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***Perception of Women of the Arthurian Legend in the
Middle Ages and in the Twentieth Century***

B.A. Major Thesis

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*I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently,
using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.*

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Author's signature

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Arthurian legend, often referred to as the "Matter of Britain", is one of the most important parts of the British national heritage; over the centuries, it has developed into a symbol of British patriotism, a consolation in bad times and a religious allegory of searching for the Truth. These interpretations are usually centered around the male characters of the legend and promote the patriarchal division of the society; still, many more possible views on the legend have been expressed. In my thesis, I will investigate two twentieth-century views and contrast them with the traditional Christian ones by analysing three of the crucial literary works based on the legend; In this analysis, I will concentrate on the female characters appearing in these rewritings. The aim of such comparison is to demonstrate in what ways the time period as well as the society where the author lives, along with his or her beliefs and political opinions, affect the treatment of the particular material, while at the same time the work itself offers diverse ways of understanding the society, its history and development.

Morte D'Arthur by Thomas Malory, a detailed prosaic description of the events of the legend, is undoubtedly one of the crucial works concerning the topic. It was first published by Caxton in 1485 and has formed the basis for all the Arthurian literature ever since; Malory's impact can be traced even in the twentieth century fantasy fiction. Malory's work reflects the Middle-Age stereotype of women as evil and responsible for the original sin only to a certain degree, the influence of courtly romances in which women were praised and adored creates a more favourable depiction of them. The social and political conditions of the twentieth century which differed radically from those in the Middle Ages are naturally reflected in literature and in the perception of the Matter of Britain, too. The role of women in the society and, consequentially, in literature, altered dramatically; the general tendency was to draw more attention towards them, their emotions and motivations; this can be observed in two important Arthurian novels, in T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958) and in particular in *The*

Mists of Avalon (1979) by Marion Zimmer Bradley. While White portrays the female characters with sympathy and understanding, he uses them mainly as a means to find out more about his male heroes. Bradley, on the other hand, makes women the central characters of her novel and describes their struggle to retain their power and dignity in the patriarchal society.

The first chapter of my thesis provides a chronological account of the development of female characters in the Arthurian legend. The chapter begins with Celtic myths from which the legend originated, the role of women in Celtic religion and society is described as well as the extent to which the Celtic aspects of the legend have been preserved, particularly in relation to the remains of Goddess worship which survived the Christianisation of the Arthurian material in the Middle Ages. The second part of this chapter deals with the way the legend developed in the Middle Ages and with the changes of the perception of woman characters. Most attention is paid to Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* and the importance of this particular work for all later rewritings of the legend. The last part of this chapter describes the changes in viewing the female characters of the Arthurian legend as well as women in general which occurred in the twentieth century, briefly mentioning the most important literary works inspired by the Arthurian mythology; this should provide context for the next chapter.

In the second chapter, T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* is compared to Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*. The time in which the story is set plays a crucial role for the religion practised in both books and, consequently, for the position of women. Therefore the setting of both novels is the first topic discussed in the chapter, the Christian surroundings in *The Once and Future King* are contrasted with the early Middle Ages and surviving Goddess worship in *The Mists of Avalon*. The general introduction to both novels is followed by a more detailed insight into the theoretical background of both novels. To a limited extent, it is possible to apply certain aspects of the postmodernist theory to White;

Bradley's work, on the other hand, is consciously constructed on the ground of Neo-Paganism and feminist spirituality. The theoretical principles will be employed in the detailed analysis of all major female characters which occur in the novels, starting with Arthur's half-sisters Morgan and Morgause and their allies to whom White refers as "The Old Ones"; this indicates their Gaelic origins and their connection to the mystical world of Celtic legends. In White, this world is almost totally forgotten while in Bradley it still survives, although the new Christian religion is pushing it slowly out of reality, into the realm of dreams and fairy-tales. Another important character which will be paid attention to is Guinevere, Arthur's unfaithful wife. While in the Middle Ages she was pictured as the sinful woman who brought the Round Table to its end, the twentieth-century authors wanted to humanize her in accordance with the feminist tendencies. This could be observed particularly in *The Once and Future King*; Bradley, on the other hand, does not depict Guinevere in a very favourable light; still the readers may sympathise with her. The last part of this chapter concentrates on the female characters who do not play a crucial role in the events of the novel but still the views of the authors can be demonstrated on them.

2. THE ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF ARTHURIAN LITERATURE

2.1 Before Malory -- From Celtic Legends to French Romances

It is not possible to specify in what time the Arthurian legend originated as its roots reach far into the mysterious pagan times about which there is little historical evidence. However, the influence of Celtic (especially Welsh) legends can be traced. To explore the treatment of women in the Arthurian legend, it is necessary to know what position they held within Celtic society as well as to what extent the impact of Celtic mythology can be traced in the later versions of the legend.

A few elements of Celtic religion which survived the Christianization of the British Isles have been preserved in the Arthurian legend. Arthur proves that he is the rightful King of Britain when he pulls the sword out of the stone; when he is deadly wounded after the final battle, he departs to the mysterious island of Fairy people; Merlin and other characters (mostly female) use magic to change the course of events. These are just a few instances which support the claim that the supernatural plays an important part in the story; even the most strict and pious medieval scribes could not omit it entirely. One such element is the existence of the Blessed Realm, a mystical sacred place where time runs differently and which has no clear boundary with this world; in Welsh, such a place is called Ynis Avalon, the Isle of Apples. Apples were associated with the female Goddess in Celtic mythology; a sacred apple tree could be found in the Blessed Realm of most Celtic mythologies (Celtopedia). The magic sword and the scabbard which protects Arthur's life are described by many authors including Geoffrey of Monmouth as gifts that Arthur receives from the fairy people, usually from the female inhabitants of Avalon.

The way in which any society perceives women is usually connected with religion. Although the belief of some feminist and Neo-Pagan movements which emerged at the end of

the twentieth century often tend to exaggerate the role of women within Celtic society, evidence exists that they did enjoy some respect and could reach a powerful position within the community. Women were probably not allowed to join the orders of druids; still, female priestesses and prophets existed. Angus Konstam's *Historical Atlas of the Celtic World* cites some examples recorded by Romans who visited Britain, such as Pomponius Mela who in the first century AD described an island called Sena, a part of what is now called the Scilly Isles, which seemed to be a sacred place where nine priestesses with supernatural powers lived (104). Even the Roman leaders consulted Celtic priestesses and asked them to foretell their future; many cases in which the words of the priestesses came into being are recorded (105). Although the female priestesses were not respected as much as the male druids, they formed an integral part of the Celtic religious life. It should be mentioned that women were active not only in the religious sphere but in warfare and leadership, too. Figures such as the famous Queen Boudicca who opposed the Romans or Cartimandua, the Queen of the Icenii, serve as powerful examples to support such claims.

Despite the status which women held in Celtic society and which was undoubtedly far more favourable than the views of the Classical civilization and of the main monotheistic religions, women do not seem to play a significant role in early Arthurian stories. This may be connected with the fact that the pre-Christian Celtic culture was of oral nature, that is why all the records of Celtic tales which have been preserved come from a later period and, for the most part, from Christian monks who may have modified the stories according to their own belief. It is also necessary to consider the warlike nature of the Celts and the importance of religious rituals within their society; both these activities were usually performed by men.

In *King Arthur in History and Legend* (1914), W. Lewis Jones gives a brief account of the references to the Arturian material that can be found in old Welsh literature. In *The Four Ancient Books of Wales*, which contain medieval Welsh prose and poetry, are counted among

the most important resources of Welsh tales, only brief references to Arthur can be found (38). These tales depict him as a King and a warrior, describing mainly his achievements in battles. However, the mystical island of Avalloch and other supernatural aspects of the Arthurian legend are present. In *The Book of Taliesin* Arthur becomes a central character who explores unknown regions in his ship called Prydwen. Another poem, *Gereint Filius Erbin*, is crucial for the development of the Arthurian legend as it introduces the knights of the Round Table for the first time, but the epic poem *Kulhawch and Olwen* deserves perhaps even more attention due to the fact that Gwenhwyfar, Arthur's wife, is mentioned for the first time. Arthur and some of the characters related to him also appear in a number of Welsh Triads. The story of the treachery of Medraut (later Mordred), resulting in the disastrous final battle, and above all the mysterious isle of Avalloch where Arhtur is buried, are mentioned (53). One of the Triads says that Arthur had three wives, all of whom were called Gwenhwyfar. The Welsh resources contain names of other important places and characters, such as the castle of Tintagel where Gorlois, the Duke of Cornwall, lives with his beautiful wife Igerne.

It is believed that not only Welsh but also Cornish and Breton versions of the legend existed; however, none of these have been preserved.

When all Britain was christianized, King Arthur was turned into a pious Christian, too, as well as all those who belonged to his court. If the Welsh tales concentrated on Arthur as a warrior while other characters including the female ones were marginalized, in the writings of the Latin chroniclers there was no place for women either. The Roman disregard of women and the Christian belief in the original sin which justified their inferiority certainly influenced the views of the society. Some chroniclers did not include the Arthurian material at all, others refer to Arthur as to a real British chieftain (only in later resources he becomes a king); in these accounts the supernatural is not present. The oldest document where Arthur appears as a warrior is *Historia Brittonum* (around 830) ascribed to Nennius; another chronicler, William

of Malmesbury, mentions not only Arthur but also the grave of his relative Gawaine. Obviously the most important chronicler to record the Arthurian story was Geoffrey of Monmouth. He preserved the affair of Igraine and Uther that resulted in Arthur's birth; it should also be noted that Igraine had one more child, a daughter called Anna who was later married to Lot of Lodonesia and became the mother of Gawain and Mordred (she thus plays the same part as other versions of the legend ascribe to Morgause).

Despite all their effort the scribes could not get rid of the supernatural aspect of the legend entirely; this can be observed in Geoffrey's work, too. Thus Arthur's sword, Caliburn, is described as "best of swords, that was forged within the Isle of Avalon" where Arthur dwells "with the fairest of all elves" (Jones 76). Real women are depicted in much less favourable light than the "elves", it seems that Geoffrey does not find them even worth mentioning. When Arthur leaves Britain and marches on Rome, his nephew Mordred is left in charge of the land but he betrays Arthur by declaring himself the King of Britain, and takes Queen Guinevere for his wife despite her marriage to Arthur. However, Geoffrey will "say naught" of this affair and concentrates only on the disastrous war of Arthur and Mordred (Jones 82).

Geoffrey inspired many other authors such as Wace who included Arthur's story in his *Brut* (1155), as well as Layamon who wrote an English version of *Brut*. While Wace's work has been considered the earliest Arthurian chivalric romance in Britain, written in the first place to appeal to the Anglo-Norman aristocracy, Layamon produced "a patriotic English epic" (Jones 92); still both works (especially Layamon) contain significant references to the supernatural. When Arthur is deadly wounded in the final battle, he is carried to Avalon in a boat with two mysterious women, in Avalon he would be healed by an elf called Argante (Morgan); this made it possible for the belief that Arthur would return to his people one day to emerge.

Wace's *Brut* marked the beginning of the era of chivalric romance, which came into fashion before the end of the 12th century and flourished especially in continental Europe. The nobility enjoyed the romantic tales about knights who were generous, courteous, loyal and always ready to "redress wrongs, protect the helpless [and] serve women" (Schofield 4-5), although the reality was completely different. The figure of King Arthur fits into the romantic ideals of the time very well, that is why he and his court served as a basis for many diverse adventures of the knights of the Round Table. Most of these stories and characters, which have been connected with the Arthurain legend ever since, are inventions of that period. It was in the time of chivalry as well that the Arthurian women started to play an important part in the story. One of the crucial aspects of chivalric ideals was courtly love; the noble ladies wanted to be entertained, too, and they could hardly express any interest in countless accounts of cruel slaughter in battles. That is why love stories such as that of Tristan and Iseult, and especially that of Lancelot and Guinevere, were introduced, and an archetype of a virtuous knight, together with that of an unfaithful wife but faithful lover, worshipped by the knight, came into being. The latter was represented mainly by Guinevere and Iseult; the impact of this archetype on perceiving women as well as a more detailed analysis of the phenomenon of chivalry in relation to the Christian doctrine will be demonstrated on Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*.

2.2 Malory, His Time and the Conditions of Women

There is no doubt that Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* has been one of the most influential Arthurian works of all times; its impact has not diminished even more than five hundred years after it was printed. Although he did little more than gathering diverse French and English resources and putting them together while adding his own ideas only occasionally, he did this with great skill and it is still very pleasant to read the "joyous and pleasant histories" of "noble and renowned acts of humanity, gentleness, and chivalry." (Malory *xiii*). Malory has created a

romantic vision of the world that never existed except in the chivalric literature; such romantic fancies were already disappearing and becoming old-fashioned in his time but he brought them to life again while contrasting them with reality. The result of this comparism must have been very bitter for a man who was leading the unhappy life of a prisoner, charged with political as well as civil crimes, probably suffering from some incurable illness and expecting death, while outside raged the War of the Roses (Schlauch 298). His nostalgia and longing for the true virtues of the noble class are understandable not only due to his personal misfortunes but also in the light of the social and political context of the end of the fifteenth century. Schlauch describes the late 14th century social context as well as Malory's situation. He belonged to the feudal nobility who were quickly losing their power, in additon to being weakened by the devastating civil war (283). The manufacturers and traders were becoming wealthy as well as influential at the expense of the nobility; however, the aristocrats would not admit that their age was over and continued acting as they had done for centuries before. This means that they still pretended that something like the tradition of "true knighthood" and chivalry really existed, while in fact their behaviour often contradicted these ideals (296). Malory realized all this very well and reflected it in his work.

If the conditions of the society were changing rapidly (in Britain as well as in all Europe), these shifts had little impact on the situation of women. The strict following of religious doctrine was soon to be replaced by the more worldly and human-oriented Rennaisance which already flourished in continental Europe. This, together with the rise of the middle class, the discoveries of unknown continents and new religious movements which opposed Catholicism, marked the end not only of the Middle Ages but also of the period of the chivalric romance when noble women were worshipped and knights did many marvellous deeds for them (at least in the world of courtly romances). There was simply no place for fair ladies and their devoted suitors among the ambitious merchants, not even in fictional tales.

Malory at least granted his readers with the moving love stories of Lancelot and Guinever, Tristan and Iseult and others, although he made courtly love at least partly responsible for the final tragedy. In the preface to *Morte D'Arthur* Caxton states clearly that the book is intended for "all noble lords and ladies" (Malory *xiii*), due to Malory's background and beliefs it is only natural that he addresses the members of the nobility; the men who are far from acting as good knights should as well as women among whom it was certainly hard to find a virtuous and true Iseult. If one wants to understand Malory's attitude to women as well as the attitude of medieval society, it is necessary to answer the question *how* he addresses the female readers. Caxton says about the *Morte D'Arthur* that "herein may be seen noble chivalry, courtesy, humanity, friendliness, hardiness, love, friendship, cowardice, murder, hate, virtue, and sin" but it is the next sentence that conveys the crucial message: "Do after the good and leave the evil, and it shall bring you to good fame and renown." (*xiii*). As A. W. Pollard claims in the bibliographical note to *Morte D'Arthur*, Caxton approached Malory's manuscript "with his usual enthusiasm in the cause of good literature, and also, it must be added, with his usual carelessness" (Macmillan edition *viii*); still, the purpose of Malory's work was undoubtedly retained. It is clear from the book who are the "full noble knights", their virtues contrast with the wickedness of the villains who violate the chivalric code; still many of the characters have surprisingly complex personalities, among the female ones especially Queen Guenevere who will be dealt with in more detail in the fourth chapter.

Most of the female characters who appear in *Morte D'Arthur* fall into one of two different categories. On one hand there are the "good" women; they possess the Christian virtues such as chastity, loyalty and piety in addition to being beautiful and gentle; women with such qualities represent either a Christian or a chivalric ideal, often both joined together. Most of the "fair ladies and damosels" who appear in *Morte D'Arthur* in great numbers could be classified as exactly this kind of women, they are the ladies in distress who present the

knights with the possibility to prove their virtue by saving them. Even though they usually do nothing more than serving as passive objects whose role is reduced to a means for the noble knights to demonstrate their qualities, their role remains essential for the genre of chivalric romance. Ladies such as Igraine and the Maid of Astolat can also be put into this category as well as Queen Guinevere, although her character seems to be far too complex to be categorized easily. For Malory these characters embody the ideal womanhood, he praises them and sympathizes with them.

In the second category, women who are wicked, mischievous and far from acting as pious Christians can be found, they often betray the good knights and lead them into mortal danger. As opposed to the virtuous women, these characters are active, seeking to determine their own destiny as well as the destiny of others, thus it would be easy to view Malory in a feministic way and accuse him of misogyny. Such simplification would be misleading as Malory treats his women with sympathy and even Arthur's sister Morgan Le Fay, who plots against her brother all the time, reconciles with him and takes care about him in the end.

Morgan and some other negative characters are connected with the supernatural, using magic forces to do harm to their enemies. The appearance of magic is reduced as much as possible, yet it cannot be said that it is always presented as evil. Still the most visible character linked with the supernatural remains Morgan who intrigues against her brother and the Round Table without having a clear motivation. Their reconciliation in the end can hardly be explained logically either. On the other hand, some characters who do not come from this world seem to act nicely, often helping Arthur and his knights. One of them is "Nimue, the chief lady of the lake, that had wedded Pelleas the good knight". The reader learns that "this lady had done much for King Arthur, for she would never suffer Sir Pelleas to be in no place where he should be in danger of his life; and so he lived to the uttermost of his days with her in great rest" (Malory 494). In connection with Malory's unstable relationship to the

supernatural, an interesting contradiction which Bradley points out in her *Thoughts on Avalon* becomes visible: characters who seem to be far from pious Christians often tend to be pictured in a more favourable light than those who live according to the Bible. (Bradley, Literary).

Apart from the Fairy people, the most obvious examples of this contradiction are Arthur and Lancelot; it is the latter who receives most praise and whom Malory grants with a good ending despite his sins, while Arthur, "the most renowned Christian king", is killed by his own son and the fellowship of the Round Table, which he loved above all things, is destroyed. Still the "good ende" of the sinners such as Lancelot and Guinevere is obtained only by renouncing all worldly joys, Guinevere even denies Lancelot a final kiss and prays to die before he arrives so that she would not see him anymore. This discrepancy coheres with Malory's inconsistent relationship to courtly love; on one hand the whole work seems to express his enchantment with its ideals as well as nostalgia for such ideals, on the other hand he makes courtly love responsible for many of the misfortunes which the heroes go through; its impact on the final tragedy seems obvious, too. Malory's critics have expressed diverse opinions concerning this issue. Margaret Schlauch states that Malory points out the negative consequences of courtly love, making it responsible for destroying the whole society. Although she admits that such society where noble knights wandered from castle to castle through enchanted forests, encountering villains and fair ladies in distress, in fact never existed (299), her statement about the evil nature of courtly love in *Morte D'Arthur* still seems unreasonably harsh. W. Lewis Jones, on the other hand, expresses his admiration for the elaborate nature of Malory's style and suggests that "he who would know and revel in the richest treasures of Arthurian romance should devote his days and his nights to the reading of what is ingenuously and truly, styled in its epigone, 'the noble and joyous book'" (115). Both these attitudes could be justified and supported by evidence from Malory's work; Malory brought the dying courtly tradition to life once again in a unique and elaborate way, while at

the same time witnessing its inevitable end and realizing its negative consequences. The unreal nature of Arthur's realm enabled him to grant his women a position of active participants in the story and of worshipped ideals, which was far from corresponding with the reality of his time but certainly pleasant to read.

2.3 Malory's Impact on Arturian Literature

It could hardly be doubted that all those who dealt with the Arthurian cycle after the appearance of *Morte D'Arthur* had to cope with its legacy, it was not possible for them to just ignore the existence of this elaborate work. In *King Arthur in History and Legend*, Jones states that Malory "gave new life to the Arthurian legends" (117-18). The validity of this statement, especially if applied to the situation in Britain, can be proved by the fact that the courtly romance was already becoming extinct; in addition, the impact of the courtly romance was much stronger in continental Europe than in the homeland of the Arthurian legend. Jones even claims that as far as British Arthurian romance is concerned, there is no piece of literature worth mentioning except for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (116). In this light *Morte D'Arthur* really stands out as a unique compilation of the Arthurian material as well as a work of literature.

In the sixteenth century, the Tudors exerted a lot of effort to reinforce the patriotic feelings in the British as it helped them build the British Empire. This means that Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* enjoyed great popularity among those concerned with patriotic issues, others, especially those influenced by the Renaissance, dismissed it completely. There are very few works dealing with the Arthurian legend written in this period. It could be expected that the Matter of Britain presented Shakespeare or some of his contemporaries with a considerable amount of material for an extensive rewriting of the legend; still, with only few exceptions, no significant Arthurian work has been preserved (Jones 121). The exceptions include William

Warner who produced some patriotic Arthurian poems; concentrating, as could be expected, more on the battles than on the romantic episodes, and Michael Drayton who criticised the lack of interest of the British in their own history. Even those who did have an intention to compose an "Arthuriad", meaning an epic poem inspired by the Matter of Britain, eventually turned to other topics which they found more profitable and interesting for the audience. One such man was John Milton who at least expressed his fascination with the legend in *Paradise Regained*. Dryden, another potential author of a great Arthurian work, composed a "dramatic opera" called *King Arthur* which in fact was a patriotic glorification of King Charles II (Jones 125). Edmund Spenser produced a long poem entitled *The Faerie Queene* with political purposes in mind, too; the main intention in writing this work seems to have been linking the main heroine with Queen Elizabeth. In the view of Jones he at least "succeeded in giving a romantic glamour to his pen which helps us to forget its allegorical intent" (127).

In the Restoration period the situation did not change very much, one of the few writers concerned with the Arthurian material was Sir Richard Blackmore who produced *Prince Arthur, an Heroick Poem in Ten Books* followed by *King Arthur*, an extensive Arthurian history consisting of twelve books. Both these works were political alegories where Arthur represented the Prince of Orange while his Saxon enemies stood for the followers of James II. The work contains strong Christian symbolism, too, with the angels of Heaven helping Arthur and his knights to oppose the Saxons; they were supported by the fallen angels led by Lucifer (Jones 126).

This brief list of works that emerged during the Renaissance and Restoration periods indicates that even the few authors concerned with the Matter of Britain recreated the legend for political, mostly patriotic and courtly purposes. This had little to do with anything else than Arthur's qualities as a leader of the British nation and his connection to the contemporary monarch. It was not before the Victorian period that the interest in the Arthurian material as

such was renewed. At this time, the question of women's position within the society started to be discussed; movements opposing the traditional Christian view of women emerged for the first time at the end of this period. Basnett states that the way the nineteenth-century authors treated this material

exposes some of the contradictions at the heart of Victorian society that critics have so frequently discussed – the contrast between images of idyllic childhood and the prevalence of child prostitution, the ideal of the ‘Angel of the House’ and the number of writers obsessed with woman’s adultery, the discrepancy between the image of England as the powerhouse of the world and the appalling social conditions in which the workers who toiled in that powerhouse lived, the development of an ideal of Englishness set against a background of xenophobia and overt racism (8).

One of the most important Victorian works in which such discrepancies can be found are *The Idylls of the King* by Lord Tennyson; this work is usually viewed as modern in style while still remaining faithful to tradition in that it shows Arthur as "ideal manhood closed in real man" (Jones 133). A didactic purpose suiting the Victorian moral is introduced, too, although Tennyson himself complained that most of the critics "explained some things too allegorically" (qtd. in Jones 132). Another work, which appeared even before the *Idylls*, deserves to be mentioned – *The Defense of Guinevre* by William Morris. The uniqueness of this long poem consists in the fact that it presents a conscious attempt to justify Guinevere's actions while openly admitting her adulterous sexual intercourse (Basnett 11).

The interest in the Arthurian material as well as the attention paid to the woman characters which began during the Victorian era served as a basis for the writers of the next century who treated the Arthurian material in ways as diverse as the religious beliefs, political movements and lifestyles which emerged in the twentieth century.

3. A DIFFERENT SETTING – THE TWENTIETH CENTURY; THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND DEMONSTRATED ON WHITE AND BRADLEY

3.1 Social Background -- God versus Goddess

There has been hardly any time in history which marked such profound changes in the European and American society as the twentieth century. It might be too simplifying to state that the prejudiced white, heterosexual and male God which had ruled the society for centuries started to be challenged by the Goddess who preferred multiculturalism, alternative spirituality and diversity, yet such a tendency became apparent due to the general situation in which the Western society found itself. Two devastating world wars caused many of those who survived to lose any illusions or religious belief, others turned away from Christianity and searched for alternatives. The feminist movement managed to change the status of women so that they became more independent, acquired new selfconfidence and started pursuing their own goals. In philosophy, as well as in art and literature, new ways of thinking connected with the dissatisfaction with the traditional Christian world-view emerged. At the beginning of the century, the movement which challenged the Victorian standards regarding art and lifestyle in general was modernism. Before and during the Second World War, existentialism enjoyed great popularity among the intellectuals; after the war, postmodernism which built on the principles of the previous movements became influential.

To understand the treatment of the Arthurian material in the twentieth century, it is necessary to explain the main concepts of postmodern theory and its development. Professor Mary Klages provides a fitting definition of postmodernism, stating that it follows the ideas of modernism by "rejecting boundaries between high and low forms of art, rejecting rigid genre distinctions, emphasizing pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony, and playfulness". She also notes

that "postmodern art (and thought) favors reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity (especially in narrative structures), ambiguity, simultaneity, and an emphasis on the destructured, decentered, dehumanized subject" (Klages, Postmodernism). However, postmodernism differs from modernism in several ways, most notably in its approach to the fragmentation and deconstruction. While modernism saw these tendencies as an unfortunate loss, postmodernism took a much more positive approach; the meaninglessness and absence of a generally acknowledged truth became a means to play with ideas and language, to discover new connections and new points of view, to cross the boundaries of reason and explore what once was a taboo (Klages, Postmodernism). That is why postmodern authors often looked for inspiration to legends and myths which had been held sacred before while viewing them from a different perspective.

One of such untouchable subjects had been the Matter of Britain. If the Victorian era witnessed attempts to humanize some characters and justify their actions (such as in *The Defense of Guinevere*), these attempts were never as daring as to question the foundations of the Victorian morals and the stereotypes connected with those morals. Everything changed in the twentieth century. One of the factors which influenced the growing popularity of the Arthurian material was the rise of new literary genres such as fantasy; authors interested in the fantastic literature have been fascinated by the ancient, ambiguous and extensive cycle of Arthurian tales. It is also important to note that for the first time in history, the supernatural aspect of the legend became the main point of interest among those who decided to express their own view of the legend. This happened not only due to the fact that magic became a crucial part of fantasy literature; exploring the Celtic roots of the legend also offered a way to the spiritual fulfilment not influenced by prejudices and dogmas of the Christian Church which remained unchanged for centuries. As a result, a great number of authors who narrated the Arthurian story from their own point of view or who used the material only as a basis for

their own tales emerged. It is beyond the aim and capacity of this paper to deal with all the various twentieth-century rewritings of the Arthurian legend, that is why two works which represent two diverse treatments of the Arthurian material will be analysed to demonstrate the variety of ways to approach one topic.

3.2 White – A New Approach To Tradition

One of these two works is *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White. This extensive work describes the life of Arthur from his childhood to the moment when he prepares for the final battle. It consists of four books; three of them originally appeared as separate volumes and were only later published under the name *The Once and Future King*. *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), describing Arthur's childhood and his education by Merlin, was followed by *The Witch in the Wood* (1939, in *The Once and Future King* renamed *The Queen of Air and Darkness*), which concentrates on Queen Morgause and her sons, and *The Ill-Made Knight* (1940), which pays attention to the adventures of Lancelot and the part he played in the story. The last volume, *The Candle in the Wind* which describes the events that led to the final tragedy, appeared only in *The Once and Future King*. White wanted to add one more book to his Arthurian cycle, *The Book of Merlin* that gives account of the final battle and which he completed in 1941 with the intention to point out the folly which leads people into disastrous wars; however, the publisher omitted this book in *The Once and Future King* (Moulder and Schaeffer, England).

In his essay on King Arthur, Andrzej Sapkowski states that White's *The Once and Future King* follows Malory closely, although he treats the story in a postmodern and ironic way (59). There is undoubtedly enough evidence to support the claim that White approaches Malory's canonical work with considerable distance from any biased, black-and-white views and with twentieth-century sense for relativity of truth; especially in *The Sword in the Stone*

many characters and events are treated in a humorous way. White's approach to tradition was also influenced by the atmosphere of fear and hopelessness of the Second World War. In *The Once and Future King*, White often doubts the meaning of the old values and asks whether they are applicable to the society which has gone mad with war. At the end of *The Candle in the Wind*, Arthur sits in his camp the night before the final battle, remembers what he learned from Merlin when he was young and wonders if his life-long struggle to promote these ideals has not become meaningless: "Looking back at his life, it seemed to him that he had been struggling all the time to dam a flood, which, whenever he had checked it, had broken through at a new place, setting him his work to do again. It was the flood of Force Majeur." (666) This Force Majeur could be seen as a symbol not only of the Nazi expansion but, in a more general sense, of the human greed for power which is eternal and invincible and therefore leaves no hope for those who oppose it. Yet, like Malory, White firmly believes that it is necessary to oppose the evil and maintain the moral values; his Arthur gives the "candle" which represents his ideals of knighthood to his page who will "give it to other people" (675). When Arthur calls the page "Sir Thomas of Warwick" (675), it is obvious that White refers to Malory.

The setting of the story, which has a crucial influence on the nature and consequently on the actions of the main characters, is also very similar to *Morte D'Arthur*. *The Once and Future King* takes place in Britain which is fully christianized (to be more precise, the story takes place in the 13th and 14th centuries) when the pre-Christian mythology is almost completely forgotten, surviving only in legends and old-wives-tales of doubtful reliability; there is no room for any pagan religion. The only character who uses magic for good and reasonable purposes is Merlin; in *The Sword in the Stone* he educates Wart (who later becomes King Arthur) by means of turning him into various animals. Other instances of sorcery described in the book are very rare and serve to evil purposes, such as Morgause's enchantment which, combined with her beauty, makes Arthur sleep with her. Malory's

concept of the Christian kingdom with the king who is himself a pious Christian and an ideal of chivalric virtues is thus disrupted but not fully abandoned. White's aim is to educate, to communicate his view about the best way to rule the society, about human nature which always destroys any aim to create a perfect social order, and about the struggle between the Might and Right. This indicates that although White asks many questions, always doubting the justice of any ideas and systems introduced in the book; this aspect of his work can be seen as truly postmodern. Still, at the same time he tries to answer these questions and to find out what is the best way to create a functional as well as moral society. He deals with the society which has traditionally been ruled by men, the answers for questions posed in *The Once and Future King* are therefore sought by the central male characters, most notably by Arthur himself, the role of the female characters being only secondary and supportive. However, the women's impact on the events of the legend should not be overlooked. Women play an essential role in the story, although only in relation to men. Unlike Malory, White concentrates on the women who are not willing to remain passive objects of the actions of men, such as Guinevere and Elaine who lead an open war for Lancelot, being much more determined and inventive than in Malory. Although the activity of these women usually brings negative consequences, they are usually motivated by understandable emotions, therefore it is not possible to condemn them for doing the wrong thing.

White's women have also another function which seems to be of more interest to him; they become the mirrors in which the nature and feelings of their male counterparts are visible. As Basnett points out, it is Arthur's relationship to his wife which enables the reader to see that, beside being a King responsible for his people, Arthur is a human being like everybody else (7) – the fact that he warns Guinevere and Lancelot that Mordred and Agravaire want to disclose their affair reveals much about his sincerity, kindness and affection. The reader learns much about Lancelot through his relationship to Guinevere as well;

his affection towards her begins when they go hawking together and Guinevere, who is not particularly skilled with hawks but wants to help her companion and wounds the creance in a wrong way. Lancelot responds in a harsh and inconsiderate way, than he realizes that he has hurt her: "She had been giving kindness, and he had returned it with unkindness. But the main thing was that she was a real person. She was not a minx, not deceitful, not designing and heartless. She was pretty Jenny, who could feel and think" (348). His attitudes thus change thanks to the encounter with Guinevere. This approach demonstrates White's primary interest in the male characters; however, it is obvious that they could hardly exist without women who are depicted as both the causes and objects of men's doings while at the same time acting out of their own initiative. The shift from presenting women as marginal and stereotypical figures thus becomes apparent, although it is not as visible as in the work of Marion Zimmer Bradley who, herself being a woman influenced by the second wave of feminism, made women the main characters of the story and added a new dimension to the Arthurian material by stressing its spiritual aspect connected with the perception of women.

3.3 Bradley – Neopaganism and Female Spirituality

In the second half of the twentieth century, new views of the world, shaped by the free-thinking movements of the 1960s, postmodernism and the second wave of feminism of the 1970s and 80s, emerged. These views were adopted especially by people searching for some alternative spirituality, not based on the classical pattern of the Western civilization which has been strengthened by the two-thousand-years long history of Christianity and which promoted one universal truth as well as prejudices against women ingrained in the society. The desire to get freed from these prejudices resulted in the emerging of the New Age and Neo-Pagan movements which have much in common but still cannot be seen as identical. Both seek inspiration in Eastern and pre-Christian religions but while New Age concentrates

more on the Eastern tradition and rastafarian ideology, those inclined to Neo-Paganism prefer the pre-Christian, most notably Celtic and native American matriarchal religions. The similarities of these two movements include their belief in humanism and individualism asserted in harmony with nature (York 145).

Like the New Age movements, Neo-Paganism is "a response to an increased dissatisfaction with the way the world is going ecologically, spiritually and materially" (Harvey and Hardman x). The Neo-Pagans stress the fact that the materialism which has gained control over the world must lead to emptiness; this emptiness cannot be filled by the Christian religion which forms the basis of the western society and which has become as empty as the society itself. That is why alternative ways to achieve spiritual maturity must be sought.

Neo-Pagan views have been embraced by many diverse movements; the most influential of them have been known as Wicca, Druidry, Shamanism, Goddess Spirituality and Heathenism. Although the beliefs and practices of these movements are not entirely identical, all refer to communities that claim to continue either the native American religion or the Celtic tradition of worshipping the Tripple Goddess and practising secret rituals. The historical authenticity of their religion is doubtful; evidence exists that Celtic religion was mediated through men - among others, Ronald Hutton proves this fact in his book (171). Nevertheless, the world-view of the ancient Celts was very elaborate and interesting, that is why it enjoys great popularity among the promoters of Neo-Paganism which flourishes especially on the British Isles and in North America. Marion Zimmer Bradley, the author of *The Mists of Avalon* and herself a practising witch, derives her understanding of the Arthurian legend from the Neo-Pagan beliefs, that is where her focus on female heroines and their perspective comes from.

It is important to note that the Neo-Pagans stress the freedom to choose what one wants to believe in and what ways one employs to discover his or her spiritual abilities. One of the crucial principles followed by the Neo-Pagans is "Do what thou wilt but harm noone" (Harvey and Harman x); this implies that every individual is responsible for discovering his or her own nature and true spirituality and develop both in harmony with other individuals as well as with nature. The Neo-Pagan movements are not willing to worship a distant God who dwells above in Heaven and thus is not concerned with the Earth and its inhabitants. Similarly, they reject any form of dogmatic belief that there is only one true way of worshipping the Divine and all other ways are sinful and come from the Devil. Rather, they believe that even though the Divine is One, it consists of the God and the Goddess that represent the male and female principles. Some Neo-Pagan movements stress one more than the other, such as the Witches who worship the Goddess, still all Neo-Pagans acknowledge the equality of both these principles. What is more, the Divine can be found in thousands of diverse shapes; similarly, there are many diverse ways in which the individual can discover his or her spirituality and reach the Divine. To understand what message Bradley wants to communicate in *The Mists of Avalon*, it is necessary to realize that the Goddess worship is only one of these ways; the Divine is eternal and omnipresent but every individual may find his or her own method to become aware of its presence.

However, those who decide to follow the path of the Goddess must overcome many difficulties and show a lot of patience and willingness to open themselves to the supernatural powers, very much like the priestesses of the Goddess in *The Mists of Avalon*. This can be observed in the initiation rites described in the novel. Meret Fehlmann criticizes the strict hierarchy of the Avalon priestesses and likens it to the hierarchy of the Christian Church which is presented as the mortal enemy of the Goddess worship in *The Mists of Avalon*. Bradley herself questions such sticking to harsh rules and realizes that the danger that people

could (consciously or unconsciously) claim that their will is the will of the Divine is always present. Many characters in the *Mists of Avalon* see Viviane, the High Priestess of Avalon, only as a cruel, reckless manipulator who does not care about others and uses them only as puppets fulfilling her will, accusing her that she mistakes her own goals for the wishes of the Goddess. Viviane's problematic relationship with others as well as her life-long suffering and her tragical end are consequences of her fatal misunderstanding of the true nature of the Goddess. Although she knows very well that Taliesin, the British Merlin or the main druid of Old Britain, is right when he says that all gods are one God and all goddesses are one Goddess, she keeps using all possible means to maintain the disappearing Goddess worship in Britain. She insists that the Christian religion disgraces the ancient, natural female power, that is how she justifies using others for her plans regardless of their feelings or opinions. By acting in this way, she misinterprets the real purpose of religion and becomes the same as her enemies, the orthodox Christian bishops. Her failure to save the Goddess worship is thus inevitable. The fact that her body is buried on the grounds of the Christian Church in Glastonbury, which means a denial of her life-long effort to maintain the old way of life, can be seen as the final sign of this failure.

Bradley did not write *The Mists of Avalon* with the intention to attack Christianity as such, she only wanted to point out that it is the Church and its fanatic, narrow-minded members who are responsible for the loss of the true spirituality. At the beginning of *Thoughts on Avalon*, an article in which she explains the reasons why she wrote this particular novel, Bradley states: "One of the main problems I had, in writing the Arthurian novel, was the fear that Christians would feel I was attacking the basics of Christianity, rather than the enormous bigotry and anti-feminism that have become grafted on to Christianity. I don't think they have any part in Christianity itself, or in the teachings of Christ." (Bradley, Literary) She goes on to point out the fear of women and their sexuality; this fear has been inherited from

Romans and ancient Hebrews who seem to have transferred it into Christianity. This led to the marginalization of women which is visible in Malory and which is a result of "cultural and religious shift at that time (i.e. the time in which the Arthurian legend is set), from Goddess-oriented, female-validating religion to God-oriented, Middle Eastern/Oriental woman-fearing religion" (Bradley, Literary). However, Bradley is convinced that the female aspect of the Divine has always been present, hidden behind the veil of Christianity, appearing in the shape of Virgin Mary and the saints. She stresses that the aim of the modern Goddess worship movements is not to dismiss God and put Goddess in his place but rather to re-discover the one, eternal and endless Divine which is the Father as well as the Mother and whose female aspect has been denied for so long.

At the end of *The Mists of Avalon*, Morgaine finally realizes that the Goddess is eternal and will always find a way to guide and comfort those who need her. It would be foolish to try to change the inevitable course of history, still the Goddess as well as the Holy Isle of Avalon will always be there for those willing to discover them. This final stage of spiritual maturity is expressed in the last words of Bradley's novel: "She [Morgaine] turned her back on the convent and walked down to the lake, along the old path by the shore. Here was a place where the veil lying between the worlds was thin. She needed no longer to summon the barge – she needed only step through the mists here, and be in Avalon.

Her work was done" (1009).

4. DEVELOPMENT OF FEMALE CHARACTERS

4.1 The Old Ones

Throughout the ages, there has hardly been any author who succeeded in producing a compact record of the Arthurian legend without mentioning the characters connected with the supernatural. Merlin, the magician who brought Uther to Igraine's arms and thus caused the birth of Arthur, has become an indispensable part of the story as well as his female counterparts who are engaged in magic. The majority of these mystical figures seem to be female; apart from Merlin and Mordred, no important males with direct links to the supernatural seem to appear in the story. In the view of Neo-Pagan feminists this is one of the ways in which the fear and hatred of women promoted by patriarchal society has manifested itself. The evil sorceress Morgan le Fay plots against Arthur and his knights while Morgause (or Morgan in some later versions) uses her magic which enables the incestuous intercourse with Arthur; Malory describes the way in which the Lady of the Lake (or, to be precise, one of the several Ladies of the Lake) demanded the heads of a knight and of a damosel before Balin punished her for her evil deeds and intentions by killing her. However, sometimes an entirely different picture can be seen; Geoffrey's Morgen who heals Arthur's wounds and Malory's Nimue, the good wife of king Pellas, are just two instances of the supernatural characters who are of friendly, helpful nature. Still the positive depiction of these characters remains rather marginal in medieval literature.

It was not until the twentieth century that significant works which drew a new interest to the mysterious aspect of the legend and its characters appeared due to the various spiritual movements connected with pre-Christian paganism as well as due to the rise of fantasy literature. This emphasis on the supernatural appears in Bradley's novel; she is concerned with the female spirituality and that is why the priestesses of the Goddess play a central role in the

events. Morgaine is the single most important character of the story; her comments connect the individual parts of the novel and most of the events are described from her point of view. Apart from her, much attention is paid to Viviane, the High Priestess of Avalon, and Morgause, Viviane's sister and the Queen of Orkney. White, on the other hand, does not show much interest in the Old Ones, except for Queen Morgause who is not depicted in a very favourable light. His Morgause is charming, not very clever, self-centered, cold, careless and cruel; when the reader first encounters her, she tries to perform some magic and therefore kills a cat just to amuse herself: "She was not a serious witch like her sister Morgan le Fay – for her head was too empty to take any great art seriously, even if it were the Black one" (221). Such depiction of the Queen of Orkney does not differ greatly from that of Bradley who describes her as ambitious and narrow-minded, playing with men just for her pleasure and willing to do almost anything to gain power. She is even able to deny her sister the joy of raising her only child as she wants to use the little boy for her own purposes. Thus Bradley creates a sharp contrast between Morgause and her quiet, intelligent and ambiguous niece Morgaine.

Morgan le Fay has appeared in almost all retellings of the Arthurian legend, usually in one of two contradictory roles - either as an evil witch who tirelessly invents new ways of killing or at least damaging Arthur and his knights, or as a healer who takes care of Arthur when he is deadly wounded. The figure of Morgan is undoubtedly of Celtic origins, that is where her depiction as a healer comes from. The Christian monks seem to have attributed to her the role of the Irish pagan goddess Morrighan, associated mainly with war and death, and in their belief that what is pagan must also be evil, they created as unfavourable picture of her as possible (Ford, *Early British Kingdoms*). However, Morgan probably originated from Modron, the Celtic Mother-Goddess, who was believed to appear in three diverse shapes; Geoffrey describes his Morgen as being able to change her shape. (Ford, *Early British*

Kingdoms). Malory, influenced by his medieval predecessors, makes Morgan Arthur's mortal foe. Interestingly, when she wants to kill Arthur by stealing Excalibur and giving it to her lover Accolon, her malicious intent is thwarted by another supernatural figure, the Lady of the Lake (obviously the good one). There seems to be no explanation of the sudden change which Morgan undergoes when she takes Arthur to Avalon, cares about him lovingly and mourns for him. While White leaves out almost all of Malory's episodes concerning Morgan, mentioning her only briefly in *The Sword in the Stone* and *The Ill-Made Knight* when she plots against Arthur and Lancelot, Bradley employs most of the events described by Malory and explains them according to her views. At the beginning of the novel, she cites Malory: "Morgan le Fay was put to school in a nunnery, and there she learned so much that she was a great clerk of necromancy." In *The Mists of Avalon*, the "nunnery" Morgaine entered was no Christian convent but the order of the priestesses of the Goddess in Avalon, where she learned Celtic magic and which remained the most important influence in her life. Viviane chose her as the next High Priestess whose main responsibility was to retain the Goddess worship in Britain. Morgaine loves her aunt Viviane, with whom she has a relationship closer than with her real mother, and prepares for her future role by the demanding training of the priestesses. However, Viviane feels obliged to use her niece for her political plans, although Morgaine is the only person whom Viviane really loves. The fact that Morgaine is given to her brother Arthur at the Holy Wedding causes her bitter disagreement with Viviane and makes her leave Avalon for many years. Morgaine feels hurt and at the same time homesick for Avalon and Viviane; these feelings, together with the dull life at Arthur's court full of small talk and endless days of sitting inside the castle, weaving and waiting for men to return from wars, make Morgaine sad and desperate. What is more, she suffers due to her unfulfilled love for Lancelot and due to Arthur's hints that she has remained the greatest love of his life, and her only child is fostered by Morgause who wants to use him to achieve her political goals. In the

middle of all these personal problems, Morgaine witnesses the rise of power of the Christian bishops and realizes that Viviane is getting old and is not able to fulfill her quest anymore. Therefore Morgaine finally agrees to accept her duty as the High Priestess and to save the Goddess worship in Britain. However, her disappointing experience causes that she becomes as manipulative as Viviane and does much harm by her reckless behaviour. When Arthur's court becomes fully Christian, she understands it as a betrayal of Arthur's vow to rule in harmony with Avalon and makes Camelot and Avalon mortal foes. The war which brings about the downfall of Arthur's realm is a natural result of the situation. When Morgaine finally sees that she was wrong, it is already too late for Arthur and the Round Table but not for those who still live and search for the truth. Bradley believes that

people who have become so sickened by the pride, arrogance, anti-woman attitudes, hypocrisy and cruelty of what passes for Christianity that they leap toward atheism or agnosticism, may well reach out for the gentler reign of Goddess-oriented paganism to lead them back to a true perception of the spiritual life of the Earth. Time enough later to make it clear -- or let the Mother make it clear to them -- that Spirit is One and that they are, in worshipping the Goddess, worshipping the Divine by whatever name. (Bradley, Literary).

4.2 Guinevere

Apart from the favourable depiction of Arthur, Lancelot, Gawaine and other knights, the retellings of the Arthurian legend pay much attention to Queen Guinevere who, in addition to being untrue to her husband and King, treats her devoted lover, Sir Lancelot, unjustly. On the other hand, she remains faithful to her lover for most of her life, what is more, when Arthur dies and the fellowship of the Round Table is destroyed, she becomes a nun and spends the rest of her days "in fasting, prayers, and alms-deeds, that all manner of people marvelled how

virtuously she was changed" (Malory 495). Malory remains a faithful Christian when he makes it clear that only after turning away from wordly matters both Guinevere and Lancelot could reach salvation. Still the love between the two is not shown as entirely sinful; even though it is the initial cause of the final tragedy, many more forces contribute to the downfall of the Round Table, including the wickedness of Mordred and his followers and Gawaine's inability to reconcile with Lancelot. Malory praises Lancelot more than any other knight, even more than King Arthur himself; this is quite striking considering that this knight was in love with the wife of his dear friend and king and would fight for her to prove that she was chaste even though they spent a night together.

In both *The Mists of Avalon* and *The Once and Future King*, the modern tendency to "humanize" Guinevere is visible, neglecting the medieval and Victorian belief that she and her adulterous relationship with Lancelot were the chief causes of the final tragedy. White and Bradley describe her as a normal woman with all her faults, joys and sorrows as well as everyday problems, permanently frustrated by her childlessness and by the insoluble triangle she finds herself in. For White, she is the most important female character, her problems are depicted in a very believable way which makes them understandable for a modern reader. During the story, she changes from a little naive, confused young girl who tries to understand the world and her feelings to an embittered, jealous woman tired with the misfortunes of her life who tries desperately to retain her charms and her lover's heart. White describes this change in a vivid and convincing way, making her development a natural process of losing youthful illusions and discovering the "seventh sense" or "the knowledge of the world" (394). At twenty two, Guinevere is experiencing

a chaos of mind and body – a time for weeping at sunsets and at the glamour of moonlight – a confusion and profusion of beliefs and hopes, in God, in Truth, in Love, and in Eternity – an ability to be transported by the beauty of physical objects – a joy

so joyful and sorrow so sorrowful that oceans could lie between them [...] restlessness or inability to settle down and stop bothering the middle-aged [...] lack of experience as to when truth should be suppressed in the deference of the middle-aged...(396).

Twenty years later, when Lancelot returns from the Quest of the Holy Grail and meets Guinevere for the first time after his long absence, he realizes that she "had overdressed for the occasion. She had put on a make-up she did not need, and put it on badly" (483). It is only thanks to his life-long love to her that he does not see a lonely woman bitterly aware of her age, fearing that she could no longer attract her lover, and recognizes the "girl of twenty, standing proudly by her throne with the presence of captives about her" (483).

While White makes Guinevere a symbol of the development people undergo as they grow old and, as was stated earlier, as a mirror which reflects the nature of the male heroes, Bradley portrays her Gwenhwyfar in a rather negative way. The High Queen does contribute to the inevitable tragedy, not by the human and understandable passion for Lancelot but by her devoted, almost fanatic belief in the Christian doctrine. According to Bradley, it was Gwenhwyfar who sewed the banner with Virgin Mary and persuaded Arthur to carry it to his battles against Saxons; she also persuaded him to impose on the people new Christian festivals instead of the old Celtic ones. Yet Bradley does not draw any clear line between good and evil, condemning all the propagators of Christianity (and Gwenhwyfar in particular) as those responsible for the misfortunes described in the book. Everybody needs something to believe in, some higher instance which can offer anchorage and consolation in suffering; and Gwenhwyfar has doubtlessly suffered through all her life. Before she became the Queen, she lived with her stepmother who was not particularly fond of her and with her father who did not hesitate to literally sell her to the King for his own benefit. At the time, she was already in love with Lancelot. Her parents had sent her to the church in Glastonbury where she had been raised in a strictly Christian manner and in the belief that romantic feelings to somebody else

than her lawful husband were sinful and she would feel God's wrath and end up in Hell; the only way to avoid this fate was to clear her mind of sinful thoughts and repent. Such upbringing caused that she lived in constant fear not only of being discovered by her husband or other people but above all from being punished by God. Quite logically, she concluded that her childlessness, another great failure in fulfilling her duties to her husband and also to her land, was part of this punishment, still quite bearable compared to the pains of Hell which would await her if she continued living in sin. It is no wonder that such frustrations drove her on the edge of madness which manifested itself in her uncontrollable outbursts of fanaticism damaging not only her but also the others and, as she was the High Queen with strong influence on her husband, the whole country.

Despite the fact that Guinevere has often been portrayed as an evil character, unfaithful to her husband, unkind to her lover and responsible for the downfall of Arthur's realm, both White and Bradley show her in a very sympathetic light. As the conditions of women have changed in general, so has the perception of Guinevere, too; yet for feminist authors like Bradley she has symbolised the fanatic, inconsiderate side of Christianity which has been damaging the self-confidence of women for centuries. Still, even Bradley does not forget that Guinevere was only a woman struggling in the world ruled by men.

4.3 Other Female Characters

Almost every author who wrote his or her version of the Arthurian legend introduced his or her own characters while omitting others. White concentrated mainly on the events which took place at the court of Arthur and during the adventures of some of the most famous knights of the Round Table, that is why he had to reduce the vast amount of Malory's characters, such as many of the "ladies and damosels" whom the knights met during their adventures and who were not essential for the story. He also joined the two most important

Elaines of Malory's story, the daughter of King Pellas and the Fair Maid of Astolat, into one character. Thus he provided the reader with a touching picture of a woman who suffered from unhappy love for most of her life. Knowing that she could stand no chance against Queen Guinevere, she engineered a clever trick which consisted in making Lancelot drunk and then, in the darkness, pretending she was Guinevere. Thus she did win Lancelot's body but not his heart. Nevertheless, she did not give up and visited Arthur's court so that everybody could see Lancelot's son Galahad. Despite all her attempts she could never succeed in making Lancelot quit his love for the Queen, therefore Elaine spent most of her life alone, longing for her love. When she fully realized that she had lived in vain, she committed suicide. The absurdity of her life, and of human life in general, becomes apparent when the reader learns that Elaine finally succeeded in getting Lancelot's attention and, if not his love, at least his sympathy, when she died -- "All the things which he might have done for the poor creature, but which was now too late to do, and all the shameful questions about responsibility which go with the irrevocable, united in his mind" (White 522).

Bradey presents the readers with a slightly different depiction of Elaine's affair with Lancelot. In *The Mists of Avalon*, Elaine, like many other women including Morgaine, suffers from unhappy love to Lancelot. Morgaine has several encounters with Lancelot but the circumstances always prevent them from satisfying each other's desires fully. When such a possibility finally emerges, Lancelot refuses her -- his Christian background does not allow him to do what he sees as humiliating her. Morgaine has a different view, she feels humiliated by his refusal and, consequently, her love turns to hatred. That is why she agrees to "help" Elaine win Lancelot and she uses her magic to substitute Elaine for Gwehwyfar. Elaine thus becomes only a means for Morgaine to take her revenge.

The Mists of Avalon, which tells the tale of Arthur from the perspective of women, is full of many diverse females. The story of the birth of Arthur is related through the eyes of

Igraine who lives in the castle of Tintagel with her husband, Gorlois, her little daughter Morgaine and her sister Morgause. Igraine is portrayed as a struggling, not very happy young woman and another victim of Viviane's intrigues; she was given as a wife to a much older man at the age of fifteen when she was nothing more than a scared child. When Viviane tells her that she was chosen to give birth to the future High King, Igraine opposes such fate, determined to choose her own destiny; however, when she meets Uther she falls in love with him and even uses magic to get together with him. As a result, he comes to Tintagel and Merlin's enchantment causes him to look like Gorlois, soon afterwards Igraine becomes the High Queen and gives birth to Arthur. After both her children are sent to fosterage and, many years later, her beloved husband dies, Igraine retires to a convent where she becomes a nun. At the end of her life she admits that all her Christian piety was a pretense and that she in fact believes in nothing. What she feels is the emptiness experienced by those who have rejected their religion for whatever reason (Igraine did not have much choice as she was to become a High Queen at a Christian court) without replacing it with another system of belief. Igraine was not capable of replacing the complex views of the Goddess worshippers with the much more simple Christian ones, that is why her spiritual maturity could not be obtained. Although she herself experienced the ancient mysteries which are as old as the world itself when she shared a dream with Uther, at the end of her life she seems to have forgotten what Bradley makes clear in the *Mists of Avalon* -- that "always, while the light dies in the west, there is a promise of rebirth from the east" (66) and that it is never too late to explore the Divine as the Divine is eternal and that "any widom is wisdom" (38).

5. CONCLUSION

The treatment of the Arthurian legend, and of its female protagonists in particular, has undergone considerable changes in the course of the centuries. As far as the role of the Arthurian women is concerned, they started to play an active and important role in the story only in the twentieth century when women came to be recognized as equal to men and when people searching for an alternative to Christianity became interested in ancient matriarchal religions.

In the Middle Ages, the story of Arthur and his court usually served to fulfill two purposes; it was the tale of a great Christian king and a warning against sinful behaviour, concurrently, in the time of chivalric romance it provided a vast amount of material for romantic tales about the adventures of noble knights who did marvelous deeds for their ladies. This can be demonstrated on the work of Malory, in his *Morte D'Artur* both these tendencies are visible.

During the Renaissance and the Enlightenment periods the national aspect of the legend became the main message behind Arthurian works; as the Matter of Britain the legend strengthened the patriotism and pride of the British Empire, although those who believed in the power of reason dismissed it as an untrustworthy fairy-tale.

In the Victorian era, its romantic aspect was revived, even though no serious attempts to attack the Victorian morals emerged.

The eventful twentieth century saw the rise of many diverse ideas and movements, most notably the shift from the patriarchal Christian God to the multicultural, female Goddess. In T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* such a tendency is not very apparent as White remains for the most part faithful to Malory and is concerned with the moral aspect of the story. Still, he shows great understanding for his characters including the female ones who, though still secondary to their male counterparts, become essential for the story. Marion

Zimmer Bradley makes women central characters of *The Mists of Avalon*, all the events as well as their causes are seen through the eyes of female characters. It is no accident that the main protagonist of the book is Morgaine, the priestess of Avalon whom Christians consider a witch. In Morgaine's spiritual journey from bitterness and desperate efforts to stop the inevitable to understanding the true nature of the Goddess Bradley expresses her conviction that it is possible to reach the Divine regardless the way one follows as long as one does not see this way as the only one and does not impose it on others.

The diversity of views on the Arthurian legend shows not only that every author is influenced by the situation of his or her contemporary society and by their specific backgrounds and beliefs, but also that any material, even the Matter of Britain can be turned into an entertaining story, a way to express one's opinion or anything else; it depends only on the way one chooses to see it.

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