhwyfar comes to think of Morgaine "with a sudden passion of love and tenderness" (864). It seems that as the characters progress in their development toward relative tolerance, they are better able to realize and appreciate the "natural bond between women" that they experience in the

other (Lupack and Lupack 293). Readers of the novel also come to value the women's similarities and differences that make their relationship "truly much more three-dimensional than either woman would have been without the presence of the other" (E. Rich 119).

The numerous maternal generations in the novel also illustrate the importance of complexity and sympathy so prevalent in second-wave feminism. Just as feminist thinkers of this time realized that mothers did not have to embody a narrow ideal to nurture and raise children effectively, so Bradley presents a host of imperfect mothers who are simply struggling to discover what is best for them and their children. Of course, one could easily argue that *The Mists of Avalon* brims with mother figures that fulfill a negative stereotype. Igraine and Morgaine become irreparably absent figures in the lives of their respective children; Viviane and Morgause manipulate their children and foster-children as pawns in their "deliberate plan[s]" (Ross 422); and Gwenhwyfar can hardly cope with the burden of her barrenness. However, rather than look at these characters with a critical lens, it is a compelling alternative to consider them sympathetically. Most of the mothers mentioned above come to reflect in later years on their motherhood and resume a positive relationship with their children. Igraine realizes how much she missed her children when she sent them away for fostering and pines for Morgaine on her deathbed (Bradley 359), and Viviane redevelops a tender relationship with Morgaine after years of separation (494). Morgaine's circumstances are quite sympathetic; her relationship with her biological son ends in failure only due to Morgause's political ambition, and she reclaims her impulse to nurture when her brother is dying, comforting

him in his final hours and calling him her "baby" (Bradley 868). Although each of these women is, at best, an imperfect mother, and their failures lead to their children's psychological issues and often tragic consequences, they learn from their mistakes and ultimately grasp what it means to nurture.

Although women as romantic partners are certainly less common in *The Mists of Avalon*, there are a few scenes in which lesbianism emerges in celebratory detail. Few scholars, however, acknowledge the import of these erotic encounters. In fact, most criticize the fact that lesbianism is not more prevalent, and thus more accepted, in the novel. Mary Loeffelholz, for example, argues that the comparatively fewer lesbian scenes pale in comparison to the paradigm of female heterosexuality and fertility that drives the novel's plot (15). Indeed, she is correct that the progression of generations relies upon heterosexual relationships, as well as that the pagan worship of the Goddess idealizes woman as a fertile companion to man. On the other hand, it is near-effortless to understand why Bradley would choose such a structure for her novel. Although the world and setting in *The Mists of Avalon* are relatively fantastical, they still clearly echo the social situation of the 1970s, at least regarding gender roles. Two historical details illuminate why Bradley's world is thus mostly heterosexual: first, the fact that publicly announced lesbians began to experience political backlash in the late 1970s, and second, the fact that many lesbians adopted a separatist ideology of forming distinct support networks. The two main lesbian pairings in the novel—between Morgaine and the Fairy Queen and Morgaine and Raven—both take place in realms that are somewhat outside that of normal experience. Because these realms coincide with Morgaine's "return to her

home, to her mother, the goddess, and . . . a return to herself and the old powers of priestess," their erotic scenes become more "pivotal" than the small quantity suggests (Farwell 92). Of course, it is also possible that Bradley's positive depiction of lesbian scenes illustrates her suggesting its healing qualities for future feminists more than her reflecting its status in the 1970s. In her romantic encounter with the Fairy Queen, Morgaine achieves a sense of comfort and merriment apart from the increasing tragedies of her life (Bradley 405). Her relationship with Raven, however, is much more developed. She refers to their erotic encounters as "a strange and sacramental rhythm" that leads to "affirming life in the shadow of death" (Bradley 765). In other words, Morgaine and Raven's relationship is at once physical, emotional, and spiritual, leading both women to a greater sense of wholeness, peace, and consolation. Although most of Morgaine's lovers—and she has many—are men, scholars rightly point out that none of those relationships provide her with the same degree of "healing" that she gains from Raven (E. Rich 109). Clearly, then, the novel supports lesbianism as a vital source of female bonding, even though it cannot be expected to become as equally common as heterosexuality.

It is interesting to note that the depictions of male homosexuality in *The Mists of Avalon* are actually quite sparser and much less satisfying for the characters than the lesbian scenes. This could be because gay men during the time of the novel's composition—and, to some degree, even today—often experienced more cultural discrimination and derision as compared to lesbians. The only male character in the novel who directly exhibits homosexual tendencies is Lancelet. Lancelet suffers in his early

years due to a hidden erotic attraction to his cousin and closest friend, Arthur. As a result of his inability to act on his desires, Lancelet learns to "fl[i]ng himself into relationships with women," not necessarily as a cover-up, but certainly as an attempt at superficial consolation (Ross 422). The only romantic relationships readers see Lancelet engaged in are colored by his sexual preference. His romantic teasing of Morgaine consists more of feigned interest than intense desire; his apparent passion for Gwenhwyfar is, in his own words, mostly due to her proximity to Arthur; and his marriage to Elaine is forced through trickery and, again, serves as a hollow attempt at consolation. What is most surprising about Lancelet's largely repressed homosexuality is the fact that he does, indeed, admit it to himself and Morgaine. When he confesses his true feelings for Arthur to Morgaine in a state of utter dejection, readers doubtlessly expect her, as a priestess of the more tolerant pagan religion and a woman who has had lesbian relationships, to accept his true self with open arms. On the contrary, Morgaine "shrink[s] back from its implications in horror" (Noble 291), depriving Lancelet of his one potential source of comfort and understanding. Of course, this horrified reaction stems more from the continual feelings of romantic rejection that Morgaine suffers in her relationship with Lancelet than an actual condemnation of his sexual preference. Nonetheless, Lancelet seems to grasp only the latter possibility. His suffering can even be said to increase after his coming out. He loses Arthur's friendship because of Gwenhwyfar, is forced to marry a woman he does not love, and finally enters the celibacy of the priesthood, apparently "cursed . . . with a sexual orientation that denies [him] a place within the mainstream" (Noble 293-95). It is difficult to say precisely why male homosexuality as "a potential

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source of pride or power" might be so absent from *The Mists of Avalon* (Shichtman and Carley 11). Critics have blamed and criticized Bradley for this omission, especially considering her relatively sympathetic treatment of lesbianism. However, it is quite possible to read Lancelet's situation as an illustration of how patriarchy, in this particular circumstance, can actually be much more limiting and controlling of men themselves. Women can always be considered in terms of their difference from an ideal male model, whereas men who differ from that model often become the subjects of even greater degrees of scorn. Read in this light, Bradley's refusal to grant Lancelet a life of peace and closure and even her depiction of his never-ending misuse of women can be interpreted as judgments of the patriarchal system rather than of Lancelet himself.

On an even broader scale than relationships, *The Mists of Avalon* also reflects and comments on the various types of female communities that flourished in the 1970s. Of the various types of communities that developed out of the second wave of feminism, the most distinctive was that of consciousness-raising groups. The main characteristic of these groups was their extremely "nonhierarchical" nature, made possible by their relatively small size (Enns and Sinacore 472). The structure of these groups encouraged women to focus on "participation and dialogue," enabling them to further their own development, their relationships with other women, and their genuine hopes for political action and change (Enns and Sinacore 472). Another essential attribute of these groups was their focus on female separatism (Adler 184). Although women in consciousness-raising groups did not advocate for a full separation from men in daily life, they embraced the notion that many women cannot openly discuss their experiences and

discover themselves in the presence of men (Adler 184). The primary fruit of these consciousness-raising efforts was women's being able to "generate a picture of [them]selves and the world within which [they] are intelligible" (Frye 175). In other words, after hearing and internalizing men's judgments of the female sex as too emotional, prone to unhealthy desires, materialistic, and seductive, many women felt unable to conceive of themselves in any other terms. Only by truly thinking about their identities and talking about their daily experiences without the male presence could these women come to formulate mantras and myths that genuinely resonated with them. Although this small, egalitarian structure is less common among modern-day feminists, who tend to find support in classes (Hooks 190) and online (Pearce 279), there is no shortage of women who still believe in the importance of consciousness-raising, even if it is only among a group of female friends.

Of course, second-wave feminism would not have been able to gain its legislative triumphs or appeal to such a wide audience without its more hierarchical, national organizations. Because these feminist communities functioned on a larger level than consciousness-raising groups and focused more on social activism than personal discovery, they simply required a more corporate model of organization so that no single individual would become overburdened. As a result of their broader scope, these organizations or coalitions also worked more directly to embrace diversity. Organizations like the Women's Action Alliance (WAA), the City-Wide Welfare Alliance (CWA), and the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) embraced "cooperative activity" by actively recruiting and including women from all racial and ethnic backgrounds to support general

women's rights (Gilmore et al., 23, 137). Several issues, ranging from women's health

(Gilmore et al., 64) to rape (166) to professional legislation (252), encouraged women

from various socioeconomic backgrounds to embrace a "shared struggle" for the

betterment of their sex (166). Even such specialized feminist venues as magazines made

it a part of their mission to become "umbrella[s]" for feminism that illustrate and reflect

upon different women's experiences (Gilmore et al., 49). Without a doubt, these large-

scale "alliances," while they did not encourage the egalitarian sharing of personal

experience to the same degree as consciousness-raising groups, served a valuable

function through their encouragement of female solidarity in social activism (Krahulik

141).

In many ways, the Isle of Avalon, home to the priestesses of the pagan Goddess,

represents a community that values the individual exploration so central to the

consciousness-raising movement. One of the most obvious ways in which Avalon

supports individual consciousness-raising among its women is its utter separation from

the world of men. Just as many women in the 1970s felt comfortable with self-

exploration only among other women, Avalon "has been removed to a different plane of

reality" where the patriarchal, oppressive culture has no influence (Urrutia 39). Located

"halfway between [the real] world and Faerie" (Paxson, "Letter" 880), Avalon

simultaneously drifts away from male-centered reality and "remains a sanctuary for

strong feminist values" (Farwell 99). On Avalon, but never in Camelot, women are

permitted to worship a feminine symbol and develop their personal power and strength

(Farwell 99). This latter detail is the second central reason that Avalon promotes

consciousness-raising: it encourages women to explore themselves and discover the impressive feats they can accomplish. When Morgaine recounts her experience of becoming a priestess through at least seven years of training, she describes being able to control "small magics," learn the highly complex "lore" of myth and medicine, play music, value her body, and "look within" to find truth (Bradley 136-37). Morgaine's final test is to be "cast out of Avalon" and "return" on her own, a clear embodiment of the individual empowerment each priestess gains in her training (Bradley 137).

Interestingly enough, the women's chapel of the Glastonbury Convent, although technically a Christian institution and thus more entrenched in patriarchy, also serves as a haven for women in *The Mists of Avalon.* The convent is also located on the Isle of Avalon, but on the more accessible side of the mysterious mist that cloaks and protects the home of the priestesses. Without any analysis of the convent's encouraging women to explore themselves, this geographical detail makes clear the "overlap" of Avalon and Glastonbury (Ross 409). The novel makes use of the real-life myths surrounding Glastonbury as "originally a site of pagan worship" that came to be "associated with the Christian legends of the Holy Grail" (Ross 409). Because it is steeped in both the pagan and Christian traditions, the convent serves as a space in-between the hidden Avalon and patriarchal Camelot. In this sense, it actually extends the invitation for female self-exploration to a larger group of women. The women selected to become priestesses of the Goddess are necessarily few in number, and Avalon can be difficult to locate even for them. Glastonbury, on the other hand, offers a place for women of all faiths and backgrounds to find personal truth and peace. The few illustrations of Glastonbury

illustrate that it encourages women to value their own experiences. Of course, the convent is tainted with a slight patriarchal bias that pushes some of its leaders to encourage young women like Gwenhwyfar to become overly pious and afraid of the world. However, the convent also welcomes women from all backgrounds without question; Igraine and Morgaine rest there despite their pagan histories, and Gwenhwyfar is welcomed back even after her affair with Lancelet has been exposed. Also, the women's chapel in the convent is a separate location in which the image of the Virgin Mary can, in the eyes of spiritual believers, be transformed into the feminine divine. That both Morgaine and the Christian women are able to find a peaceful and supportive community here illustrates yet again the importance of placing sympathy above dogmatism in female relationships.

Of course, both Avalon and Glastonbury as religious orders also have large-scale structures more akin to that of national organizations. In Avalon, priestesses are ranked from novice to the Lady of the Lake, with the latter serving as the very voice of the Goddess that guides the entire community. Glastonbury also has its hierarchical structure of nuns and abbesses. These turns away from the egalitarianism of feminist consciousness-raising do, indeed, create difficulties for the individual women in the novel who seek to explore themselves without being controlled by reigning leaders. Critic Alexandra Lindstrom describes these difficulties in great detail. She argues that Avalon might protect its women from patriarchal oppression, but its "matriarchy" is hardly more freeing (Lindstrom 34). For instance, many of the women of Avalon cannot rise above their rank or question those of higher ranks, rendering them unable to "choose their own

destinies" (Lindstrom 67). Similarly, the Christian women at Glastonbury do not wholly escape the oppression of "male authority" so prevalent in Camelot (Lindstrom 22). Lindstrom's conclusion is that the novel ultimately fails to develop "an alternative power structure" that will support feminist egalitarianism (66). However, she ignores the degree to which the novel supports individualism through the character of Morgaine. Lindstrom describes Morgaine as little more than another limited, oppressed woman of Avalon (56) when, in fact, her character represents an individualistic impulse that can function in between Avalon, Glastonbury, and Camelot. One of Morgaine's consistent attributes is her ability to not only sense oppression, but to rebel against it with her entire being. As a child, Morgaine already understands that the Christian doctrine she is taught is far too judgmental of women; she responds by creating a mental barrier between her inner state and the lessons she hears. As a priestess, Morgaine sees Viviane's manipulations after her sexual initiation at Beltane is revealed to have been with her brother; again, she responds by abandoning the hierarchy of Avalon, even while she maintains belief in the Goddess in her heart. Similarly, when Morgaine dwells among the Christian women both at Camelot, Glastonbury, and even in North Wales, she creates an internal, protected space for her identity that none can challenge. This is perhaps the most obvious during her marriage to Uriens in Wales, when her role as queen becomes secondary to her role as leader and goddess among the fairy people. Clearly, although Bradley's depictions of feminist communities do not reach an egalitarian ideal, Morgaine's ability to transcend both patriarchy and matriarchy in a more fluid, individualized, exploratory state is certainly a valuable suggestion for the future of women's organizations and identities.

The final and perhaps most explicit feminist theme that drives the plot of *The Mists of Avalon* is female imagery of the divine. Of course, the idea and practice of Goddess worship was not new to the 1970s. In fact, the "earliest artifacts" of many cultures (Spretnak xii), dating from as early as 25,000 BC, illustrate reverence for the deity as the "Great Goddess" or "Divine Ancestress" (Stone xii). Celtic paganism, a worldview much akin to the faith of Avalon in Bradley's novel, valued women especially, both in its myths (Davidson 226) and in its affording them a relatively large degree of "personal liberty" (Squire 30). By the sixteenth century BC, however, male images for God began to "suppress" female ones (Stone 68). Although the dominance of the Abrahamic religions has made this suppression almost complete, the "feminine imagery has not been entirely lost" (Bowker 191). Nineteenth-century thinkers like Ludwig Feuerbach argued that divine images are based not on an objective reality of the nature of God, but rather on the qualities of human life—male or female—that individuals elevate and value (17). Second-wave feminists in the 1970s combined the ancient veneration of the Divine Mother with the notion of the divine as metaphor to create an incredibly robust resurgence of interest in the figure of the Goddess. Theologian Sally McFague, writing in the early 1980s, crystallizes this notion by describing a "metaphorical theology" in which the lived experiences of "outsiders," such as women and ethnic minorities, could be incorporated into divine imagery (29). Although McFague wrote largely from a Christian perspective, her concept of metaphorical theology resonated with the popular Jungian mythology to encourage second-wave feminists to reestablish the Goddess as a figure worthy of reverence (Waldron 149). Women like

Miriam Simos, also called Starhawk, began to write books in the late 1970s that popularized neo-pagan religions like Wicca for their emphasizing the female mind and body as divine. Starhawk writes that "the Goddess inspires women to see ourselves as divine, our bodies as sacred, the changing phases of our lives as holy" (24). Starhawk's vision of modern-day witchcraft is of a religion that encourages people to see women as a source of divine imagery along with men (115), describes the Goddess with "a thousand names" applicable to diverse women and cultures (94), and enables women to embrace the "Mystery" that they themselves are the Goddess (98). This worldview encourages women to create their own concept of deity (Spretnak 161), to commemorate the cycles of their lives through ritual (Christ 285), to both join egalitarian support groups and accept positions of leadership (Adler 209), and even to engender political action (182). Considering this paradigm's potential for female empowerment, it is not surprising that it has grown since the 1970s to include an estimated 500,000 self-professed witches in the United States, with another 100,000 in Britain (Rountree 217).

Without a doubt, the importance of Goddess worship and the conflict between it and Christianity is vividly present throughout the novel's entirety. This is hardly surprising, considering that Bradley took inspiration from Neopagan groups and even founded the Darkmoon Circle, an organization within the women's spirituality movement (Paxson, "Letter" 879). Using this personal experience as her guide, Bradley formulates a woman-centered paganism that is at once "a woman's spiritual quest" and a battle against patriarchal oppression (Paxson, "Letter" 879). On the one hand, Morgaine especially exhibits many of the benefits that individual women experience through Goddess

worship. As readers follow her personal growth, they witness her connection to her body's natural cycles, her acceptance of "the legitimacy of female power," and her focus on "woman's bonds" through supportive community (Alden). Because she values her body and her ability to determine her future, Morgaine experiences a degree of sexual freedom that has no comparison among the Christian women in the novel (Bucciaglia 34). Finally, after a difficult journey of trials and self-doubt, Morgaine gains both confidence and peace in her realization "that she is herself the Goddess, herself the Fairy Queen" (Quilligan 11). The Goddess religion also functions in the text as the polar opposite to the Christians who seek to suppress it. The central conflict in the novel is between the two faiths and their proponents. Whereas the pagans emphasize the natural world, "woman as a source of power," and an inclusiveness that embraces diversity, most of the Christians focus on dominion over nature, women, and all other ideologies besides their own (Ross). Bradley's tone clearly reveals her preference in this debate. The "integration" of Celtic paganism encourages its followers to live "dynamic" and "vital" lives (Ross 421); some of the most vivid and joyous scenes in the novel are Morgaine's training on the Isle of Avalon and her sexually charged reawakening as a priestess in her later years. In contrast, Christianity is largely a religion that "separates" people, forcing them to devolve into "static" and "lifeless" individuals that see doctrine as virtue and the freedom to enjoy the natural pleasures of life as vice (Ross 420). Both Gwenhwyfar's persistent inability to empathize with others and Arthur's estrangement from Morgaine are illustrations of the potentially negative influence of a Christianity that is seen only as patriarchal and dominating. Interestingly enough, the king's relationship to the Christian

tradition is perhaps the most important detail of the traditional Arthurian legend that
Bradley chooses to revise. Bradley's younger Arthur swears an oath to encourage
freedom of religion and to protect the pagans who are being persecuted, but he later
betrays Avalon by withdrawing his support at the urging of his overly pious queen. Thus,
Morgaine's apparent betrayal of her brother, emphasized in more traditional versions of
the legend, "becomes justified" (Ross 413). The ultimate betrayal of the novel, and the
primary reason for Camelot's fall, becomes Arthur's "rejection of the cauldron in favor of
the cross" (Spivack 28). If Bradley is willing to blame the fall of Camelot on Arthur's
denunciation of paganism, then clearly the Goddess is an image that she sees as vital not
only to women, but to all people.

However, just as Morgaine learns to navigate the space between Avalon and
Glastonbury to locate the best aspects of both, so she comes to realize that her pagan
tolerance must ultimately respect, not deny, the Christian tradition. Although the
polarization of paganism and Christianity is the most significant driver of plot in *The
Mists of Avalon*, this more mature notion of acceptance and tolerance is also a common
theme. At numerous points in the text, major pagan leaders like Viviane and Taliesin
repeat the epigram that "all the Gods are one God . . . and all the Goddesses are one
Goddess" (Bradley xi). Toward the end of the novel, Morgaine carries the Holy Grail—in
Bradley's version, the chalice of the Goddess—through Camelot's central hall, and it
reflects "the common yearning in the hearts of all" despite their religious differences
(Thompson 135). Even the geography of the novel, with its "multiple dimensions,"
suggests "that more than one world, more than one truth, is possible" (Ross 410). This

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common theme does not reach its climax, however, until Morgaine, the novel's central consciousness, grasps its import at the end of her life. Living among the nuns and virgins of Glastonbury, Morgaine witnesses the women's respect for Viviane (Bradley 872), their acceptance of her planting the Holy Thorn from Avalon (873), and their high estimation of the Virgin Mary in the women's chapel (875). Thus encouraged to see the Goddess as inhabiting Christianity as well as paganism, Morgaine finally achieves inner peace and is able to "step through the mists" between the worlds at will (Bradley 876). Without a doubt, this conclusion suggests that a "narrow vision of life . . . is destined to result in a distorted view of reality" (Hopson 118). Both paganism and Christianity attain pieces of truth, but never address the entirety of human experience. It is only in a "broader vision" of "reconciliation" that truth and humanity dwell, and it is Morgaine's ultimate reward to finally glimpse this reality for herself (Hopson 118).

The Mists of Avalon is both eloquent and detailed in its depictions of women's reclaiming their voices, building their relationships and communities, and valuing their life experiences in divine imagery. However, it is the numerous implications of these depictions that give the novel its true staying power. Aside from the fact that the novel reflects gains in women's rights made possible by feminism in the 1970s, it also points toward the future by encouraging women from the 1980s onward to seek all types of personal empowerment. Numerous women—both scholars and public readers—attest to the fact that Bradley's masterpiece not only reflects female empowerment, but encourages its further development. Reader Patricia Shechter, for instance, describes the novel as a channel for her "finding an alternative to patriarchal religion" in images of the

feminine divine (Shechter and Suchocki et al., 91). Similar, Marjorie Suchocki describes

her experience of reading the text as "catalytic and totally absorbing," encouraging her

not only to apply its wisdom to her daily life, but also to buy copies of the novel for her

daughters (Shechter and Suchocki et al., 108). Although the novel certainly has its flaws,

ranging from historical inaccuracies (Ross 441) to a rather quick shift from "anti-

Christian polemic" to open tolerance (456-57), it is clear that such faults have little effect

on the novel's widespread appeal and its effectiveness in encouraging women to value

their lived experiences. Since its release, *The Mists of Avalon* has proved enormously

popular, inspiring both film adaptations (Maryles) and numerous collaborative prequels

(D'Ammassa 12). According to Melinda Alden, the novel's greatest strength is its

encouraging readers to imagine "the possibilities of what life might be like for men and

women in a world where the feminine in humanity, as well as in the divine, is equally

valued" (80). It is this gesturing toward the future that makes *The Mists of Avalon* not

only a reflection of past feminism, but also an inspiration for women of today. Both

shaped by and shaping reality, the novel already succeeds in what most great literature

hopes to achieve.

CONCLUSION

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What each of these case studies in the Arthurian myth illustrates is that just as culture changes over time, legends meant to appeal to that culture change, as well. Although this study has focused on depictions of gender roles to the exclusion of other recurring issues, the same could be said of numerous other themes in the Arthurian myth. Each of the novels makes profound comments on the nature of friendship, war, love, and betrayal—the very foundations of life itself—that could be similarly demonstrated to have their grounding in the surrounding culture and hopes for the future of that culture. To some degree, this correlation is common sense, and the case studies merely analyze in greater detail what has been known to be true all along. What these studies of Arthurian gender illustrate that is not common sense, however, is that both cultural and textual change often winds and turns back upon itself. Rather than progressing down a straight path toward an increased respect and appreciation for women's stories and complexities, the broader comparison of these legends shows how this progress goes through many bends before it reaches such a destination. Although the comparison between *Le Morte d'Arthur* and *The Mists of Avalon* clearly demonstrates the growing prevalence of the

female experience in the Arthurian legend, the middle novels are less clear-cut in their progression toward gender equality.

Malory's text very clearly endorses the prevalent gender ideology of its time: whereas male characters are encouraged to gain honor through formal means, women are only permitted to do so if they work through, not around, the patriarchal structure. In the late medieval period, men were taught that they alone deserved and were capable of succeeding in official positions of power and influence. From all levels of the social strata, including knights and students, men exchanged women as a form of currency and devalued both wives and single women alike as wholly dependent citizens. On the other hand, medieval women were not powerless by any means. Both aristocratic women and women from the marketplace learned to gain unofficial power through patriarchy with education, kin and friendship networks, and as representatives of absent husbands. In many ways, Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* prescribes roles for men and women that closely match those of this medieval social structure. His primary focus is on the men of the tale, and he allows them to gain honor and prowess through combat, as well as independence through sexual freedom. Malory's women, on the other hand, fail to gain any power or influence unless they do so with the help of men. Some of the women, such as Igraine, exhibit formulaic feminine weaknesses that prevent their gaining power; others, such as Isoud and Morgan le Fay, become equally powerless because they seek too much independence. The only women who become influential are those who use their words or bodies to persuade men or gratify male sexual desires. Clearly, although this path to

power is better than no path at all, it denies women any independent agency and forces them to rely on men for even the smallest of tasks.

Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, while still reflecting the prevailing anti-feminist ideologies of its time, comes to critique them to a much greater extent than Malory. Although some Victorian thinkers argued for complete gender equality, myths about the limited nature of woman were far more prevalent. The two most common myths have come to be referred to as the separate spheres and female savior ideologies. According to the doctrine of the separate spheres, women's proper place is in the home, providing a nurturing environment for children and a sanctuary for their husbands who work in the stressful public world. Clearly implicit in this ideology is the notion that women must be married mothers to fulfill their role in life. The second myth, that of the female savior, argues that women have a higher capacity for morality than men and, as a result, should abstain from sexual desires and encourage men to do the same. Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, first published in a limited form that explicitly compared positive and negative types of women, reflects these ideologies in many ways. Positive figures like Arthur, Gareth, Lynette, and Elaine illustrate the idea that women should be domestic supports for men. On the other hand, Vivien and Guinevere show the disastrous social consequences of women who refuse to fulfill this ideal, either through prostitution or adultery. However, there are actually a significant number of characters and scenes in *Idylls of the King* that undermine such conventional ideas. For instance, the story of Balin and Balan places the responsibility for male control squarely on the shoulders of men themselves; Enid learns that marriage must consist of relatively egalitarian

communication; and Arthur himself becomes blamed rather than honored for his attempts to turn real-life people into unnatural idealizations. Overall, then, *Idylls of the King* actually seems to support unconventional gender roles to a much greater degree than thinkers in its time period.

The Once and Future King, while sympathetic to redefinitions of the masculine ideal during the 1930s through the 1950s, actually strives to limit women to the domestic sphere much more than Tennyson's text. White's dismissal of the masculine ideal reflects its repudiation in the larger society itself. Whereas individuals in the 1930s unquestionably accepted the myth of the ideal man as the soldier-hero, the experience of the Second World War forced them to reevaluate their beliefs and confront the grim physical and psychological effects that battles had on soldiers. White's description of the young Arthur's education among the animals and King Arthur's dedication to Right over Might forcefully combine to criticize and subvert the concept of war as heroic. On the other hand, both the culture of the 1950s and *The Once and Future King* repeatedly strive to define women wholly and completely by their domestic role. Culturally, the 1950s represented a conservative backlash against women's increased involvement in the professions, which was required when men were fighting as soldiers during wartime. Manuals for women began to emphasize the importance of maternity in giving meaning to their lives, and men supported this ideology by refusing to hire women workers. *The Once and Future King* clearly reflects this ideology in its almost pathological fixation on mother figures. Although White's Guenever is described in positive terms despite her barrenness, every other female character is either judged for ineffective mothering or

praised for strong maternal instincts. Arthur's nurse is strong and insistent and thus described by his foster-father as insane; Maid Marian is incredibly independent and thus refused prominence as an outlaw; Morgause ignores her children and forces them to become violent to get attention; and Morgan le Fay is promiscuous and has her reputation blackened. The fact that Elaine, the positive mother who raises the honorable Galahad, is described as relying on Lancelot's love and dedicating herself only to the domestic environment illustrates how little White permits his female characters to develop into full-bodied and complex individuals. Clearly, *The Once and Future King*, despite being written a century after *Idylls of the King*, is actually much less in favor of women's rights.

Finally, *The Mists of Avalon* represents a departure from nearly all previous Arthurian renditions; whereas the others only incidentally, if at all, grant women the opportunity to achieve empowerment, Bradley brings women's lives and stories to the center of her text. This is not surprising when one considers that the novel, published in 1982, was influenced by and reflects the growing gender equality of the 1960s and 1970s. Feminists during this time, called second-wave feminists, privileged women as complex individuals, encouraged them to develop relationships with other women, supported their personal exploration and activism for increased rights, and even fostered religious imagery of the feminine divine. Bradley's text explicitly reflects and supports each of these gains for women. Valuing individual women, she presents female characters that are complex and allows them to control the narrative voice of the legend for the first time in its history. She creates women who learn not only the importance of female personal and sympathetic relationships, but also come to appreciate the healing qualities of

lesbianism. She depicts various types of communities that encourage women to explore their potential for greatness and the true thoughts and feelings of their hearts and minds. Finally, she describes worship of the divine in the form of the Goddess as an empowering option for women who sense that their thoughts, feelings, bodies, and experiences are sacred. Without a doubt, Bradley's text is one of the first and only examples of an Arthurian retelling that explicitly focuses on gender to revise its themes. Many readers, especially women, have gravitated toward and found inspiration from it as a result. The major implication of this trend is that legends do not only reflect and echo their surrounding cultures; they can also point toward future possibilities and bring them into action through the readers they inspire.

Without a doubt, the large-scale development of both feminine history and the Arthurian legend is one of increasing rights for women and respect for them as complex individuals. However, it is also clear that this development did not come about evenly or in a straightforward manner. In many ways, more recent conservative backlashes, such as that of the 1950s, can be just as limiting for women as earlier periods of time, such as the Victorian era, when notions of gender equality were less prevalent. This is perhaps one reason why *Idylls of the King* is more willing to critique gender stereotypes than *The Once and Future King.* The lesson embodied by this fact is one of acute awareness for modern-day feminists: no matter how many strides are made toward gender equality and no matter how many rights women gain, the possibility for regression into stereotypes and limitations is always a major threat. In an age that many individuals consider post-feminist, this is an enlightening realization. On the other hand, comparing the medieval

period to the 1970s and *Le Morte d'Arthur* to *The Mists of Avalon* illustrates just how much respect and equality women have gained over time. Although the progression toward relative gender egalitarianism has not been straight or smooth, progress has been definite and strong. The Arthurian legend has shifted and transformed from one in which male-male relations, chivalry, and military escapades were central to a myth that values women's experiences enough to allow them full reign in narrative voice and subject matter. These enormous changes illustrate that flexibility, rather than stability, is perhaps the most important quality of the King Arthur stories and of mythology in general. Much of its staying power emerges from its ability to adapt even to the point of transforming previously marginalized groups into focal points.

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