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Re-vision from the Mists:

The Development of a Literary Genre of Feminist Arthuriana as an Allegorical Response to Second Wave Feminist Politics

A Women's Studies Thesis

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Advised by Leslie Dunn and Lydia Murdoch

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*For all my friends
who convinced me that I had to write about Arthurian legends;
for my mother, who asked me why I loved them so much;
for Beth Darlington, who told me they were important.*

A Note on Names

Due to the influence of Welsh, Latin, Anglo Saxon, Old English, Old French, and other medieval Western European languages in which the Arthurian legends have been retold countless times, the spelling of many of the names of Arthurian characters are inconsistent across literature. For the purpose of this thesis, I will be using the author's spellings only in direct quotes. In all other instances, I will be using a standardized (often meaning Latinized or Anglicized) version of the name. The spellings I will use are: Morgan (for Morgan le Fay, Morgan le Fey, Morgaine, Morgue); Vivian* (Vivianne); Lynett (Lynet, Lunette, Lionet); Guinevere (Guenevere, Guenever, Gwenhwyfar, Guanhumara); Morgause** (Morgause, Morgawse); Arthur (Artus, Arto); Merlin (the Merlin, Myrddin); Bedwyr (Bedivere); Cai (Kay, Caius, Cei); Lancelot (Launcelot, Lancelet); Mordred (Modred, Medraut); and Meleagant (Meleagant, Meliagance, Maelgwn).

*In some tales, Vivian and Nimue are separate characters, each with their own role. In others, one character (under either name) takes on all of the roles. In this paper, I will use whichever name makes the most sense in context.

**While Morgause was originally the mother of Mordred, Arthur's son and nephew, Morgan has taken on this role in some of the modern retellings. Regardless of who gives birth to him, however, he is always raised in Lothian/Orkney with the sons of Morgause and Lot. For this reason, I will be primarily referring to Morgause as Mordred's mother, unless Morgan-as-mother is relevant to the analysis.

Introduction

“The flags on the great towers of Camelot fluttered, the roof-tiles glittered in the sun – every window was garlanded with flowers or spread with carpets and gay drapery – bells pealed, and the shrill note of trumpets wafted up towards the blue skies.”
– opening line of *The King’s Damosel*

In 1976, Vera Chapman published *The King’s Damosel*, one of three Arthurian short stories in which the tale is told through the eyes of a female character. With this story, Chapman became the first woman to reinterpret Arthurian legends through the perspective of an Arthurian woman, and initiated a political project of female authors reclaiming the lives and roles of women in Arthurian myth and literature.¹ This trend was one of many manifestations of what feminist literary theorist Elaine Showalter describes as, “[f]eminine realism, feminist protest, and female self-analysis” that combined “in the context of twentieth-century social and political concern” (304). Feminist literary criticism, which calls attention to the need for more feminist literature, is a product of the second wave feminist movement – the era of feminist consciousness “from the post-World War II period to the end of the twentieth century” (Gubar 293). Between 1975 and 1995 – a twenty-year period overlapping with and heavily influenced by the second wave – four other women would take up the task of telling the stories of Arthurian women, each offering unique and politically engaging contributions to the genre of Arthurian literature.

The purpose of this thesis is twofold. The first is to compare and contrast the portrayal of Arthurian women as presented by five works: Vera Chapman’s *The King’s Damosel* (1976), Sharan Newman’s *Guinevere* Trilogy (*Guinevere* 1981, *The Chessboard Queen* 1983, *Guinevere*

¹ While Chapman’s other two stories – *The Green Knight* and *King Arthur’s Daughter* – are also told through the perspectives of female characters, the protagonists in those are Chapman’s original characters. While those stories are still politically interesting, I chose to include only *The King’s Damosel* in this thesis because the protagonist, Lynett, appears in Malory’s canonical text *Le Morte d’Arthur*, and is a recurring character in the Arthurian tradition.

Evermore 1985), Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1982), Persia Woolley's *Guinevere* Trilogy (*Child of the Northern Spring* 1987, *Queen of the Summer Stars* 1991, *Guinevere: The Legend in Autumn* 1993), and Joan Wolf's *The Road to Avalon* (1988). This comparison will examine the influence of patriarchal Arthurian literary tradition on its female characters and the ways in which these authors have complicated, subverted, or rejected this influence in different and similar ways. The second is to analyze these novels within the historical and political context in which they were written. The novels written by these women are not simply five more works of speculative, fantastical, or romantic historical fiction in a long line of Arthurian reinterpretations. In her work *The Resisting Reader*, Judith Fetterley argues, "Literature is political" (xi). Women's literature, even more so: as Hélène Cixous claims, "A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive" (Cixous 424). In her essay on feminist interpretations of ancient stories, Amy Richlin declares that women "can appropriate; we can resist. The old stories await our retelling; they haunt our language anyway" (178-179). The writings of these Arthurian feminists are political, in that they *draw* from a wide range of prominent feminist theory of the time; they *apply* those theories to the lived experiences of individual characters; they *interact* with the theories by promoting them, challenging them, and putting them in conversation with each other through the experiences of their characters; and they *redistribute* these theories in accessible, relatable stories that could reach much different and broader audiences than could the academy for which much of the original theory is written. This collection of works, which I am calling "feminist Arthuriana," is distinct from works in both the historical genre of Arthurian literature and the increasingly popular genre of feminist fiction because it usurps a preexisting literary tradition and reclaims the canon for feminist ends.

Methodology

The primary methodology of this thesis is an analysis of these five feminist Arthurian novels through the lens of the feminist literary theory that was being written preceding and alongside these novels. That these novels are Arthurian is inarguable; in order to claim them as feminist, we must first identify what makes a novel “feminist.” Fetterley claims that the exclusion of women from literature is based in the (a)political nature of that literature. She argues, “One of the main things that keeps the design of our literature unavailable to the consciousness of the woman reader, and hence impalpable, is the very posture of the apolitical, the pretense that literature speaks universal truths through forms from which all the merely personal, the purely subjective, has been burned away” (xi). Feminist literature must *be political*. Additionally, Showalter asserts, “There is clearly a difference between books that happen to have been written by women, and a ‘female literature’...which purposefully and collectively concerns itself with the articulation of women’s experience, and which guides itself ‘by its own impulses’ to autonomous self-expression” (4). Feminist literature must *honestly represent women’s experience*. The second wave was the ideal age to combine the political and the personal. “Women’s experience” in the 1970-80s was increasingly being shaped by feminism, and the experiences of female authors were no exception. Feminist theory and scholarship “increased [authors’] sensitivity to the problems of sexual bias or projection in literary history” (Showalter 8). This applied to Arthurian feminists in two ways: first, they had to recognize and understand their own struggles and the oppression of their fellow women, as presented by second wave feminists, and second, they had to overcome the “sexual bias” rampant throughout hundreds of years of male-dominated Arthurian literature.

These issues are further exacerbated by the task of writing pseudo-historical women living in a period from which there is little solid historical evidence about the nature of women’s lives.

Feminist literary theory engages with feminist history to question the realities of the portrayal of medieval women throughout history:

Did literary, prescriptive, and legal sources accurately reveal the lives of medieval women?... Similarly, the depictions of women in literary and religious sources seemed to reflect narrow gender ideals, if not downright misogyny, and suggested women were dominated by men. Influenced by literary criticism, medievalists began to wonder if such texts reflected the ideals of the author or the realities of the society. As a consequence, scholars began to investigate whether or not the ideals contained in these sources really captured the life experience of medieval women. (Goldy and Livingston 3)

Rather than restricting Arthurian feminist authors to “historically accurate” portrayals of their female characters, however, the lack of unbiased historical evidence provides these authors the perfect opportunity to re-envision the lives of Guinevere, Morgan, Lynett, and others in ways that were relevant to twentieth-century women but remained situated in a speculative sub-Roman British society.

Historical context

While Arthurian feminist authors were the first to make explicitly feminist revisions of Arthuriana, there is a long tradition of taking Arthurian legends and turning them into stories that are not primarily written as a nationalist tribute to the Matter of Britain or a glorification of knightly chivalry. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, specifically, there was a revival of interest in allegorical Arthuriana in both Britain and the United States. In this genre were popular works such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (completed 1885), Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), John Steinbeck’s *Tortilla Flat* (1935), and T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King* (consolidated in 1958, which inspired the 1960 Lerner and

Loewe musical *Camelot* and the 1963 Disney movie *The Sword in the Stone*).² Arthurian scholar Andrew Mathis explains, “This use of myth to address and critique historical events spread beyond the realm of literature and entered popular culture as early as Twain’s own time. This was part of the general trend of medievalism seen in the formation of fraternal orders among working people in the late nineteenth century” (Mathis 2). Almost a hundred years after Tennyson finished his classic, the combination of a twentieth-century medievalist revival and a newly widespread familiarity with Arthurian legends provided a prime genre for Arthurian feminists to work from. As women writing women, they found themselves, “in a sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex,” but as Arthurian writers, they did not have to work from scratch (Showalter 12). They did, however, have to sort through the material available to them and negotiate which parts were worth keeping and which would need to be reclaimed, reimagined, or thrown out altogether. Understandably, these negotiations complicated Arthurian feminists’ relationships to their male predecessors:

On the one hand, therefore, the woman writer’s male precursors symbolize authority; on the other hand, despite their authority, they fail to define the ways in which she experiences her own identity as a writer. More, the masculine authority with which they construct their literary personae, as well as the fierce power struggles in which they engage in their efforts of self-creation, seem to the woman writer directly to contradict the terms of her own gender definition. (Gilbert and Gubar 48)

An authentic womanhood is *essential* to these authors’ understandings and portrayals of Arthurian women, so for that authenticity to be lacking or blatantly nonexistent in their working materials

² While it is rarely included in the genre of Arthurian literature, Mathis describes *Tortilla Flat* as Steinbeck’s “most Malory-influenced work,” with the obvious exception of his “unfinished modern English rendering” of Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* (Mathis 32). Its characters and themes are all intentionally reminiscent of *Camelot* and the Grail Quest, and their failings are just as much of a commentary on the modern sociopolitical climate as they are a critique of Arthurian legends themselves.

made it necessary for these authors to subvert much more material than they kept in its inherited form.

Re-vising the canon

Because a vast majority of feminist literature (as analyzed by feminist literary critics) written in the late twentieth century was made up of original stories, the question still remains: *why* Arthuriana? Why do the work of sorting through a long history of masculinist Arthurian literature to create a feminist reinterpretation when original settings, plots, characters would be more easily applicable to second wave women's lives and more easily recognizable as explicitly feminist works?

First of all, we must understand the canon as undeniably masculine. Tongue in cheek, Lillian Robinson offers that "it may seem somewhat of an exaggeration to speak of 'the' literary canon, almost paranoid to call it an institution, downright hysterical to characterize that institution as restrictive" (572). Fetterley answers in no uncertain terms: "American literature is male. To read the canon of what is currently considered classic American literature is perforce to identify as male... Our literature neither leaves women alone nor allows them to participate" (xii). Looking at the most prominent (and sometimes, only) names of classic Arthurian authors, it is clear that the same can be said for Arthurian literature as Fetterley states for American literature.³ Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar agree that myths and fairytales are legitimate genres for women to assert their participation in the canon. Showalter identifies fables as a site "for men writers from a variety of

³ Gildas, Nennius, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes, Sir Thomas Malory, etc. In the medieval canon, we see a single exception in the lays of Marie de France. Dinshaw explains, "To be sure, some women in the Middle Ages *did* own and compose texts... But women's disenfranchisement within the literary sphere was certain, and medieval attitudes about women's expression preserved strong classical and biblical prohibitions" (Dinshaw 657). Therefore, the existence of Marie de France's vaguely-Arthurian works are not enough to deny that the canon is overwhelmingly male – her contribution is much more of an exception than a rule.

class and ethnic backgrounds to explore their literary identities,” and Gilbert and Gubar argue that myths “both state and enforce culture’s sentences with greater accuracy than more sophisticated literary texts” (Showalter 332; Gilbert and Gubar 36). For these reasons, the benefits of using a pre-established collection of legends instead of an original story become clearer.

More than accessibility, there are political reasons for reverting to stories that have already been told. Robinson goes on to situate the issue in the history of feminist literary theory, explaining, “For more than a decade now, feminist scholars have been protesting the apparently systematic neglect of women’s experience in the literary canon... Moreover, the argument runs, the predominantly male authors in the canon show us the female character and relations between the sexes in a way that both reflects and contributes to sexist ideology” (573). In the preface for the final book of her Guinevere trilogy, Woolley remarks that “although women look at the same events as men, they see very different things,” and therefore, “it was time we took a new look at this old story through the eyes of a real woman” (*Legend* 5). If the literary canon had simply refused to acknowledge the existence of women in its works, it would be simple to disregard any and all of it and begin anew with women’s stories. It is because these male authors, more often than not, *did* write women, and wrote them *terribly* in ways that are not only frustrating but also damaging, that we must revisit the canon through a feminist perspective. From the brief glimpses of women’s narratives we see in the male canon, we must answer, “But what is this other plot? Is there any *one* other plot? ...What, in other words, have women got to hide?” (Gilbert and Gubar 75). Feminist theorist Adrienne Rich describes the necessity of searching for these answers:

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (qtd. in Fetterley xix)

Is it possible for contemporary women to identify with Arthurian women? Does it matter? Do we only appreciate motherhood when we know that Igraine had to give up her children for the sake of being queen? Do our love lives only make sense when we realize just how much Guinevere loved Lancelot? Does our faith in the Divine depend on understanding Morgan’s motives for lashing out against the Knights of the Round Table? The answer is no, and yes. No, because obviously, most women can live full lives without ever having heard of Camelot. Yes, because when we take away the names and the places, we are left with the realities that affect women now just as much as they did then: relationships, autonomy, sexuality, leadership, spirituality, duty, power, love. Yes, because we cannot locate ourselves in these issues without first knowing how we *have been* unwillingly located by the perpetuation of dishonest representations of our selves by a masculinist tradition. Yes, because while we will never know firsthand what it is like to be a queen, or a High Priestess, or a knight errant, we will know it better than any man who has ever failed to write us as such.

The texts

While all five works examined in this thesis draw from the same canon, they focus on different themes, characters, and stories, and each serve a distinct purpose. Even so, they are compatible in a compare/contrast analysis simply because they all, in one way or another, fall prey to the “tyranny of tradition.” Coined by noted Arthurian scholar Norris J. Lacy to describe the

failings of Arthurian film, the “tyranny of tradition” refers to “a particular kind of filmic ‘anxiety of influence,’ whereby filmmakers must deal with two opposing impulses: on the one hand, the natural desire to innovate; on the other, the need to tell a story that corresponds at least in major respects to the audience’s understanding of orthodox Arthurian fact” (76). Even though Lacy is talking about film, the phenomenon is still very much applicable to Arthurian literature, wherein there are only so many alterations to plot or characterization that can be made before the story is unrecognizable – and familiarity is part of the point of using it in the first place. Still, some authors are more traditional than others, and those distinctions are worth noting.

Chapman is undoubtedly the most unconventional with her Arthurian interpretation. Her main character, Lynett, is the younger of two daughters of a sonless lord, and as such, is raised with less gender restrictions than her sister. The story begins on the night of Lynett’s unhappy marriage to the brother of the man she is in love with, and her backstory is told in a series of flashbacks. As a young girl wishing she could be a boy, Lynett is raped by a friend of her father, and the flashbacks follow her as she copes with her assault. The familiar story of Lynett and Gareth, or Beaumains, here only serves to bring Lynett to Arthur’s court, where she is given an opportunity that leads to a confrontation with her rapist, where she exacts her revenge. The story ends when she completes the Grail Quest, a plot traditionally reserved for Galahad, and finds love and purpose in her life as an important member of Arthur’s court.

The other four works take a more traditional approach, covering the events from the end of Uther’s reign to the Battle of Camlann and the fall of Camelot. Woolley and Newman both place Guinevere at the center of their narratives, beginning with her childhood and ending with her quiet life after Arthur’s death – Woolley tells the story from Guinevere’s first-person point of view, and Newman uses third-person omniscient with an emphasis on Guinevere and how others relate to

her. Key plot points that they share are growing up in childhoods mixed with love and loss, marrying Arthur and becoming the High Queen, falling in love with Lancelot, raising an adopted son, coping with a traumatic experience of sexual violence, facing accusations of treason and a fall from grace, and a finishing life with a relatively happy ending. Each of these authors tell their story in trilogies, and therefore have plenty of room to flesh out these lengthy tales.

Bradley and Wolf also give Guinevere many of these plots, but prioritize Morgan in their novels. Wolf uses third-person omniscient similarly to Newman, but though we probably see more of Guinevere's perspective than Morgan's, the central focus of the novel is the complicated relationship between Morgan and Arthur. Morgan is raised and educated alongside Arthur, but because Arthur's royal parentage was kept secret, it was not until after they had fallen in love that they discovered that they were too closely related to be together. The novel follows their falling out, subsequent reunion, and love affair upon a backdrop of the traditional Arthurian story.

Bradley's epic is unique in that it tells the events of Arthur's reign exclusively through the perspectives of several different women, but uses third-person point of view for all women except Morgan, who narrates from the first-person, denoting Morgan as the protagonist. This story begins earlier than the others, starting before Igraine meets Uther, instead of telling Igraine's experiences through memories later in the story; it covers more details than any of the others, by virtue of its length and breadth; it provides more subversive detail, for while Guinevere's story runs parallel to Arthur's in the canon, Morgan is so often portrayed as the antagonist that hers runs underneath, outside of, and perpendicular to Arthur's, meaning that much of it is left open to interpretation. Like Wolf's, however, Bradley's telling ends abruptly, for Morgan's story ends with Arthur in Avalon, and is not allowed to continue on as Guinevere's is.

Organization

This thesis is divided into three chapters: Queen, Lover, and Witch. The reason for organizing by archetype rather than character or theme is in the interest of conciseness and coherency, but also as a way of labeling the sites of gendered oppression as common literary tropes that Arthurian women have historically been limited to, reclaiming and expanding those archetypes to understand their depth and significance on the lives of Arthurian women. Susan Gubar writes, “Feminist critics began by investigating images of women in literature composed by men and in male-dominated religious and folkloric, psychoanalytic and philosophic, scientific and political contexts. Feminists dedicated to tracing the imprint of male-domination (or masculinism) dealt with various stereotypes of women that contributed to their alterity, their Otherness” (295). The Otherness of Queen (as opposed to King), of Lover (as opposed to Fighter), and of Witch (as opposed to Knight) shows the specific challenges faced by Arthurian feminists as they used second wave feminist theories and concepts to rework the characters that had been passed down to them by men.

Guinevere, Camelot’s High Queen and arguably the most famous Arthurian woman, has been portrayed with a plethora of different personalities and characteristics throughout history, and within feminist Arthuriana it is no different. Chapter one will take a close look at representations of her character as beautiful, intelligent, kind, competent, or any combination of those and other traits. But while the queen is the most politically powerful woman and Guinevere is the most notable queen in Arthurian Britain, she is not the only woman caught in the trap of power. Chapter one primarily analyzes women’s political power with the recognition of power as a gendered, patriarchal tool, and therefore includes many women with various degrees and definitions of power, as well as the opportunities and bargains available that let some women gain more power

than others. The education of women is a prime factor in their ability to be politically competent, but the availability of education and other opportunities that give women these skills is rooted in gender norms and how well women conform to them. A secondary factor that plays into women's leadership is the author's interpretation of sub-Roman British society, because a general trend across contemporary Arthurian literature shows that the more heavily the new society of Camelot relies on Roman standards of gender (instead of ancient Celtic ones, whatever they were), the less likely it is that women will be accepted into any leadership roles. The various duties of a queen are also affected by these two factors, but the consistently most important one is bearing an heir for the king. Because of this, motherhood has essentially been inextricably linked with the role of queen – because Guinevere is barren, that link must be severed and queenship reconstructed.

The medieval Arthurian romances' introduction of courtly love is responsible for many modern, mainstream idealizations of chivalrous masculinity and heteromonogamous romance, and for that reason, chapter two will work to expand the interpersonal relationships of Arthurian women beyond the notorious couples.⁴ With this in mind, the chapter purposefully begins by centering female friendships, invisible in the canon but essential to these women's survival.⁵ The heteroromantic relationships cannot be ignored, but more prevalent in these works than the glorification of romance is the emotional cost of inescapable, romantic love and the harsh restrictions of monogamy. Included with romance but ignored or vilified by the canon is the sexual aspect of these relationships. Feminist Arthurian authors offer nuanced portrayals of sex, sexual

⁴ Besides Guinevere and Lancelot, other infamous Arthurian lovers include Tristan and Isolde, Erec and Enid or Geraint and Enid, Gareth and Lyonesse, Gawain and Ragnell, La Cote Mal Taillée and Maledisant, etc. Notable but less romanticized are a number of Arthurian seductions and one-night-stands-gone-wrong, such as Uther and Igraine, Arthur and Morgan/Morgause, and Morgause and Lamorack.

⁵ One exception to the lack of female friendships in the Arthurian canon is the friendship between Guinevere and Enid in Tennyson's "The Marriage of Geraint," which is mentioned only briefly but is used as the instigator of Geraint's jealousy and abuse of Enid. (The tale implies that Geraint is jealous of a nonexistent lover of Enid's that he suspects her of having because of Guinevere's bad influence, but an alternate and preferable reading is that Geraint is jealous of Enid's love for Guinevere.)

autonomy, and sexual power, giving these women what little sexual agency they could possibly have and exploring the social obstacles limiting them from forming ideal romantic and sexual bonds. One of these obstacles is sexual violence, a discussion of which concludes this chapter. Including sexual violence and rape into a chapter on romance, love, and sexuality is necessary because of the long historical tradition of these legends. This is not to conflate violence and sexuality. Rather, instances that appear to modern readers as dubious at best and rape at worst have been brought to us under the guise of patriarchal romance, and for feminist Arthurian authors to expose the violence for what it is, it often must be challenged from its recognizable position of pseudo-romance. Issues of bodily autonomy, coerced consent, and marital rape were nowhere near the minds of the authors of the masculinist canon, but were very present in the thoughts of second wave feminists. In an effort to analyze these authors' representations of rape and sexual violence in concrete terms, the specific experiences of three characters – Igraine, Guinevere, and Lynett – are closely examined. In these examples, these authors challenge preconceived understandings of power and consent and separate, sometimes as messily as seen in real life, love from violence.

Unlike the first two chapters, chapter three addresses one of the most prominent additions of feminist authors to the Arthurian story, and therefore draws primarily from a specific branch of second wave feminist thought. The addition is the introduction of Goddess-worship, paganism, the “Old Ways,” or any other female-centric pre-Christian religious practice. The phenomenon is a direct result of the combination of the resurgence of Goddess-worship as a feminist spiritual reclamation and Celtic Reconstructionism, which makes it possible to incorporate a “realistic” portrayal of sub-Roman British religious practice. Using the Goddess movement as a lens, this chapter examines the transition of Arthurian women like Morgan, who have historically been identified as “witches,” to a more empowering identity of “priestess.” With this position comes

spiritual and political power, both of which provide more opportunity for women to improve their lives than sorcery ever did canonically. Although “witch” is the antithesis of Christianity, because of the religious power granted priestesses, it is also necessary to juxtapose this power with the disempowerment of women under Christianity, and ways that Christian women work to subvert their subordinate position. Finally, because portraying female characters as exclusively Good would do nothing to offer a realistically diverse representation of women, the challenges and freedoms of being Bad women, who generally fall under the category of witch because spiritual/magical power is the most easily accessible path to power for women under patriarchy, conclude this chapter.

Chapter 1. *Queen*

“At length, when the whole country was reduced by him to its ancient state, he took to wife Guanhumara, descended from a noble family of Romans, who was educated under duke Cador, and in beauty surpassed all the women of the island.”

– Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*

“I am fully aware that I’m nowhere near the beauty that Mama was; trustworthy, quick-witted, competent – these are the words they use to describe me.”

– Guinevere, Persia Woolley, *Queen of the Summer Country*

1972 marked the foundation of the National Women’s Political Caucus, a group of liberal American women dedicated to getting women elected into positions of political power. During that election cycle, 40 percent of the delegates were women, thanks to the NWPC and the growing national attention to the women’s liberation movement (Steinem 116). It was not just politics women were forcing their way into: by 1988, “nearly half of all families with children had both parents in the work force,” (Coontz, *Way* 18). Even more women chose to forgo making the difficult decision of family or career by not having children at all, for “[m]otherhood may in fact have replaced gender as the primary factor constraining women’s choices” (Coontz, *Strange* 178). Arthurian feminist authors were not unaffected by the rise of women in the public realm, especially in the ways it affected their characters. Goldy and Livingston write, “Traditional medieval history gave primacy to political and institutional history, both by definition ‘male spheres.’ We say this not to dismiss the innovations of these historians but merely to recognize that questions about women (mostly queens) were generally left to romantic writers” (2). Reclaiming queens from the genre of romance and imposing onto them the traits of powerful second wave female leaders, feminist Arthurian authors challenge hegemonic restrictions on appropriate gender roles and reimagine what “empowered” femininity can look like with limited accessibility to true power.

Writing Guinevere

Guinevere, High Queen of Camelot, is written with more variety than any other female character across feminist Arthuriana. Working with a literary tradition of a beautiful, educated Guinevere whose skills as a queen are of little importance when compared to her betrayal with Lancelot and her part in the fall of Camelot, these authors all reinterpret her character differently.⁶ While Woolley and Bradley fall into a dichotomy of beautiful versus intelligent, Wolf portrays her as both. Newman, however, focuses on aspects of Guinevere's personality that do not revolve around her appearance or her opportunities, but on her socialization and how her life as an isolated noblewoman affects the way she interacts with her world.

Not only is Woolley's Guinevere not beautiful – she is altogether unconcerned with her appearance. She is aware that she is not the most attractive, preferring to be perceived as “trustworthy, quick-witted, competent” in the eyes of her people (*Queen* 235). More than simply acknowledging her average looks, however, when she is complimented in court, she considers beauty to be a “vanity” that she had “never developed,” distancing herself from other women in the court for whom flattery would have been welcome (*Queen* 235). Deviating from tradition and writing a Guinevere who is not beautiful is Woolley's attempt to reclaim Guinevere's power as a

⁶ Arthurian literary tradition loves to blame Guinevere for the fall of Camelot. Not only does she provide no heir; she then engages in an affair with a knight who is usually the king's right hand/best friend. It's understandable that adultery might cause some marital tension, and that if the married couple happens to be the High King and Queen then there could be some scandal, but the conclusion that it is Guinevere's infidelity alone that leads to the dissolution of a kingdom is slut-shaming at its best. (Woolley makes a good joke by having a young Guinevere compare herself to Helen of Sparta until she discovers that Helen's promiscuity lead to the fall of Troy, and then Guinevere rejects association with her because she judges her for abandoning her people for love of a man. In her handling of Guinevere's affair, Woolley makes the case against blaming Guinevere *and* Helen for the mistakes of men.) In the canon, if any part of the fall has to do with Guinevere, it is that Gawain convinces Arthur to leave Britain and follow Lancelot and Guinevere to France after Lancelot rescues Guinevere from execution, only because Lancelot accidentally killed two of Gawain's brothers in the rescue, which leaves Britain vulnerable to Mordred and the Saxons. That sounds like a lot of men making mistakes that Guinevere happens to be in the middle of – a convenient scapegoat. That's not even to go into all of the other events in Camelot's history that contribute to its downfall, like the Grail Quest, from which most of the knights of the Round Table never return.

queen. She makes it clear that Guinevere is not influencing the king or the court with her appearance or sexuality, but is wielding power of her own through her own ability to rule efficiently and effectively as the High Queen. By redirecting both the reader's and Guinevere's attention from her physical appearance, Woolley is able to portray Guinevere's character strengths, not just as distinct from her looks, but *in spite of* them.

Alternatively, but perhaps with similar intentions, Bradley writes a Guinevere whose beauty is her only redeeming quality. Unlike Woolley, for whom Guinevere is the protagonist, Bradley's Guinevere is often the foil to the protagonist Morgan; because of this, Bradley seems to be agreeing with Woolley's dichotomy of beautiful, vapid women or plain/ugly, intelligent women. Upon first seeing her, Morgan describes Guinevere as "young and dazzlingly pretty," and able to "shed tears without any ugly distortion of her face, so that, weeping, she only looked prettier than ever" (157). Her beauty, however, comes at a price: she explains to Lancelot, "I am not wise; I am very stupid" (255). Despite Guinevere's insipid personality, Bradley is not entirely unsympathetic to her. Guinevere is clearly the kind of woman whom feminist Mary Daly would call a "painted bird": "The painted, cosmeticized artifacts (whether this is understood on the physical level or on the psychic level, or in both of these dimensions) are the creatures created by phallocracy, the artificial selves which prepossess all women, though in varying degrees" (334). In this way, Bradley is not placing the blame of being beautiful and stupid on Guinevere as an individual, but on the harsh patriarchal restrictions she has been raised in.

Furthermore, Guinevere's situational anxiety hearkens to literary feminist theories of women projecting their authorial insecurity onto their female characters. Gilbert and Gubar write, "Images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and

fiery interiors - such pattern recurred throughout this tradition, along with obsessive depictions of diseases like anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia” (xi). A product of an isolated life behind castle walls, Bradley’s Guinevere suffers from agoraphobia that plagues her for much of her life. She describes her anxiety as fear of “the very weight of all the sky and the wide lands” that surround her home (252). It is this fear more than uncertainty of arranged marriage or the daunting prospect of becoming High Queen that prods her to find comfort where she can – in the form of Lancelot, who has come to her home to bring her to her marriage. Although Guinevere is the antagonist, Bradley is commenting on upper-middle class women’s confinement and the potentially negative emotional effects of breaking from that confinement.

Drawing from the positive qualities presented by Woolley and Bradley in an attempt to bring a feminist perspective to a traditional portrayal, Wolf’s Guinevere is both intelligent and beautiful. Politicians in the court describe her as “intuitive” as well as beautiful (184). Echoing Woolley’s concern that beauty could be misconstrued as vanity or poorly-spent energy on the part of a competent queen, Wolf dodges this trap with a Guinevere who “had never had to be concerned about her appearance,” because she had simply “known she was beautiful” (180). This effortless beauty allows Guinevere to be beautiful without having to exert any effort that would be better spent ruling the kingdom.

While it may seem that the combination of intelligence and beauty would be the ideal portrayal, I would argue that it is in fact Newman’s dismissal of both of those categories in favor of focusing on other aspects of her personality that is the most ideal, and realistic, depiction of Guinevere. Guinevere is Newman’s protagonist, but she does not write her as Woolley does – always in the right and completely sympathetic – nor does she treat her as cruelly as Bradley. Instead, Newman gives the reader a thorough view of a girl who, like Bradley’s, has been isolated

all her life, along with all of the benefits and detriments that come with such isolation. Instead of judgment, Newman gives opportunities for character development. At first, Guinevere is childlike in her naïveté, but, like Bradley, Newman is clear that the blame for her innocence lies in her social circumstances, not inherently in her character. When she finds herself in a potentially dangerous situation, she is “not overly concerned, for in her whole life she had never had a difficulty that someone hadn’t quickly helped her out of” (*Guinevere* loc 180). Later, however, it “slowly entered her mind that she hadn’t been very observant,” and that perhaps she should watch out for herself, in the case that someday she would be on her own (*Guinevere* loc 1575). In another example, the way that Guinevere deals with death shows how she matures after leaving home. When she is young and her brothers are killed in war, her thoughts are only for herself, for “she couldn’t sense the finality of their lives, only the ending of something in hers” (*Guinevere* loc 1842). However, after fostering away from home and being queen for several years, she feels the loss of her foster-mother as more than merely a loss to herself, but a loss to the kingdom. The progression of her grief from self-centered loss to a deeper understanding of “finality” is notable even to her. She describes the revelation as “only a flash of insight, a moment of humility in the midst of sadness, but it was the first. Guinevere had never before doubted her own wondrous worth” (*Chessboard* loc 3478). This doubt is rendered as neither helpful nor hindering to Guinevere – it simply exists as the next step for her character. In doubting, Guinevere is not facing the devastating lack of self-confidence that often troubles other portrayals of her character, or that plagued many women in the real world fighting for recognition of their worth. Instead, her moment of self-doubt is not a doubt of her Self or of her true worth, but of her superiority over others. It affords her a self-effacement that benefits her interpersonal relationships as well as her ability to govern.

Education

There are few examples given of official educational opportunities in any of these novels, and even less available to women. Women's education, when it is sanctioned by the patriarchy, is in "docility, submissiveness, self-lessness"; Gilbert and Gubar argue that, "to be trained in renunciation is almost necessarily to be trained to ill health..." (54). Some Arthurian women are able to escape the disease of patriarchal education, and instead gain knowledge and skills that will be useful to them, not to their husbands. In an effort to acknowledge that women's topics of instruction are as valid as what might have been found in a noble boy's traditional tutoring, feminist Arthurian authors worked to depict whatever topics these women might have had a chance to study. Bradley's Morgan, who is sent to Avalon to become a priestess, learns of the Mysteries that are part of her religious training, but also learns skills for survival and pleasure. She says of these mundane lessons that

[M]y knowledge of the Sight helped me not at all: the herb lore, and the lore of healing, the long songs of which not a single word might ever be committed to writing, for how can the knowledge of the Great Ones be committed to anything made by human hands? Some of the lessons were pure joy, for I was allowed to learn to play upon the harp and to fashion my own, using sacred woods and the gut of an animal killed in ritual; and some lessons were of terror. (137)

These lessons give Morgan an ability to be self-sufficient in ways that many other female characters do not have access to, which gives her enviable mobility through the world of men. Wolf, too, gives Morgan a highly privileged education, which she receives solely by virtue of her relationship with Arthur. Arthur's guardian observes that Morgan "had no business at all being in this class. She should be with the women, learning how to weave and sew. But she wanted to do everything that Arthur did, and Merlin had given in to her without much protest" (18). Guinevere resents Morgan's education, which gives her more influence at Arthur's table than she has, and

comments to Arthur, “Morgan is fortunate to have resources few other women possess. I know I have been wishing more and more frequently that I knew how to read and write” (275-276). In Woolley’s novels, Morgan, as the Lady of the Lake, begins a school for noble children at Avalon, but Guinevere’s parents decline her invitation. Guinevere, who was given private tutelage in her home, still regrets not having been able to go to a proper school, for there, “at least I might have learned the art of shape-changing under the Priestess’ guidance, and at most I could have become a warrior” (*Child* 38). In most of these situations, access to education is less about the knowledge itself and more about the political opportunities that arise when these women can come to the table (if they are invited at all) with the same intellectual tools as the men.

It is not surprising that Morgan is generally afforded more educational freedom than Guinevere. As Coontz explains, these authors were writing at a time when “[c]onventional wisdom held that marital harmony would be threatened if a woman acquired educational and economic resources of her own... Right up to the 1980s, sociologists and economists...insisted that a woman with her own resources had less incentive to marry and was less attractive as a potential mate” (*Strange* 168). It is not that Morgan’s marriage would be useless as a bargaining tool – those authors who do present Morgan as a wife acknowledge that the marriage is to benefit Arthur’s reign. Instead, Morgan’s role as a wife generally comes second to her religious duties, as opposed to Guinevere, who is raised for no other reason than to marry for political advantage. As a figure of religious authority, it is beneficial for Morgan to have “educational and economic resources of her own,” whereas education that could be seen as detrimental to Guinevere’s “incentive to marry” might not be considered worth the risk by her family. For these authors, the decision to give Morgan more education than Guinevere is less a statement about their characters than an

opportunity to criticize the prioritization of “attractiveness” for women over enabling their independence.

Gender

Socialization and education both play a part in these characters’ willingness to abide by the gender norms of their societies. Newman’s Guinevere, the youngest child and only daughter of her parents, lives the better part of her childhood and young adult years in isolation, “protected” and “kept apart from the rest of the society” (*Guinevere* loc 88). Because of this, she has no motivation to question the life she is expected to live, for she knows nothing different. Her father “lovingly” regards her as “obedient” and “docile,” and for the rest of her family, she is “the essence of all their dreams: a happy, innocent creature, beautiful and untouched by the grief and conflict outside her narrow world” (*Guinevere* loc 137; loc 687). Guinevere is happy to play this part, more than willing to let her brothers concern themselves with war and her parents think about politics while she keeps the house. Before she leaves home and matures and learns to think for herself, she is the epitome of a fragile, thoughtless damsel – another of Daly’s “painted birds” – who relies exclusively on the men in her life. In stark contrast to her outspoken, politically adept mother, who eventually realizes that she did wrong by her daughter, this Guinevere serves as a cautionary tale for failing to expose young girls to the outside world.

Not all characters, however, are so willing to sit by while others make decisions about their lives, even in the face of blatant patriarchal dictates of acceptable gendered behavior. Unlike Newman, Woolley writes a Guinevere who spends her childhood days playing, learning, and roaming around the countryside. However, despite having few rules, there are still gendered expectations of her, and when she assumes she can accompany her father on a political tour, she

is denied on the grounds that it is a “man’s errand” (*Child* 222). This denial follows her even into her position as queen, where she “silently cursed the day they quit teaching women how to handle arms” (*Queen* 67). In a similar episode, Chapman’s Lynett provides the only solution to their siege and offers to take on the responsibility herself, but because it involves disguising herself as a man, the idea is protested on the grounds of the “unseemliness of it” (33). The difference between these two characters, however, is not in the tasks that they desire to do, but in the motivation behind that desire. Guinevere understands that access is denied to her on the grounds of being a woman, and longs for the pre-Roman days when *all* women were treated more equally. Lynett, on the other hand, does not have that same nostalgia, and decides that she would “rather be a boy” in order to escape the confines of spinning and embroidery and other women’s work in favor of the freedom associated with masculinity (Chapman 11). The reason for these different approaches to liberation – institutional versus individual – could be attributed to their different sociopolitical statuses. As High Queen, Guinevere is more likely to be able to improve the status of women as a class on an institutional level. From her position of political authority, she can do as Gloria Steinem once called on female politicians to do, and use her position to “force change” (111). On the other hand, Lynett, the orphan daughter of a lesser lord, has no institutional authority, and must rely on herself to assert a masculine autonomy, handling the mixed responses on her own.

Perhaps because of her ability to take an individual approach, Lynett is more successful in transgressing gender norms than women like Guinevere, who live under constant public scrutiny and cannot afford to be seen as “unseemly.” Woolley briefly introduces us to her version of Lynett, who is “more urchin...than noble” and the “most mischievous” of Guinevere’s maids, but it is Chapman who gives us closer insight into Lynett’s background (Woolley, *Guinevere* 37). Second daughter to a father with no sons, Lynett’s father “put his younger daughter into the place of the

son he would never have, and brought her up like a boy,” a position Guinevere could never be in as the eldest/only daughter, whose ability to run a household would make her a desirable wife in a political marriage (8). Because of this, liberation for Lynett does not look like gender equality, but like gender transgression. On being included on the daily outings of her father and his companions, Lynett “felt herself grow into a kind of manhood,” marked by the distinction between herself and her sister, who is stuck “ninnying in parlours and gardens” (15). This distinction is rooted in internalized misogyny that only becomes worse after Lynett’s self-esteem plunges after her assault, but the healing of her mind leads her to accept her femininity. Lynett never lets go of her independent nature and continues to defy feminine gender norms even after leaving home, but eventually grows out of her identification with masculinity, finding a balance of womanhood and autonomy.

Ruling Alone

While Guinevere is first and foremost Arthur’s queen, she and other female characters show great capability to rule autonomously. Women in the second wave were forcing their way into United States mainstream politics, thanks to what Steinem calls a “Feminist Realization” that had reached women “all over the country” by 1972 (116). Women were beginning to see themselves represented by mayors, governors, and congresswomen, and feminist Arthurian authors contributed to this representation by writing their own female politicians. Both Wolf and Woolley give Guinevere an opportunity to rule in the king’s stead while he is away, and Woolley’s Arthur even acknowledges Guinevere’s success: “The Pendragon extends greetings to the competent and admirable High Queen of Britain...They tell me you have done a fine job in my absence. Behooves me to get well before you decide you can do it all by yourself” (*Queen* 346).

Morgause, on the other hand, is often portrayed as the sole ruler of Orkney, and her lovers are never more than consorts. These two and others show women's ability to govern as successfully as any male counterparts. However, their leadership skills do not come at the expense of their femininity; instead, while these characters often struggle with their desire to take on men's duties, their gender transgression manifests no further than in traditional roles, and they are able to prove themselves not just as competent, but as competent women.

The queens with the most autonomous power do not come by their abilities and ambitions on their own, but are themselves raised by powerful role models. Woolley's Guinevere is not shy about the fact that she "had been raised in the tradition of brave and competent women," and is told directly from a young age that she is not "meant to be a pawn in someone else's game" by the women contributing to her upbringing (*Queen* 8; *Child* 39). Newman's Guinevere, too, comes from a long line of ruling women. She is given the name of her grandmother, her mother having explained her desire to "raise [her] to be a strong, brave woman, just as she was" (*Guinevere* loc 599). This multi-generational approach to raising queens draws directly from feminist theories of historical memory and inherited struggle. Virginia Woolf, who wrote before the second wave but whose writings were influential on a new generation of feminist thinkers, writes that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (88). It is important for these authors to write a Guinevere who takes inspiration from the women before and around her because essential to women's understanding of their status in society is the recognition of all the successes and failures of the women who came first that contributed to their present place. When Guinevere claims Boudicca as an ancestor "not directly, but perhaps in spirit," she is not just strengthening her credibility as a queen, she is acknowledging her place in a tradition of ruling women, a tradition that is largely responsible for the autonomy she is now afforded as queen (Woolley, *Child* 386).

Whether or not these queens actually rule by themselves, they show that they are more than capable of doing so. Woolley's Morgause, after her husband's death, becomes the Queen of Orkney in her own right, and is described as "the most beautiful and powerful woman in the world," refusing to allow the men she may be involved with to usurp her power (*Child* 152). Like Morgause, Sidra, the queen who fosters Newman's Guinevere, rules autonomously, despite being married:

She was a strong, proud woman who was saved from being a tyrant in her home by a sense of humor and a firm belief in her own ability to manage people without their knowing it. Certainly she had succeeded so well with her husband that he never realized he had not made a decision in his own home for twenty years. (*Guinevere* loc 2408)

Woolley's other autonomous queen, Ragnell, the "young leader of the Ancient Ones," possesses a "magnificent indifference" towards those who criticize her rule (*Queen* 203). Similarly, Lynett, who is not a queen but entertains the politically powerful position of diplomat for the High King, rules in her own way with a reputation for "a particular kind of eloquence" – a sharp, unapologetic tongue – that enables her to disregard personal criticisms of her character and focus instead on the effectiveness of her political agenda (Chapman 64). All of these women show different but related styles of autonomous ruling: Morgause with a firm grasp on what is hers, Sidra with subtle manipulation, Ragnell with confidence that is unaffected by others' opinions of her, and Lynett with the ruthlessness to achieve all of her goals regardless of cost. With such a wide range of women rulers, not one of them falls into the trope of women who can only rule by essentially becoming men – all of these women maintain or recover many traditionally-feminine traits, such as beauty and/or vanity, elegance, grace, and sensuality, and reclaim traditionally-masculine traits like aggression, scholarship and/or intelligence, and determination, using all of these qualities to make political gains in the face of patriarchal standards of political competency.

Despite having to share the throne with Arthur (legendary specifically for his rule), Guinevere is not always on the sidelines. Sometimes this is because she is able to appeal to those who support her *over* Arthur. Woolley's Guinevere is pleased to discover this faction of warriors: they, "most of whom had known me since I was a child, supported me readily enough. I was glad they had never followed the Roman pattern of looking askance at women in power" (*Queen* 243).⁷ This Guinevere is lucky to be able to rely on a populace that clings to the "Old Ways" (of pre-Roman Britain) and accepts a female ruler. However, even for those portrayals of Guinevere that are not so lucky and are confined to more gender-stereotypical styles of co-rule, it is possible for her to exert influence in ways that Arthur, in his staunch masculinity, lacks. After Wolf's Guinevere successfully confronts Arthur in private about being unfairly ignored in court and is "restored to her old confidence," she "spread the radiance of her beauty about the entire court" (190). Newman explains the power of that radiance as more than simply an aesthetically-pleasing distraction for the men of the court. She writes, "Guinevere sparkled among such surroundings. She excelled at being beautiful and gracious. Many visitors left with only a vague idea of who Arthur was or what he was doing, but with a radiant, golden image of Guinevere as the central figure in a renaissance of the good life" (*Chessboard* loc 3881). This Guinevere, along with Wolf's, has power in her position as a figurehead, as an image of the kingdom Arthur is trying to build, that is often more effective in swaying other political leaders to follow Camelot's lead than all of Arthur's theories and dreams. Even more important, however, is that this figurehead role is not

⁷ It would seem that the blame for resistance to women's rule lies squarely on the backs of the Romans. Bradley's Morgan, when she rather unexpectedly becomes a queen, notes of her new husband, "Unlike the Romans of the South, these men of the Tribes never scorned to listen to a woman's advice, and for that, at least, I was grateful, that he would hear what I said and never put it aside as being but a woman's counsel" (Bradley 569). But despite Morgan's pleasure at being allowed to rule, the reader never gets to actually see Morgan do much in the way of ruling.

effortless – more than external beauty, Guinevere’s charisma, tact, and diplomacy are hard-earned skills that she is forced to perfect in order to play her part in Camelot’s success.

Although ruling autonomously is a dream for these characters, it is rarely an easy reality, and they are often forced into less powerful positions by the demands of their patriarchal society. Newman’s Guinevere is first introduced to the conditions that drive her desire for self-rule by her parents, who, at Merlin’s insistence, send her away from her home when Arthur first comes to visit. Furious, she decides, “What am I? ...A slave to be ordered about? A doll to be cast aside? I am almost a woman and they treat me as if I were a baby. I will never let anyone else do this to me again. I will control where I go and what I do!” (*Guinevere* loc 880). Alternatively, Woolley’s Guinevere, given much more freedom from her parents, cannot imagine being in a situation in which that freedom is rescinded, and promises, “No husband’s going to forbid me to do anything” (*Child* 242). Unfortunately for her, this desire is not a practical reality, as she becomes queen and is forbidden to participate in the military and diplomatic affairs with the Saxons. She jestingly threatens Arthur to not “go counting on my tameness,” for “this country’s been led by more than one independent queen” (*Guinevere* 154). However, her words do little to disprove Arthur’s claim that he has “tamed” her, because in practice, any and all of her autonomy is extended to her at Arthur’s behest, and she is still required to adhere to his wishes should he impose them. While it is disheartening to understand Woolley’s Guinevere – arguably the most outspoken and independent of all the Guineveres written by feminist Arthurian authors – as less structurally empowered than she herself understands, this is a vital aspect of her character that relates to all Arthurian women, and indeed, all of the real-life women reading these novels. By demonstrating that personal empowerment and any sense of autonomy are, ultimately, still dependent on the decisions of men, Woolley critiques the “individual liberation” model of mainstream liberal

feminism (Maraini 688). She displays an understanding of women's structural oppression under patriarchy, and demonstrates it on the interpersonal level of a relatable, "feminist" queen who is just as unable to escape her patriarchal bonds as any other character.

Ruling together

When Arthurian women are not in positions that allow them to govern autonomously, they must work in partnerships with men if they have any hope of exerting their royal privileges. Only one queen, in any novel, denies an opportunity for equal political partnership: Bradley's Guinevere, whose character flaws are extrapolated above, panics at the thought of ruling alongside Arthur, thinking, "How could he expect that of her? How could it be a woman's place to rule?" (273). All others either jump at the opportunities offered, or adamantly insist on being offered them. From the beginning of their relationship, Woolley's Guinevere assures Arthur that "a Celtic queen is a working queen," and it is this insistence that she can and will pull her weight that inspires Arthur to include her in the affairs of state (*Child* 295). Equal partnerships between ruling women and men, and the demand for them, are where these female characters are given the most room to develop as queens and other political figures, and offer women who are forced (interpersonally or structurally) into marriage the inspiration to resist submission.

Celtic or otherwise, most Arthurian queens are portrayed as women determined to prove their skills, and unafraid to demand recognition if their work goes undervalued. Before Guinevere even dreams of taking the throne, Woolley's Igraine sits beside Uther, not "the sort to be intimidated" and providing counsel that proves that "it was well for both Britain and its leader when she became High Queen" (*Queen* 11). Guinevere seems to follow in Igraine's footsteps in this regard, for her first encounters with Arthur are often spent asserting herself, both in their

relationship and their rule. Even Bradley's Guinevere, who is certainly the sort to be intimidated, is affronted by Arthur's initial treatment of her, and when he asks her about the horses in her dowry before asking about herself, she reacts, "What did she know about his precious horses? Did he have to make it so clear that it was the horses and not herself which he awaited in this wedding business? She drew herself up to her full height – she was taller than some men, and for a woman she was a good height – and said with dignity, 'I do not know, my lord Arthur, I have not counted them' " (272-273). It takes Wolf's Guinevere a bit longer to make her stand, but after spending her first few days with Arthur being ignored, she puts her foot down:

She appeared at dinner that evening with her usual serenely beautiful face, but behind the smile there was growing anger. Never, in all her seventeen years, had the Princess Gwenhwyfar been treated the way Arthur was treating her now. She was a princess, the king's intended wife, not a necessary nuisance...When finally he turned to say something to her, she said, without pausing to consider the wisdom of this course of action, "I should like to speak with you alone, my lord." (Wolf 189)

The outcome of both of these events is the same – Arthur recognizes his fault in underestimating Guinevere, and their relationship moves forward with a better understanding of the respect they expect from each other. By insisting on a certain level of participation in the marriage or governing of the kingdom, these characters are taking their relationships and responsibilities into their own hands as much as is permitted them, and are benefiting from their assertiveness in ways that they would have missed if they had not spoken up, for certainly most versions of Arthur (and Uther) would not have extended the same opportunities for which these women reached.

As in the case of Igraine and Uther, it is clear that the queen is not the only one who benefits from actively participating in rule, for her capability to govern is proven again and again to the benefit of the king, the court, and the kingdom. The initial step into traditionally male spaces is daunting; Wolf's Guinevere encapsulates this transition and its accompanying internalized self-

doubt during her first, uninvited but ultimately successful venture into the government: “She stood for a moment on the threshold, looking at the lamplit room with the five men seated in a circle at the far end of it, and her poised exterior masked inner uncertainty. Perhaps she ought not to have come” (203). Her acceptance into this space should not be taken for granted, but neither should it be thought of as necessarily progressive. Daly argues that “token women” are “allowed into pieces of patriarchal territory as a *show of female presence*” (334). It is her adamant self-insertion, not others’ acceptance of her, that is to be applauded. “Certainly,” Coontz writes, “feminism changed the terms on which women understood their work and confronted its conditions; conversely, women’s growing economic clout encouraged them to demand equality with men both on and off the job” (*Way* 154).

Guinevere’s self-doubt is not unwarranted – Lynett, for example, must overcome some resistance to her place among men (for her, a place on the Grail Quest) before she gains their trust and acceptance. Like Guinevere, though, she is eventually met with success, and when she laments, “You were four once, a complete square, the pillars of the house. Now you are only three, and the square is broken,” her companions respond, “No, we are still four...now that you have come back to us. As four we will go together on the Quest” (Chapman 144). Despite their trials, however, once they have established their place, these women do earn the respect of their partners (although sometimes that respect is conditional on their success). Guinevere’s father, Newman writes, is “very glad he had married a woman who could think faster than he,” and Bradley’s Arthur extends the “honor” of co-rule to Guinevere after being most impressed by Morgause, who “rules as well as [Lot], when he is absent in war or council” (Newman, *Guinevere* loc 298; Bradley 237). In all of these scenarios and others, the women who step forward end up going above and beyond what is expected of them, to the betterment of the lives of those around them.

Duty

While these characters may go beyond expectations, it is worth noting what the expectations of a queen are to begin with, for not all of these women accept their responsibilities eagerly. The duties of Arthurian women fall under traditional feminine gender roles, such as home-keeping and child-bearing and -rearing; the only differences between noble and peasant women are the management aspects of running a household and the understanding that their marriage will be based on the political advantage of men before all else. Understandably, not all of these characters are pleased about following through with their duties, not wanting to “give up” the relative independence of childhood (Woolley, *Child* 216). Woolley’s Guinevere, who is unable to escape as she wishes, resignedly accepts that “personal desires are rarely considered in political marriages, and no one seemed to care how I felt about the matter” (*Queen* 4). While she would never have thought to run away, Bradley’s Guinevere is equally bitter about being forced into marriage and losing her sense of identity in the process: “She was not herself, there was nothing for herself, she was only some property of a High King... She was another mare, a brood mare this time for the High King’s stud service, hopefully to provide a royal son. Gwenhwyfar thought she would smother [*sic*] with the rage that was choking her” (268). Lynett also contemplates her status as possession, considering herself as having been “given” to a man she does not know or care for; more than remaining passive, however, she recognizes not just that she has been given, but that men *take*, and that a knight had taken “her sister as the reward of his exertions, as one would choose a prize for a game” (Chapman 3). This loss of individual identity that accompanies these women’s marriages is not unique to medieval characters in arranged marriages with strangers. Women in the United States were not “granted a separate legal identity” from their

husbands until the Married Women's Property Act of 1848 (Marcus 19). It took another hundred years for society to recognize women's social identities distinct from a husband or father, as observed with the 1961 revival of "Ms." as an honorific title for women that does not denote marital status (Michaels). It is the search for this individual identity that leads Lynett to abandon her marital duties to become the king's diplomat.

The loss of childhood freedom and innocence is the first in a long list of sacrifices women must make in the name of duty. From learning how to "manage a weaving room's schedule" to putting aside love for the sake of responsible marriage, Arthurian women are forced to carry out tasks that they would be happier without (Woolley *Child* 51). In the end, the theme that motivates all of these sacrifices echoes the advice given to Woolley's Guinevere by her mother: "Remember, Gwen, no matter who says what, the important thing is to understand what needs to be done, and then do it. No matter how hard it is, or how much pain you feel. It's as simple as that, really. Once you know what you have to do, you just do it" (Woolley, *Child* 67). The mother of Newman's Guinevere also leads by example. Even at the most difficult times, like after tragedy strikes her family, she recognizes that she cannot afford to grieve because "it was her duty to tend to the household, to see that everyone was cared for" (*Guinevere* loc 1814). Wolf's Guinevere learns this lesson as queen; when Arthur tells her that heroes are "only men trying their best to do the job they have to do," she responds "and women," not letting herself or Arthur forget the difficult job of a queen (376). A queen is not the only woman with devastating sacrifices to make, although many other noblewomen's decisions revolve around the royal couple or court. When Wolf's Arthur would give up his kingdom to be with Morgan, "from somewhere deep within, she found the courage to say what must be said, to do what must be done": she tells him, at great cost to herself, "And how do you think I will feel? Britain is my country too" (99). Also for the sake of Britain,

Lynett must force herself back to her old home to raise the next generation of great knights. She is told, “Your father taught you the arts of chivalry, though you were a woman. And you, a woman, will teach his grandson the arts of chivalry. Perhaps before the end you will have a greater part to play than anyone knows” (Chapman 175-176). In each of these examples, it becomes clear that what needs to be done, as a queen and as a woman, ultimately ends up having to do with children. Guinevere must marry to provide the High King with heirs; Morgan cannot marry Arthur for the same reason, because he must have heirs by someone who is not her; Lynett must give up her freedom to pass on her knowledge to her sister’s child. In motherhood, however, these feminist authors make their most prominent arguments about duty and sacrifice.

Motherhood

The most vital obligation of a royal dynasty is its continuation – regardless of the reason, be it name, property, or loyalty from allies and armies, bearing and raising an heir is a top priority for any kingdom. And this priority falls almost exclusively on women. Adrienne Rich writes, “In the division of labor according to gender, the makers and sayers of culture, the namers, have been the sons of the mothers” (*Of Woman Born* 13). Sub-roman Britain is no exception, and while the High King’s marriage to Guinevere often bodes politically advantageous for Camelot (until, of course, it does not, see footnote 6), the tradition of Camelot’s barren queen is too fraught with potential for relevant political commentary on and criticism of motherhood for Feminist Arthurian authors to avoid. Rich explains further, “Woman’s status as childbearer has been made into a major fact of her life. Terms like ‘barren’ or ‘childless’ have been used to negate any further identity” (*Of Woman Born* 13). As these authors expose, a High Queen who cannot conceive a child is more than just a queen who is failing her duty – in the eyes of many, she becomes a woman who is

failing her sole purpose. “It’s my fault, they think,” says Newman’s Guinevere to Arthur; “Some of the women say I’m cursed and...barren. That I’m not really a woman at all” (Newman, *Chessboard* loc 3103). These feminist authors tackle headfirst the physical and emotional responses of these characters as they undergo barrenness and miscarriages, suffer cruel public scrutiny and ridicule, debilitating self-doubt, and relationship tensions, and, for some, eventually find peace and acceptance. In doing so, these authors prove that, despite deeply-internalized notions of motherhood as the epitome of womanhood that are just as damaging in real life today as they may have been for medieval queens, women are more than what their bodies are capable of.

In no novel does Guinevere have any doubt that bearing a child to the king is her primary purpose; she is prepared to accept that her role in her marriage will “arrest her at the level of biological experience” (Millett 339). In *Road*, Guinevere’s father goes so far as to tell her explicitly: “Arthur needs sons...that is your role, Gwenhwyfar. Give him sons, and all will be well” (Wolf 177). While Newman’s Guinevere has some initial wariness towards the task – the pain and suffering sounding “very disagreeable” to her – Woolley’s queen-to-be has no concerns, “since of all the things expected of a queen, childbearing is the most natural and easiest to fulfill” (Newman, *Guinevere* loc 2010; Woolley, *Child* 9). No portrayal of her ever questions her ability to perform as expected; a failure which, they each come to discover, reflects disastrously on them as individuals and, more importantly, as representatives of both the kingdom and the land. Wolf’s Guinevere is most concerned with the political effect of barrenness: “A barren woman was always tragic, she thought despairingly, but at least her tragedy belonged to herself and her husband alone. When a queen was barren, the tragedy belonged to a nation” (215). On the other hand, Woolley’s Guinevere, as a pagan, is most conscious of how her barrenness reflects on the land, saying of the

Beltane festival, “I had a very personal interest in seeing that all went well, both for the land’s fertility and my own” (*Queen* 254). Taking both into consideration, Newman’s Guinevere expresses her frustrations:

Dimly she felt that his need for a visible manifestation of his reign was somehow tied to her and her failure. Five years they had been married and still they had no children. Guinevere did not wish to think of that. It embarrassed her that so many people had such a vital interest in the workings of her body. And it angered her that she had done nothing she knew of to deserve such divine punishment. She knew it was her duty to provide Arthur with children and, though she hadn’t cared much for the process, she had obeyed as best she could. But nothing had happened. (Newman, *Chessboard* loc 162)

Here, Newman is addressing many of the issues with reproductive health and justice that were taking hold in mainstream consciousness at that time. Primary is the public attention to individual women’s reproductive choices or situations, blurring the dichotomy of public versus private in invasive and inappropriate ways in order to regulate women’s bodies (Petcheskey). Second, Guinevere’s anger shows the true unjustness of the situation – not just that she was unworthy of “punishment,” but also that her barrenness should be considered a “punishment” at all, when her failure is in no way dependent on her own actions. According to Matthews and Matthews, who write extensively on the topic of involuntary childlessness, this reaction is a typical reaction of infertile women, who “come to believe that it is a ‘curse’ or punishment by God” (643). Finally, her discomfort with sexual activity, alluded to here, and her prioritization of her duty over her own comfort and needs portray a damaging tendency of women to submit to the expectations of society and their husbands in the bedroom, never questioning the morality of being institutionally or culturally forced into sexual activity.⁸ All of these conditions complicate the “natural” process of childbearing; however, while it is important to understand the injustice of the systems that put

⁸ I will go into depth with this in the next chapter when I discuss consent in marriage.

women in this position, of equal importance is a sympathetic approach to individual characters who are suffering this failure to meet an expectation, regardless of how oppressive that expectation is.

The responses of Guinevere and other women who, for one reason or another, are unable to have children are all depicted with the nuance and sensitivity necessary to represent an issue that can be a source of pain and trauma on women in the real world. Some of this emotional distress is inflicted by others – Bradley’s Guinevere is constantly taunted by callous ladies-in-waiting who care only about “when the Queen will get pregnant,” despite knowing that the subject causes her grief (306). Much of the despair, however, comes from internalized notions of failure. What begins as a “small, nagging doubt,” in Woolley’s Guinevere’s mind culminates in the harsh realization of barrenness that, even years later, she describes as the “old, aching void of barrenness...bleak and empty, full of despair and the bitter knowledge” of failure (*Queen* 96; *Guinevere* 87). Not all other women are so quick to condemn, and one unexpected blessing of this hardship that softens the blow from the self and others is the solidarity that occurs between women who find themselves struggling together against the same devastation. One of the ladies-in-waiting tells the others to “shut up,” while Woolley gives her Guinevere a close friend who is also barren; because she had already experienced all the “confusion and hurt” brought by barrenness, Guinevere was able to both find and bring comfort by holding her friend “close while her pain overflowed in weeping,” (Bradley 306; Woolley, *Guinevere* 66). As Guinevere discovers in the end, strengthening bonds with other women proves more productive and satisfying than raising a child might have.

However, despite finding common ground with some other women, many relationships between Guinevere and other women become strained when she is at her most desperate for conception, and cannot regard other women without seeing their successful motherhood first. Her

failure where many others succeed leads to tension on two levels. The first is Guinevere's exclusion on an organizational level from communities of mothers. Newman's Guinevere feels her isolation distinctly, finding herself in situations in which the "babble of [children] playing was augmented by the gossiping of their mothers, conversations from which Guinevere was excluded, not because of her rank, but because she lacked the vital credential to join them: there was no warm, sticky toddler pulling at her skirts" (*Chessboard* loc 651). Besides isolation, but related to it, is tension at the interpersonal level in the form of jealousy. Generally, this jealousy is randomly targeted and followed by internal struggle and guilt, whether it is "a woman in town holding a baby" that causes her to "fight not to burst into tears," or a friend toward whom she had to "fight not to lash out at...in her pain and anger," but whose pregnancy induces a "blind, black jealousy" (Wolf 241; Woolley, *Queen* 177). It is not until the arrival of Arthur's illegitimate son that Guinevere's jealousy finds a target that she deems justifiable, and if the relationship between Guinevere and Arthur's sister was tumultuous before Mordred's appearance, it is close to violent when Guinevere discovers another's success at what is specifically her job – giving the High King a son.

Relationships with other women are not the only ones that suffer; because bearing an heir is so integral to a queen's duty, barrenness puts a disproportionate amount of stress on a marriage that might otherwise be able to rely on other aspects of the relationship to make up for the lack of children. As the "designated person" responsible for their childlessness, it is reasonable for Guinevere to "feel guilt and experience doubts about the continuing affection" of her husband (Matthews and Matthews 644). For Wolf's Guinevere, who has Arthur's "confidence," "friendship," and "passion," the only fault in her marriage is that she does not have his love, and she decides that the only reason for that is her barrenness, for he "could not commit himself to her

completely, because if she were barren...if she were barren...he might have to put her away” (217). As she tells Arthur later, “I don’t think I could bear it if you put me away” (219). Newman’s Guinevere is in quite the opposite position as Wolf’s – that is, while Wolf’s Guinevere falls head over heels in love with Arthur, who has already given his heart to Morgan, Newman’s Guinevere seems ambivalent about her husband, despite Arthur being completely infatuated with her. His obvious affection does not stop her from reacting strongly to advice from Arthur’s council that he find a new wife, and she begs, “I will say nothing if you take a mistress; I will love her children as your heirs! Only don’t, don’t send me away!” (*Chessboard* loc 3095). This willingness to sacrifice her honor for the sake of maintaining their relationship shows the desperation that haunts her failure, but also shows her resolve toward keeping her position at his side. Especially considering her indifference toward Arthur himself, this determination to remain queen shows that she believes she is a capable ruler in spite of her barrenness, and that her confidence in her own abilities outweighs public perception of her.

Fortunately for Guinevere (but, arguably, unfortunately for Camelot), Arthur’s confidence in her reflects her own, and he never divorces her or puts her away, despite the remaining need for an heir.⁹ They continue to hold out some shred of hope for conception, because, since they are unaware of the source of the infertility, they “are faced with the dilemma of not knowing whether they can rightfully mourn for what they cannot have, or hope for what they might still obtain” (Matthews and Matthews 644). To cope with this sense of loss and unease, Guinevere takes on maternal roles in other ways – usually, by raising or helping to raise the son of either Lancelot or

⁹ Unfortunate for two reasons: Guinevere and Lancelot’s affair, which I have already discussed, and Mordred. Because Guinevere is unable to bear Arthur legitimate heirs, his illegitimate son by his sister has the only claim to the throne. Mordred is traditionally an antagonist and Arthur’s downfall – therefore, in many versions, he is either heavily manipulated by those who seek to do Camelot wrong (Morgan, Morgause, Agravaine, to name a few), or completely loathsome in his own right. The battle of Camlann, where Mordred and Arthur have their final confrontation, most often occurs in the death/downfall of both Mordred and Arthur, leaving Camelot with no king, no heirs, and vulnerable to the final, successful Saxon invasion.

Arthur. The conception of Lancelot's son, Galahad, occurs under questionable circumstances, but Lancelot's refusal to acknowledge the child's mother does not extend to the child, who is sometimes brought to Camelot and inevitably raised by Guinevere, being both childless and Lancelot's lover.¹⁰ Understandably, the relationship between Guinevere and her lover's son by another woman is complicated, but feminist authors choose to provide this as an opportunity for Guinevere to embrace her maternity. Newman's Guinevere says to the infant, "You are my child, Lancelot's and mine. It was his love for me that conceived you. You have my hair, my skin, and I claim you for my own" (*Chessboard* loc 4592). Slightly less possessive is Bradley's Guinevere, who thinks to herself, "Ah yes, this was the son I should have borne to Lancelet - or to Arthur..." (684). As this Guinevere remembers, her love for Lancelot comes second to her duty to Arthur, and it is with Arthur's son that her relationship is the most intense and ill-fated. Woolley and Wolf introduce Mordred to Guinevere under similar circumstances, in which Mordred's appearance (even existence) is unexpected and devastating, but Guinevere's desire for motherhood overcomes her jealousy. Remembering the advice that, "'tis a lucky thing when a barren woman finds a child in need of mothering," Woolley's Guinevere jumps at the opportunity to take Mordred in after Morgause's death, arguing with Arthur that, "You know I've always wanted a son... And now we have one. I may not have raised him from birth, but a child is a child no matter who its parents are. And the boy is in need of reassurance and acceptance, particularly after what's happened to his mother" (*Queen* 179; 461). Wolf's Guinevere, equally taken aback but not wanting to waste an opportunity that has thrown itself at her, notes that, "She had thought she would hate this son of

¹⁰ In many traditions, Lancelot is seduced by Elaine of Corbenic, sometimes with the aid of sorcery or other trickery to both lower Lancelot's inhibitions and make him think he is sleeping with Guinevere. Lancelot does not discover the trick until it is too late, and always regrets the scenario. In researching sexual violence in Arthurian legends, this story is rarely mentioned, and never analyzed as a valid incident of rape, even by feminist Arthurian authors. I had wished to write more about this incident, but found the lack of material evidence frustrating. My hope is that, with the increasing public awareness of sexual violence against men, future interpretations of Arthurian legends will interpret this scene with more depth than simply an unfortunate source of romantic drama between Lancelot and Guinevere.

Arthur's but she did not. Quite the opposite, in fact; she found herself liking him very much" (322). In these examples of step/foster-motherhood, Guinevere finds empowerment through vicarious maternity, as explained by Cixous: "The mother, too, is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was 'born' to her" (419). With both boys, Guinevere loves herself in the role of borrowed/appropriated motherhood, and the royal obstacle of barrenness is seemingly overcome.

But motherhood, it seems, is not for Guinevere. The fate of both of these boys is tragic and outside of Guinevere's control.¹¹ More importantly, however, these opportunities arise late enough into Guinevere's reign that adoptive motherhood tends to disrupt her already-full schedule, making it difficult for her to balance full-time governing with full-time motherhood. As Coontz points out, "Mothers pay a high price for whatever choices they make - or are forced to make. Working mothers find it hard to negotiate flex time or are looked down upon for doing so, and often run themselves ragged trying to juggle competing demands on their time" (*Strange* 182). Feminist authors are making two points with this situation. The first is a contribution to the long-standing debate on whether or not women can "have it all" – that is, a flourishing career and a happy, healthy family. In many cases, the argument that women *cannot* have both is exacerbated by single motherhood. Even though both of these boys have fathers that are close to Guinevere, neither father is interested in taking an active role in his son's life, making Guinevere's parenthood essentially a single one; judging by the drastic downturn Guinevere experiences in her relationships with the boys and their fathers late in her reign, it would seem that these authors are arguing *against* the impossible expectation that women could excel in their careers while parenting

¹¹ Galahad dies upon succeeding the Grail Quest, Mordred is defeated/killed by his father in the battle of Camlann.

alone. Far from confining women to one path or another, the way that this argument is presented by Guinevere's example is a condemnation of the external, patriarchal forces that expect women to be able to work to overcome resistance in the work force to succeed in traditionally-masculine realms *and* singlehandedly raise a child.

The other, related point these authors make is that, because women often *are* forced to choose between a career and motherhood, choosing a career can be just as rewarding as succumbing to the overwhelming societal pressure to bear children. Coontz agrees with Betty Friedan that, "on average, independence is good for women and good for their partners holds up across the board. Women who work outside the home have higher self-esteem and lower lifetime rates of depression than full-time homemakers" (*Strange* 172). Woolley conveys this best. Guinevere receives the advice that she should not grieve for lack of children because "many another queen has found her duties as a monarch more than enough to fill her time" (*Queen* 108). Eventually, this plays out to be true, and Guinevere comes to "be proud" that, "in the final analysis, Britain was the only child we'd ever have" (*Queen* 202). In all feminist reinterpretations, Guinevere is vital in the creation of Camelot, not just as a prosperous kingdom, but as an ideal of justice and peace. The citizens of Britain love her as their queen, and even when her affair with Lancelot is discovered and deemed treasonous, the people trust and respect her. She seeks independence, but makes strong interpersonal connections and asks for help when she needs it; she uses whatever personality traits she has, be it grace, intelligence, self-assuredness, or others, to rule efficiently and effectively; she does what needs to be done, but is not afraid to demand that her needs be met. When her womanhood is questioned by barrenness, she redefines motherhood and reclaims womanhood as something that can be done for and by herself. Along with other women, be they allies like Lynett or foes like Morgan, when her femininity is challenged by her

desire to rule, she overcomes patriarchal barriers and damaging stereotypes of what it means to be a queen.

Chapter 2. *Lover*

“It is the custom of all lovers to feast their eyes gladly with gazing, if they can do no more.”
 – Chrétien de Troyes, *Cliges*

“I know of your vows, Lancelot. I won’t ask you to break them, but you must look at me now, because I never, never again want you to mistake another woman’s body for mine.”
 – Guinevere to Lancelot, Sharan Newman, *The Chessboard Queen*

When Shulamith Firestone penned a chapter entitled “Love” in her 1970 book *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, her goal was not to espouse romance as a means of sexual liberation for women – rather, she writes, “For love, perhaps even more than childbearing, is the pivot of women’s oppression today” (113). Love, sex, and relationships were contentious topics for second wave feminists, and often proved divisive in conversations about the root of patriarchal power. On the one hand, liberal and sex-positive feminists like Gloria Steinem and Wendy Holloway encouraged women to find empowerment in reclaiming the sexuality that had so long been denied them by the patriarchy. Alternatively, radical feminists like Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, Mary Daly, and Susan Brownmiller argued that romance and sex are little more than tools of the patriarchy used to perpetuate violence against women. In the end, they all agreed, along with lesbian feminists such as Adrienne Rich, that the best method of resistance to sexual oppression was to create communities based on the love of sisterhood and intimate female friendships. For feminist Arthurian authors, it is difficult to escape the “tyranny” of traditional heteromonogamous romance, but not impossible to subvert it. In inventing or reimagining connections between Arthurian women that have been overlooked by the male literary canon, these authors are able to recontextualize heterosexual romance and sex as inevitable and potentially damaging, using feminist paradigms to discuss the complexity of women’s experiences with sex and sexual violence.

Female friendships

Because the majority of Arthurian literature is written from the perspective of men, readers rarely get to glimpse women interacting with each other, let alone forming close emotional bonds. Feminist Arthurian authors have shattered this tradition, writing women who have intense, formative, complex, and realistic relationships with each other. Furthermore, these friendships exist independent of their marriages and are rarely sexual, but are still more fulfilling than traditional, heterosexual relationships. Gloria Steinem emphasizes the benefits of female friendships in her essay “Sisterhood,” and Adrienne Rich analyses the importance of recognizing female friendships as part of the erotic experience in her classic feminist work “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” friendships that include “the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (Steinem 121; Rich, “Compulsory” 648-649). Friendships between Arthurian women fall easily into these categories, and from there we can see the depth of women’s connections to each other that has long been denied by Arthurian literature.

Communities of women, such as the priestesses in Avalon or Guinevere’s ladies-in-waiting, are prime examples of spaces where women make connections that men would not have access to. These friendships, like female friendships in real life, vary in emotional, physical, and sexual intimacy, and represent a spectrum that could easily be compared to Rich’s lesbian continuum. Newman’s Guinevere is reserved and makes friendships carefully, but she considers her lady-in-waiting Risa as “more of a friend than a maid,” and her first real friendship, or “a relationship that was as close to friendship as either had ever come with a girl of her own age,” is with a Saxon hostage. Both of these cross-social status friendships begin hesitantly, but the bonds

that form show that political or class status need not interfere with emotional connection (*Chessboard* loc 668; *Guinevere* loc 2545). Woolley's Guinevere also befriends a hostage in her home as a child, but that friendship expands into a rich, lifelong relationship – one of the only to survive through Arthur's disappearance and Camelot's fall, so that at the very end as in the very beginning, it is Guinevere and Brigit alone, together. Guinevere and Brigit are physically intimate throughout their lives; as children, they go about "holding hands as sisters do," and when they are reunited late in life, "we threw our arms around each other then, laughing and crying at the same time, and I blessed whatever Gods were responsible for having given me so loyal a friend" (*Child* 195; *Queen* 112). Despite their physical closeness, there is nothing to suggest a sexual partnership. A vital aspect of Rich's theory of lesbian existence is that the hierarchy of relationships – with sexual/romantic relationships at the top and all others beneath – is a tool used to enforce compulsory heterosexuality, and that there is nothing inherently more satisfying or fulfilling about sexual relationships. Guinevere and Brigit are an example of an intense emotional bond without sexual tension. And, when female characters *do* have relationships that include sexuality, their sexual encounters do not validate their friendship, but are simply another aspect of it. Bradley's Morgan and another priestess, Raven, have known each other for most of their lives, and each new encounter between them shows development that is impacted, but not restricted, by their individual lives. As they grow older, their relationship does take on sexual aspects. On their journey to reclaim the Grail from Camelot, they lay "woman to woman, affirming life in the shadow of death. As maiden and man in the light of the spring moon and the Beltane fires affirmed life...the priestesses of Avalon together called on the life of the Goddess and in the silence she answered them" (765-766). Regardless of what these female friendships look like, they are all given the same weight,

and all prove just as, and even more, essential to the well-being of the female protagonists as their relationships with men that are demanded by the traditional legends.

Besides forming friendships for the sake of emotional satisfaction, some women find it beneficial to create alliances with other women in response to patriarchal subordination. Steinem observes, “Any woman who chooses to behave like a full human being should be warned that the armies of the status quo will treat her as something of a dirty joke... She will *need* sisterhood” (126). This solidarity can be established early in a relationship, based simply on the notion that there are some women’s experiences that are universal. Hélène Cixous explains, “When I say ‘woman,’ I’m speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history” (414). While this idea of “universality” faced criticism from feminists striving for the recognition of intersectionality, the relative sameness of Camelot’s noblewomen allows them to focus primarily on overcoming their gender-based subordination together. In the first encounter between Woolley’s Igraine and Guinevere, Igraine gives Guinevere advice about queenship, part of which includes learning how to deal with ignorant masculinity. Igraine “laughed gently as though at the blindness of men,” and Guinevere “found myself laughing with her” (*Child* 418). Years later, when Guinevere finally meets Morgause after years of knowing nothing more about her than that Arthur hates her, she attempts to defend her against Arthur to no avail, after which, “Morgause gave me a look of bemused resignation, as though we were fellow conspirators against the unreasonableness of men” (*Queen* 443).

The blindness and unreasonableness of men is a common theme in Arthuriana, and is rooted in more than the ignorance of individual men. Mary Daly argues, “In order to understand the misogynistic roots of androcratic aggression, we must comprehend that the perpetual War is

waged primarily on a psychic and spiritual plane” (357). The inability to identify with women’s perspectives is not considered a fault by patriarchal standards – it is a normalized method of invalidating and controlling women. This is what leads women to unite. Wolf’s Morgan discovers the depth of this control when she is faced, for the first time, by men who do not treat her with the respect of her station and power. She declares, “I will reveal the source of my information to the queen,” realizing that “she would get nowhere” with the men to whom she is speaking and that Guinevere would be more capable of aiding her; the men, however, forbid her from contacting Guinevere, to the detriment of both women (396). While unreasonableness creates a barrier for these women, there are more immediately endangering characteristics of men that threaten women as a class, and that women work together in solidarity to avoid. When remembering Igraine, Guinevere’s mother, Guenlian, recalls that, “She was kind to me and risked much to help me escape from court with Leodegrance, that I might be spared the horror she lived with every day,” referring to Uther’s unwanted sexual advances (*Guinevere* loc 1337). Similarly, when Newman’s Guinevere is abducted by Meleagant, Meleagant’s wife is thrilled for the company: “It was not often that they had any civilized company and Gilli had no interest in letting Guinevere go before Easter, either” (*Chessboard* loc 2680). Although Gilli does not act as Igraine had and does not aid in Guinevere’s escape from the constant threat of rape, she does not leave her side, offering her as much protection as she is able to from her limited influence with her husband. The solidarity across these characters encourages women to turn to the women in their own lives, to acknowledge shared experiences of oppression and discrimination, and to work together against the interests of men.

Because not all aspects of patriarchal oppression manifest in tangible, interpersonal ways, Arthurian women form lasting support networks that they can rely on in desperate times. One of the most difficult experiences for these women is pregnancy – for Morgan, it is conceiving a child

she does not want, and for Guinevere, it is failing to conceive the child she longs for. In both *Road* and *Mists*, Morgause is the first to notice Morgan's pregnancy, even before Morgan herself. Upon the revelation, Wolf's Morgause offers herself to Morgan as a ready and willing resource: "You can talk to me, you know. We have not met very often, it's true, but I am your sister. I would like to help you" (109). Later, when the gravity has sunk in and Morgan is distraught, Morgause remains calm, providing her with "comfort" and "shelter," and reassuring her, "We'll find a solution, never fear" (111). Although Bradley's Morgause is less kind-hearted, she still reaches out to an ailing Morgan, offering to bring Morgan to her home for the pregnancy and birth, and fostering the child afterward with her own sons (222). This connection stems less from their familial ties, and more from their shared experience of motherhood, in which the more-experienced Morgause becomes a mentor for the young and terrified Morgan, passing on generational knowledge that had been inaccessible due to Morgan's early separation from her own mother. Similarly, when Woolley's Guinevere is grieving her miscarriage, Ragnell is the only one who can comfort her, as a "wordless lament wove a shelter around us - a lullaby of sorrow sung by every mother who has ever mourned" (Woolley, *Queen* 198). These two queens barely know each other and do not even speak the same language, but Ragnell is able to reach Guinevere through her grief as one who has suffered a similar loss, and is imparting that knowledge and sharing in the experience of devastation and healing. Without support networks, these women would most likely suffer from isolation; in order to maintain vital energy without being consumed by patriarchal expectations, networks and communities of help and support must be established.

Romance

Arthurian legends are known for their passionate, heterosexual romances, which exist in these novels alongside these female friendships; unlike the bonds between women, which are set up purposefully in the face of patriarchal resistance, the romantic bonds exist within the confines of compulsory heterosexuality and enforced monogamy, prompting emotional fatigue and social ostracization for women who search for fulfillment outside of their politically-inspired, lackluster marriages. In her writings about love caught within power imbalances, Firestone argues that “love demands a mutual vulnerability or it turns destructive: the destructive effects of love occur only in a context of inequality” (116). The nature of medieval patriarchal oppression as depicted by these authors makes power in heterosexual romance inherently uneven, and therefore, its “destructive effects” are, for most Arthurian women, eventually inevitable. Most notorious of the Arthurian romances, of course, is Guinevere’s affair with Lancelot, the forbidden, inescapable romance which takes the blame in much of the literary canon for the fall of Camelot (see footnote 6). However, Guinevere is not the only woman to form life-changing romantic bonds. These relationships can be conditionally-empowering, complicated, and emotionally-demanding, as realistic relationships are, and, like the representations of female friendships, cover a wide spectrum of dynamics that show the nuances of navigating heterosexual romance under power.

As spirited and independent as many of these female characters are, they are just as susceptible to finding empowerment through external validation as any woman socialized under patriarchy. Arthur is often portrayed as an inspiring king and a respectful marital partner, but the lack of bedroom chemistry – regardless of whether he pays her too much or too little attention – seems to be for these authors the driving force behind Guinevere’s affair with Lancelot. The struggle to find fulfillment in an arranged marriage reflects the struggles of married couples during

the second wave, in which “reported marital happiness did decline slightly in the United States. Some authors...suggest that it reflects unrealistically high expectations of love in a culture that denies people safe, culturally approved ways of getting used to marriage or cultivating other relationships to meet some of the needs that we currently load onto the couple alone” (Coontz, *Way* 16). Although all of these authors include the affair in their versions, Woolley portrays, arguably, the most vivid shift in Guinevere’s outlook on relationships when she falls in love with Lancelot. She loves Arthur dearly, would not do anything to jeopardize their partnership, and only laments that he seems reserved with his love. However, she makes the best of it, reminding herself that Arthur “held me in high regard” and that “it was better to have caring actions in silence than pretty promises left unfulfilled by a more loquacious lover” (*Queen* 169). This mentality changes drastically when she realizes what it is to be loved. On their initial acknowledgment of mutual affection, Lancelot “looked down at me with a depth of tenderness that flowed over me without words. And when the flash of his smile filled the night, my heart leapt in wonder that he, too, cherished the love that had never been spoken aloud. The world began to spin wildly” (*Queen* 276). Her world may eventually stop spinning, but the joy of being shown love does not fade, and after spending a time with Lancelot (and Tristan and Isolde, another star-crossed couple), she notes, “No matter what else the summer at Joyous Gard had brought, I knew I was loved, and even seen as lovely, by a man I admired and loved in return. That knowledge wrapped around me like a charm” (Woolley, *Queen* 402).

There were contrasting second wave theories on the empowerment of women through heterosexual romance. For women, Coontz argues that “the process of falling in love is not so much a loss of control as it is a socially acceptable way of exploring her own powers, challenging herself, finding the simultaneous transcendence and self-absorption that men find in work” (*Way*

62). Agreeing to a point but qualifying with a nod to the overarching patriarchal system at play, Kate Millet claims,

The concept of romantic love affords a means of emotional manipulation which the male is free to exploit, since love is the only circumstance in which the female is (ideologically) pardoned for sexual activity. And convictions of romantic love are convenient to both parties since this is often the only condition in which the female can overcome the far more powerful conditioning she has received toward sexual inhibition. (Millett 348)

Neither of these views directly address Guinevere's romance, simply because it is extramarital and therefore not always "socially acceptable" or "pardonable." But before the realities of compulsory monogamy (as expounded by the Church) twist her relationship in hopes of exploiting it in personal vendettas, the benefits of romance sustain Guinevere throughout many of the hardships she encounters late in her queenship.

There are few interpretations of Arthurian legends in which there is not a close emotional bond between Guinevere, Lancelot, *and* Arthur. For Newman and Chapman, this love-triangle results in heartbreak for at least one party involved. Chapman's Lancelot shares his frustrations with Lynett, telling her "of his heartbreaking love for Guinevere, and how his loyalty and duty to Arthur pulled him one way and his love pulled him another, till he was nigh tortured to death between them" (148-149). This is a traditional portrayal of Lancelot's angst, but, while all authors acknowledge the complications of this arrangement, some feminist Arthurian authors embrace this scenario as an opportunity to present satisfying, if not always healthy, alternative relationship dynamics. Woolley's Guinevere "could not imagine not loving them both," and despite Christian authorities telling her otherwise, she does not "see that there has to be a conflict," explaining, "I simply love them both in different ways...they are, after all, very different people" (*Queen* 411; 415). When Wolf's Guinevere consummates the affair, she observes that he "was not suffering

from remorse for having gone to bed with his best friend's wife," but that "[s]he was not sure what she felt," fearing Arthur's reaction (255). She need not have worried, however, for her lover had a better idea of their dynamics than she: Arthur "had known about her and Bedwyr almost immediately, though. He had not slept with her since. And yet...he trusted her. She had joined Bedwyr and Cai in that inner circle of friends with whom he could simply be Arthur and not 'the king'" (Wolf 276-277).¹² Bradley, as she is wont to do, takes the relationship a step further, going so far as to write a *ménage à trois* between Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot that is, in the moment, enjoyable for everyone. Guinevere notes that "she loved them both," and "loved Arthur all the more that he could be generous enough to give her this" (Bradley 449).

Expanding her marital, monogamous relationship in these scenarios allows Guinevere to acknowledge the love she has developed for Arthur as equally valid as the love she cannot help for Lancelot. In what Larry and Joan Constantine would call a "multilateral" relationship, Guinevere benefits from her husband's and lover's shared resistance to the "isolation" of the nuclear family and her own sexual and romantic "self-realization" (209). Depicting alternative relationship dynamics was a progressive move for an era in which queer issues were being denied space in the feminist movement, but Bradley and Woolley get at the heart of the social construction of romantic monogamy when Guinevere insists that she loves them equally, but differently

¹² In an effort to be more "historically accurate," some authors do not include Lancelot in their stories, as his character is not introduced until the late twelfth century in Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*. Wolf relies instead on Bedwyr and Cai, Arthur's companions from older Welsh mythology, to fill the place of Arthur's right hand that Lancelot so often occupies in contemporary literature. Rather than leave out the affair, writes Guinevere and Bedwyr together. In an interesting combination of the two factions, Woolley includes Bedwyr as Arthur's first officer at the beginning of his reign, and Bedwyr fills in some of Lancelot's traditional roles (such as retrieving Guinevere from her home to bring her to her marriage), even developing a strong friendship with Guinevere; however, he is replaced by Lancelot after losing his hand during battle.

Sexuality

Whereas romance is an Arthurian fascination that has persisted from medieval writings, sex and sexuality, especially women's, has been given little positive attention in Arthurian literature. In fact, Miller and Fowlkes argue that this lack occurs in literature in general, where "a search of existing literature reveals scant attention to the sexuality of adult women in the context of their normative social roles and relationships"; "woman's married heterosexual experience," especially, "serves as a boundary delineator," and is paid the least attention (784). In light of this, women's sexuality is a major theme for these feminist Arthurian authors. In its most basic and depoliticized form, Steinem argues that, "For human beings, sexuality can also be a way of bonding, giving and receiving pleasure, bridging differences, discovering sameness, and communicating emotion" (244). While Arthurian women do sometimes experience these benefits, to describe even the most sexually active Arthurian woman as "sexually liberated" would be shallow – as radical feminist Alix Kates Shulman claims, sexual liberation "can mean nothing unless it includes the freedom to reject or enter into sexual relationships fearing neither exploitation nor punishment" (604). These authors seek to address these fears and the sociopolitical conditions under which these women engage in sexual activity, commenting on state or Church laws that affected how women were viewed sexually, but they also show how these women embrace their own sexuality and strive for autonomy and control over their own bodies even in the face of punishment.

When it comes to the legality of married women's sexuality, there is some disagreement among authors as to the place of queens under "Celtic law." That is, there is no historical consensus on sexual restrictions for married noblewomen under pre- or sub-Roman Celtic law, so any reference to it in regards to women's sexual relations is constructed by the author. Wolf's

interpretation of the law reflects second wave understanding of patriarchal desire for sexual control over women. In *Road*, despite Arthur's easy acceptance of Guinevere's extramarital relationship, she understands that, "[a]dultery by the queen was a very serious matter indeed. A state matter" (370). She disregards the legal obstacles, however, in favor of sexual fulfillment. While the seriousness of her affair persists in her consciousness throughout, it is not until she is caught and Arthur's judgment is forced that he acknowledges the danger she is in, chastising Mordred: "Do you understand the danger you have placed her in? ...Under Celtic law, adultery by the queen is punishable by death" (380). That none of the men involved in the relationship or the exposure of it understand the weight of their actions until it is too late is a significant comment on the lack of responsibility that men take when it comes to women's sexuality, unless it is to either access it or punish it. There is nothing under the law, of course, that would limit the sexual escapades of men, whose promiscuity is not only permissible, but encouraged. Wolf's Guinevere is luckier than most others – Arthur casts those involved in the exposure out of the city, and the scandal is mostly forgotten. While Guinevere feels able to explore her sexuality on an interpersonal level, she is still at the mercy of the patriarchal legal system, and is spared more by Arthur's quick, undercover solution than by any form of official justice.

Alternatively, Woolley's Celtic law offers a glimpse of what women's sexual liberation could look like in a society where sexual autonomy for women is legally and culturally sanctioned. Her vision of this society is based on idealist components of the sexual revolution of the early second wave, such as those "that accepted sexual activity between unmarried men and women" (Coontz, *Way* 197). Guinevere is raised to fully embrace her identity as a "Celtic queen," with all the sexual autonomy that comes with it. She comments as a young woman that she should be able to marry the boy she loves, despite his low status, because "other queens have had consorts while

they ruled” (*Child* 258). Later, after she has married Arthur but has fallen in love with Lancelot, she notes of their relationship that, “I naturally assumed that we would bed, Celtic queens having the right to a personal as well as public life” (*Guinevere* 32). The rhetoric of public versus private, described by Carole Pateman as “ultimately, what the feminist movement is about,” was, and continues to be, crucial to contemplations of women’s control over their bodies, and Woolley’s deliberate repetition of this concept makes it clear that this is a topic that is driving much of her representations of Guinevere’s relationships (Pateman 155).

Furthermore, Woolley’s Guinevere does not limit this right of privacy to herself, and says of Morgan’s affair with Accolon that, “As a Celtic queen she had a right to bed with anyone she chose, provided that she not desert her people” (*Child* 510). This is in direct contrast to Bradley’s Guinevere, who does not allow her ladies-in-waiting to participate in the sex rites of Beltane because she considers it “her duty to guard their chastity” (318). The main distinction in the way these women approach the sexuality of other women seems to be rooted primarily in their religious beliefs. Woolley’s Guinevere, a “Celtic queen” who worships a feminine aspect of the Divine, views sexuality as a woman’s right, whereas Bradley’s, a pious Christian, has been raised in the Church and views sexuality outside of marital duty as sinful, despite her affair with Lancelot. Their oppositional portrayals have the same effect, however. Woolley seems fully supportive of Guinevere’s sexuality, and in fact, it is the Church who overrules her right as a Celtic queen and condemns her to death for adultery. Bradley emphasizes Guinevere’s double standard that serves to anger and alienate some of her ladies-in-waiting. Both imply that sexual autonomy and empowerment among women should be celebrated, and that women should not resort to shaming each other while engaging with their own sexuality in secrecy.

Morgause is another character who is known for proud promiscuity. In *Mists*, she tells Morgan, “I am grateful to [Lot], and he has never had the shadow of cause to think he rears another man’s son. But that does not mean I must be blind when a young man has fine features and shoulders like a young bull, either” (Bradley 217). Morgause’s ability to freely engage with her own sexual desires with little fear of negative or violent repercussion is just one of many ways that Bradley portrays the marriage between Lot and Morgause as one of the most egalitarian partnerships between major characters of any in these novels, competing only with Woolley’s Guinevere and Arthur. Even after Lot’s death, her string of lovers continues. Wolf’s Morgan, faithful only to Arthur, nevertheless applauds Morgause on her sexual decisions, and when Mordred criticizes her for marrying a third husband who is much younger and accusing her of looking “foolish,” Morgan replies, “I’m sure she doesn’t think so. She is probably happy. I hope she is. She deserves to be” (359). Again, we can see women choosing to lift each other up instead of put them down for their sexuality, which provides further evidence of the strength of their ties to each other and the support networks they have built, and defeats any expectations of sexual shame or shaming.

Power through sexuality

While satisfaction and empowerment are often enough reward for unrestrained sexuality, some women have an ulterior motive: power. Gloria Steinem identifies this as a harmful stereotype of women, that “[i]f they succeed, it could only have been sexually, through men” (126). Contrary to radical feminist thought, in which only men can have power in heterosexual relationships, Wendy Holloway argues that women can find resistance in sexuality, that power can be “a more complex process of negotiation” between men and women, and that women can achieve power in

heterosexual relationships when they “recognize that men need relationships” (63). When Merlin is comforting Lynett, he recognizes that “for some women, virginity is the only treasure they have to bargain with, and a place in a man’s house the only thing they want to use it to buy” (Chapman 22-23). His observation strongly echoes Dworkin’s argument that, “[f]or women, according to the killer/husband, virginity is the highest state, an ideal; and a fall from virginity is a fall into trivialization, into being used as a thing” (Dworkin 17). In this case and others, gaining power exclusively through sexuality is portrayed as insidious, viewed as inherently deceitful and condemned more strongly than other treachery because of its gendered nature. For this reason, it is usually only women who are, or have the potential to be, antagonistic towards Camelot or the novel’s protagonist who seek out sex as a means of political influence. In some novels, like Newman’s trilogy and *Mists*, Morgan and/or Morgause use the threat of exposing Arthur’s sexual history, particularly his incest, as a means to control him until Mordred has grown and claimed his place in court. In others, Morgause is described more generally as learned in the ways of sexual manipulation; Woolley’s Morgan claims that Morgause “always saw bed for the path to power that it is,” and Wolf writes of Morgause that, “She might not be overly shrewd about matters of policy, but matters of sex were another matter altogether” (Woolley, *Guinevere* 495; Wolf 310). The tradition of sexuality being primarily used by female antagonists stems from the denigration of women’s sexuality by patriarchal society, both in these historical fictional settings and in our contemporary world. By showing women of various intentions toward Camelot who are unabashedly sexual, these authors give protagonists the ability to claim the power in their own sexuality, while simultaneously offering sexuality as *a* path to power for antagonists, but not the *only* path.

Where some women use their sexuality to gain power, others assert their power by denying their sexuality. Sometimes, this is in the form of rejecting a marriage proposal, even when it is socially unacceptable for a noblewoman to live and care for her land alone. The rejection of marriage can happen for different reasons. Understandably, Lynett's sister refuses her suitor, Sir Ruber, on the grounds that he is a total stranger and is only interested in marriage in order to gain control of her lands and wealth. She tells him straightforwardly, "thank you very much, but – no," and though he then holds her castle under siege, her eventual rescue by an upstanding knight shows that, despite a social taboo of single women, her refusal in this context is socially condonable (Chapman 27). In a more emotionally complicated example, Wolf's Morgan denies the marriage proposal of a close friend who loves her and for whom she cares deeply. Even though it is her father urging the union, she tells him, "No... I will not marry Cai...or anyone else for that matter. You will have to think of something else" (115). Here, she is not only refusing a specific suitor, but any marriage at all, preferring to keep her independence and the liberty to engage sexually with whomever she pleases, rather than tie herself to one man, especially a man who is not the one she loves (Arthur). Other times, the rejection pertains more directly to sex and sexuality. When Lynett is captured, even though her captor has complete power over her and has previously assaulted her, she still has the audacity to throw his sexual advances back at his face. He insults her, telling her she's "not attractive" (compared to how she was as a child), and when he says, "I don't want you," she spits back, "Nobody asked you," (Chapman 74). In a situation where Lynett is totally powerless, she still asserts the façade of control, although she and her captor both know how fragile that façade is. Nevertheless, in Lynett's commitment to establishing it, Chapman shows that the determination of women to assert power by keeping their bodies to themselves, even when the situation is beyond their control, is far from useless. Instead, it can be empowering in the way that

all empowerment is superficial – it does not change the reality of the powerlessness of women in such situations, but it allows her to maintain confidence and self-control in the face of that powerlessness.

Sexual violence

Sexual empowerment cannot be fully understood until juxtaposed with sexual disempowerment and sexualized violence against women. The theme of ravishment is common in Arthurian legends – usually as a plot device to show the courage and chivalry of knights who rescue damsels from this fate. In their book on medieval and early modern rape, Elizabeth Robertson and Christine Rose explain that, “in the Middle Ages, the word ‘raptus,’ found most commonly in legal documents, applied equally to forced coitus and abduction for the purposes of marriage, sometimes with the consent of both partners” (7). For that reason, many of the medieval stories of ravishment that come to contemporary readers show ambiguous portrayals of assault in which the effect of the incident on the woman is passed over in favor of rhetorical fawning over the savior knight. It is only when the stories are told from the perspectives of female characters that we can see the reality of these assaults – not just the details of the incident itself, but the events leading up to the assault, the nature of the assault itself, and the severe physical, emotional, and psychological impact of the assault on the woman and those close to her, even long after the incident has taken place. Woolley’s Guinevere observes, “Perhaps the hidden scars of rape reach more deeply than even those of us who have gone through it know,” and it is exactly these scars of trauma – hidden both by the individual characters’ emotional situations and also by a long-standing tradition of literary oversight – that these authors work to draw attention to (*Queen* 424). The majority of this work is done through the experiences of three characters, whose assaults can

be analyzed as isolated events and also as connected symptoms of an overarching rape culture based on medieval conceptions of women's sexual autonomy and courtly love that continue to haunt contemporary sexual culture.¹³ Through Igraine, Guinevere, and Lynett, feminist Arthurian authors respond to a wide variety of feminist discourses on rape, looking at the ways in which theories of consent and trauma play out materially on their characters' lives.

Far from being gratuitous, Tanya Horeck argues that the depiction of sexual violence "necessarily brings self-reflexive questions about feminist politics and feminist interpretation," as well as "operate[s] as the ground over which the terms of the social – and the sexual – contract are secured" (8; 9). Robertson and Rose agree, writing, "while representations of rape reveal how violence against women pervades culture – and yet is easily elided – at the same time such violence constitutes how we come to know ourselves and our world" (Robertson and Rose 3). For feminist Arthurian authors, it is impossible to fully understand women's place in Arthurian society without examining the extent to which violence is (allowed to be) perpetrated against them, just as it is impossible for contemporary women to ignore or avoid the violence they are directly or indirectly experiencing.

Before discussing rape and assault, it is essential to analyze what consent can and does look like for Arthurian women. One of the main complications of consent is marriage, due to the societal notion that, because a wife's duty is to provide children (see previous chapter), sexual intercourse in the marriage bed is expected and even obligatory. This notion was not merely medieval – consent in marriage was a serious issue addressed by feminists of the second wave, who "had brought the issues of incest and spousal rape under public scrutiny, winning new laws

¹³ It is worth noting that the three scenarios of sexual violence examined in this chapter are not the only portrayals of sexual violence in these books. This is especially true of Guinevere's character. My decision to limit my analysis to her abduction/rape by Meleagant is solely for ease of comparison, not to discount the rape/trauma/threat of rape she faces from other characters (i.e. Newman's Lancelot and Mordred, Wolf's Agravaine).

against marital rape and stricter enforcement of domestic violence ordinances” (Coontz, *Way* 141). Newman’s Guinevere’s thoughts concerning her relationship with Arthur show the unpleasant position married women are forced into in regards to sexual expectations. When Arthur tries to initiate sex on his last night before he leaves, Guinevere reflects:

She knew that he loved her and would miss her terribly. Of course he would. She wanted so much just to roll over and stay asleep, but she could not do that to him on their last night together. Why couldn’t she love him the way he did her? She knew it was her job, but...if only he would be quick tonight! (Newman, *Chessboard* loc 1732)

It is painfully clear that Guinevere is in no way interested in engaging in sexual activity with Arthur. What is less clear is the acknowledgement of this situation and others like it as incidents of rape. While there does not seem to be any trauma related to it, her reluctance and resignation show that, if there is a gray area of consent, this is where it might exist. This incident also hints at some of the other themes that are portrayed more obviously in the following examples, such as the autonomy of women to describe their own sexual experiences regardless of the objective truths affecting it, definitions of consent as the absence of a “no” versus the presence of a “yes,” and the false conflation of love and sexual desire/activity.

This is not to say that consent for Arthurian women *must* be complicated. Wolf presents readers with the best, and arguably, the only *real* portrayal of consent in a sexual experience.¹⁴ The

¹⁴ “Real,” here, refers to the contemporary, sometimes legal, definition of consent as active, verbal, and enthusiastic. Of course, no relationship, be it sexual or not, is without power imbalances, so it is always possible to argue that there can be no “real” consent under hegemony. Robertson and Rose argue, and many radical feminist theorists would agree, “if rape is viewed as systematic, its definition becomes harder to formulate, since our very tools of analysis are implicated in the production of rape,” and if the definition of rape is unclear, then the nature of consent becomes even more complicated (Robertson and Rose 6). Most liberal/mainstream feminists would disregard this argument, preferring instead to give women the agency to make empowering, intimate sexual connections (even with men). Because a great majority of feminists would argue in favor of the existence of consent, and because it is impractical (even if theoretically thought-provoking) to suggest that all sex is rape under hegemony (what even are the boundaries of sex in that scenario?), for the purpose of this paper, I will be using consent as a basis for analyzing experiences of trauma and assault, knowing that consent obviously looked much different during the second wave than it did in sub-Roman Britain, and assuming that feminist Arthurian authors also took this difference into account in their writings.

experience is between Arthur and Morgan when they are young; he asks, clearly contextually initiating sexual activity, “*Do you want to take off your wet gown?*” and Morgan “*said yes and with her own hands pulled the wet material over her head*” (48, emphasis mine). Three vital interactions occur here that will be essential to any further discussion of consent. The first is the act of asking a partner if she is interested in sexual activity *before* any contact is made (as opposed to asking after or in the midst of physical/sexual contact); the second is the verbal affirmation (as opposed to relying on body language or ambiguous non-verbal cues to establish affirmation); the third, and debatably most important and most often overlooked, is the woman’s first move as an active contribution in which she is in control of her own body and is reciprocating sexually based on the desires of *both* partners.¹⁵ Some of the following examinations of assault are blatant, unquestionable portrayals of rape, in which a distinct lack of any of these factors is coupled with violence. However, not all events are so black-and-white, and it will be necessary to keep a nuanced understanding of consent in order to examine the wide-spread, long-lasting effects of trauma on these characters.

Igraine

It is standard in Arthurian tradition that Arthur’s mother, Igraine, is previously married before she becomes High Queen, and that the reason for the initial resistance from some kings as Arthur claims the throne is that Arthur’s conception occurred under dubious circumstances, his birth was deemed illegitimate, and his fostering kept his existence a secret until Uther’s final days. But behind his conception, there is a long, often untold history of Uther and Igraine’s relationship

¹⁵ I would like to acknowledge that discussions of consent as necessarily “verbal” are usually based in the ableist assumption that everyone is always verbal, but since all characters portrayed in these novels are verbal, the issue is less relevant here.

both before and after Arthur that these authors delve into, both from Igraine's perspective as she lives it and recounts it, but also from other women on the sidelines who have their own opinions on the events.

The wife of Duke Gorlois, Igraine does not meet Uther until he is newly named High King, when he falls in love with her on sight. Bradley and Woolley provide the most detailed accounts of Igraine's reactions to Uther's unwelcome advances, but while Bradley's Igraine had had forewarning that Uther would pursue her, Woolley's Igraine recounts, "I was sure something fearful was going to happen...and that night at the feast I tried every way possible to avoid him"; even so, she was unsuccessful, for, "the Pendragon prowled the Hall like a wolf circling sheep" (Woolley, *Queen* 16). Woolley is not the first to use the wolf-and-sheep simile to describe a man's undesired sexual advances – in truth, past literary use of this metaphor can be used as evidence that the situation Woolley is describing here *is* pursuit with the intent to rape.¹⁶ Understanding the initial encounter between Igraine and Uther in this way is *crucial*, because, as examined below, while individual feelings toward the situation may shift, the circumstances under which that shift occurs leave more than enough room for the question of assault.

Igraine's husband takes her home, sometimes at her insistence, hoping that Uther will move on and leave her in peace. Instead, Uther's first act as High King is to follow, and, through a series of deceit and trickery, he succeeds in reaching Igraine. Bradley's Guinevere grows up hearing the rumors of that event, and asks, "Lady, is it true that when Uther Pendragon came to you before you were wedded to him, he came to you by the Merlin's arts in the magical disguise of Gorlois, so that you lay with him thinking he was Duke of Cornwall and you still a chaste and faithful

¹⁶ Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, notorious as a collection of mythological rape narratives, uses the wolf-and-sheep metaphor to describe several instances of rape or attempted rape. Included in this list are the stories of Philomela and Daphne (the former brutally violated, the latter narrowly escaping rape by transforming into a laurel tree), whose tragic stories are well-read enough to assume Woolley's repetition of the metaphor here is intentional.

wife?” (269). This Igraine denies the myth that she was deceived, responding, “whatever tales they tell, I knew perfectly well that it was Uther and no other... I loved Uther” (270). Although not having been quite in love at that point, Woolley’s Igraine also shuts down all questions regarding being tricked, asking Guinevere incredulously, “Can you believe anyone thinking a woman couldn’t tell the difference between two men?” (*Queen* 23). Contrary to all of his actions leading up to this point, Woolley’s Uther tells Igraine, “you must come to me of your own choice – there shall be no thought of rape between us” (*Queen* 21). The facts that Uther a) makes advances that are unreciprocated and clearly unwanted, b) pursues Igraine after she has begged her husband to take her away from Uther’s advances, c) starts a war between himself and Gorlois to distract (and kill) Gorlois so that he can take his wife, and d) invades her home in disguise and corners her in her room, all completely discount his shallow attempt at making himself feel better about his actions by claiming that it is not a rape. What seems a meager attempt at redefining the situation, however, succeeds, and Woolley’s Igraine takes Uther at his word and does not describe the experience, to herself or to others, as rape.

Others are not so convinced. Despite Igraine’s own insistence that her relationship with Uther was consensual, her daughter, Morgan, sees the situation very differently. She tells Guinevere, “Uther Pendragon...raped my mother and placed her on the High Throne of Britain like a trophy, all to satisfy his own lust. And she let herself be gulled into thinking it was an honor to be so used” (*Guinevere* 499). In a similar situation, Newman’s Igraine is dead before the novels begin, but when Guinevere’s mother hears confirmation of the events from Merlin (who had been present), she is furious:

“It was true then. There were rumors even at the time that Uther had gone to Tintagel the night that Gorlois died and forced himself upon Igraine. I never understood why she consented to marry him. I thought it was out of fear, but she was carrying his child even then.” Her voice intensified in anger. “He raped her with her husband’s murder on his soul, and you connived it for him!” (*Guinevere* loc 1321)

In both of these instances, the reader’s understanding of the events is complicated or controlled by the opinions of women other than Igraine, challenging the feminist anti-rape movement’s prioritization of a “focus on the victim’s perspective” that centers a woman’s definition of her own experience (Brownmiller 1). Woolley’s Morgan, as explained in the next chapter, is in danger of becoming a caricature of radical separatist feminism for many of her views, and here offers a perspective of rape that relies on the presence of imbalanced and violent power structures rather than on Igraine’s personal definition of her own experience. But while this approach may be more radical, it validates the views of any reader who was confused by Igraine’s sudden change of heart as her relationship toward Uther shifted drastically from fear to love. By adding this perspective to a situation that was clearly introduced as rape, Woolley shows the damaging effects of sexual coercion on a woman’s ability to define her own experience. She questions whether Igraine’s definition should trump all others, while simultaneously offering Igraine an opportunity to empower herself with her own definition in spite of all of the evidence that would define the experience objectively as rape.

Newman asks a similar question. In this case, the reader is forced to take Guenlian at her word that the event was a rape, as her interpretation is deemed the most reliable given that her position as another lesser queen under Uther’s High Kingship is the most similar to Igraine’s. Under what circumstances is it acceptable to define others’ experiences as trauma? This question

and others like it were under serious debate among second wave feminists, and feminist Arthurian authors offer their own complications and interpretations.

Guinevere

Like the seduction/rape of Igraine, the abduction of Guinevere is rooted in the Arthurian tradition. While the origins of her abduction are pre-Galfridian, the version most commonly replicated by contemporary authors is the one that comes from Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*. The canonical importance of this tale is that it is the introduction of Guinevere's affair with Lancelot, who rescues Guinevere from abduction. In many later retellings, including some of these feminist ones, it retains this significance as the first moment that Guinevere's relationship with Lancelot is consummated. For feminist Arthurian authors, however, the effects of the abduction on her relationship with Lancelot are overshadowed by the effects on Guinevere herself. While Wolf and Newman retell the details of the canonical story from Guinevere's perspective, others take the plot a step further; what comes to us from the legends as an abduction becomes a site of explicit sexual violence for Bradley and Woolley.

Guinevere's first encounter with her abductor, Meleagant, takes a variety of guises. Wolf introduces him at a time when Guinevere is frustrated with the other men in her life, and, because she "was accustomed to men falling in love with her," she "was kinder to him than she would ordinarily have been" without recognizing any potentially negative outcomes of her actions (244). This is not in an attempt to blame Guinevere for her abduction; rather, Wolf takes the reader through the events and emotions leading up to the abduction that offer an alternative to victim-blaming notions of women "leading men on." Contrary to Wolf's Guinevere, Bradley's and Woolley's both recognize Meleagant as a potential threat, although Woolley's is the only one who

initially clues into the sexual nature of the threat. Instead of treating him kindly, they react vehemently to his advances: Bradley's "clenched [her hand] into a fist and pulled it away," telling him to "Let me go," while Woolley's demands, "Get your hands off me" and strikes him "without thinking, as hard and as fast as I could, the flat of my palm crashing against the bones of his cheek" (Bradley 370; Woolley, *Child* 326). That kindness, resistance, and aggressive self-defense all result in the same outcome of abduction is a substantial testament to the inability of women to control situations in which men seek domination over them. Susan Griffin dispels the idea that good behavior will protect women from rape, arguing, "Though myth would have it that mainly 'bad girls' are raped, this theory has no basis in fact" (14). This argument is in direct response to victim-blaming analyses of violence against women, demonstrating that women's interpersonal interactions with men are insignificant compared to men's desire for control when it comes to inspiring violence.

After the abduction takes place, there is a period of time in which Guinevere understands the threat of impending violence, and desperately attempts to avoid it. The primary motivation for the abduction in the first place is almost always a power struggle between Meleagant and Arthur – Guinevere is caught in the cross-fire as the most vulnerable and valuable of Arthur's possessions that can be taken in a direct challenge to Arthur's rule. Griffin writes, "Since male society defines the female as a possession, it is not surprising that the felony most often committed together with rape is theft... [T]he elements of theft, violence and forced sexual relations merge into *an indistinguishable whole*" (22). It is this "indistinguishable whole" that feminist Arthurian authors are attempting to re-separate. Newman's Guinevere is lucky (if one can be "lucky" in this situation) that Meleagant is more interested in Arthur than in her. When she fears violence, he tells her, "Don't worry about that, my dear... Not but what you might be fun to tame... I just want your

upstart husband to know that I could have you if it pleased me and there would be nothing he could do to stop me” (Newman, *Chessboard* loc 2354). There is not even a question that *she* might be able to do anything to stop him, which is the harsh reality of her situation. As presented by Wolf, Woolley, and Bradley, Guinevere has similar fears, but hopes to be able to talk her way out of violence. Wolf’s Guinevere’s understanding of danger comes as an abrupt realization:

Gwenhwyfar froze with fear. He was going to rape her. She stared up into his strange glittering eyes and knew that this was what he had brought her here for. What a stupid fool she had been to let him think... Abruptly her brain began to function again. He was not thinking rape. He thought she loved him. She would have to play up to him. (Wolf 249)

Woolley’s Guinevere also understands her precarious position, hoping to rely on her intelligence to escape, knowing, “It was clear that I could not gain my freedom by either regal command or sheer physical strength. Whatever was going to happen, I’d have to keep my wits about me” (Woolley, *Queen* 260). Not having much in the way of intelligence and possessing little “regal command,” Bradley’s Guinevere can only resort to the unheeded threat that “Arthur will kill you” (513, 514). Talking, it is shown, only goes so far: Wolf’s Guinevere stalls Meleagant long enough for her rescue to arrive; Woolley’s and Bradley’s are not so fortunate, and fall prey to rape and violence at the hands of their abductor. As with their pre-abduction interactions, it is clear that there really is *nothing* a woman in this situation could do that would *guarantee* her safety, discrediting all anti-rape advice that is targeted at women instead of men.

When Guinevere is raped, even the knowledge that she could not have stopped the violence is not enough to assuage the guilt, self-blame, and sense of worthlessness that plague her thanks to cultural messages condemning women for being in that situation. Bradley’s Guinevere blames herself for her lack of physical resistance, “knowing that she should fight, but too terrified of his fists and blows to resist” (514). The idea that she “should” fight, even when she is clearly

outmatched in strength and is only putting herself in more danger of physical abuse if she does, is laden with unrealistic, patriarchal standards of victimhood as never succumbing, but struggling futilely to the last. Because it is obvious to the reader that Guinevere could not have escaped no matter how hard she fought, Bradley is showing the absurdity of this expectation, but also validating that the expectation *does* exist, and that women's internalization of this message sometimes outweighs the practical reality of their situation. The same is true for Woolley's Guinevere. Although she knows from the start that physical resistance is useless and does not attempt it for the same reasons that Bradley's Guinevere stops trying it, she still berates herself for not having done enough to stop Meleagant. She thinks, "I should never have tried to outbluff Maelgwn. If only I'd been more...more sensible. Less arrogant. I should have watched my tongue..." (*Queen* 280). But, as we see from earlier interactions between Guinevere and Meleagant, and also from Bradley's example, being more sensible and less arrogant is just as fruitless. Woolley knows that, no matter how a woman reacts, sexual violence is not the result of a lack of diplomacy, it is an act of domination, and no woman can be blamed for that.

A side-effect of this internalized guilt is the paranoia that a failure to adhere societal expectations of rape-resistance detrimentally affects other people's perceptions of them. Bradley's Guinevere experiences being "sick and sore, but worse than that was the sense of being used, shamed, and ineradicably dirtied" (515). Woolley's Guinevere, even though she knows that "Arthur was unlikely to berate me for this failure," worries that he will still see her as "unclean, defiled, unworthy" (*Queen* 283). Neither Bradley nor Woolley portray any character – even those unfriendly to Guinevere – who thinks that Guinevere's rape has made her dirty or worthless. Like with guilt, the intention of showing Guinevere's self-doubt is not to validate that she *should* doubt herself, but to show that the feeling is valid inasmuch as it is a feeling shared among survivors of

violence because it has been ingrained in women's minds to doubt themselves any time they fall short of perfection.

For Woolley's Guinevere, her sense of failure is exacerbated by her body's life-threatening reaction to the trauma. In this way, Woolley does perhaps the most thorough job of portraying the realities of rape not as an isolated event in a woman's life, but as an experience that has long-lasting, physically and emotionally damaging implications. After her rescue, Guinevere spends the next two weeks "wandering in a delirium of terrifying nightmares and poignantly beautiful dreams," recovering from what contemporary readers would identify as a sexually transmitted infection (*Queen* 277). Although Guinevere obviously survives, Nimue imparts the tragic news that, "if infections like this don't kill her, they leave a woman barren. It's unlikely you'll ever get pregnant again" (*Queen* 282). As discussed in the previous chapter, Guinevere's barrenness is a traumatic experience in itself, and is the cause of much doubt from herself and others of her capability to rule. That Woolley writes the cause of Guinevere's barrenness to be her rape and subsequent illness demonstrates, for anyone doubting the seriousness of psychological damage, the physical consequences of trauma.

That is not to say that Woolley does not put equal emphasis on emotional trauma. Immediately after recovering lucidity, Guinevere suffers "a dreadful, cold numbness" while "pictures of the abduction and rape marched relentlessly through my head" (*Queen* 280). Her helplessness to repress these memories affects her day-to-day life in ways both understandable and unexpected. Her relationship with Arthur becomes strained, because "the idea of bed left me feeling numb and chilled," and while Arthur is sympathetic to her needs, her own desire to overcome these feelings and her inability to do so leaves her feeling more helpless, frustrated, and guilty (Woolley, *Queen* 283). The stress also manifests in ways that leaves others at a loss. Arthur

questions why he must replace the horse that Guinevere had always ridden, but because she had been riding that horse on the day of her abduction, “I’d taken one look at the pretty mare and burst into tears. I couldn’t blame her for [Meleagant’s] actions, but neither could I bring myself to ride her again” (*Queen* 289). Guinevere’s reactions are typical of a rape survivor, as understood during the second wave. The theory of rape trauma syndrome was coined in 1974 by Ann Burgess and Lynda Holmstrom, who noted that rape victims experience many of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as numbness, nightmares and intrusive memories, phobias relating to the event of the assault, and other stress-related reactions that Woolley portrays so vividly in the aftermath of Guinevere’s rape.

Lynett

Chapman’s story of Lynett is unique among the feminist Arthurian novels in that the story is an exercise in developing a backstory for a character who is only briefly mentioned in canonical sources of Arthurian legend. Different from approaches to Igraine, Guinevere, and other Arthurian women discussed throughout this paper, the story of Lynett is not reinterpretation, but speculation. Chapman is not rewriting a mythological instance of rape from a woman’s perspective – she is *creating* a rape narrative for the primary purpose of writing about rape. Her motivations for doing this, however, can be viewed as similar to Bradley’s and Woolley’s addition of rape into a story that has not explicitly included it through all of its reinterpretations up to this point. Chapman is writing about rape through the eyes of a rape-survivor because this perspective of rape is not told often enough, but her story is not just about survival – it is also about revenge, incorporating into literature a filmic trend of rape-revenge narratives emerging in the 1970s (Read 3). Lynett experiences many of the same emotions as Guinevere after her abduction, and Chapman would

agree with other feminist authors on the danger of many cultural opinions toward sexual violence. More drastically and with much more intent, however, Chapman challenges popular rhetoric of what a survivor is supposed to look like by taking Lynett on a journey of revenge that ends with forgiveness *not* for the sake of the rapist, but for the sake of her own acceptance of her experiences.

Like most instances of child sexual abuse, Lynett is raped by a trusted friend of her family. Sir Bagdemagus, a friend of her father, becomes a mentor for Lynett, including her on his outings and encouraging her disdain for the confinement of femininity.¹⁷ Lynett “worshipped and adored him, but it never occurred to her that there was anything of sex in her adoration,” not only because she is still practically a child herself, but because she views him as a second father-figure (14). Bagdemagus, like many men trying to justify their violence, claims that he misreads her friendliness and naïveté as an open invitation for a sexual advance, accusing, “You know you’ve been inviting me ever since I set eyes on you” (18). In this moment, Bagdemagus rejects all responsibility for his actions, blaming Lynett for sending mixed signals and distracting her with the guilt of bringing this violence upon herself. Chapman brings this up as a tactic used not only by individual men, but by a society that relies upon victim-blaming to excuse the inherent violence of hegemonic masculinity.

Not only does Lynett suffer from guilt for Bagdemagus’ actions; her inability to comprehend how she could have done anything differently leading up to her rape that would have prevented it leaves her overwhelmed with feelings of helplessness. She admits that “there was indeed nothing she could do but to suffer the shameful violation of her body and the bitter

¹⁷ The use of Bagdemagus as the rapist in this story is really a curious choice. Because the story is original to Chapman, she could have used any number of the rogue knights who become enemies of Camelot, so it would seem that Bagdemagus was an intentional decision. Bagdemagus features primarily in Arthurian literature as Meleagant’s father. In Chrétien’s *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*, when Meleagant brings the abducted Guinevere to his stronghold, Bagdemagus does all in his power to protect Guinevere from the licentious intentions of his son. Why Chapman decides to use a character known for protecting women against rape as her story’s rapist is unclear, but it could perhaps be a subtle comment on the folly of trusting even the most seemingly-well-meaning men.

disillusion of her mind” (19). Unlike Igraine and Guinevere, Lynett has the extra culturally-imposed shame of losing her virginity before marriage, permanently endangering her ability to make an acceptable political alliance through marriage, which is expected to be a noblewoman’s best course of action. At a loss for how to move forward with this “shame” and sense of worthlessness connected to her loss of virginity and lack of ability to stop it, she reacts with suicidal ideations, asking Merlin (who finds her and offers his aid), how he could help her: “Will you show me a cliff I can leap over, or a river I can jump into? Or perhaps you have a poison on you?” (21). While her self-destructiveness diminishes, the lingering effects of her rape continue to haunt her in two ways: the first, in post-traumatic stress that affects her physically and emotionally as a survivor of rape, and second, with the promise of vengeance as the motivation to continue surviving.

Like Woolley, Chapman works to portray the aftermath of rape as realistically as possible by showing Lynett in a variety of situations that inflict post-traumatic emotional distress, even long after the event. Her initial response is to stay in the woods at the site of her rape “for a long time in a stupor of shock and misery,” and is only brought out of her shock by prodding from Merlin (20). Years later, when she is unwillingly married, the thought of consummating the marriage fills her with dread, although she “tried her best not to wince and shrink too perceptibly from the bridesmaids’ playfully rough hands, not to mind when they pinched her cheeks and pulled her hair” (6). Her relationship with her new husband is complicated. On the one hand, she despises him, is angry at having been given in marriage, and worries about having to “endure him” in bed (7). On the other hand, when he does not come to her, all of her insecurities as a result of her violation come out in full force, leaving her feeling “alone, neglected, rejected” (48). Like Guinevere, Lynett is more self-conscious of what others will think of *her* than of what they will

think of what has been done *to* her. This fear is more emphasized in Lynett when juxtaposed with her complete lack of care given to others' opinion of her in all other contexts of her life. In her portrayal of this internal contradiction, Chapman identifies the cultural opinions of rape as more deeply internalized than other societal expectations for women, and therefore less easily overcome.

However, overcoming her trauma is Lynett's ultimate quest, and the only way she can conceive of this happening is through revenge. When Merlin and Arthur present her with the opportunity and the means to confront him, Lynett jumps at the offer, despite the fear that accompanies the prospect of facing him again (60). When the time comes, he does not immediately recognize her, and she revels in the chance to use the sharp tongue she has become notorious for and destroy his reputation to his men:

Knights, listen. This man deceived, betrayed and raped me, when I was a virgin, thirteen years old, and he a guest in my father's house. Cruelly and deceitfully - not by any persuasive seduction, look you, but practising on my innocence - I who trusted him as a father. Oh men and knights, the hardest of you would respect a child, below the age of consent, ignorant of all evil, trusting her father's guest. Not only the treasure of my body he took from me, but the innocence of my mind, the trust and confidence of my heart. As a father I trusted him, as a father, and lo what he did to me... (70)

This development of an acid tongue is in direct response to the physical powerlessness she experiences during her rape. It is for her reputation with language that Arthur invites her to be his diplomat in the first place, and with the personal and political gains she is able to make with it, she is able to claim power for herself where it had been taken away. In this dramatic confrontation with Bagdemagus, she turns the tables on him as much as she is able to, manipulating others' opinions of him and leaving him helpless to stop her in such a public setting. Finally, when the knights in her entourage arrive and her forces are able to overpower his, she responds to Bagdemagus' pleas for mercy with the same ruthlessness he showed her. He tells her that what he

did was out of love, and she replies, “Call that love? Your beastly appetite, that was all... All right, kill him” (82). By being given the decision to kill him or not, Lynett takes his life in her hands just as surely as her life was in his hands when he raped her; even though he did not kill her, his actions severely dampened her quality of life, replacing any joy with constant psychological duress. Killing her rapist may seem like a severe punishment to some, but in order for Chapman to continue Lynett’s story as she does, it is necessary for Lynett to take the action she did.

Having completed her quest, Lynett’s emotional reaction to the death of Bagdemagus is different than how she thought it would be, and she discovers that there is more left in her journey of recovery. After killing him, “she wondered – should she not feel like Judith of old? She had avenged her virginity, and removed her King’s enemy... Her personal quest, her own long-desired revenge, was accomplished, and she ought to find it sweet. And yet...” (84). The rest of Lynett’s story is where Chapman offers a compromise between forgiveness-as-expected and vengeance-as-subversive as two paths taken by rape-survivors. As examined in the next chapter, Lynett embarks on the Quest for the Holy Grail and succeeds because she is determined pure of spirit by the Divine. So, when Lynett compares her actions to those of the biblical Judith, this serves to further confirm her spiritual competency as she prepares to embark on the Quest. Chapman is making it clear that the killing of Bagdemagus is within the realm of morally acceptable actions, and is not shaming Lynett for her desire for vengeance. Instead, Chapman is working to address the issue at two different levels. In the first, Chapman is not necessarily critiquing rape survivors’ *desire* for revenge, but more the effectiveness of that revenge on a structural level. Killing one rapist may offer instant gratification, but it does not dismantle rape culture, it does not affect the behavior of other men, and it does not end the danger for the survivor. Second, Chapman is digging deeper into the complex emotional state of a rape survivor, suggesting that, for all the reasons mentioned

above, eliminating a single threat does not necessitate emotional improvement on an individual level, and that, to fully heal, work needs to be done on the self and not just the external.

Self-work for Lynett comes in the form of forgiveness. She tells Bagdemagus' animate head, "I forgive you," and "from the minute she had forgiven Bagdemagus, she had a sense of being set free" (108; 110). This is why it is so important that Lynett kills Bagdemagus before forgiving him – if she had forgiven him and spared his life, the moral of the story would be entirely different. As it is, giving forgiveness *after* his death ensures that Lynett is giving the forgiveness *for her own sake*, not for his. In this way, Chapman is able to incorporate forgiveness into a victim-centered approach to survivorship, satisfying both psychotherapeutic theories recommending forgiveness as a means of healing *and* a feminist centering of the needs of the self (Fitzgibbons; Brownmiller). Forgiveness, as Lynett gives it, is not excusing Bagdemagus' actions, but accepting that the violence done to her body is something that no action of hers will be able to change, and that she must learn to live with her experience. The proof of her healing mind appears when she first encounters the man she eventually falls in love with. Contrary to her experience of dread when thinking about physical contact with her undesired husband before the confrontation with Bagdemagus, when this new man rescues her from drowning, "She lay still, though trembling, and it seemed to her, very strangely, that she felt no revulsion or fear at so close a contact with this man's body. Rather did she feel confidence and safety" (112). Confidence and safety are two feelings she had not been able to regain even on her own, before, so for her to find them now in the close presence with a man – not *because* of the man, but in spite of him – shows her true individual growth on her journey towards recovery.

All of these women show that sexual violence is not the end of a woman's life, and that meaningful relationships can be built after rape. Whether their strongest bonds are with men or

other women; whether their romances are stifling or fulfilling; whether their responses to trauma are repression or revenge, Arthurian women experience a realistic range of interpersonal relationships, made possible by feminist Arthurian authors' attention to and interaction with second wave women's stories and theories of love and power.

Chapter 3. *Witch*

“Now shall I tell you for what cause I hate them: for they be sorceresses and enchanter many of them, and be a knight never so good of his body and full of prowess as man may be, they will make him a stark coward to have the better of him...”

– Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*

“I’m a witch... Didn’t you know?”

– Morgan to Arthur, Joan Wolf, *The Road to Avalon*

In 1979, Margot Adler’s *Drawing Down the Moon* strived to bring the Goddess to mainstream audiences, serving as both an overview of contemporary worship and inspiration for a feminist revival of Goddess-worship. At that time, and in the generation since then, many women have embraced the idea of the Divine Feminine, drawing from “ancient goddesses or the Great Goddess of prehistory” and combining what is known of the old with a “contemporary feminist self-understanding” (Yates 70). Goddess-worship (also commonly referred to as paganism and Witchcraft, although distinctions can be made between those) was “spearheaded” by the women’s movement of the 1970-80s, and was embodied in a multitude of ways (Gadon 230).¹⁸ The appearance of the Goddess in Arthurian literature seems to be a recent phenomenon that has been heavily influenced by the popularization of Celtic Reconstructionism in the 1970-80s.¹⁹ Many

¹⁸ Goddess-worship can be used as a catch-all term that encompasses a variety of non-Abrahamic religions. Paganism is more specific, often referring to New Age or Reconstructionist religions (including Celtic, Viking/Norse, Greek/Roman, etc.) that have their own pantheon of goddesses and gods. Witchcraft, or Wicca, is a branch of paganism dedicated to Balance and Harmony in Nature. Mainstream Wicca recognizes equality between the Lady and Lord, but Dianic Wicca is strongly related to second wave radical feminism, and is exclusive to women and the Goddess.

¹⁹ While the term “Celtic Reconstructionism” (CR) was not specifically coined until 1992, the “founders” of the movement explain that they drew from Adler’s phrase “Pagan Reconstructionism” in *Drawing Down the Moon* to define their goals. The CR movement is a response to NeoDruidism, Wicca, and other “eclectic” New Age religious movements, and seeks to use historical and archeological evidence of pre-Christian Celtic religious practices to understand lost practices and faith, rather than the romanticization of mythology found in NeoDruidism (NicDhàna). Because of its rejection of eclecticism and its strong emphasis on Celtic identity and culture, CR as a movement does not fall into the trap of cultural appropriation that is present in Wicca and many other New Age spiritual practices. This is to say that CR is generally the approach taken to representing non-Christian religion(s) in these books, not to say that these authors identified with CR – Bradley herself was a Dianic Wiccan, a contentious practice that is one culprit responsible for the violent appropriation of Native and other cultures (as explained by Andrea Smith in her essay “Spiritual Appropriation as Sexual Violence”).

theologians of the New Age movement have pressed for an acknowledgement of Witches as legitimate practitioners of Wicca, making “witchcraft” synonymous with many forms of paganism that include Goddess-worship. Therefore, because characters such as Morgan and Nimue have come to us in the legends as sorceresses, reclaiming ancient witches as priestesses of the Goddess seems a natural character progression. Besides the presence of witches in the legends, Gilbert and Gubar explain the literary significance of women writing witches: “To mention witches, however, is to be reminded once again of the traditional (patriarchally defined) associations between creative women and monsters. In projecting their anger and dis-ease into dreadful figures, creating dark doubles for themselves and their heroines, women writers are both identifying with and revising the self-definitions patriarchal culture has imposed on them” (79). By drawing from Celtic Reconstructionism and the resurgence of Goddess-worship, authors of feminist Arthuriana are able to introduce the Divine Feminine into their interpretations and rewrite witches as priestesses, recreating religious practices that not only justify the acts of the women portrayed as antagonists to Camelot, but also offer an outlet for protagonist women to experience their own power through embracing sacred femininity without reducing them to the trope of the villainous witch.

Worship

With the emergence of the Goddess, Arthurian women who had been historically accused of witchcraft are able to find empowerment through their places as spiritual leaders of the people of Britain, revered for their powers instead of feared. Years after leaving Avalon, Bradley’s Morgan is inspired by a lover to regain her priestess powers; “I rose...and raised my hands above my head, bringing them down slowly, my eyes closed, my breath held in the tension of power...and only when I heard him gasp in awe did I venture to open my eyes” (588). When Woolley’s Morgan

assumes the position of Lady of the Lake, a young Guinevere notices that there “was much speculation about Morgan le Fey. That she could command such power when she was not yet past thirty was impressive... she was a fine healer, and gave promise of becoming a strong spiritual leader as well” (*Child* 209). As queen, Guinevere experiences Morgan’s power firsthand, noting that her “voice was pure magic, swooping and soaring on the air around us, reaching from the heights of heaven to the depths of earth as she called forth the Mother” (*Guinevere* 175). Here, Guinevere is acknowledging Morgan’s authority as the spiritual leader of the Goddess whom they both worship, and their relationship in regards to their faith and practice is relatively unstrained. The benign nature of this encounter is significant in examining Morgan’s relationship with Guinevere in other parts of this story. Even though Woolley’s Morgan is portrayed as a foil to Guinevere, she is so because of the choices she makes that are distinct from her spiritual power or possession of magical abilities. Giving the spiritual attributes of power, talent in a vocation, and leadership to Morgan offers her a position of respect and authority in which she can choose to use those powers as she will, rather than being trapped in the inherent evilness that has plagued the characterization of sorceress-Morgan for centuries.²⁰ Morgan entertains a status in her society that gives her access any number of paths she could take; that she *chooses* to antagonize Guinevere, and that the reader can understand her reasons (or is, at least, made aware of them), portrays Morgan as wicked *and* as possessing magical powers, without resorting to sorcery as the cause of her wickedness.

An integral part of spiritual leadership for these women is direct association or communication with the Goddess. Woolley’s Igraine, when speaking of the conception of Arthur,

²⁰ Geoffrey of Monmouth first identify her as having magical and healing abilities, and both Geoffrey and Chrétien write her benevolently. The devolution of her status begins in the Vulgate Cycle, and is solidified in her role as wicked witch in the subsequent works of the prose *Tristan*, the Post-Vulgate, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

tells Guinevere that, “It was a night when I was the Goddess incarnate,” and she means it literally, not metaphorically (*Queen* 22). In her book *The Once and Future Goddess* (the title of which is, coincidentally, an Arthurian reference), Eleanor W. Gadon explains that the internalization of the Goddess is “essential,” otherwise women “will be prey to self-doubt and disempowerment” (261). As explained in the previous chapter, the night of Arthur’s conception has potentially negative emotional effects for Igraine; for her to have internalized the Divine in that moment allows for her to find empowerment in the face of trauma. In *Mists*, an original character of Bradley’s who is a priestess of Avalon finds her voice exclusively through Divine possession. Raven is isolated from her peers and Morgan often considers the difficulties she has endured through her vows of silence, but when she speaks in prophecy, she is given the authority of the Goddess Herself (167). In both of these scenarios, these characters are placed into positions that women in real life are often forced into: romantic relationships with harmful power imbalances and a sense of actual or perceived voicelessness. However, both women find empowerment through their identification with a Divinity whose femininity they find both relatable and awe-inspiring. While this empowerment may seem limited or reaching when compared to the power of women such as the Lady or other spiritual leaders, because such high-ranking positions of power for women were anomalous, many women had to be content with what little power they could construe in their restrictive situations.

Even women whose relationship with the Goddess is more devotional than communicatory find power in their faith. While personal Divine-identification was an important step for women in the Goddess movement, Gadon also notes that women were encouraged to go beyond the personal, to look at each other in sisterly solidarity and find the Goddess in everywoman (261). In a rare moment of happiness between missed opportunities for pregnancy, Woolley’s Guinevere celebrates May Day with her ladies, and says of it: “It was a beautiful celebration, calling forth

the deep, thrilling unity of womankind, and when I dropped to the greensward my ladies-in-waiting showered me with clusters of mayflowers plucked from the tree” (*Queen* 256). In her shared faith, she finds the connection with these women that has been hindered by her position as queen and by her jealousy over their fertility in the face of her barrenness, a connection that could have and should have flourished were it not for Meleagant’s interruption into this scene. Although she does not enjoy a connection with the other women around her, Chapman’s Sibyl experiences cross-generational connections with her foremothers, explaining to Lynett that, “There has always been a woman here who tends the shrine within the cave, and keeps the words and the secrets, and never lets the power of the White One be forgotten” (124). The use of a Divine Feminine as a power around which women can orient themselves in solidarity harkens strongly to the goals of the Goddess movement.

The Goddess movement was a way for women to see themselves represented in their spirituality, for women to center themselves and their experiences of womanhood as aspects of the Divine. Drawing from the ideas that representation of women in popular media provided unrealistic models of femininity, Chapman creates a visual representation of the Goddess that more accurately portrays the realities of womanhood. Lynett is taken aback when she first sees the statue. Because she has been raised to reject femininity and womanhood, she describes it from the perspective of someone who is struggling to overcome internalized misogyny, self-consciousness, and self-hate:

A vast stalagmite had formed itself, perhaps aided by men’s hands, into the shape of a woman - ‘naked like a beast’ was the thought that occurred to Lynett. A naked woman, but with no beauty to clothe her nakedness. The breasts and genitals were grossly, crudely exaggerated. The woman was old, flesh-fallen, hideous. The face, if there were face at all, was turned away. The lewd, sagging shape gleamed ghostly in the torchlight. (119)

She is repulsed by the image just as she is repulsed by her own body (which she sees as ugly), but the Sibyl chastises her, explaining that the ancient ones who formed her “saw her thus - the breasts that nourish, the gates of birth through which we all must pass. Do you think they knew aught of comeliness or seemliness?” (Chapman 131). Feminist Mary Daly similarly celebrates this view of women. She might as well be describing the White One herself when she explains, “Our foresisters were the Great Hags whom the institutionally powerful but privately impotent patriarchs found too threatening for coexistence... Hag is also defined as ‘ugly or evil-looking old woman.’ But this, considering the source, may be considered a compliment. For the beauty of strong, creative women is ‘ugly’ by misogynistic standards of ‘beauty’ ” (Daly 14-15). In this moment, the Sibyl is telling not only Lynett, but also the women readers, that true celebration of womanhood is not in appearances that are painstakingly maintained for the gaze of the world, but in the power of women as mothers and life-givers. In line with the biological essentialism and cisnormativity that was rampant in the Goddess movement that assumes that every woman is able to and should want to bear children, this message nevertheless encourages women to disregard externally-imposed arbitrary expectations of beauty standards and focus more on the power that comes from within.

However, a religious movement that *centers* women is not the same as a religion *for* women, and the separatism that existed in the more radical feminist-inclined factions of the Goddess movement is not accepted by all authors as an ideal strategy for women’s spiritual empowerment. While interaction with the White One of *Damosel* is exclusively for women, for “no man may see her and live,” the Sibyl teaches her male ward “to see her inwardly,” declaring that even if the rituals are only for women, the Goddess is for all (Chapman 130). Woolley’s Morgan, too, thinks that rituals are for women but the Goddess is for all. A druid who has left Avalon and Morgan’s influence explains to Guinevere that

At the Sanctuary all prayers are directed to the Great Mother...not only are the male Gods no longer honored, their names are never spoken aloud. As a consequence men are no longer included in the ceremonies. Morgan claims that in the old times only the Priestess and her nine acolytes were accepted as holy, and she's determined to reinstate that regime. (*Guinevere* 169)

Indeed, it seems that Woolley is not concerned with disguising her disdain for an exclusively-female spirituality in what could easily be read as a direct response to Bradley's Avalon.²¹ She goes further, apparently aware of the ideological ties between the religious and the sociopolitical radical feminist separatist movements, when Guinevere observes that Morgan's acolytes' "greatest virtues seemed to lie in adoring Morgan and hating men" (*Guinevere* 372). In this clear jab at feminist separatist communities, Woolley is implying her political allegiance with a liberal feminist politics that seeks equality and a balance between women and men, rather than a role-reversal of women dominating men.²² For both Chapman and Woolley, it seems that empowerment has its limitations, which directly coincide with the potential for the disempowerment of men, which they see as undesirable. For Bradley, however, if women are associated with the Goddess, men and masculinity are inextricably linked to Christianity, and it is this gender-based power struggle that produces the primary conflict in *Mists*.

Religious conflict

Medieval authors declare Arthur as an unequivocally Christian king, but the reality of the fifth century saw a Britain in religious turmoil as the "Old Religion" – the worship and practices

²¹ We know, from Woolley's own prefaces and endnotes, that she had read and critically engaged with *Mists* while writing her novels, and purposefully distanced herself from Bradley's use of "high fantasy" and her portrayal of spiritual magic. Because of this, and because of Bradley's obvious pro-Goddess-worship agenda throughout her work, it is not difficult to imagine that Woolley is responding with Bradley in mind.

²² As opposed to Bradley, who was a founding member of Darkmoon Circle, a women's-only Wicca coven, which inspired the Goddess-worship in *Mists*.

of the Isles before the Roman occupation – strived to stay relevant with the increasing popularity of Christianity, the “New Religion.” In her dissertation on religious representations in Arthurian legends, Tomaselli notes that contemporary Arthurian authors “try to flesh out the problem” of religious conflict where it had been overlooked by their medieval inspirations (Tomaselli 76). This conflict is inherently gendered. Kate Millet claims, “Patriarchal religion could consolidate this position by the creation of a male God or gods, demoting, discrediting, or eliminating goddesses and constructing a theology whose basic postulates are male supremacist, and one of whose central functions is to uphold and validate the patriarchal structure” (340). Historical arguments for the conflict gave feminist authors an opportunity to utilize the clash as a site for institutional resistance and adherence to the rigid gender roles of medieval Christianity. To portray not only powerful women, but all followers of the Divine Feminine, fighting to reject but ultimately succumbing to Christianity’s patriarchal regime shows how the religious disempowerment of women influences their sociopolitical status. With the rise of the Goddess movement, women of the second wave were challenging the masculine-dominated religious authority, for, as Goldenberg claims in her book on the cultural reemergence of the Goddess, “a culture that maintains a masculine image for its highest divinity cannot allow its women to experience themselves as equals of its men,” and therefore, “Jesus Christ cannot symbolize the liberation of women” (22; see also Fuog 75). While these women were not the first to challenge the Church’s masculinity, they were the first to offer a women-centric alternative with successful widespread popularity. Most of the feminist Arthurian literature posits Arthur’s generation as the last to have any experience with Goddess-worship, depicting Christianity overwhelming Britain during the latter half of Arthur’s reign. In writing so, these authors portray women’s lives as they struggle with the rapid disintegration of their rights

and status, but also as they seek out individual, subversive practices that allow them to peacefully assimilate into a violently patriarchal religion.

The work of Christian authorities to drive out paganism automatically casts them as an antagonistic force in the books where the main protagonist finds empowerment through the Goddess. Bradley's Morgan tells the reader, as she introduces herself as the storyteller, "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" (ix). Even Woolley's Guinevere, who attempts to maintain religious neutrality on a political level, states, "It was the Roman Christians I found distasteful, with their belief that all other gods were evil and their followers blasphemers. The very notion sent a chill down my spine" (*Guinevere* 54). But while militant monotheism is the face of the priests' regime, these authors do not disregard the misogynist intentions behind their quest to save the souls of Britain. Because Goddess-worship in these novels allows women to feel individually empowered *and* hold significant influence in the name of their Goddess, Christian adherents seek to discredit the Feminine both mundane and Divine. The Archbishop in *Mists* preaches that "the women of Avalon are evil sorceresses or harpies," and the priests in *Child* call the Goddess' rituals "grotesque" (Bradley 219; Woolley, *Child* 394). The Sibyl states it directly as she sees it: "[T]here are men who have hated her... But women should not be afraid of her," (Chapman 131). She is hated by men because of the threat She poses, or rather, the threat She empowers Her worshipers to pose, to patriarchal Christianity, and women should embrace this potential in order to keep the subordination of women by Christianity at bay.

However, the injustices that occur during the conflict between Christianity and paganism are not one-sided; as Christianity becomes more popular, pagans become more desperate, inflicting their own unyielding ideology on Britain. In their attempt to counter-balance the monotheism of

Christianity, some followers of the Goddess – usually portrayed as radical factions – revert to the same politics of exclusivity for which they had previously condemned the Christians. Bradley, as a practitioner herself, writes a sincere exultation of the Goddess as the supreme, enduring Divine: Igraine’s character finds redemption on her death bed by revealing that her conversion to Christianity was purely political, and telling Guinevere that, “The Goddess is beyond all your other Gods. Religions may come and go, as the Romans found and no doubt the Christians will find after them, but she is beyond them all” (360). Along with recognizing the Goddess above all Others, the pagans appropriate the concern for the souls of humans in order to make their faith more personal and palatable to the British people who are converting to Christianity in droves. Although the priestesses’ belief in reincarnation is evidenced by their connection to their past lives, Vivian, as the Lady of the Lake, fears that “this struggle with Christ will be lost and their souls lie in slavery to a false faith” if Avalon loses power in Camelot and Arthur turns toward Christianity exclusively (470). Because of this contradiction, it is possible that Bradley is using Vivian’s character development to demonstrate the political benefits and detriments in a resistance movement of adopting the dominant discourse in order to combat hegemony with hegemony. Because Vivian is portrayed as ruthless and willing to sacrifice herself and others regardless of the cost, she can easily be identified with the more socially unacceptable, fanatical aspects of radical organizing; because she ultimately fails at her goal of keeping Avalon relevant – let alone powerful – in the mortal world, the reader can infer that Bradley, perhaps pessimistically directed at her own radical feminist political communities, finds her strategy ineffective, and therefore undesirable. In the end, dismantling the Church cannot be done with its own dogma.²³

²³ The struggle between liberal reformers and radical dismantlers was alive and well in the second wave, and is reflected in the priestesses’ responses to the Church. Vivian discovers that attempting to use the rules of the Church against it only succeed in strengthening it, and in this way, the Church can stand in place for patriarchal (or any other) domination. See Audre Lorde’s essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” Although this

With a different approach but perhaps similar goals, Woolley does not look upon such religious fervor favorably. In *Queen*, Guinevere is dismayed to hear that Morgan, as Lady of the Lake, is fighting Christians with their own weapons:

Morgan began spinning out dreams and hopes for the future of a unified Britain, much as we do here. But there is one major difference; she wants to see a monarchy powerful enough to dictate that all people worship her Goddess. *All people...Pict and Scot, Roman and Cumbri, the Ancient Ones and the new Germanic immigrants...all people must be made to bow before the Great Mother.* (Woolley, *Queen* 427)

This is a far cry from the Morgan's initial desire for religious coexistence, a sentiment that is echoed by Guinevere. When conceptualizing all-female religious communities and the ways in which religious devotion affects power imbalances, Woolley appears to be the liberal response to Bradley's radical endorsement of all-women communities and rituals. In this regard, however, they are in closer ideological alignment: they assert their beliefs precisely by portraying the negative effects of the alternative. In other words, they might not know what path the Arthurian Goddess-worshippers should have taken to succeed, but Bradley and Woolley do know that the Arthurian women failed (part of the "tyranny of tradition"), and therefore could condemn assimilation or reformist strategies by retroactively putting their characters through these steps and then portraying their demise.

As these characters eventually discover, any resistance to the Church is ultimately futile; in order for them to maintain a sense of dignity, they must resort to subverting the dominant narrative of Christianity to find a place for themselves in it. Because of this, we see women who have peacefully converted from one religion to the other, choosing to submit to and attempt to subvert the harsh demands of Christianity, rather than spend their energy in resistance. Both

was not published until two years after *Mists* was published, there are clear parallels between their what-not-to-do strategies for taking back power from oppressive authority.

Bradley and Woolley write that Igraine retires to a convent after having lived out her life as a pagan, although in both instances it is more out of convenience than religious fervor. Because Woolley's Guinevere is a follower of the Goddess (as opposed to Bradley's, who is a fanatic Christian), when Igraine speaks to her of the Goddess on her deathbed, it is with a shared sense of sisterhood and an understanding that the two faiths do not need to be mutually exclusive:

There's some things, my dear, which men will never understand - even, or perhaps particularly, men of the cloth. I've seen my peace as regards my Christian life, and expect to see the heaven they tell of soon enough; but it's wise to give credit where it's due, and matters that pertain to the Goddess are best shared with one who follows the Old Ways. (*Queen* 14)

In addition to Christian conversion without the animosity or condemnation of paganism that the Church preaches, readers also see spiritual leaders who combine the two seemingly-oppositional faiths into one. The teachings of Avalon assure that "all the Gods are one God...and all the Goddesses are one Goddess, and there is only one Initiator," and the Sybil of the White One guards the shrine of "the Mother of All... from the Beginning, next to the Father," who "keeps us all in life, under the Father's power" (Bradley x-xi; Chapman 120). Woolley writes this peace from both perspectives: Guinevere, a pagan, embraces this coexistence, and "include[s] the White Christ's mother as well" in her prayers; her dear friend Brigit, a devout Christian, agrees that, "What the White Christ doesn't look out for, His Mother will" (*Queen* 248; *Guinevere* 462). The relationship between Guinevere and Brigit is exemplary of the ideal coexistence between Goddess-worship and Christianity. When a Roman Christian woman refers to the Lady of the Lake and her followers as "heathen aberrations," Brigit scolds her, saying, "One can be Pagan without being either the Devil or unclean. Look at Her Highness, for instance... Would you say she is a direct relative of the Evil One?" (*Child* 453). As the name of a Celtic goddess and also a Catholic saint, it is significant that a woman who acknowledges both faiths as valid is named Brigit. In the epilogue of *Mists*, Morgan

also meets a Brigit, although in her Divine form. When visiting the convent on Glastonbury, Morgan finds the Christian nuns giving offerings at a statue of Saint Brigit. She has a revelation, then, that the Goddess will carry on without the presence of Avalon in the world, and that, “even if they think otherwise, these women know the power of the Immortal. Exile her as they may, she will prevail. The Goddess will never withdraw herself from mankind” (Bradley 875). This sentiment remains true today, where the Virgin Mary “has a legitimate base of power in the human psyche. Behind her sanitized figure lurk all the great pagan goddesses of the ancient world” (Goldenberg 75). Although Bradley and Woolley do insist that the Church is an oppressive patriarchal institution, they – along with Chapman – understand it is often necessary for women to make what feminist scholar Deniz Kandiyoti called “patriarchal bargains,” or women’s need to “strategize within a set of concrete constraints” in order to survive (275). By showing women who are able to coexist across religions, these authors are encouraging readers who are unfulfilled by Christianity but have been socialized into a Christian culture to find or make space in their faith for feminist subversion.

Grail women

As literary evidence for the potential to celebrate femininity under a patriarchal religious regime, there is room for the holiness of women within the restrictions of Arthurian Christianity in the form of the Grail Maiden. The legendary Holy Grail was popularized by Arthurian legends of the knights’ quests for its retrieval. In the legends, the successful knights are led to the Grail Castle, Corbenic, by the Grail Maiden.

In an effort to protect the holy relics of Avalon (which include the Grail) from defilement at the hands of the Christian priests, Bradley’s Morgan channels the Goddess when “she lifted the

cup between her hands, seeing it glow like a great sparkling jewel, a ruby, a living, beating heart pulsing between her hands...she moved toward the bishop and he fell to his knees before her as she whispered, ‘Drink. This is the Holy Presence....’ ” (770-771). The reclamation of Her artifact is perhaps the only spiritual success Morgan has over the Church, given that the Presence in Camelot’s court is credited to the miracles of the Christian God. But regardless of to Whom those who see it attribute the Grail, it is undeniably a woman who embodies the “Holy Presence,” disproving Guinevere’s belief in the Church’s doctrine that “all...women were evil, they had never any chance to be anything but evil” (268). Just before witnessing the miracle of the Grail, Guinevere finally realizes the error in the teachings of the Church, and wonders, “surely not all that is woman can be evil” (774). This train of thought is only strengthened after the Grail, when Guinevere understands that the will of man is not the Will of God, and that she should be free to worship Him as she sees fit. In representing the Divine, Morgan is able to find solace again in the power of her faith, and reassure others that the Divine is not wholly masculine; in seeing the Divine represented by the feminine, Guinevere is able to reject the barriers of the Church that have been placed upon her as a woman, and acknowledge her own worth in God’s eyes.

While Bradley gives Morgan the responsibility of presenting the Grail and instigating the Quest, Woolley gives Guinevere the opportunity to partake in the Quest. In a personal conversation with the Goddess, Guinevere argues that, as Queen, “I can’t just go looking for the Grail because I want to,” to which the Goddess replies, “Of course you can... Haven’t you heard what I said? Do you think you have to have a horse and wildwood to find the Grail?” (*Guinevere* 315). With the guidance of the Grail Maiden, Amide, it is Galahad who achieves the Quest of discovering the physical Grail and healing the Fisher King; however, as the Goddess explains to Guinevere, the Grail is more than a cup – it is the sense of true spiritual fulfillment. By the time she returns to her

position as Queen (after her escape from the pyre with Lancelot), she realizes the Goddess' meaning: "As Camelot's hill came into view, a great wave of gladness surged through me. I had found my Grail, both within and without, and knew how blessedly lucky we were" (Woolley, *Guinevere* 466). According to most Grail legends, Galahad is able to achieve the Grail due to his purity of body, mind, and spirit, and must die (and presumably ascend to Heaven) for his achievement.²⁴ Guinevere's experience of spiritual fulfillment through the mundane is noteworthy for two reasons: it redefines spiritual fulfillment by placing it with the joy of life rather than the transcendence of life, and it challenges patriarchal ideals of perfection as synonymous with chastity. That Guinevere, in all her flaws, is able to attain the Grail makes spiritual fulfillment a possibility for all women.

Chapman works even more to dismantle the "requirements" for achieving the Grail. Lynett not only acts as the Grail Maiden, offering the Grail to Galahad and the other knights; she also achieves the Quest by healing the Fisher King and taking advantage of the Grail's wish-granting capabilities for her personal life. Merlin first shows Lynett her potential in a vision, in which, "she saw the figure of a woman coming out of a door, as in some other place, and she carried in her hands that holy cup, but covered with a white cloth. She came pacing slowly forward, her eyes on the thing she carried, and then she lifted her face for a moment, and Lynett saw it was her own face" (53). Having been indoctrinated into the Church's definition of holiness, Lynett doubts her qualifications, and angrily tells Merlin, "That is work for – a virgin – a woman of virtue... I've lost my virtue and you know it," to which Merlin advises her, "[S]ome people seem to have taught you that there is only one virtue, at least for a woman, and that is chastity. Or virginity, which is

²⁴ In her book *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, Pauline Maud Matarasso writes, "Of Galahad it has been alleged that he is a cardboard saint, that his austere virtue excludes humanity" (Matarasso 17). The inhumanness of Galahad's traditional portrayal stands here in stark juxtaposition to Guinevere's very human fallibility.

not always the same. Believe me, there are other virtues” (54). Here, Merlin attempts to direct Lynett away from the Church’s influence and toward an understanding of her worth that is based on her own actions, rather than on the status of her “innocence” after violence was perpetrated against her. Despite his assurances, her view of her self-worth remains vulnerable to the patriarchal dictates of others, and when she asks the knights if she may search for the Grail with them, although two of the four agree that she may, she fixates only on the response that a woman could only join the Quest if she were a virgin (90). It is not until the Sibyl chastises her for believing them that she realizes that her worth is not found in her loss of virginity (146). She discovers the truth of her potential, and achieves the Grail before Galahad, succeeding in a way that he legendarily does not in that she lives after the achievement to enjoy the blessing that the Grail has bestowed upon her, similarly to Woolley’s Guinevere.

Although it is not virginity that is holding Lynett back from the Quest, there are still personal barriers that she must overcome. Merlin informs her that she must, indeed, be virtuous, and the Sibyl explains that her “great sin was that of being unforgiving, and that is repented, and absolved, and forgotten” (139). In this way, Chapman tells women that their virtue lies in internal practices that are for the benefit of the self, and not in externally-imposed patriarchal expectations for women. Lynett’s “sin” is in being unforgiving, which she overcomes through forgiveness; in doing so, Chapman gives women permission to forgive their own flaws, arguing that “virtuous” is not a static state of being, but one that defies rigid, Christian definitions and fluctuates over the course of women’s lives. Although these authors show their identification with the Divine Feminine through their protagonists, not all of their characters are able to do the same; however, Chapman, Woolley, and Bradley all portray female characters with realistic, mortal shortcomings

who can access Divinity in a Christian context, showing a convergence of mundane and Divine femininity through the feminist subversion of Christianity.

Religious influence

Despite attempts at unifying the kingdom under religious neutrality, women do not experience the same restrictions on power spiritually that they do politically; therefore, many Arthurian women attain their greatest political influence through religious means. As noted Arthurian scholar Maureen Fries observes, where once “the heroine Guinevere, the female hero Lunette and the female counter-hero Morgan le Fay” held political sway in their own right, a shift in “puritanical ideas that matured from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries” demoted these women from their roles as politicians (Fries 68). Rather than place these women on equal standing with men and attempt to convince today’s readers that these women existed in pre-patriarchal conditions, feminist Arthurian authors expand and develop the same power that has been afforded to queens for centuries – that of subtle, behind-the-scenes influence, often possible through religious or spiritual connections. Guinevere, Lynett, and Morgan, among others, all hold different positions in relation to Arthur, but each use their spiritual power to influence his politics, providing examples of non-traditional methods of influence and manipulation that are more accessible to women than overt positions of authority.

Guinevere, a queen by blood and by marriage, comes to her power through bonds of nobility rather than religious fervor, and so has the least amount of spiritual authority of all the politically powerful Arthurian women. Woolley’s Guinevere acknowledges this not as a disadvantage, but as a more natural way of distributing power, when she comments on Morgan’s role of both Queen of Northumbria and her newly-given title as Lady of the Lake: “I nodded

silently, wondering what a queen would do with the powers normally reserved for a religious leader. It seemed an unholy combination of interests, and not one I was easy with” (*Child* 152). Alternatively, Bradley’s Guinevere takes advantage of every opportunity to use the teachings of the Church, and her interpretations of them, to persuade (and often guilt) Arthur into certain political decisions. The most significant example of this is her emotional manipulation of Arthur that results in him recognizing the Christian God above all others, a move which leads to not only turning his back on many of his people, but also actively rejecting the powerful aid of Avalon. As Karen Fuog notes in her work on *Mists*, Guinevere is relying on “Arthur’s love for her” to achieve her goals (Fuog 84). More than his emotions, however, Guinevere appeals to his piety, arguing that, “God has punished us because he feels we are not fit to give this kingdom another king, you and I, unless we will vow ourselves to serve him faithfully, not in pagan ways but in the new way under Christ” (Bradley 392). The bishop may approve, but the idea is entirely Guinevere’s, demonstrating women’s ability to use men’s competition for authority to their own advantage.

The woman who bears the title Lady of the Lake or Lady of Avalon is no queen, but is often considered to have comparable sociopolitical powers to a queen, even to the High Queen, which she exercises independently of the gendered duties that other queens face, such as political marriages and child-bearing. Although this power manifests in mundane ways, it is often rooted in magic or mysticism. Unique among feminist Arthurian authors, Newman’s Lady is not a mortal woman, but an otherworldly being:

The Lady had no name that she knew of, no childhood, no family. She had lived with her retinue within the Lake for thousands of years, so many that she had forgotten the order of the humans and others who had arrived, passed by, and gone on. For the most part, she didn’t care. She knew that she and her followers were immortal. (*Chessboard* loc 301)

Her immortality and her general apathy towards mortals does not, however, stop her from ensuring that her ward, Lancelot, is instated as the best knight of Arthur's court, a decision which obviously drastically affects the fate of Camelot. On the other end of the magical spectrum, Wolf's Morgan, who becomes known as the Lady of Avalon, gains fame "throughout Britain for her healing arts," and even though she is perfectly mortal and scoffs at even the mention of magic, she is accused of sorcery for her successes with healing (155). While these women have completely different attitudes toward magic, their association with magic enables them to rule independently and relatively unquestioned. This rule relies on the talent and resources to survive as self-sufficiently as any client king, which allows them the ability to influence the politics of Camelot just as a lesser king or a knight may.

That the Lady is afforded more power than arguably any other woman in Arthur's Britain is not usually lost on anyone, least of all the Lady herself, whose ambition affects many of the major events in Camelot. Of Bradley's Avalon, Fuog states, "Living apart from the world but still active in it, the priestesses of Avalon seek not only to be self-sufficient, but also to influence the rest of the world" (83). When Uther is king and the Church does not yet have the power it will gain under Arthur, Bradley's Lady is able to manipulate the king into giving her what she wants. She is able to do this even though he is aware that he is being manipulated, proving that her power is legitimate and recognizable and not the underhanded power most women must utilize (129). This observation is true of every representation of the Lady, who isolates herself while maintaining enough contact with the court that she stays relevant. Even from the beginning of Arthur's reign in *Child*, Morgan as the Lady uses her role as spiritual leader and her relationship as Arthur's sister to influence events in her favor. Lamenting the long-standing animosity between her and Morgan, Guinevere recognizes Morgan's ambition as the cause of her hatred:

Personal power, political power, religious power - these were the spurs that goaded her on, the hunger she couldn't satisfy, the treasure she plotted for. I thought it sad and ironic, for as the High Priestess she had long since been acknowledged as one of the most powerful women in the country. Yet nothing seemed enough. (Woolley, *Guinevere* 431)

Of all the Ladies, Woolley's is the most self-serving, and for this reason, is portrayed in the worst light. But despite this less-than sympathetic portrayal, rather than act as a cautionary tale for women who are power-hungry, Morgan is able to use her cunning to succeed, in her own mind, in her goal of becoming High Queen. While Woolley may not argue that this is true "success," and that Guinevere may lose the crown but gains a more important sense of peace, she does not depict any negative repercussions for Morgan's bid for the crown, and the unfamiliar reader can assume that the book ends with Morgan succeeding Arthur after his death.²⁵ With Morgan's ruthless political win, Woolley is not condemning her strategy, only challenging her motives when compared to Guinevere's self-sacrificing abdication of her title and power.

The Lady is both associated with magic and politically influential – these two attributes are sometimes seen as related in suspicious ways, and many Arthurian women are accused of using their power to magically affect politics, whether or not the woman is actually capable of magic. Women whose independent power is obtained solely by magic is an unfortunate trend that comes from early renditions of Arthurian legends, because, as explained above, roles in religious leadership and/or magic were viewed by Arthurian men as the only legitimate ways for women to gain political power. Because of this, many accusations of magical influence are accurate, even if magic has no malicious intent. Fuog explains the extent to which women in *Mists* rely on magic in regards to the workings of Camelot:

²⁵ Those readers familiar with the legend, however, know that Camelot all but fell to the Saxons after Arthur's defeat at Camlann, and that Morgan, who spirited the fatally-wounded Arthur away to Avalon, was not knowingly seen again.

Viviane, Morgaine, and Niniane all fulfill the role of Lady of the Lake – interpreter of the will of the Goddess on earth. Nimue, too, would have fulfilled this role had she lived. Raven holds the gift of the Goddess’s prophecy and speaks only for her. Morgause is the dark aspect of the Mother, the Sow who eats her Young. These women use their sexuality and knowledge of magic to manipulate political events. (Fuog 82)

As Fuog shows, these are the only tools available to Arthurian women, many of whom put them to use generously. When Woolley’s Morgan invites the young Guinevere to her school, her messenger asks, “What better way to ensure success for the coming generations than to reestablish the School and send our young royalty to study at the Sanctuary of the Lady?” (*Child* 36). She does not hide her motivation for acquiring all the royal youth – she intends that “every leader of the future will be versed in the secret ways of the Goddess’ knowledge,” and is allowed to proudly acknowledge her intent to indoctrinate the nobility into her religious ideology only because, at the time, she enjoys royal favor (*Child* 36). To be sure, when she falls out of favor with Arthur, despite her successes with the teachings of many other young rulers, her school fails. Guinevere seems to be the only woman who does not possess magical abilities with which to rule, but that does not protect her from suspicion. When Newman’s Guinevere is abducted by Meleagant, he is “intimidated” and “puzzled” by her, and because of her ability to “exert an influence on those around her,” he concludes that the only possibility is that she “must be a witch, a sorceress, enchanting all who came within her sphere of influence” (*Chessboard* loc 2500-2511). Justifiably, Guinevere, who is not only innocent of magic but also a devout Christian, is hurt by his accusations, having had only harmful encounters with witches prior to this incident. By labeling her a “witch,” Meleagant reduces her political competency to that of trickery, refusing to entertain the notion that she is capable of making sincere personal relationships with her people and her peers. Here, the use of the label “witch” as a gendered insult rather than as an accurate recognition

of magical power gets at the heart of the importance of the Goddess movement and the call for women to reclaim “witch” for themselves as an empowering label.

Wicked witches

Although these authors worked to transform the witches they were given into more empowering embodiments of magic and power, they cannot altogether escape the witch. Bradley’s Vivian knows what is at risk for women with magic in a Christian court. While she, of course, recognizes young Morgan’s power spiritual gift from the Goddess, she warns Uther, “The girl has the Sight; she was born to it. There’s no way she can escape the Unseen, it will follow her wherever she goes, and in playing about with such things, she’ll come to be shunned for a witch, and despised” (128). When Chapman’s Sybil is introduced, she is known as the “Servant of the White One,” but while she is sometimes called the “Witch of the Cave,” she, like Bradley’s Vivian explains to Uther about Morgan, is in truth “no witch” (118). This is where we see a clear distinction between a priestess or religious leader and a “witch”: in the Sybil’s case, that distinction has little to do with the power the Sybil can access as a priestess to her goddess, and more with the public perception of *how* she wields such power – that is, benignly. This is in direct contrast to the villains: “three women, withdrawn into the back of the church, who looked too much like witches to be there – the three sisters, Morgan le Fay, Vivian called Nimue, and the Queen of Orkney” (Chapman 5). Isolated and “looking” like witches (Chapman allows the reader to interpret what a “witch” might look like), Lynett knows that they have no place among the common, good folk, and her distrust of them is eventually justified.

To understand the power of “witch” as a derogative, readers must be familiar with the history of witches and witch-hunts. In her book *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches*, revolutionary

feminist Marianne Hester writes of the witch-hunts of Early Modern England, arguing that they were used as a “means controlling women socially within a male supremacist society, using violence of the threat of violence, and relying on a particular construct of female sexuality” (108). More recently, but describing a phenomenon that second wave Goddess revivalists would no doubt have known, Sarah Sahagian observes, “For thousands of years, the witch label in mainstream society has functioned as a gendered slur reserved for women who, through their extraordinary abilities or their defiance of traditional gender roles, have been perceived as enemies to the male-dominated order.” The extreme and undeniably gender-based violence historically committed against women under the guise of eradicating “witchcraft” should not be ignored, but these authors demonstrate various levels of engagement with this history. Although all of the feminist Arthurian authors resort to the idea of an antagonistic witch, the situations in which they employ this word vary; all use it as a slur to denigrate women of magical power, but the different sources of the accusation imply that some of these authors recognize the history of the word as a patriarchal tool to deny women access to education and to eradicate women who defied Church-imposed gender roles and thought and worked independently of men.

The most violent instance of “witch” as a slur used by a Christian fanatic is the murder of Vivian by Balin. This scene is almost identical in Woolley’s and Bradley’s versions. Woolley’s Guinevere is not present for the murder, but hears secondhand how, “[g]rasping the pommel of the Sword, he lifted it from the Priestess’ palms with the blade still flat, and with one great swing cut off her head,” raving as he is restrained that, “She was a witch, a foul fiend” (*Child* 184). In Bradley’s tale, the reader gets more context for the animosity: when Vivian is unable to save Balin’s mother, in his anger, he calls the Goddess a “fiend” and cries out, “Murderess! Foul murderess! Father! Father, here’s murder and evil sorcery-!... Murder! Treachery, sorcery-! Foul,

murdering witch-!” (342). His hatred cannot be attributed only to his grief, however, because much later, when he sees her in court, his reaction is the same. We see her murder through Morgan’s perspective, as she watches “Balin rise in his place and rush forward... then there was a scuffle and a cry, and she heard her own scream as the great axe came whirling down. But she did not see the blow, only Viviane’s white hair suddenly red with blood as she crumpled and fell without even a cry” (498). The collective grief and the condemnation of Balin that occurs after both of these murders clearly portray Balin as a villain and his motives as fanatical and unrepresentative of others of the same faith. More than that, though, the language used in these representations show the gender-based nature of this crime, as Balin’s accusations of murder quickly devolve into the derogation of Vivian as a priestess and “witch,” the nature of which has little to do with Balin’s mother’s death and more to do with the precedent of those under that label to be widely accepted as evil and easily targeted as scapegoats.

More ambiguously wicked are the characters of Morgan and Morgause. Because they are most commonly portrayed as sisters, the plot lines of Morgan and Morgause tend to overlap in literature, each given credit for the different acts in various versions. Because of this, feminist authors often portray them working together, both in a display of sisterly solidarity and in order to more efficiently blend their plots. Newman shows them together frequently, meeting in Morgan’s castle and plotting against Arthur. It was together that they “discovered the possibilities of magic and deception,” and it is together that they use their powers for malicious ends (*Chessboard* loc 1436). Their motivation is revenge for their mother’s rape and their father’s murder at Uther’s hands. In their plans to reveal Guinevere’s infidelity, Morgause tells Morgan: “I think it’s time that our dear brother, Arthur, got a taste of what his father gave ours. Do you think that a cuckold’s horns will sit any better on him?” (*Chessboard* loc 3960). By revealing a motive inspired by a

justifiable desire for vengeance, Newman may be attempting to allow the reader to identify with them, but that sympathy disappears when they actively disregard Mordred's serial rape and torture of female servants in their house. More likely, Newman is falling prey to the trap of presenting these women who are antagonistic to her main character as evil, and the easiest way to categorize an evil and magically-powerful woman is as a witch. It is the joint efforts of Morgan and Morgause that Woolley's Arthur fears, with good reason. He tells Guinevere, "Believe me, it was a relief to have Urien sue for peace, as I was loath to make both my sisters widows one day. I don't need two women versed in the black arts plotting against me; one is quite sufficient," referring to his current alliance with Morgan in spite of Morgause's animosity (*Child* 358). In both of these scenarios, a witch alone is dangerous, but witches working together is a serious threat. However, despite their cooperation, underestimating the threat they each pose individually is a devastating mistake for Camelot.

Morgan enjoys more literary notoriety as the arch-nemesis of the Round Table than her sister, and is therefore depicted more often when a villain is called for. In *Damosel*, Lynett has an unfortunate encounter with Morgan that could just as easily have ended well, if Lynett had agreed to Morgan's request. The meeting begins with Morgan reassuring Lynett that "we are all kinsfolk," relying on their tenuous marital ties to establish a common ground (Chapman 98). To draw Lynett into granting her request, she appeals to Lynett's desperation to be seen as worthy compared to her beautiful, rich, happily married sister, and argues that Arthur is failing in satisfactorily compensating her. Morgan tells her, "I could do better for you than this. I also need a messenger. I would reward you well, with gold and houses and lands," but when Lynett refuses, Morgan's generosity turns sour, and she makes it clear that their good relationship is not based on their shared kin, as previously suggested, but on the condition of Morgan getting what she wants: "I am sorry

then...for I cannot be your friend as I should have wished (100-101). If showing animosity toward Arthur was not enough, Morgan then manipulates Lynett into agreeing to never forgive her rapist, taking advantage of Lynett's emotionally-charged secret and tricking Lynett into shaking her hand, which pulls her out of the glamour and into the waiting hands of her enemies (102). This scene gives the reader a ruthless Morgan who preys on people's vulnerabilities to get her way and reacts vindictively when her demands are not met. But even when Morgan is not cruel and cares deeply for Arthur, her circumstances sometimes require her to work against his best interests. Wolf gives us a Morgan who loves Arthur more than anyone, but even she keeps Mordred a secret from him and lies to keep that secret "at all costs" (Wolf 168). Shortly after she has lied, he questions her on how she could know the secrets of some unrelated topic, and she responds, "I'm a witch... Didn't you know?" (Wolf 168). The reply is tongue-in-cheek, for Morgan does not believe in magic, but the proximity of her lies to her self-deprecation suggests that the act of deceit and the label of witch are somehow associated in her mind. The tradition of Arthur and the Table being thwarted in some way by Morgan the sorceress is so strong that Morgan cannot even escape the trope as a protagonist. Far from trapping Morgan into perpetual villainy, the inevitability of her deceit shows that she is flawed, and that regardless of her intentions, she is allowed to make mistakes and does not alternatively fall into the trap of innocent, ideal womanhood.

Morgause, on the other hand, is consistently portrayed with power that is matched only by her ambition for herself and her sons. Both Newman and Woolley have Gawain discuss her with Guinevere, calling her a "sorceress" and relaying how she "cursed [him]" (Newman, *Guinevere* loc 2305; Woolley, *Queen* 208). This description of witchcraft does not only come from her sons, though. Newman's Merlin calls her a "witch," and Woolley's Leodegrance refers to her as "a real wildcat, full of black powers and terrible rages" (Newman, *Chessboard* loc 4221; Woolley, *Child*

171). Leodegrance also comments on her animosity toward Arthur. Bradley has Morgause use magic to divine that Arthur is the father of Mordred – a thrilling find, as she believes that, “It is just as well to know some evil secret of a king” (250). Wolf’s Morgause, too, enjoys this secret, for, “It puts him under an obligation to me, and it is not a bad thing to have the high king under an obligation to one. (Wolf 318). Similar to Guinevere’s use of guilt to encourage men’s political cooperation in *Mists*, Morgause understands that her greatest source of power is the influence she holds over the men in recognized positions of authority. It is Bradley’s Morgause who makes the connection between this power and witchcraft: “As for me, I am ambitious; Lot seeks my counsel, and all goes well in our land. The priests are very sour about me and say I do not keep my place as befits a woman - no doubt they think I am some kind of evil sorceress or witch, because I do not sit modestly at my spinning and weaving” (212). One of Bradley’s cleverest characters, Morgause is hyper-aware of her political situation as sister to the High King (and therefore mother to the heir, so long as Guinevere remains barren), and every decision she makes is with deliberate attention to potential benefits to her and hers.

The final witch, “Vivian called Nimue,” is popularized by legend as the downfall of Merlin. Seducing, ensorcelling, and entombing alive (in a tree or a cave), Nimue has often filled the trope of sexuality that is overwhelming and inescapable, inextricably linked to witchcraft. Feminist Arthurian authors took many liberties with this legend, and besides Chapman’s passing mention of her engagement with Merlin, all of these authors portray Nimue as innocent of any accusations of foul play in regards to Merlin. In *Queen*, Guinevere first hears the rumor on the street: “I’ll wager she tricked that daft old man into giving her all his secrets, then got rid of him” (Woolley, *Queen* 214). Woolley’s Nimue, who is a close friend of Guinevere’s, declares the rumors to be wholly false, and Guinevere accepts this as truth, and even goes so far as to embrace her as Merlin’s

prodigy and a worthy replacement in court. Wolf's Morgan, too, is confronted by the rumor from Uther and Igraine, who "insisted that Nimue was an enchantress, to have seduced [Merlin] into marriage," but she refuses to believe it (22). Both of these women, when presented with claims of other women's promiscuity and sorcery, do not accept these claims as truth at face value, either because they decide to wait until they can hear the story first-hand or from a more reliable source, or because they use their own rational thinking to decide that what they know of Nimue's character does not suggest her guilt in this. To show women who hesitate to condemn other women and engage critically with gossip is vital to the praxis of female solidarity in the face of patriarchal expectations of competitiveness among women.

Even in the two scenarios in which there is a seduction, the motives and outcomes are contrary to the depiction of a wicked Nimue seducing/enchanting a helpless Merlin. In *Chessboard*, Nimue is one of the immortals in the Lady's retinue, and after an unsuccessful attempt to seduce Lancelot at the command of the Lady, she encounters Merlin in the woods. Upset by rejection but also aware of her sexual appeal, she opens her gown and asks him, "If I had come to you and offered you this...would you throw me on the ground and yell at me?" (Newman, *Chessboard* loc 2191). After the initial seduction, however, which is not premeditated and is done with no intent to steal Merlin's powers, Nimue and Merlin fall in love, and when Nimue takes Merlin away from Camelot, it is only so that they can be together forever in a parallel universe. Bradley's Nimue likewise begins as a pawn, a seductress by order of the Lady, but her target is indeed Merlin, that she "should be the instrument of the traitor's punishment" (763). Here, Nimue also falls in love with Merlin, but far from a happy ending, when Merlin is put to death, Nimue commits suicide. In both cases, Nimue's power and sexuality are being controlled by outside forces, and she herself is not guilty of malicious intent, either with the seducing or the enchanting.

The reclamation of Nimue as lover and/or victim in place of witch complicates the relationship between her and Merlin, and dispels the myth of inescapable sexuality. It confers some of the responsibility of the attraction onto Merlin, who is several years her senior and should not be able to escape the relationship claiming naïveté, and allows Nimue to retain some of the youthful innocence to which she is entitled.

By understanding witches as they relate to second wave Goddess-worship, and by examining the patriarchal derogation of witches through a social *and* a religious lens, feminist Arthurian authors find new roles for witches outside of villains, and find ways to expand villains beyond two-dimensional, wholly Evil women.

Conclusion

“So I smile, knowing the truth of it, loving the humans at the heart of the myth. Yes, it was magnificent, and no, it was never easy...yet, still in all...I’d do it all over again, tomorrow.”
 – closing line of *Guinevere: the Legend in Autumn*

The effects of these novels lingers today. *Mists* continues to be one of the most well-known contemporary adaptations of Arthurian legends, and three of these works have inspired films. But in the twenty-two years since Persia Woolley’s final book was published, there have been two opposing trends: the rise of interest in Arthurian legends, and the fall of a nation-wide feminist movement. Hundreds of Arthurian reinterpretations have been written in two decades – “no fewer than forty books on Arthurian themes were published in the United States in the year 2000 alone,” (Mathis 140). Only a handful of these have been written by women through the perspectives of female characters. Of those few, most of them have followed feminism on its path away from institutional criticism and towards post-feminism. As Angela McRobbie explains in her book *The Aftermath of Feminism*, post-feminism looks like this:

Elements of feminism have been taken into account, and have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life. Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice,’ these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism. (1)

What does this mean for Arthuriana? The tyranny of tradition still reigns. Guinevere is still queen. Morgan is still a witch. Authors are still competing for the freshest story, the most creative spin – but that spin no longer includes the feminist politics that have been declared outdated and irrelevant to women today.

Persia Woolley’s final book was published in the last days of the second wave feminist movement. It was also published the same year I was born. Like Guinevere pining for the days

before the Romans, I am pulled back by nostalgia to an era I never knew. This is not to disregard the problems of the second wave – nothing is perfect, and in many ways, feminism has come a long way. Feminist Arthurian authors were isolated in their originality, forced to invent a completely new genre in the face of a literary tradition and a larger society telling them that the stories of women were not good enough, were not worth listening to, let alone writing. They had no mothers to think back through, yet they forged ahead anyway. The current generation of women writing Arthuriana is not lacking in feminist role models. But, like their foremothers, they are a product of their society, and it is not their fault that their only experience with a women's movement is with no more than a *woman's* movement – singular, individualized, just as isolated as women writers ever were before the birth and death of sisterhood.

Why do I bring back feminist texts that were written thirty years, forty years, half a century ago? For the same reason that I write about legends from a millennium and a half ago. They have not lost their relevance: there is more we can learn from them, more we can teach with them, and, moving forward, more generations of women who can find in them meaning and purpose for their own lives. Arthur may be the Once and Future King, but it is our job to ensure that the women in his stories return with him.

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