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The Literary Death and Rebirth of King Arthur and His Kingdom

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1. The Myth Reborn: Introduction

> *The appetite of the general public for such an idea, including the educated public, has never been stronger. For this there are no doubt many reasons, but one is that the past century has taught many melancholy lessons about overstretched empires, ethnic cleansing, movements of population, imperial complacency, and imperial loss of nerve, often applicable (however dubious the phrase) to "the age of Arthur." In "King Arthur" we continue to recognize ourselves.*
>
> *(Shippey 2009, p. 464)*

In *The Structural Study of Myth*, Lévi-Strauss equals myths to language, inasmuch "to be known, myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech" (1955, p. 430). Thus, he proceeds to explain his ground-breaking theory:

> Myth, like the rest of language, is made up of constituent units. These constituent units presuppose the constituent units present in language when analyzed on other levels, namely, phonemes, morphemes, and semantemes, but they, nevertheless, differ from the latter in the same way as they themselves differ from morphemes, and these from phonemes; they belong to a higher order, a more complex one. For this reason, we will call them gross constituent units. […] Therefrom comes a new hypothesis which constitutes the very core of our argument: the true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but *bundles of such relations* and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning. (1955, p. 431)

In 1981, drawing inspiration from Lévi-Strauss's structuralist study of myths and his idea that myth should be viewed "as consisting of all its versions" (1955, p. 435), Marcel Detienne recognises "mythology" as "an ensemble of discursive statements, of narrative practices, or even, more simply, of tales and stories" (p. 12). He remarks mankind's undeniable tendency to reinterpret and retell stories, especially myths:

> no living culture, ours included, can help commenting on, gossiping about, and adding to what is told, to the continuous series of its own actions and gestures. The exegesis is indeed the unceasing and immediate comment that a culture gives on its own symbolism, of its habits, of everything which makes it a living culture. (p. 89)

Furtherly, he adds that "[m]ythology, in its Greek acceptation – which is, after all, the fundamental acceptation and the one which is universally acknowledged – is built by writing's assertive progress" (1981, p. 157). Combining Detienne's and Lévi-Strauss's statements about myths and mythology, we may infer that the communicative act of mythical retelling is common to and an integral part of human society. Throughout the centuries, the act of retelling reinvents myths and grants them new significance, as mythical meaning shifts and acquires new qualities depending on its contextualization within and without the textual retelling:

> According to Lyotard, postmodernism encourages the discrediting of grand narratives and the retextualization of history and reality so that overarching metanarratives, or grands récits, become replaced by micronarratives and multiple perspectives. From a critical standpoint, the legitimization of alternate narratives allows for the serious reconsideration of modern and even pre-modern texts, such as in Jane Chance's examination of Grendel's mother and the critically marginalized women of *Beowulf*. From a creative standpoint, postmodern fantasy allows for the production of various parallax retellings and expansions. (Casey 2012, p. 117)

In many fantastic texts, we see how the postmodern mythical retelling enacts a shift in focus from epistemology – theories on knowledge – to ontology – theories of being (Casey 2012, p. 118). This becomes apparent when we start to analyse the evolution of the Arthurian retelling throughout the centuries: historically, the figure of King Arthur has inspired so many authors that its canon stretches to the entire European continent and spans through lifetimes. Some pieces of literature from the VI century belong to the Celtic tradition and folklore; others to the French poems of the XII century – *Erec et Enide* and the following Arthurian romances written by Chrétien de Troyes, and his literary descendants – and later, from the XIII century

onwards, adaptations and translations can be found as far as in the Scandinavian region; literary and artistic references hold a place even in Italy – the *cantari* folk ballads from the XIII to the XV century, mainly invested in the Tristan and Iseult's tale – Spain and Portugal; Germany also boasts an entire tradition of re-workings of the Grail cycle – among them, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, dated 1210. This richness is a clear testament of the intrinsic appeal of the Arthuriad: its variety of perspectives, events, characters and settings make it naturally suited to exploring the "varying, uneasy relationships which pertain between moral standards and obscure objects of desire" (Gilbert 2009, p. 169). The act of retelling and, consequently, of reworking of the Arthurian myth gradually led to a process of narrative metempsychosis which was and still is the key to the immortality of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. The very death of King Arthur – or rather, the ambiguity of his death – and his fabled return add to the myth of Camelot a sense of endlessness which, even when it is not explicitly framed as biblical, still sounds prophetic.

Throughout the history of Great Britain, several monarchs have exploited the myth of King Arthur at the benefit of their political agendas, adding to, transforming or interpreting the legends to suit their needs. In doing so, they progressively helped in the building of a legend which not only mythicises the figure of a heroic King Arthur but it rather exalts the entire kingdom of Albion and all his fantastic inhabitants. Gradually but steadily, the Arthurian legends have resurfaced multiple times during the English history, unavoidably linked to a collective sense of nationality, and have been consequently infused with new meanings. The adoption of the Arthurian legends by the British monarchies transformed the Arthuriad from legend into mythical discourse: Arthur became the embodiment of kingship, "the representative figure of the idea of king for Anglo-American culture" (Allen 1988, p. 1). According to Allen, the distinctive dimension of a-historicity created by the sense of perfect finish and the eternal suspension which coexist in the Arthuriad is the key to King Arthur's successful incarnation of the concept of kingship; Arthur is neither dead nor alive, his exile in Avalon chains him somewhere which is not earthly and not heavenly, and while his kingdom exists no more, the promise of Arthur's return

seems to invite the re-interpretation of his myth in accordance with the changing perspectives and preoccupations of an ever-transforming society:

> As the role of king changed historically, so changed the Arthur of literature, reflecting social and political developments in metaphorical, literary portraits. And like many literary reflections of history, Arthur encapsulates more than just the social and political past: he also reflects interpretations of this past, providing means both to survey historical kingship and to epitomize modern understanding of what kingship implies. (Allen 1988, p. 1)

From the second half of the XX century, King Arthur seems to have returned in the forefront of our minds as our contemporary literature is filled with Arthurian retellings of all kinds: poems, short stories, plays, comics, anthologies, movies, tv-shows, music, and – of course – novels (Dean 1988; Lupack 2005; Pérez 2014). While Shippey remarks that “nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians were well aware of the Arthurian story, they were not persuaded of its historicity” and so are modern historians, “non-specialists are significantly more credulous” (Shippey 2009, p. 449). Therefore, for about fifty years in the mid-twentieth century, the possibility that King Arthur truly existed as a historical figure is considered once again:

> not because of new documentary evidence, for Gildas and Nennius at least had been familiar to scholars from the time of Polydore Vergil, and only partly as a result of input from two disciplines unknown to previous eras, namely comparative philology and scientific archaeology. The main reason for the revival of belief in Arthur’s historicity was that he fitted, or could be made to fit, an ominously and increasingly familiar contemporary political model, into which several authors were able to project their own life-experience. (Shippey 2009, pp. 449-450)

Although it would seem almost tautological to remark why we, as a society, cherish the myth of Arthur, in his analysis of King Arthur’s inalienable association with the ideals of kingship, Allen finds that this affection springs not from a mere exaltation of the past, but rather from our perception of the Arthurian myth as a “standard” used “to derive a comforting sense of presentness from our awareness of what we leave behind” (1988, p. 9). Truthfully, Arthurian literature brims with works which are

concerned with the theme of memory and the passing of an age, as in the case of T. H. White's nostalgic overtones in *The Once and Future King* (1958), Mary Stewart's vivid interest in history or Marion Zimmer Bradley's portrayal of the decline of society's pagan roots in *The Mists of Avalon* (1983). Perhaps, because the idea of king and kingship is an obsolescent concept and two recurring elements in the myth of Arthur are the past setting followed by the promise of return in the future, the best contemporary Arthurian retellings are those which we find to be "the layered re-shapings or interpretations of earlier versions, where a narrator or a character participates both in the Arthurian context and in our world, bridging for us the distance we cannot or do not wish to break" (Allen 1988, p. 11). This is again the case of all three works we are going to examine in the next chapters, as White's Merlyn, Stewart's Myrddin and Bradley's Morgaine all speak from or exist in a time paradox: they are there to witness the events as they unfold while they are also here to interpret and narrate them according to our modern perspective. This acquired quality of modernity causes, in these retellings, an increasing preoccupation with social and political questions, which inevitably sinks into the texts (Bould and Vint, 2012 p. 108): T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958), repeatedly stresses the need to prevent war and domesticate humanity's inclinations towards violence, Mary Stewart's *The Merlin Trilogy* (1970-1979) opens a theological debate on the alleged naturalness of the progression of religions, and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1983), focuses on the struggle between matriarchal and patriarchal governing societies.

If we wish to compare efficiently these different works – *The Once and Future King, The Merlin Trilogy, The Mists of Avalon* – perhaps thematic criticism may be the most effective approach, as it joins the reading experience with the analytic one and – it almost goes without saying – to write a retelling, authors must have firstly been readers of the same story they retell:

> Thematic criticism is […] a mode of reader response criticism and as such contributes an extra layer to the text, the role of the reader who brings to the text his or her own prior reading and may slot the text into a pattern of thematic reading which the author did not envisage. (Mendlesohn 2012, p. 125)

It has been noticed that thematic and political criticism are often interwoven in fantasy fiction: the thematic analysis easily detects political messages within a text, while political criticism is at times deliberately structured around themes so as to induce a reader response and leave the audience in charge of the thematic interpretation of the text (Mendlesohn 2012, p. 128). Because of their shared interest in socio-political themes, the thematic approach would allow us to deconstruct each of the cited works into two parts: the main theme and the secondary theme. While *The Once and Future King* doubtlessly revolves around the theme of human violence, a second pattern about the role of women in men's lives seems to emerge; similarly, *The Merlin Trilogy* and *The Mists of Avalon* are both heavily and explicitly concerned with matters of religion while also adding different representations of female agency to each work. Demonstrating Lévi-Strauss claim that "what gives the myth an operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting; it explains the present and the past as well as the future" (1955, p. 430), these examples of postmodern revisions of the Arthurian myth uproot it from its historical context as it is traditionally perceived and fill its sempiternal political exploitation with renewed significance: "with the rise of fantasy texts, […] a postmodern Arthur begins to emerge, one whose historicity and 'reality' are less important than the qualities and cultural beliefs attached to him" (Fulton 2009, p. 3).

Therefore, we may conclude that despite the strenuous research for a "real" Arthur, which is still pursued even nowadays, what makes King Arthur's myth real is not its historicity – that is to say, it does not matter at all if an Arthur-character ever existed – nor which sources of the Arthuriana are more or less reliable, more ancient or more modern: what truly matters is King Arthur's immortality, each time period reinventing the myth of Arthur to fit its own context and meet its needs. Today he embodies "a postmodern sense of heroism" and confronts "current sensibilities of evil" (Fee 2019, p. 193); tomorrow, we shall live and see, for even the retellings like *The Mists of Avalon* which negate Arthur's promise of a return still contribute to the survival of the myth, and in keeping Arthur alive they are, in fact, feeding and nurturing his immortality.

2. The history behind King Arthur's story

> *There is no "original" Arthur and no originary or authentic Arthurian legend. There are, however, ideas - of leadership, kingship, empire, nation, social identity, religion, power - which, in order to be represented, require corporeal form and have, at various times and in different combinations, realized themselves through Arthurian characters. [...] It is about representation and the processes of signification, the ways in which meaningful uses can be made of characters and legends embodying cultural beliefs and ideologies.*
>
> *(Fulton 2009, p. 1)*

Arthurian history is a highly complicated subject. Truthfully, even the word 'history' bears its own kind of issues. What should we expect to take into consideration when we talk about Arthurian 'history'? Are we talking about archaeology, about literary texts, about folktales, or do we consider all these branches together as one gigantic subject? They are, after all, deeply linked to one another, and Arthurian scholars are still struggling to find within a single one of these areas the definitive proof which would allow us, at last, to place Arthur – whether king, warlord, or mere legend – both historically and geographically. Because this is the fundamental problem when we try to tackle the mystery of King Arthur: nothing is certain, not even after a millennium and a half of analysis of his stories. Every fact we know about him is connected and influenced by other facts, to the point that it is hard to create a solid chronology which would aid us in understanding what happened and when.

Archaeological Arthur

Nowadays, non-scholars generally identify King Arthur with two historical figures: either Lucius Artorius Castus, or Rigotamus. However, Arthurian academics have

reached the general conclusion that more than one historical Arthur contributed to the creation of the legendary character we all know today: the likeness of their names, of their titles, and their geographical placement gradually led to the merging of all these people and the accounts of their accomplishments into one single, epic character. As we try to identify Arthur as a historical individual, we currently find ourselves in front of several different people who existed and who may have inspired the stories which eventually became the legends and tales which compose the Matter of Britain, that is to say, the body of Medieval texts and legends concerning Great Britain and Brittany, and particularly, King Arthur.

Mike Ashley (2005), in his quasi-encyclopedic study of King Arthur recognises ten historical figures whose stories most likely merged into what we commonly understand as the legends of King Arthur:

1. Lucius Artorius Castus, the “Roman” Arthur, who lived approximately during the II century AD;
2. Arthwys ap Mar, at times called Arthur of the Pennines, who lived in 460–520;
3. Artúir ap Pedr, also known as Arthur of Dyfed, who lived approximately around 550–620;
4. Artúir mac Aedan, prince of Dál Riata, alive around 560–596. It is to be noticed that this particular Arthur did not survive long enough to become king;
5. Athrwys ap Meurig, also called Arthur of Gwent. According to Ashley’s calculation he should have lived during 610–680 but not all scholars agree on these dates;
6. Arthfoddw of Ceredigion, or Arth the Lucky, who lived about 550–620;
7. Artúir ap Bicor, the Arthur of Kintyre, who also lived about 550–620;
8. Armel or Arthmael, the warrior saint, who lived about 540–600;
9. Arzur, the Arthur of Brittany, who may or may not be the same as our tenth Arthur
10. Riothamus, or Rigotamus, a military leader in Brittany last heard of in 470.

Already from this list, it is clear that Arthurian archaeologists have a lot on their hands, and yet not enough to confidently cross out some of these historical characters in their long search for the “real” Arthur – especially when we consider that the above-mentioned Arthurs are not all the ones we can contemplate: they are only the most preeminent. In case we hoped to gather a better understanding of King Arthur’s history by looking at the ruins and the cities universally acknowledged as Arthurian, we would find ourselves none the wiser. Among the many Arthurian sites, there are three which are so renowned they are almost taken for granted by now: Tintagel, Winchester and Glastonbury.

Geoffrey of Monmouth identifies Tintagel as the place where Arthur was conceived, when Uther Pendragon infiltrated the castle after the killing of the Duke Gorlois, and lay with the widowed Duchess, Ygraine. In Tintagel there are indeed ruins of an ancient settlement, and people have recognised it as the place where King Arthur’s story first began for so long that in 2016, the English Heritage commissioned the artist Rubin Enyon with the creation of a bronze sculpture which was unmistakably inspired by the Arthurian legends, and had it placed on the cliffs of Tintagel, overlooking said ruins. However, as long as concrete, archaeological research and findings are concerned, the real history of the archaeological site of Tintagel remains still unclear: by the time Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote his *Historia Regum Britanniae* in 1135, the site had already fallen into disrepair, and we have yet to understand whether the ruins were originally a monastery, a castle, or even a small town (Lane 2009). Therefore, we have no clear inkling as to the why Geoffrey chose Tintagel as Arthur’s birthplace, but the legend fed upon itself when in 1233 the lands around Tintagel fell under the property of Richard, brother of Henry III: at the time, Cornwall was no longer considered one of the British nations alongside Wales, Scotland, and Ireland but merely a part of the English nations, and yet it maintained a strong sense of independence, so much so that the Cornishmen very probably viewed the new Earl of Cornwall as an outsider.

In order to gain the trust of his new subjects, he called upon the myth of King Arthur. Already born in Winchester – one of the alleged “real” locations of the Arthurian

Camelot – Richard acquired from the de Hornacot family the castle where our legendary king was said to have been conceived, and rebuilt the castle from its old ruins, purposely avoiding a modern style and favouring an antiquated one which would better suit the older, legendary feeling of King Arthur's time period which Richard was invoking: when he acquired Tintagel castle, he did so in order to present himself as the symbolic heir to Arthur. Richard was an ambitious man, as it is already inferable from his many rebellions against his brother the king, and his exploitation of the myth of King Arthur did not stop at the mere search for consensus among the Cornishmen: his political interest spread to continental Europe as well. Being the brother-in-law of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, Richard highly hoped to be named his successor, to become Emperor as King Arthur did in the Galfridian text after his mission against the Roman Lucius Tiberius. Richard was indeed named "King of the Romans" in 1257, exactly as he wished, but much like King Arthur had to retreat back to England before his victory march to Rome, Richard was prevented from being crowned by the Pope himself because of the political realities of his time period and, in fact, he managed to visit Germany only four times before his death.

Yet, what is important to us is not Richard's misfortune, but rather that his rebuilding of the Tintagel Castle turned the place into a "conscious historical statement about Arthur" (Rouse and Rushton 2009, pp. 226-227) and it solidified the belief in the following generations that King Arthur had indeed played a part in the history of Great Britain, that he had existed and that Tintagel had truly been the place to witness the beginning of his story. We can understand the web of self-referentiality which caught Tintagel: because there were mysterious ruins in Tintagel, Geoffrey linked them to the birthplace of a mysterious king; because Geoffrey cited a castle, the ruins in Tintagel must have been said castle; because Richard I rebuilt the castle upon the Tintagel ruins, that very castle should be the place where King Arthur was born. After all, didn't Geoffrey of Monmouth write so himself?

Alongside Tintagel, Winchester and Glastonbury also fall into a similar Möbius strip, with the added charm of the latter being the alleged "real" location of Avalon and the

first one of the very Camelot, a name which, it must be noted, never occurred in British Arthurian texts until the French romances spread across the English Channel. Truthfully, it is only the French branch of the Arthurian romances and the following texts which drew from said French canon which named Camelot as King Arthur's primary seat: the previously existing English texts favoured Carlisle as the focal point of the Arthurian court. Curiously, in 2016, Peter Field claimed he had solved the long-unanswered mystery of Camelot's true location and asserted that the fabled Arthurian stronghold happened to be to the west of Huddersfield, in West Yorkshire (Kentshire 2016). Yet, as Professor Field reminded us again, the first mention of Camelot is to be found in a French poem from 1180, and his deductions on the whereabouts of Camelot spring from his assumption that Arthur lived around the VI century, a time period when no written sources we know of ever name a 'Camelot': Thomas Malory – who famously relied on the French romances about King Arthur as he composed his work – was the first Englishman to identify Camelot with the city of Winchester, when he completed *Le Morte Darthur* in the second half of the XV century. Malory's chief proof for stating that Winchester was the Arthurian Camelot was the presence of the Round Table in Winchester's Great Hall. However, the object which we have come to identify as King Arthur's Round Table was likely ordered to be constructed by King Edward I, on occasion of an Arthurian-themed tournament which was held in 1290.

Edward I was very well acquainted with the Vulgate and Post Vulgate cycle – the French branches of the Arthurian romances – and he most likely knew about a piece of the French *Mort Artu* where a tournament was hosted in Winchester by King Arthur. Edward I chose Winchester consciously: not only was he most probably familiar with the *Morte Artu*, but the city had also been long associated with English kings already since the Anglo-Saxon period, when it acted as King Alfred's chief city and was considered the traditional burial place of the Wessex kings, so even in the eyes of the less-cultured folk it would not have been hard to believe that a king as great as Arthur would decide to host a tournament there. The crafting of the Round Table in Winchester was not the first time Edward I planned something to augment voluntarily the impact of King Arthur's legend: already in the early 1270s he had

demanded that Rusticiano da Pisa weaved an anthology of the Arthurian legends; correspondingly, Eleanor of Castile had commissioned Gerard d'Amiens with the composition of the Arthurian verse romance *Escanor*. Similarly to how Richard the Earl of Cornwall would later want to be viewed as a new Arthur and so he re-built Tintagel castle to surround himself with an Arthurian aura, Edward I also wished to imitate a legend: Arthur had been crowned "King of the Britons", he had conquered the lands of all Britain and more and vanquished the resistance of all the Celtic people. By impersonating Arthur at the Winchester tournament, Edward presented himself as Arthur's equal and Rex Britanniae, a new, powerful and wilful king who would rise victoriously over all the people of England, as Arthur had done before him (Rouse and Rushton 2009, p. 221). Edward's schemes are just one of the many occurrences of the Arthurian legends feeding onto themselves: a piece of the *Mort Artu* inspired Edward I to host an Arthurian-themed tournament in Winchester, and in turn, his reenactment would later reinforce Malory's idea that Winchester and Camelot were the same place.

Nevertheless, if some kings tried to keep the memory of Arthur alive in order to exploit the symbolic parallels between themselves and the legendary monarch, others willed the mythical king dead, so much so that they managed to find his burial place.

Before Geoffrey of Monmouth, the stories about King Arthur usually ended with his death at the battle of Camlann, where Mordred fell alongside him, or merely list his many victories against rebel lords and Saxons. Geoffrey added his own twist to the story as he claimed that Arthur was indeed mortally wounded at Camlann and later carried off to the Isle of Avalon, so that his wounds might be healed. He later embellished this event in his *Vita Merlini*: Geoffrey transmitted the Celtic tradition that not only Arthur did not die, but that he would also one day return from the magical otherworld where he was carried off. The healing of Arthur in Avalon created a sense of ambiguity regarding his death and shaped a new aspect of the Arthurian geography:

> the sleeping Arthur is placed in a variety of specific locales: he is said to remain in Avalon; to sleep in a cave under Snowdonia; or even to rule in the Antipodes. The common factor in all these stories is a strongly held belief in his eventual return – a return that is often linked to a revival of the British nation. The wide dispersal of the legend across the British Isles suggests a competitive sense of local pride that became attached to such stories. However, for the English kings, the persistence of rumours of Arthur's return presented a continuing problem, in that it seemed to create a focus for rebellions and uprisings in the Celtic territories in which they increasingly wished to assert their political control. The myth of Arthur's return is repeatedly associated with Welsh rebellions of the 1130s, and even if the English did not themselves believe in such superstitious folklore, they clearly felt that it had a significant unsettling effect upon their Welsh subjects. (Rouse and Rushton 2009, p. 227)

Being aware of the difficulties the monarchy was encountering at keeping the Celtic nations at bay, it seems incredibly convenient that in 1191, the monks of Glastonbury discovered in the grounds of their abbey the grave of King Arthur, a returning king under whose banner no one could unite anymore since he was now proven unmistakably dead.

In his *Speculum Ecclesiae* (c. 1215) Gerald of Wales recounted the discovery and related exhumation of King Arthur's corpse, lying alongside Queen Guinevere, in the graveyard of the abbey. Along with their bodies, another piece of evidence proved that those were doubtlessly Arthur and Guinevere's bodies: a lead cross was found with them, which bore the Latin engraving 'Here lies buried the renowned King Arthur, with Guinevere his second wife, in the Isle of Avalon'. Apparently, Gerard of Wales – a notorious detractor of the Galfridian myth of Arthur's return – bore witness to the moment when their mortal remains were transferred to a stupendous tomb in the great church of Glastonbury. Although it is still debated why the monks would search for King Arthur's remains, Gerald of Wales suggested that their quest happened under the desires of King Henry II: apparently, a mysterious Welsh bard had informed the king of the location of King Arthur's grave. The king would have surely benefitted from this discovery, as it would hopefully extinguish Arthur's value

as a symbol of any Celtic national feeling; secondly, becoming the custodian and protector of such legendary remains would gain him a prestige only King Arthur could invoke, both in Britain and across the pond, because if the European sovereign were already enchanted by the legends of the Round Table – indeed, the recounting of the Arthurian tales was a flourishing subject even in the continent (Tusker Grimbert 2009) – then surely Henry could exploit Arthur's symbolic value as the English king of a British empire in the same way the Capetian kings had capitalised on the figure of Charlemagne (Fulton 2009, p. 49; Rouse and Rushton 2009, p. 228).

King Arthur's connection to Glastonbury did not start with Henry II and his providential discovery of the royal tomb, though. Precisely as Tintagel and Winchester, there were foundations upon which Henry II span his own tale on King Arthur's story: according to *Vita Gildae* (c. 1130) written by Caradoc of Llancarfan, Glastonbury was besieged by King Arthur after his wife Gwenhwyfar – the Welsh version of the name 'Guinevere' – had been abducted and imprisoned there by King Melwas. When the abbot of Glastonbury was informed about the abduction of the queen and the consequent siege of the city, he intervened and negotiated with Arthur and Melwas the peaceful return of Gwenhwyfar. As a reward for his inestimable help, the two monarchs bestowed numerous lands upon the abbey. Caradoc's recounting was disingenuous, of course: most probably, he wished to account for the wealth and the privileges of Glastonbury Abbey, as it often happened with hagiographies. Yet, he established an everlasting link between the abbey and King Arthur, so much so that numerous other episodes connecting Arthur with Glastonbury sprung into being throughout the Middle Ages: during the following centuries, Glastonbury became increasingly linked with Joseph of Arimathea and the Holy Grail – another gentle borrowing from the French cycle, alongside 'Camelot' – as well as with other Arthurian relics, such as Craddok's mantle and even Mordred's bones.

Even though today we are very sceptical about the discovery of Arthur's body in 1191, it appears that the fact had been largely accepted by the chroniclers of that

time, and it quickly established itself as a genuine part of the Arthurian chronology. As a matter of fact, in 1205, Gervase of Canterbury demonstrated his own belief about the veracity of the story when, while composing his *Chronicle of the Kings*, he deviated from Geoffrey of Monmouth's older recounting of Arthur's demise, and located his burial place in Glastonbury instead of placing him in Avalon.

Notwithstanding the fortuitous discovery of King Arthur's tomb, neither Henry II nor his successors ever managed to quash completely the myth of Arthur's return: tales of Arthur as 'the sleeping king' or 'the sleeping lord' continued to be told, especially among the Celtic population of Great Britain, and even Malory would later integrate the myth of his return in his own version of King Arthur's tale:

> Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of Our Lord Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the Holy Cross. Yet I will not say that it shall be so; but rather I would say, here in this would he changed his life. But many men say that there is written upon the tomb this:
>
> Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam rexque futurus.

Were we to dig even further into the *history* of King Arthur's *story*, we would discover that the Arthurian legends were either twisted or reinterpreted for so long, that their retellings became an integral part of the Arthurian canon. Truthfully, they became an integral part of King Arthur's *history*, and the twists and turns the legends acquired throughout the centuries are both the proof of and the reason for the long survival of these stories: the possibility for and the acceptance of these retellings, complete with the adoption of new details or even new characters – as in the case of sir Lancelot, the most popular knight of the Round Table, who did not even exist before Chrétien de Troyes brought him to life in his *Lancelot ou le chevalier de la charrette* – led to a metempsychotic cultural process. The Arthurian legends are seemingly as immortal – as *returning* – as the king who names them, and from time to time, new authors filled their hands with the old Arthurian canon to shape it into something new, adding voices and perspectives and other keys of interpretation.

For the sake of this dissertation, we shall hence overview the milestones of Arthurian canon upon which even contemporary writers still rely when they wish to tackle and reinterpret the Arthurian matter. Accordingly, we will also see how the Arthurian legends survived the distance from one cornerstone to the next.

Early Arthur

The first Arthurian legends were of Celtic origin. Peter Ackroyd informs us that

> Welsh poems of the ninth and tenth centuries already invoke Arthur as a figure of the remote past, and the Black Book of Camarthaen mentions the names of his knights or retinue while mysteriously suggesting that 'anoeth bit bed i Arthur', 'the world's wonder is the grave of Arthur'. […] The provenance of Arthurian stories and legends then moves to Cornwall, and to Brittany, which suggests that an oral tradition concerning the king existed among the Brythonic Celts of these regions. (2004, p. 108)

Although Lupack in 2005 lists *Y Gododdin* as the first poem ever mentioning King Arthur (p. 14), its precedency is in truth debatable, since *Y Gododdin* has yet to be accurately dated: the earliest manuscript of the *Book of Aneirin* where the poem *Y Gododdin* can be found dates back to the XIII century and, as of today, it has proven impossible to pinpoint the precise time frame of the original version, as the incipit *"This is Y Gododdin; Aneirin sang it"*, which would refer to the late sixth-century poet Aneirin, is not proof enough to date safely the original version of the *Gododdin*. Thus, we should say that the first traceable appearance of King Arthur occurred in Gildas's *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, although Arthur was not explicitly named.

The text could have been written in the years between 490 and 560, and although it was not intended as history, Gildas's work is considered still today one of the key documents for information about the Saxon invasions and the condition of Britain at the time. He recounted the withdrawal of the Romans from the British lands and the

consequent pillaging by the Scots and Picts, up until the moment when a tyrant who was later identified by Bede as Vortigern allowed the Saxons into the island, as wolves into the fold, so that they would force the Northerners back to their lands. According to Gildas, the ravages of the Saxons directly resulted from the sins of the Britons: he portrayed them as "militarily inept latter-day Israelites experiencing divine punishment for their sins, and the Saxons as if Old Testament Assyrians and Babylonians, so as a scourge of his people inflicted upon them by a vengeful God" (Higham 2009, p. 31). Nevertheless, Gildas also narrated the resistance by the British people under the leadership of Ambrosius Aurelianus, a Roman-British nobleman. This resistance peaked with the events of Badon Hill, which was to be forever remembered as the last major defeat of the Saxons.

It has been theorised that Gildas wilfully omitted to mention Arthur as the leader of the siege of Badon Hill either because his name was unimportant – if not detrimental to Gildas's moral purpose of vandalising the image of the past Britons – or because during his lifetime it was common knowledge that Arthur was the victor of Badon Hill, therefore it did not need explicit mentioning. Whatever the case may be, Gildas laid the groundwork for future writers to ascribe to a valiant leader the long British resistance, which culminated with a crucial victory at Badon Hill and was followed by a period of peace.

After Gildas, the second datable work which dealt with the Arthurian times was Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, written around 730. Mostly in line with Gildas's pitiless take on the Britons, Bede's main purpose was to depict his own people, the English, as the chosen people of God and the truthful heirs of the Romans. In order to proclaim his view, the Britons had to appear like the Biblical Canaanaties: unworthy people who got swept aside according to God's greatest plan for Britain. Bede developed Gildas's portrayal of the Britons and wrote them as opposed by the power of God and man alike, and out of communion with Rome (Higham 2009, p. 31). Despite his goal of glorifying the English people as opposed to the Britons, Bede explicitly named Ambrosius Aurelianus and the battle of Mount Badon. Of course, he reported the battle in an attempt at objectivity – after all, Bede has been viewed as the "true begetter of English history" because of his "obsession with past times"

(Ackroyd 2004, p. 37) – however, celebrating the defeat of the Saxons at the hands of an acclaimed Briton would have served his purposes very poorly, so he did not write in detail about Ambrosius Aurelianus's victories.

Both the *Excidio Britanniae* and the *Historia Ecclesiastica* were later to become the most important sources for Nennius, as he wrote the *Historia Brittonum* between 829 and 830. As Higham reminds us, Nennius was "arguably less interested in what had actually happened than in shaping the past for the specific needs of his contemporary audience, writing as a political polemicist rather than a historian" (2009, p. 31). This was mostly due to the political context Nennius lived in: across the late VIII and early IX centuries, several Mercian kings had sought to impose themselves on Wales, but their hegemony was continuously undermined, until it completely shattered when the Saxon Egbert was crowned "Ruler of Britain" and the Mercians, Northumbrians, and Welsh all submitted to him in 828. As a Welshman, and in stark opposition to Gildas and Bede, Nennius wanted to reconnect the Celtic Britons with God, and to create a narrative which portrayed them as the rightful owners of Britain. His desire to link the Britons with a heroic epic which would be expected of a great nation was even the more necessary since Merfyn, the Manx king of Gwynedd and Nennius's patron, was apparently not a legitimate king's son, therefore he needed to bolster his claim to the throne of Gwynedd with nationalistic rhetoric (Higham 2009). Although the West-Saxon invaders were never explicitly addressed in Nennius's *Historia Brittonum*, which is most reflective of the danger attached to comment thereon while a Saxon king was on the throne, the author found in the decay of Mercian power the space he needed to plant a new nationalistic rhetoric, coupled with condemnation of the Saxons.

Nennius's Arthur was a *dux bellorum*, a war leader of the British people, and after describing the events which led Britain to complete disarray – Vortigern's incapability of defeating the Picts and his subsequent request that the Saxons entered Great Britain to beat them back to the North – Nennius recounted how Arthur's rallied the Britons against the Saxons and led them to victory in twelve

battles, the most notorious of them being the battle of Badon Hill, where Arthur alone killed nine hundred sixty enemies.

Galfridian Arthur

Now, according to Jankulak and Wooding,

> Already in the ninth century Welsh and English rulers such as Merfyn Frych of Gwynedd and Alfred the Great can be seen as the patrons of learned men of international origin, active in their royal courts. By the beginning of the second millennium the reformed monastic orders on the Continent had begun to find patrons in both Anglo-Saxon England and Celtic Britain. The appearance of the Normans in this environment, as well as the Bretons who followed in their train, fueled what was already a dynamic court and church culture interested in the "British" past, an interest which found its greatest advocate in Geoffrey of Monmouth. (2009, p. 71)

Alongside Thomas Malory, Geoffrey of Monmouth has been proved to be the most important author of the entire Arthurian literature, as he put into words the earliest full biography of King Arthur. Even though Geoffrey's credibility as a sound historian was disputed throughout the centuries, his recounting of King Arthur's life was never substantially revised. He was the first author to add the character of Gawain to the list of King Arthur's knights; furthermore, he was also the first to introduce Arthur's removal to the isle of Avalon.

Geoffrey's initial Arthurian work was the *Prophetiae Merlini*, which he dedicated to the bishop of Lincoln. Evidently, he considered the *Prophetiae* an important part of his work since he reissued them as the seventh book of the *Historia Regum Britanniae*: there, the *Prophetiae* served as a commentary on past events and even on those he lived through during his time and recorded in his work, namely the civil war between Stephen and Matilda, and the uprising of the Welsh and Scots.

The composition of *Historia Regum Britanniae* dates back approximately to 1138 and was dedicated to Robert, Earl of Gloucester, the illegitimate son of Henry I. In his dedication, Geoffrey acknowledged his indebtment to Gildas and Bede, although his reliance upon Nennius went unmentioned. Additionally, his principal source for the chronology of the British history appears to be lost: Geoffrey asserted that his *Historia* was no more than a mere translation of a "very old book" which his old mentor had given him. However, this book has never been either found or recognised. Nowadays, we are almost certain that such a source never existed in the first place, and that his had been only a strategy to confer historical value to his work (Fulton 2009). Interestingly, Geoffrey stated in the Arthurian section of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* that besides retrieving from the "British book" the account of the battle of Camlann fought between Arthur and Mordred, he also heard it told by Walter of Oxford, thus suggesting that the story was already circulating at least orally (Fulton 2009, p. 50).

As the *Historia* dealt with the history of the British nation, starting from the foundation of the island by Brutus, descendant of Aeneas of Troy, and culminating with the conquest of the island by the Saxons, the recounting of King Arthur's life began only in Book VIII, as Geoffrey explained the uncommon circumstances of Arthur's birth: the great king was conceived thanks to the magic tricks of Merlin, who helped King Uther to sneak into the castle of Tintagel and seduce the Duchess Ygraine after the killing of her legitimate husband, the Duke of Cornwall. Already from the start, the use of magic which led to his conceiving established Arthur as a supernatural, heroic leader very much in tune with the Greek mythological heroes.

Geoffrey proceeded from here to describe in full detail the life of Arthur, from his nomination as king in Book IX and his coronation by the Archbishop of Caerleon – a fictional office, yet one Geoffrey needed to furtherly legitimise Arthur's ascent to the throne. Helen Fulton remarks that Geoffrey's Arthur stood as "the symbol of imperial power, nationhood, the realization of God's will on earth, and the importance of genealogy in legitimating kingship" and was "the true product of prophecy; as a secular messiah, his coming is predicted by Merlin as the 'boar of Cornwall' who will repel the foreigners, command the forests of Gaul, and strike fear

into the House of Romulus" (2009, p. 56). Indeed, Geoffrey's military descriptions of King Arthur's march against Rome deliberately alluded to the mounting of a crusade: back when Geoffrey was writing his *Historia*, Muslim armies were reuniting to counter the effects of the First Crusade of 1099, so it is no surprise that Geoffrey's account of Arthur's European campaign was voiced politically and ideologically as a conflict between West and East. As a consequence of this rhetoric, when Geoffrey's Arthur vanquished Lucius, not only did he avenge his people who suffered under the Romans' oppression back when they ruled over Britain, but he also demonstrated the Western superiority over an unjust Eastern society.

Nevertheless, it is significant that Arthur did not fully complete his march against Rome, as Mordred's treachery forced him back home before the conclusion of his crusade: Geoffrey's Arthur served as a symbol of the Norman monarchy over England, their precursor and their ancestor, and his shortcomings and failures worked as a cautionary tale for the ruling class. When at the end of the *Historia* Geoffrey foretold Arthur's return by means of Merlin's prophecy, he was probably warning the Normans of the possibility of future British revolts, since, at the time when Geoffrey was writing, their authority was under constant threat because of the rebellious Celtic nations. However, it was not the myth of Arthur's return but rather Geoffrey's presentation of the character of Mordred that would later be claimed by the Scottish tradition as a proof of the English unrightful authority over Scotland and all of Great Britain: while before the Galfridian texts Mordred was only said to have fallen alongside Arthur at Camlann and nothing more about him was known, Geoffrey introduced him as Arthur's nephew by his sister Anna, who was legitimately born after Uther and Ygraine's marriage. Although Geoffrey wrote Mordred as the traitor who tried to usurp his uncle's throne while Arthur was away fighting his European campaign, the Scottish nation, in opposition to the British monarchy, pictured Mordred as the true legitimate heir to the throne of England, by his mother's lineage – the incestuous begetting of Mordred was not to enter the Arthurian canon before the prose of the French Vulgate – and so his coup d'état was nothing more than the reclaiming of a crown which should have been the birthright of Anna and Lot's children (Lupack 2009; Tichelaar 2011).

Besides Mordred, Geoffrey was also responsible for the creation of Merlin as we imagine him today: in his last work, *Vita Merlini*, he fused the Latin tradition of Ambrosius, Vortigern's prophet in Nennius's accounts, together with Welsh folk tales of Myrddin, the mad bard. In Geoffrey's *Vita*, as he roamed the wild forests of the North of England in the aftermath of a great battle, Merlin raved about things past and future, from his first prophecy to Vortigern to the succession of Constantin and Conan on the throne of England after Arthur's fall, covering an impossibly large time span.

The *Historia Regum Britanniae* was an incredible success, read, adapted and translated by many. Ackroyd asserts that what gave it its immortality to Geoffrey's was that "the emphasis was not put upon the race of Arthur but upon the land he administered and defended, if it was a national epic […] it was the epic of a sacred earth and territory" (2004, p. 109) thus rendering it "the representative national epic" (2004, p. 110).

In the time span which separates Geoffrey's *Historia* and Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, there was an "explosion" in Arthurian literature: counting the numerous adaptations, revisions and variants, over one hundred and thirty different works appeared (Ashley 2005, p. 320). Most notably, the *Historia Regum Britanniae* started to be translated into vernacular: the earliest translation was by Geffrei Gaimar, who translated it into Anglo-Norman during the 1140s for Ralph Fitz Gilbert and titled it *Lestoire des Engles*. Unfortunately, this work is now lost to us, but its importance is only relative as *Lestoire* was soon superseded by the *Roman de Brut*, a work by Robert Wace.

In 1155, Wace completed his translation of the Galfridian *Historia* and presented it to Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine. While he worked on his adaptation of Arthur's story, Robert Wave had set his mind on a royal audience, therefore he represented a courtly Arthur, someone who could withstand the comparison with the Norman rulers, so he embellished the tale with pageantry and exciting battles, and as he spoke of Arthur's removal to Avalon, he poetically wrote: "He is yet in Avalon, awaited of the Britons; for as they say and deem he will return from whence he went and live again," even though he also added a cautious "but nevertheless Arthur

came never again" (Wace 1155, cited in Ashley 2005, p. 338) so as not to provoke the enmity of King Henry II, the same king who would later 'discover' Arthur's tomb in an attempt to quash the seed of the Welsh rebellions.

However, Wace's most resounding contribution was not the new, sophisticated style of King Arthur's court: Wace was the first Arthurian author who wrote about the famous Round Table. While it is not sure from which source Robert Wace took inspiration for one of King Arthur's most famous objects, his invention was probably prompted either by recollections from returning crusaders or by Breton fables, as it was usual amongst Celts and Greeks to sit in an open circle on occasion of large gatherings, and the most important individuals would sit at its centre (Ashley 2005, p. 338).

Wace's Anglo-Norman *Brut* quickly became as popular as Geoffrey's *Historia*. Comparatively, a deeply felt wish to establish a tradition of secular English literature to rival the French arose: as a result, around 1190, Layamon successfully presented his own translation into English of Wace's *Brut*. While English versions of the Arthurian romances were already circulating orally, Layamon's *Brut* was the written text which consecrated the everlasting link between King Arthur and the English language (Putter 2009, p. 43). After 1204 and the loss of their territories of Normandy, the ideal of England promoted by Layamon's *Brut* became all the more relevant to the Englishmen:

> His preoccupation with the land is matched only by his emphasis upon 'continuity' and his interest in 'ordinary people'. It is possible therefore that Layamon's use of English and his adoption of the alliterative line were methods of evoking or even creating a natural and national community of English speakers. [...] By native instinct or literary fortune, the reign of Arthur was intimately attached to the national linguistic enterprise, so that his name and fame will live as long as the English language itself. (Ackroyd 2004, pp. 112-113)

Malorian Arthur

Drawing from the rich variety of Arthurian texts circulating during his time, Thomas Malory attempted to reunite in one cohesive Arthuriad all the fragmented pieces of the Arthurian legends. Writing between 1469 and 1470, Malory mostly drew his inspiration from the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles, the *Prose Tristan*, the Alliterative and the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and, of course, Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae.*

In 1485, William Caxton printed the first edition of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, which was to become the most important piece of Arthurian canon after the Galfridian *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Subsequently, the Caxton text was reproduced in two new editions in 1498 and in 1529, and two more followed in 1557 and 1578. However, after the fifth Caxton print of 1634, the interest in this Arthuriad died down and would not reignite until 1934, when the Vinaver version was discovered in the library of the Winchester College. Malory's Winchester codex was edited by Vinaver, who remarked the copious differences from the Caxton version: apparently, Caxton had heavily altered the original structure of *Le Morte Darthur*, dividing it into twenty-one books instead of eight, adding chapter headings and divisions, and changing the wording of some sections, favouring a stronger adherence to the form of the original French sources. When Vinaver edited the Winchester version and published it in 1947, the overall structure differed so much from the more familiar Caxton edition, it was decided to print the text under the title *Works of Malory* instead of appropriating the standard *Le Morte Darthur* (Lupack 2005, p. 133).

Although Malory was not the first author to try to assemble a coherent English Arthuriad, he proved to be the most successful, as his narrative served as a source for later retellings and it is one of the few works from the XV century which is still read even today (Lynch a 2009, p. 297). Malory did not limit himself by unoriginally copying down his sources and ordering them in neat, chronological sequences. His innovation lay in his interpretation of the original texts, as he emphasised or omitted

certain aspects of the Matter of Britain in order to consciously accentuate the themes and moral virtues he held dear: chivalry, loyalty and piety.

The most explicit way by which Malory reshaped his earlier sources was the centrality he reserved to Lancelot's character, turning him into such a significant, powerful figure he often overshadowed King Arthur himself. In stark opposition to Chrétien de Troyes – the French poet who first introduced the character of Lancelot and exploited the extremes of his love for Guinevere to offer a clever parody of courtly love – Malory's Lancelot became the true protagonist of the English Arthuriad and the epitome of "True Knighthood". By comparing and opposing Lancelot to Gawain, the typical "Heroic Knight" who envisioned honour only in terms of familial bonds, and to Tristan and Arthur who incarnated the "Worshipful Knight", the knight who similarly considered a deed as more or less honourable depending whether the concerned individuals *deserved* to be treated with honour, Malory showed how a "True Knight" should behave: according to him, a True Knight must acknowledge both the importance of familial and social bonds and yet, only an individual's respect of God and His will would mark him as honourable and elevate him to perfection (Kennedy 1997). Consequently, Lancelot's struggle between God's will, his steadfast love for Guinevere, and his loyalty to Arthur in *Le Morte Darthur* gave him grandeur and complexity in a time when well-rounded characters hardly existed. Lancelot became the ever-questing, fallible hero to whom people could relate: his weakness made him human, closer to the common man than the mythical King Arthur could ever aspire to be when considered on his epic own. Truthfully, Lancelot's imperfection positively affected all the other characters of *Le Morte Darthur*, turning them into more human, realistic characters.

> Lancelot's prominence does not negate the centrality of Arthur or the roles of the vast cast of other fascinating characters in the Morte. Indeed, it is the wealth of characters and tales in the book that has made it such a treasure trove for future artists. But Lancelot's character and conflict are central unifying elements in the book; and he is the one against whom all the others are measured. (Lupack 2005, p. 135)

Contrary to its predecessors – *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, *Historia Brittonum* and *Historia Regum Britanniae* – Malory's retelling of the Arthurian legends was not supposed to be read as a political statement or even as a symbolical portrayal of the times he lived in (Lynch a 2009, p. 302): most and foremost, Malory viewed the Arthurian legends as a story to tell, "accessible and explicable in the terms of the present" (Lynch a 2009, p. 307).

Despite his view, historical and political context was most influential in securing the popularity of Malory's masterwork: in the same year as *Le Morte Darthur* was published, Henry Tudor won the battle of Bosworth and became King Henry VII. He marched from Wales under the banner of the Red Dragon, a well-known emblem of Arthur's Britain in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*; even his coat of arms showed Arthur in one quarter, alongside the legendary British kings Brutus and Belinus (Windeatt 2009, p. 100). Henry VII was wonderfully astute and used the Galfridian prophecy of King Arthur's return as propaganda, persuading his subjects that he, a Welsh king descended from the Arthurian Britons, had fulfilled the prophecy of Arthur's return by restoring his kingdom. Both he and his successors exploited Arthur profusely as a symbol of power and as a reminder of an English Golden Age which the house of Tudor would supposedly bring forth once more: already listed among the Nine Worthies, Arthur became part of the decorative schemes and civic pageants and ceremonials throughout the Tudor era and was constantly remembered and referred to by means of Arthurian-themed tournaments, weddings and knighting ceremonies. To further deepen the Arthurian symbolism, Henry named his eldest son Arthur and had him baptised at Winchester, which Malory had recognised as Camelot. The king planned that his son should indeed become King Arthur II but, alack and alas, the prince died young and the crown was inherited by the unoriginally named Henry VIII.

Notwithstanding Arthur Tudor's unfortunate death, the Arthurian propagandistic parallelisms withstood: during the reign of Elizabeth I, her hosts would put on Arthurian-themed pageants to accompany and welcome her, and the royal astrologer John Dee went as far as claiming that Elizabeth had a right of rulership

over North America since Arthur's subjects had reached the American shores before the Spanish people; Geoffrey's *Historia* was treated as genuine history and loyalists defended it viciously against the judgment of sceptics and critics. Additionally, Edmund Spenser dedicated to Elizabeth I his *Faerie Queene*: in this uncompleted work, composed between 1590 and 1596, Spenser presented the Malorian and Galfridian characters as foreshadowing for his own time, and as he recounted the majority of the events from the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, he plainly stated that Elizabeth's realm was Arthur's kingdom restored (Ashe 1971, pp. 120-123). Even after the downfall of the house of Tudor and the arrival of the Stuart dynasty in 1603, the monarchy did not cease to appropriate the Arthurian legends for their political purposes.

However, royal propaganda was not a widely popular genre, and the aristocrats quickly lost their interest in King Arthur's story. The characters of the Matter of Britain would have fallen into oblivion, had it not been for folk culture and the mild, often comedic or satirical survivals in lesser social circles (Ashe 1971; Gossedge and Knight 2009). Arthurian retellings of a different kind continued to play a role in English culture: a solid tradition of romances, plays, ballads, poems, satires and almanacs established itself and kept the Arthurian legends alive. So, King Arthur resisted as a symbolic image of honour, justice and peaceful civilisation, until the antiquarian movement reclaimed the genre of romance in reaction against the neo-classicism of XVIII century (Matthews 2009): in 1718, Thompson published the first English translation of *Historia Regum Britanniae,* and Bishop Thomas Percy had his most influential *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* printed in 1765; Percy's three volumes of ballads and Thompson's modern translation reconnected the English-reading audience with Geoffrey's work on the legendary history of Great Britain and successfully reintroduced the Arthurian myths into English discourse, facilitating the Arthurian revival later brought forth by the works of Sir Alfred Tennyson and the art of the Preraphaelite Brotherhood (Ackroyd 2004, Lupack 2009).

Tennyson's Arthur

> During the Victorian and Edwardian age, the medieval past was gradually installed as the basis of British heritage. Arthurianism, with the *Morte* as its main medieval reference point, was central in the process of inventing a new version of the historical origins and cultural inheritance of the present. At the same time, the success of the medieval revival depended on bringing Arthur up to date. (Lynch a 2009, p. 298)

When he set about composing the *Idylls of the King*, Alfred Tennyson was extremely conscious of Malory's prestige and importance. Still, he wished to soften the problematic medium and era propelled by Malory, in order to present a more ideal and idealistic King Arthur: Tennyson modernised his Arthur, turning the legendary king into "a spokesman for contemporary bourgeois attitudes, in ways that have later made him seem very old-fashioned" (Lynch a 2009, p. 298).

He composed his ensemble of poems already as Poet Laureate, in the years between 1859 and 1873. After the passing of Prince Consort Albert in 1861, he dedicated the *Idylls* to his memory, out of respect for Queen Victoria and her late husband, and used the composition as a way to express his own idealistic beliefs about monarchy and religion: the underlying message of the *Idillys of the King* was that although a government inspired by religion would rarely work and spiritual ideals can prove hard and taxing to be practised all life long, everyone ought to keep on trying, to better themselves, to aim for perfection. In Tennyson's *Idylls*, King Arthur was King of Britain and at the same time he also stood as a symbol of the human soul and of mankind's struggle against evil. Through Tennyson's poetry, Arthur's victories against wild beasts and heathens were an allegorical victory of humanity over our inner wickedness, our darkness.

Linked with or perhaps because of the gravity and greatness of the spiritual ideals of Camelot, Tennyson wished to highlight the importance of marriage as a Christian ideal: whereas the romancers of the Middle Ages focused their Arthurian reworks on courtly love affairs, Tennyson's Arthur exhorted his knights to find wives and become living examples of model family life. Since the Idyllic Arthur set

stupendously high standards for everyone to aim at, as his glory failed so did the heavenliness of his court: human faults slipped through the cracks of the Round Table, and as soon as Guinevere's unfaithfulness got revealed, the knights gradually began to fail their appointed tasks and stopped taking their marriage vows seriously. Guinevere's unfaithful love caused a domino effect which led to the loss of the great values of chivalry. However, her betrayal was only one of the causes of Camelot's downfall: for Tennyson, the quest of the Holy Grail was disastrous from the start, as it lured away valiant knights only to lead them to their deaths. Camelot lost its best men, and the new, younger knights who replaced them could not hold a candle to their predecessors. Seeing a weakened Arthur and court, his subjects began questioning his rulership and his right to the throne, and the doubts over the legitimacy of his birth were brought back.

As a matter of fact, we could infer that Tennyson was suggesting that even the greatest heroes are not exempt from failure (Ashe 1971, p. 124): in the last poem of the *Idylls*, Arthur got lethally wounded during his fight against the newly arisen enemies, and he disappeared over the water in a barge, after demanding Sir Bedevere that he cast away the sword Excalibur in his stead.

Despite this tragic, solemn ending – which is truly to be considered as standard whenever the canonical Arthurian outline is followed – Tennyson refrained from picturing Arthur's demise in terms of absolute finality: in the last line of the *Idylls of the King*, Sir Bedevere saw a new sunrise bringing a new year, and such image closed the poem almost as a hint of a future return and of King Arthur's endlessness, as the monarch's attempt at creating a perfect, idyllic world should be viewed as a pattern for the future days – the *dawning* days – to be imitated and insightfully improved by the people to come (Ashe 1971, p.125).

The *Idylls of the King* was a roaring success in his days, to the point that it influenced the general view on all Arthurian literature for a full century, from 1850 to 1950, to the detriment of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*: the XV century was unfortunately deemed as "a barren, decadent time between Chaucer and the emergence of Wyatt, Surrey, and the Elizabethans" (Lynch a 2009, p. 298). Malory was perceived as little more than a "nostalgic idealist" (Lynch a 2009, p. 298), a medieval gentleman who

deeply wished the decadence of England would slow down and that his fellow Englishmen would once again value the great virtues of manhood, courteousness and gentleness of yore, and as such, his *Morte Darthur* was read – perhaps unjustly – as an idealization of a past world and a rebuttal of the fifteenth-century life. Thankfully, this harsh and simplistic perception of Malory gradually shifted with the passing of the years, as shown by both Steinbeck and T. H. White, who modelled their Arthurian retellings on the Malorian *Morte*.

Contemporary Arthur

> The Arthurian legend of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is a remarkably malleable body of material, capable of being expanded, contracted, or radically changed in form to fit the design of an author or the tastes of the public. Since 1900, and far more so since 1950, the legend has been shaped into social and political satire, comedy, science fiction and fantasy, feminist fiction, mysteries and thrillers, comic books, and more than a few examples of pure silliness, both on the printed page and on the screen and stage. In addition, we have a good many basic retellings of the traditional story, most inspired by Malory and recast either for adults or, more often, for young readers. […] It is perhaps not entirely surprising that Arthur, in his modern incarnations, is most popular in literature written in English. (Lacy 2009, p. 120)

Following the Arthurian Revival of the Victorian era, King Arthur became an extremely popular subject within the English-speaking spheres. This Arthurian enthusiasm could be partly attributed to the anglophone post-modern scepticism regarding the ground notion of the authority and correctness of the text, thus encouraging, especially in North America, the literary lode of reworking and adaptation of the "original" legends. A remarkable number of Arthurian poems and poetic cycles were written between the First World War and the Fifties and, among their authors, T. S. Eliot's and David Jones's works stood more brightly than others.

Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) quickly became one of the seminal poems of the XX century. Drawing his inspiration from Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*

(1920) rather than from the canonical sources, Eliot's *The Wastle Land* resonated with the Arthurian theme of the Fisher King's impoverished, sterile land, and used king and kingdom as a metaphor for the decay embodied by the modern city.

Similarly, Welsh poet David Jones composed two significant Arthurian works: *In Parenthesis* (1937) compared the battlefields of the World War with the Arthurian wasteland; his *Anathémata* (1952) also repeatedly referred to Arthurian imageries, as well as it mentioned Galahad's vision of Christ; moreover, while not as explicitly Arthurian as his other two collections of poems, the posthumous *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments* (1974) also acknowledged an Arthurian inspiration within its title.

As Lacy notices, some of the most frequent recent approaches to the Arthurian legends involve the appropriation of only one or some elements – a motif or an episode – of the legends and their assimilation inside the structure of a text which otherwise may not even be explicitly Arthurian or only vaguely so (2009, p. 127), as it is the case with Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*, where we discover the reality of the link with King Arthur's time only well into the story, as the old knight who is repeatedly mentioned in the first half of the novel is revealed to be the Scottish Sir Gawain. While the strict fidelity to what are now considered the canonical Arthurian sources – Nennius, Geoffrey, Wace, Layamon, Chrétien de Troyes, Malory and the Welsh and Scottish medieval texts such as *Gawaine and the Greene Knight* or *Mabinogion* – meant everything to some authors such as Stephen R. Lawhead (*The Pendragon Cycle*, 1987-1999), J. R. R. Tolkien (*The Fall of Arthur*, printed posthumously in 2013) or Gillian Bradshaw (*Down the Long Wind*, 1980-1982), other writers considered the Arthurian canon merely a light inspiration for their more transformative works, as in the case of Walker Percy's *Lancelot* (1977) or Susan Cooper's pentalogy *The Dark Is Rising* (1965-1977). Among the huge list of the transformative authors, we should probably regard Mark Twain as the *de facto* forefather of the contemporary Arthurian transformers: his unprecedented success at Arthurian parody (*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, 1889) validated King Arthur as "a central figure in anglophone popular culture, reinforcing the notion

that the king and the legend are, or can be, whatever we want them to be" (Lacy 2009, p. 121).

Opposed to the transformative authors, the more conservative branch of Arthurian contemporary writers holds the canonical sources in high regard and tries to offer new perspectives while still adhering to the Arthurian canon as closely as possible. Since Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, two different schools of thought shaped themselves within these Arthurian writers and retellers: on one side, there are the authors who would rather view King Arthur as *history*; on the other, the authors who treat as a *story*. We could place at the two extremes of this spectrum the work of Rosemary Sutcliff – Arthur as history – and T. H. White – Arthur as story.

Rosemary Sutcliff, actively writing Arthurian retellings from 1959 to 2007, was so fascinated by the Arthurian legends that she abandoned the genre of children's fiction and started working on a series of adult novels which ought to portray King Arthur and his kingdom as they might really have appeared. Allegedly, her detailed account of the battle of Badon Hill was based on advice from a professional soldier who studied how the fight might truly have progressed (Ashe 1971, p. 128).

At the other far end of the conservative spectrum, we see T. H. White and his tetralogy of *The Once and Future King*. Starting in 1938 with the composition of the first volume, *The Sword in the Stone*, White wrote three more books (*The Witch in the Wood* later retitled *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, *The Ill-Made Knight* and *The Candle in the Wind*) deliberately re-narrating Malory in his own style. White won such a big audience in and outside the United Kingdom, that his collective book inspired the stage musical *Camelot* of 1960, with none other than Julie Andrews as Queen Guenevere, and it was later filmed in 1967 under the same title starring Richard Harris as King Arthur, Franco Nero as Lancelot and Vanessa Redgrave as Guenevere.

In-between the extremes of the conservative Arthurian scope, we might place Mary Stewart's *The Merlin Trilogy*, a series of books which see Merlin as the protagonist. While many of Merlin's most famous, seemingly impossible enterprises are here demystified and explained through reason and logic by Merlin himself, our attempt

at pretending that the Arthurian legends are a believable part of British history must shatter each time Merlin calls upon the powers of his God, and the deity answers him by granting Merlin visions of the future or even the power to set the Crystal Cave ablaze with light. In *The Merlin Trilogy* there are many instances when the audience is hard-pressed to invoke the suspension of disbelief, as any reader of fantasy-fiction would do, and Stewart flirted with pretences of historicity as many times as she conceded some impossible events to occur, thus exploiting both aspects of the Arthurian canon: history *and* story.

All these different reiterations and variations of the Arthurian characters and legends led uniformly to one important consequence: in the end, there is not *one* authentic Arthur, as there is not *one* authentic Camelot, or *one* authentic story to tell. They are all real, they exist in the same dimension and share the same validity and authority.

3. Tim's troubled heart: *The Once and Future King*

(1) As an author chosen by the American Book Club, I offered my services to the British Council, to lecture in America, a year before the war started. They were politely refused.
(2) On the day war broke out I offered them to the Ministry of Information through Sir Sydney Cockerell, who, I thought, being a well-acquainted old gentleman with a handle to his name, might have had a pull. I was politely told to wait.
(3) On the collapse of France I joined the local Defence Force in Belmullet, but, after a couple of parades, I was politely asked, not to resign, but to absent myself from parade. They were afraid I was a Fifth Column.
(4) All this time I was writing a book about the non-fascist ideal (my Arthur book) for publishing which I shall certainly have my head chopped off, if Hitler wins the war.

(White 1941, cited in Sprague 2007, p. 188)

T. H. White (1905-1964) writes *The Once and Future King* between 1938 and 1941, although the public does not read it in its entirety until 1958, well after the end of World War II, when White convinces his publishers to print the book in its collective form. Sadly, its fifth and last segment, *The Book of Merlyn*, is to be published only posthumously in 1977 as Collins refuses to print it as part of *The Once and Future King* – supposedly because of its aggressive anti-war contents – so White resorts to incorporating some of its elements into the published tetralogy, namely Arthur's lessons with the ants and the geese, while he omits other passages, such as the visit to Galapas's castle or the scary episode with Madam Mim, which is retained only in the late Disney adaptation of *The Sword in the Stone* from 1963. At first, *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), *The Witch in the Wood* (1939), and *The Ill-Made Knight* (1940) are each published separately, while the fourth book, *The Candle in the Wind*

does not appear until the collective work *The Once and Future King* gets printed in 1958, with the second book almost completely rewritten and aptly retitled *The Queen of Air and Darkness* after Housman's poem from 1895: "The Queen of air and darkness / Begins to shrill and cry,/ 'O young man, O my slayer, / To-morrow you shall die".

Nowadays, *The Once and Future King* is considered one of the major Arthurian retellings and the last one to draw notable inspiration from Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* instead of favouring earlier sources (Brewer 1993, p. 18). Even though White relies heavily on books and treatises about the Middle Ages to better frame his story, his only source book for the Arthuriad per se is Vinaver's edition of *La Morte Darthur* (Brewer 1993, chap. 8-9). Indeed, White seems little interested in any other source material about the Arthurian legends, and what we read in *The Once and Future King* which is not to be found in Malory, is always of White's own invention, especially Arthur's apocryphal childhood. Apparently, he does not avail himself of much contemporary Arthurian scholarship either: his letters to Sir Sydney Cockerell, David Garnett, and L.J. Potts refer to Sir Thomas Malory profusely, yet White names only two of Malory's critics, Sebastian Evans and George Wardle, neither of whom is mentioned in Vinaver's bibliography as aid for his version of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (Sprague 2007, p. 61).

White interprets Malory's version of the Arthurian legends as a single, unified, Aristotelian tragedy, and indeed *Le Morte Darthur* leans heavily on feelings of nostalgia, melancholy and transience, naturally provoking thoughts on melancholy and loss – loss of lives, of peace, of an entire kingdom. Thompson believes that it is this exact sense of something dear that has become irretrievably lost what gives power to *The Once and Future King*: even though the sense of loss is developed in more detail in the following books, *The Sword in the Stone* already bears the seeds of melancholy because of the palpable affection and nostalgia with which White depicts the settings of Arthur's childhood. Such yearning sentiment will become one of the reasons why *The Once and Future King* is still considered as one of the most influential Arthurian novels for young readers (2004, p. 131). Helen Fulton acknowledges *The Once and Future King* as "the harbinger of a new fashion for

Arthurian fantasy" which reinvigorated the influence of the Arthuriad on modern audiences as well (2009, p. 7). According to Fulton, White's retelling conveys "what the naturalistic violence – almost a 'cartoon' violence – of the medieval Arthurian legend looks like when viewed from a realist perspective as actual violence" (2009, p. 7). However, his satire is not directed against an idea of the Middle Ages themselves, but it actually aims at "a modern educative tradition of competitive aggression, in which medievalist models were routinely used to ennoble the idea of war and empire" (Lynch b 2009, p 181). Indeed, already in his first instalment, *The Sword in the Stone* totalitarian dictatorships of the twentieth century are mocked by White: the giant Galapas appears as a combination of Mussolini, of a sadistic school headmaster, and a gangster who greedily invests in his business of "thousand-dollar wreaths at funerals" (White 1938, p. 262).

The Once and Future King is a work deeply invested in the themes of violence and war, their existence and their rebuttal: White asserts that Malory's implicit purpose with his *Morte Darthur* is to find an "antidote" to war (White 1940, as quoted in Lupack 2005, p. 188) and, since *The Once and Future King* is to be considered as a "preface to Mallory" – or so White claims in his letter from 14th January 1938 to his former mentor, Potts – he faithfully follows Malory's steps. However, as Brewer remarks, *The Once and Future King* is far from being only a slavish modernisation of *Le Morte Darthur*: being a man of his own time, White's creativity is fuelled by the reawakening of the interest in myths which World War II had brought forth, and is also furtherly inspired by his own studies on psychoanalysis (1993, p. 19). As he writes his Arthuriad, White adds to a literary trend of the day which embraces both mythical power and psychoanalysis, all the while being also profoundly influenced by the pacifism of the nineteen-thirties: in the aftermath of World War II, it is nearly impossible for White to reason critically about the parallels between past and present without seeing the downsides of ancient chivalric rituals, which leads to his increasingly vibrant comments on the tragic consequences of Man's inner belligerency (Brewer 1993, p. 206).

Bearing such notions in mind, when we look at *The Once and Future King*, we should view it most and foremost as an experimental critique on the institution of war and of mankind's inner cruelty. After all, the "immersive" type of the fantasy genre – that is to say, fantasy novels where the fantastic envelops the entire setting of the story, and *The Once and Future King* should definitely be considered as belonging to this category – is regarded as the most fitting to political readings, and war is nothing if not political:

> Immersive worlds thus function to convey 'reality' in a manner similar to the way in which, according to Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957), everyday semiotic structures convey reality; but unlike 'myth today', which obscures contingency by transforming 'history into nature', immersive fantasy potentially lays bare the operation of worldbuilding. (Bould and Vint 2012, p. 107)

While, of course, White simply *must* locate his story in England – for not only is he paraphrasing Malory, but King Arthur's is also impossible to uproot from the land of Albion without affecting his intrinsic symbolic meaning – he succeeds in creating a fantastic world which the reader knows to be fictional. Gramarye, where the young Arthur spends his childhood, does not exist in reality. Additionally, White manipulates time on two different levels in order to create such distance between the reality of his setting and the reality where his readers live, that even something as familiar and real as England would be perceived as fictional: first of all, White uses anachronisms consciously and admits as much already at the beginning of *The Sword in the Stone*:

> it was not Eton that he mentioned, for the College of Blessed Mary was not founded until 1440, but it was a place of the same sort. Also, they were drinking Metheglyn, not Port, but by mentioning the modern wine it is easier to give you the feel. (1958, p. 10)

Here, by pointing out the anachronism, White sets the rules for his adopted time frame, mostly in order to escape eventual accusations of historical inaccuracies. However, further on into his novel, he also mentions real historical figures and dubs them as mythical, fictional: the Angevin kings are "legendary figures" (1958, p. 235)

actual monarchs belong to "mythological families such as Plantagenets, Capets and so forth" (1958, p. 530) and White speaks of them as "legendary kings like John", "fictional kings", even using irreverent lines such as "an oaf like the imaginary Richard Coeur de Lion" (1958, p. 532). In *The Once and Future King*, time stretches to impossible lengths: Uther's reign lasts from 1066 to 1216 (1958, p. 195), thus covering the reigns of seven real English monarchs, from William I to King John, and King Arthur's reign lasts even longer than that, ideally two hundred years. Moreover, with the figure of Merlyn, White creates a character who stands independent of any realistic concept of time: White's Merlyn is born in the future during White's own time – as it is inferable from his numerous references to Hitler – and lives backwards, thus appearing to have premonitions of the future while, in truth, those premonitions are memories to him.

White's playful attitude towards historical facts benefitted his book, as it enables him to "move easily between fact and fiction without puzzling the reader, since there is no consistent attempt at historical realism. We knowingly enter a fairyland, but a fairyland with many points of connection with past and present" (Brewer 1993, p. 199). Furthermore, Attebery acknowledges that such manipulations of time are rather frequent, even common, in fantasy narratives. Time manipulation in fantasy novels occurs by means of the narrator, who recounts the story from a chronologically distanced point of view, or, more frequently, time manipulation is part of the story itself instead of the narrative discourse, and the characters move in time – from the past into the future or vice versa – or have powers of clairvoyance:

> One effect of moving such manipulations from the level of discourse to that of story is to invite metafictional readings. Unlike some versions of metafiction, however, metafictional fantasy tends not to close in on itself, implying that there is no connection between discourse and reality, nothing outside the text, as deconstructionist readings sometimes claim. Rather, fantastic metafictions tend to open up the text, inviting us to see the degree to which reality itself is structured like a story – or indeed, because much of the reality we live in is of human making, is constructed through the act of storytelling. (2012, p. 88)

In *The Once and Future King*, comments and considerations which are explicitly or indirectly connected to the reality that T. H. White experiences – World War II, the awful rise of totalitarianisms – are copious. Mostly thanks to Merlyn, White offers his audience continuous insightful comments about the ferocity of his own time period without ever alienating his readers.

White's retelling is also highly auto-biographical. The author explicitly identifies with Lancelot – as he clearly states both in his notes and his letters to his friends – but the young Arthur and even Merlyn are the transpositions of White's own life: Arthur's blessed childhood without any decent parent but filled with loving caregivers such as Sir Ector and Merlyn himself are symptomatic of White's education with his grandparents. Later on, as *The Once and Future King* progresses, Merlyn evolves from being the symbol of White's tender caretakers – his grandparents and his school teachers – to White himself as an older man. Doubtlessly, Merlyn's deeply rooted hatred towards war and violence is a manifestation of White's own passionate disgust for warfare, and by placing himself in the role of the omniscient narrator, as White guides his readers through his four novels, he becomes for us what Merlyn was to Arthur: a teacher (Hadfield 2009, p. 424). Last but not least, in the first versions of the *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, when the "Queen" was still a "Witch", Morgause is entirely shaped after White's own mother: volatile and cruel, at times distant and sadistic and at times overbearingly affectionate. The corporal punishments to which Morgause subjects her sons are probably a by-product of the violence White experienced at the boarding schools, and perhaps even King Lot, the Orkney faction's father, absent and rough, never one to decently oppose his wife or to take care of his own sons, may have been reflective of White's own father, described by the author's biographers as an alcoholic and a violent man.

By 1959, one year after the publication of the collective work, *The Once and Future King* proves to be a grand success: it gets on the *Ten Bestsellers* list in the United States for three successive weeks, Lerner and Loewe are showing their interest in making it into the musical *Camelot*, which will later be filmed in 1967, and in 1963 Disney adapts the first book of the tetralogy into an animated movie (Lacy 2009).

Moreover, after the assassination of J. F. Kennedy, his presidency begins to be referred to as 'Camelot', partly because of the late President's fondness for the homonymous musical and his childhood interest in the Arthurian legends, but also as a metaphor for his short-lived tenure in the White House. In fact, the identification between JFK and Arthur's court is consciously orchestrated by Jacqueline Kennedy herself after her husband's assassination: Kennedy's myth is to be labelled in explicit Arthurian terms as a message which everyone will hear loud and clear: "one man, by trying, may change it all" (Lupack 2005, p. 192).

1. The Sword in the Stone

One of the most brilliant aspects of *The Once and Future King* is that the tetralogy ages with its protagonists: White parallels the ageing of the Arthurian characters with the macro-structure of the book, which evolves in tone and genre along with them. As it dealt with King Arthur's childhood, *The Sword in the Stone* is a children's book: the turning of Arthur into many different animals in order to make him learn new, fundamental concepts, his adventure with Robin Wood against Morgan Le Fay, the talking – and talkative – owl Archimedes, Merlin's clumsy spells and his humorous commentary seek to catch the attention and enchant the youngest readers, while also introducing them to the ideas of politics thanks to the lessons the animals impart on Arthur, here playfully nicknamed "the Wart" (Lupack 2005, p. 189).

Because Arthur's childhood is mostly skimmed over in the *Morte*, White uses little of his Malorian sources for his first part of the tetralogy. While he never means to bowdlerise nor conceal the story of Arthur's birth as recounted by Malory, he still prefers to direct the attention of his readers to different matters, to his recreation of "a never-never land which should also be a king of ideal" (Brewer 1993, p. 21). In the place of motherhood, of which White admittedly has only a slippery understanding, and fatherhood, in which he is even less experienced, White substitutes the parental bond with the as fulfilling relationship between Merlyn and

the Wart, a relationship in which Merlyn is later to assume the role of the *senex* figure, becoming a "repository of wisdom, kindliness and skills", while Arthur incarnates the position of the *puer aeternus*, the forever young and innocent boy who wishes to learn and make his master proud (Sprague, 2007, p. 4).

For Arthur, the bond with his legendary teacher begins when he stumbles across Merlyn's cottage while he is chasing a falcon in the Forest Sauvage. Merlyn is already expecting the Wart and immediately offers to become his tutor, but as we learn that Merlyn lives backwards in time, we are to understand by his emotional reaction to meeting the young boy, that for Merlyn this moment is in fact the coronation and the end of an incredibly long friendship:

> He stopped talking and looked at the Wart in an anxious way.
>
> "Have I told you this before?"
>
> "No, we only met about half an hour ago."
>
> "So little time to pass?" said Merlyn, and a big tear ran down to the end of his nose. (1958, p. 35)

As the book progresses, Merlyn uses his magic to change Arthur into a variety of animals, and by so doing he allows the future sovereign to learn about politics and society in an extraordinary way, for it is always clearly hinted that Arthur is to become king and that these lessons with the animal world are meant to teach him how to rule his fellow men. Arthur becomes a perch, an ant, a merlin, and a badger; he also meets Robin Wood – not "Hood", as the book jokingly explains (1958, pp. 96-97) – Maid Marian, and Little John and joins them in their adventurous mission against Morgan Le Fay, one of the infamous Cornwall sisters.

Eventually, at the death of King Uther Pendragon, a jousting tournament is held in London in order to appoint an heir to the crown. At first, since Uther died leaving no apparent heir, the new king is to be designated by the legendary challenge of pulling the sword Excalibur from its anvil; however, no one succeeds and the tournament has to be organised as an alternative way to elect England's new king. Sir Ector, Kay, and the Wart travel to London to partake in the tournament, but Kay leaves his

sword behind in the inn where they are staying, and the Wart, acting as his squire, runs to retrieve it. Finding all the doors locked and no one to let him in, the Wart looks for a fitting sword elsewhere, so he anxiously pulls Excalibur from its anvil, only caring about presenting a good weapon to Kay. Immediately, Kay and Sir Ector recognise the sword and announce to everyone the Wart's fantastic feat. London whole bows to the new king, who childishly bursts into tears as he realises that nothing will ever be the same.

2. The Witch in the Wood or Queen of Air and Darkness

White completes *The Witch in the Wood* in May 1939 during his retreat in Ireland. He is growing increasingly exasperated by his publisher's insistence that he modify the manuscript completely until he manages to exorcise the spectre of his mother from his book, but the political restlessness of those days affects him as well: by 1939, the Englishmen expect a full scale attack to be unleashed any day, young men are being called up for military service, and White himself attempts many times to contribute in his own way to the war-effort, as he has already been excluded from the battlefields due to his age and physical unfitness. However, all his offers fall onto deaf ears. Eventually, he reaches the sobering realisation that *The Once and Future King*, his "Pendragon", could be his contribution to the fight against dictatorships (Brewer 1993, p. 9).

After the brutal revision which drastically shortens the book and transforms *The Witch in the Wood* (1939) into *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, White contrasts Arthur's attempts to unify his kingdom and to sensitise his subjects to the matters of war and violence with the anarchic and disturbingly merciless world at the boundaries of his kingdom: the Orkneys, ruled by Queen Morgause, Arthur's half-sister. *The Queen of Air and Darkness* reprises the childhood theme by showing Gawaine and his brothers' life in Lothian but with an additional darkness and anxiousness which is absent from *The Sword in the Stone*. The role of the

protagonist here is shared both by Arthur, "the young king of England" (1958, p. 220), and Morgause's neglected children, thus making *The Witch/Queen* a book which fittingly symbolises the oxymoronic age of adolescence.

The Orkney faction's childhood, like the Wart's in *Sword*, is White's personal invention: in Malory, the readers do not meet the Lothian clan until they come to Arthur's court with their mother. White transitions from children's literature to Bildungsroman by drawing parallels between Arthur's idyllic childhood and the Orkney boys' gruesome one: the touch of comicality and humour typical of children's book is retained by means of the subplot of Sir Palomides, Grummore and King Pellinore – the latter two having played the role of comic relief already during Arthur's childhood – but episodes like the killing of the unicorn, which parallels the killing of the gryphon after the assault of Morgan Le Fay's castle while also foreshadowing Morgause's later murder by Agravaine, show an increase in violence and aggressiveness. In this case, the horror and gruesomeness of the unicorn's slaughter at the hands of the Orkney children, who only wish to please their volatile mother, functions as a sign of the deep dysfunctionality of the Lothian clan, which is to be entirely attributed to Morgause's deficiencies as a mother, indeed a "witch" who casts a horrific shadow over her children, up to the point that most of the brothers will eventually grow up as psychopaths (Hadfield 2009).

In stark contrast with Merlyn's mindful teachings, *The Queen of Air and Darkness* opens with Gawaine, Agravaine, Gaheris, and Gareth repeating versions of the story of Uther Pendragon's rape of their grandmother, Igraine. The reiteration of this event forms the principal basis of their brutalising education, as delivered by their mother who, rather than worrying about her children's welfare, is more concerned with half-heartedly practicing petty dark magic and planning her revenge on Arthur, against whom her husband, King Lot, is fighting. Besides their negligent mother, the young boys are taught by a belligerent Irish tutor, the heretic St Toirdelbach, who imparts on them lengthy parables from Irish history which incite and glorify violence.

To oppose the exaltation of ferocity which takes place in Lothian, the second chapter revolves around Merlyn and Arthur's elucubrations about war: in the aftermath of a

victorious battle, the sorcerer masterfully accultures Arthur on the devastating consequences of war, luring him towards a pacifist path so that Arthur can gradually understand on his own that "Might" is not exclusively "Right" and that violence should be abhorred at all costs, resorting to it only when nothing else works. Arthur takes heed of all his master's suggestions, and at the end of the book he wins the battle of Bedegraine by attacking Lot and his followers in a night ambush, fighting "the twelfth-century equivalent of what later came to be called a Total War" (1958, p. 296). While Lot returns home, Morgause takes up the initiative and travels to England in order to be reconciled with the new regime. There, supposedly through the use of a spancel – a type of *piseog* as macabre as the spell Morgause is testing in the opening of the book: it is a piece of human skin taken from a dead body which traces the outline of the deceased, and if thrown over a sleeping man and tied with a bow, it should make him fall in love with the caster of the spell – Morgause seduces Arthur and conceives Mordred, who will bring about the destruction of Camelot, and of his father alongside it.

It should be noticed that by ending *The Queen* with the seduction scene, White is able to keep Igraine out of his book, completely avoiding the emotional reconciliation scene related by Malory, and leaving Arthur motherless, a vulnerable prey to Morgause's powers of dark motherhood.

3. The Ill-Made Knight

In his many letters to his friend and former tutor at Cambridge L. J. Potts, White defines *The Ill-Made Knight* as a "Romance" (Brewer 1993, p. 76). With the adventures and quests and – of course – the romantic subjects inevitably implied by this literary genre, the third instalment of *The Once and Future King* portrays at length different aspects of and points of view on love, religion and strife. In full accordance with the ageing process of *The Once and Future King*, White presents at the beginning of *The Ill-Made Knight* the concept of a "seventh sense" which people develop only in their middle age. This seventh sense would be a life-

balancing ability which can be gained only with experience of the world. According to White, it is the reason "Middle-aged people can balance between believing in God and breaking all the commandments, without difficulty" (1958, p. 378). White introduces this acquired sense while neither Guenever nor Lancelot have developed it yet because the very ageing and balancing process which will gain them their seventh sense is the subject of the third and central book of his Arthuriad (Lupack 2005, pp. 189-190).

In *The Ill-Made Knight*, Lancelot makes his first public appearance; however, White recounts that the boy has already met Arthur a few years prior, as his father King Ban embarked to return to France after fighting at Arthur's side against the Gaelic cohort captained by Lot. White's Lancelot, the "Chevalier Mal Fet" – literally, the "ill-made knight" – is an ugly boy with a face like an "African ape" (1958, p. 317), and in his obsessive love for Arthur, he trains himself to be the best knight in the world, so as to be Arthur's greatest asset. As he moves to Camelot, Lancelot is illogically jealous of Arthur's regard and deep affection for his nephew Gawaine, and even more so of his love for Guenever, whom Arthur affectionately calls "Jenny". Lancelot's own attraction to Guenever will not be sparked until the incident when he unjustly shouts at her and, in seeing her misery, he finally thaws from his cold resentment and realises that Guenever is a "real person", with real feelings, just as he is. She becomes "pretty Jenny" in his eyes, the love of his life (1958, p. 334).

Halfway through *The Ill-Made Knight*, after having fathered Galahad and lived with Elaine for a while, Lancelot travels back to Camelot to reside there, relishing in his love for Guenever for about fifteen years: having been tricked into sleeping with Elaine twice, Lancelot has come to the conclusion that his status as the best knight in the world has already been irremediably compromised, given that he strongly believes his prowess and almost-supernatural skill lie in his vows of chastity, and so he might as well pursue his love and desire for Guenever. Yet, this does not imply that White's Lancelot is not also as tormented by feelings of guilt at his disrespect of the Christian vows to which a knight ought to have adhered as his Malorian counterpart is (Hadfield 2009, p. 426).

All the while, Arthur seems to be aware of the consummated love between Lancelot and Guenever – if not with certainty, at least unconsciously – but the love he himself bears for them leads him to play ignorant for the entire duration of their affair. The only time Arthur acts upon his suppressed anger at their betrayal occurs during the *grand melée*, as he opposes Lancelot instead of fighting at his side and, consequently, "just for that one moment of anger Arthur was the cuckold and Lancelot his betrayer" (1958, p. 496). However, White is quick to remark that Arthur's acrimony might not be caused by Lancelot and Guenever's affair, but rather it is a product of Arthur's older age, of his world-weariness:

> [T]here may have been another thought behind it. It was a long time since Arthur had been the happy Wart, long since his home and his kingdom had been at their fortunate peak. Perhaps he was tired of the struggle, tired of the Orkney clique and the strange new fashions and the difficulties of love and modern justice. He may have fought against Lancelot in the hope of being killed by him—not a hope exactly, not a conscious attempt. This just and generous and kind-hearted man may have guessed unconsciously that the only solution for him and for his loved ones must lie in his own death—after which Lancelot could marry the Queen and be at peace with God—and he may have given Lancelot the chance of killing him in fair fight, because he himself was worn out. It may have been. At all events, nothing came of it. There was the blaze of temper, and then their love was fresh again. (1958, p. 496)

Besides, Arthur's own benignant education prevents him from feeling real anger towards the two people he loves best in the world:

> The effect of such an education was that he had grown up without any of the useful accomplishments for living – without malice, vanity, suspicion, cruelty, and the commoner forms of selfishness. Jealousy seemed to him the most ignoble of vices. He was sadly unfitted for hating his best friend or for torturing his wife. He had been given too much love and trust to be good at these things. (White 1958, p. 389)

By representing Arthur as so noble and refined, gentle-hearted due to his positive education, White further complicates our vision of childhood: while in *The Queen* we

are to understand that a better education would solve all evil, in *The Ill-Made Knight*, White presents the idea that a too illuminated education might pose a limitation in a flawed, aggressive world which is much more suited to the violent approach of the Orkney faction. White also points out how Arthur is never seen as a teacher by the new generation of knights; truly, he is perceived "not as the crusader of a future day, but the accepted conqueror of a past one". The undying link between the legends of King Arthur and nationality is retrieved in the third book of *The Once and Future Knight* as the young generation – Saxons and Normans alike – come to Camelot and finally start to feel "English": "To these young people, a sight of Arthur as he hunted in the greenwood was like seeing the idea of Royalty. They saw no man at all but England" (1958, p. 421).

Arthur strives to tame his knights' tendency for violence. As he learns from Gareth that Agravaine has murdered his own mother in a fit of fury – and jealousy at finding her in bed with a young lover, as his obsessive attachment to his mother was already exemplified in *The Queen of Air and Darkness* with the killing of the unicorn: "This girl is my mother. He put his head in her lap. He had to die. [...] I ought to have killed Meg too" (1958, pp. 259-260) – and sees also how his initial idea of channelling the need for violence with tournaments has turned into a "Game mania", Arthur encourages his knights to embark in the quest for the Grail, so that "Might" will serve not pride nor "Right", yet something altogether higher, a spiritual need for the divine. However, the Holy Quest fails catastrophically, the knights return either in demure or contemptuous fashion and recall both their unsuccessfulness – Gawaine, with his earthly, violent spirit is among the first ones to get back to Camelot – and, eventually, Galahad's achievements. However, Lancelot's son's success is not reported with astonishment nor marvel, as he has always been seen by his fellow knights as aloof and inhuman: Sir Lionel comments about Galahad's victory, "it may be all very well to be holy and invincible, and I don't hold it against Galahad for being a virgin, but don't you think that people might be a little human?" (White 1958, p. 452). Among the very few people who truly understood the importance of reaching the Grail, of taming the earthly instincts by means of spiritual inspiration, only Lancelot returns, but he is barely half-victorious as his carnal attachment to Guenever prevented him

from reaching the relic. Instead of strengthening the court, the quest for the Grail causes the loss of the best half of the knights of Camelot, thus paving the way for Agravaine and Mordred's dominant influence in *The Candle in the Wind* (Hadfield 2009, p. 428). Their hatred towards Arthur and Guenever creates multiple fractures within the court, spiking up grievances and quarrels until the "Indian summer" (1958, p. 509) of chivalry is forced to an inevitable end.

Closing in on his opening stance about the seventh sense, at the end of *The Ill-Made Knight*, White says, "Now the maturest or the saddest phase [of Camelot] had come, in which enthusiasms had been used up for good, and only our famous seventh sense was left to be practised" (1958, p. 477) as his characters have reached, at last, a mature and perhaps a bit disillusioned middle age.

4. The Candle in the Wind

Before the drastic cut which turned *The Witch in the Wood* into *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, the final volume, *Candle in the Wind* was the shortest instalment of *The Once and Future King*. Whereas the first three pieces are original works, planned as novels since the beginning, Sylvia Townsend Warner – T. H. White's biographer – informs us that the last volume of White's Pendragon was initially written as a play (Brewer 1993, pp. 104-105). The heritage of this genre can be still identified in the unbalance between dialogue and narration and in the preference for indoor locations; where outdoor settings are needed, the outside actions are mostly recounted in speech by the witnessing characters. Truth to be told, even in its novelistic final form, enclosing the action in a shorter time span and favouring dialogue over action in small spaces adds huge dramatic impact to White's text (Worthington, 2002 p. 113). Additionally, the heavy presence of inner monologues and dialogues proves to be poetically attuned to the more mature characters, who would rather speak than act. in *The Candle in the Wind*, the story ages again with the characters as it advances from romance to tragedy (Lupack 2005, p. 190).

In *The Candle in the Wind*, White's reliance on Malory is limited to Book XXI, from which White draws the material for the first three chapters. The focus, which has moved to Lancelot in *The Ill-Made Knight*, returns here to Arthur, aged and tired, still desperately trying to domesticate mankind's ferocity while also suffering for the cruelty of his own son, Mordred: White portrays King Arthur as quintessentially English, and Mordred – Arthur's ultimate nemesis – as "everything which Arthur was not – the irreconcilable opposite of the Englishman," and possessing "the savagery and feral wit of the Pict [...] expelled by the volcano of history into the far quarters of the globe, where, with a venomous sense of grievance and inferiority, they even nowadays proclaim their ancient megalomania" (1958, p. 518).

By the time of *The Candle*, the love and respect which binds Lancelot and Arthur equals their love for Guenever: Arthur keeps being aware of the affair between his best friend and wife, subtly hinting at his knowledge with them more than once, yet he elects for the good and the stability of his kingdom, and for the sake of his loved ones, to forgo his own pride. However, when Mordred and Agravaine's plan to unveil the affair puts Arthur in the corner, the king can no longer look the other way: to do so would cost him the sanctity and the integrity of the entire system of law and justice which he has laboriously promulgated in order to guarantee that fairness and honesty be protected under his rule.

As the story progresses, even after Lancelot and Guenever return to Camelot to affirm their innocence, aided also by the Pope's request that the two parties make peace, Arthur is yet again prevented from reconciling with Lancelot by Gawain's anger at the accidental killing of his brother Gareth, anger which Mordred works hard to fuel, so as to quicken his father's fall and create a chance for himself to abduct Guenever. Mordred, like a true scoundrel, twists the morality of justice to his own avail, forcing the king to exile Lancelot and chase him even as the knight is banished to France.

In his metaphor for contemporary violence, White compares the plot of Agravaine and Mordred to that of the Irish Republican Army, yet the horror of their cruelty and evilness is a perfect portrayal of Nazism: their "Thrashers" party adopts the swastika

as their symbol, and together they gather England's principal foes, the Saxons, as one mass. Mordred's Thrashers proclaim their goal of "Gaelic autonomy and a massacre of the Jews as well" (1958, p. 593), and he is clearly compared to Hitler when Agnes, Guenever's maid, remarks in terror how Mordred's behaviour is becoming increasingly deranged: "all these speeches about Gaels and Saxons and Jews, and all the shouting and hysterics" (1958, p. 609). As opposed to Mordred's Celtic, tribal hatred, the eldest of the Orkney faction has conversely become English after his long sojourn at court: while at the beginning of *The Candle in the Wind*, White stresses how Gawaine "still kept his outland accent in defiance of the mere English" it is also true that "he had ceased to think in Gaelic" (1958, p. 524). As *The Once and Future King* proceeds towards its end, it is Gawaine's fealty to Arthur and England – so the *Englishness* of his reasoning – what convinces him to set aside his vengeful instincts in order to make peace with Lancelot and urge him to come to Guenever's rescue once more (Hadfield 2009, p. 429).

In this last volume, the imagery of light and darkness accompanies the impression of approaching destruction, and it is developed until it reaches the metaphor of the flickering candles, which will then inspire the very title of the book: as already explained, the settings of *The Candle in the Wind* are all indoors, and the action covers the time span of a year, beginning in the spring and ending in the late winter. The contrast between sunlight and darkness, sunset and sunrise and, at last, the moments before dawn, are constantly emphasised to better convey the tragedy or underline the ephemerality of happier moments. The imagery of downing light follows Guenever closely whenever she appears: she and Lancelot sing together in chapters 3 and 4 during the spring evening and "the sundown of chivalry" (1958, p. 539); as King Arthur reaches the two to warn them of Mordred's intentions of exposing their affair, the king has to order candles to disperse the darkness; as he leaves, Arthur "stood up in the firelight" (1958, p. 551) supposedly casting a shadow over the two lovers while only he, out of the three of them, can still be viewed as a paragon of light. Meanwhile, night has fallen as the Orkney faction keeps on plotting against Arthur in the Justice Room, and "the five men glittered in the candlelight" (1958, p. 552). When Gareth hastens to warn Lancelot of his brother's scheme

against him, the older knight's room is dark "except for the one light in front of the holy picture" (1958, p. 560) and he must walk "into the darkness of the passage" (1958, p. 564) to meet with Guenever at the end of the chapter. The candlelight illuminates the sweet encounter between the two lovers as Guenever awaits Lancelot "'in the candle-light of her splendid bedroom" (1958, p. 564) and the flames burn in quiet stillness, until "old" Guenever "turned [Lancelot] to face the candles" (1958, p. 571) one last time before he leaves to face their foes (Sprague 2007, pp. 126-127).

Eventually, the candle and light imagery abandons the subject of love and secrecy, but it peaks with the concluding parallel, "[t]he brief triumph of the Round Table was a candle that flickers in the wind" (1958, p. 637). On the eve of his last battle against Mordred, the avatar of Man's senseless ferocity, Arthur sees that the ideals of Camelot are at peril, and as he realises that geography and nationalism are to blame for Man's belligerency, he also comprehends that, one day, humanity will be free of the ideological chains of nationalism. To give mankind a better chance at liberty, Arthur commands his young page, Thomas of Newbold Revell, to escape the battle of Salisbury, and to preserve their story and the ideals of Camelot for the generations to come. As White strongly believes that:

> It is the duty of the intelligent, imaginative and loving men to preserve themselves alive. It is this duty to be repositories of culture in the medieval darkness which looms ahead. If they do not survive, to tell somebody of love and beauty, all will be Hitler, all be Mussolini, all Chamberlain and Stalin, all fortified, bestial, boarish (sic) and mad, all subservient to robber-barons in the tortured gloom of mindless misery (White 1938, as quoted in Brewer 1993, p. 71).

We can easily understand how, after having entrusted the values he has protected all his life long to Thomas, King Arthur finally finds himself at peace with the good and the bad of his life, and he walks out to meet his fate with "a peaceful heart" (1958, p. 639).

Thus, even without the closure given by the final Arthurian instalment *The Book of Merlyn*, White completes the cyclical structure of *The Once and Future King* by

returning the story into Thomas Malory's own hands and ending, after all, his Aristotelian tragedy with a glimmer of hope.

5. The Book of Merlyn

The pattern of ageing is perhaps overly stressed in *The Book of Merlyn* where Arthur is repeatedly described as old already from the first page. In this book, the sequence moves from tragedy to philosophical treatise. The change in genre proves to be the key in the construction of the sequence, which is a "speculative reflection on the nature of man and on the problem of Might" (Lupack 2005, p. 190).

White still avoids confronting the gruesome subject of Arthur's final battle, and he zeroes in again on the night before Arthur and Mordred's confrontation. While Arthur sits alone in his tent, Merlyn returns to help him one last time by reminding the king of the lessons he has learnt during his childhood, aided by his animal friends. The wizard promptly transforms Arthur first into an ant and then into a goose so as to introduce him to the realities of dictatorship and of utopian anarchy, and then he escorts him to an animal Privy Council, where all members meet to discuss mankind's inclination towards warfare and violence and reach together one absolute verdict: the enemy of mankind is nationalism.

Both animal episodes – the ants' and the geese's lessons – will be reissued in the 1958 version of *The Sword in the Stone* as White comes to terms with his publisher's refusal to print *The Book of Merlyn*. Even though the return to the animals' counsel would have created a "circular pattern" with some structural merit, Elisabeth Brewer finds that:

> Interesting as *The Book of Merlyn* is, it would have made a strange ending to the story of Arthur [...] For what reader, after reaching the tragic end of the story, when Arthur, old and defeated, faces death at the hand of his own son, really wants to attend a Privy Council of animals, including the sentimental and

> sentimentalised hedgehog, for another dose of polemic and facetious humor at the end? (1993, pp. 150-152)

Hadfield seems to agree with her as he suggests:

> White's final message in the *Book of Merlyn* would appear to undermine the complex and sophisticated nature of the fictional sequence in its simplistic pacifist message, as well as repeating much of what is already in the published version of *The Candle in the Wind.* The moral is far too easily directed, and would seem to be a rather self-regarding vindication of White's own peripatetic and solitary life-style. It also avoids the challenging educational message of *The Sword in the Stone*, which placed great stress on the need for a child to learn actively, to become self-reliant and independent. (2009, pp. 422-423)

However, we should bear in mind that whereas *The Once and Future King* underwent serious reworking in order to be printed, *The Book of Merlyn* never gets the chance to be rethought and worked upon as White did with the rest of the tetralogy: it is simply discarded and retrieved only after his death. As of today, we have no chance of knowing how White would have reshaped *The Book of Merlyn* to fit in with the final edition of his Pendragon from 1958.

The matter of violence and cruelty

In her critical text on children's literature, Hourihan tells us that, usually:

> The story glorifies violence and defines manhood within this context. There is a level of psychological allegory in the story which is concerned with the transition from boyhood to manhood, and at this level the monsters represent fears and self-doubts which must be overcome, and in some cases the actual ceremonies of initiation which must be endured, before the boy can call himself a real man. At this level the phallic symbolism of the weapon which he wields is only too apparent. This level of psychological meaning reinforces the literal significance of the story, defining the essential qualities of true manhood as prowess, courage, aggression, determination, dominance. (1997, p. 3)

However, what we see already in *The Sword in the Stone*, is a hero – the Wart – whose formative journey consists in learning to avoid violence, to assert dominance through reason and who is rewarded for his gentle-heartedness. As his tutor, Merlyn teaches Arthur to mistrust violence and to be conscious of the pain it causes. At first, the Wart does not always realise how horrible war could be:

> "Personally," said the Wart, "I should have liked to go to war, if I could have been made a knight. I should have liked the banners and the trumpets, the flashing armour and the glorious charges. And oh, I should have liked to do great deeds, and be brave, and conquer my own fears. Don't you have courage in warfare, Badger, and endurance, and comrades whom you love?" (1958, p. 194)

Arthur's crusade against violence and war is linked with his education. As Merlyn progressively pushes him to reach his own conclusions so as to raise him as an independent thinker, Arthur becomes a staunch pacifist and a defender of the weak and the vulnerable – "I ought to have thought of the people who had no armour" (1958, p. 225).

The Once and Future King explores at length the matters of violence and culpability, it shows why violence occurs in the first place and whether it can be stopped. Eventually, White's Arthurian narrative directs us to a multi-layered response: violence is innate; it is a product of an aggressive society; it can also be a matter of education, as Arthur's pacifism is. The Orkney faction – especially Gawaine, Agravaine and Mordred – function as key characters in White's discourse on violence; additionally, their behaviour brings forth who the real villain of White's Arthuriad is: "The real matter with them is Morgause, their mother. She brought them up with so little love or security that they find it difficult to understand warm-hearted people themselves. They are suspicious and frightened [...] It's not their fault" (1958, p. 332).

1. ***Homo ferox* or Might as Right**

Early in *The Sword in the Stone*, the Wart has his first brutal meeting with tyranny as Merlyn turns him into a roach, and he and the old wizard meet the pike, the King

of the Moat. Mr P – that would be the pike's moniker – is an "old despot," whose "face had been ravaged by all the passions of an absolute monarch – by cruelty, sorrow, age, pride, selfishness, loneliness and thoughts too strong for individual brains," and he is also "remorseless, disillusioned, logical, predatory, fierce and pitiless" (1958, p. 51). With his fearsome attitude, the King of the Moat imparts on the Wart a lesson about power which can only come from a long experience in ruling:

> "There is nothing," said the monarch, "except the power which you pretend to seek: power to grind and power to digest, power to seek and power to find, power to await and power to claim, all power and pitilessness springing from the nape of the neck."
>
> "Thank you."
>
> "Love is a trick played on us by the forces of evolution. Pleasure is the bait laid down by the same. There is only power. Power is of the individual mind, but the mind's power is not enough. Power of the body decides everything in the end, and only Might is Right." (1958, p. 52)

Mr P stands as a blunt and disillusioned warning of the kind of monarch Arthur should never become but also of the hardships he is going to face. The King of the Moat serves as a reminder of what happens to kings who let power corrupt them to their bones. His precise and rhythmical prosody pictures a sterile and haunting universe devoid of any constructive purpose. What the King of the Moat explains to Arthur is disturbingly true in a world defleshed of any sympathy, however what the Wart is learning is to resist the inevitability of violence and aggression, and to recognise the corrupting quality of power in order to avoid its poison and to keep chasing the greater good. Therefore, the King of the Moat as Arthur's first encounter with political power becomes a clear *vademecum* of what not to be (Hadfield 2009, pp. 430-431). Mr P's persuasion that "Might is Right" (1958 p. 52) will be echoed throughout the next three novels while Arthur matures and tries to balance the opposing forces of Might and Right.

Another essential lesson in the Wart's understanding of man as a political animal and of the inherent issues of "Might" is the ants' episode: as he is turned into one of

them, the Wart is left aghast in discovering that their minds are deadened by a monotonous music which prevents them from forming any creative thought, and their language is reduced to as a series of opposites which represses personal expression: “the Wart discovered that there were only two qualifications in the language, Done and Not-Done – which applied to all questions of value” (1958, p. 124). This dehumanising logic reminds us of George Orwell’ Newspeak in *1984*, and the slogans that the ants employ – “EVERYTHING NOT FORBIDDEN IS COMPULSORY” (1958, p. 122) – are similar to those found in *Animal Farm* (Hadfield 2009, p. 431). The endless broadcasting of propagandistic music actively brainwashes the ants, and the transmission increases in intensity as it is revealed that the neighbouring ants’ nest owns a richer hoard of seeds. The broadcast immediately engages in a seemingly logical outline to justify the aggression against their wealthier neighbours:

> A. We are so numerous that we are starving.
>
> B. Therefore we must encourage still larger families so as to become yet more numerous and starving.
>
> C. When we are so numerous and starving as all that, obviously we shall have a right to take other’s people’s stores of seed. Besides, we shall by then have a numerous and starving army. (White 1958, 128)

The circular logic aims at sanctioning an aggressive and expansionist policy, and the indoctrinated ants are so used to absorbing the formicary’s reasoning without personal, critical thinking that no one challenges the bellicose statements. The second broadcast sounds even more openly contradictory, with every statement reinforced by its opposite, yet the ants still accept it as God-spoken truth:

> A. We are more numerous than they are, therefore we have a right to their mash.
>
> B. They are more numerous than we are, therefore they are wickedly trying to steal our mash.
>
> C. We are a mighty race and have a natural right to subjugate their puny one.

> D. They are a mighty race and are unnaturally trying to subjugate our inoffensive one.
>
> E. We must attack them in self-defence.
>
> F. They are attacking us by defending themselves.
>
> G. If we do not attack them today, they will attack us tomorrow.
>
> H. In any case we are not attacking them at all. We are offering them incalculable benefits. (1958, p. 129)

The comparison between the ants' regime and Hitler could not be more explicit, especially as the Nazi's motto "Deutschland Über Alles" is reprised as "Antland Over All" (1958, p. 128). With the ants' lesson, White imitates Hitler's inspirational tirades and demonstrates how an apparently logical thought may mislead us in terrible directions. The formicary's abuse of logic foresees Mordred and Agravaine's same technique of reversing the logical connections between right and just so as to corner Arthur in his quest for justice; the ants and the Orkney faction are to be viewed as part of the same spectrum of damaged individuals whose education has warped their sympathy and their capability of critical thinking (Hadfield 2009, p. 432).

At the end of *The Sword in the Stone*, the Wart needs to pull the famous sword from its anvil. As the sword exists as a universal symbol of royalty and political power, the young protagonist cannot extract it without bearing in mind all the lessons he has learned about politics and Might during his childhood among the animals:

> "Put your back into it," said a Luce (or pike) off one of the heraldic banners, "as you once did when I was going to snap you up. Remember that power springs from the nape of the neck."
>
> "What about those forearms," asked a Badger gravely, "that are held together by a chest? Come along, my dear embryo, and find your tool."
>
> A Merlin sitting at the top of the yew tree cried out, "Now then, Captain Wart, what is the first law of the foot? I thought I once heard something about never letting go?"

> "Don't work like a stalling woodpecker," urged a Tawny Owl affectionately. "Keep up a steady effort, my duck, and you will have it yet."
>
> A white-front said, "Now, Wart, if you were once able to fly the great North Sea, surely you can coordinate a few little wing-muscles here and there? Fold your powers together, with the spirit of your mind, and it will come out like butter. Come along, *Homo sapiens*, for all we humble friends of yours are waiting here to cheer."
>
> The Wart walked up to the great sword for the third time. He put out his right hand softly and drew it out as gently as from a scabbard. (1958, pp. 204-205)

As the Wart lifts the sword from the stone, encouraged by the circle of his animal friends, he is proving that he has learnt and metabolised his lessons on politics and rulership: it is the knowledge which he has gained that allows him to become king.

Nonetheless, his learning process is far from over. As newly crowned monarch, Arthur inherits a kingdom maimed by "the Uther Pendragon touch" (1958, p. 225). This picture of an England which has fallen into chaos before Arthur's civilising impact is plainly explained:

> "Uther," [Merlyn] said at length, "your lamented father, is an aggressor. So were his predecessors the Saxons, who drove the Old Ones away. But if we go on living backward like that, we shall never come to the end of it. The Old Ones themselves were aggressors, against the earlier race of the copper hatchets, and even the hatchet fellows were aggressors, against some earlier crew of esquimaux who lived on shells. You simply go on and on, until you get to Cain and Abel." (1958, p. 231)

In the aftermath of an easily won fight against Lot's cohort, the young King Arthur is overlooking the battlefields and, pushed by Merlyn's ever-supportive prodding, he reaches the conclusion that "Might isn't Right" (1958, p. 225), and because of this, his goal as newly appointed king of England is to understand when Might can be used legitimately for the benefit of Right and also how to contain the brutal force of Might and channel it into a Right cause: on the eve of the battle of Bedegraine, Arthur victoriously announces his plan for a Round Table, where the ideal of equality

between all knights will be obeyed. Additionally, Arthur explains to Merlyn that he has, at last, discovered a justification for fighting a “good” war, which is simply to have a “good” and sound reason and to impose it on the people who still fail to understand what would be best for them. However, Merlyn informs Arthur that he is well aware of such tentative experiments to justify war, since when he was a youth, “an Austrian [...] invented a new way of life and convinced himself that he was the chap to make it work, and plunged the civilized world into misery and chaos.”

> “There is one fairly good reason for fighting—and that is, if the other man starts it. You see, wars are a wickedness, perhaps the greatest wickedness of a wicked species. They are so wicked that they must not be allowed. When you can be perfectly certain that the other man started them, then is the time when you might have a sort of duty to stop him.” (1958, p. 232).

The cautionary parallel between Arthur and Hitler is reiterated as Kay notices that the young king is fighting to “impose his ideas on King Lot” (1958, p. 266-267) and we inevitably come to realise that “[t]he gap between the fanatical nationalism of the Orkney faction and the civilizing efforts of Arthur, just like the gap between love and hate or cruelty, may actually be an overlap” (Hadfield 2009, p. 425). Doubtlessly, the path to a resolutive pacifist theory is still long and curvy, and Arthur has only begun to make his way towards good rulership. Nonetheless, he is in the right as long as his opponents are King Lot and his Gaelic cohort, who all belong to an old-fashioned generation of nobility who regard warfare as a mere, jolly sport. Lot stands as the “image of fox-hunting without its guilt, and only twenty-five per cent of its danger” (1958, p. 296), and in White’s perspective, he and his fellow “Old Ones” – that is to say the Gaelic tribes – are to be the embodiment of national violence and thirst for vengeance:

> “Pulling swords out of stones is not a legal proof of paternity, I admit, but the kings of the Old Ones are not fighting you about that. They have rebelled, although you are their feudal sovereign, simply because the throne is insecure. England's difficulty, we used to say, is Ireland's opportunity. This is their chance to pay off racial scores, and to have some blood-letting as sport, and to make a bit of money in ransoms.” (1958, p. 225)

The Gaels' uncivilised propensity for violence and blood feuds is reiterated in another episode of *The Queen of Air and Darkness* when, during a heated quarrel with Gawaine, Agravaine attacks his own older brother with a knife, and Gawaine answers in kind with a savage, almost lethal, beating. This early on, we are already warned that Gawaine is a "fatally damaged" person (Hadfield 2009, p. 425) whose passions inevitably overrule his ability to think clearly:

> [W]hen he was in one of these black passions he seemed to pass out of human life. In later days he even killed women, when he had been worked into such a state – though he regretted it bitterly afterwards. (1958, p. 275)

The fight between the brothers anticipates the general mood of the last days of the Arthurian court and the split over Guenever's infidelity. Moreover, the Orkney faction will later perpetrate the trend of blood feuds as they murder both King Pellinore and his son Lamorak, the first as revenge for his accidental killing of King Lot in a tournament, the latter for being discovered in bed with the widowed Queen Morgause.

In opposition to the tenacity of the Old Ones' violent ways, as he matures and his experience in the ways of Man and rulership grows, Arthur will keep on reasoning on the question of Might as Right vs. Might for Right. White's last two Arthurian books, *The Candle in the Wind* and *The Book of Merlyn*, deal more extensively with mankind's violent inclinations. Desperately looking for a way to tame Man's violence and after the catastrophic results of the Grail Quest, in *The Candle in the Wind*, Arthur reaches the conclusion that Might and Right need an intermediary: Law.

> At last he had sought to make a map of force, as it were, to bind it down by laws. He had tried to codify the evil uses of might by individuals, so that he might set bounds to them by the impersonal justice of the state. [...] And then, even as the might of the individual seemed to have been curbed, the Principle of Might had sprung up behind him in another shape—in the shape of collective might, of banded ferocity, of numerous armies insusceptible to individual laws. (1958, p. 628)

However, on the eve of the final battle the old King Arthur reflects on his achievements and on the impossibility of establishing true justice while ruthless enemies keep on attacking it for the mere sake of unleashing their violence. He also understands that "wars were not calamities into which amiable innocents were led by evil men. They were national movements, deeper, more subtle in origin," (1958, p. 630) and as such they will always overwhelm the efforts of the single individuals:

> The fantastic thing about war was that it was fought about nothing—literally nothing. It was geography which was the cause—political geography. It was nothing else. [...] The imaginary lines on the earth's surface only needed to be unimagined. The airborne birds skipped them by nature. How mad the frontiers had seemed to Lyo-lyok, and would to Man if he could learn to fly. (1958, p. 638)

The link between war and national borders leads, in *The Book of Merlyn*, to the wizened sorcerer's solution to end once and for all this sempiternal *casus belli*:

> The simplest and easiest solution [is to] abolish such things as tariff barriers, passports and immigration laws, converting mankind into a federation of individuals. In fact, you must abolish nations, and not only nations but states also; indeed, you must tolerate no unit larger than the family […] the main thing is that we must make it possible for a man living at Stonehenge to pack up his traps overnight and to seek his fortune without hindrance in Timbuktu. (1977, p. 139)

Yet, Merlyn's proposition is uncharacteristically simplistic as war is also part of Man's inner nature, and it will take mankind thousands of years to overcome this genetic trait:

> "[...] man is more inefficient, more *stultus*, than his fellow beasts. Indeed, no sensible observer would expect the contrary. Man has been so short a time upon our globe, that he can scarcely be expected to have mastered much." (1977, p. 49)

As a consequence, the animal Council finds that the Linnean denomination *Homo sapiens* should be rethought. They ponder critically about the definition

of Man as "*sapiens*" once "it became obvious that *sapiens* was hopeless as an adjective" (1977, p. 43). After the alternative of *Homo stultus* is discarded, Merlyn offers his second alternative:

> "*Homo ferox*," continued Merlyn, shaking his head, "that rarity in nature, an animal which will kill for pleasure! There is not a beast in this room who would not scorn to kill, except for a meal. *Homo ferox*, the Inventor of Cruelty to Animals (1977, p. 46)

However, as the animal Council proceeds in their philosophising on politics and nature, the wizard recognises another as Man's damning quality:

> "*Impoliticus*," said Merlyn. "*Homo impoliticus*. You remember that Aristotle defined us as political animals. Badger suggested examining this, and, after we had looked at his politics, *impoliticus* seemed to be the only word to use." [...] "We found that the political ideas of *Homo ferox* were of two kinds: either that problems could be solved by force, or that they could be solved by argument. The ant-men of the future, who believe in force, consider that you can determine whether twice two is four by knocking people down who disagree with you. The democrats, who are to believe in argument, consider that all men are entitled to an opinion, because all are born equal—'I am as good a man as you are,' the first instinctive ejaculation of the man who is not. [...] *Homo impoliticus* is content either to argue with opinions or to fight with his fists, instead of waiting for the truth in his head. It will take a million years, before the mass of men can be called political animals." (1977, pp. 50-51)

As King Arthur weighs all the theorizing and philosophising he has done concerning Might and Right, and he re-evaluates the steps he has taken to curb down the illicitness of Man's ferocity, he understands his system of coded laws will not be enough to bridle a banded force of aggression. Another step has to be taken, but that is now beyond his power and his time:

> If there was such a thing as original sin, if man was on the whole a villain, if the bible was right in saying that the heart of men was deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, then the purpose of his life had been a vain one. Chivalry

> and justice became a child's illusions, if the stock on which he had tried to graft them was to be the Thrasher, was to be *Homo ferox* instead of *Homo sapiens*.
>
> [...] Perhaps there were no virtues, unless jumping at pinpricks was a virtue, and humanity only a mechanical donkey led on by the iron carrot of love, through the pointless treadmill of reproduction. Perhaps Might was a law of Nature, needed to keep the survivors fit. (1958, pp. 629-630)

Yet, not all is lost. Already in *The Sword in the Stone*, Merlyn tells Arthur that "the best thing for being sad... is to learn something," (1958, p. 183) and at the end of *The Candle in the Wind*, Arthur "remembered the aged necromancer who had educated him – who had educated him with animals. There were, he remembered, something like half a million different species of animal, of which mankind was only one" (1958, p. 638). This humbling perspective reveals White's central thesis that "only by retaining a childish desire to learn can we become properly human" (Hadfield 2009, p. 432). Interwoven with the philosophical assumptions of *The Book of Merlyn*, the ending of *The Candle in the Wind* teaches us that the best answer to macrocosmic sorrows like war can be found in culture, and by learning from the past examples of books like Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and White's own sequence: the Pendragon tetralogy finds closure when a youth, not the Wart but a young Tom Malory, takes upon himself the duty to learn and to inspire the future generations to be good and do good thanks to the illuminated example set by King Arthur.

Thus, we could infer that in *The Once and Future King*, Arthur's prophesied return is not to be expected as a literal resurrection of the legendary monarch, but rather as the constant return of the Arthurian legends that we witness again and again in literature, art and music, building up on a tradition to which White himself adds his experimental retelling. "Art and culture, embodied in the young Tom Malory, become crucial [...] so that values and ideals can be preserved and absorbed even when Merlin or some Merlin figure like T. H. White is not around to teach" (Lupack 2005, p. 191). Arthur himself comes to the same conclusion in the awe-inspiring ending of *The Candle in the Wind*:

He caught a glimpse of that extraordinary faculty in man, that strange, altruistic, rare and obstinate decency which will make writers or scientists maintain their truths at the risk of death. *Eppur si muove*, Galileo was to say; it moves all the same. They were to be in a position to burn him if he would go on with it, with his preposterous nonsense about the earth moving round the sun, but he was to continue with the sublime assertion because there was something which he valued more than himself. The Truth. To recognise and to acknowledge What Is. That was the thing which man could do, which his English could do, his beloved, his sleeping, his now defenceless English. They might be stupid, ferocious, unpolitical, almost hopeless. But here and there, oh so seldom, oh so rare, oh so glorious, there were those all the same who would face the rack, the executioner, and even utter extinction, in the cause of something greater than themselves. Truth, that strange thing, the jest of Pilate's. Many stupid young men had thought they were dying for it, and many would continue to die for it, perhaps for a thousand years. They did not have to be right about their truth, as Galileo was to be. It was enough that they, the few and martyred, should establish a greatness, a thing above the sum of all they ignorantly had. (1977, p. 154-156)

2. Fox-hunting

The armies were packs of hounds, as it were, whose struggle with each other was to be commanded by Masters of Hounds, who took the matter as an exciting gamble. (White 1958, p. 296)

The Queen of Air Darkness, already in its primordial shape of *The Witch in the Wood*, deals extensively with Man's taste for and inclination towards cruelty, which is reflected in the Orkney faction's instinctive, at times ingenuous, violence. Indeed, Sprague argues that:

White shows a preoccupation with physical suffering and is obsessed particularly by the cruelty shown to poor dumb animals who, in their brutal stupidity, are incapable of guilt. This preoccupation with animals becomes analogized in an inexpressibly sad transfer to the cruelty shown to small unloved children who, themselves innocent, are chastised unmercifully by the idle, capricious mother whom they continue to adore. (2007, p. 107)

It is true that Morgause's mercilessness sets the tone of the entire book. In the first chapter, the Queen of Lothian is shown while boiling a cat alive, half-heartedly planning to cast a spell of sorts. The disturbing description of the cat's agony, the stark contrast between Morgause's psychotic lack of empathy and the interloping description that her neglected children give about her – "our Mammy is the most beautiful woman in the high-ridged, extensive, ponderous, pleasantly-turning world." "And [because] we love her" (1958, p. 219) – forces the reader to confront head-on the problem of cruelty. The theme of sadism is a matter which is periodically discussed throughout *The Once and Future King* and it aids the shaping of a distinctive identity for White's Arthuriad (Hadfield 2009, p. 420). In fact, Morgause's sadism has been already predated in the first edition of *The Sword in the Stone* from 1938, in the subsequently redacted episode when Madam Mim caught young Kay and Arthur and planned to eat them like an ogre from a fairy tale:

> "There's the cruel old custom [...] of plucking a poor chicken before it is dead. The feathers come out cleaner so. Nobody could be so cruel as to do that nowadays, by Nothing or by Never, but of course a little boy doesn't feel any pain. Their clothes come off nicer if you take them off alive, and who would dream of roasting a little boy in his clothes, to spoil the feast?" (pp. 77-78)

Because of this recurrent repetition of cruelty and the presence of multiple sadistic characters, we come to wonder whether Morgause is acting unnaturally in destroying an innocent creature so wantonly – she loses interest in her experiment before achieving her goal, thus rendering the cat's agonising death utterly senseless – or if she is rather showing us how "dreadful and terrifying nature untamed by civilization can be" (Hadfield 2009, p. 421). In the wild and savage Scottish outlands, the least tamed area of Arthur's civilised dominion, Morgause actively feeds on the festering resentment of her children in order to turn them against Arthur. Her reason for this generational hatred would be Uther's seduction of Igraine, Morgause's mother and the children's grandmother: "They considered the enormous English wickedness in silence, overwhelmed by its dénouement. It was their mother's favourite story, on the rare occasions when she troubled to tell them one, and they had learned it by heart" (1958, p. 216).

Morgause's wicked education of her children contrasts pointedly with the rich, life-enhancing schooling that Merlyn imparts on Arthur in *The Sword in the Stone*. Her neglect and the volatility of her displays of affection transforms the Orkney boys into love-starved individuals, too inexperienced to understand the scope of their mother's cruelty or to point out Morgause's hypocrisy when she blames others for their wretchedness but fails to see her own. Morgause's disturbingly mean influence on her children is probably best captivated in the ominous episode of the killing of the unicorn: as King Pellinore and Sir Grummore comically land in the Orkneys, Morgause flirts with them and persuades them to go hunting for a unicorn with her. Obviously, their hunt can only fail as the presence of a virginal maiden is paramount to attract this kind of mythical beast. Aware of their mother's displeasure at the botched hunt, the Orkney boys decide to trap a unicorn for her, and, after consulting their teacher St Toirdelbach, they plan to capture one using the young girl Meg as bait. The children are so caught up in their plot to capture the unicorn and please their mother, they do not even realise how cruel they are acting towards the poor girl:

> In the clean bog-wind of the high tops, they discussed the hunt. Meg, who cried incessantly, was held by the hair to prevent her from running away, and occasionally passed from one boy to the other, if the one who was holding her happened to want both hands for gestures. (1958, p. 255-256)

White furtherly highlights the cruelty of the uneducated and directionless youths when the unicorn finally arrives and gently lays its horn on Meg's lap: as Meg functions here as a stand-in Morgause, Agravaine immediately understands the sexual metaphor of the horn and the virgin, and he brutally murders the unicorn, for, "This girl is my mother. He put his head in her lap. He had to die" (1958, p. 259). The boys try to contain the damage Agravaine has done and set themselves to follow the proper hunting procedure and perform a gralloch by removing the guts of the unicorn so that every part of the animal can be used. However, they are unskilled and untrained, and soon the unicorn becomes no more than a revolting carcass: "Everything had begun to be horrible, and the once beautiful animal was spoiled and repulsive" (1958, p. 261).

As Hadfield notices, killing a unicorn is an especially wicked and senseless crime, for not only are unicorns a symbol of innocence and purity, they also stand as symbols of Christ (2009, p. 425). Nonetheless, the boys' dogged perseverance in trying to present the precious spoils to their mother reads as "a product of their warped childhoods" (Hadfield 2009, p. 425), and a warning of the unrelentingly cruel individuals they are doomed to become as adults:

> All three of them [Agravaine, Gaheris, and Gawaine] loved the unicorn in their various ways, Agravaine in the most twisted one, and, in proportion as they became responsible for spoiling its beauty, so they began to hate it for their guilt. Gawaine particularly began to hate the body. He hated it for being dead, for having been beautiful, for making him feel a beast. He had loved it and helped to trap it, so now there was nothing to be done except to vent his shame and hatred of himself upon the corpse. He hacked and cut and felt like crying too. (1958, p. 261)

The boys' gut reaction to the maiming of something as beautiful as the unicorn is significant: Gawaine and Gareth have room for improvement, and with a better, healthier education they might have become more mindful of senseless violence and taken responsibility for their cruel action. On the other hand, Agravaine is a sadist and a psychopath, as Mordred will be.

It is to be noticed that, out of a lot of four – soon to be five – sons, both children who will turn out to be the cruellest criminals are the ones who were the most subjected to Morgause's influence.

The matter of motherhood and culpability

There are several important female characters to be found in the vastness of the Arthuriad and, among them, Lady Igraine is one of the most significant, as she is Arthur's and the Cornwall sisters' mother. However, White elects to erase her completely from *The Once and Future King*: not only she is not mentioned during Arthur's adulthood – thus cancelling any positive influence she might have had on

him – but his childhood also lacks any alternative maternal simulacrum. Contrary to other authors interested in Arthur's childhood and early adolescence – such as Marion Zimmer Bradley and Mary Stewart – White painstakingly avoids introducing even Sir Ector's wife, who in Malory nursed and cared for Arthur since infancy, and whom was in turn remembered fondly by the young king.

Truth to be told, the Old Nurse of *The Sword in the Stone* provides the only note of feminine presence in White's Castle Sauvage. She appears to have worked for Sir Ector's family for forty years already and, because of her incredible familiarity with him, she is not too deferential towards her lord or the little children in his care. Although the anonymous Old Nurse serves mostly as a comic figure, with her malapropisms and trivial fussing, she is still handled with enormous sympathy: in making the only nurturing female presence in Castle Sauvage a lowly commoner, White probably feels that he is dodging the great authority a noblewoman would impose over Kay and the Wart (Sprague 2007, p. 81).

White's mistrust and wariness with regards to female authority stems most probably from his admittedly conflictual relationship with his own mother. Brewer remarks how White considers himself "as parentless to all intents and purposes as Arthur, except in so far as he had in the background an active mother who was not like the gentle Igraine, but whom he later came to hate and to characterise as a witch" (1993, p. 22). In White's traumatised vision, a "female figure is in a position of authority, able to wield absolute powers of pleasure and pain" (Sprague 2007, p. 78) so it is understandable that he would try to limit the female power by inducing his readers to associate women with instability and emotional unpredictability, as in the case of the dismissed governess of *The Sword in the Stone* or Lancelot's Elaine. However, even in their absence, White's Arthurian female figures manage to wield an incommensurable impact on the male characters who would otherwise gravitate around them. In fact, that very absence and unreliability influences much of the men's actions and thoughts.

1. **Arthur's loves: Lyo-lyok and Guenever**

The first female character we encounter in *The Sword in the Stone* who can be perceived under a vaguely romantic light is Maid Marian, Robin Wood's beloved. However, it should be noted that the moment that the Wart's thoughts travel ideally towards images of marriage, White quickly establishes that Marian's charms reside in her skills as a woodswoman, not in her attractiveness: Marian is proficient at whistling, imitations, hunting and archery, which positively impresses the Wart. Maid Marian is more of a woodsprite, a creature of the forest than an actual woman. Nothing in her nature is inherently female enough to threaten White's necessity for a male-dominated, quiet childhood.

Only when the Wart meets the goose Lyo-lyok, the boy encounters an individual that can be seen as utterly female. Indeed, the Wart grows progressively fond of Lyo-lyok, "in spite of her being a girl" (1958, p. 171). Their relationship is based mainly on education: Lyo-lyok explains to Arthur the ritual of sentry-duty, she educates him on the utopian society of the migrant fowls who know no war because they have no borders to conquer or to defend. In fact, she is abysmally repulsed by the concept of war as the Wart tries to inquire about it. Overviewing White's relationships with women, Sprague comments that,

> It is somehow fitting that the most purely human, dignified, warm-hearted of the sex be cast by White as a fowl—writing about another species entirely, White could attain the objectivity toward women that is lacking elsewhere in the book. (2007, p. 82)

In his words, Lyo-lyok functions as a "repository of wisdom and power" (2007, p. 82) in *The Sword in the Stone*; however, the scenes with Lyo-Lyok, first appeared in *The Book of Merlyn*, and their tone steers more towards romantic affections rather than platonic feeling of mutual friendship and understanding. The innocence of the Wart's relationship with Lyo-Lyok is the result of significant reworkings, although the warmth between the two appears in both versions. One of the longest passages which White cuts from his geese's episode in *The Book of Merlyn* follows Arthur's

crossing of the North Sea, and it contains the heartbreaking detail of Arthur's unhappiness over Lancelot and Guenever's affair:

> A married couple would repair to the same nest, year by year, although they might have travelled many thousand miles between. The nest was private, and so was family life. Geese, [Lyo-lyok] explained, were not promiscuous in their love affairs, except in adolescence; which, she believed, was as it should be. When they were married, they were married for their lives. (1977, p. 113-114)

Here, an aged and world-weary Arthur reflects upon his human griefs and wonders how quiet and tender a life among the geese would be instead:

> He began comparing [Lyo-lyok] wistfully with the women he had known, not always to her disadvantage. She was healthier than they were, nor had she ever had the megrims or the vapours or the hysterics. She was as healthy as himself, as strong, as able on the wing. There was nothing that he could do, which she could not do: so that their community of interests would be exact. She was docile, prudent, faithful, conversable. She was a great deal cleaner than most women, because she spent one half of the day in preening herself and the other half in water, nor were her features disfigured by a single smear of paint. Once she had been married, she would accept no further lovers. She was more beautiful than the average woman, because she possessed a natural shape instead of an artificial one. She was graceful and did not waddle, for all the wild geese do their walking easily, and he had learned to think her plumage handsome. She would be a loving mother. (1977, p. 128-129)

In his brooding, Lyo-lyok becomes the paragon of the good and faithful companion, of the type of wife Arthur has probably longed for all his life without even knowing someone like her existed. And indeed, Lyo-lyok is impossible to find: as the old Arthur is about to propose to her, Merlyn's magic brings him back to the animal Council, back to his human life, forever snatching away Arthur's chance at a happy marriage and a happy life. As readers, we cannot help but wonder if White is subtly or even unconsciously suggesting that a joyful and fulfilling companionship with a woman is so impossible to enjoy that even magic would fail to grant it.

Opposing Lyo-lyok's gentle quietness, we find Arthur's true lifelong partner: Guenever. Although she appears only in the second half of *The Once and Future King*, her character is so wilful and well-defined that she can hardly be forgotten. She is a fully fledged person, rich in personality: White identifies three determining sides of her character and calls her "Jenny" when she is sweet and intimate, "Guenever" when she is calm and neutral, yet she becomes a distant and imperious "Queen" as she unleashes her fury (Sprague 2007, p. 124). Although Guenever "is seen almost entirely from the outside" and "[h]er actual thoughts are very seldom revealed" (Brewer 1993, p. 90) she feels genuine and true since White worked tirelessly on the veracity and credibility of her character, seeking advices from his most trusted friends: White has always been candid about his ignorance of women, therefore he asked Mary Potts, the wife of his former tutor at Cambridge, J. H. Potts, how a woman like Guenever might behave. His letter to the Potts feels familiar and humorous, but White's tone betrays his underlying embarrassment:

> If either you or Mary have heard anything about what love feels like at 50, or about whether a man of 50 can go on loving a mistress of the same age, with whom he has been sleeping for 30 years, I should be glad to hear it? And what about love-making during the change of life? Has Mary some famous book on this, or will she write me a brief monograph on the subject (and will it get past the censor)? (Gallix 1982; as quoted in Brewer 1993, p. 90)

It is interesting that the most realistic female character in White's books – someone who is not haunting like Morgause, passive as Lyo-lyok and neither stereotypical as the Old Nurse feels – is Guenever, a character which White eventually shapes mostly thanks to the constant help of another friend, Mrs Ray Garnett (Brewer 1993, p. 10). Any curious reader would end up wondering: if Constance White, the mother of the author, reputedly influenced the portrayal of Morgause so much that the Queen of Lothian became her literary alter-ego, how much of Ray Garnett became Guenever?

Aside from Mrs Garnett's positive advice, another reason for White's success with the characterization of Guenever might be that White, like Malory and Tennyson, harbours an unwavering hero-worship for Lancelot:

> None but a genuine heroine would be proper to serve as Lancelot's mistress: anything else would be demeaning. Lancelot's character might have been enriched if White had seen Guenever as a different sort of woman. If she had been fragile and gentle, perhaps, the contrast between Lancelot's gentleness in falling in love with her and the fury of his sword arm could have been accentuated. But to some extent this is the kind of person Elaine is, and the queen must contrast with her. (Sprague 2007, p. 121)

In White's narration, Guenever's "central tragedy" is that she has no children (1958, p. 472), and so showers her affection and sexual love onto the only two men in her life who can return her feelings: Arthur and Lancelot (Hadfield 2009, p. 427). Moreover, White recognises that the bond between Guenever and Lancelot sometimes borders on Oedipal as the dynamics of White's Arthurian triangle are multi-layered: while Lancelot and Guenever are lovers close in age, Guenever suffers for the weight of her childlessness, so much so that when she views herself as Arthur's wife instead of Lancelot's lover, the younger man idealistically fills the void left by the child she and Arthur never had.

Since White admittedly sees Lancelot as a projection of himself, the undeniable physical resemblance that Guenever shares with Morgause – Constance White's alter-ego – can be read as disturbing (Sprague 2007, p. 5). However, the contraposition between Guenever and Morgause could be interpreted as such: Morgause is everything a woman should not be, while Guenever, whose spontaneity and honesty White genuinely respects, is the example of how a good woman should be, and the type of companion men should aspire to meet. Flawed, passionate and with an unpredictable temper as Guenever is, she is also caring, beautiful, and loyal – in her own way – to the people she loves. Bearing in mind that White never truly reconciled with his misogynistic and suspicious view of women, Guenever is the best exponent of the female gender that White could ever understand: "a woman who had grown a soul" (1958, p. 564).

2. **"Innocence is not enough"**

> Since Arthur is so strongly admired in most works, it is hardly a surprise that there should be attempts to absolve him of guilt as far as possible by placing the blame on others. One way to achieve this is to transform him from the seducer of a guest, as in the later medieval prose romances, into the victim of seduction by an older and more experienced woman. Further sympathy is gained by making Morgause aware that he is her half-brother, while preserving Arthur's ignorance. His subsequent sense of guilt contrasts favorably with her flagrant disregard of propriety to further her own ambitions. (Thompson 1993, p. 8)

On a different yet related instance, despite *The Once and Future King* being a tragedy and thus the catastrophe and heartbreak happen are *bound* to occur, White takes away neither agency nor guilt from his protagonist's hands:

> "What did you do?"
>
> "I let them make a proclamation that all the children born at a certain time were to be put in a big ship and floated out to sea. I wanted to destroy Mordred for his own sake, and I didn't know where he would be born."
>
> "Did they do it?"
>
> "Yes, the ship was floated off, and Mordred was on it, and it was wrecked on an island. Most of the poor babies were drowned—but God saved Mordred, and sent him back to shame me afterwards, Morgause sprang him on me one day, long after she had got him back. But she always pretended to other people that he was a proper son of Lot's, like Gawaine and the rest. Naturally she didn't want to talk about the business to outside people, and neither have the rest of his brothers."
>
> "Well," said Guenever, "if nobody knows about it except the Orkneys and ourselves, and if Mordred is safe and sound…"
>
> "You mustn't forget the other babies," he said miserably. "I dream about them."
>
> [...]

> “Arthur,” [Lancelot] exclaimed, “you have nothing to be ashamed of. What you did was done to you, when you were too young to know better. If I could lay my hands on the brutes who frighten children with stories about sin, I would break their necks.” (1958, pp. 548-549)

White’s Arthur fully acknowledges his guilt and his shame in trying to have Mordred killed by drowning. Lancelot and Jenny’s refusal to see and accept his fault shows how immature they are, despite their old age, compared to King Arthur. They rob him of his agency by saying he was young and ill-advised, and they direct the real guilt – the real *sin* – towards the counsellors who instructed him to have his natural son murdered. Yet, Arthur never absconds to their opinion as he admits full responsibility for his past actions: “You would not call me a wicked man?” (1958, p. 551). White’s Arthur bears the blame for the drowning of all those babies and for the unsuccessful killing of Mordred, unlike in Mary Stewart’s text which, in the final part of her Merlinian trilogy, *The Last Enchantment* (1979), will portray him as completely guiltless. Additionally, even though White’s Arthur does not know he is committing incest with his sister when he loves Morgause, there is still a damning touch of incestuous feelings as White never quite explains what draws Arthur to Morgause. Indeed, he lets the reader infer that it is Morgause’s image as a mother which appeals to Arthur – a motherless young man – and his affair with her is the fulfilment of an Oedipal fantasy. Possibly, this is the reason why White decides to deprive Arthur of Igraine’s support: with his biological mother present, Arthur would already have a maternal figure to which he could cling, and a healthy one, so he would hardly fall prey to Morgause’s desires. Instead, much like Madam Mim tries to eat Arthur in *The Sword in the Stone*, Morgause hunts down and captures the young king.

This unconscious incestuous lust finds no place in Stewart’s *The Hollow Hills* (1973), where Arthur is only a young boy, hot-blooded and excited for his first victory, and Morgause seduces him despite being fully aware that Arthur is her half-brother. Similarly, Vera Chapman in *The Echantresses* (1998) explicitly informs us over and over that Arthur has no idea that Morgause is his sister – in fact, he does not even know that Morgause is Morgause: she introduces herself as the fairy queen of Hy-

Bresail (1998, p. 164) – and it is repeatedly stated that Morgause hungers for a little brother, perhaps that she lusts after him. Therefore, the guilt of sin falls once again entirely upon Morgause, and Arthur is more of a victim rather than a criminal. Bradley follows a similar path in *The Mists of Avalon* (1989), except that in her narration both Morgaine – not Morgause in this specific instance – and Arthur are manipulated by the higher powers of Avalon so that they will lie together and, hopefully, conceive an heir who will be fully Avalon's and the Goddess's: neither of the two unwilling future parents know who the other is; in fact, as they realise they have committed incest, they are both horrified and Morgaine decides to forswear altogether her allegiance to Avalon. Moreover, Morgaine will keep the secret about her son, initially choosing not to tell Arthur about the baby's existence at all, and then, once her maternity is revealed, she still conceals the identity of the boy's father. As a consequence, the incident of Arthur commanding the Herodian drowning of the babies in the attempt to kill his own son never takes place in *The Mists of Avalon*.

The eerie line "but, it seems, in tragedy innocence is not enough" (1958, p. 312) does not appear, at first, in White's *The Witch in the Wood*, where Morgause is ridiculed and exaggerated to the point she is grotesquely comic. Yet, once White transforms his witch into a queen, hauntingly terrifying, Arthur's innocence and ingenuity against her stark hunger is emphasised, and the unfairness and cruelty of the Arthurian tragedy is perfectly conveyed in this remarkable sentence. White is absolutely right in saying that the Arthurian legend is the perfect tragedy: actually, it is a tragedy of biblical proportions where one act foreshadows and preempts a future one – and we have already seen in our surmise of the early Arthurian texts how Arthur was at first depicted as the secular Messiah of the Britons.
According to White, three big tragedies flow into the greatest tragedy of all, the fall of Arthur and his Camelot: the Cornwall Feud, existing since Uther killed Gorlois to marry his wife's Igraine, the Nemesis of Incest, and the Guenever-Lancelot romance (Brewer 1993, p. 49). Mordred stands at the epicentre of the three calamities: he is Igraine's grandchild and brother to the Orkney lot, he is Arthur's incestuous son, and the denouncer of Lancelot and Guenever's affair. So, when Arthur lies – albeit

unknowingly – with his own sister, the young hero literally sows the seed of his own destruction. However, that seed has been already planted in the beginning, as the fall of Mankind is preannounced by the Fall of Lucifer: the adulterous affair – because Igraine did not know herself to be already a widow as she lay with Uther – which leads to Arthur's birth is already an omen of both causes to Arthur's own demise, namely Mordred's illicit conceiving, and Lancelot and Guinevere's adultery. Before his encounter with the demonic Morgause, "Arthur was happy. Like the man in Eden before the fall, he was enjoying his innocence and fortune" (1958, p. 226): he is so untouched by the weight of sin that he lives in a state of Edenic bliss. With the introduction of Morgause, though, White begins to confront the inherent tragedy of the Arthurian legends, namely, "that the best education in the world could not devise a way of avoiding, might even contribute to, the ultimate disaster" (Brewer 1993, p. 22).

Because White's study of psychoanalysis makes him "acutely aware of the importance of early upbringing and of parent/child relationship", he mostly blamed his mother and the unstable childhood he led because of her for all his traumas and neuroses (Brewer 1993, p. 23). So, either consciously or unconsciously, he regurgitates all his resentment against her as he writes Morgause, the Arthurian epitome of the cruel, unloving mother:

> Morgause is the villain of the piece. (I may mention that she is my mother.) This is why I have had such awful difficulty with her. I have already written that book four separate times, sometimes taking her seriously, sometimes trying to palm her off under a patter of farce. I shall have to write it again. (White, as quoted in Sprague 2007, p. 103)

White's first portrayal of Morgause begins as a savage attack on the faults and failings of his own mother Constance. His spite for Constance White – and, in turn, for Morgause – is so extreme and brutal that the initial version of the Queen of Lothian is hardly better than a caricature, unconvincing in her villainous glory, too exaggerated to inspire any real horror and at the same time too disgusting to provoke humour. Under the pressure of his publisher and his friends, who invite White to rethink Morgause, White revises the manuscript several times, until he

succeeds in transforming *The Witch in the Wood* into *The Queen of Air and Darkness* (Hadfield 2009, p. 420). At last, the Queen of Lothian is depicted without the hindrance of the savage animosity, personal bitterness and physical disgust that impedes the earlier version (Brewer 1993, p. 57). With this new version of Morgause, White creates a powerfully symbolic figure of the female who threatens and devours the male; truthfully, the rendering of Morgause in *The Queen of Air and Darkness* is reminiscent of the Arthurian female counter-hero who violates the norms of patriarchy with her magic and charms, and whose beauty is a danger to the Arthurian hero as she refuses to submit to the authority of the male characters (Fries 1996).

Morgause's attacks are physical, sexual, and maternal: when she is not neglecting them, Morgause shapes her children, vulnerable victims of her whimsical nature, after her own image, and she inculcates an innate mistrust of the Englishmen in her sons' malleable minds by dogmatically recounting the tale of Igraine's seduction by Uther, stressing its violent connotations. White justifies the Orkney faction's volatile nature by showing us the childhood they lead and how Morgause dominates them, how she influences them well into their adulthood. Later, in *The Ill-Made Knight*, Lancelot will be inevitably put in comparison with Morgause and the Orkney faction as a person who, like them, suffers from an innate instinct to hurt and who finds pleasure in causing pain. However, Lancelot wilfully chooses to restrain his inner violence and to punish himself when he causes pain:

> It is the bad people who need to have principles to restrain them. For one thing, he [Lancelot] liked to hurt people. It was for the strange reason that he was cruel, that the poor fellow never killed a man who asked for mercy, or committed a cruel action which he could have prevented. One reason why he fell in love with Guenever was because the first thing he had done was to hurt her. He might never have noticed her as a person, if he had not seen the pain in her eyes. (White 1958, p. 339)

Even though they both contribute to the annihilation of the Arthurian world, the civilized and caring Lancelot stands in contrast to Morgause's uncontrolled savagery (Hadfield 2009, p. 421). True enough, the Queen's influence is so heavy that, even

after her death, Morgause lives on in the child she had under her control the longest: Mordred.

Instead of healing the scars left by Morgause education, the affection shown to him "by the King-father whom his mother had taught him to hate with all his heart" leaves Mordred "confused between the loves and hatred of his frightful home" (1958 p. 523), and the conflagration of Morgause's will and Arthur's meekness cause him to grow up misshapen in mind as well as body. The "poor boy" (1958, p. 549) becomes his mother's twisted reincarnation, and even his taste for farcical fashion is reminiscent of Morgause's first depiction in *The Witch in the Wood*, as she appears when reading the pages of an "uncanny" magazine-turned-grimoire *Vague* while smoking from a fashionable cigarette holder (1939, p. 14).

> He, while his brothers fled to England, was the one who stayed alone with her for twenty years—her living larder (1958, p. 611-612). Now that she was dead, he had become her grave. She existed in him like the vampire. When he moved, when he blew his nose, he did it with her movement. When he acted he became as unreal as she had been, pretending to be a virgin for the unicorn. He dabbled in the same cruel magic. He had even begun to keep lap dogs like her—although he had always hated hers with the same bitter jealousy as that with which he had hated her lovers. (1958, p. 612)

This is the ultimate maternal rape: in dying, Morgause takes back the life she has given, and she takes control of her son's body like a demonic vampire-mother. She is a parasite, a dead thing living off the life of her son, and her conscience inside him drives him to madness. Merged with his mother's consciousness, Mordred is shaped to be "the feminized alter-ego of Arthur, a twisted black shadow of his father" (Worthington 2002, p. 113).

From this perspective, the theme of incest is exponentially multiplied in him: not only is Mordred the biological product of sibling incest, his absorption of Morgause's spirit transmutes his madness into the abstract spawn of the incestuous rape he suffers by his mother. Finally, his threat to marry Guenever, his father's wife, does not only read as an attempt at substituting his father Arthur, but also as an even more

disturbing incest with the closest living mother-figure he has: “Yes. My father committed incest with my mother. Don’t you think it would be a pattern, Jenny, if I were to answer it by marrying my father’s wife?” (1958, p. 616)

4. Queens and witches: Mary Stewart and Marion Zimmer Bradley

> *In contrast to Classical myths and stories, [Celtic myths] do not lend themselves to such easy categorisation. Our old myths are incredibly complex: both structurally and morally. I work with Celtic myths and archetypes above all because, unlike stories from profoundly patriarchal civilisations like Greece and Rome, they accord power to women. In our native Celtic mythology, women are the guardians and protectors of the land, carrying all the moral and spiritual authority of the Otherworld.*
>
> *(Blackie, 2016)*

In her work *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion* (1983) Jackson borrows the Freudian notion of the Uncanny as the breaking through of an unconscious repression which can be either individual or cultural. Supposedly, these cultural repressions are essential to safeguard the cultural continuity; however, repression naturally instigates a need to be faced and discussed by the repressed subjects. Fantasy literature, then, provides a safe space where to address the repression without dealing with the most disturbing aspects of the Uncanny: cultural taboos can be explored and even enjoyed within the safe containment of imaginary worlds; in the modern fantastic, the Uncanny disrupts the reality where it is contextualised, preserving the continuity in the real world. Thus, according to Jackson, fantastic literature is always embedded in its individual and social context, as it comes from an inner urge to discuss and critique issues of the real world which cannot be solved there – at least, not immediately. Indeed, we have already seen in the previous chapter how much the socio-cultural context of World War II influenced T. H. White during the writing of his fantastic Arthuriad, so it comes not as a surprise that the

booming interest in mysticism and spirituality of the XX century would influence the Arthuriads from that – and even our – time period.

The two key elements of the Arthurian legends which are usually reworked into spiritualistic/religious retellings are Merlin and the Holy Grail (Dean 1988, p. 61). Most often, Merlin is associated with the druidic tradition of ancient and medieval Britain; as a mortal man and also a supernatural priest, he stands as the conjunction between familiar and unfamiliar – the Uncanny – that is to say, he links the real world to the preternatural and the fantastic. *The Mists of Avalon* (1983) portrays him as the living link between Avalon, the heart of the ancient matriarchal religion of the Goddess, and the secular world of Camelot; he exists in both worlds while belonging to neither of them. While Bradley reduces him to a simple title – Taliessin first and Kevin later are the appointed "Merlin of Britain" – Mary Stewart in her *Merlin Trilogy* (1970-1979) portrays him instead as a skilled architect, a healer and a counsellor; however, he is a Sighted prophet above all, and the chosen worshipper of the God among people – not his hand nor his representative on earth, but rather the very voice of the deity, a liminal creature who stands between the human and the divine.

On the other hand, the Holy Grail as presented in the Arthurian legends has always been subject to many different studies which try to identify the thin line between the fictionality of the Arthuriad and the reality of the Grail (Mersey 2004, pp. 166-167). Because one of the Grail's powers would be to provide whatever food and drink one desires, many have associated it with the Celtic cauldron of plenty (Kennedy 2009, p. 204) and have consequently incorporated it into a Celtic spiritual dimension instead of a Christian one, alongside the sword Excalibur and – sometimes – the staff of Joseph of Arimathea. Vera Chapman swings between the two options by presenting the Holy Grail as a Christian relic, whereas Excalibur is a magical sword retrieved from the clutches of a lake monster. In different narratives, both sword and chalice have even been identified as the regalia of legendary figures from the past, as in the case of *The Merlin Trilogy*, where the sword, the cup and even the tip of a spear – which seems suspiciously similar to the Spear of Longinus – belonged to Macsen Wledig – the same Magnus Maximus who appears in the Welsh *Mabinogion*

and who is mentioned again also in *The Mists of Avalon* – and they become Excalibur and the Holy Grail.

> In religious fantasies and in pagan ones, this context of supernaturalism/magic locates good and evil outside the merely human, in a different dimension. It is a displacement of human responsibility onto the level of destiny: human action is seen as operating under the controlling influence of Providence, whether for good or for evil. (Jackson 1981, p. 31)

Fantasy functions as a space where the repressed can be freed, and as such it has become the speaking platform for feminine voices. Although the Arthurian literary tradition is undoubtedly foregrounded in masculine ideals of kingship, power and chivalry, contemporary Arthurian retellings written by women rework the patriarchal structures by means of the fantastic element; the foundations of these feminist revisions lie in the traditional presence in the Arthurian legends of women who challenge the patriarchal structures thanks to their magic: medieval Arthurian literature used the element of magic to contain, villainise and dehumanize feminine agency, depicting magic women as evil or distant; conversely, contemporary women writers rebuke this process of othering by including the legitimization of magic through religious rituals or through a depiction of magic as privileged source of knowledge and skill rather than common-folk sorcery (Hebert 2014; Shaw 2009).

> [A]s the feminine moves from the textual unconscious to "inhabit" the textual consciousness, texts play out the cultural repression of feminine agency and autonomy. This can be done through the explicit delineation of repressions, or through the exploration of alternative socio-cultural possibilities. (Shaw 2009, p. 466)

A lively breaking through of female repression is presented by Vera Chapman in her *Three Damosels* (1976) and her proclamation of female independence is reasserted in her following trilogy *The Enchantresses* (1998). Particularly in *The King's Damosel*, the second novella of the *Damosels*, the heroine Lynette shatters the stereotype of the dependent and passive woman and becomes King Arthur's appointed Damosel, his travelling representative, equal to the Knights of the Round

Table. Lynette is outspoken, short-tempered, brave and daring. She lives in violent times and, in her adventures, she suffers rape and incarceration; however, at the end of the novella, she is finally rewarded for her strength of heart by fully achieving the Grail. A perfect example of Maureen Fries's "female hero", Lynette "[is] able to undertake journeys to knowledge in which encounters with that which is Other lead ultimately to the decisive encounter with the Self" and she returns to her home "with the prized gift of renewal" (Fries, 1996 p. 60).

Indeed, the trend of feminist fictions sees the female characters appropriating power or symbols of power for themselves – as Lynette does by obtaining the Grail while her fellow knights fail – often reversing the traditional gender roles. In the Arthurian context, this is usually exemplified when Arthur receives the sword which appoints him King of Albion: the possession of the sword from the stone and/or the sword from the lake – Excalibur – anoints him as king by divine right. Swords stand as a universal symbol of power and kingship, and are usually acknowledged as phallic, associated with maleness, because of their shape and their obvious connections with warfare and battle (Howey, 1999); yet, both in *The Enchantresses* as well as in *The Mists of Avalon*, female characters explicitly appropriate the right to appoint Arthur as king since in both books it is the Lady of the Lake who chooses to retrieve the sword and bestow it upon him. Similarly, in the non-fantastic retelling *Here Lies Arthur* (2007), a young girl hides in the water following Merlin's direct orders, and Arthur receives the sword from her hand in a make-believe supernatural ceremony which will be spun into the legend of the Lady of the Lake and King Arthur's magical sword.

The purpose of *Here Lies Arthur* is not to reinterpret the Arthurian legends after a feminist fashion but rather to play with the concepts of storytelling and historical fiction, two themes which often catch the interest of Arthurian retellers. Truthfully, even in religious and pagan retellings of the Arthurian saga like *The Mists of Avalon*, *The Merlin Trilogy* or even Lawhead's *Pendragon Cycle* (1987-1997), the historical setting cannot be eschewed. Most of the time, the political context will be one of warlords and petty quarrels between kingdoms, and a recurring theme of defeating

barbarism and countering anarchy will inevitably emerge. When historicity is required, many authors prefer to adhere to the early canon of Nennius, Bede and Geoffrey, picking out only the most convenient elements from Malory, and while romantic Celticism is usually very marked, reminders of Rome often linger in the background. Sometimes, magic is explained rather rationalistically, leaving space only for some or few extraordinary moments of pure supernaturality – as in Stewart's trilogy – or it acquires mystical, New-Age accents – as with Bradley and many of her successors (Shippey 2009, p. 459).

Nowadays, the most complex exploration of socio-cultural alternatives we are offered in a feminist Arthurian revision is probably still *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley. Her work depicts the existence of Avalon's feminine social order, vibrantly opposed to male-dominated structures, which promotes "an order of agency and autonomy outside masculine understanding and control" (Shaw 2009, p. 466-467): the women from *The Mists* find refuge and independence in the matriarchal community of Avalon, where they can escape the oppression – or even the simple presence – of men. In Bradley's text, the conflagration of male and female is mostly expressed as a fight between the liberating cult of the Goddess, Ceridwen, and the repressing dogmas of Christianity.

Among the myriad of contemporary – explicitly or less so – feminist Arthurian retellings, we shall compare Stewart's *Merlin Trilogy* and Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* because of the similarities they bear both in style and themes: in both works, the narrator appears in the first person, leading to the identification between reader and narrator while also hinting at a superimposition of author and narrator; but most and foremost, *The Merlin Trilogy* and *The Mists of Avalon* share a deep interest in religious concepts and in female agency, although they express their ideologies in contrasting ways. The most obvious difference between Bradley and Stewart is perhaps that the latter argues for an individual relationship with the divine, whereas Bradley focuses on the public and social effects of religion: Stewart's trilogy depicts a "pluralist environment in which one individual experiences a personal calling from a god" (Hildebrand 2001, p. 18), so it does not invoke the *imperium* of one religion

over all others; indeed, its conclusion rather argues in a favour of a peaceful, supposedly natural progression of the cults, where some things will get inevitably lost yet without causing any pain to human beings. On the other hand, Bradley is explicitly feminist and Neo-Pagan, she proclaims the religion of the Goddess as the empowering religion of women, and its submission under the yoke of Christianity is portrayed as an entrapment of the feminine divine, as a religious aphasia which deprives women of their right to speak, to act and to think for themselves. Nonetheless, in the end *The Mists of Avalon* also reiterates that all religions are the same, and all gods and goddesses are actually only one primordial deity.

Both these texts stand as solid proof of the never-ending interest for the Arthurian legends and of their inherent flexibility, as the Arthurian matter is here moulded to highlight the gravity of religious issues and to express notions and fears about gender inequality as perceived by the modern public.

The Merlin Trilogy

> I am an old man now, but then I was already past my prime when Arthur was crowned King. The years since then seem to me now more dim and faded than the earlier years, as if my life were a growing tree which burst to flower and leaf with him, and now has nothing more to do than yellow to the grave. (1970, p. 11)

The late XX century sees an increasing disillusionment with the ability of political leaders to set things right. As a consequence, a trend in heroes who can magically bring back order emerges in literature, with Merlin as one the prime examples: Merlin is a wizard who can aid his leader – Arthur – in accomplishing his goal of peace and unity thanks to his preternatural wisdom and his abilities as a prophet, and as such, he becomes a dear point of reference for disillusioned authors (Dean 1988, p. 61).

As the protagonist of Mary Stewart's best-selling trilogy composed by *The Crystal Cave* (1970), *The Hollow Hills* (1973) and *The Last Enchantment* (1979), Merlin ponders about his role as counsellor at King Arthur's court:

> I was there, appealed to sometimes, but in the main watching and listening only: the counsel I gave him [Arthur], I gave in private, behind closed doors. In the public sight, the decisions were his. Indeed, they were his as often as mine, and as time went on I was content to let his judgment have its way. (1979 p. 772)

As opposed to White's Merlyn, who interferes more actively in the life of Camelot by consistently leading Arthur towards the path he considers the rightest, in *The Last Enchantment*, Stewart's Merlin completes his gradual shift to the role of passive listener:

> Less and less did he need to come to me for counsel, but, as always since his boyhood, he needed the chance to talk over—to himself as much as to me—the course of events, and the problems of the newlybuilt concourse of kingdoms as they arose. (1979, p. 833)

Stewart's Merlin, as many other Merlin-like characters who draw extensively from medieval and mythological traditions, reminds us of a Trickster figure, inasmuch "Tricksters typically change form, confusing the distinctions between male and female or human and animal" (Attebery 2012, p. 87); and Stewart's Merlin consistently disrupts and mediates between polar opposites: religious and secular power, male and female. However, her Merlin is also doubtlessly human, not the embodiment of an archetype and, as such, he is complex and deeply flawed: as a child, Merlin is ostracised by his peers because of his bastardy and his lack of physical strength; as a young man, he yearns for a legitimate father who will recognise his incredible intelligence and ambition; even as an adult, after his father Ambrosius dies, he perseveres in chasing his parent's shadow, caring about Arthur only because he recognises in the child the reincarnation of his beloved father, and only later will he grow sincere affection for the boy. His magic stems from the power of the Sight inherited from his mother and which enables him to be trained by Galapas, who teaches him spells, fire magic, instructs him in healing and, above all,

he trains Merlin's innate ability to become a vessel for the unnamed God who speaks prophecies through him. His magic and his mulish craving for power characterise Merlin, however they are not his only defining qualities: many of his most renown accomplishments are in fact the product only of his exceptional intelligence, as the building of the Dance of Stones – Stonehenge – which Merlin erects aided only by his engineering and architectural skills so as to make it the tomb of his father Ambrosius, and a monument to his parent's feats.

Mary Stewart writes her Arthurian novels as a three-part romance set in fifth-century Britain. The trilogy depicts post-Roman Europe, with Roman mansions falling into disrepair and a slowly disappearing Roman lifestyle: Ambrosius, Uther and – in a way – Arthur are Romans, and they attempt to re-establish the values and order of the Roman Law so as to bring peace to the shattered kingdoms of Britain – similarly to White's King Arthur who tries to tame Man's ferocity by promoting Civil Law as a social unifier – however, Arthur's friends and court, and the nation he creates, are distinctively British and Arthur will become the symbol of the national cohesion between Saxons, Britons and Celts alike.

The Crystal Cave opens with Merlin as a child and ends with Arthur's conception, while *The Hollow Hills* recounts the search for and acquisition of Excalibur and Arthur's subsequent coronation as Uther's heir and Britain's new leader. The third volume, *The Last Enchantment*, narrates the events leading to Arthur's demise, yet it ends before the actual fall of the Round Table, closing the trilogy with a sense of melancholy rather than tragedy. The trilogy is followed by the additional *The Wicked Day* (1983) which tells the story of Mordred's childhood and adolescence up until his death at the Battle of Camlann, and while the ending this time is surely harrowing and sad – father and son trying until the very last moment to avoid the conflict and return to their roles without spilling innocent blood – there is still a lingering sense of hope in the elegiac tones chosen by Stewart to depict Arthur's removal to Avalon as it is seen – or rather heard – by the dying Mordred:

> A woman's voice said:
>
> "Lift him carefully. Here. Yes, yes, my lord, lie still. All will be well."

> And the King's voice, too faint to hear, followed — surely? — by Bedwyr's:
>
> "It is here. I have it safely. The Lady will keep it for you till you need it again."
>
> Again the voices of women, and the first voice, strongly: "I shall take him to Applegarth, where we shall see to the healing of his wounds."
>
> Then the rain, and the creak of rowlocks, and the sound of women's weeping fading into the lapping of the lake water and the hiss of the rain falling.
>
> His cheek was on a cushion of thyme. The rain had washed the blood away, and the thyme smelled sweetly of summer.
>
> The waves lapped. The oars creaked. The seabirds cried. A porpoise rolled, sleek in the sun. Away on the horizon he could see the golden edge of the kingdom where, since he was a small child, he had always longed to go. (1983, pp. 505-506)

Possibly inspired by the resurgence of national consciousness among the Welsh, Stewart's trilogy relies mostly on one side on the early Arthurian tradition of Nennius and Geoffrey of Monmouth, and on the other on ancient Welsh traditions and folk legends about King Arthur and Merlin which predate Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (Thompson 1993, p. 9), all the while taking advantage of Arthurian scholarship as well; Stewart researches maps of ancient and Roman Britain, which is made explicit in her extensive reference to local topographical traditions concerning Arthur and Merlis, although she also admits being influenced by T. H. White in her portrayal of the Orkney faction (Snyder 2009, p. 117). It is Stewart's great interest in history that draws her to the Matter of Britain and inspires her to write four Arthurian novels, so not King Arthur per se. Especially when reading *The Merlin Trilogy*, it is apparent how her books are concerned not with the passing of a king, but with the passing of Roman culture instead, and with the growth of a new religion as witnessed by one man – Merlin – through his relation to his God. Her main accomplishments lie in her convincing portrayal of a mystic wiseman who is incredibly human and psychologically complex, and in the underlying analysis of the condition of women in a patriarchal society. In her retelling of the story of Merlin, Mary Stewart mixes the epic and the archetypal aspects of the hero's journey

punctuating the different steps in Merlin and Arthur's life with the parallel journey of the magician as a worshipper and a theologist: starting from the ancient myths of Celts and Romans alike, and referencing even to the obscure mysteries of the Near Eastern Mithras, Merlin recounts the arise of Christianity in Roman Britain (Goodrich 2003).

Stewart's approach to the Merlin's legend is predominantly realistic as she details correctly the historical context of her trilogy; however, she allows for one fantastic assumption: at times, Merlin can act as a channel for the supernatural power of his God, a non-sectarian deity who speaks prophecy through Merlin – whom the God possesses at pivotal moments – and is also the source of the magician's pyrokinetic powers and the enhanced second Sight. The aporia created by the conflagration of the magical from the early Arthurian canon concerning Merlin and the historical context is often resolved by Stewart's demystification of the extraordinary, as in the case of the Merlinean legend of Vortigern's falling tower: early in *The Crystal Cave*, a child Merlin finds the underground caves and tunnels which weaken the tower's foundations and cause the building to crumble. While facing King Vortigern, Merlin realises it would be more fruitful for him to pretend that his knowledge is preternatural:

> I could tell them the truth, coldly. I could take the torch and clamber up into the dark workings and point out faults which were giving way under the weight of the building […] but what Vortigern needed now was not logic and an engineer; he wanted magic. (1970, p. 195)

This will be the first of many times when Merlin puts on a show and deliberately lets people believe that he is in full control of his magic instead of being a mere vessel for his God's will. Nonetheless, the God truly grants him a prophecy which Merlin, in his inexperience, fails to comprehend clearly:

> All wrapped up, it was, with eagles and wolves and lions and boars and as many other beasts as they've ever had in the arena and a few more besides, dragons and such… going hundreds of years forward. (1970, p. 199)

Other foreknowledge is meant to be private instead, intended only for Merlin's understanding, as the vision the God sends to him to let him know that one day he will be charged with Arthur's care and with the shaping of his destiny:

> Someone was coming softly down the stairs; a woman, shrouded in a mantle, carrying something. She came without a sound. […] It was Marcia. I saw the tears glisten on her cheeks as she bent her head over what lay in her arms. A child, wrapped warm against the winter night. She saw me and held her burden out to me. "Take care of him," she said. (1973, p. 398)

In *The Last Enchantment*, the third book of the trilogy, Nimuë comes to Merlin, crossdressing as a boy at first in order to become his apprentice despite Merlin's renown misogyny. As he learns she is indeed a girl – and an extraordinarily talented one – Merlin must revise his prejudice about women's incapability of wielding great magic, and he willingly teaches her everything he knows, aware that his powers will soon fade and Arthur will be in need of a new magician and prophet: "I could feel the power coming from her, my own power, stronger now in her than in my own hands. […] It was time… let me go in peace" (1979, p. 853). All the knowledge and magic Nimuë receives from him, is willingly given. The decline in his strength leaves him increasingly vulnerable to Morgause's plots, someone whose motifs and reasoning Merlin always fails to understand without the aid of his magic, and so Arthur's half-sister succeeds in poisoning the sorcerer. While her plot does not finalise Merlin's death, the poison cripples him severely, and when Morgause manages to drug him fatally a second time by the end of the book, Merlin is so weak he is left for dead and entombed in his cherished Crystal Cave. Arthur grieves for the loss of his father-figure and he "shut[s] himself up alone for three days, and would speak to no one" (1979, p. 879). As for Nimuë, far from being the wicked traitor of the legends, she "went back to the cave, but the door was blocked still, and [she] called and called" (1939, p. 904). In a reversal of the medieval theme of the entombment, Merlin escapes the cave in the hollow hill, metaphorically coming back to life. Even though he is deprived of his power, Merlin is still a milestone in Arthur's life – "When I asked him what the business was in Caerleon, he put the question aside, till I wondered […] if the journey had been made merely to see me" (1979,

pp. 910-911) – and the tale of his apparent resurrection is accepted "not as plain truth, but as legend" (1979, p. 910).

Despite her indebtedness to *The Once and Future King*, where White's Merlyn's perception of time is generally anachronistic and muddled up between forwards and backwards, Stewart's Merlin is a timeless, almost omniscient narrator. At times it is unclear whether he knows something because he has lived his life and is accessing his knowledge from a time-distanced perspective, or if he already knew the details of the events at the time of their occurrence due to his peculiar pre-science:

> The first memory of all is dark and fireshot. It is not my own memory, but later you will understand how I know these things. You would call it, not memory so much as a dream of the past, something in the blood, something recalled from him, it may be, while he still bore me in his body. I believe that such things can be. (1970, p. 11)

On the one hand, Merlin claims a special type of knowledge which must come from the God, while on the other hand he suggests here – in the recalling of the last meeting between his parents – some sort of genetic inheritance, that knowledge may be as hereditary as blood – "recalled from him while he still bore me in his body" (Wynne-Davies 1996, p.168).

While this opening stance anticipates the concept of reincarnation – Arthur is Ambrosius's reincarnated soul and the King's repeated farewell to Merlin, "Wait for me. I shall come back" (1979, p. 911) seems to hint softly at this cycle of reincarnations – the idea of preternatural knowledge applies as much to Stewart the author as it does to Merlin the narrator, their respective storytelling caught between the divide of materialistic reason and imagination. While this literary device allows Stewart's protagonist to know things which have happened before his birth and to witness events even though he is not physically there to see them unfold, it also initiates the use of a twinned self-representation formed by the juxtaposition of authorial and narratorial voice and by the subjectivity of the rational and the imaginative (Hildebrand 2001; Wynne-Davies 1996). Furthermore, the neutralisation of Merlin's gender throughout the novel – he is alienated from men by

his choice of sexual abstinence, and he cannot live the female experience of creating life for the same reason – aids the identification of both reader and author with the narrator:

> As a female author articulating her version of the Arthurian narrative in what was previously an almost exclusively male-dominated discourse, Mary Stewart was undoubtedly a pioneering woman […] what Stewart does offer is a self-aware voicing of her own marginalised position as a woman writer in a male field and, consequently, of the split nature of her 'art'. (Wynne-Davies 1996, p. 176)

With her portrayal of a gender-resisting Merlin, and in giving a plot-wise weight to minor female characters such as Ygraine, Nimuë, and Merlin's mother Niniane, Stewart's text paves the way for the more explicitly feminist Arthurian retellings of the 1980s and 1990s.

The Mists of Avalon

> As I tell this tale I will speak at times of things which befell when I was too young to understand them, or of things which befell when I was not by; and my hearer will draw away, perhaps, and say: This is her magic. But I have always held the gift of the Sight, and of looking within the minds of men and women; and in all this time I have been close to all of them. And so, at times, all that they thought was known to me in one way or another. And so I will tell this tale. (1983, p. X)

The New-Age and Wicca movements concerned with women's spirituality find their cult-book in Marion Zimmer Bradley's Arthurian retelling *The Mists of Avalon* (1983) where Glastonbury is portrayed once again as the historical Avalon, secretly co-existing within the intolerant and fundamentalist Christendom. The influence of Bradley's work can be traced even in the recent depictions of Glastonbury Tor in many Arthurian reworkings, where the site is now rarely exclusively Christian (Rouse e Rushton, 2009, p. 230). Thanks to Bradley's *Mists*, the threads connecting King Arthur with the Tor hold steadfastly in place even centuries after the alleged discovery of the King's grave, as we can infer even from children's movies like *The*

Kid Who Would Be King (2019), where the entrance to the Underworld and Morgana's prison lie under Glastonbury Tor.

With *The Mists of Avalon*, Bradley is mostly concerned with the creation of an imagined and attractive version of the Goddess religion. Drawing profusely from the Gardnerian Wicca and the writings of Starhawk and Dion Fortune (1983, p. VIII), the enchantresses of her book respect nature, celebrate the female principle above the male, and believe in reincarnation and religious tolerance. Unfortunately, their naturalistic cult is strongly contrasted by the masculinized, worldly and repressive Christianity preached by fanatical priests. At the time she is writing *The Mists of Avalon,* Bradley herself works as a Wiccan priestess for the Darkmoon Circle she co-founded with her second husband. As the Darkmoon Circle develops, Bradley joins workshops about the emerging Neo-Pagan and Women's Spirituality movement, and she explores both the history of the Goddess religion and the primordial esoteric aspects of monotheistic religions (Paxson 1999, p. 114). Consequently, the favourable treatment of paganism in *The Mists of Avalon* comes as no surprise. Truthfully, Hildebrand objects to the reliability of the character of Morgaine as a narrator, since the heavy identification between authorial and narratorial perspective nullifies any impression of objectivity (2009, p. 98); similarly, Davidson dubs the religious discourse upheld within the narrative as a "manipulation of the reader" (2012, p. 11) since the audience's sympathies are constantly steered to side with the old religion and to abhor the polarised bigotry of Christianity. Indeed, many find that the conservatism of Bradley's book, which revolves mostly around the celebration of female fertility and the maternal aspect of the Goddess, is nothing short of the male-oriented ideals promulgated by older Arthurian texts: it is the same constrictive philosophy, only reversed so as to diminish men instead of women.

Of course, we should take notice of the social context in which *The Mists of Avalon* is written. During the 80s, the feminist movement is divided into different philosophies: the materialist and the essentialist approach, the former interested in the historical location of the female identity and its possibility to change and evolve, and the latter mainly focused upon immutable aspects of the uniquely female

experience, such as motherhood. At times, Bradley appears to be torn between these two different factions: her female characters are powerful figures who refuse male authority, they find a sorority reminiscent of the "sisterhoods" of the 1970s women's groups, and are free to have sex with any man they choose – as their Goddess intends them to celebrate fertility and sexuality – perhaps suggesting an allusion to the sexual revolution of the late 60s and 70s; Bradley also advocates for women's right to end pregnancies, stating that women have always performed abortions and that reclaiming that right is actually a return to an earlier independence that women had when they were the ones in charge of medicine (Wynne-Davies 1996, p. 180) – a theory probably inspired by Margaret Murray's cult work from 1921 *Witch Cult in Western Europe*, one of the most influential pieces of literature in Wicca culture (Bradley 1983; Larrington 2006). In *The Mists of Avalon*, we have an example of this stance when Broca comments on Morgaine's miscarriage:

> She said in an undertone to Morgaine, "Lady, you should have taken more care - those drugs can poison you. I have a brew which would have done what you wanted more quickly and with less sickness." (1983, pp. 853)

Bradley's deep desire to promote women's independence is what draws her towards the world of symbolic myths and legends: as she asserts that women's freedom is something which has been lost and found again, not regained for the first time, the logical conclusion is that women have always been autonomous subjects and their liberation is an inalienable right, "an inevitable resurrection of an essential aspect of gender identity, which had at some point become unjustly repressed" (Wynne-Davies 1996, p. 181). However, Bradley has also explained that one of her main purposes in life was to bring back into the world the worship of the Goddess (Paxson 1999, p. 125), and *The Mists of Avalon* is surely part – if not the culmination – of said religious agenda.

While she mentions in the introduction to *The Mists of Avalon* that she was given the Sidney Lanier edition of the *Tales of King Arthur* by her grandfather (1983, p. VII) and she was a die-hard fan both of the *Prince Valiant* movie (1954) and of the

fantasy literature of the thirties and forties (Paxson 1999, p. 111), her most influential source for the writing of *The Mists of Avalon* is probably the literature of Dion Fortune. The depth of her indebtment to the fellow female author goes almost unmentioned, perhaps because Bradley has internalized Fortune's school of thought to the point where she does not see it as research, however the first evidence of her inspiration can be found already in the choice of Morgaine as a protagonist: Fortune presents in her novels the figure of the sea-priestess of Atlantis, Morgan Le Fay, foster daughter and student of Merlin, who has been reborn in order to re-establish the power of the Great Goddess in the world. The stylistic device of alternating a first-person narrator with passages into the third-person of different characters is something we can see in Fortune's *Moon Magic* (1938), and even the physical appearance of Fortune's Morgan is strikingly similar to that of Bradley's Morgaine (Paxson 1999, p. 122). The esoteric theology about the many different forms of divinity and the universal common roots of the gods are often referred to in Fortune's non-fiction and in her novels alike; similarly, these notions find space in Morgaine's prologue, as the priestess claims that, "I have no quarrel with the Christ, only with his priests, who call the Great Goddess a demon and deny that she ever held power in this world," and then she recalls Viviane's preaching, "For all the Gods are one God […] and all the Goddesses are one Goddess, and there is only one Initiator…" (1983, pp. IX-X). Dion's theories on reincarnation and on the existence of Atlantis also recur explicitly in *The Mists of Avalon*, particularly in those scenes where Igraine and Uther remember their previous lives as a priestess and priest of Atlantis. In that life, Igraine's name was Morgan, which would partly explain the unusual variation of the name which Bradley chooses for her protagonist, as it sounds like an odd combination of the names Morgan and Igraine:

> 'I never truly believed it till this moment, Morgan.'
> For a moment, Igraine, wife of Gorlois, wondered why this man should call her by the name of her child; yet even as she formed the question in her mind she knew that 'Morgan' was not a name, but the title of a priestess, meaning no more than 'woman come from the sea,' in a religion which even the Merlin of Britain would have found a legend and the shadow of a legend. (1983, p. 64)

By reincarnation or telepathy, the female characters of *The Mists of Avalon* are – for the most – connected to one another, therefore the focus on the female perspective serves not only to critique the archetypal coming of age of the male hero Arthur and to reinterpret the natural and mythic role of women, but it also works as an organizing principle, allowing Bradley to select from the Matter of Britain only the elements which will enable her to tell a coherent story, where the lives of different women are connected and integrated into the main narrative of Morgaine: although *The Mists of Avalon* draws heavily on Arthurian tradition, the homonymous king is no longer the focus of the novel, and the most important events are hardly ever initiated by him.

Bradley takes advantage of Morgaine's longevity – she is born before Arthur and she outlives him by far – to retell the Arthurian legend skipping all the journeys and battles which Mary Stewart foregrounds and focusing instead on women's relationships: she details the complex enmities and affections which characterise Morgaine and her kinswomen, especially her traditionally conflicted bond with Gwenhwyfar. As a contrast to Arthur's queen and to the repressions of a patriarchal Christianity, Morgaine stands as a representative of Avalon and successor of the Lady of the Lake among the common folk; in her character, Bradley explores the socio-cultural possibilities of matriarchy: the magical island beyond the mists where Morgaine is educated presents all the possibilities which are forbidden to women within the conservative and rigid Christian framework played out in the character of Gwenhwyfar; Avalon inculcates female independence and strength of will and promotes the search for freedom, while Gwenhwyfar's upbringing denies her autonomy and suffocates her wish for it (Shaw 2009, p. 471).

By proclaiming the idea of a ruling feminine principle, a universal "Mother" in opposition to a patriarchal Christianity, Bradley also links the right to rule with a oneness with nature: as the "land", Britain exists both as natural and political entity; it is devoted to an earth-goddess and her mysteric religion, which links the political system of hereditary monarchy to the fertility ritual of the "Great Marriage", where the priestesses of Avalon serve as avatars of the Goddess and symbols of the land.

The legitimacy of British kings' rulership resides in their allegiance to this rite and, in turn, it guarantees Avalon's authority over the outside world. When endangered by the growing Christian intolerance, the leaders of Avalon – the Lady of the Lake and the Merlin of Britain – plan to control the royal succession by the begetting of Arthur on Igraine, the middle-sister of the Lady herself and, as such, a daughter of Avalon. Their scheme fails abysmally when Arthur eventually forsakes the Goddess-worship because of the pressure his Christian wife Gwenhwyfar enacts on him. Ultimately, *The Mists of Avalon* reads as the story of a gendered battle between freedom and oppression, in which the Goddess-religion fights for survival against the repressive crusade of Christianity:

> In this context the struggle for religious *imperium*, the right to say what divine power underlies everything, is of more narrative significance than Arthur's fight for political control. The long-term historical triumphs of the Saxon invaders and of antifeminist Christianity are accommodated by an anthropological understanding that all religions are really one, and by an acceptance that all is the inscrutable will of the Goddess. Yet even in this polemical revision, where the once-despised Morgaine replaces Arthur or Lancelot as protagonist, the story still seems attached to the idea that all things are meant to be as they are, that the course of worldly *imperium* is not merely subject to historical contingency, but providential and inevitable. (Lynch b 2009, p. 185)

In fact, while Marion Zimmer Bradley does not change the epilogue of the Arthurian story into a happy ending, she still concludes *The Mists of Avalon* on a complacent note of hope: "Arthur may be gone, and his golden age with him, but the balance between old and new has been maintained long enough for the Goddess to take a new form in the figure of the Virgin Mary" (Lupack and Tepa Lupack 1999, p. 294). Similarly, the two opposing representatives of the religions – Morgaine for the Goddess and Gwenhwyfar for God – become slightly more forgiving of each other's differences: by the end of the book, Morgaine sees that, "in spite of all old enmities, there was love too" between her and her sister-in-law (1983, p. 835), and Gwenhwyfar thinks about Morgaine "with a sudden passion of love and tenderness" (1983, p. 995).

The Mists of Avalon has been unanimously recognised as a pathbreaking work. It alters the bias of the Arthurian narrative and initiates the tradition of privileging women's story instead of repressing them. While it is true that the complexity of Marion Zimmer Bradley's female characters – especially Morgaine – are "still restrained to dichotomies" (Hebert 2013, p. 127), Bradley, like Stewart before her, achieves a sensational revisionist reading: her protagonist assumes the role of the traditional storyteller, and her voice – projected from the mythic past to the audience of the post-1960s feminist movements – emphasises the kind of timelessness which Bradley links directly to the cult of the Goddess through the plot-device of reincarnation and the underground survival of the matriarchal faith within Christianity (Wynne-Davies 1996, p. 184). *The Mists of Avalon*'s fusing of the Arthurian legends with the religion of the Goddess has also proved to be instrumental, if not foundational, in promoting Morgan and the other Ladies of the Lake – Viviane, Elaine, Nimuë – as avatars of the Goddess. Many of Bradley's inventions have now become incorporated into the lore of the Goddess, specifically that Igraine was originally from Avalon, that there was a cultic sisterhood of the Lake and the island of the mists may host the descendants of Atlantis (Larrington 2006, p. 192); even the misconception of Morgan as Mordred's mother is now widely accepted as part of the contemporary Arthurian canon.

All-encompassing deities

> Fantasy literature offers much of what religion offers without making any of the demands that religion makes: there are heroes to emulate, quests to fulfill, growth to experience, dangers to overcome, and rewards to be gained. The language of fantasy, like the language of much Scripture, is highly metaphorical: it speaks in parables. Like the language of religion, the language of fantasy literature points beyond itself, but to what? Authors of fantasy often include a god or goddess, or several of each; some exclude the possibility of either. Yet, even when God is apparently absent from fantastic texts, His presence seems, paradoxically, to inhabit the absence. (Filmer-Davies 1997, p. 59-60)

Due to its varied sources – Christian and pagan, modern and medieval, folkloristic and literary – the legendary court of King Arthur is a place made of collisions and superimpositions, and one of the many leitmotifs of contemporary Arthurian retellings is either the contrast between paganism and Christianity or their merging (Lupack 2005, p. 279). Truthfully, Filmer-Davies notices how many fantasy authors preferably superimpose the worship of a female deity over the Christian God and portray the act of creation as a divine sexual activity which culminates and partakes in the worship of a female Goddess (Filmer-Davies 1997). This is certainly true of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, whose envisioning of the warring dualities of the Pagan Goddess and the Christian God may be interpreted as an indication of her own disappointment and disillusionment with Christianity itself, or perhaps as simple dislike for a male-oriented monotheism. As many other authors who enjoy dabbling with Celtic concepts of paganism, she reclaims the Holy Grail for her fictional cult of the Goddess; yet she also dallies with Gnostic concepts in her portrayal of the *hieros gamos* – the sacred union with the land during the rituals of kingmaking – and of the Rosacrucianist Chymical wedding, "the wedding between spirit and matter that has been the goal of alchemists throughout the ages," which is attempted, in her work, by the Merlin of Britain (Filmer-Davies 1997, p. 68).

Bradley's Ceridwen is almost always benevolent, at least to women, and intrinsically existent in every woman since birth. Her Goddess is openly linked to the land and to Nature; however, although in the Gnostic thought Nature is also potentially tainted, like all flesh is (Filmer-Davies 1997, p. 66), Bradley shies away from the possibility of her Goddess being also cruel and destructive, so in *The Mists of Avalon*, she merely hints at it, avoiding to even name her deadly aspect:

> [Viviane] said in a whisper, and Igraine saw her shiver, 'The Goddess has a fourth face, which is secret, and you should pray to her, as I do–as I do, Igraine– that Morgause will never wear that face.' (1983, p. 26)

On the other hand, Stewart's trilogy depicts more than once the violent side of the God who takes possession of Merlin's body, causing him pain and agony, forcing him away from his loved ones and tyrannically demanding that he know no physical

comfort as long as the God needs him. Even once the God is done with Merlin, and the magician's power has fully transmigrated into Nimuë, the God is merciless and does not erase the memory of the ordeal preceding Merlin's coma:

> "Do you remember it, when I hung about you and tormented you to your death, like a spider sucking the life from a honey-bee?"
>
> I put my hands up to cover hers. I looked straight into the beautiful eyes, and lied. "My darling girl, I remember nothing of that time but words of love, and God taking me peacefully into his hand. I will swear it if you like." (1979, p. 903)

1. The God

Religion is the link which binds all three books of *The Merlin Trilogy* together. It is present everywhere: in the declining old creeds and in the rising new ones, as well as in the characters' personal beliefs. Most of them adhere to various religions: from the pantheistic Celtic faith in the "gods of hills and woods and streams and crossways" (1973, p. 468), which are still worshipped only by the isolated groups of the forest-dwelling tribesmen, and the bloodthirsty Druidism of Belasius – Merlin's teacher – to the mysteric Mithraic worship of Ambrosius, and Niniane's Christianity. These religions are all depicted as functioning beliefs, most of them containing no more truth than the others, but each of them suits different people. Pluralistic and tolerant, the trilogy's environment is that of late antiquity rather than the early Middle Ages. Stewart's work never means to justify the rise of Christianity because it offers a needed moral standard, nor it aims at proving the existence of a divine being. Instead, it "explores the pluralist society and the religious individual, i.e. Merlin, the person so immersed in his calling that all else must give way before it, and strives to couch this in terms understandable to contemporary readers" (Hildebrand 2001, p. 69). Conformingly, an underlying sense of fellowship between worshippers of different faiths spreads throughout the three books, as it becomes apparent already when Ambrosius respects his enemies' religion and accords Hegist his own funeral rites rather than enforcing his own ceremonial system.

Choosing Merlin as its protagonist, the trilogy focuses on the desire of the individual for contact with the divine and the role he plays in the worship: as a prophet and teller of the truth, Merlin is the vehicle which the divine possesses in order to interfere actively in the history of Britain and produce a sacred king (Hildebrand 2001, p. 68). Stewart's depiction of Merlin as prophet and mystic is actually influenced by a common Western heritage: like the prophets of the Old Testament, or the sybils and Pythias of classical mythology, Merlin is called by the god and must speak the divine prophecy to an incredulous audience. Stewart makes conscious use of Biblical language at the end of the trilogy to hint at whose will Merlin has been obeying during the last half of his life: her passage "The god, who was God, had indeed dismissed his servant, and was letting him go in peace" (1979, p. 910) is an almost *verbatim* quotation from Luke 2.29: "Now lettest thou thy servant depart, O Lord, according to thy word, in peace" (Hildebrand 2001, p. 76).

In a significant counterpoint to Bradley's view of overt sexuality as an act of worship – and perhaps furtherly suggestive of the Christian nature of Merlin's God – Merlin's supernatural abilities are inevitably linked to sexual abstinence. He views the power of and from the God as masculine – the common healing magic is "so easy that a woman can do it" (1970, p. 47) while he doubts "if any woman could go where I go and see what I see" (1973, p. 452) – and emasculating, as shown in the episode when Merlin is tempted to have intercourse with a young girl, Keri. As he is initiating the encounter, Merlin perceives in a horrifying moment the deadly potentiality of sexual embrace:

> Suddenly it was I who was strangling; her arms dragged at me, her mouth sucked me down, and her body drew me into that tight and final darkness, no air, no light, no breath, no whisper of waking spirit. A grave inside a grave. Fear burned down into my brain like a white hot blade laid across the eyes.
>
> I opened them and could see nothing but the spinning light and the shadow of a tree laid across me whose thorns tore like spikes. Some shape of terror clawed my face. The thorn-tree's shadow swelled and shook, the cave mouth gaped and the walls breathed, crushing me. I struggled back, out, tore myself

> away and rolled over apart from her, sweating with fear and shame. (1970, p. 247)

The episode holds significance on four different levels: firstly, it draws on the folk tradition that a wizard would lose his powers or transfer them to his partner through sexual intercourse (Goodrich 2000, p. 105); then, the allusions to the “thorn-tree” and the “cave mouth” refer to the medieval traditional story of Merlin’s fall, as he is trapped into a tree or a crystal tower by the Lady of the Lake; inside the narration of *The Merlin Trilogy*, it is also a prophecy of his own end in *The Last Enchantment*. Finally, the almost-encounter with Keri is also reminiscent of the mythological Vagina Dentata, the sexual, violent aspect of the Goddess: sexual intercourse has a long history of comparisons with death, especially as it seen, by a male perspective, as a concrete spilling of life (Filmer-Davies 1997, p. 66). While it is unsurprising that the birth channel of a Goddess may be viewed as a devouring mouth – as a supernatural entity she wields both power of life and death – it is also possible that Merlin, a man who worships a male deity, may be more vulnerable than others to the attacks of the feminine.

This impossibility to live the commonplace male experience places Merlin on the margin of the male value system, and as he is also – rather obviously – located outside the female life, he reads as a gender-neutral narrator. Even though Merlin welcomes his prophetic gift as “the final pang of childbirth” (1973, p. 509), Stewart stresses how his remains only a metaphor for his prophecies are no children and indeed, Merlin is not a father nor a rearer:

> “I don't know if I can make you understand, Moravik. Visions and prophecies, gods and stars and voices speaking in the night...things seen cloudy in the flames and in the stars, but real as pain in the blood, and piercing the brain like ice. But now...” I paused again. “...now it is no longer a god’s voice or a vision, it is a small human child with lusty lungs, a baby like any other baby, who cries, and sucks milk, and soaks his swaddling clothes. One’s visions do not take account of this.”

> “It’s men who have visions,” said Moravik. “It’s women who bear the children to fulfill them. That's the difference.” (1973, p. 420)

Merlin’s celibacy is closely associated with his magic. His choice to cling to his abilities is deliberate – “I had known, that day at twenty, when I fled from the girl’s angry and derisive laughter, that for me there had been a cold choice between manhood and power, and I had chosen power” (1973, p. 565) – and it is made understandable by the authority and power his God grants Merlin in exchange for his abstinence. However, the relationship between Merlin and his God reeks of passivity, a position usually associated with female characters. Indeed, Hildebrand argues that Merlin’s power is a direct consequence of his acquired femininity:

> his power is consistently opposed to manhood and male sexuality, and exists outside the male world. The narrative technique suggests a parallel of false passivity which is in actuality empowering: Merlin is empowered by his listening to his god. He is the voice of the god and his power is religious; nations are created and kings are crowned around him as result of his communication with his god. The power he gains from this communication is undoubtedly real. (2001, pp. 75-76)

On the rare occasions when Merlin is offered a chance at ordinary life, he always rejects it in order to further pursue his calling, even though it is often emphasised how desirable a normal life would be, compared to his as the God’s messenger. Alas, he craves the power, therefore he willingly pays the emasculating price, living the major part of his life as neither man nor woman. Truly, he is his God’s messenger.

The lack of explicit gendering in *The Merlin Trilogy* has often been read as androgyny. In the concluding volume *The Last Enchantment*, where Merlin encounters and eventually falls in love with Nimuë, this androgyny reaches its apotheosis: while superficially their relationship seems to gender them – Merlin abandons his celibacy, becoming male at last, and Nimuë forgoes her disguise as a boy, reclaiming her femaleness – by avoiding to bring a specific gender to their union, Merlin and Nimuë actually meet in androgynous union (Watson 1989, p. 81).

Their banded androgyny would furtherly work with the concept of Merlin's all-encompassing God when we recall how the Gnostic philosophy recognises in the Holy Spirit the feminine aspect of God, who is at the same time both male and female (Filmer-Davies 1997, p. 65).

As we analyse the identity of Merlin's unnamed God, at the beginning of the trilogy we might infer it could be Mithras, the only god in whose worship Merlin joins as an initiate, and almost certainly it is Mithras, the god of Merlin's father, who is protecting the wizard as a young man. However, Mithras later demands to be dethroned by Merlin – "Throw down my altar. It is time to throw it down" (1973, p. 487) – thus disappearing from the text. In the second half of the trilogy, Merlin recognises that:

> I had long known that this god brooked no companions. He was not mine, nor (I suspected) would he ever be Arthur's, but throughout the sweet three corners of Britain he was moving, emptying the ancient shrines, and changing the face of worship. (1979, p. 623)

This is the conquering Christian God, who will become not so much as Arthur's God, as the god of the knights of the Round Table (Hildebrand 2001, p. 80). When Arthur leaves the Green Chapel wielding Excalibur, which Merlin retrieved for him in the temple of Mithras, the wise prophet lingers behind and notices how this change in worship is already becoming apparent:

> The tears showed me the altar now, bare of the nine-fold light that had pleasured the old, small gods; bare of the soldier's sword and the name of the soldiers' god. All it held now was the hilt of the carved sword standing in the stone like a cross, and the letters still deep and distinct above it: TO HIM UNCONQUERED. (1973, p. 604)

This development seems to be welcomed even by the abdicating gods. Clearly there is more than one, both Mithras and other minor divinities, who initially co-exists and will later be replaced by the Christian God; however, this view of the divine as having an independent and personal existence shows the gods to be not invented manifestations of human faith but conscious actors. Indeed, in *The Merlin Trilogy,* the God does not only interfere with Merlin's life but exploits him at the benefit of the

British people, prompting the shift from Celtic and Roman beliefs to Christianity. As the God's helper and his prophet among the people, Merlin sees and tones this change, treating it as unavoidable because it is the God/s' will. As both Ambrosius and Arthur, two illuminated monarchs, try to bring unity and peace through the ideals of the Roman Law, the achieved position of Christianity as monopolistic religion serves as salvation not from Hell but from social ills:

> By providing a shared system of symbols for all the inhabitants of Britain, for instance, Christianity creates a British identity for the Romanised Britons, thus preventing them from looking towards Rome for support and enabling them to cope with the Saxon invasion for a few years more. Hence, religion is not so much the road to salvation as an important part of a functioning society, a view which recalls both *Historia Regum Britanniae*, where Christianity is a synonym for civilisation, and today's understanding of religion as a shared system of symbols. (Hildebrand 2001, p. 82)

In Stewart's text, the God's intervention in Britain's history culminates in the creation of a sacred king. The realistic view of the monarchy as a potential political unifier combines with the archaic myth of the sanctity of kingship. Therefore, Arthur is a military and political unifier, while also a divinely chosen leader of supernatural abilities, with a charisma which works a mystical impact on his world and on the future generations. His mystical qualities as a godly appointed king enable him to protect his people from physical threats while also inspiring them spiritually. He is not to be a sacrificial king like in Bradley's narrative, but an anointed saviour.

Ultimately, the trilogy may also hint at a superior divine dimension which exists beyond the realm of all deities: all of the gods and all of the faiths belong to the same universal truth (Hildebrand 2001, p. 81). Although only in passing, Merlin expresses such early on in the trilogy:

> "It is God who keeps the price secret, Uther, not I."
>
> "God? God? What god? I have heard you speak of so many gods. If you mean Mithras–"

> "Mithras, Apollo, Arthur, Christ–call him what you will," I said. "What does it matter what men call the light? It is the same light, and men must live by it or die." (1970, p. 305)

Merlin speaks only vaguely of God, and refuses to specify about which God he might be talking. However, it is interesting to notice that Merlin includes also the unborn Arthur in his list of possibilities: in elevating him as one of the names of the God, Merlin seems to be underlining the supernatural power which Arthur will wield and, surely enough, Merlin already places much of his faith in the unborn king, for Merlin knows him to be the reincarnation of his father Ambrosius, a man who Merlin worshipped with almost divine fervour – if the building of Stonehenge as his tomb is any indication. Indeed, long before his conceiving, Merlin prophecies about Arthur: "we will make between us a King whose name will stand as long as the Dance stands, and who will be more than a symbol; he will be a shield and a living sword" (1970, p. 254). By the end of the novel, Arthur's superior role is hinted at again by Pelleas, Nimuë's husband after Merlin's apparent death: even though Pelleas knows his wife is charged with being the new voice of the God after Merlin, and thus she is a servant of the divine entity, Pelleas says of her, "She belongs to the King […] And I– well, it's the same, isn't it? I am his before ever I can be hers. Which of us, in the sight of God and King, is ever his own man?" (1979, p. 908). By placing King Arthur and God on the same level, he is unconsciously equalling Arthur with the divine. Even Nimuë, invested of her role as the new prophet of the God, tells Arthur that he holds such great spiritual powers, that he will be a sufficient source of peace and inspiration for his people:

> "[The grail] is not for you, either, Arthur. You do not need it. You yourself will be the grail for your people, and they will drink from you and be satisfied. You will never fail them, nor ever leave them quite. You do not need the grail. Leave it for those who come after." (1979, p. 909)

The reference to "those who come after" in a story where we know reincarnation exists, and which draws on the Arthurian material where Arthur is the one to initiate the quest for the Holy Grail, seems to hint at a future reincarnation of Arthur/Ambrosius, of his return, as does Arthur's hopeful farewell to Merlin:

> Arthur trod away from me across the grass, leaving ghost-prints in the frost. He reached the place where the track led down to the grove, and half turned. I saw him raise a hand.
>
> "Wait for me." It was the same farewell always. "Wait for me. I shall come back."
>
> And, as ever, I made the same reply:
>
> "What else have I to do but wait for you? I shall be here, when you come again." (1979, p. 911)

2. The Goddess and the Christ

In *The White Goddess* (1948), Robert Graves identifies the Triple Moon-Goddess in her three manifestations – the Maiden, the Mother and the Crone – as characters from the Arthurian legends: particularly, Morgan Le Fay and Nimuë should embody different aspects of the Goddess; Morgan as ruler of Avalon or the Fortunate Isles; Nimuë as Merlin's executioner. Grave's Moon-Goddess finds her consort in her brother or her son, a seasonal god who will be ritually sacrificed at the end of the yearly cycle or replaced by a successor. This will surely remind us of Bradley's own interpretation of the Goddess in *The Mists of Avalon*, where the Lady of the Lake is divided into three different characters – Nimue, Niniane and Viviane – who represent the three faces of the Goddess: Maiden, Woman and Crone. Viviane herself acknowledges to be part of another triad, where she again plays the Crone, embodied by her, Igraine and Morgaine:

> '[…] It is fitting that my last service to the Mother, before I take my place among the wise-women, shall be to bind his land to Avalon, and so I am to be the Goddess to him in this mystery.' She was silent, but for Igraine the room was filled with the echo of her voice. Viviane bent over and picked up the sleeping Morgaine in her arms, holding her with great tenderness.
> 'She is not yet a maiden, and I not yet a wise-woman,' she said, 'but we are the Three, Igraine. Together we make up the Goddess, and she is here present among us.' (1983, pp. 25-26)

Bradley's ceremony of the Great Marriage to the land which Viviane mentions evokes the ritual recalled in Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1915) – one of the books which inspired Graves for his *White Goddess* and Bradley herself (1983, p. VII) – where the priests of the goddess Diana at the temple of Nemi attain their priesthood by killing the current priest in single combat, thereby gaining the title of *Rex Nemorensis*. Similarly, in *The Mists of Avalon,* Arthur participates in a stag hunt – the stag being Diana's sacred animal – and is then received by Morgaine as the worldly representative of the Goddess in her aspect of the Maiden Huntress. Mordred is conceived during their union, in adherence to the prophetic hymn: "The Goddess receives her consort and she will slay him again at the end of time, she shall give birth to her Dark Son who will bring the King Stag down" (1983, p. 204). The inevitable downfall of the King Stag is actually one of the leitmotivs of the book, as is the haunting line, "what of the King Stag when the young stag is grown," which runs like a refrain throughout the work. In the kingmaking ceremony male participation is evidently limited and subordinated to the power of the priestesses of Avalon, who function as human avatars of the Goddess. The ritual function invests women both of religious and spiritual power, as legitimate authority over the land is given by the Goddess, and during the *hieros gamos* her priestesses *are* the Goddess. Instead of being a saviour, Bradley's sacred king becomes a sacrifice to ensure the fertility of the land – "…the blood of the God is spilled upon the earth…" (1983, p. 204) – and he exists only as long as the Goddess and her priestess wills it (Hildebrand 2001, p. 103).

Empowering to women and disparaging to men, Bradley's Goddess-worship is a mysteric cult and a religion of initiation: "the successful return from outside Avalon is not only a test of magical ability, but also a symbolic death and rebirth, as in the ancient mystery cults" (Hildebrand 2001, p. 103). The initiation test which Morgaine passes as she is cast out of Avalon and proves she can lift the mists, making her way back to the isle, is later mirrored when Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar meet for the first time: because Gwenhwyfar has a slight predisposition for the Sight, she has mistakenly crossed the mists which stand as a barrier between Avalon and the monastery of Glastonbury. Since she has no training – and will never receive it, as

her Christian faith has smothered any wish for independence and power in her – Gwenhwyfar is unable to find her way back to the nunnery and must rely on Morgaine to guide her. This episode means to highlight how women are taught dependence rather than self-sufficiency under the yoke of Christianity, and the differences between Gwenhwyfar and Morgaine foreshadow the warring dichotomy between Christendom and Avalon.

However, only because Morgaine has passed her initiation test, this does not mean she is always able to abscond to the will of the Goddess or even to understand the divine plan: the Goddess is a distant deity, and communication with the divine is difficult and uncommon. Mostly, her wishes are accessible only to those who are taught how to listen; however, the Goddess is not beyond enforcing her will without her worshippers' consent:

> if I had stayed here, the Goddess would have worked with me one way, but even when I tried to flee my sworn duty, she brought it upon me elsewhere […] none of us can escape. We are both in her hands, and it is too late to say it would have been better the other way […] she will do with us as she will. (1983, p. 740)

Morgaine, who eventually becomes Lady of the Lake, high priestess of the Goddess, cannot communicate directly with the divine: only in retrospect can she understand how the Goddess has guided her. Because of this distance between the Goddess and her acolytes, priestesses may misinterpret the Goddess's will, mistaking their own motives for the will of their Goddess: to Morgaine's rebuke, "I do what the Goddess has given me to do", the Merlin of Britain wonders, "The Goddess – or your own will and pride and ambition for those you love?" (1983, p. 838).

Despite the fanatical actions of some of the characters towards the end of the book, all throughout *The Mists of Avalon* the practitioners of the old religion are generally portrayed as tolerant of Christianity, and their objections arise only as Christians attempt to declare all other creeds heresy: a basic principle of the religion of Avalon which is often asserted in the novel is that "all Gods are one"; it is preached by Taliessin in the beginning – the first of two Merlins of Britain – and later by his

successor, Kevin, who complacently tries to accommodate the rising Christianity in ways which cause Morgaine to sentence him to death for his betrayal of Avalon. Because of a similar sacrilege committed by Arthur who uses Excalibur, Avalon's sacred sword, as a cross on which to swear an oath to the Saxons, Morgaine will instruct her lover Accolon to steal the sword from Arthur and become the new King Stag. Contrasting with Stewart's peaceful evolution, in *The Mists of Avalon* the shift from the old to the new religion is not initiated by the gods but rather by narrow-minded men like Bishop Patricius – the ominous saint who freed Ireland from snakes, and in *The Mists of Avalon* the followers of the Goddess bear snake tattoos on their wrists – and meeker men like Kevin and Arthur who allow the matriarchal cult be absorbed into and conquered by Christianity. The new system of symbols maintained by Christians robs women of their authority, and as the system of symbols changes, women's power fades: their right over the kingmaking ceremony is merely the last to disappear.

Already in her Prologue, Morgaine describes the Goddess as having been linguistically confined by Christians in a simplistic dichotomy: either evil – "a demon" and "Satan" – or inhumanly pure and asexual – the Virgin Mary.

The constriction of the Goddess in Mary is perpetrated in the continual present: "they clothe her in the blue robe of the Lady of Nazareth" (1983, p. IX), thus suggesting that the repression is endlessly re-enacted (Shaw 2009, p. 468). However, people like Kevin and Arthur who seek to mediate and even subordinate the power of Avalon to that of Christendom should hardly be seen as spineless individuals but rather as mere pragmatists: in a landscape populated by zealots – both the followers of Avalon and Christians prove to be fanatics more than once – they realize that Christianity has the historical momentum to succeed in its conquest of all other religions. "Christians are a tide that will sweep all men before them like straw" (1938, p. 836), claims Kevin, and Avalon and the cult of the Goddess are a doomed religion: the island itself, like Atlantis – which Bradley suggests to be its forerunner at the beginning of her novel – is progressively drifting into another dimension, and even the initiates find it harder and harder to find their way back beyond the mists (Shaw

2009, p. 467). After Avalon's disappearance from the real world, what we are left with is the Christianity evangelised by men like Father Patricius, who assiduously cultivates Gwenhwyfar's self-loathing and pushes her to new heights of religious hysteria, all to serve his main purpose of driving Arthur to break his oaths to Avalon.

In the character of Gwenhwyfar, the destructive conflagration of femininity with patriarchal and religious oppression is explicated; the chapters where Gwenhwyfar is the main focalizer show how her conscious efforts to adhere to the Christian standards of female submission cause her a sort of aphasia: at first, she mutes her voice; then, she mutes her own will. The continuous effort of silencing herself shatters all bonds with her femininity; consequently – in a religious and narrative context where the female and the Goddess are interconnected with nature – her aphasia evolves into agoraphobia (Shaw 2009, p. 470). As a child, sensitive and fragile with no understanding mother-figures to support her in a male-oriented society, Gwenhwyfar learns that her "shouting" father disapproves of her speaking out, so she stifles down her opinions and uses her "shyest little voice" whenever she needs to speak to him (1983, p. 293). Her upbringing in the convent reinforces her tyrannical understanding of her father's authority: "she must obey her father's will as if it were the will of God" (1983, p. 309). But after so long trying to curb down her strong will for the sake of men's ideal of female submission, the adult Gwenhwyfar is seething with anger and rebellion. She hates being called "pretty little featherhead" (1983, p. 293; p. 295) by her father, and she resents being married off without her consent, as if she were no more than chattel:

> She was not herself, there was nothing for herself, she was only some property of a High King who had not even bothered to come and see the woman they were sending along with all the horses and the gear. She was another mare, a brood mare […] Gwenhwyfar thought she would smother with the rage that was choking her. (1983, p. 309)

However, her rage is not strong enough to break through the overwhelming and impeccable logic of the Christian ideology which has been inculcated in her:

> But no, she must not be angry […] Women had to be especially careful to do the will of God because it was through a woman that mankind had fallen into Original Sin, and every woman must be aware that it was her work to atone for that Original Sin in Eden. No woman could ever be really good except for Mary the Mother of Christ; all other women were evil, they had never had any chance to be anything but evil. This was her punishment for being like Eve, sinful, filled with rage and rebellion against the will of God. (198, p. 309)

Later, when Arthur gives her his open permission to take Lancelet as her lover, she is overwhelmed both with anger and fear at the possibility of sinning against Christian morality: “she would never dare to go out of doors again for fear of what she might choose to do” (1983, p. 387). The open air represents a freedom which, while wildly tempting, Gwenhwyfar believes to be forbidden to her, and her yearning for it makes her burn with shame and horror: “How could she ever bear to go out of doors again, or to leave the safe, protected space of this very room and this very bed?” (1983, p. 388).

Strangely enough, the very place where the oppressed Gwenhwyfar was educated is the location Bradley chooses to show that unity between the two faiths can be achieved. This change in her aggressively anti-Christian rhetoric occurs as Morgaine travels for the last time from the female world of Avalon to the patriarchy of the Christian Glastonbury: as the island fades more and more into the mists, Morgaine fears it might become lost forever to the outside world, so she brings to Glastonbury some cuttings from Avalon’s thorn tree – which originally sprouted from the staff of Joseph of Arimathea – so that a trace of Avalon will resist even outside the isle. As she crosses the mists, she finds that Glastonbury is in a state of change, brimming with light and people. Morgaine is astounded: unlike the declining Avalon, where Morgaine is now mostly alone, save for the faerie people who share her own ancestry, Glastonbury is alive. There, Morgaine meets a “procession of robed monks” (1983, p. 1003), nuns, gardeners and a band of novices. The “veil” (1983, p. 1001) which separates Avalon from Glastonbury is like a shroud on the mystical island; Glastonbury, on the other hand, thrives in the “sunlight” (1983, p. 1002) and in the “daylight” (1983, p. 1008). The Epilogue describes Glastonbury as a bright,

new stronghold for what Avalon once symbolised. Indeed, the nuns from the convent are astonishingly similar to the priestesses of Avalon; they wear “a dark robe not unlike [Morgaine’s] own” (1983, p.1004), so much so that the novices mistake her for a visiting nun and the call her “sister” (1983, p. 1004) and “mother” (1983, p. 1006; p. 1007), and she naturally answers by calling them “daughter” (1983, p. 1006; p. 1007). Moreover, the nuns recognise the holiness of the water well which exists in Avalon and Glastonbury at the same time and only drink from it, as the priestesses of Avalon used to do.

When we consider the book in its entirety, the rehabilitation of Christianity in the Epilogue sounds extraordinary, if perhaps a bit anti-climatic. Biased because of the aspect of Christianity her sister-in-law Gwenhwyfar incarnated, Morgaine had expected the nuns to be “sad and doleful, ever conscious of what the priests said about the sinfulness of being born women'' (1983, p. 1006). Instead, Morgaine finds the young novices enticing – “the girl was so much like one of her own young priestesses” (1983, p. 1007) – confident and assertive as her fellow Avalonians would be as they claim, “there are ignorant priests and ignorant people, who are all too ready to cry sorcery if a woman is only a little wiser than they are!” (1983, p. 1006). It is when one of them confesses that, “God is so great and terrible I am always afraid before his altar, but here in the chapel of Mary, we who are her avowed virgins may come to her as our Mother, too” (1983 pp. 1007-8) that Morgaine finally comprehends that the cult of Goddess is resisting, hidden behind the veil of the Virgin Mary and surviving within the clutches of Christianity:

> Exile her as they may, she will prevail. The Goddess will never withdraw herself from mankind. […] The holy thing had brought itself from Avalon, moving, as the hallows were withdrawn from Avalon, into the world of men where it was most needed. […] No, we did not fail. What I said to comfort Arthur in his dying, it was all true. I did the Mother’s work in Avalon until at last those who came after us might bring her into this world (1983, pp. 1008-1009)

The gospel of the Christ has come and it cannot be contained, Morgaine bows her head to the leeway the Goddess has found for herself, while her priestesses were

still trying to fight a war which the deity knew to be lost from the very beginning. The Goddess endures even as Avalon falls.

Female agency in the Lady of the Lake

In her Foreword for *In Search of the Woman Warrior* (1998), Bradley states:

> When I first conceived my novel *The Mists of Avalon*, it was partly because I was having trouble understanding why Arthurian legends had so many women who did absolutely nothing. If they weren't doing anything, why were they in the stories at all? I eventually concluded that in earlier versions they must have been important to the stories that even when their actions were removed, the men rewriting the stories couldn't imagine removing the characters themselves. (p. VIII)

In *The Mists of Avalon*, Marion Zimmer Bradley attempts to create a fantastic world where women have power, where – to put it into more Arthurian terms – they 'seize the sword'. However, Bradley is merely baiting her readers with a feminist rhetoric which is only superficial, as it fails the test of deeper analyses on many different levels: from a very explicit perspective, while she battles the traditional barriers which impede female power, Bradley perpetuates the traditional gender essentialism, focusing so much of her rhetoric on active female sexuality and women's ability to give birth. Under a purely visual and symbolic perspective, the dominant symbolism of a phallic Excalibur and a vaginal scabbard is repeatedly enforced even by Morgaine herself as the priestess inexplicably tries to have Accolon – a man – take the sword from Arthur instead of doing it herself: Excalibur is said to be part of the holy hallows of Avalon, and as such pertaining the pagan world of the Goddess; when Viviane bestows the sword upon Arthur, she has him swear his allegiance to the Goddess of Avalon and she explains to him that Excalibur "was not made from iron raped from the body of the earth, our mother; it is holy, forged of metal which fell from the heavens" (p. 236). Therefore, the sacred

sword should be a symbol of equality between men and women, which can be wielded by both:

> [a symbol] which specifically negates the violent images of rape, male aggression, war and the phallus, often associated with the emblematic significance of swords. Thus, Bradley commutes the sword/penis symbolism into an androgynous vision of power which appears to encompass both male and female values. (Wynne-Davies 1996, p. 178)

Despite Excalibur's symbolic androgyny, Bradley's women never succeed or even try to seize the sword: Morgaine stands only as a witness and later she is not even that as her two lovers move farther away from her in their battle for the Avalonian relic. Morgaine never tries to wield Excalibur and she only manages to get her hands on the magical, feminine scabbard (Lynch b 2009, p. 185).

Furthermore, *The Mists of Avalon* should be a fantasy which expresses repressed female desires and explores alternative feminine knowledge and social formations. Avalon is presented by Bradley as a school which teaches its women to be "independent agents and knowing subjects" (Shaw 2009, p. 467), and the rhetoric interwoven throughout the novel leads the audience to cherish the matriarchy promoted by Avalon, possibly even to feel nostalgic of it. However, this feminist utopia is doomed: as a woman repressed by patriarchy and kept in the dark about the power of her femininity by the tyranny of Christianity, Gwenhwyfar tries to compensate for her fear of sin with a fanatical sense of piety which borders on hysterical, crippling everyone around her as a consequence; the constant pressure Gwenhwyfar inflicts on Arthur convinces him to betray Avalon, which leads to the progressive Christianization of Camelot. As a consequence, Avalon drifts further and further into the mists, inaccessible to anyone until better times will come. Although the Epilogue's promise of resistance ignites a flicker of hope, it still does not change the fact that:

> The fantasy of feminine independence and autonomy is fading, and the growing desperation of this privileged community fuels the narrative imperative for the second half of the text. Reading the text from the perspective of the repression

> and realization of feminine desire brings us to a disturbing conclusion. Repression is more effective than realization. Gwenhwyfar, as the agent of her own repression, has an ever-expanding range of influence. Morgaine, as the exemplar of the independent woman, despite living for years in Camelot, has no instructive effect on any character in the text. Rather than realization being an irreversible breaking-through of repression, realization is only a moment that is vulnerable to the powerful self-corrective effects of repression. (Shaw 2009, p. 472)

Truthfully, it has been argued that the only female character who achieves her life-goal in *The Mists of Avalon* is Gwenwhyfar, for she succeeds in turning Arthur away from paganism. However, throughout the novel we see Gwenhwyfar meeting with women such as Morgaine and Morgause, who have freed themselves from their social constraints, yet the High Queen is so indoctrinated that resents their freedom rather than emulating their ways (Hebert 2013, p. 132). As she finally manages to make Arthur break his vows to Avalon, her actions result in the internal strife in the kingdom and its final destruction, something which – we can safely say – was far from Gwenhwyfar's intentions. Afterwards, as she escapes Camelot with Lancelet, she chooses to confine herself in a convent in order to save Lancelet from Arthur's anger and reunite the two friends. Thanks for her love for Lancelet, Gwenhwyfar finally overcomes her fear of life and, consequentially, her agoraphobia. However, it is all for nought: because of her obligations as High Queen, she must relinquish her chance for personal happiness and imprison herself in the nunnery. The sense of enclosure in the cloister, which had once made her feel "so safe, so protected," now suffocates her as her life-long self-loathing had, and she feels the walls "closing her in, trapping her" (1983, p. 995): Gwenhwyfar's story ends in sacrifice.

Likewise, whenever women try political actions in *The Mists of Avalon*, they all inevitably fail: Viviane, the first Lady of the Lake, who is at first presented as a wisewoman, someone who bears an incredible authority and has gained extraordinary knowledge, is coldly murdered at Camelot before she could attempt to force Arthur's hand and either make him repeat his vows to the religion of Avalon or surrender Excalibur. Viviane is also the one who led Uther and Igraine towards

each other so that Arthur would be born from their union, a new king who should have respected the divinity of Avalon; yet, Arthur thrashes Viviane's plans as he relinquishes Britain in the hands of Christianity. The old Lady of the Lake resumes her scheming for the benefit of Avalon once again as she orchestrates the conceiving of Mordred, believing that a son who is doubly descending from the mists will be the saviour of the Goddess, yet Mordred forsakes Avalon as his father does – "What is the Goddess to me?" "I needed not the Goddess" (1983, p. 998) – and, in his death, he breaks the cyclical death and rebirth of the King Stag which bound the British kings to the land in communion with Avalon and the Goddess forever. Viviane died trying to prevent the absorption of the Goddess-worship into Christianity, proclaiming it a vile heresy while the Merlins believed it to be inevitable; in the end, the female character of power is proved to be wrong, and her complacent male counterparts the most far-sighted.

As the protagonist of the novel, Morgaine attempts the most political action. Even though she resents Viviane's manipulations which caused the incestuous union between her and her brother Arthur, Morgaine later regrets giving up the potential power she had over him. However, that power is never really lost, and that is the reason why Gwenhwyfar struggles to direct Arthur towards Christianity and away from Morgaine and everything she represents; while Arthur and his wife are aware of the eternal bond which links the king to his sister, Morgaine herself fails to understand she still bears a strong influence on her brother:

> She could speak with him—but no, he would not listen to her; she was a woman and his sister—and always, between them, lay the memory of that morning after the kingmaking, so that never could they speak freely as they might have done before. And she did not carry the authority of Avalon; with her own hands had she cast that away. (438)

At this moment, Arthur has just rejected the authority of Avalon and has refused to surrender to Viviane the sword of the Goddess. Morgaine could have taken advantage of her close bond with Arthur and manipulated him into resigning the sword to Avalon, and yet she does not. It is not sisterly love which prevents Morgaine

from acting: she has simply internalised the constraints of the Christian society she despises so much, that she does not even consider that her authority as a sister and a past lover might be exactly the kind of voice which could succeed in subduing Arthur's stubbornness (Hebert 2013, p. 134).

However, the most jarring episode of *The Mists of Avalon* occurs when Morgaine sees the statue of Saint Brigid at the convent of Glastonbury and feels satisfied by this speck of survival of the Goddess-worship:

> '[…] And here is a very old statue that our bishop gave us, from his native country… one of their saints, her name is Brigid…"
> Morgaine looked on the statue of Brigid, and she could feel the power coming from it in great waves that permeated the chapel. She bowed her head.
> *But Brigid is not a Christian saint,* she thought*, even if Patricius thinks so. That is the Goddess as she is worshipped in Ireland. And I know it, and even if they think otherwise, these women know the power of the Immortal. Exile her as they may, she will prevail.* (1983, p. 1008)

Morgaine appears to be completely satisfied by this shadow of the Goddess in the outside world even though it is a representation which casts the Goddess out of the divine. Moreover, the demotion into Christian subalternity strips the Goddess of her agency, allowing her only the power of intercession. Disturbingly, the Epilogue normalises the position of women as being satisfied with what little they can get: "they should remain happy but retiring, and not meddling with the ways of the world" (Shaw 2009, p. 474), remaining safely tucked away in the mists and far from any political landscape, as Avalon is.

The most exemplary instance in which Bradley's feminism fails to deliver has been skilfully analysed by Fuog (1991) and it would be Nimue's seduction of the second Merlin of Britain, Kevin: already from the start, when Nimue arrives at Camelot, she petitions for the High Queen's help; even though it seems reasonable for a woman to apply to the highest fellow female figure of power – and this is indeed part of Nimue and Morgaine's deceit – Gwenhwyfar is approached because, as a woman, she is more gullible than the Merlin (Fuog 1991, p. 74). Moreover, instead of trying

to create a sisterhood to educate and liberate other women from the repression of patriarchy, Nimue feels a deep contempt for the other noblewomen of the court: she despises the maidens, scathingly describing them as “feckless virgins […] with their minds between their legs!” (1983, p. 913). Her insults, however, are hardly in tune with Avalon’s ideal of women’s right to do how they see fit with their bodies, while it sounds suspiciously similar to the values of the patriarchal society which deifies virginity and condemns overt sexuality. Instead of considering the maidens of Camelot her fellow sisters, Nimue views them as competitors and,

> since the audience is meant to agree with Nimue’s judgment instead of to question it, the rift between women is created both within and without the text. To promote the patriarchal myths of sinister conspiracies and to promote rivalry between women should not be part of a feminist project. (Fuog 1991, p. 75)

When Nimue captures Kevin, it is with a destructive spell she learnt during her training in Avalon. Unlike her medieval counterpart who entraps Merlin in a tree, the girl does not need to cajole any knowledge out of the magician: she relies on her own training. In this, Bradley’s Nimue is the Merlin’s equal, and her final victory rests on her scheming abilities, as she let the Merlin believe her to be untrained and unskilled. In playing the part of the feckless fool, feeding Kevin’s biased perception of her as an innocent pretty thing, Nimue is successfully “undermining patriarchal structures from within” (Fuog 1991, p. 78) and in demystifying female sexuality – Nimue literally enchants the Merlin because he underestimates her magic, whereas the medieval tradition sees Merlin falling prey to Vivian’s seduction because the sorcerer does not comprehend the inherent mystery of women’s metaphorical charms – Marion Zimmer Bradley “undermines other patriarchal myths concerning sexual intercourse” (Fuog 1991, p. 80): even though the fear of dissipation into the female body which stops Stewart’s Merlin from having intercourse finds its realisation in Kevin's case, the cause of the Merlin’s demise is not the sexual union with the feminine per se but the spell Nimue employs to capture him.

On the surface, the upheaval of the patriarchal prejudices about women’s ignorance and virginity reworks the episode of Merlin’s capture into a celebration of female

agency. However, the matriarchal power structure which sends Nimue on her avenging mission is still phallocentric: the pyramidal hierarchy of Avalon's priestesses, with the Lady of the Lake invested of all the power, is a specular image of the verticality of patriarchy, only gender-reversed. The singleness of their power structure is mirrored by the singleness of their purpose: to perform the will of the Goddess in and out of Avalon, to influence the rest of the world so as to shape it after the Goddess's vision. This power-hungry matriarchal society is found to be as oppressive to women as patriarchy is, as exemplified by Nimue's agony when she is forced to suffocate her own sexuality in order to be able, one day, to enact the will of the Goddess:

> As she had waited all those years… There is a magic that comes with yielding to life. The priestesses of Avalon knew it when they lay in the fields at Beltane, invoking the life of the Goddess in their own bodies and hearts… but there is a deeper magic which comes from guarding the power, damming up the stream. […] She had wondered often, alone in the temple at Avalon, when she was forbidden to mingle with the other maidens or to go to the rites, when she felt that life force in her veins with such power that she sometimes burst into hysterical crying or tore at her hair and her face… why had they set her aside for this, why must she bear the terrible weight of all this without relief? But she had trusted the Goddess and obeyed her mentors, and now they had entrusted this great work to her, and she must not fail them through her own weakness.
>
> She was a charged vessel of power, like the Holy Regalia which it was death to touch unprepared. (1983, pp. 909-910)

In order to fulfil her holy duty, Nimue spends years chaining and resisting the forces of life within her. Even though the denial of relief grants her greater power, this kind of deprivation is not unlike the one she would suffer in a patriarchal society, and indeed her hysterical fits feel similar to Gwenhwyfar's irrational bouts of religious hysteria. In the end, the yoke of matriarchy and the tyranny of patriarchy are the same. Even worse, after an initial feeling of catharsis, the final unleashing of her sexuality eventually leads Nimue to her death: because she cannot live with having betrayed her beloved, the girl commits suicide.

In *The Mists of Avalon*, women's power is inextricably linked to their sexuality. Eventually, this inevitable connection only fuels the patriarchal belief that women are all voracious and destructive sexual creatures as Morgause seems to be, with her young lovers and dark magic – indeed, the fourth face of the Goddess: Mór Ríoghain, the Morrigan, the ravenous, raven-like goddess of death and strife – while their constant failures in becoming victorious, political agents reinforces the biased ideas on women's ineffectiveness. Additionally, even though Bradley successfully demythologises female sexuality, she merely shifts the sense of Otherness from female to male; moreover, female Otherness is not even completely dispersed as women remain conspicuously different from men in that they wield magic: the Merlin's mystical abilities are never explicitly addressed – indeed, even the fantastic knowledge he should retain from all his past lifetimes does not ever come to fruition in the character of Kevin and it is only softly hinted at by Taliessin.

The choice to avoid portraying male magic is probably deliberate, as Bradley strategically removes men from positions of power in order to pursue her feminist agenda: Arthur's importance as king is diminished when he is shown to be a simple puppet of the powers that be, and men's thought and feelings come generally unvoiced, rarely understood even by the women who love them. Instead of quelling the differences, Bradley has appointed men as her fulcrum for Otherness: the battle of the sexes is still going strong, women become their own persecutors and the great Goddess-worship strips the priestesses of their agency, rendering them mere "vessels of power" who, instead of being empowered by the divine possession of their bodies, crush under the godly pressure; whereas in *The Merlin's Trilogy*, Stewart argues the exact opposite: in her work, being a vessel of Merlin's all-encompassing God is a privilege which entails enormous power over the non-worshippers of the deity. The very pain the divine possession involves is treated as a proof of Merlin's strength, who faithfully awaits and endures. Such is the required strength, that Merlin firmly believes women could never hope to reach his levels of power: "Content yourself with such magic as young maids can use" (1973, p. 452). However, Merlin is proved to be sorely mistaken – and a mere misogynist – when his revered God chooses Nimuë, a young woman, as the next vessel for the mystical

gift of prophecy and godly magic. Truthfully, in portraying a relationship with the divine which is exceptionally personal and individualist rather than socially oriented, Stewart creates a religion which includes women as much as men and empowers them both, as opposed to Bradley's female characters who should be active conveyors of the religion instead of "passive recipients" (Hildebrand 2001, p. 36) like Stewart's worshippers, and yet they still succumb to the power of their allegedly liberating Goddess.

Fuog believes that because "[t]he Arthurian legends themselves uphold and reinforce patriarchal and phallocentric values", feminist Arthurian retellings may not be able to "rework society's myths, but rather may have to create new myths and completely restructure the notion of plot" (1991, p. 87). However, this is the moment when we should look again at Stewart's *Merlin Trilogy* and wonder: while Wynne-Davies believes it would be a mistake to call Mary Stewart a "feminist" author (1996, p. 162) it should be noticed how *The Merlin Trilogy* constantly emphasises how society's expectations contributes to the shaping of women, going so far as to wonder if the terribly evil Morgause would have kept herself away from the lethally dangerous dark arts, had she not been constricted and limited by the harsh standards of a patriarchal society.

It is true that Mary Stewart composes *The Crystal Cave* before the feminism of the late XX century becomes a recognised concept, that she does not narrate her story from a woman's point of view and neither does she overly concentrates upon the female characters of the Arthurian legends as Lady Charlotte Guest does. Truthfully, she chooses as her first-person narrator the one character who, above all, is the most suspicious of women; yet her choice is still successful "since, although Merlin might be depicted as misogynistic and/or nervous of women, he is at the same time always cast as an outsider" (Wynne-Davies 1996, p. 163). Additionally, the subjectivity of his opinions is not imposed on the reader as Gospel truth – while Bradley wants her reading audience to absorb completely Morgaine's judgments – as Merlin himself understands during his narration that some of his pre-conceptions

are actually biases which need to be revised. Indeed, at first, Merlin's view of women is disparaging even regarding his own mother:

> "Where do you get the Sight from? Your mother?"
>
> Against all expectation, he believed me. I said eagerly: "Yes, but it is different. She saw only women's things, to do with love. Then she began to fear the power, and let it be."
>
> "Do you fear it?"
>
> "I shall be a man."
>
> "And a man takes power where it is offered." (1970, p. 107)

However, he is admittedly in error more than once in his comments on women's ability to handle magical power. Wynne-Davies asserts that only in *The Last Enchantment* Stewart initiates the redemption of her female characters with the introduction of Nimuë (Wynne-Davies 1996, p. 172): unlike all her predecessors, Stewart's Nimuë does not trick Merlin into teaching her his mysterious arts, nor is her power in any way inferior to that of the great magician. As Merlin's magic fades, both he and Nimuë understand that Arthur cannot afford to lose the life-altering help and expertise of the vessel of the God, so she takes on the role of the High King's new magician and advisor. Already while he still believed Nimuë to a boy – Ninian – Merlin foretells that his disciple will become Arthur's prophet in his stead, claiming that her power will be "as ready to [Arthur's] hand as the royal sword" (1979, p. 828). Unbeknownst to him, Merlin is here claiming that while women, perhaps, may not be able to seize the sword, they can still be as powerful as that professed symbol of male dominion. As a matter of fact, Nimuë even surpasses Merlin's expectations as she bears the prophetic sight of Morgause attempting to steal Macsen Wledig's regalia, and retrieves them before Arthur's devious sister could snatch them for herself. Truthfully, Bedwyr even wonders if Nimuë will not prove to be an even better ally to Arthur than Merlin was:

> "Arthur will feel more comfortable with both his loving sisters safely shut up, and a good long way away. It was Nimuë's suggestion." He laughed, looking at me

> sideways. “Forgive me, Merlin, but now that the King’s enemies are women, perhaps it is better that he has a woman to deal with them. And if you ask me, you’ll be well out of it…” (1979, p. 908)

By the end of the trilogy, Nimuë has grown into an extraordinary prophet and wise advisor, and during their reunion after his entombment, Merlin compares Nimuë to a fine weapon once again, and he perceives how the power of the God is permeating her whole being:

> Something quietly formidable, a kind of honed brightness, like a weapon’s edge. And in her voice, at times, sounded a subtle echo of the deeper tones that the god uses when, with authority and power, he descends to mortal speech. (1979, p. 907)

At some point, we also start to wonder if Merlin’s dogmatic celibacy might have actually been an indicator only of a personal deficiency of his own since, at the end of *The Last Enchantment*, we learn that Nimuë is not going through the same sexual repression: despite being happily married with Prince Pelleas, she maintains her magic, thus foregoing the vow of chastity which Merlin had to keep for all his life in order to safeguard his power – at least before choosing to give up his magic in order to be with Nimuë completely.

However, Nimuë is not the only strong-willed female character in Mary Stewart’s trilogy. If we wish to overlook Guinevere because of her passive nature – and yet, she is no featherhead as she keeps a cool head when Melwas abducts her to rape her, and she “smiled and spoke him fair, and hid her fear” (1979 p. 806), wittingly biding her time until Bedwyr and Merlin come to her rescue – Ygraine and Niniane stand out as women who dare to speak their mind and who actively influence the course of events in order to pursue their own wishes.

In an unwelcoming medieval society, which forces women to “lead lives of dependence so complete as to breed uncertainty and fear” (1979, p. 805), Stewart’s female characters learn to get what they want with quiet insistence. Ygraine is a politically able woman, clever and ambitious, who does not care to play the part of the submissive wife:

> “I was married at sixteen to the Lord of Cornwall; he is a good man; I honour and respect him. Until I came to London I was half content to starve and die there in Cornwall, but he brought me here, and now it has happened. Now I know what I must have.” (1970, p. 284)

Even Merlin, always so wary of women and hardly impressed by them, notices admiringly that “[Uther and Ygraine] are man and woman for each other, and outside their bed they are King and Queen” (1973, p. 395). Ygraine is Mary Stewart’s ideal woman: she takes charge of her life, cleverly arranging her meeting with Uther, and she frequently displays her political experience in front of men.

However, it is neither in Nimuë nor in Ygraine that we find the starkest opposition and victory over the repressions of the patriarchal society: Niniane, Merlin’s mother – as baptised by Mary Stewart after one of the many variations of the Lady of the Lake’s name – stubbornly rebels against the patriarchal order for all her life. In Geoffrey’s *Historia Regum Britanniae,* Merlin’s mother is a nameless nun, hopeless and helpless, who suffers the seduction of a demon; as far from her medieval counterpart as Stewart’s Nimuë is, Niniane is an assertive woman, with plans to pursue which never focus on men, family or love but only on her own self-realisation. Merlin’s power of the Sight as much as his firm trust in the divine, his disregard for secular authorities and his preference for quiet and solitude are all traits which he inherits from his mother: since the very beginning of her trilogy, as quietly but also as constantly as her characters, Stewart marks women’s importance by changing Geoffrey’s tradition of Merlin’s peculiar traits as a legacy of his unholy father, and turns Merlin into his mother’s son (Hildebrand 2001, p. 87).

Niniane openly disputes the patriarchal order on multiple occasions: when she refuses to reveal to her own father and later even to King Vortigern the identity of Merlin’s father, she denies both their authority over her and the patronymic and patrilineal system; again, she refuses to marry and let a man gain control over her life and body even though this spikes her father’s violent fury; she fully rejects any type of external control over her own life and she retires to her beloved nunnery, not in an act of self-confinement but as a coronation of her gut-felt desire for peace and

quiet, which she finally achieves among the sisterhood of fellow female worshippers which Bradley tries but fails to promote with her Avalon. Even as a nun, Niniane proves to be spirited and opinionated: when the Abbess of the nunnery where she has taken her vows forbids her to meet any visitor, Merlin already knows that, “it will take more than a word from the Abbess to stop her from seeing me” (1970, p. 164), and indeed, Niniane cares little for the Abbess’s orders and meets her son as she pleases. Her general attitude towards Merlin throughout the book is one of fierce protectiveness, yet she is never possessive or jealous of him: when the High King Vortigern threatens Merlin’s life, Niniane bravely defies the monarch and outfoxes his claims in order to protect her son; however, once Merlin is all grown up and feels he does not need to rely on her support any longer, Niniane follows her heart’s wish and chooses life in the convent. As it is the case for Merlin, religion for Niniane is an empowering instrument which grants her the possibility to live her life as she prefers.

Stewart’s women, like her men, are complex and layered individuals with their own set of goals and fears, and their modernity draws them close to the audience’s sympathies (Hildebrand 2001, p. 90): in her narrative, one gender does not prevaricate the other.

Ultimately, Stewart’s views of equality expressed by Merlin’s religion – all the gods are the God, and even all goddesses are one awesome deity; and the God accepts as his messengers men and women alike – ricochet in the subtly proclaimed equal worthiness of men and women, which builds a Round Table of the genders where everyone is to be respected; whereas Bradley, in waging her war against the male-perceived ideals and rhetoric of Camelot, strengthens the dichotomies and fuels the strife between opposing realities – God and Goddess, man and woman, repression and freedom – resulting in a failed message, which falls as Arthur does.

5. Inalienable immortality: Conclusion

> *It is a legend of origin combined with the myth of revival; part of the power of the Arthurian saga lies in its uncertain significance so that the very absence of meaning, particularly in the ambiguous death of Arthur, has encouraged a hundred different meaning – national, social, tribal, cultural – to rush into the available space. Arthur himself lies suspended between heaven and earth, the significance of his equivocal posture matched by the sense of suspended significance in the texts devoted to him.*
>
> *(Ackroyd 2004, p. 112)*

In his work from 2004, *Albion: the origins of the English Imagination*, Peter Ackroyd specifically dedicates an entire chapter to King Arthur, aptly titling it "He is not dead". Although many of the recurrent themes of the Arthuriad are in tune with what he defines as the English imagination, he finds that the most English quality of King Arthur is his melancholy, the English leitmotif *par excellence*:

> The story of Arthur has always been striated with sensations of loss and of transitoriness, which may well account for its central place within the English imagination; the native sensibility is touched with melancholy, […] and the sad fate of Arthur and his kingdom corresponds to that national mood. There is something too of determination and endurance within this dominant sensation. Some men say that Arthur will rise again; we must endure our going hence. (2004, p. 110)

Reflecting on "the sad fate of Arthur", Gilbert realises that, "Arthurian ideals remain unrealisable and irreconcilable even for Arthurian heroes" (2009, p. 156). Indeed, we have come to see that in the economy of the Arthurian myth, no character can ever find complete gratification because they all belong to a story, to an era, which is inevitably going to fall: the characters involved in the Arthuriad cannot achieve their greatest goals since King Arthur himself, the character who influences the

entire saga, could not prevail over his final foe. In a way, it is not far from what also happens to the Homeric heroes: all the major protagonists of the Iliad die; they cause grief and bloodshed, and because of this they pay the ultimate price. Only one of them, Odysseus, is spared: unlike Achilles, Ajax or Agamemnon, Odysseus plays a relatively small part in the war, becoming pivotal only by the end of the conflict. His contribution is critical enough to condemn him to an eleven-year-long journey before he can make it back home, but it is not enough to mark him as eligible for death. In a similar manner, all the characters of the Arthurian legends who are strongly complicit in the fall of Camelot cannot go unpunished: retribution is requested for the part they played, so they either die or lose everything they hold dear. As the exception confirms the rule:

> The characteristic Arthurian dilemmas can only be resolved in an elsewhere outside the court, a fantasy space receding within the works themselves. Thus the Grail is achieved in a distant castle, and knights love happily in far-flung domains. Alternatively, long-standing dilemmas are overcome just when collapse has already become unstoppable, as when Arthur at the height of his conquering glory hears that Mordred has seized his throne. Fulfilment is inseparable from breakdown. (Gilbert 2009, p. 156)

We see an example of this inherent need to remove geographically the characters from the traditional Arthurian setting in order to have them achieve their happiness in Mino Milani's trilogy *Le Cronache di Merlino* (2003): here, the protagonists Brandano and Selvaggia travel overseas to warn their king of the impeding Saxon attack but, after a sea-storm wrecks their boat on distant shores, they find themselves on the unknown isle of Altilia, where no one has ever even heard of King Arthur. It is here that Brandano gets adopted by the old king of the realm because of his extraordinary likeness to the late prince Teucro, who died during an attack by the invading army of the Moors. Brandano then takes up the prince's sword and leads the royal military forces into battle; despite his inexperience, he succeeds in his mission to defeat the enemy, peace is brought back to the realm and now Brandano – who, at the beginning of the trilogy is a mere servant – officially becomes a prince and can marry his beloved princess, Selvaggia.

As a consequence of this impossibility to achieve fulfilment while inside the Arthurian landscapes, we could infer that defeat is an integral part of King Arthur's myth: his story is never complete until it meets the extinguishing of any chance of victory. It is at that very moment of desperation that the true magic of King Arthur is set into motion: in death, the promise of rebirth; in defeat, the possibility to wipe everything out and start anew, to face one day the enemy with more wisdom, more conscience and knowledge, with – as T. H. White would say – the insight of our "seventh sense". The *Rex Quondam Rexque Futurus* is a figure which links the hope for the new generations to come with the baggage of knowledge which the previous one has matured. Returning to Lévi-Strauss statement that, "Myth, like the rest of language, is made up of constituent units" (1955, p. 431), we could safely deduce that the return of Arthur – from death, from oblivion, from a geographically removed Otherworld – is one of the "gross constituent units" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, p. 430) of the Arthurian myth as much as failure is, and when a retelling avoids to integrate this element to its plot, the meaning is drastically changed and disappoints the overall intended purpose.

Indeed, if it is true that "repetition has as its function to make the structure of the myth apparent" (Lévi-Strauss 1955, p. 443), then even in contemporary reworkings we see that Arthur's return is a quintessential unit of a structurally successful Arthuriad: in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* (2015), Arthur's return is associated with the return of national memory, which lies "buried" as long as the she-dragon Querig slumbers in her enchanted sleep, however the spell is already fading, and as soon as Querig will wake, the memory of Arthur will rise as well; in Philip Reeve's *Here Lies Arthur* (2007) the return of the legendary king is a story invented by Merlin and his adopted daughter Gwyna, who deliberately create the legend of King Arthur around the "real" figure of the warlord Arthur, and by the end of the book, Gwyna decides to keep weaving these stories and to add a prophecy of return in order to give hope to all the people who still live in chaos and have begun to see in Arthur a promise of unity; Vera Chapman explicitly nods to King Arthur's return in the last novella of *The Three Damosels* (1976) as Princess Ursulet finds her father magically sleeping with his knights under a hill; even Stephen King, in the *Dark Tower* saga

(1982-2004), faithfully adheres to this Arthurian cycle of death and rebirth as the brotherhood of the gunslingers – descendants of Arthur's knights – has died out and yet when Roland Deschain, the last of the gunslingers, should meet his demise on the last floor of the eponymous Dark Tower, he wakes up back at the beginning of the story to start the cycle again, this time with Arthur's horn at his side which will – supposedly – help him find a better ending; Stewart's Arthur is already the reincarnation of Ambrosius and her trilogy closes with Arthur asking Merlin, "Wait for me. I shall come back" (1973, p. 911) in a half eerie, half comforting entendre that Arthur will indeed come back in more ways than one. Finally, T. H. White reinvents the return of King Arthur by associating it with the promulgation of his story and ideals through culture: Arthur's hopeful resurrection lies in the "commitment to communicating the ideals, not of a chivalric dream-world, but of modern Western society at its best" (Brewer 1993, p. 206).

However, Marion Zimmer Bradley fails to integrate appropriately the element of the return in her novel: *The Mists of Avalon'*s adage – "and he shall rise and reign forever… he has triumphed, he shall triumph forever" (1983, p. 204) – and its intrinsic promise of continuity is reneged when both Arthur and Mordred – the "Dark Son" (1983, p. 204) who should come after – die at Camlann and no possibility of reincarnation is ever hinted for any of them, despite the book's theology explicitly admitting that reincarnation exist in this setting. Bradley negates King Arthur's return as her character dies in the arms of Morgaine before he can reach salvation in Avalon: "I kissed his eyes. And he died, just as the mists rose and the sun shone full over the shores of Avalon" (1983, p. 1000). Despite the opening claim from the Prologue – "king who was and king who shall be" (1983, p. IX) – her infantilized Arthur – "take care of the baby", "I will never leave you again, my brother, my baby" (1983, p. 1000) – is doubtlessly dead as Henry II wanted him to be when the monks discovered his grave at Glastonbury in 1191: there is no suggestion of a future resurrection, and the only real immortality is that of the Goddess, who survives in the worship of the Virgin Mary. Yet we have seen that in her attempt to underline men's position of subalternity and unimportance within the grand scheme that is the matriarchal power of the Goddess, by denying Arthur his return and shifting all the

focus to the Goddess-worship, Bradley changes the Arthurian story into one of survival instead of one of death and rebirth. Contrary to her purpose, this change in the subject of the return leads to the general failure of the theme and the message Bradley hopes to convey with *The Mists of Avalon*. Indeed, even Wynne-Davies believes that “the self-consciousness of her political and theoretical position” misleads Bradley into “simplistic readings of the Arthurian characters and symbols” (1996, p. 176), and this becomes all the more apparent when Bradley tries to have Morgaine overcome all her defining struggles and reach her catharsis when she sees the endurance of the Goddess-worship in the veneration of Saint Brigid and the Holy Virgin.

Bradley’s impossibility to deliver her final message could be explained by Lévi-Strauss’s theory that “if there is a meaning to be found in mythology, this cannot reside in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way those elements are combined” (1955, p. 431). As a result, even the most well-intentioned retelling cannot work properly when it misses the quintessential links of its mythic structure. In the “*bundles of relations*” (Lévi-Strauss 1955, p. 430) which constitute the Arthurian myth, both the element of failure and the element of resurrection/return are inescapably related to the character of Arthur, and they must remain so in order for the “mythical value of the myth” (Lévi-Strauss 1955, p. 430) to be preserved, as:

> [The] substance [of a myth] does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the story which it tells. It is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at “taking off” from the linguistic ground on which it keeps on rolling. (Lévi-Strauss, pp. 430-431)

While there are elements of the myth whose different interpretation does not interfere with the final significance, some cannot be avoided as they are the fixed elements which give structure to the myth’s meaning. In the Arthurian myth, the promised return of the Once and Future King is that essential part of the sentence without which we cannot retain its meaning.

Although Bradley's impact on the Arthurian literary landscape and her contribution to the feminist movement of the late 70s should not be questioned, her retelling still misinterprets the main components of Arthur's myths, to the point that *The Mists of Avalon* reads as an ineffective Arthurian retelling – in fact, Wynne-Davies also remarks how "her text appears to have been less influential upon succeeding women writers than the more psychologically fraught works of Mary Stewart" (1996, p. 176) – where the erroneous rendition of the constituent unit of the return drastically shifts the intended meaning of her discourse, tainting her final portrayal of the Goddess-worship as victorious – "she will prevail" (1983, p. 1008) "we did not fail" (1983, p.1009) – and turning endurance into a strained survival and an "exile" (1983, p. 1008).

If Lévi-Strauss is right in maintaining that "a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such" (1955, p. 435) and Arthur's ending is to be perceived as one of hope, then we can turn our attention back to Roland Deschain, who attempts his scaling of the Dark Tower with renewed strength as Arthur's relic – previously thought to be lost – is now with him; to Ursulet who "looked up at [Ambris] with new radiance in her eyes" when she finally understands that "yes – Arthur shall come again" (1976, p. 383); or to Arthur himself who, in *The Once and Future King*, foresees that:

> There would be a day—there must be a day—when he would come back to Gramarye with a new Round Table which had no corners, just as the world had none—a table without boundaries between the nations who would sit to feast there. (1958, p. 639)

So, as the old monarch finds hope in the "chance that [people] might come to reason" and he meets his future "with a peaceful heart" (1958, p. 639), T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* too "remains a flickering candle shedding light as its author hoped it would" (Brewer 1993, p. 206), and King Arthur and his myth are made ever-returning and immortal once again, as they always shall be.

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