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Women Characters in Arthurian Literature

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I declare that I have worked on this diploma thesis independently,
using only the sources listed in the bibliography.

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0. Introduction

Much has been written about what is now called Arthurian literature and the amount of this literature is a clear evidence of the unrelenting popularity of this topic. There have, of course, been times when writers' attention was diverted in a different direction, the Renaissance era being the best example. The Arthurian legends, however, always find a way of winning back their popularity. The twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, in particular, brought new ways of portraying this one thousand years old topic. The endless popularity of the Arthurian matter is, therefore, one of the major motivations for writing this paper.

The focus of this paper on women characters in Arthurian literature is inspired by Marion Zimmer Bradley's novel *The Mists of Avalon* (1979) which established a completely new perspective on Arthurian legends. Bradley's new reading of the stories of the knights of the Round Table with its focus on women characters in particular showed that the Arthurian legends are a question of interpretation and this made the writer of this paper consider the ways previous Arthurian literature was read and the way the stories were interpreted. The main issue, then, is how Arthurian women characters have been portrayed throughout the centuries and the reasons for those particular ways of portrayal. The major Arthurian legend representatives of each era are chosen and analysed in order to show the elements and details of the position of women in that particular era, but also to trace the development of this portraying. In the medieval period, the major representatives are Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, Chrétien de Troyes' *Arthurian Romances*, and Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. The paper will then follow some of their recreations through the ages in an anonymous English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Morris' "The Defence of Guinevere" and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*.

Let me now briefly introduce the selected books one by one and hint at some of their major features as far as women characters are concerned in terms of comparison of the portrayal of Guinevere. She is the best character to serve as a starting point as she was already present in Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of the story and her character is not missing in any major book dealing with Arthurian matter.

Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote his book *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*The History of the Kings of Britain*) between 1136 - 1138. He is the first one to write down the whole legend of King Arthur; he is not the first one, though, to record Arthur's name. As early as the 8th century, Nennius wrote a Latin chronicle *Historia Britonum* where he talks about an Arthur. His Arthur is, however, not a king, but only a leader of an army.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of the Arthurian story already contains the names of Guinevere, Mordred and Avalon. The characters are, however, in a different relation to Arthur than in later versions of the story, e.g. Mordred is Arthur's nephew. Guinevere's lover is not Lancelot but Mordred. The significance of the book lies in its being a basis for the upcoming Arthurian literature and that is the reason for considering the level of its credibility. Margaret Schlauch ascribes the lack of historicity of the Arthurian legends in general to Geoffrey's naivety in drawing on a book which he believed to be historically authentic, or to the French romancers' liberty in "adapting [Geoffrey's sources] to their purposes of entertainment pure and simple, without any pretensions to historicity" (Schlauch, p. 127).

Despite its being referred to as "pseudo-chronicle" (Schlauch, p. 127), Geoffrey's *Historia* is of great importance as there are many motifs of crucial significance which have been recurrent during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance era, Romanticism and up to contemporary literature. But it has not been the inspirational source only for literature. The legends of king Arthur have had a great influence on many folklorists, musicians, painters and other artists.

Chrétien de Troyes, who wrote his cycle on Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, brings a significant change in the form of the story: it is the shift from epic to romance, which entails the emergence of conventions of chivalry and courtly love in the Arthurian story. A new knight, Launcelot, appears and he becomes a representative of an ideal lover. This fact brings on a new consideration of Guinevere's love affair: she is not seen as a betrayer any more, but rather as an active participant in an love affair, which is considered (at least at the time of writing the book) a positive attribute.

Chrétien's book and the realm of courtly love with its sexual completion can be contrasted with an English fourteenth-century romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* composed by an unknown writer. In this romance, the result of the courtly love is no longer of sexual nature. It has rather something to do with temptation and honour. These qualities offer a different point of view on the issue of courtly love and this romance will therefore become one of our major interests.

Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* was printed in 1485 by William Caxton, in the year when the Tudor dynasty came to reign. Malory's version is drawn upon three sources: one of the sources were German legends (Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parsifal* and Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*), another one was French (Chrétien de Troyes' poem on Launcelot) and the third one was Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle.

Malory's version differs from its predecessors in the amount of violence, which was probably due to the age he was living in (the Wars of the Roses). The author himself was imprisoned. Malory's account of the story establishes a basis on which many later versions were founded. Guinevere is not seen as an adulteress but her love for Launcelot is in the same chivalric mood as in Chrétien de Troyes' account. Arthur knows about their love affair and therefore is reluctant to condemn his wife to death as he is later forced to do by the sons of

Margawse. Guinevere is therefore not pictured as an adulteress but rather as a destroyer of the notion of knighthood and the Round Table.

The Renaissance period did not pay much attention to the Arthurian story and so it is only in the 19th century that this theme reappears in the works of Tennyson and Morris.

Tennyson's version of Arthurian legends, *Idylls of the King*, was completed in 1869 and it consists of twelve books. His account is based on Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* which was republished in the 19th century. Tennyson, as a Victorian poet, differs in his account of the story from his predecessors: the Romantic tensions are clearly visible and the key words he employs are guilt, sin, secret and punishment. He blames Guinevere for cheating on Arthur and having an adulterous relationship with Launcelot. This depiction was of course due to the Victorian society and the strict values Tennyson advocated.

Morris' *The Defence of Guinevere and other poems* was published in 1858 and it stands in fierce opposition to Tennyson's account. The biggest difference in comparison to Tennyson's version lies in portraying the queen as a very sensuous woman. As the title of the poem hints, Morris defended Guinevere: she should not be blamed for her personal feelings and deeds. Morris does not deny that Guinevere has a sexual relationship with Launcelot but he does not think she should be blamed and punished for this, either. Morris' account of the story is the most humane and fair one.

In the 20th and the 21st centuries, new versions of this old story emerge not only in writing but also in movies (*Excalibur*, 1981 or *King Arthur*, 2004). As far as writing is concerned, this paper focuses on Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1979) which is a highly feminist account of the events. It attempts to establish the idea of women actively participating in the rise and fall of the Round Table. It also plays with many dualities, of which the most important is the character duality of Morgan and Guinevere: the first one

represents the old pagan druidic religion and the other one the new Christian religion. This character duality is then entangled in a much more profound religious duality.

Although *The Mists of Avalon* is sometimes dismissed as a one-dimensional feminist novel offering "a somewhat simplistic reading" (Wynne-Davies, p. 176), the book needs to be included in this paper as it is a perfect representative of the era of its emergence. It is surprising that the novel is not credited with much quality for being tendentious (in terms of feminism), even though the previous Arthurian literature shows the same amount of tendentiousness, this time, however, in terms of masculinism. This paper aspires to analyse this discrepancy and find an optimum and balanced conclusion.

The question of naming should not be neglected. As different writers brought different spellings of the main characters' names, the question of "neutral" naming becomes a very problematic one. Geoffrey of Monmouth works with the name forms of Guenevere and Mordred. Chrétien de Troyes, as a Frenchman, uses different ways of spelling of the Queen's name: Guinevere. Furthermore, he introduces a new character, Lancelot. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* uses these name forms: Morgan the Fay and Guinevere. Malory works with these forms: Launcelot, Mordred, Guenever and Morgan le Fay. Tennyson uses these spellings: Lancelot, Modred, Guinevere (although he titles her "the Queen" almost exclusively) and Vivien (for Morgan). Morris uses the spelling forms of Launcelot and Guenevere. The novel *The Mists of Avalon* works with the forms of Gwenhwyfar (for Guinevere), Morgaine, Lancelet, Arthur (whose pagan name is Gwydion) and Gwydion (for Mordred).

The only name, which stays stable throughout the centuries, is then the name of King Arthur which does not have any spelling alterations. The stability of the name form is the evidence for both the little dynamics of the character in time, and for the dignity of his personality which entails stability.

The original names were retained in the analyses of the particular works of art, e. g. Bradley works with the archaic Celtic name form Gwenhwyfar (for Guinevere) and that is why this name is also used in the part dealing with *The Mists of Avalon*. However, in the introductory part and the conclusion the neutral name form "Guinevere" is used. Other major characters take on these neutral name forms: Launcelot, Mordred and Morgan. The choice of these forms was made in relation to the most usual forms used in the primary sources, but also to the tradition of the secondary literature concerned with the Arthurian legends.

1. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*:

Silence of the Nameless Women

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* is one of the first, basic and most powerful sources of the legend of King Arthur. In his account of Arthurian legends Geoffrey builds on the material of Nennius's *History of the Britons* from the 9th century and Gildas's *On the Ruin of Britain* from the 6th century, Welsh traditional poetry concerning the figures of Arthur and Merlin and oral British culture. Furthermore, mention of his own inventions should not be neglected: "...the Arthurian portions of his so-called *History* are as fabulous as his account of the descent of the British race from Brutus...", " says W. Lewis Jones but at the same time he adds that Geoffrey's chronicle is "the chief literary event of the twelfth century" (Lewis Jones, p. 60, 61).

The facts of Geoffrey's life are very scanty, and if any, they are considerably inaccurate as far as Lewis Jones's work on King Arthur asserts. Geoffrey of Monmouth was born sometime around 1100 possibly in Monmouth in south-east Wales, although there is no unquestionable evidence of this. He is said to have become an archdeacon in 1140 and consecrated bishop in 1152 but the only authentic facts are those that he was ordained priest and appointed bishop in 1152. He most probably died at Llandaff in 1155. Geoffrey completed *Historia Regum Britanniae* in 1138. It covers the period of some fifteen hundred years and tells the history of the British kings, starting with Brutus, the son of Aeneas, continuing with Constantine, Constans, Vortimer, Aurelius Ambrosianus, Uther Pendragon and his son Arthur. They all fight against the Saxons, but only Arthur is able to relieve the country of the foreign usurpers. The hero of the book is then not Brutus as it was in the previous chronicles, but Arthur - more than a fifth of the book is devoted to him. This work is most significant due to the fact that it was the first time when Arthur was claimed to have

been a king, not just an army leader as had been suggested before in Nennius's *Historia Brittonum* or in William of Malmesbury's *History of the Kings of England* (William Jones, p. 30). Arthur's kingship becomes a key issue which has been followed and copied ever since.

What was Geoffrey's motive to write a book like this stays an unanswered question. It is generally accepted that the book was written with "a patriotic purpose" and that "the writer is conscious of having got hold of a good thing" (Lewis Jones, p. 67, 70). Jones claims that Geoffrey's account is much more of a romance than a sober chronicle (Jones, p. 70). The reason for this assumption is for example Geoffrey's mention of Avalon - which has a long Celtic tradition and obviously refers to something beyond historical evidence. This preference of romance over history is also supported by the commonly accepted notion that Geoffrey included a lot of inventions of his own in the book and thus did not stick to the historical facts only. Although the author refers to "the British book", this unknown source has usually been discredited. According to Lucy Allen Paton's introduction to the book, Geoffrey drew on too many sources: "chronicles of his contemporaries, William of Malmesbury, and Henry of Huntigdon, on ancient Celtic records, the legends of Celtic saints, Celtic myth, Biblical history, classical and Scandinavian story, the universal stock of folk-tales, local British tradition, the Carolingian cycle, familiar facts of general history, and events in the life about him" (Paton, p. XVIII). Another supportive evidence of the fictitiousness of this so-called chronicle is the fact that the historicity of Geoffrey's book was doubted even by some of his contemporaries. William of Newburgh, for example, "denounced it unreservedly as a tissue of impudent lies" (Lewis Jones, p. 86). Geoffrey's patriotism as the reason for writing such a book is also acknowledged by Scudder: "The complex peoples living in Britain needed some unifying past if they were to find themselves as a nation" (Scudder, p. 20). Nation is the key word and Geoffrey's *Historia* serves as a starting point of the matter of Britain – an important concept instrumental in the creation of British nationalism.

As far as women are concerned, their appearance in the book is limited. The limitation of Guenevere's presence corresponds to the silence about the Queen in secondary literature (e. g. Parry and Caldwell or Susan Basnett). In her paper "Gender and Thematics: the Case of Guinevere", Susan Basnett deals with the development of Guenevere's character throughout the centuries with regard to "the universal patterning in the representation of women" (Basnett, p. 117). However, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* is treated only perfunctorily by Basnett. The plot is briefly outlined and the main characters (Arthur and Guenevere) are given simple and one-dimensional attributes: Arthur is an "ideal ruler", Guenevere is an "unfaithful wife" (Basnett, p. 121). Only a short paragraph is devoted to Geoffrey's chronicle although other pieces of literature (Malory, Tennyson, Morris) are treated much more abundantly. Basnett who works in the area of comparative literature does not take Guenevere of Geoffrey's chronicle into account because she is not depicted a great heroine. The absence of female characters in a primary source is not of much interest for her. This does not seem a very effective way of comparing works of literature dealing with Arthurian matter and Guenevere will therefore become one of the major concerns in this paper on Geoffrey's *Historia*. She will be dealt with with regard to her limited presence - or her abundant absence - in the text.

In *Historia Regum Britanniae* originated not only the legend of Arthur, the king, but there is also the character of Guenevere, including her unfaithfulness and subsequent entry to the nunnery. Her lover is, however, not Launcelot as the modern reader would expect, but Mordred who is at the same time Arthur's nephew by one of his sisters. Launcelot did not exist at this early stage of Arthurian legends, he only came to existence in a French romance of the twelfth century. The final battle between Arthur and Mordred appears in *Historia* and this significant motif has stayed untouched throughout the centuries. They both get wounded and Mordred dies. Arthur is taken to the Isle of Avalon to have his wounds healed.

Among the other issues concerning the Arthurian legends which had their origin in Geoffrey's *Historia* the figure of Merlin should not be neglected. It is generally assumed that Geoffrey adopted this character from Nennius's *History of the Britons* and from traditional Welsh poems. Already in 1135 Geoffrey wrote *Prophetiae Merlini* (*The Prophecies of Merlin*). He incorporated this part of the Arthurian legend in his book as Book VII. Merlin's prophecies are made especially to Vortigern but they also foreshadow the rise and fall of Arthur.

These motifs - Arthur, the king and his unusual conception, Guenevere's unfaithfulness, Mordred's treachery, Merlin's prophecies, the existence of Excalibur (or Caliburn) and the presence of the Isle of Avalon - represent the cornerstones of the Arthurian legends as we know them, although with some modifications, today. For the purposes of the investigation of the position of women in Geoffrey's *Historia*, Geoffrey's attitude towards women in general should be examined first. Then the focus of this paper will move to the character of Guenevere and her relationship with Arthur. In the end, our interest will turn to the identity of Mordred's mother. All these questions will be answered only within the passage concerning our main focus, that is king Arthur. The passages concerning Arthur are to be found in Books VI – XI of *Historia*.

Women who are mentioned in Geoffrey's text are as follows: Igerne, Arthur's mother, Guenevere, Arthur's wife, and that is, surprisingly all as far as the particularly named women are concerned. In this respect, women in Geoffrey's *Historia* can be divided into two major groups: those who have identity of their own and the others who are identified only through their kinship or bond to another character, always a man, e.g. Arthur's sister was the wife of Lot but we never learn her name. To start with the second group of women, Merlin's mother (later Niniane) is a good example. The story about Merlin's conception is told: his mother *was*

seduced. The passive voice leaves no space for interpreting this deed as her own action. Her voice is simply not heard.

Igerne, Arthur's mother is a good example of the group of women with their own identity. Although named, Igerne is put in the same situation as other women in the book: her husband Gorlois takes her away from the court when Uther Pendragon starts to court her. Uther manages to have a sexual intercourse with Igerne by means of Merlin's magic. This is the old story of Arthur's conception and it is one of the crucial places in the book. Igerne's opinion is, however, never heard during the whole process. She is just a passive and powerless woman, even though she is named and in that way identified.

Kristina Hildebrandt expresses a remarkable opinion in her book *The Female Reader at the Round Table*. She says that the fact that women are not given any voices of their own in Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* makes it harder for the reader to determine the extent of women's influence over men or political events (Hildebrandt, p. 55). However, the question should be put in a different way: did women really have no voice at all, or Geoffrey just did not display this influence? These women definitely became visible in later mediaeval and modern Arthurian literature, they started to have a personality and identity of their own. So why do they not occupy the proper position in Geoffrey's chronicle? Was it because of the *nature* of this book which is about warriors, kings and the kingdom and therefore the author did not pay attention to such an issue as women personalities, or was the invisibility of women in his work something that he was aiming at?

The answer seems to be obvious: it is both the contents and the author's aim that edged women out. The author could not possibly avoid any mention of women at all as that would be considered something unnatural. Women are a natural part of the world as well as men are. However, Christianity established a male-dominated society where women occupied only marginal positions. And as Geoffrey's book is devoted to Christianity, there cannot

possibly be too much space left for women. At the same time, Geoffrey's *Historia* aims at a clear target: to tell about the fame of the British kings in a likely historical way, which presupposes many wars and a lot of fighting - that is something within men's domain of which women are not a part. In this respect, Geoffrey's aim is really concealing of women because they simply are unable to be instrumental to his account of the Arthurian legends. Considering these two issues (Christianity and warfare which are both of men's domain), Geoffrey omits unnecessary mentioning of women on purpose because he wants to stress out the exclusion of women from this male-dominated society. It is the society of warlike and at the same time Christ-devoted men. Women do not have a place in Geoffrey's society: they are not adored as in the later romance literature, they do not incite men, they do not have influence on any events, nor are they capable of any actions of themselves. They are simply something redundant in Geoffrey's world and their only function is to be beautiful.

One of the two women who are given the respect and are named is Guenevere, the crucial female character in all later significant versions of Arthurian legends. She is directly mentioned in three places in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Guenevere is first introduced as follows: "[...] he took unto him a wife born of a noble Roman family, Guenevere, who, brought up and nurtured in the household of Duke Cadur, did surpass in beauty all the other dames of the island" (*Histories*, p. 164). Guenevere's virtues are noble birth and beauty. She is mentioned only because she became the king's wife and she achieved this only thanks to her noble birth and beauty. Geoffrey thus strictly sticks to the depicting of the hero, Arthur, and Guenevere is, in fact, only one of Arthur's characteristics. Geoffrey includes nothing superfluous: the two attributes Guenevere is given only contribute to the explanation why she could become the wife of the most powerful and respected man.

The second mention of Guenevere comes a few pages later when Arthur hands his country over to Mordred's guard. The passage is worded as follows: "When Arthur learned

that they were upon the march, he made over the charge of defending Britain unto his nephew Mordred and his Queen Guenevere, he himself with his army making for Hamo's Port..." (*Histories*, p. 178). In this passage again, Guenevere is denied her own identity. She is still the wife of the king and that is her only impersonation: she is not a character of her own. Even the attribute *Queen* refers to the King. What is also of much significance is the wording of this act of handing over the country as it is different from other versions: it is not the queen who is put under Mordred's guard. It is the two of them, Mordred and Guenevere, who are asked by Arthur to take care of the country. This is, in fact, the only passage in the book where Guenevere is acknowledged with some importance, although still staying without her own individuality.

The last mention of Guenevere is made in the passage where Arthur learns about Mordred's betrayal: "[...] when message was brought him that his nephew Mordred, unto whom he had committed the charge of Britain, had tyrannously and traitorously set the crown of the kingdom upon his own head, and had linked him in unhallowed union with Guenevere the Queen in despite of her former marriage" (*Histories*, p. 196). It is just Mordred's betrayal, not Guenevere's, as Geoffrey suggests. This passage clearly shows that Geoffrey does not blame the Queen for betraying Arthur, and again, there is an obvious background for not blaming Guenevere: she is not there, her womanhood suppresses her individuality. She is a woman, and according to Geoffrey, this stands for inability. The Queen - a woman - is not given as much importance as to give her credit for performing a deed so "tyrannous and traitorous" as Geoffrey puts it down. Guenevere was used by Mordred only as a means of getting to power but otherwise, she has only little significance for the author. Her womanhood showed itself when she learns about Arthur's intended revenge but it is presented as a weakness: "When this was reported unto Queen Guenevere, she was forthwith smitten with despair, and fled from York unto Caerleon, where she purposed thenceforth to lead a chaste

life amongst the nuns..." (*Histories*, p. 198). Geoffrey does not blame Guenevere directly but he hints at what might befall to wrongdoers. He shows Guenevere's weakness by saying that she was "smitten with despair" and assigns a good place for her: a nunnery. The author does all this without commenting on her possible guilt.

Kristina Hildebrand says in *The Female Reader at the Round Table* that "it is not entirely clear from this whether Guenevere had any opinion about this unhallowed union" with Mordred; "while the male characters' feelings and motives are sometimes mentioned, Guenevere's are not" (Hildebrandt, p. 55). As has been shown above, this is not entirely true as Guenevere regrets her union with Mordred, even though the reader does not know the motive of this regret. She is "smitten with despair" and she "purposed thenceforth to lead a chaste life" - but why? Is it because she loved Mordred? Or because she was sure to lose her acquired power? The motive stays unrevealed because Geoffrey did not think it important enough to disclose it.

Geoffrey's era still does not offer enough space for the existence of the scheming and powerful women as the readers know them from the later versions of the legends. Women are of no importance to Geoffrey and that is the only reason why he does not blame Guenevere but charges only Mordred for all misbehaviour. He is a man and a man has to be held responsible for his acts. This attitude of Geoffrey's is well understood from the passages concerning Arthur: he is always praised as a good man and a good warrior. "For at that time was Britain exalted unto so high a pitch of dignity as that it did surpass all other kingdoms in plenty of riches, in luxury of adornment, and in the courteous wit of them that dwelt therein" (*Histories*, p. 171). Still, Geoffrey's depiction of Arthur stays a little distant. The only thing we learn about the king is that he was a good warrior and a good king: "At last the fame of his bounty and his prowess was upon every man's tongue, even unto the uttermost ends of the earth, and a fear fell upon the Kings of realms oversea lest he might fall upon them in arms

and they might lose their nations under their dominion" (*Histories*, p. 164 - 165). But what was he like as a person? Geoffrey stays silent about this and this leads to the presupposition that Arthur might not be a real person but rather a powerful symbol of strength and goodness. In any case, this distance in portraying of Arthur remains typical for all the future major depictions of this hero.

As well as Arthur can be seen as a symbol of knighthood and goodness rather than a real person, we might consider Mordred as a symbol of treachery and evil. As Parry and Caldwell say: "A hero as great as Arthur could not be conceived as falling except by treachery, and so Geoffrey introduced Mordred" (Parry and Caldwell, p. 85). Mordred's character is not depicted by the author but Geoffrey passes a heavy judgement on him. He titles him as "that most detestable traitor" (*Histories*, p. 197) and blames him for Arthur's ruin and physical doom. Geoffrey does not say that Mordred is a negative character but he only denounces one of his acts: the betrayal of the king. The clear distribution between good and evil is strongly supported: Arthur is good, while Mordred is evil. There is no place for Guenevere left between the two men: she is not an object of Geoffrey's judgement and therefore is left to await her future lot in the nunnery.

Mordred is identified as follows: "... Lot, who in the days of Aurelius Ambrosius had married Arthur's own sister, who had borne unto him Gawain and Mordred, ..." (*Histories*, p. 163). Mordred's and Gawain's mother's name is not given in any place in the book but from the later versions it is known to be Margawse. Again, Geoffrey does not think it important to give a name to a woman (who is given a lot of space for expressing her own acts in later Arthurian literature) because it is a woman and Geoffrey's women do not have any other identity but through their kin ties. What is important is that she is Mordred's and Gawain's mother (as these are well-known knights) and Lot's wife.

The identity of Mordred's mother and father underwent significant modifications in later versions. In Malory's account of the legend, Mordred's mother stays Margawse but his father is - surprisingly enough - Arthur. In later versions, Mordred's mother is Arthur's sister again but this time it is not Margawse but Morgaine, and his father is Arthur. Why did these changes happen? Why was it necessary to modify the story? It might have to do something with Arthur's possible sexual potency and homosexuality.

In the recent versions of the Arthurian legends, Arthur's possible homosexuality has been sometimes hinted at (e. g. in Bradley's twentieth-century interpretation *The Mists of Avalon*, 1979). This feature might have unintended roots in Geoffrey's book: "... Arthur, burning with yet hotter wrath for the loss of so many hundred comrades-in-arms..." (*Histories*, p. 198). In fact, Arthur felt "hotter wrath for the loss" of his comrades than for the loss of his own wife. It is just an inconspicuous mention but it is probably the reason for Arthur's insinuated homosexual orientation in upcoming literature.

In any case, it seems to be quite clear that Arthur did not have any children of his own in Geoffrey's interpretation. Geoffrey states: "Even the renowned King Arthur himself was wounded deadly and was borne thence unto the island of Avalon for the healing of his wounds, where he gave up the crown of Britain unto his kinsman, Constantine, son of Cador, Duke of Cornwall, in the year of the Incarnation of Our Lord five hundred and forty-two" (*Histories*, p. 200). Arthur passed the crown on one of his kinsman but not on his own child. The only explanation is that he did not have a child. Geoffrey does not communicate this fact openly, he only hints at it. At the same time, it is known that Mordred had two young sons and Constantine pursued them and slew them "by a cruel death" (*Histories*, p. 201). The distinctive features between Arthur and Mordred thus go even deeper: Arthur does not have a child of his own, while Mordred has two children and on top of that, they are both sons. Arthur is in a disadvantage but this handicap was mitigated in later versions by changing the

person of Mordred's father: Arthur was made Mordred's father. Through this change, Arthur acquired more potency.

Geoffrey's *Historia* is a book which has two major aims: to praise the fame of men and knights of Britain (especially King Arthur) and to praise Christianity. Both these domains are male-dominated and therefore there is no space left for women. Women are therefore usually excluded from the society of men:

And when the divine services had been celebrated in both churches, the King and Queen put off their crowns, and doing on lighter robes of state, went to meat, he to his palace with the men, she to another palace with the women. For the Britons did observe the ancient custom of the Trojans, and were wont to celebrate their high festival days, the men with the men and the women with the women severally.
(*Histories*, p. 170).

This is a very clear statement and, in fact, it determines the division line between men and women for the whole book.

If women are not directly excluded and Geoffrey finds them necessary for communicating his account of British history, it is only due to their being an indispensable complement of the men's fate, e.g. Mordred's mother, Merlin's mother or Arthur's wife, Guenevere.

It is obvious that women in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* find themselves in a hard position: they have no influence over men, nor politics. They have no personalities. They have no qualities, apart from being beautiful. They are passive, inactive and silent. They are even deficient of the identity of their own: they are usually identified through a kin tie to a man. Women in Geoffrey's *Historia* lack everything that is important for one's existence: the women are simply not there at all.

2. The Courtly Literature:

The Controversy of Courtly and Sexual Love

Little is known about the author of the five or six French Arthurian romances of the twelfth century, Chrétien de Troyes. He might have lived sometime between 1130 and 1190 in France. According to the preface to the book, it is probable that he was attached to the Templar Order due to the fact that he worked in eastern France under the patronage of countess Marie de Champagne whose husband became a Templar in 1124. He is remembered and well-known thanks to his amorous interpretations of Arthurian legends. However, Chrétien's most important contribution to the Arthurian material is – apart from the Grail legend (Loomis) - the emergence of completely new characters who had not appeared in either Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1138), nor in Wace's or Laymon's narratives. This opens an unanswered question of Chrétien de Troyes's sources. He might have drawn on Geoffrey's chronicle which was translated into French and further extended by Wace in 1155. He also might have found inspiration in some of the Celtic material but there is no clear evidence for this. Chrétien himself claims that "the material and the treatment of [the story] are given and furnished to him by the Countess, and he is simply trying to carry out her concern and intention" (Chrétien, p. 270).

His work contains five romances with Arthurian motifs. The author also refers to a sixth one but this romance has probably been lost. The five preserved romances are as follows: *Erec and Enide* (1170), *Cligés* (1176), *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion* (1177 - 1181), *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart* (1177 - 1181) and *Perceval, the Story of the Grail* (1181 - 1190) which has been left unfinished. All these characters of Erec, Enide, Cligés, Yvain, Lancelot and Perceval come to existence only in the second half of the 12th century in

Chrétien de Troyes's romances as there had not been preserved a mention of them in Arthurian material of the earlier authors. It is unclear where Chrétien de Troyes discovered these knightly characters. It is without any doubt, however, that they survived and became recurrent in upcoming Arthurian tradition. Lancelot and Perceval, in particular, became respected knights of the Round Table. Perceval has become familiar to the readers through Wolfram von Eschenbach's later narratives. Perceval's story in Chrétien de Troyes's version first introduces the quest for the Holy Grail (or the *Saint Grail* in the language of the original). Lancelot has become one of the crucial and integral figures in Arthurian legends of all writers ever after. Particularly for this reason, Lancelot and the story concerning his affairs with women will become the topic of this paper.

W. Lewis Jones in *King Arthur in History and Legend* suggests that all these newly born characters came to existence only to meet the requirements of the era. *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart* is dedicated to Marie de Champagne who represented the women's taste for a sentimental literature as the opposite to the "sagas of monster-slayers and warriors", which was the reason for the emergence of new characters (Lewis Jones, p. 100). Vida D. Scudder expresses a similar opinion: "... since Guenevere, according to the swiftly-developing canons of courtly love, must have her lover, Lancelot slipped into the vacant place, never again to leave it" (Scudder, p. 121). Even though we learn that Lancelot's "business in life was to become knight of the Table Round and lover of Guenevere" (Scudder, p. 120), the shift in the person of lover from Mordred in Geoffrey's account to Lancelot in Chrétien's version is not sufficiently explained. It seems to be the need for a positive hero to fit in the "vacant place" that was the cause for the emergence of the new character. It is not the purpose of this paper, however, to examine the question of the "newcomers" to the Arthurian legend and therefore Jones's and Scudder's explanation will be taken for granted. This paper deals not with the *way of coming to existence* but already with the *existence* of amorous

heroes and heroines and that is why the actual characters (women characters in particular) and the relationships between them will be discussed.

The story of Lancelot reveals the way of adapting Geoffrey of Monmouth's material in the most demonstrable way: it is the emergence of a new hero who would suit the courtly love taste of the age. The already existing material was taken and transformed into an amorous story full of amorous feelings, knightly values and courtly conventions. Jones suggests that only this was the moment of the emergence of the "matter of Britain", paradoxically in French literature (Lewis Jones, p. 104). The story of Lancelot is the most illustrative of all the romances in terms of the changing taste of the society and the rise of women and will be therefore discussed in detail.

It has been suggested several times that the situation changed significantly and women got much more space and voice in Chrétien's romances. The turn of the situation of women's position in comparison with Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of the Arthurian legends can be seen especially in these areas: courtly love and men's service to women; the emergence of women who openly express their thoughts, feelings and even will; women's and men's sexuality; women's superiority over men, i. e. cleverness, sexual power and magic. Jean Frappier goes as far as claiming that *Le Chevalier de la charrette* "involved the glorification of adultery and the degradation of Arthur to the level of a coward and a poltroon" by allowing the characters - Guinevere and Lancelot, in particular - to express their free sexual will in an unrestrained way (Frappier, p. 175). Scudder, on the contrary, occupies quite the opposite view of Arthur: Arthur's "own unfaithfulness is far more blatant than Guenevere's" (Scudder, p. 131).

In general, there are two groups of issues concerning women in the romance: pure courtly love and sexuality. Courtly love seems to be the men's domain while sexuality refers to women's power over men. It is a question whether these two stand in opposition (and rule

out each other) or whether they are complementary (and are both present in love affairs). In order to answer this question, we need to focus on the courtly love and analyse it.

Courtly love has its origin in France in the 11th century. The generally known and accepted characteristics is as follows: "a tradition in literature, especially in Medieval times, involving the faithful love of a knight for his married lady, with whom he can never have a relationship" (Wehmeier, p. 337). The stages are as follows: attraction to the lady, devotion to the lady, rejection of the men by the lady, unsatisfied desire, physical manifestations of lovesickness, heroic deeds to win the lady's heart, secret love, avoiding detection (Wikipedia, Courtly love). Scudder observes any such extra-marital relationships shown in the romances are based in reality: women were left in the castles by themselves and they naturally enjoyed themselves with the young squires (Scudder, p. 130).

The question stays the same: is courtly love of a sexual nature, or is it more of a pure love? This problematic issue has not been solved satisfactorily: both the theories have their supporters and opponents as the nature of love differs in different romances. For example, C. S. Lewis in *The Allegory of Love* states that "courtly love necessitates adultery" (Lewis, p. 12) and he finds two reasons for this necessity: first, the marriages were "matches of interest" (Lewis, p. 13); and second, poets of this era pursued the notion "that true love is impossible in marriage" (Lewis, p. 18). In Chrétien de Troyes, Lewis can see "the developed theory of love put into action in the course of stories" (Lewis, p. 32). As far as *The Knight of the Cart* is concerned, however, we can clearly distinguish both the elements of love there: its purity as well as its sexuality. Beverly Kennedy in her work "Love, Freedom, and Marital Fidelity in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*" also points out to the fact that "mediaeval romances had often made erotic love the basis for marriage" or – as in the case of Guinevere and Lancelot, and Tristram and Isode – for an adulterous relationship (Kennedy, p. 180). These two views of Lewis and Kennedy support the presupposition that in this particular romance, *Lancelot, the Knight of*

the Cart, the courtly love could not hold the essence of pure love, or, at least, the pure love has in some cases drifted to sexual love. By claiming this, the question of complementarity of pure courtly love and sexuality is answered as far as Chrétien de Troyes' romance is concerned. The love of Lancelot and Guinevere is based on sexual attraction and sexual desire. What is worth mentioning, is the fact that it was not only Lancelot, a *man*, whose sexual desire we are discussing. Guinevere was also involved and this sexual inclusion of hers gives evidence of a higher state of women's independence of that era:

And the Queen extends her arms to him and, embracing him, presses him tightly against her bosom, drawing him into the bed beside her and showing him every possible satisfaction: her love and her heart go out to him. It is love that prompts her to treat him so; and if she feels great love for him, he feels a hundred thousand times as much for her.
(Chrétien, p. 329)

Guinevere has the right to choose her lover, and not only a platonic lover but also a real physical lover, which is the evidence of her independence. It is clear from the cited passage, however, that it is the woman who gives and the man who takes: she shows "him every possible satisfaction". And she does this because her "love prompts her to treat him so", meaning the great pure love, while "he feels a hundred thousand times as much for her" refers to the sexual love of his.

One more example of women's free sexual ways can be shown by a damsel who is trying to seduce Lancelot: "Sir, my house is prepared for you, if you will accept my hospitality; but you shall find shelter there only on condition that you will lie with me" (Chrétien, p. 282). Of course, Lancelot refuses her offer but later, "since it is unavoidable" as the narrator claims, "lets her have her way" (Chrétien, p. 282). Later at night the lady wants Lancelot to keep his promise:

He sweated with the trouble of it all; yet, in the midst of all the trouble, his promise impels and drives him on. Is this then an actual force? Yes, virtually so; for he feels that he is in duty bound to take his place by the damsel's side. It is his promise that urges him and dictates his act. So he lies down at once, but like her, does not remove his shirt. He takes good care not to touch her; and when he is in bed, he turns away from her as far as possible, and speaks not a word to her, like a monk to whom speech is forbidden.
(Chrétien, p. 285, 286)

This scene, although demonstrating sexual freedom of women, is different from the above one. Lancelot does not want to have a sexual intercourse with this woman, he is actually unhappy about the promise he had made. It is because "his heart does not go out to her" (Chrétien, p. 286). The difference from the above discussed scene is the nature of Lancelot's love. It is clear that sexual intercourse with another woman does not bring him any pleasure, but rather on the contrary. His love for Guinevere must contain some pure essence and it is only this purity that gives Lancelot the pleasure of sexual love. Furthermore, the knight is driven by his desire for Guinevere.

Tony Hunt in his work on Chrétien de Troyes speaks about the "chivalry topos", e. g. "an ideal co-ordination of chivalric and amatory pursuits" (Hunt, p. 141). He elaborates this co-ordination in these words: "Love of a lady inspires the knight to displays of chivalric prowess which in turn intensify the lady's love" (Hunt, p. 141). This co-ordination is also present in *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*. In order to achieve Guinevere's love, he has to do whatever the lady desires and make her every wish come true. At a tournament Guinevere asks him to act poorly, which he does and everyone is mocking him. By means of "cruel coquetry" she makes Lancelot prove his love to her (Frappier, p. 179). This fact makes Frappier also ask about the author's intentions: "How could he render credible a hero who was a paragon of physical prowess and energy, and at the same time a lover ecstatically submissive to a tyrannical divinity?" (Frappier, p. 175). This is Frappier's explanation of Chrétien's reluctance to compose this romance and also the reason why he did not finish it, but rather passed it on Godefroi de Leigni. According to Frappier, Chrétien simply found it difficult to "harmonize the ideal of a hero who is a free agent and dominates his fate with the ideal of a hero who is a slave to his mistress" and that is why he "permitted himself occasional ironies and exaggerations at the expense of his hero and heroine" (Frappier, p. 176).

However, as Frappier admits, Chrétien did not fail to harmonize all the requirements of his benefactor. He put his personal feelings aside and managed to create a "brilliant" character in Lancelot (Frappier, p. 176). He also acknowledges that although Guinevere submits "the knights to the most humiliating trials", she acts as an "inspirer of prowess" (Frappier, p. 179). This role of an inspirer is of great importance in the medieval literature, e. g. Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is inspired by the temptress to defend such virtues as "courtesy, generosity, loyalty, moderation, bravery and chastity" (Stone, p. 131).

What is noteworthy, is the fact that Lancelot considers sexual intercourse with an unloved woman a duty and that is the only reason that impells him to be with the woman. Knights, then, valued honour more than love. This value is even more powerful and can override the importance of courtly love. This is also the case with Maleagant who had to give up the Queen in order to make peace with the King. However, he consents to the peace treaty only under one condition: he will have a chance to fight for the Queen. In case he wins, the Queen has to "come back with him again without the interference of any one" (Chrétien, p. 319). She, as a woman, does not have a choice of her own. She cannot say yes or no and thus remains passive. Other people make decisions about her life.

A similar situation comes about at the beginning of the romance: when the King fails to stop one of his seneschals named Kay, he sends the Queen to him to try to make the seneschal stay. When Kay refuses her, "the Queen prostrates herself at full length before his feet" and he cannot refuse her and promises her to stay (Chrétien, p. 272). Kay says that he will stay under one condition: he wants to take the Queen and go after an unknown knight. As the King had already promised to do whatever Kay wishes, he has to allow to that, although unwillingly: "My lady, you must accompany Kay without making objection" (Chrétien, p. 272). The result is that Kay leaves the court anyway and in addition to that, he takes the Queen with him.

What is noteworthy is the fact that the Queen is sent to the seneschal by the King, her husband, whose wish she obeys. And again, the King orders Guinevere to leave with Kay, which is based on the promise he had given to the seneschal. In result, Guinevere, the Queen, has to go. The King, as a man, gives orders and she, as a woman and his wife, obeys him passively. Honour, again, has a higher status on the value scale than love or marriage.

Such interference in the women's affairs is, however, only exceptional in Chrétien's romances. It comes about only when a man makes a promise, which is treated as a deed of honour (e. g. Lancelot's promise to the lady, the King's promise to Maleagant or the King's promise to Kay). In most cases, women are free to express their thoughts, feelings and will.

Together with pronouncing free will in sexual matters, women in *The Knight of the Cart* also openly and self-confidently express their thoughts and feelings:

"See here, damsel, " he cries, "you are not going right; come this way! No one, I think, ever went straight who left this road. " "Sire, this is a better way for us, " the damsel says, "I am sure of it. "
(Chrétien, p. 288)

In this passage, the lady feels free to contradict the knight and give him her opinion on the direction of their passage. Even though the knight enforces his own will, the self-confidence of the lady is the evidence of the turning away from the voicelessness of the women of the previous era of Geoffrey of Monmouth.

The same lady later finds a comb and starts to laugh:

When he sees her doing so, he begs her to tell him why she laughs. And she says: "Never mind, for I will never tell you. " "Why not? " he asks. "Because I don't wish to do so. "
(Chrétien, p. 288).

Again, the damsel openly expresses her unwillingness to do something. However, later, when Lancelot begs her to tell him, she says: "Your appeal is so strong [...] that I will tell you and keep nothing back" (Chrétien, p. 288).

It always looks as if the women could hold something back or could play upon men but in the end men always get what they want. Of all the above mentioned examples, women

always lost but actually looked as if they won: Guinevere who tried to persuade Kay to stay, Guinevere and her sexual intercourse with Lancelot (is it her or his victory?), the lady who wants to choose her own direction over Lancelot's opinion, the lady's intended sexual intercourse with Lancelot which never came true and the lady's refusal to reveal the ownership of the comb, which she later reveals anyway. All these would-be victories of women over men might be there only due to the change in the audience: mostly women read these romances and their taste needed to be satisfied.

This taste was satisfied also by the completion of the love of Guinevere and Lancelot as their love was illegitimate and had to be punished. Some writers say that Chrétien de Troyes deliberately abandoned completing of the romance (the last thousand lines were finished by Godefroi de Leigni) because of his personal disapproval of the love between Lancelot and Guinevere which he had to create according to the Marie de Champagne's wish (Lewis Jones, p. 103 or Frappier, p. 175). In any case, the ending as Chrétien wrote it has been preserved in Arthurian literature till today so there is no need to elaborate on that.

One last thing needs to be discussed and that is the naming of the heroes and heroines. There are not many changes in this romance in comparison with Monmouth's chronicle as far as naming of the heroines is concerned. The point is, however, that even the men in *The Knight of the Cart* do not take on any names: they are mostly referred to as *knights*. This, together with a lot of various *damsels* and *ladies*, leads to a confusion in the reading to a certain extent. The author does not seem, however, to lower the importance of the individual characters: they are convincing personalities on their own, although stuffed into the courtly love pattern.

The position of women in Chrétien de Troyes' work definitely changed in comparison with Monmouth's chronicle. The most important shift is in their voice gaining: they started to be heard. It is true that they only speak to speak and their words do not have any serious

impact on the matters around them, but at least, they are there and are heard. In Monmouth's chronicle, there were no women characters at all – there were women occurring from time to time, but they were no real and developed personalities. In Chrétien de Troyes' romance, women are present and they are heard. They also take on a new role: the role of independent and sexually free beings. Although sometimes only seemingly independent, still the first seed of independence opens the door towards the fully developed and independent female characters of Arthurian literature of the 15th century and Thomas Malory's interpretation whose treatment of women's sexuality is very similar to Chrétien de Troyes'.

However, Chrétien de Troyes' view is only one of a few possible readings of the courtly love. As Peter Johnson says in his paper on Arthurian romances, "the Arthurian romance had always been supplemented in its more successful representatives by a moral, ethical element which ranged from the level of courtly manners and etiquette to genuine moral dilemmas involving duty and the knightly, feudal code, and reaching to the level of religion" (Johnson, p. 199). This is also the case with another "courtly love" romance: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

This fourteenth century English romance offers a completely opposite view of the courtly love (in terms of its being of sexual or pure nature). The main hero of this romance, Sir Gawain, is tested by the beautiful wife of his host, Sir Bertilak. As far as women in this romance are concerned, their depiction is completely different from Chrétien de Troyes's conception. It is given, however, by the different purposes of these two works of art. While Chrétien tried to fulfill a wish of Marie de Champagne and did his best to meet the requirements of the era demanding a courtly love story, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* aims at composing an allegorical poem including a courtly love plot line. Courtly love in this poem serves, however, only as a secondary issue: by means of the issues of women and love, the author can test the main hero and his chastity. Brian Stone characterises Gawain in these

words: "a knight of luminous chivalric purity" who defends virtues such as "courtesy, generosity, loyalty, moderation, bravery and chastity" (Stone, p. 130 - 131). In Chrétien's romance, courtly love is the major subject: the author's aim is to tackle the issue of courtly love on the example of Lancelot and Guinevere.

The crucial significance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in respect to the topic of female characters lies in the way the women characters are portrayed. And that is also the major interest of the next chapter.

3. Polarity of Female Characters:

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is an English romance written in alliterative verse whose author remains unknown. Several names have been suggested, e. g. John Donne, John Pratt, Hugo de Masci, etc. However, there is no clear evidence for any of these names. In any case, the author seems to be familiar with the courtly life (Loomis, p. 529). The poem was written in the late fourteenth century and only one manuscript has been preserved. This manuscript also contains three other pieces: *Pearl*, *Cleanness* and *Patience* which are all of a religious character. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a symbolical poem full of allegorical meanings open to many various interpretative possibilities. Laura Hibbard Loomis characterises and values the poem in terms of its "spiritual maturity", "brilliant realism", "dramatic vigour", "poetic sensitivity", "humour", and "nobility of spirit" – she simply considers it "exceptional" as far as the artistry of the poem is concerned (Loomis, p. 528, 537).

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, two women characters are presented: the Lady and Morgan the Fay. These two women represent polarity or duality of characters. Already from the name giving and from the knowledge of other Arthurian literature, it is quite obvious who is the active and who is the passive character in this romance. Morgan the Fay stands for the active and strong female characters, which also entails further characterization: with females, being active and strong equals being evil and scheming. As in the other versions, Morgan hates the Queen and plots against her. The Lady, whose name is not mentioned anywhere in the whole romance, on the contrary remains the weak part of this dual

relationship, although it might seem from the beginning that she is an active, strong and independent character as well. This point will be elaborated on later.

If we accept this outlined polarity of characters (Morgan being the active one, while the Lady being the passive one), we can incorporate this fourteenth century romance within the traditional Arthurian literature of that time as far as women characters are concerned, at least. This polarity is, however, not so obvious throughout a significant part of the book:

My young body is yours,
Do with it what you will;
My strong necessities force
Me to be your servant still.
(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. 68)

This scene describes the Lady's first visit to Gawain's bedroom. She offers her body and her love to Gawain quite openly and without restraint. She is depicted as an independent female character: she is married but she does not take her marriage vows seriously. She is the embodiment of what C. S. Lewis calls the necessity of adultery in courtly love (Lewis, p. 12). She only acts in order to satisfy *her* needs and fulfill *her* own happiness. She definitely does not behave in a passive way, but rather acts self-confidently. Her behaviour does not allow for interpreting her character as a passive one. Her role in the book is the one of a *temptress*: she keeps trying to seduce Sir Gawain in a very courteous way, which partially alleviates the sexual character of her lure. Brian Stone in his essay "Gawain's "Eternal Jewel" observes that "Gawain is not suggestible to sexual temptation. It is his courtesy that is hard pressed, not his sexual instinct, by each assault of the Lady" (Stone, p. 134). Stone, then, accepts the play of dualities (courtly love and sexual temptation versus chastity and courtesy) but stresses the importance of courtesy as the only element which is actually at stake: "... there is no real sexual interest in the poem because the hero simply does not play the game" (Stone, p. 134). Stone, however, neglects a fact of great importance: the Lady is not as active character as she is portrayed in the book. Her activeness is only seeming and the illusion of it is supported throughout the book, e. g. the Lady is not given name anywhere in the book, which is a

typical feature of passive females characters (as is the case with Malory or Geoffrey of Monmouth, for example). However, as the romance later reveals, the Lady is only used as her husband's instrument:

Your conduct and your kissings are completely known to me,
And the wooing by my wife – my work set it on.
I instructed her to try you, and you truly seem
To be the most perfect paladin ever to pace the earth.
(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. 109)

The Lady loses the seeming of independence and free will as is obvious from this passage. She was only used as an instrument by her husband. Love has no place in this reading of the depicted love scenes. She was instructed, she was told what to do. The Lady did not act of her own free will and in this way becomes the contrary of what she was depicted before: she is not an active, but a completely passive character. She has no free will. She is told to seduce Gawain, who is "mighty in arms, courageous of heart, true to his word, faithful to duty, pure of body and of mind, courteous in even the most trying conditions, fine of spirit and of ideal, devout in act" in John Edwin Wells' words. The Lady tries to fulfill this difficult task of seducing one of the best Arthur's knights. There is, however, no trace of love or free will in her conduct.

The duality of contrary characters is completed by Morgan the Fay. She is the most important female character in the romance, although (or because of that) she is given only a few lines:

She sent me forth in this form to your famous hall
To put to the proof the great pride of the house,
The reputation for high renown of the Round Table;
She bewitched me in this weird way to bewilder your wits,
And to grieve Guinevere and goad her to death
With ghastly fear of that ghosts's ghoulis speaking
With his head in his hand before the high table
(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. 112)

These words of the Green Knight finally shed light on the whole plot: the existence of the beheaded Green Knight, the reason for his presence at Arthur's court, the test of Sir Gawain,

etc. are finally explained and justified. It was all because of Morgan the Fay's magical power and witchcraft that all this had to happen. She is an active character. She moves the plot. She creates the story.

Being an active female means – in the language of the traditional Arthurian literature – being evil and scheming. Morgan plots against her brother and the knights of the Round Table. She wants to point to the weakness of the notion of knighthood. Furthermore, a kind of female vengeance or fight can be traced in Morgan's behaviour: she wants to grieve Guinevere. It stays unclear, however, why there is any hatred between these two women.

The important point lies in the fact that the Lady as a weak and passive female character is given a lot of place in the romance, while Morgan the Fay as a strong and active female character is given only a few lines explaining her origin, her intentions and her evil qualities. Furthermore, none of these two women is given a *voice* of her own in the book. Morgan is not present anywhere in the romance. She is only talked of but she does not have a chance to defend herself or her motives. The Lady, on the other hand, is given quite a lot of space and she also speaks a lot. It seems, from the beginning, that she has optimal conditions to express herself. This is, however, only an illusion: the Lady is not speaking for herself, but she only carries out her duties. She is loyal to her husband she does what he tells her to do. Considering this, the Lady is not given voice anywhere in the book either. She remains silent and indistinct. The readers do not learn her real intentions or motives. She does not express herself, she does not speak for herself. She only obeys her husband.

To conclude, the polarity is highlighted by one more contrary issue: the Lady is beautiful and young. She has an attractive, fresh, unused body. However, her brains stay unemployed: she only does what she is told to do, she does not think for herself. In this way, she might be considered a representative of form.

On the contrary, Morgan the Fay is present in no place in the book. The readers do not know anything about her appearance. They are just told about her qualities: she uses witchcraft and is a proud woman (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. 112). She plots against her brother and the Round Table. She is the enemy of the notion of knighthood. It is her *mind* what is important, and not her body. In this duality of characters, she represents the meaning or *concept* because she gives meaning to everything what is going on in the romance. By introducing her character, the whole plot is explained and all the uncertainty of the romance becomes clear in the end.

The author of the essay "The Common Enemy of Man", Brian Stone, expresses the idea of Morgan the Fay and the Lady being just one woman: Morgan. The author supports this view by the fact that both the Lady and Morgan are enchantresses whose aim is to seduce Gawain by means of sorcery and lower the dignity of the Round Table. The Lady must be an enchantress because although Guinevere is supposed to be the most beautiful woman, Gawain likes the Lady even more. The passage describing the Queen is as follows:

Fairest of form was this queen,
Glinting and grey of eye;
No man could say he had seen
A lovelier, but with a lie.
(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. 24)

Later, Gawain's first encounter with the Lady is described in these words:

Then the lady had a longing to look on the knight;
With her bevy of beauties she abandoned her pew.
Most beautiful of body and bright of complexion,
Most winsome in ways of all women alive,
She seemed to Sir Gawain, excelling Guinevere.
(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. 56)

According to the author of "The Common Enemy of Man", there is a clear contradiction in the depiction of these two antagonistic females. This is explained through the means of magical powers of Morgan. She made the Lady (or herself) appear even more beautiful than Guinevere who is supposed to be the most beautiful woman of all – and this is found

suspicious by the author of the essay. Therefore, Stone concludes that the Lady is an enchantress, which means that she must be Morgan. This assumption goes against my thesis of the Lady being only a passive character.

Stone contradicts himself, however. Later in the paper it is said that "the host pairs our hero-guest with his wife..., arranges for her to keep company with him during the first hunt, and again pairs her with him at the supper after the boar-hunt" (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. 121). This, however, only supports my thesis: the Lady was told by her husband to seduce Gawain in order to try him. It definitely contradicts Stone's view of the Lady as an active and sorcerous character. If she obeys her husband, she cannot be considered an independent heroine.

Brian Stone's proposal is that Morgan and the Lady are both only one figure: Morgan. This argument is supported by the fact that the aim of both of them is to bring about the fatal fall of Sir Gawain and the loss of his chastity, entailing the loss of dignity of the Round Table. Everything has been plotted by Morgan who wants to harm Arthur and Guinevere. Her motives stay unclear in the poem, but in conjunction with other Arthurian romances it can be deduced that their enmity and polarity represents the clash of the old, pagan world and Christianity.

In my opinion, however, Morgan and the Lady are not the same person. They are different personalities fulfilling the duality requirements: Morgan is an active, strong, independent, evil, scheming and sorcerous character, while the Lady is only an instrument of her husband, a passive, plain, obedient housewife. The ending of the romance supports this view: the existence of the Green Knight is explained by Morgan's plotting. She created the Green Knight who was supposed to challenge one of Arthur's knights and bring him to doom together with the whole Round Table. The Green Knight is an extra personality of Gawain's host. He might be considered his other ego. Gawain's host tests the knight but not of his own

free will: he was induced by Morgan who is also a guest at Sir Bertilak's castle. This shows that all the plotting has been done by Morgan the Fay.

Although strongly supporting this polar reading of the text in terms of female characters, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, an allegorical romance, is – as has been stated at the beginning of this paper – open to many various interpretations, this polar reading being only one of them.

4. *Le Morte Darthur*:

The Dichotomy of Good and Evil

There is no clear evidence of the identity of the author of *Le Morte Darthur* due to the existence of several Thomas Malorys at the time of the origin of the book. It is generally accepted, however, that it must have been Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel. According to Eugène Vinaver, there are not many certain facts about the author's life. He was probably born sometime around 1416 although it might have been even earlier. His father, John Malory, was M. P. for Warwickshire where he also held some offices. After his father's death in 1434, Thomas succeeded to his estates and also became M. P. for Warwickshire in 1444 or 1445. After that, his life turned into rather a different dimension. At this time, Thomas Malory is infamously known for his criminal activities which he is alleged to have been practising since 1443 until the rest of his life. He was accused of rape, burglary, theft, extortion, and other criminal charges. There has, however, never been found a record of a trial and conviction and that is why it is generally supposed that Malory was charged without any evidence of his misconduct. It might be even suggested that all these indictments against Malory were raised for political reasons - however much they may have been justified - which was not unusual in Malory's era. Although he was not brought to trial, he was put in jail several times but he managed to escape on two occasions. Sometimes he was out of jail on bail or pardoned by the sovereigns. There is almost no uncertainty that Malory died as a prisoner as he was buried near Newgate and it is evident that at least part of his work was written while being in prison. He died around 1471, shortly after completing *Le Morte Darthur*. It is right at the end of the medieval era which finished in 1485, in the political life, at least.

Thomas Malory lived in a century full of disturbances. The 15th century was a time of turbulent politics and unstable religious issues. In England of the 14th century, it was John Wycliffe who believed people had the right to read the Bible in the language they could understand. He criticised the Church and called for a reformation.

In politics, the nobility were divided between the "Lancastrians" who supported Henry VI, and the "Yorkists" who were loyal to the duke of York. This conflict, known as the Wars of the Roses, lasted for twenty-five years but the fighting only took about fifteen months. Of all the classes, only the nobles were involved but the nobility were almost destroyed.

Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, which focuses on the issues of kingship, nobility, chivalry and knightly qualities, almost certainly hints at the current situation in England. The destruction of knights of the Round Table resembles the destruction of the English nobility in the Wars of the Roses which were still taking place at the time he was working on his masterpiece.

The age Malory lived in definitely had a significant influence on his work. First, he served in the army and his experience is reflected in *Le Morte Darthur*. Second, there is the similitude of the knights' fights and the fights which were going on while Malory was still alive. And third, Malory made an obvious attempt to express his religious outlook in the book. Christianity and warfare are the key words, then, when speaking of the fifteenth century society.

As far as women were concerned, their lot was hard as the Church taught that they should obey their husbands. According to the *An Illustrated History of Britain*, women were widely looked down on and the pretext for this was the original sin. Women represented a moral threat for men and could not be trusted. At the same time, however, women were supposed to be pure and passive (McDowall, p. 62 – 63). These contradictory views of the women are clearly reflected in Malory's work as well.

Malory's work does not express this hard lot of women in medieval times, because the women's position was not his major concern, but it nevertheless expresses the low status of some of the women characters. *Le Morte Darthur* does not give women almost any voice and thus denies them any importance. As Beverly Kennedy states in her paper "Love, Freedom, and Marital Fidelity in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*", "history of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table necessarily entailed a primary focus upon knighthood [...] from which women were barred by virtue of their sex" (Kennedy, p. 179). Most of the women in the book are then portrayed as passive, inactive recipients of their lots; they are presented as helpers to men; they are only the means of men's achievement of knightly aspects. These aspects include service to women, fighting in battles, courage and bravery, chastity, avenging the death of a kin, belief in God and considering love one of the most important features of one's life in terms of Christianity. On the other hand, there is also the other kind of women: women who represented the moral threat and could not be trusted. There can be now clearly detected a few dichotomies: the dichotomy of courageous men and inactive women, the dichotomy of secular temptation and spiritual duty, the dichotomy of good and evil. These three dichotomies are tightly interwoven.

The dichotomy of courageous men and inactive women is impressively effective in the book. While the passive women are associated with the good, the active women are associated with the evil. While the courageous men almost always try to achieve spiritual values, evil women do their best to thwart men's good intentions. Women are often shown to lead men down from the righteous path and thus are depicted as negative spirits. *Spirit* is the right term to be used as women in Malory's book do not represent whole human beings, but rather essences. Their role in the book is not to introduce human characters, but rather to represent the good or the evil. They never act for themselves and out of their inner impulses.

However, this is only one kind of women introduced in Malory's work. The other kind are those passive women who do not represent any danger for the knights. These women require to be protected and helped but they do not even think of taking the pious knights down from their attempt to achieve the spiritual values. The women of the first kind are often referred to as sorceresses, while the women of the second kind are considered good ladies.

Morgan La Fay is supposed to be the most notorious example of the first group of women portrayed in *Le Morte Darthur*. Her name has undergone many modifications: besides Morgan La Fay (Fay meaning Fairy), she has sometimes been called Morgana, Morgain, Morgaine, Fata Morgana (meaning Fairy Morgana), which is the evidence for her integral position in Arthurian legends and in mythology in general. Morgan La Fay is Arthur's half sister – she is the daughter of Igraine and Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall, and Arthur is the son of Igraine and Uther Pendragon. Morgan La Fay is typically (but not always) portrayed as a villainous woman in old versions of the story.

In the 20th-century-versions, Morgan La Fay underwent a significant change: she is no longer viewed as a wicked character and this new view thus goes against the traditional portrayal of Morgan. Her character has developed and she is no longer given a stereotypical attribute of a sorceress. However, she is not an explicitly positive character either. Rather, she is portrayed as a fully developed human being – with all her virtues and all her faults. This is probably one of the most significant shifts between the medieval and modern depictions of this crucial personality. While in Malory's work, the knights' and the ladies' characters are not of much importance as their only purpose is to contribute to the depiction of the ways of the knightly order, in modern versions of the story of the knights of the Round Table the characters are those elements who create the story and who actually incite further movement of the plot.

In Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, Morgan La Fay is a dangerous sorceress who plots against her brother Arthur. She tries to get rid of him and wants her lover Accolon to become the ruler of the country. This also shows that Morgan La Fay's role changes throughout the centuries: while in the traditional view, including Thomas Malory's work, Morgan La Fay is referred to only as a sorceress and betrayer of her brother Arthur, in the new 20th-century-versions her part in the story is made more complicated: she is the mother of Mordred who is said to bring about the downfall of the Round Table. Morgan La Fay's more intricate role in the 20th-century-novels is given by the need to create a complex psychological frame of this crucial character.

The simplicity and the explicitness of the characters in Malory's version has often been supposed to be one of the most significant features of this work. The characters seem to be schematic and black-and-white. They stay the same throughout the story, they do not develop. In this respect, Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* reminds us of a fairy tale. There are many more aspects in this version admitting the fairy tale reading of the text, e. g. the presence of the sorceresses, unearthly phenomena, or clear distribution of good and evil. Using Vladimir Propp's terminology, we can also distinguish the hero (Arthur), the donor (Merlin who gives Arthur the sword Excalibur), the hero's magical helper (Merlin), the villain (Morgan), the princess (Guenever), and the usurper (Mordred). The fairy-tale elements are typical feature of Malory's style. They are an inherent part of his writing and, as Zdeněk Stříbrný says, Malory's usage of fairy-tale elements seems so factual that it invokes the illusion of reality (Stříbrný, volume I, p. 90). The internality of the fairy-tale elements used in the book is provided for by the illusion of reality which is a very effective one. What remains a fairy-tale element is then not the existence of magical objects or unearthly phenomenon, but rather the simplicity of the characters, i. e. the lack of their psychological analysis. A typical example of this lack of more profound characterization is given in the character of King

Arthur himself. He is not a developed character: he is always good and faultless, he is the symbol of perfection. Even when he makes a mistake, he is excused and never blamed - the blame is laid on someone else (e. g. when he conceives a child with his sister). In Malory's interpretation, Arthur is the symbol of the notion of knighthood and the Round Table but he is not a real and fully developed personality.

This rule of characterization simplicity does not apply to Sir Launcelot, however. Among all of Malory's characters, Launcelot is the most elaborated personality. He seems to be the most human personality of all the knights. He takes on the shape of a real human being with almost fully developed qualities. He is not without emotions, in fact, he even undergoes a state of madness. It is just Malory's manner of presentation that stays calm, without emotions:

And when Sir Launcelot heard this he was passing heavy and wist not what to do, and so departed sore weeping, and cursed the time that he was born. [...] And then he called himself a very wretch, and most unhappy of all knights; [...]
(Malory, volume II, p. 270).

The point is that Launcelot suffers a lot as he is struck by a sudden sadness but the way Malory puts it down is a very plain one. There are more examples of this sober way of communicating even the tensest situations, e. g. the story of Elaine de Blank, the maiden of Astolat:

Now speak we of the Fair Maiden of Astolat that made such sorrow day and night that she never slept, ate, nor drank, and ever she made her complaint unto Sir Launcelot. So when she had thus endured a ten days, that she feebled so that she must needs pass out of this world, then she shrived her clean, and received her Creator. [...]
Then she said, "Why should I leave such thoughts? Am I not an earthly woman? And all the while the breath is in my body I may complain me, for my belief is I do none offence thought I love an earthly man; and I take God to my record I loved never none but Sir Launcelot du Lake, nor never shall, and a clean maiden I am for him and for all other; and sithen it is the suffereance of God that I shall die for the love of so noble a knight, I beseech the High Father of Heaven to have mercy upon my soul, and upon mine innumerable pains that I suffered may be allegiance of part of my sins. For sweet Lord Jesu," said the fair maiden, "I take Thee to record, on Thee I was never great offencer against Thy laws; but that I loved this noble knight, Sir Launcelot, out of measure, and of myself, good Lord, I might not withstand the fervent love wherefore I have my death."
(Malory, volume II, p. 413).

This is probably one of the saddest accounts in the book. Malory uses a very powerful device here: direct speech. This gives the readers the possibility to view the inner thoughts of the protagonist. Malory uses this device very rarely and that is why this maiden's speech is so powerful. Yet, she is not a fully developed character. The readers encounter her only on one of Launcelot's quests. She only belongs to one of many Launcelot's stories. She is not a complex character as Sir Launcelot is.

Launcelot develops throughout the narrative, there are not just separate glimpses of his life in Malory's account of the story. He represents the constant fight between the spiritual duty and secular desires.

As far as the other fairy-tale-like elements are concerned, i. e. the presence of sorceresses, the unearthly phenomena and the clear distribution of good and evil, it should be noted that there are two possible readings or understandings of Malory's text. One of the readings is generally accepted: it is the authentic and original word-for-word understanding of the text. We read what is written. And we understand it literally. When there is a sorceress in the text, we believe in her supernatural powers. This reading is not difficult to accept as Malory employs the device of making the magical look real.

The second possible reading of Malory's text enables the readers more space for consideration: all these likely fairy tale elements might be nothing else but metaphors and they might have symbolic meanings. When there is a woman who used her charms to seduce a man, is it not just a way to avoid putting the blame on the man? It seems to be clear that the knights had sexual desires which could not be freely fulfilled as they were supposed to be the righteous and pious knights of the Round Table. When you accept that those women who tried to lead them down of the right path were sorceresses and they could achieve this only through their supernatural powers, the culprit is evident: a woman. She is clearly the one to be blamed for the faults of the pious knights.

Kristina Hildebrandt gives us an example of a woman who wants Bors to become her lover. It is very hard for him to refuse her because in fact, she is a devil. Hildebrandt accepts this simplistic reading, regarding Malory pro-feminist. She claims that Malory does not consider women evil because he distinguishes between women and devils. Thus the woman who tries to seduce Bors is not really a woman, but a devil (Hildebrandt, p. 59 – 60).

This reading is, however, a very shallow one. It seems to be clear that Malory wanted to say that the woman was a devil. Furthermore, it is necessary to understand this in a metaphorical way: women have sexual power over men and that is the crucial point of all the dispute in *Le Morte Darthur*. By saying that a woman was a sorceress, Malory can easily put the blame on the woman, not the man. This metaphorical reading explicitly excludes the pro-feminist reading of Malory's work and leaves only the medieval understanding of the text: women were inferior to men and their sexual power over men should not be publicly accepted – that is why the dangerous women could be presented only in form of sorceresses. It would be a too simple explanation to claim that only by making these women evil enchantresses and devils, Malory should be considered a pro-feminist. It would be misleading to think that Malory wants to imply that those women were not women at all but devils. On the contrary, he implies that those evil women (that means women whose aim was to seduce the pious knights) were devils.

These "sorceresses" or "enchantresses" are usually very powerful women. Some of them have names, others do not. The ones we know by name are Morgan La Fay, Lineta, Nimue, Dame Brisen or Dame Elaine. Dame Brisen is even called "one of the greatest enchantresses that was at that time in the world living" (Malory, volume II, p. 191). In case we accept the metaphorical reading of the motif of sorcery, we should come to the conclusion that Dame Brisen was a very experienced and scheming woman as far as men were concerned. Brisen is able to help Elaine conceive a child with Launcelot without him knowing

about it - and furthermore, Brisen manages Elaine and Launcelot to have a sexual intercourse twice. Again, Malory lets his readers know that Launcelot cannot be blamed for this as this all has been made by means of sorcery and trickery of the two women:

And then Dame Brisen brought Sir Launcelot a cupful of wine; and anon as he had drunken that wine he was so assotted and mad that he might make no delay, but withouten any let he went to bed; and he weened that maiden Elaine had been Queen Guenever. Wit you well that Sir Launcelot was glad, and so was that lady Elaine that she had gotten Sir Launcelot in her arms. For well she knew that same night should be gotten upon her Galahad that should prove the best knight of the world; and so they lay together until undern on the morn..."
(Malory, volume II, p. 192).

Of course, Sir Launcelot regretted deeply what happened but Dame Brisen managed to trick him once again:

... Dame Brisen came to Sir Launcelot's bed's side and said, "Sir Launcelot du Lake, sleep you? My lady, Queen Guenever, lieth and awaiteth upon you."
"O my fair lady," said Sir Launcelot, "I am ready to go with you where ye will have me."
So Sir Launcelot threw upon him a long gown, and his sword in his hand; and then Dame Brisen took him by the finger and led him to her lady's bed, Dame Elaine; and then she departed and left them in bed together. Wit you well the lady was glad, and so whas Sir Launcelot, for he weened that he had had another in his arms.
(Malory, volume II, p. 201)

According to the literal reading, Sir Launcelot was unable to resist because he was under the power of "one of the greatest enchantresses that was at that time in the world living" (Malory, volume II, p. 191). If we accept the metaphorical reading, Launcelot seems to be either a little simple-minded man as he did not recognize his only true love, or he might as well be a wordly man indulging in wordly pleasures. In this respect, it can be claimed that Malory used the device of irony to depict the world of the knights as it was clear to him that the knightly order was not perfect. Malory's main purpose might not be to show the perfect world of the knightly order as is usually claimed but quite the opposite: to show its imperfections and demonstrate that there is no perfect society in the world.

This argument can be also supported by the continuous struggle between the duty of the spiritual world and the pleasures of the sensuous world. Apart from Launcelot, there are other knights who have to undergo this inner struggle, e. g. Sir Bors. And it is only the defeat of the sensuous pleasures that is highly valued in Malory's world.

The chapter about Sir Bors' struggle between the spiritual and the worldly is called *How the devil in a woman's likeness would have had Sir Bors to have lain by her, and how by God's grace he escaped* (Malory, volume II, p. 319). Even the name of the chapter clearly shows the distribution of good and evil: devil - woman; God - man. Sir Bors' struggle ends up in success as he does not allow the woman (devil) to take advantage of his knightly qualities:

"Ah, Sir Bors, gentle knight have mercy on us all, and suffer my lady to have her will, and if ye do not we must suffer death with our lady, for to fall down off this high tower, and if ye suffer us thus to die for so little a thing all ladies and gentlewomen will say of your dishonour."
Then looked he upward, they seemed all ladies of great estate, and richly and well beseen. Then had he of them great pity; not for that he was not uncounselled in himself that lever he had they all had lost their souls than he his, and with that they fell adown all at once unto the earth...
(Malory, volume II, p. 320).

Malory shows what a knight's proper behaviour should look like: a knight should never let himself be tempted by a woman because every woman who tries to lure a man must necessarily be a woman-devil which is understood as a woman of loose manners.

Marion Wynne-Davies in her work on women in Arthurian literature sets this distribution of good versus evil women but at the same time she acknowledges that this distribution is not easily delimited. There are "good" women as well as "evil" women in Malory's work (Wynne-Davies, p. 66). The point is that they are not only good or evil but *substantially* good or evil. This makes the issue more problematic. Wynne-Davies' mistake lies in the fact that she still considers the characters in the literal way of reading. She is unable to disengage from the fairy tale understanding of the text and that is why the non-black-and-white characters do not fit in her interpretation.

What is meant by *substantially* good or *substantially* evil characters is that the women are either good or bad in the core but sometimes they might act right the contrary to their supposed behaviour. This brings about more real characters than we would expect in a fairy tale as the personalities of these characters become more complicated.

Wynne-Davies gives two model examples: Morgan La Fay, who is portrayed in *Le Morte Darthur* as an obvious negative character who plots against her brother and favours her lover Accolon, takes care of Arthur and carries him home on a magical ship at the end of the book. This suggests very strong family ties, which is one of the core elements of Malory's work. Wynne-Davies considers Morgan La Fay a negative character, yet in the end, Morgan helps bring her brother home to Avalon.

Let us compare these two passages:

"Now, sir," said Accolon, "I will tell you: this sword hath been in my keeping the most part of this twelvemonth; and Morgan le Fay, King Uriens' wife, sent it me yesterday by a dwarf, to this intent, that I should slay King Arthur, her brother. For ye shall understand King Arthur is the man in the world that she most hateth, because he is most of worship and of prowess of any of her blood. Also she loveth me out of measure as paramour, and I her again; and if she might bring about to slay Arthur by her crafts, she would slay her husband King Uriens lightly, and then had she me devised to be king in this land, and so to reign, and she to be my queen; but that is now done," said Accolon, "for I am sure of my death."

[...]

"O Sir Accolon," said King Arthur, "mercy shalt thou have, because I feel by thy words at this time thou knowest not my person; but I understand well by thy words that thou hast agreed to the death of my person, and therefore thou art a traitor; but I wit thee the less, for my sister Morgan le Fay by her false crafts made thee to agree and consent to her false lusts, but I shall be sore avenged upon her and I live, that all Christendom shall speak of it. God knoweth I have honoured her and worshipped her more than all my kin, and more have I trusted her than mine own wife and all my kin after."

(Malory, volume I, p. 134 - 135).

The second passage is as follows:

Then Sir Bedevere took the king upon his back, and so went with him to that water side. And when they were at the water side, even fast by the bank hove a little barge with many fair ladies in it, and among them all was a queen, and all they had black hoods, and all they wept and shrieked when they saw King Arthur.

"Now put me into the barge," said the king.

And so he did softly; and there received him three queens with great mourning; and so they set them down, and in one of their laps King Arthur laid his head.

And then the queen said, "Ah, dear brother, why have ye tarried so long from me? Alas, this wound on your head hath caught over-much cold."

And so then they rowed from the land, and Sir Bedevere beheld all those ladies go from him.

Then Sir Bedevere cried, "Ah, my lord Arthur, what shall become of me, now ye go from me and leave me here alone among mine enemies?"

"Comfort thyself," said the king, "and do as well as thou mayest, for in me is no trust for to trust in; for I will into the vale of Avilion to heal me of my grievous wound: and if thou hear never more of me, pray for my soul."

(Malory, volume II, p. 517).

These two excerpts capture the behaviour of Morgan La Fay. Between these two passages there is only one more which is of the same nature as the first quotation as it portrays Morgan La Fay as an obviously negative character:

"We marvel where Sir Launcelot is, for he came never here but once."
"Marvel not," said Sir Bors, "for this half year he hath been in prison with Queen Morgan le Fay, King Arthur's sister."
(Malory, volume II, p. 195).

Then it is definitely surprising to see the change in Morgan La Fay's behaviour as in the first two quotations she is portrayed as an evil woman who plots against the good endeavour of Arthur's knights or as a traitor who tries to bring about her brother's doom. In the second passage, however, she tries to bring Arthur home. This shift in Morgan La Fay's personality is not further explained in the text, it is just uttered. The readers do not learn Morgan La Fay's motive for the change in her behaviour and the reason is just one: she is never given voice in the text.

In the first quoted passage, there are two honest men talking about evil Morgan La Fay who is, in fact, not present. Accolon and Arthur both condemn Morgan's schemes which is not surprising as far as Arthur is concerned, but might be found startling in Accolon's case. He is the one who was the center of Morgan's plans: he is supposed to replace Arthur on the throne and thus benefit from the subversion most of them all. It is astonishing, then, that Accolon looks very passive when he confides in Arthur. He actually does not accept any responsibility for his deeds and he rejects them as evil. Furthermore, he praises and admires the king because "he is the most of worship and of prowess".

This passage shows two *good men* talking about an *evil woman*. This sets an important notion. Accolon, even though considered a traitor, is still treated with respect by Arthur. Morgan La Fay is, however, threatened with revenge. The quoted passage is not the only place in the book where Morgan is provided with negative attributes. She is often associated

with undesirable aspects: "false treason" or "false enchantment" (Malory, volume II, p. 136) which depict her character in the worst possible light.

Again, the evil Morgan's character is not that simple. Even though we accept that she is substantially bad, she is not *almighty* bad. When Morgan decides to kill her husband Uriens, she is caught by her son Sir Uwain:

"Ah, fiend, what wilt thou do? And thou were not my mother, with this sword I should smite off thy head. Ah," said Sir Uwain, "men saith that Merlin was begotten of a devil, but I may say an earthly devil bare me."

"O fair son, Uwain, have mercy upon me, I was tempted with a devil, wherefore I cry thee mercy; I will never more do so; and save my worship and discover me not."
(Malory, volume II, p. 138).

Morgan is in trouble and she begs her son not to reveal what she attempted to do. Now, she is given voice as she is in a humble position and she needs her son's (i. e. men's) help. This fact shows that even Morgan's sorcery might not be literal, but rather symbolical as well as most of the other fairy tale elements in the book. Morgan is not a real sorceress in a fairy tale sense of the word, but rather an active woman who wants to share in the public affairs of the country.

This all shows, then, Malory's attitude to the kind of women characters who are active, which entangles the attributes of dangerous and also evil. It is only because Morgan La Fay is not impassive that she might be supposed dangerous and thus she is not allowed to speak in the book. Compared to Morgan La Fay, the maiden of Astolat is given much more voice, even after her death. Malory thus sets an example of good, noble and generally appropriate woman's behaviour for which he finds much more space to be expressed.

The second excerpt (the episode on the barge) shows Morgan La Fay in a completely different light. The most intriguing fact in this passage is that Morgan is not given a name: she stays nameless. But why is she not acknowledged? The answer seems to be clear: the family ties are too strong to be really ever broken. And by calling each other "brother" and "sister" Arthur and Morgan La Fay even emphasize the notion of kinship which is one of the crucial

knightly qualities. It is no longer important that one of them has been supposed to be good and the other one evil: the family tie is the only thing that matters now.

On the other hand, Malory introduces another kind of women. These are the women who *substantially* present good but might possibly - at some point - perform an evil act. Wynne-Davies gives an example of Guenever who brings about Launcelot's ruin although she usually behaves in what Malory would term as a good and noble manner.

Malory's attitude to love in general and to Guenever's unfaithfulness is best expressed in these words of his:

But nowadays men cannot love seven night but they must have all their desires: that love may not endure by reason; for where they be soon accorded and hasty, heat soon it cooleth. Right so fareth love nowadays, soon hot soon cold: this is no stability. But the old love was not so; men and women could love together seven years, and no licours lusts were between them, and then was love, truth, and faithfulness: and lo, in likewise was used love in King Arthur's days.

Wherefore I liken love nowadays unto summer and winter; for like as the one is hot and the other cold, so fareth love nowadays; therefore all ye that be lovers call unto your remembrance the month of May, like as did Queen Guenever, for whom I make here a little mention, that while she lived she was a true lover, and therefore she had a good end.
(Malory, volume II, p. 426)

These words express Malory's opinion of love. The most intriguing part is the end of this speech where he approves of Queen Guenever. Surprisingly, he does not condemn her but quite the opposite: he praises her for her faithfulness to her lover, Sir Launcelot, and thus at the same time Malory ignores Guenever's unfaithfulness to King Arthur. Beverly Kennedy gives us the reason for Malory's attitude to Guenever's cheating: "Arthur never truly loved Guinevere" and he married her only in order to get the Round Table (Kennedy, p. 184). In this way, Kennedy makes Arthur responsible for the ruin of his realm and the notion of knighthood. She finds evidence of this in this passage: "... my heart was never so heavy as it is now, and much more I am sorrier for my good knights' loss than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have enow, but such a feloowship of good knights shall never be together in no company" (Malory, volume II, p. 473). Although this passage expresses Arthur's attitude towards the loss of both his knights and his Queen, it should be considered

in the general purpose of Malory's work: the stress on the notion of knighthood should not be neglected. Furthermore, Kennedy tends to claim that this attitude of Malory is only an "addition to his source" (Kennedy, p. 184). This is, however, not true. The same approach is traceable in Geoffrey of Monmouth's version: "... Arthur, burning with yet hotter wrath for the loss of so many hundred comrades-in-arms..." than for the loss of his Queen (*Histories*, p. 198). Kennedy's argument for Arthur's lack of love for Guinevere thus falls down.

Even though Malory tends to ignore the marriage of Arthur and Guenever, he nevertheless admires the great love between the Queen and Sir Launcelot and he pretends not to see how this love destroys her marriage with King Arthur and is the cause for the destruction of the whole notion of the Round Table together with its ideals and perfection. In this way, Malory shows that there is no ideal society which can be attributed as perfect.

What is significant is the fact that Guenever is not blamed by the author for the doom of the knights, especially Launcelot's. She is blamed, however, by William Henry Schofield in his work on Malory. He finds Guenever "altogether lacking in humility, patience or other Christian virtue" and "captious and unreasonable to her lover, as well as unfaithful to her husband" (Schofield, p. 104, 107). The only reason why Malory did not make his condemnation of Guenever clear in his work is, according to Schofield, the fact that "his material gave him little chance to make that clear" (Schofield, p. 110). This explanation seems to be, however, a little far fetched. It seems to be much more probable that the author favoured Guenever and her love for Launcelot, or at least, their love affair was not an issue for Malory. That is also why Malory does not blame Guenver but rather finds a culprit in Mordred and mentions his impure conception which came about between Arthur and his sister Margawse. The question is, however, whether Margawse and Arthur were aware of the impurity of Mordred's conception. Malory does not hesitate to give us the answer immediately:

And thither came to him King Lot's wife, of Orkney, in manner of a message, but she was sent thither to espy the court of King Arthur; and she came richly beseen [...] For she was a passing fair lady, wherefor the king cast great love unto her, and desired to lie by her. So they were agreed, and he begat upon her Mordred, and she was his sister, on the mother side, Igraine. So there she rested her a month, and at the last departed.

Then the king dreamed a marvellous dream whereof he was sore adread. But all this time King Arthur knew not that King Lot's wife was his sister. Thus was the dream of Arthur.
(Malory, volume I, p. 45).

Malory makes sure that the reader understands that Arthur did not know that Margawse was his sister. He even starts to talk about Arthur's dream and comes back to the suspicious conception only later. To Malory, the fact that Arthur did not have the slightest idea that he conceived a child with his sister seemed to be of so much importance that he even collides the logical structure of his narration when he interrupts the recounting about Arthur's dream and illogically puts a sentence relating to the conception inside the paragraph concerning Arthur's dream of serpents and griffins. Malory definitely wants to make sure that the readers know that Arthur was innocent as far as the conception is concerned and thus manages to lay the blame aside from Arthur.

However, the issue is different with Margawse. It is true that Malory does not blame her, at least not directly. But he does not say that she did not know that Arthur was her brother, either. Malory simply does not mention whether she knew or not. There might be two reasons for this silence:

Malory did not mention Margawse's name, which is at least surprising. We know, however, that Malory used this device very often in his narration. What is significant, then, is the fact that he used this namelessness with Margawse who is usually supposed to be a very important figure in Arthurian tales (her character is to be found already in Geoffrey's *Historia* as Mordred's and Gawain's mother, even though she remains a nameless character there). It was her, in fact, who brought about the ruin of the Round Table, although only indirectly. Malory probably does not see this significance of hers, or - and this might be the real reason for his silence - he does not want to give her too much importance. In fact, he sees the cause for

the destruction of the Round Table in Guenever's and Launcelot's love, rather than in this incestuous relationship between the king and King Lot's wife, of Orkney, as Margawse is titled.

The second reason for Malory's silence about Margawse's familiarity with these particular kin ties might be the author's general attitude towards women: Malory suggested in many places of his narration that some women were evil, although he never openly expressed that this might have been given by the fact that women possessed the power over men's sexual desires. This could be Margawse's example. Malory describes her as "a passing fair lady, wherefor the king cast great love unto her, and desired to lie by her" (Malory, volume I, p. 45). Once again, the readers are given explanation for Arthur's motivation and the king stays, as usual, blameless. This passage insinuates that Margawse, as a sexually powerful woman, had the ability to control men and even the king at some moment in his life. This reading enables Malory to turn the blame over from a man to a woman.

Whatever Malory's intentions were, in his interpretation of Arthurian themes, Margawse apparently stays in the camp of the many nameless women which he himself created. In later versions, however, Margawse is a fully developed character. At the same time, her role changes. She is not Mordred's mother, but his aunt, and in this respect, Margawse's character is depicted as even more evil and scheming. But this will be the subject of the next chapter.

The continuous shift in the person of Mordred's father in particular is of the highest significance. In Geoffrey's account of the Arthurian matter, Mordred is Arthur's nephew and Arthur himself has no children as is evident from the fact that he passes the crown on one of his kinsmen (*Histories*, p. 200). The establishment of Arthur's fatherhood was of great importance because it wiped out the allusions to Arthur's supposed homosexuality, or at least

impotence, which could be traced in Geoffrey's *Historia*. These allusions can, however, still be found in Bradley's twentieth-century account.

Malory's attitude toward finding the right culprit of the downfall of the Round Table is a little unclear. Zdeněk Stříbrný attributes the indecisiveness and ambiguity in Malory's work in general to the structuring of the book: was it outlined as a whole, or rather as a collection of several Arthurian stories? (Stříbrný, volume I, p. 89). Stříbrný finds the second alternative more probable as it offers the explanation of those many unclear places in the book. One of the places might also be the author's irresoluteness in terms of pointing at one person responsible for the downfall of the Round Table. As has been already noted, Malory suggests that the love between Guenever and Launcelot was the ground for the downfall of the Round Table but he does not blame the lovers. Quite on the contrary: he praises their love and he seems to be blind to the fact that Guenever is a married woman and furthermore the Queen. He condemns unfaithfulness between lovers but he does not judge Guenever's adultery. He only suggests that their love was a pretext for the ruin of the Round Table but he does not lay blame on them. If Malory blames someone in particular, it seems to be Mordred. Mordred must be a negative character because he does not obey the orders of the good king and he attempts to usurp both the kingdom and Queen Guenever when Arthur trusts him and puts him in charge of the country. Also, in Merlin's prophecy, Malory puts Mordred's name next to the issue of the upcoming destruction of the knighthood: "... the name of your son begotten of your sister that shall be the destruction of all this realm" (Malory, volume I, p. 55). Although connecting Mordred with the destruction of the realm, Malory still stays non-judgemental. And that is probably the most significant element of his interpretation of the Arthurian legend.

5. Victorian Era:

The Fight of Social Morality and Personal Happiness

After Malory's fifteenth century version of Arthurian stories, there was a sharp decline in the interest in this topic. Of course, there were authors occupying themselves with the Arthurian material but these were mostly unknown or less significant writers. Among the most important interpretations is probably Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* in which he recreates the story into an allegorical epic. It lacks any commonplaces with the real Arthurian legends, except for the names of Arthur, who becomes a prince in Spenser's interpretation, and Merlin.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, there are two famous authors dealing with Arthur: John Dryden and Henry Fielding. Their interpretations, however, do not represent the classical readings of the legends: e.g. Fielding's Arthur commits suicide - and that is just one example of the ridicule of the traditional legend.

In the 19th century, Alfred Tennyson (1809 – 1892) is one of the most popular English poets engaging in classical and mythological themes, including the Arthurian material. As Anne Thackeray Ritchie points out in her work on Alfred Tennyson, the Idylls "mean the history, not of one man or of one generation, but of a whole cycle, of the faith of a nation failing and falling away into darkness" (Ritchie, p. 40). Taking over Geoffrey of Monmouth's, Chrétien de Troyes' and Thomas Malory's interpretations of the life of King Arthur, Tennyson created a cycle of twelve poems introducing the Arthurian material in terms of Victorian values of the nineteenth century. Above all, the term "Victorian values" refers to sexual repression and strong social ethic. These values are displayed in the female characters' passivity, obedience, devotion to a man and submissiveness. The roles of men and women are strictly delimited as well as the positions of good women and evil women are defined. In

order to evaluate the position of women in *Idylls of the King* (1885), it is crucial to take a quick look at some of Tennyson's sources.

In Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain*, the strong women characters are missing. Even though there are some women present, they definitely lack any importance of their own: they have no properties, no positions, no names.. They are identified only through a family tie with a man. It seems as though they were there only because they are an indispensable part of the human life.

In Chrétien's romances, an important shift can be discerned: the women characters are there and they are also capable of influence on the run of the narrative. They are heard when they speak and some of them start to be sexually free and independent. Of course, this freedom is a little bit unsteady and wobbly. However, the shift is there.

In Malory's interpretation the readers encounter many different female characters: good, passive, sorcerous, independent and, of course, evil. Some of them might seem to have fully developed characters with personalities detached from men but this is not actually true. Rather than characters of their own, the women are only *symbols* of either good or evil.

Tennyson, writing in the atmosphere of his era, did in no way step aside from the ethical and moral concepts of Victorian values. By performing this, Tennyson moved backwards in the understanding of women's freedom, both the physical or sexual freedom and the freedom of the women's minds in comparison with the sources he used for inspiration. As Susan Basnett points out in her paper on Guinevere, the difference in portraying Guinevere in comparison with the previous versions lies in the shift from "a noble or ennobling love" to "a secret, guilty love" for Launcelot (Basnett, p. 129).

Tennyson mostly created female characters standing up to the criteria of an ideal Victorian woman: he praises the values of passivity, silence, obedience, submissiveness and devotion to a man. These women were portrayed as good (e. g. Enid in *Geraint and Enid*). On

the contrary, Tennyson also created women representing evil. These female characters were often sorcerous, scheming and independent women (e. g. Vivien in *Merlin and Vivien*, later Morgaine). Vivien is portrayed as an evil and pagan woman. In later versions of Arthurian material (in Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, in particular) Vivien becomes Morgaine and her paganism is depicted as a positive quality.

This division of the female characters in good and passive versus evil and independent might have some traces of resemblance with Malory's interpretation. This similarity is, however, only superficial. In Malory, these women characters stand only for some higher values, e. g. good or evil. In Tennyson's *Idylls*, the allegory of the notions of good and evil is there but in a much weaker form: it is only suggested but does not constitute the core of Tennyson's interpretation.

What has changed, then, in comparison with the previous treatment of Arthurian legends is the reality of the women's existence: they – as real characters (not just essences as in Malory's work) - are finally coming to be an integral part of the legends.

In her work on the female characters at the Round Table, Kristina Hildebrand talks about feminisation and sexualisation of evil (Hildebrandt, p. 65). Two comments should be added to this. First, Hildebrand does not make a distinction between the terms "feminisation" and "sexualisation". She puts them side by side without any further explanation. It is important, however, to elaborate on the terms a little. According to a dictionary, *to sexualize* means making sexual in character or quality. Applying this term to the *Idylls*, the evil performed there is of sexual character: Guinevere and Lancelot's secret love is of sexual nature, even though the sexuality is only hinted at; seductive Vivien trying to manipulate Merlin through the means of sex; or Ettarre and her bad treatment of Pelleas are all examples of sexualisation. The instigator of the evil done in these three examples is always a woman: Guinevere, Vivien or Ettarre. Still, this is no reason to confuse the two distinct terms. What

Hildebrand probably meant is that *women* could perform evil deeds by means of *sex*. This elaboration includes both the sexualisation and the feminisation. However, there were also men performing evil sexual deeds, e. g. Earl Doorm who tried to make Enid his lover with the use of violence. In this case, it is possible to talk about sexualisation but not feminisation (considering that we do not blame women for their sexual charms as has been traditionally done, e. g. in *Le Morte D'Arthur*). The conclusion is that we cannot blame Tennyson for sexualisation and feminisation of evil as there are also violent sexual acts committed exclusively by men.

My second comment on Hildebrand's usage of terminology concerns the term „feminisation“. It does not seem to be appropriate, or, more precisely, unbiased. It is obvious that there are women in the *Idylls* who are representatives of evil. On the other hand, however, it should be observed that there are also men in the *idylls* who are termed as traitors or sinners – and these are definitely issues that can be labelled evil as well as women's sexual manipulation. At the same time, there are women characters who represent the ideal Victorian female, e. g. Enid.

To talk about sexualisation and feminisation of evil at the same time in Tennyson's *Idylls* is a mere simplification. Of course, we can find examples of both in one (Vivien). But we can also find examples of only sexualisation of evil without its feminisation (Earl Doorm). It is true that there are no examples of feminisation of evil without its sexualisation – and this is, of course, the evidence of the Tennyson's biased opinion on men and women and the relationships between them which Hildebrandt was pointing to.

Another significant shift from the medieval Arthurian tradition to the modern recreations is represented by the usage of names with the female characters. The importance of names has changed significantly. The women in the book are no longer nameless creatures,

but rather on the contrary: most of them are given names. There are still some, however, that stay nameless. These are women of no importance to the narrative:

"But who first saw the holy thing to-day? "
"A woman, " answer'd Percivale, "a nun..."
(*The Holy Grail*, p. 281).

This woman, a nun, is not given a name as there is no further mention of her. All women with some position in the narrative, however, are given names. Some characters, furthermore, gain more names in later versions, e. g. Vivien alias Morgaine. There are two women with these names in Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* and they are different characters. In Tennyson's *Idylls*, however, there is just one woman named Vivien who is actually Morgaine according to the Arthurian tradition.

The importance of names can be deduced from the dialogue between King Arthur and a girl who comes to his court. Before asking about anything else, Arthur asks her her name (*Gareth and Lynette*, p. 50).

In the story of *Pelleas and Ettarre*, Ettarre is a great lady of her property. The name is pointed out as well:

Scorning him [Pelleas]; for the lady was Ettarre,
And she was a great lady in her land
(*Pelleas and Ettarre*, p. 319).

A name can also be an indispensable part of a character:

Isolt, the daughter of the King? "Isolt
Of the white hands" they call'd her: the sweet name
Allured him first and then the maid herself
(*The Last Tournament*, p. 356).

When Arthur dies, three Queens are with him in the barge:

Then murmur'd Arthur, "Place me in the barge, "
So to the barge they came. There those three Queens
Put forth their hands, and took the King and wept.
But she, that rose the tallest of them all
And fairest, laid his head upon her lap,
And loosed the shatter'd casque, and chafed his hands,
And call'd him by his name, complaining loud,
And dropping bitter tears against a brow
Striped with dark blood....
(*The Passing of Arthur*, p. 414)

These three Queens are nameless in all the previous texts about Arthur's death. In Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, Arthur's sister Morgaine is shown on the barge taking the king to Avalon. The barge in the *Idylls* takes him to Avilion as well. One of the Queens might truly be Arthur's sister as her grief is so real and serious. It is definitely someone in a close relation to Arthur. This is the only case in the book when a somewhat important figure is given no name. Thus the three Queens – and the one of them in particular – remain nameless.

The reasons for not giving names to the unknown nun and to these three queens are much different from the reasons for not naming women in previous works. While in the preceding centuries the women characters in Arthurian material were not fully developed, in the nineteenth century when the *Idylls* were written these characters took on a crucial position in the legend. They became an active motivating force in the development of the events. They are finally capable of influencing these events. However, these women are not praised for this. Rather on the contrary: they are found scheming and evil.

The portrayal of the community of women in comparison to the portrayal of the community of men seems disconcerting. While women – as evil creatures – never stick together, men – as the representatives of goodness – are almost always supportive of each other. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. Arthur betrayed by Modred, or Pelleas betrayed by Gawain are the two most distinct examples. These traitors are always strongly criticised and doomed. In the end, they always get their punishment.

It is different with the women traitors. There is some kind of presupposition that women are like that: there is always the chance that they won't carry out their promises:

"These be the ways of ladies," Pelleas thought when Ettarre rejected his love after he had fought for her and officially won her in a tournament (*Pelleas and Ettarre*, p. 323).

We can find many examples of the differences in the conduct of the community of men and the community of women, which is the evidence of the author's intended motif. For example, in *Pelleas and Ettarre*, we can find examples of both these opposite manners.

Palleas is in love with Ettarre but

His tenderness of manner, and chaste awe,
His broken utterances and bashfulness,
Were all a burthen to her, and in her heart
She mutter'd, "I have lighted on a fool,
Raw, yet so stale! " [...]
(*Pelleas and Ettarre*, p. 319)

He is devoted to her but she rejects him. And Pelleas decides to win her in a tournament. Ettarre does not think so highly of him as to admit that he might win and she gives him permission to fight for her:

"O the strong hand, " she said,
"See! Look at mine! But wilt thou fight for me,
And win me this fine circlet, Pelleas,
That I may love thee? "

Then his helpless heart
Leapt, and he cried, "Ay! wilt thou if I win? "
"Ay, that will I, " she answer'd, and she laugh'd
[...]
(*Pelleas and Ettarre*, p. 320)

Ettarre is portrayed as an evil woman. She is independent, she lives with no need for a union with a man, a guardian. She is the "lady in her land" (*Pelleas and Ettarre*, p. 319). Together with other ladies, she laughs at Pelleas for his daring attempt to achieve her. A woman laughs at a man. Furthermore, her wrongdoing is stressed out by her unwillingness to keep her promise.

Arthur helps Pelleas win Ettarre: he withholds older and more experienced knights from the tournament and declares "The Tournament of Youth". By doing this, Pelleas is able to win the tournament together with the desired lady. This is definitely an example of the community of knights sticking together and helping one another.

Later, Ettarre meets Guinevere and this conversation takes place:

[...]
Said Guinevere, "We marvel at thee much,
O damsel, wearing this unsunny face
To him who won thee glory! " And she said,
"Had ye not held your Lancelot in your bower,
My Queen, he had not won. " Whereat the Queen,
As one whose foot is bitten by an ant,
Glanced down upon her, turn'd and went her way.
(*Pelleas and Ettarre*, p. 322)

Guinevere and Ettarre are clearly no friends at all. We may have some doubts about the sincerity of Guinevere's speech to Ettarre but there is no shadow of uncertainty of the sarcasm in Ettarre's answer. She openly eggs on Guinevere because of her supposedly secret love for Lancelot.

In the same idyll, however, Pelleas is betrayed by Gawain who wins Ettarre's love by claiming he has killed Pelleas. Pelleas has a chance to kill them both when sleeping but he is too noble to do that:

"What! Slay a sleeping knight? The King hath bound
And sworn me to this brotherhood;" again,
"Alas that ever a knight should be so false. "
(*Pelleas and Ettarre*, p. 333)

Pelleas does not kill the two treacherous lovers as he is a knight and he is aware of the knightly qualities he should meet.

Later, Pelleas realises that he confused love with lust. His realization is an explosion of emotions:

I, the poor Pelleas whom she call'd her fool?
Fool, beast – he, she, or I? myself most fool;
Beast too, as lacking human wit – disgraced,
Dishonour'd all for trial of true love –
Love? – we be all alike: only the King
Hath made us fools and liars. O noble vows!
O great and sane and simple race of brutes
That own no lust because they have no law!
I loathe her, as I loved her to my shame.
I never loved her, I but lusted for her –
(*Pelleas and Ettarre*, p. 334)

Pelleas feels used by Gawain who won Ettarre's love thanks to his treacherous deed. Ettarre is thankful to Gawain and offers him her love. Pelleas realises that this woman does

not deserve his love and so he withdraws his love. Now he can see that his love was only a lust for this beautiful woman. Her beauty, in fact, made him fall in love with her:

Pelleas gazing thought,
"Is Guinevere herself so beautiful? "
For large her violet eyes look'd, and her bloom
A rosy dawn kindled in stainless heavens,
And round her limbs, mature in womanhood;
And slender was her hand and small her shape;
(*Pelleas and Ettarre*, p. 317 – 318)

It was her beauty, again, that caused Gawain to have a sexual relationship with Ettarre and thus betray Pelleas. Tennyson tries to show that it is a woman who makes a man fall. Once more we are coming back to the feminisation and sexualisation of evil. Ettarre is a woman and she is a beautiful woman – therefore she has a certain amount of power over men. Accepting this notion, Ettarre must be evil.

Ettarre's character is a little bit more psychologically depicted. When Pelleas resigns and comes to say goodbye, suddenly and unexpectedly, Ettarre comes to regret the nature of their mutual relationship for a second:

"Why have I push'd him from me? This man loves,
If love there be: yet him I loved not. Why?
I deem'd him fool? Yea, so? Or that in him
A something – was it nobler than myself? –
Seem'd my reproach? He is not of my kind.
He could not love me, did he know me well.
Nay, let him go – and quickly. "
(*Pelleas and Ettarre*, p. 327)

Ettarre has her doubts but as an independent woman she rejects these doubts and decides to pursue her former decision: she banishes Pelleas and has sexual intercourse with Gawain. This sexual relationship is, of course, only hinted at and any detailed description of physical love in general is missing unlike in Chrétien de Troyes' version:

Then was he ware of three pavilions rear'd
Above the bushes, gilden-peakt: in one,
Red after revel, droned her lurdane knights
Slumbering, and their three squires across their feet:
In one, their malice on the placid lip
Froz'n by sweet sleep, four of her damsels lay:
And in the third, the circlet of the jousts
Bound on her brow, were Gawain and Ettarre.

(Pelleas and Ettarre, p. 332)

This is the only way that the readers get to understand that Gawain actually betrayed Pelleas and stole his lover.

The love of Guinevere and Lancelot is described in a similarly brief way. The depiction of their love is missing. Their sexual intercourse is only hinted at but neither their meetings, nor their physical involvement is depicted in detail as it was the case with Chrétien's version, for example. The last night of Lancelot and Guinevere's love when the scheming and treacherous Modred was waiting for the lovers' mistake to demonstrate their guilt is described in these words:

And then they were agreed upon a night
(When the good King should not be there) to meet
And part for ever. Vivien, lurking, heard.
She told Sir Modred. Passion-pale they met
And greeted. Hands in hands, and eye to eye,
Low on the border of her couch they sat
Stammering and staring. It was their last hour,
A madness of farewells. And Modred brought
His creatures to the basement of the tower
For testimony; [...]
(Guinevere, p. 375)

This depiction of Lancelot and Guinevere's sexual intercourse is definitely lacking something: sex. In comparison with Chrétien's version, this extract is lacking the sexual details but not the vividness. Both the texts are vivid enough, although in different ways. Chrétien describes the lovers' last night as follows:

First he finds Kay asleep in his bed, then he comes to the bed of the Queen, whom he adores and before whom he kneels, holding her more dear than the relic of any saint. And the Queen extends her arms to him and, embracing him, presses him tightly against her bosom, drawing him into the bed beside her and showing him every possible satisfaction. [...] Now Lancelot possesses all he wants, when the Queen voluntarily seeks his company and love, and when he holds her in his arms, and she holds him in hers. Their sport is so agreeable and sweet, as they kiss and fondle each other, that in truth such a marvellous joy comes over them as was never heard or known. But their joy will not be revealed by me, for in a story it has no place. Yet, the most choice and delightful satisfaction was precisely that of which our story must not speak. That night Lancelot's joy and pleasure were very great.
(Lancelot, p. 329)

In this excerpt, the author refuses to speak about the sexual pleasures of the couple (and Lancelot, in particular) but he feels no constraint to tell his readers enough about the couple's *happiness* and *satisfaction*. In his description of the last night he goes much farther than Tennyson. The difference is, of course, given by the different views of sex and sexual relationships by the two eras: the age of courtly love was much more open to the explicit expressions of physical love than the age of Victorian values with its rejection of every physical manifestation, including sexual intercourse. That is why Tennyson's text only hints at Guinevere and Lancelot's coitus on their last night. It does not mean, though, that his poem loses its vividness. In his work on Victorian fantasy, Stephen Prickett deals with Tennyson's (and Victorian in general) portrayal of sexuality. In Prickett's words, the sexuality of the Victorian poets suggests "unnamed vice" and "sexual unwholesomeness" (Prickett, p. 97). Tennyson's poetry, in particular, has "a sexuality that is dreamy, languid, remote, and stylized" (Prickett, p. 97). In any case, Tennyson chooses different kinds of depiction of the scenes of sexual character (in comparison with Chrétien, for example) but the narrative itself is in no way deteriorated by this. Tennyson's *Idylls* is the first modern artistic text fully devoted to the topic of the Round Table. The poems are full of foreshadowing of doom and death, of evil, sin, disloyalty and betrayal, but also repentance and forgiveness. All these elements contributed to the view of the poem as "the greatest narrative-poem since "Paradise Lost" (Stedman, p. 175).

What might be an interesting point for discussion (and it also later became an apple of discord) is the way Tennyson depicted Guinevere. Most essayists agree on Guinevere's character as being more real than that of Arthur (e. g. Tillotson, p. 295- 296). Some essayists even find the top of humanity in Tennyson's portrayal of the queen: "we see a dramatic change in Guinevere, as she is presented as more human, even though she still represents the ideal and thus the cult of true womanhood in some sense. In the end, Tennyson allows Arthur

to forgive her. We see a humanity, a depth of personality in Tennyson's Guinevere that Malory and the Gawain-Poet was not able to accomplish" (Lombardi). This view is, however, a little simplistic: Gawain-Poet's Guinevere was in no way the poet's focus nor was she positioned in the center of the events of Malory's version. Furthermore, Tennyson's condemnation of Guinevere's adultery cannot be seriously considered *human* as Lombardi would like her readers to believe.

According to *The Arthurian Handbook*, Tennyson's text was enormously influential and this influence entails both the positive and negative reactions. There were many authors who tried to imitate Tennyson's poetry, e.g. George du Maurier, Edward Bulwer-Lytton or Thomas Westwood. The most significant of the writers influenced by the *Idylls of the King* was, however, a poet who stood in opposition to Tennyson's poetry: William Morris. In his most important poem on Arthurian subject, "The Defence of Guinevere", Morris leaves the Queen to speak for herself and defend herself. It is a short poem in a form of a monologue of the Queen Guenevere, who defends herself before Sir Gauwaine, who accuses her of wrongdoings. Guenevere is depicted as a proud woman who stresses her right for personal freedom. The repetition when Guenevere swears that she is telling the truth and accuses Gauwaine of telling lies goes like this:

"Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,
Whatever may have happened through these years,
God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie. "
(*The Defence of Guenvere*, p. 2)

Her defence is, surprisingly, not a denial of her faults as *The Arthurian Handbook* points out (*The Arthurian Handbook*, p. 163) and this seems to be the crucial motif of the poem: Guenevere's illegitimate love for Launcelot is indisputable but her *guilt* for it is missing. She admits her love for Launcelot but she does not express any regrets but rather on the contrary: she talks about happiness.

"In that garden fair
"Came Launcelot walking; this is true, the kiss
Wherewith we kissed in meeting that spring day,

I scarce dare talk of the remember'd bliss"
(*The Defence of Guenevere*, p. 5)

Later, Guenevere describes the night when she and Launcelot were caught in her bedroom:

"In my quiet room that night, and we were gay;
Till sudden I rose up, weak, pale, and sick,
Because a bawling broke our dream up, yea

"I looked at Launcelot's face and could not speak,
For he looked helpless too, for a little while;
Then I remember how I tried to shriek..."
(*The Defence of Guenevere*, p. 9)

Guenevere mentions gaiety (and we can only guess what kind of gaiety she has in her mind) and she blames the traitors, including Mellyagraunce, for breaking up their dream. She does not feel guilty but she finds the men who entered her bedroom guilty of ruin of her personal happiness.

Morrison's short poem on Guenevere is full of allusions to the importance of an individual's life. Furthermore, it is always clear that the notion of individual love is valued more than social morality. The two dichotomies, love versus morality, and individual versus social, reflect the two opposing major issues pursued in the poetry of the two authors, Tennyson and Morris.

In his poem on the defence of Guenevere, Morris rejects Tennyson's tendentious interpretation and its Victorian reading of this old story. Morris lets Guenevere defend her love for Launcelot and in that way defend her own personal happiness. The author gives out his opinion of personal life being of much greater importance than the moral values supported by Tennyson.

Morris' poem ends up in an optimistic way when Launcelot comes to support Guenevere as a knight "at good need":

At last hear something really; joyfully
Her cheek grew crimson, as the headlong speed
Of the roan charger drew all men to see,
The knight who came was Launcelot at good need.
(*The Defence of Guenevere*, p. 10)

Morris wrote more than one poem on the Arthurian subject. The most famous one is "The Defence of Guenevere" because this was the key poem in his answer to Tennyson's moral views of life. In other poems, such as "King Arthur's Tomb", Morris pursues happiness of an individual and personal life as well. In this view, he seems to be the first writer dealing with Arthurian material who was not influenced by the morals of his time in his depiction of a female character. Although it is the first time Guenevere is given so much space to speak for herself before the arrival of the feminist literature of the twentieth century, Morris does not tend to favour women. In "King Arthur's Tomb", he also gives voice to Launcelot to speak about his love. It is a man, a human being in general – and not a woman exclusively - that stands in the centre of his poetry as an opposition to any social order of any era. The notion of humanity as the only tendentious force makes Morris' version of Arthurian material the most fair and unbiased one.

6. The World of Dichotomies

in *The Mists of Avalon*

Already in the first paragraph of the Prologue to Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, it is quite clear that this twentieth-century-novel is a very religious-centred one: the controversy of Christianity and paganism is introduced here along with their symbols of Mary, the Lady of Nazareth, and Glastonbury versus the Great Goddess and the Holy Isle of Avalon. Bradley acknowledges in the Prologue that the other world, the world of Avalon with its magic powers, has often been considered "the property of Satan, and the doorway to Hell, if not Hell itself" (Bradley, p. IX). This is, straightforwardly enough, an allusion to those numerous treatments of Arthurian motifs in which women, i. e. Morgaine or Vivien, were portrayed as powerful and influential and therefore scheming and evil. In contrast to these independent female "wise-women" characters as they have been traditionally depicted, Bradley places the traditional Christian-valued female characters and she calls them "slave-nuns". In this way, the terminology itself helps the author promote the feminist issues she was trying to introduce as "the earliest feminist attempt to reinterpret the existing narratives" as Marion Wynne-Davies points out in her book *Women and Arthurian Literature* (Wynne-Davies, p. 176).

However, the argument over religion and its validity is only one of the several dichotomies presented in this book, even though all these dichotomies are strongly intertwined with religious questions. Approaching the text by means of dichotomies is probably one of the most transparent ways of reading this novel as it is a very extensive book with a vast number of various episodes and digressions to these episodes. Apart from the religious dichotomy of Christianity versus paganism with all their symbols and motifs, there are also dichotomies of friendship and enmity, sensual and magical world, freedom and

slavery, or love and duty, all of which are introduced already in the Prologue. At the same time, it is proposed that the two elements of each of these dichotomies are always complementary and cannot exist without each other, which is, of course, one of the crucial attributes of a dichotomy.

Although strongly dependent on each other, the dichotomy elements are not overlapping.: Morgaine and her relationship to Arthur is a good example. First comes the dichotomy of friendship and enmity: their greatest friendship was transformed into the darkest enmity. Then there is the dichotomy of the sensual and magical world in which Morgaine represents the world of magic while Arthur is the representative of the world of senses – but they are always parts of the two as a whole, which is evident from the final scene in which Arthur leaves on a barge to the world of magic and Morgaine must live in the sensuous world in order to apply her magic powers. Then there is the dichotomy of freedom and slavery: the freedom of pagan women is stressed out in the opposition to the slavery of Christian women: " [...] her mother had borne those children in freedom, as a Tribeswoman should, to such fathers as she chose, not as a slave to some Roman whose customs gave him power over women and children" (Bradley, p. 8). It is quite obvious that Bradley's attitude to all the dichotomies, questions and motifs in her book is strongly subordinate to the matter of religion. The last dichotomy is the one of love and duty. Morgaine as Arthur's sister is the speaker of love, while as a "wise-woman", she is the speaker of duty: she loves Arthur as her brother, but fights him as the King and a representative of the Christian religion. These are contrary forces, again, and Morgaine deals with them in terms of friendship and enmity.

Although being strongly tendentious in terms of religion and male - female relationship, *The Mists of Avalon* also allow for a different reading of the legend: "For all the Gods are one God, " says the Lady of the Lake to Morgaine and thus allows for the agreement of the two religions (Bradley, p. X). It is only the question of truth that makes the difference

in the readings. And "truth has many faces". Morgaine does not claim that her interpretation is the true one, she just says that it is *her* interpretation, *her* truth (Bradley, p. XI). She admits, however, that the real truth might lie somewhere between the Christianity and paganism: "Perhaps between the two, some glimmering of the truth may be seen" (Bradley, p. X).

The greatest dichotomy of all of those mentioned above is that of Christianity representing the male dominated society versus paganism representing the female power over the world. Bradley, as a feminist writer, pursues the second element of the dichotomy: paganism with its female supremacy. Although strongly supported, it is not the female supremacy in static situation that is described, but rather the female supremacy in a battle for its domination. It is not a state, but rather a process. It is a constant fight for being in charge. In the end, the male dominated Christianity wins. According to Wynne-Davies, even the defeat of the world of powerful females has its meaning and its valid place in the book:

If Bradley, through the Arthurian myth, can affirm that women were once autonomous subjects, then women's liberation becomes an inalienable right, an inevitable resurrection of an essential aspect of gender identity, which had at some point become unjustly repressed.
(Wynne-Davies, p. 181)

The defeat of the world of Avalon is inevitable but Bradley is still able to use it in favour of women: she shows that the world used to be female-dominated and it should be – or maybe even is – returning to its former state.

The importance of women characters is quite obvious already in the opening chapters of the novel: the first chapter is started by the introduction of a female character, which was rather impossible in the previous centuries. Up to Morris' poem on the defence of Guenevere, there had been no writer discussed in this paper who would have begun his account of the story from the female perspective or with a female as a starting point. There had always been a male character – a father, a husband, the king – who would have served as the starting point through which other characters, including the female ones, would have been introduced. It is also true, however, that *The Mists of Avalon* is the first and the only novel taken into

consideration in this paper. All the other literary works of art were nothing of that kind. They were mostly knightly tales of not much of internal cohesive structure as in Malory's account. They were history accounts of Britain without much of artistic device as in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. They were individual epic poems on various and different knights and issues lacking any integrity as in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. They were courtly romances with completely new characters unknown before, e. g. Lancelot, as in Chrétien de Troyes' *Arthurian Romances*. They were short poems on particular and specific topics of Arthurian legends as Morris' "The Defence of Guenevere", which, of course, lacked any wholeness of the narrative as well.

The novel is told exclusively from female perspective: it is started by Igraine's point of view and the first four characters introduced are women: Igraine, Morgause, Morgaine and Vivien. In general, the novel is strongly female-centred, with the male characters functioning as only supportive elements. It is no longer the fights and battles that are important: the focus shifts on women and the lives of women. It is possible to find many various female characters: they are not black-and-white as they used to be in the previous works on Arthurian topics, e. g. in Malory who was, of course, more concerned with the knightly values and men in general than women characters.

The most interesting and the crucial character in respect to the topic of this paper is Gwenhwyfar (or Guinevere), Arthur's wife, the Queen. Bradley's portrayal of Gwenhwyfar is a much more complicated one than in the previous versions in which she was either ignored, or blamed for the ruin of the Round Table. In Bradley's account, Gwenhwyfar is definitely not damned for cheating on her husband, but still, she is blamed. Her blame, however, is related not to her chastity, but rather to her weakness. Gwenhwyfar is depicted as an obviously weak female character who is looking for protection in the Christian religion. The drawback of this is that Christianity is a male-dominated religion which tries to suppress

women and womanhood in general and that is why Gwenhwyfar is treated with neither dignity, nor support. On the contrary, Gwenhwyfar is strongly criticised by the Church for her adulterous relationship with Lancelot. Her right for freedom is suppressed by means of the strict Christian rules. As a weak character, Gwenhwyfar allows the Church to form her to the desired shape and she drops both her husband and her lover in the end, and ends up in a Christian convent. She becomes what Morgaine already refers to in the Prologue of the book – a "slave-nun".

It is not simple, however, with the freedom of the pagan women, either. For example, Igraine, who was reared in the ways of the old religion, becomes a victim of this religion. As a woman, she has to serve the Great Goddess and do as Merlin and Viviane urge her. At the age of fifteen, she is married to Gorlois. Her feelings about him are contradictory:

"Do you love Gorlois, Igraine?"

Igraine stared at the floor. "That has nothing to do with it. It is a matter of honor. He was kind to me –"

(Bradley, p. 17)

A few pages later, Igraine becomes sure about her feelings for Gorlois: "... she knew, now, that she hated him, which she had never before allowed herself to know –" (Bradley, p. 71). Igraine's life ends up at a side of a man whom she loves, Uther Pendragon, and it might be supposed that she was rewarded for her previous suffering. But what was the cause of the suffering? Was it not Viviane who had married her to Gorlois, a man she did not love? Igraine, even though a pupil of the old religion, did not have much more freedom than a Christian woman. She had to obey the teaching of the Great Goddess in the same way as Gwenhwyfar had to obey the teaching of the Christian religion. Both these women were being manipulated with. And Morgaine's argument against the "slave-nuns" of Christian religion thus breaks down.

Considering this, the religion is only a supportive or discouraging force. What is really important and what really matters is the strength of one's (female's) personality. When the

woman is strong, she is capable of surviving in every religion, even though non-supportive of women. Morgaine is an example of such a kind of woman. Although reared in the old religion, she is strong enough to live in the Christian world which operates with terms as *sin*, *shame* and *punishment*, terms based on a completely different system of values than the old religion of Avalon. There are many clashes of these two worlds, e. g. Igraine versus the priest. When Morgaine asks her mother, Igraine, for a brother, the priest says: "Morgaine, your mother did not have a son because your father was angry with her, and God withheld a son to punish her for her sinful will" (Bradley, p. 79). Morgaine opposes the priest who blames her mother of wrongdoing and the priest, again, has a punishment on his mind: "That child should be beaten. Give her to me and I will punish her for her disrespect! " (Bradley, p. 79). After this argument with the priest, Igraine decides not to let the Christians bring up her child: "She would not have a daughter brought up to feel shame at her own womanhood" (Bradley, p. 79).

Morgaine is the main protagonist of the book. She had always been depicted – if she was mentioned at all - as a sorceress and a scheming woman. But only the twentieth century brought her portrayal as a complex character. Morgaine is not an exclusively positive character, although she represents the dying world of the Great Goddess which is the favoured one in the book. She is very human and real in her erroneousness and decisions making.

As the representative of the old religion, Morgaine possesses some supernatural qualities, one among them is the ability of Sight – she can see things not revealed to other human beings, especially to the Christians. Morgaine's strength lies in her continuous fight against the orthodox Christians who claim only one God and deny the existence of the Great Goddess. Even though she leaves in the end, Morgaine does not resign. She realizes that her task has been completed: the Great Goddess has transformed into Virgin Mary and will guide mankind throughout the future centuries. It is the democracy of the old religion which allows for such a shift. Democracy is one of its most significant features: the old religion is capable

of existence alongside of the new religion, Christianity. It is capable of tolerating Christianity. It admits that there might be two or more Gods. Christianity, on the contrary, is limited by its restricted views: it allows for the existence of only one and true God and must get rid of all other teachings. It is its demagoguery that is the source of the religious strength: it appeals to the fears of the people and in this way gains their confidence. Bradley shows this fear on several levels:

First, it is the men's fear of the identity of their children's father:

"But my mother was of the old blood," Igraine said, "and Viviane, too. I think her father must have been one of the fairy folk."
Gorlois shivered and said, "And you don't even know who fathered her – one thing that the Romans did well was to make an end of those folk"
(Bradley, p. 85).

Gorlois is physically suffering, he "shivered", when hinting at the possibility of uncertainty of the identity of a child's father. For him, as a man, it is unacceptable that a woman could make her own choice as far as the father of her children is concerned. Christianity eliminated such a threatening possibility (from men's point of view) and thus established the dominance of men over their wives.

Second, it is the men's fear of women's (sexual) powers over them. It is easier to blame women for having attractive physical appearance than blaming themselves for lewdness: "Igraine saw that Gorlois followed the girl with his eyes. She thought, appalled, Morgause is only fourteen, then remembered in dismay that she herself had been but a year older when she was given to Gorlois as his bride" (Bradley, p. 73). Both Igraine and Morgause were at one point in their lives beautiful young girls and therefore it was only natural for Gorlois to take interest in them. Despite his marriage with Igraine, Gorlois is physically attracted to her younger sister.

Third, it is the fear of the unknown, of magic, or sorcery. When Gorlois beat Igraine for her lack of obedience and submissiveness, he was unable to have a sexual intercourse with her. He blamed her for sorcery: "Have you put some spell upon my manhood, you accursed

bitch? " (Bradley, p. 72). Although Igraine was not aware of any intention of hers, "she knew, with the sure intuition of the priestess-trained, that he would never be potent with her again" (Bradley, p. 72).

Morgaine's opposite, and later even adversary, is Gwenhwyfar. Bradley strongly stresses the contrasts between these two women: they become representatives of the two religions together with other values: activity versus passivity, strength versus weakness, democracy versus intolerance or dogmatism, responsibility versus inability to accept responsibility, etc.

Kristina Hildebrand in her work *The Female Reader at the Round Table* mentions some of these attributes in order to show why Gwenhwyfar was condemned by the readers. Apart from activity, passivity, intolerance, and responsibility, Hildebrandt also works with the terms xenophobia, racism, fanaticism, or ideology. All these terms refer to the contemporary world rather than to the Arthurian matter. By dealing with these contemporary issues, Bradley managed to update the old legends and in this way draw attention of the contemporary readers.

The whole book is permeated by the atmosphere of futility of human acting. Fate plays an important role. Before Igraine makes her decision on leaving (not physically but psychologically, at least) Gorlois, she is told by Viviane: "You will bear no son to Gorlois, Igraine" (Bradley, p. 17). Igraine knows that Gorlois desires a son and is decided to do her best to satisfy this desire of her husband. But even before she could even try for another child, she is told that this is futile because everything had already been planned and decided on. It is not the question of whether she wants it or not: someone else has already made the decision for her. This time, it is not a man who has an overwhelming power over women as it used to be in the earlier versions, but rather the *fate*: it is something that makes decisions on one's life

and that cannot be changed. Even though Igraine refuses to betray her husband, she cannot escape her fate and in the end, she actually fulfills it.

The role of fate is, however, not unconscious as might seem from the above example. It is rather on the contrary: the importance of fate is stressed very frequently. When Igraine refuses to meet Vivian's and Merlin's wish to get pregnant with Uther Pendragon and in that way betray her husband, Igraine's fourteen-year-old sister, Morgause is eager enough to perform this act. Merlin refuses her offer by telling her: "No man or woman can live another's fate" (Bradley, p. 18). Merlin and Vivian hint at their knowledge of the possibilities the future might bring and that their task is to secure the realization of the best alternative. The question that arises is as follows: best for whom? It is only through their intrigues and plans that the future sequence of events takes place.

In general, however, Merlin and Vivian are portrayed as positive characters. The only reason for them to play with the future is that they are the representatives of the fate. Coming to this, neither Merlin, nor Vivian can be considered evil characters. They just fulfill their duty.

Bradley's novel is, however, a well-elaborated and coherent narrative, and it is above all this aspect that makes the difference in comparison with all the previous works. Its integrity and completeness with many well-thought out dichotomies, structural wholeness and a certain tendency makes it completely different from everything that has been discussed so far.

Bradley's tendentious feminist interpretation leads into "somewhat simplistic readings of the Arthurian characters and symbols" because it modifies its characters in the desired way (Wynne-Davies, p. 176). As Morgaine says in her monologue in the Prologue, the truth is somewhere between. Bradley uses Morgaine in order to express her attitude and concede to the fact that her feminist reading of the Arthurian legend might not be the only true or

acceptable one. The truth, therefore, may lie somewhere between the feminist novel, those patriarchal readings of the chronicles, the courtly romances and the knightly tales of the previous nine centuries. The truth of this twentieth century feminist novel might not be so true, after all.

8. Conclusion

It is quite obvious that every historical epoch has its specific issues and concerns. This statement is also valid in connection to Arthurian literature. The concerns of different societies are mirrored in the changing attitudes toward the position of women in the Arthurian legend, Guinevere's adulterous relationship with Launcelot being the best demonstrable example. Throughout the centuries, the Arthurian women gain and lose sexual and magic powers, which also entails the loss of influence over politics and men. It is necessary to look for the cause of this shifting importance of women in the era of the emergence of the particular work of art.

For example, for Malory, Guinevere's relationship with Launcelot was only a secondary event, leading to the destruction of the Round Table. He did not condemn Guinevere, nor Launcelot. He did not praise or support them, either. He simply did not express his feelings and opinions because Guinevere's private affair with Launcelet was not his main concern. Malory lived in the era of The Wars of Roses and battles and fights represented his major field of interest. His indifference towards Guinevere's private life exemplifies Malory's general attitude towards women. In *Le Morte Darthur*, women are only portrayed as secondary characters who are important only as far as men's sins are concerned. Women are considered seducers and therefore capable of endangering the knights' chastity.

A similar view of Guinevere and of women in general as Malory's was already advocated by Geoffrey of Monmouth. In his account of the Arthurian legends, women have no importance. There is simply no place for them in his chronicle. The only woman who is taken into account more thoroughly is Guinevere. Again, she is not a significant figure in her own right (not even speaking of a *character* as she does not have any), but rather only an instrument which was used in order to subvert the power and dignity of the Round Table.

Guinevere remains undervalued. Geoffrey does not make any judgements of her because she is of no importance for him. She is only a passive and insignificant female figure. This does not mean, however, that the author does not find a culprit. He blames Mordred for his treacherous taking over of the Queen. Guinevere's opinion – whether she did this of her own free will or under pressure – is never mentioned because it has no significance for the further development of the story. Geoffrey's aim is to show and highlight the dignity of England's past.

It was only Tennyson's working of the Arthurian literature that brought about an important change: women became an integral part of the world of knighthood and chivalry. Tennyson attributes women with power and influence over men and the events that were going on. However, he only does this by means of women's negative portrayal. Again, Guinevere is the best representative of the author's point of view on women.

Tennyson, living in the Victorian era with its rigorous attitude towards anything physical, expressed his hard rejection of Guinevere. She was not blamed for the destruction of the Round Table and the era of chivalry in the first plan as in Malory's work, but she was blamed for cheating on her husband because it was Tennyson's major interest. He wanted to show the harsh consequences of such an adulterous relationship because the age he was living in required this condemnation.

Tennyson's view is a very rigid and strict one in comparison with the other pieces of literature presented in this paper. In no other era was Guinevere criticised and condemned so vehemently as in this nineteenth century poem. For example, Chrétien de Troyes supported the Queen's amorous relationship, which he demonstrated by bringing a completely new and previously unknown character on the scene: Lancelot. It was this heroic knight who was intended to take the place of Mordred who was the Queen's lover in Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle. The reason for emergence of this new character was only one: Mordred as a

negative character could not be sufficient for the courtly love taste. The courtly love romance required a positive hero with knightly values, a true representative of the chivalric era to occupy the place of the Queen's lover. Mordred as a treacherous and disloyal character just could not make do.

The fact that Chrétien de Troyes created a completely new character holds up the view of his support of the Queen's romantic relationship. As both Launcelot and Guinevere were taken as positive characters, the readers were not allowed to condemn them.

Another evidence of Chrétien's positive attitude towards Guinevere's extra-marital love affair lies in the fact that he focused almost exclusively on the love of these two people in his romance *The Knight of the Cart* and he left the King and his feelings aside. In detail, Chrétien gives us the description of the lovers' fatal night. His main concern, however, is not the fatality and the result of this night, but rather the night itself. Chrétien focuses on the love affair, he depicts its various stages and its development: Launcelot needed to undergo a lot of unpleasant inconvenience in order to find his Queen and fight for her. Furthermore, he had to submit to Guinevere's conceited desires. Launcelot went through all this without any trace of hesitation and this makes him the great figure of courtly love romances.

Although Guinevere's and Launcelot's *pure* love ended up in a *sexual* intercourse, this was not always a rule in the courtly love romantic literature. For example, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the main hero, Sir Gawain, manages to resist the Lady's sexual proposals. It is important to realize that the incentives and the results in the two romances are different: in Chrétien's account, Launcelot and Guinevere were in love with each other and their relationship ended in a sexual intercourse while in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the presence of love was only illusory and love (in both its pure and sexual form) was used only to seduce Sir Gawain and in this way bring about the doom of the Round Table.

All these works of literature became a relevant source for the twentieth century novel *The Mists of Avalon* in which Marion Zimmer Bradley managed to fit together all of these various and sometimes contradictory readings and views of Arthurian legends. Out of all the pieces of literature introduced in this work, Bradley's novel is the only one which offers a complex reading of the more than one thousand years old story. This is, of course, given by the nature of the chosen genre: the novel. Bradley includes many different motifs and issues and manages to harmonize them into one complex unit. She deals with the role of religion which was important for all the other versions considered in this paper. What is different, however, is the fact that it is no longer Christianity which is seen as pre-dominant. Paganism with the cult of the Great Goddess is now important, with Christianity only as an alternative.

Bradley deals with the position of women within these two religions and their attitude towards men. Her account of females is a very feminist one. She favours the strong, independent, active women (Morgan) and disadvantages the weak, dependent and passive ones (Guinevere). These two women represent all the dichotomies covered in the book: activity versus passivity, paganism versus Christianity, independence versus dependence, strength versus weakness, fertility versus sterility, female-dominated world versus male-dominated world, freedom versus slavery, magical world versus sensuous world, love versus duty, etc.

Although the book is the most extensive of all books cited in this paper, this does not stand for objectivity. The complexity of this novel lies only in the fact that it covers all the issues and motifs which have been covered in the centuries before. It gives its readers a complex depiction of the world of King Arthur but not in an objective way. *The Mists of Avalon* is a tendentious piece of Arthurian literature and the tendentiousness of it is located in its discrimination in favour of female figures. This is an important shift as far as the previous literature is concerned. In all the other works cited in this thesis, it was the male figures who

were favoured by the authors. It was always the world of Christianity, knighthood, chivalry or kingship that was the relevant issue. *The Mists of Avalon* seems to offer the polarity to the male reading of the Arthurian legends: it brings the female reading, which, however, entails an even higher level of tendentiousness.

It is absolutely crucial to realize and understand that all these pieces of literature, beginning with Geoffrey of Monmouth and ending in the twentieth century feminist novel, are tendentious: their authors choose the theme of the Round Table with its knights only to point to and highlight something in the society they are living in. The tendentiousness of these works of art is represented by Geoffrey of Monmouth's history chronicle which aims at highlighting the great history of England and the power of English kings. In the twelfth century, it was a romance whose main concern was the depiction of courtly love and it was targeted exclusively at the love affair, predominantly adulterous, as Chrétien de Troyes and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* show. In the fifteenth century, it was the actual depiction of fighting and battles that was going on in the time of Malory's life that moved Malory to create *Le Morte Darthur*. In the Victorian era, an epic cycle supporting adultery could not be accepted and that is why Guinevere was condemned. The twentieth century, on the other hand, brought about the establishment of importance of the female role in Arthurian literature and the female independence.

There is, then, only one work of art that might not be in this strict sense of the word termed *tendentious*: *The Defence of Guinevere* seems to be the only major work of Arthurian literature where a human being with his or her feelings is prominent. Morris defends Guinevere and justifies her deeds by her being only a human trying to achieve her bit of happiness. This is the real mirror of life and therefore the mirror of the truest life value.

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