A Harlot at Camelot

Female Power and Sexuality in The Mists of Avalon

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INTRODUCTION

*The Mists of Avalon* is not the first contemporary novel written based on the tales of King Arthur. It is, however, the first best-selling story with solely female focalizers, which makes it a notable work. Drawing largely on Sir Thomas Malory's *work Le Morte D'Arthur*, it tells the tale of Arthur's rise and fall through the eyes of his sister Morgan le Fay or Morgaine, as Bradley has chosen to call her. Making Morgan le Fay the main character and focalizer is an unusual move, since she, although she has been portrayed in several different ways throughout history, has always been seen through someone else's eyes. In this regard, *The Mists of Avalon* turns the tables of the traditional narrative, and gives Morgan le Fay - or Morgaine - a personality, and makes her someone whose perspective the reader can understand and relate to.

Bradley's depiction of Morgan le Fay is, ostensibly, a flattering one. As Victoria Sharpe puts it: Morgan is described as an evil seductress, and this characterization continues into the middle twentieth century. Recently, however, Marion Zimmer Bradley has restored Morgan to her original, historically-based character (Sharpe 36), which not only implies that there is actually such a thing as an original, historically-based Morgaine, but also that she is no longer an evil seductress which I will investigate further throughout the essay. Furthermore, what might initially seem like a multi-faceted image of Morgaine may be simpler than one first thinks.

Maureen Fries discusses the ways in which the character of Morgan le Fay has been portrayed throughout history, and she argues that over time, the character changed from being a connector of life with healing, as mistress of Avalon, into a connector of death with illicit sex and wrongful imprisonment (Fries 2). Since Sharpe argues that Bradley has restored Morgaine to her original role as someone with healing powers (Sharpe 36) who is identified as a wise woman (Sharpe 36), it is fitting to question the origin of the character. In Bradley's novel, Morgaine does create the scabbard which prevents Arthur from getting seriously injured in battle - but she also partakes in illicit sex, since she has intercourse with her brother. Morgaine also ultimately throws the scabbard away, and with that her role as the healer. Additionally, her power seems to stem mainly from sensuality evinced in her power over men such as Kevin, Uriens, and Accolon - and herbs, both of which she uses more often to harm than to heal or help regardless of her intentions. Her power over Kevin, which starts out as a mutual friendship and turns into a sexual relationship, ultimately leads him to his death. Her marriage to Uriens is initially a mistake, but turns into a political alliance.
However, she still uses her sexuality in order to get him to trust her with political issues—something which eventually leads him to his death as well. Accolon, her ‘partner in crime’ turned lover turned son-in-law, gives his life for Morgaine’s plan. It is clear that Bradley’s Morgaine is not quite restored to the ‘original’ form of the healer that Sharpe describes.

Using Morgaine as a starting point, this essay focuses on female sexuality in *The Mists of Avalon*. It will include discussions on the objectification of women, the nature of female power, different aspects of the female body, and gender roles. It will cover subjects such as women as wives, mothers, and objects; female sexuality and how it differs from male; and, finally, how the character of Morgaine differs from the rest of the characters in the novel. The point of this essay is to explain how Bradley’s novel is profoundly ambiguous on the subjects of feminism, sisterhood, and female autonomy, as well as female sexuality. It simultaneously advocates for and problematizes a feminist reading, handing the interpretation almost entirely over to the reader.

### 1.1 A Brief Background on the Author

Born in Albany, New York on June 3, 1930, Marion Zimmer Bradley was a writer of science fiction-, fantasy-, and gothic novels until she passed away on September 25, 1999. Her most renowned works are the *Darkover*-series, a collection of twenty science fiction/fantasy books, as well as the best-selling novel *The Mists of Avalon*, which generated a number of sequels. In 1964, Bradley acquired a Bachelor of Arts in English, Spanish, and psychology from Hardin Simmons University in Abilene, Texas, after which she went on to three years of graduate work at the University of California, Berkeley (Biography). Her first novel, *The Door Through Space*, was published in 1961, and within a year, she had had five books published. In total, Bradley wrote approximately 75 novels - many of them published under a different name - as well as established *Marion Zimmer Bradley’s Fantasy Magazine*, which was founded using profits from *The Mists of Avalon* (Oliver).

Bradley’s novel *The Mists of Avalon* is considered to be a feminist work by many, seeing that it is a previously male-dominated story re-written from a female point of view. Jean C. Stine states that the theme of feminism has been present in Bradley’s earlier works as well, referring to ‘an undercurrent of feminism [which] runs throughout the *Darkover* series. Bradley frequently examines sex roles and the limitations they place on the individual’ (Stine). Stine also states that ‘Critics have praised Bradley’s ability to incorporate feminist and utopian ideals into the harsh realism of *Darkover* without diminishing the credibility of the characters or their society’ (Stine). In addition to her interest in feminism
and gender roles, Bradley had a continuing curiosity for the occult, at a point identifying as "neopagan" (Oliver). This can be linked to her thoughts on feminism, since she herself explained that her faith "rejects the Christian belief in man's dominion over the earth" (Oliver) - a view that is reflected in *The Mists of Avalon*.

In 1978, Bradley and her author friend Diana Paxson, founded Darkmoon Circle; a Wiccan organization, exclusively for women who have received an invitation. The circle still exists today, and meets at "the dark of the moon" (Path). The group is also a member of the greater Wiccan organization *Covenant of the Goddess*.

According to Diana L. Paxson, "Marion traveled to the British Isles several times to visit Arthurian sites and do research" (Paxson 880) - trips that made it clear that in order to be true to her vision she would have to abandon history, and instead, tell the truth of legend (Paxson 880). This undermines Sharpe's view that Bradley's depiction of Morgaine would be historically accurate. The same sentence also points out that *The Mists of Avalon* is a work of fiction although also a legend rather than an objective, accurate description of history. The novel definitely had a huge impact on some readers, who seem to have taken the book quite literally; Paxson describes how "women continued to come to Darkmoon Circle looking for the College of Priestesses on Avalon" and that "people began to phone [Bradley] in the middle of the night wanting spiritual counsel" (Paxson 880). *The Mists of Avalon*, then, became an influential work in the context of neopaganism.

### 1.2 Literature Review

*The Mists of Avalon* was first published in 1982, and is a re-telling of the Arthurian legends. A search for the title in the MLA database results in 28 hits, where the earliest is dated to June 1986, and the most recent to the summer of 2015. An additional search for "Morgan le Fay" - who is the main character of Bradley's book - generates 57 results, and another name for the same character, "Morgaine" gives yet another 6 hits.

The first article written on Morgan le Fay was published in 1945, and is named "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses". It was written by Roger Loomis and focuses on Irish myth and folk literature. This aspect of mythology is also brought up in the title "Morgain the Fay and the Lady of the Lake in a Broader Mythological Context" written by Clark Colahan and published many years later in 1991. Between 1945 and 1985, there are fairly few pieces written about Morgan le Fay - seven, to be exact - but after that, something happens. Throughout the 1980s, there are several essays on Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight - probably a result from the film adaptation coming out in 1973, heightening
the interest for this particular piece of literature.

Throughout the 1990s, there seems to be an interest in whether Morgan Le Fay is portrayed as good or evil in literary sources; titles such as Edwin Arlington Robinson’s Morgan Le Fay: Victim or Victimizer? (Cochran, 1991), Morgan Le Fay: Goddess or Witch? (Spivack, 1992), From the Lady to the Tramp: The Decline of Morgan le Fay in Medieval Romance (Fries, 1994), and A Rebel and a Witch: The Historical Context and Ideological Function of Morgan le Fay in Malory’s ‘Le Morte Darthur’ (Saul, 1994) attract attention. Two out of these four name *The Mists of Avalon* as a study example. Bradley’s novel, unsurprisingly, appears numerous times in various essays and articles; since the novel retell the Arthurian legends and myths from a female perspective, the work became original just through the use of female focalizers instead of male ones.

Several of the more recent articles are not so much concerned with whose side Morgan le Fay is on, but rather with how and why the portrayal of her, has evolved. There are titles like Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter (Hebert; 2013), The Lady, the Goddess, and the Text of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Warner; 2014) and ‘Unthinking Stereotype’ to Fearless Antagonist: The Evolution of Morgan le Fay on Television (Mediavilla; 2015) which are examples of this.

When instead searching more specifically for *The Mists of Avalon*, there are several articles focusing on sexuality and romance; titles like Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Subtext: Toward a Theory of Lesbian Narrative Space (Farwell, 1990), The Romantic Shadows of Avalon (Aygun, 1992-1993), Feminism, Homosexuality, and Homophobia in *The Mists of Avalon* (Noble, 1994) and Gender Anxiety in Arthurian Romance (McClain, 1997). There are also, as could be expected, various articles that focus more exclusively on feminism in different ways. This angle is visible in titles such as Dark Sisters and Light Sisters: Sister Doubling and the Search for Sisterhood in *The Mists of Avalon* and The White Raven (Hughes, 1993), Feminism and the Fantasy Tradition: *The Mists of Avalon* (Shaw, 2009), and Re-Visioning Morgan le Fay: A Unifying Metaphor for the Image of Woman in Twentieth Century Literature (Hopson, 1993).

Several articles have common themes with the focus on this essay, which is female sexuality and how Bradley’s view of it has affected the portrayal of Morgaine in *The Mists of Avalon*, where she is painted as a woman with a lot of power who opposes the patriarchal society around her. This focus can be seen in the article Malory’s Morgan le Fay: The Danger of Unrestrained Feminine Power by MaryLynn Saul; although this article focuses on Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* first published in 1485, making it much older text
than Bradley’s novel—it is still useful, especially since Malory’s work inspired *The Mists of Avalon* to a great extent. Saul opens her article with the words: Medieval ideas about witches, who were thought to be primarily women, exhibit a substantial gynophobia (Saul 85), and then goes on to argue that as a witch, Morgan Le Fay gains access to power in several ways. Curiously, in spite of all her powers, Morgan is rarely successful in any of her plots. Nevertheless, she remains a medieval symbol of the potential danger of uncontrolled female power (Saul 85); this fear of female power is a point I want to stress in my essay, because I think this is not only a fear of uncontrolled female power but is also linked to a fear of uncontrolled female sexuality. The connection to sexuality is embedded in figurative language; Saul writes that Morgan controls a castle given to her by Arthur, and rules it as a lord of the castle would (Saul 87-88), and that she seeks power over others to do her bidding, including her lover Accolon and her husband, just as a necromancer would seek power over a demon to do his bidding (Saul 88). The controlling of the castle can be seen as her control over her own body; traditionally, the women are not the rulers of their bodies the same way that men are. The power over her lover and her husband are also closely connected to sexuality.

Another source that has been useful for this essay is Kristina Hildebrand’s doctoral dissertation *The Female Reader at the Round Table: Religion and Women in Three Contemporary Arthurian Texts*—mainly the fourth chapter, which concerns *The Mists of Avalon*. Hildebrand discusses the book’s ambition—to dismantle the patriarchy—and whether or not this works. She has numerous points that are of interest to this essay, concerning patriarchal views of women noticeable in Bradley’s novel, oppositions between Neo-Paganism and Christianity, and how women are portrayed in general in Bradley’s book. Hildebrand calls attention to the fact that in *The Mists of Avalon*, the female reader can identify with Morgaine (Hildebrand 96), meaning that in this version, Morgaine—or Morgan Le Fay—cannot be seen as an unsympathetic villain, which she has been otherwise through a great part of history. When it comes to the sexuality of Morgan Le Fay, Hildebrand gives the example of a scene with Morgaine and Lancelot being intimate. She points out that Morgaine is not as passive as Gwenhywyfar; she makes the choice, forestalled only by circumstances, to ignore her oath (Hildebrand 100). Here is again an example of how Hildebrand’s focus on female reader-response both highlights and problematizes the feminism portrayed in the book; something that is definitely significant for my essay.
1.3 Theory and Definition of Terms

1.3.1 Reader-response theory

Reader-response theory is founded on the belief that a text cannot be seen as simply an object or a thing, so much as an event. This theory maintains that what a text is cannot be separated from what it does (Tyson 170), meaning that the reader is as much a part of the text as the text itself. Although there are several different perspectives within reader-response theory — some argue that the reading is controlled by the text, while others argue it is controlled by the reader — theorists from this field all have two beliefs in common: (1) that the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and (2) that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature (Tyson 170). In other words, the reader creates the meaning of the text as much as the author does; this means that there are as many interpretations of a text as there are people. This also means that it is very much possible to incorporate other theories into the field of reader-response theory. For example, in this essay feminist criticism will be used, which can also be a form of reader-response theory, since it can make the reader understand the patriarchal influences in the reading of a text.

1.3.1.1 Transactional Reader-Response Theory

Out of several different fields within the study of reader-response theory, the one chosen for this particular essay is transactional reader-response theory. As the name suggests, it focuses on the transaction that occurs between the written words on the page and the person reading them; it studies how the text makes the reader respond with feelings and memories. This particular method is often associated with Louise Rosenblatt, who coined a few terms which are often used within this field.

Rosenblatt doesn’t reject the importance of the text in favor of the reader; rather she claims that both are necessary in the production of meaning. She differentiates among the terms text, which refers to the printed words on the page; reader; and poem, which refers to the literary work produced by the text and the reader together. (Tyson 173)

Rosenblatt also describes two different reading modes which are important to differentiate: the efferent and the aesthetic mode. When we read in the efferent mode, we focus on just the information contained in the text, as if it were a storehouse of facts and ideas that we could carry away with us (Tyson 173), whereas if we read in the aesthetic mode, we experience a personal relationship to the text that focuses our attention on the emotional subtleties of its language and encourages us to make judgements (Tyson 173). In other words, as we read in
the aesthetic mode, the text becomes a stimulus – something which the reader responds to and makes sense out of. Hildebrand explains this process as a dialogue, where the reader / narratee's unspoken questions to the text are answered by the character / narrator (Hildebrand 40). In the case of *The Mists of Avalon*, the text requires a significant amount of subjective input from the reader in order to make sense, since the text is ambiguous to a high degree. Hildebrand, specifically bringing the female perspective into view, argues that this form of identification might be particularly accessible to the female reader, due to the position as listener, suggesting passivity and compassion, which society often encourages women to hold (Hildebrand 40). When it comes to *The Mists of Avalon*, it almost seems that the implied reader must be female, since the narrator is so distinctly female and the novel deals with issues that are traditionally gendered as such – for instance marriage, childbirth, and abortion.

The two reading modes can also be connected to two different types of meaning in a text: determinate and indeterminate meaning.

Determinate meaning refers to what might be called the facts of the text, certain events in the plot or physical descriptions clearly provided by the words on the page. In contrast, indeterminate meaning, or indeterminacy, refers to gaps in the text such as actions that are not clearly explained or that seem to have multiple explanations which allow or even invite readers to create their own interpretation. (Tyson 174)

Bradley's novel, as we shall see, has a substantial amount of indeterminate meaning, which leads to the text being deeply equivocal.

### 1.3.2 Female Sexuality

The tendency to view the female body solely in terms of its biological functions – the images of motherhood, reproduction, and sexuality – is very common, and something that has not been applied to men to the same extent. Male bodies can be seen as sexual as well as female – the difference is that the female body is seen as available for men, while the male body is less often seen as available for women (Eduards). Additionally, the idea of motherhood complicates the female body further; the mother and wife cannot also be a sexual being: patriarchal ideology suggests that there are only two identities a woman can have (Tyson 89). This duality relates to the *good* and *bad* girls also referred to as the *Madonna* and the *whore*, and will be further discussed in this essay. Both these roles have to do with male rather than female desire; *bad* girls are sexually forward in appearance or behavior, or they have multiple sexual partners (Tyson 90), while *good* girls are *modest,*
unassuming, self-sacrificing, and nurturing (Tyson 90). Both of these roles are objectified by patriarchal society; like objects, women exist, according to patriarchy, to be used without consideration of their own perspectives, feelings or opinions (Tyson 91).

The ideas of Simone de Beauvoir have also proven useful for this essay, since she discusses the woman’s place as man’s Other, which also plays with a duality although this time the dynamic between women and men, rather than between good and bad women. She describes that this dichotomy of Man - Woman is set up the same way as Sun - Moon or Day - Night, and explains that no group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself (de Beauvoir 26). However, she also points out that no feminine element is involved at the outset (de Beauvoir 26).

Considering the theme of religion running through The Mists of Avalon, Beauvoir’s thoughts on Christianity are also quite relevant to this essay. Beauvoir’s discussion contemplates the effect of religion on gender roles, and especially how the Genesis legend has affected the view of women in the society she currently lived in:

All the creation myths express this conviction that is precious to the male, for example, the Genesis legend, which, through Christianity, has spanned Western civilization. Eve was not formed at the same time as man; she was not made either from a different substance or from the same clay that Adam was modeled from: she was drawn from the first male’s flank. Even her birth was not autonomous; God did not spontaneously choose to create her for herself and to be directly worshipped in turn: he destined her for man; he gave her to Adam to save him from loneliness, her spouse is her origin and her finality; she is his complement in the inessential mode. (de Beauvoir 194-195)

In Bradley’s novel, this discussion is important to bear in mind; Gwenhwyfar sees her role in life as complementing her husband, while Morgaine, whose religion does not draw on the same myth, sees herself as a complete person. We can see, then, that this affects the view of women in the novel quite radically.

If one instead looks at the time during which Mists of Avalon was written, it seems like a breaking down of the dichotomy of good versus bad girls was happening, and so these more current issues regarding gender roles and female sexuality should affect the way the novel was written.

The recognition among feminists, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, that the personal is political brought into public discourse a host of concerns previously muffled, or at least confined to talk among friends. Prominent among these was the question of
women’s sexuality. Breaking the silence of a subject long taboo, such discussion led to the affirmation that women are in fact sexual subjects who are capable of fashioning their own sexual arrangements as they see fit, and not simply the passive objects of male desire. (Stein and Press 205)

This discussion is not completely unproblematic, however; rape, pornography and sexual violence are still very real threats to women, and focusing the dialogue on these subjects might lead to a “marginalization of notions of female pleasure” (Stein and Press 205). The goal of breaking down the “Madonna versus whore” images also failed to an extent. A split occurred between sex-positive libertines and anti-porn activists, and the idea that “females must be beautiful, sweet, and young if they are to be worthy of romantic admiration” (Tyson 89) lives on. The issue of breaking the silence on female sexuality and undermining the view that women are “passive objects of male desire,” while still being shamed—publicly and privately—for doing this, is a struggle clearly seen in Bradley’s novel.

Following the 1970s, the 1980s—the time during which The Mists of Avalon was written—came ideas of separatism. Some feminists wanted to create a “women’s culture” as an alternative to patriarchal society; this stemmed from the belief that male culture was too stained with power and violence to be repaired (Stein and Press). In Bradley’s novel, Avalon might be seen as an attempt to achieve this, considering that no men are allowed to live on the island, and very few may visit. Reading the novel this way, it is more about trying to create a “sisterhood” rather than achieving equality in a shared society. However, this idea implies that there is in fact a polarization between male and female sexuality. Paraphrased and quoted in Stein and Press’s text, Alice Echols argues that this polarization “has led to a highly prescriptive notion of what constitutes politically correct sexual practice for women and has fostered, paradoxically, women’s sexual repression” (Stein and Press 207).
2 Analysis

2.1 Women Defined by Relationships

In the opening lines of The Mists of Avalon, Morgaine presents herself: “In my time I have been called many things: sister, lover, priestess, wise-woman, queen (Bradley ix). In almost all these descriptions, she is defined by her relationship to someone else: to her brother, to a lover, to a convent or to Avalon, or to a king. The only exception to this rule is wise-woman, which is a title acquired through knowledge; the definition of wise-woman is A woman considered to be knowledgeable in matters such as herbal healing, magic charms, or other traditional lore (Dictionary). This will to define, in particular, women through their relationships to others is a clear theme; Morgaine acquires much of her status and identity through family relations—she meets Viviane and gains a place in Avalon because they are relatives, she is welcomed at Arthur court because she is his sister, and she is married to Uriens because she is of royal blood from Igraine. This notion has been pointed out before, for example with the words: Morgan is defined in terms of her affiliation to various male characters, rather than as a self-substantiated person. Her relationships with Uryens and Arthur define Morgan’s position in the society (Reid 53). Although this refers to Malory’s Le Morte DArthur, is still applies to The Mists of Avalon.

Arthur, too, is initially defined by his relationship to others - in this case, Morgaine: Arthur my brother, my lover, king who was and king who shall be (Bradley ix). An important distinction to make, however, is that these are Morgaine’s personal thoughts; while she thinks of Arthur through their relationship as siblings and lovers, women are defined as mothers or wives throughout history in general, as well as in the novel he is not reduced to his role as a brother or lover in general, but is also High King in his own right even though this is also due to his lineage. Simone de Beauvoir explains that

Undoubtedly, there are stylized images of man as he is in his relations with woman: father, seducer, husband, the jealous one, the good son, the bad son; but men are the ones who have established them, and they have not attained the dignity of myth; they are barely more than clichés, while woman is exclusively defined in her relation to man. (de Beauvoir 196)

As Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo puts it: Women may be important, powerful, and influential, but it seems that, relative to men of their age and social status, women everywhere lack generally recognized and culturally valued authority (Rosaldo, Lamphere and Bamberger 17). There is also a visible difference between a king and a queen in Bradley’s
novel, since a king does not need a queen by his side to rule, while a queen cannot be regent in her own right without a king. This might stem from the view that male, as opposed to female, activities are always recognized as predominantly important, and cultural systems give authority and value to the roles and activities of men (Rosaldo, Lamphere and Bamberger 19). Beauvoir expresses the same view, and adds a discussion of why this is: 

This comes from being considered not positively, as she [the woman] is for herself, but negatively, such as she appears to man (de Beauvoir 197) — she famously places woman as man’s Other.

Examples of women being defined solely through their relationships reach from descriptions of new characters entering the story, such as Drusilla, daughter of one of the petty kings to the east (Bradley 304), to direct address, as in the invitation Come and sit with us, my sister (Bradley 292), as well as an argument for certain behavior: As your husband’s mother it is suitable that I should dress you for your wedding, since your own mother cannot be here to make you ready on this day (Bradley 276). The last example is perhaps the most problematic, since it puts and expectation on women to behave a certain way towards certain people depending on their blood relations. Mark Piper states that TMGS [Traditional Male Gender Socialization] implies that women ought to assimilate their value systems, social expectations, and behaviors to traditional forms of masculinity (Piper 274), further stressing that women are often expected to conform to certain social standards and behaviors.

2.2 WOMEN AND THE OBLIGATION TO CARE FOR OTHERS

In the first few pages, the reader is informed that Every lady must learn to spin (Bradley 5). It is safe to make the assumption that this is not because it is a pleasurable activity, considering how much the majority of women complain about it throughout the book — it is interesting also to note here that the spinning is associated with female magic, and has a negative connotation. Rather, it seems to be expected that women learn this particular skill because this is what is expected of them as mothers and wives: they need to be able to make clothes for their children and husbands. Women are raised to take care of those who cannot take care of themselves — and this very much includes men. I use the word raised since this is a question of social construction rather than biological innateness. According to Mark Piper, being a woman is not necessarily associated with the traditional way of conceiving it as a matter of being care oriented and the like. Rather, being a woman can take many different forms, some of which are considerable departures from traditional notions of femininity.
The female reader will recognize this unsaid alternative in Piper’s quote, and realize that there is more to any woman than can be summed up in the stereotype of being a woman. The reader of *The Mists of Avalon* is also supposed to agree with Piper in this sense, and object to women being reduced to mothers or whores in a point that Bradley’s novel at first seems to support, but later undermines. *The Mists of Avalon* takes place in a society where women are indeed caught in these notions of femininity, and the female characters in the novel are obliged to care for the male ones. For example, Morgaine describes when Arthur came to her “as a dying man in need of the Mother’s aid, where all men come at last” (Bradley x). This implies a one-way relationship where men need women, but women do not need men. The question then becomes why it is so important for women to learn to take care of someone they do not need.

Tyson describes this expectation that women care for “whichever members of the family cannot care for themselves as well as for healthy male family members” (Tyson 99), and suggests that the consequence - whether intended or not - is that women are deprived of their sense of their individuality as well as of their independence and autonomy (Tyson 99). The connection between putting other people first and losing power over oneself is undeniably a problem in *The Mists of Avalon*; perhaps the most evident example is Gwenhwyfar, who makes it her life’s mission to please the kingdom through bearing Arthur a son. In her case, it is not even caring for her family that makes her put herself aside - it is her duty towards the kingdom, as well as her Christianity and piety. Although the reader most likely sides more with Arthur, who expresses at several occasions that “I would rather have you [Gwenhwyfar] than another woman who could have given me a dozen sons already” (Bradley 546), Gwenhwyfar’s opinions cannot be entirely neglected as uninfluential on the reader - she is, after all, High Queen and a woman with power. Considering this from a transactional reading perspective, the ambiguity in the text becomes more obvious. Reading this in what Rosenblatt calls the efferent mode, there is the conflict between Gwenhwyfar and Arthur as to whether or not it is a woman’s life mission to bear children, whereas in the aesthetic mode the reader includes previous statements and descriptions of Gwenhwyfar and realizes that we are supposed to side with Arthur.

Gwenhwyfar, being an example of the patriarchal “good girl,” feels that “those women who have sons think ever they are the betters of any woman who is barren” (Bradley 546). Here it is not then even an issue of pleasing one’s husband or other family members, but instead an issue of what other women might think, making it a more extensive problem than just men oppressing women – also called internalized sexism, a term that refers to women's
incorporation of sexist practices, and to the circulation of those practices among women, even in the absence of men (Bearman, Korobov and Thorne 11). Additionally, this shows that there is also a social expectation on women, indicating that it is women, and not men, who have the primary responsibility for raising children; this fact seems to make it unlikely that women will be a society’s hunters, warriors, or the like (Rosaldo, Lamphere and Bamberger 18). The view of women as mothers and primary caring parents then affects the structure of society as a whole—something the reader will also recognize in The Mists of Avalon. The poem—which the reader and the text create together—then shapes a view of a world that is much like the one we live in today, at least in the aspects that have to do with the view of women. In fact, when the reader is involved in the understanding of a text, it is impossible for that interpretation to be completely separate from our society today, since the reader will inevitably make sense out of the past using his or her own experiences of the modern society.

As can be seen above, women’s main function is to have children. In fact, they appear not to be complete as women unless they do. This is possibly most evident in Gwenhwyfar, who repeatedly convinces herself that her life lacks meaning until she can have children, and that Arthur will surely leave her for another woman because she is infertile. What is instead shown through Morgaine is that when women do have children, they are not free to do what they want with them: after going through a sexual ritual with Arthur without knowing who he is she becomes pregnant, and although she has her mind set on abortion, she is talked into acting otherwise. After a woman in the Fairy Country has warned her to “Think twice, Morgaine, before you refuse what the Goddess sent you from the King Stag” (Bradley 225), and Viviane has told her that “The royal blood of Avalon is not to be cast aside” (Bradley 228), she ultimately keeps it; not just because it is her child, but because it is doubly royal. Although Morgaine gives up the care for her son Mordred, this is still an example of how women are forced to become mothers and care for their children. Susan Moller Okins discusses how “nothing in our natures dictates that men should not be equal participants in the rearing of their children” (Okin 5), but that in spite of this, women are primarily responsible for it (Okin 5). This is problematic, Okin argues, since “[u]ntil there is justice within the family, women will not be able to gain equality in politics, at work, or in any other sphere” (Okin 4). And so, Bradley’s novel fails to achieve the feminist agenda it strives for; even though this is, supposedly, a feminist text, women are yet to be presented with a story where equality, when it comes to the rearing of children, has been achieved.

Miriam Johnson further discusses the two most prominent roles for women: mother and wife. She argues that “Women as wives tend to be relatively powerless compared
to women as mothers (Johnson 127), and goes on to explain how “Mother implies women’s power over children, wife implies men’s power over women” (Johnson 127). This is an interesting difference to point out, since it calls attention to the power relations in the family, which are then transferred to society as a whole. However, it is important to stress the fact that when it comes to the issue of caring, women are still obliged to put their family members’ needs in front of their own.

The complication of women putting men first is also visible in The Mists of Avalon; the only character who does not do this is Morgause, but she is painted as, if not a villain, then at least a problematic character which ultimately seals the fate of both Arthur’s kingdom and Avalon. Tyson explains this:

[É ] women’s allegiance to men from their own social class, race, or religion always supersedes their allegiance to women from different classes, races, or religions. In fact, women’s allegiance to men also supersedes their allegiance to women from their own class, race, or religion. (Tyson 97)

This is made very clear as Morgaine, with whom the reader is supposed to side through the story, comforts her mother and thinks back on her childhood:

Morgaine stroked her mother’s arm, but she felt impatient; always, always, ever since she could remember, her mother had had no thought for her children, only for Uther, UtherÉ Even now when he was dead and lay in his grave, her mother would push her and Arthur aside for the memory of the man she had loved enough to make her forget everything else (Bradley 209)

This quote is also proof of the expectation that women should put everyone else’s needs in front of their own; Igraine’s choice to care for Uther is criticized by her daughter Í she is expected to live for other people, and constantly put them first.

The prioritization of men over women is something that only happens outside of Avalon - probably mainly because there are no men at Avalon - but the de-prioritizing of women’s individual wishes is evident even on this feminist island, shown clearly when Morgaine is convinced to keep her child even though she does not want to, as discussed above.

2.3 Women as Objects and Possessions

The reader also learns, first through Igraine, that women are mainly considered to be objects rather than actual individuals in Bradley’s world, and that they are not supposed
to take action in their own lives. The most telling example might be when Igraine speaks to Viviane, and reminds her that "it was you who decreed that I must marry Gorlois." (Bradley 5); while the novel supposedly advocates women's rights, it is still expected that the women on Avalon lay down their lives for the Goddess in order to reach a higher goal, making them pieces on a chess board, vessels for a plan.

Susan E. Murray draws a parallel between women, as objects or possessions, and castles during the Middle Ages, stating that "castles were an integral part of medieval society having both practical and metaphoric significance: they were [a] symbol of the lord's power." (Murray 17). She also points out that "both lady and castle are usually possessions of the lord." (Murray 18). Even though she only applies her theories to medieval texts, the legacy of this view of women and castles is present even in Bradley's novel. The idea that Morgaine legally owns Tintagel but does not use it, and instead chooses to live at Arthur's court for a long time, is therefore significant to the story: she has integrity and power over her existence since neither she nor her castle belongs to a lord, but she chooses not to take advantage of this.

Additionally, Murray points out that "when a woman is the sole proprietor of the castle, a weak or corrupt society is usually evidenced within." (Murray 18), which is also the case with Morgaine's Tintagel; since she is not there to reign, a man called Marcus - described as "old and peevish." (Bradley 660) - starts ruling there. The other occasion of a female ruling a castle is Morgause, who, after Lot's death rules alone in Orkney, and it could be argue that this is an example of female independence and successful rulership. However, there is manipulation going on inside the castle, in Morgause's relationship with Morgaine's son. Her ambitions to seize even more power than she already has make her use manipulation to create Mordred, and brings down Arthur's kingdom.

After leaving Avalon, Morgaine decides to stay unmarried for a long time, which causes rumors and concerns from other people. The discomfort with a woman who does not settle, which arises in Arthur's court, probably stems from the idea, which is prevalent at this time, that women's most important task in life is to bear children to their husbands - preferably sons. However, since the reader is expected to side with Morgaine, this instead becomes a critique of the dominant idea that unmarried women are somehow unnatural - until Morgaine eventually gives in and gets married. It is also interesting to note that Morgaine is under the impression that she chooses her husband; however, since Arthur is referring to the father of the man Morgaine is currently involved with, Morgaine, like her mother, ends up being married to a man she did not choose - something that again
undermines the independence of the female characters in the novel. This idea that women should always be controlled by a man makes the problem of adultery a pressing issue of the time; Igraine thinks, at one point: “these Romans made a great matter of worrying over who lay with their women, and locked them up and spied on them” (Bradley 7). Igraine herself, however, is clearly oblivious to why adultery would be considered interesting to some: ‘one man was bad enough, who would want others who might be worse?’ (Bradley 7). This not only says something about male possessiveness and jealousy, but also about disregard for female pleasure, as well as Igraine’s experience as a wife. It also relates to Okin’s argument that ‘gender-structured marriage makes women vulnerable’ (Okin 5); it keeps women suppressed, and giving them tasks like cooking, sewing, and caring for children, makes the image of women as submissive and sympathetic a self-fulfilling prophecy.

One could argue that Igraine’s values shift throughout the story, and that she becomes a subject rather than an object when she meets Uther, falls in love, and marries him, since she chooses her husband herself the second time around. The novel is quite ambiguous as to what stance the reader is supposed to take on this issue; on the one hand, Igraine believes it to be her own choice to marry Uther, but Morgaine seems to find Igraine enchanted. Since the reader is assumed to side with Igraine in the beginning and then shift to Morgaine, the moral of the text is noticeably confusing on this question. The series of events which lead up to this point make it less believable, though. It is Viviane who has told Igraine that she needs to marry and have a son with Uther, and the love both Uther and Igraine feel for each other could, arguably, be an effect of spells that Viviane and Taliesin weave - something that occurs to Igraine as well: “Uther’s eyes, fixed on her, haunted her thoughts. How he had stared at her - no; not at her, at the moonstone. Had the Merlin enchanted it somehow so that Uther should be smitten with the woman who bore it?” (Bradley 40-41). This makes Igraine’s falling in love seem less of a choice, and more the fulfillment of someone else’s wish. What is also equally important to point out is this again makes her an object, a vehicle of a phallocentric political power that takes advantage of women.

A similar storyline is seen in the relationship between Kevin and Nimue, wherein Nimue casts various spells on Kevin, but is trapped in her own net. She realizes that “this bond I am forging is a double-edged sword, a rope with two ends” - I will desire him as well, I cannot prevent that” (Bradley 787), and similarly, seeing that attraction can be manufactured by spells and charms, the love between Uther and Igraine could be a result of Viviane’s magic. As we can see throughout all of these arguments, Bradley does not offer her
readers the radical, feminist world and independent female characters a reader might have wished for.

2.4 Women as Manipulative and Using Power Underhandedly

Zofia Reid argues that in many depictions, Morgan is only able to wield power over the man as long as the knight remains unaware of being manipulated by her woman. Once this is discovered, the heart turns against her and she once again becomes the villain. (Reid 57), which would explain why Viviane is seen as a villain by many people at Arthur's court. Morgaine also considers Viviane as such at some points in the story, such as when she runs away from Avalon; you have worked upon me and played with me like a puppet for the last time! [É] I will no longer be your toy and plaything (Bradley 228-229). This would also explain the previously mentioned relationship between Kevin and Nimue; as long as he is in her power, he does anything she asks: Get to your horse and ride. He rose, his movements leaden. He turned toward the horse and she knew that with this spell she must be precise. Garb yourself first, she said (Bradley 798). When her spells break, and he sees her for what she truly is and has done, he, naturally, changes his mind about her: She [Nimue] looked at Kevin, but he did not meet her eyes (Bradley 799). This, again, questions the freedom of love, and whether or not the characters in the story actually choose their partners.

When the young Morgaine meets Viviane the Lady of the Lake and Igraine's sister and agrees to follow her to Avalon in order to become a priestess and serve the Goddess, she needs the consent from Igraine's current husband, Uther Pendragon, High King of Britain. When Viviane talks to him in order to persuade him that this is the right decision, she says: [Morgaine] not for the convent or the church bell (Bradley 128). Three things are worth noting concerning this conversation. The first is that the conversation takes place at all and therefore proves the lack of power that women have over their lives. Secondly, that it occurs not between Morgaine whose future it concerns and Uther, but instead Viviane and Uther. The third thing to be pointed out is that the only two choices a woman has, according to the Christian world view, are either to go to a convent or to marry. In both these cases, she will spend her life behind walls, unable to lead her own life based on her thoughts, values, and feelings. In both these cases, she is also unable to make decisions concerning her sexuality; in a convent, the only lover she is allowed to have is God, whereas in a marriage, her only partner is her husband whom she most likely did not choose herself. Morgaine claims that this fear of female power and sexuality came with Christianity: At
best, [the Christian priests] say that [the Mother Goddess’s] power was of Satan. Or else they clothe her in the blue robe of the Lady of Nazareth who indeed had power in her way, too ņ and say that she was ever virgin (Bradley ix). Avalon is then supposed to be the third option, a place where a woman can make her own decisions and choose her own lovers. The question is if it is that simple. As Reid puts it:

Morgaine’s determination to be in charge of her sexuality fails time and time again. Not even in the world of Avalon is she able to determine for herself and is unwittingly manipulated by Viviane, the Lady of the Lake, into an act, which spells disaster to her peace of mind and shapes the rest of her life. [É ] The well-being of a woman is once again disregarded, and the greater good is of little solace to the broken Morgaine. (Reid 65)

Even though it might first appear to be the case, women are not allowed to make their own choices on Avalon. The novel sets out to be a feminist voice, an image of a world where women have the power rather than men; but considering that no woman has direct power, along with the fact that no female characters truly follow their own wishes, this cannot be said to be achieved. The Goddess makes decisions for Viviane, Viviane makes decisions for Igraine, Igraine makes decisions for Morgaine, and so on. Thus, ņit [É ] persistently repudiates the very message it pretends to champion(Wynne-Davies 177). The reason why The Mists of Avalon was so acclaimed and considered a work of feminism when it was published might have been due to the fact that it does, after all, focus on the women of the story, something that had been uncommon up until then. Tyson points out that ņthe literary works of (white) male authors describing experience from a (white) male point of view was considered the standard of universality (Tyson 84), which makes any novel that departs from this view, and still manages to sell well, quite noteworthy.

Another thing to note about the dichotomy of men and women in Bradley’s novel is that according to Viviane, the bonds between women and men seem to be less important than the relationships between women. She says that ņI have never found any man who meant more to me than necessity, or duty, or a night’s pleasure (Bradley 161), and goes on to add ņAnd only once, I think, any man save yourself [Taliesin, the Merlin] who came near to matching me in strength ņ (Bradley 161). Lancelet also describes his relationship with his mother Viviane with the words ņI would rather have a loving mother than a stern Goddess whose every breath bids men live and die at her will (Bradley 144). However, the fact that Viviane puts herself above most men ņ and women ņ does not mean that she is free
to rule over her own life. She still follows the Goddess, whose will she tries to obey in all things. As Hildebrand points out, though, it seems to sometimes be hard to determine the will of the Goddess: "Communication with the divine is neither easy nor common" (Hildebrand 105), proven by occasional warnings from different characters. Taliesin says to Viviane at one occasion: "That must be as the Goddess wills," said the Merlin sternly. "See you mistake not your own will for hers." (Bradley 163), noting this ambiguity.

Even the women of Avalon are not allowed to make decisions about their own lives, which make the idealized image of the Avalon sisterhood problematic; if this society takes on the same oppressive, hierarchal structure as the patriarchal society, then it does not really serve as a valid, feminist, equal alternative. This flawed sisterhood is visible, for example, when Viviane talks to Igraine about Morgause’s future. Viviane explains that there are three faces of the Goddess: the maiden, the mother, and the crone. She then adds: "The Goddess has a fourth face, which is secret, and you should pray to her, as I do as I do, Igraine I that Morgause will never wear that face." (Bradley 23). Viviane here refers to the warrior face of the Goddess, which, ironically, seems to be the only role a woman can accomplish by herself, without a man or the natural course of time. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

2.5 “Good” and “Bad” Girls

The idea that the women in The Mists of Avalon are not wished to grow up wearing the face of the warrior Goddess is a close parallel to Tyson’s thoughts on “good” and “bad” girls in a patriarchal society: "The main female characters are stereotyped as either “good” girls (gentle, submissive, virginal, angelic) or “bad” girls (violent, aggressive, worldly, monstrous). These characterizations imply that if a woman does not accept her patriarchal gender role, then the only role left her is that of a monster." (Tyson 89). In other words, Avalon has in some ways the same system for oppressing women as the Christian society it opposes. Bradley does break down the duality of the two categories of “good” and “bad” girls, since she wants the reader to sympathize with Morgaine I who would be considered a “bad” girl in a patriarchal society, and is also considered so by many of the characters in the novel I but as an author, she fails to create a female society which allows women to do what they want with their lives without being judged and exploited. A feminist society is therefore not achieved on Avalon, since sacrifices of both individual autonomy and the well-being of several characters are made for the “sisterhood” which in this case reflects the hierarchal power-system of the patriarchal society it protests.
In her book about body politics and women’s roles in society, Maud Eduards quotes noted women’s rights activist Frida Stéenhoff, who puts the standards to which women are held in words:

Samhället, dvs. männen, ha sedan urminnes tider haft ett tvåfaldigt krav på kvinnan såsom könsvarelse. Å ena sidan att hon med obrottslig trohet skall hålla sig till en man och blifva moder. Å andra sidan raka motsatsen: att hon skall vara tillgänglig för många män och icke blifva moder. Ej samma kvinna naturligtvis. (Eduards 137)

Society, i.e. the men, have since the dawn of time had a dual demand on women as gendered people. On the one hand, that she is supposed to with inviolable fidelity stay with one man and become a mother. On the other hand, the opposite: that she shall be available to many men and not become a mother. Not the same woman, of course. (My translation)

In other words, there are two kinds of women: the marriageable virgins and the harlots, the "good" and the "bad", the Madonna and the whore. Both of these types are expected to be available sexually, but with different social contracts. If a woman is intimate with several men, or with men outside of marriage, she is no longer a desirable wife and mother. Rosaldo describes that women, as wives, mothers, witches, midwives, nuns, or whores, are defined almost exclusively in terms of their sexual functions (Rosaldo, Lamphere and Bamberger 31), and then goes on to argue that purity and pollution are ideas that apply primarily to women, who must either deny their physical bodies or circumscribe their dangerous sexuality (Rosaldo, Lamphere and Bamberger 31). This again connects to the idea of the "good" and the "bad" girl, and that a woman who makes her own sexual choices is no longer "pure". Perhaps, the reluctance towards "bad" girls comes from the idea that "fearless women [É ] challenge prevailing power structures (Madriz 162).

In the past, political theorists often used to distinguish clearly between "private" domestic life and the "public" life of politics and the marketplace, claiming explicitly that the two spheres operated in accordance with different principles. They separated out the family from what they deemed the subject matter of politics, and they made closely related, explicit claims about the nature of women and the appropriateness of excluding them from civil and political life. (Okin 8)

Women are thus told to stay out of the political life, since their place is in the "private" life. Those who challenge this system - women who partake in political discussions - then become "the other" a threat. This can also relate to the "good" and "bad" girls, since a
“good” girl would never challenge the patriarchy, while a “bad” girl does so by merely making her own sexual choices.

This view is reflected in Bradley’s novel, not just through Morgaine being publicly shamed for her sex life with a painting, but also less blatantly, such as when Gorlois asks Igraine, “What can it matter to a woman who rules the land? (Bradley 27). He does not want her to be involved with politics, because that might make others assume that she is a dissatisfactory mother and wife — both of which roles are very important for her to uphold to Gorlois. A “good” girl does not challenge the political system, and since it is important to Gorlois to be married to a “good” woman, it is important for him that she does not engage in politics - and so, Igraine becomes a commodity; the commodification of people occur when relationships are structured in order to promote oneself financially or socially (Tyson 62). She is no longer considered a person in her own right, but rather a way for her husband to show his social status. However, it should be noted that the text does not support this particular view of women; Gorlois abuses and rapes his wife, and is with that written as a character with whom the reader does not, and should not, sympathize.

However, there are other problems which occur when women interfere in politics throughout the book. Morgause being the most obvious example. She is the ruler of both her body and her court, and is the only character who can be seen as truly independent, which makes it impossible to overlook the fact that she is also a villain in the story, bringing down both Avalon and Camelot through manipulating Mordred. It is also quite interesting that Morgause’s power is not direct, but indirect — even though she is a Queen, her voice still has to travel through a man in order to be heard; it is not Morgause herself who brings about the fall of Arthur’s kingdom, but Morgaine’s son. So concluding these thoughts on women in politics in The Mists of Avalon, it is not as obvious for the reader to side with Igraine in the first chapter as it first may appear.

The relationship between Gorlois and Igraine also has to do with what Eduards describes as a relationship in which the man is dependent on the woman to be submissive in order for him to be dominant; the defender cannot be a defender if the person does not want or does not need to be defended. Or, as Esther Madriz puts it: “The motto is: If you do not want to be a victim, then be a good girl and follow the rules” (Madriz 90). In other words, women submit to a deal where they are said to be guarded, but this is in trade for their compliance.

The only man in the novel who does not seem to control his wife in any way is Arthur. He says: “God forbid I should be the kind of husband who wishes to keep his wife

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1 More detail on this further on in the essay, on page 25-26.
locked away in a cage from all other human beings. A husband who cannot keep his wife's kind regards and faithfulness probably does not deserve them (Bradley 292-293), which points to a quite modern perspective on relationships. This might have something to do with the fact that Arthur is High King and a warrior, and he does not feel the need to reassure himself through others. Swami and Voracek points out that patriarchal structures and oppressive beliefs are associated with men's body health (Swami and Voracek 6), after discussing how men with a greater tendency to objectify women reported greater drive for masculinity (Swami and Voracek 6). If masculinity can be seen as a symbol for power, it would make sense that Arthur does not feel the need to objectify and suppress the women close to him, since he already has the greatest power of all the men in the country as High King. However, Gwenhwyfar puts the chains of obedience and submission on herself, due to her faith, leaving both her actions and her emotional life just as controlled by men as the other female characters in the book — the only difference is that she is controlled by priests rather than her husband. This means that the only other character in the novel who is not controlled by anyone — male or female — is Morgause. When her husband, who cared too much about his own business to be bothered to restrain her in any way, dies, she decides to stay unmarried. Additionally, she is neither controlled by the Goddess or Viviane, since she does not have any spiritual connection to Avalon. Therefore, it is of utter importance when reading the text to note that Morgause ultimately becomes a villain — making a point of the danger of unrestrained female sexuality, or "bad" girls.

2.6 The Shaming of Women's Sexuality

Another vague notion when it comes to the will of the Goddess on Avalon is the idea that women are free to give their bodies to whomever they want. When Morgaine meets Lancelet after they are both grown — they used to play together as children — Morgaine clearly experiences sexual attraction: She startedled, Morgaine recognized that for the first time in her life, she had looked on a man with desire (Bradley 141). As she realizes this, Viviane's words come into her head: "Your virginity is sacred to the Goddess. See you keep it so till the Mother makes her will known" (Bradley 141). Clearly, the priestesses of Avalon are not as free to make decisions about their sexuality as it first may seem. They also reproduce the patriarchal ideas of virginity and gender roles. Additionally, Morgaine is granted no say as to whom she eventually loses her virginity, and is understandably so devastated to find it was her own, long lost brother. In spite of this traumatic first experience of sexual intimacy, though, she still shames women who are virgins. In the opening section of the book, we get to
read Morgaine’s thoughts: “But what can a virgin know of the sorrows and travail of mankind?” (Bradley ix). In other words, it does not matter how much knowledge one has acquired through life as long as a woman has not had intercourse with a man, she cannot know the struggles of life, meaning that a woman cannot truly live or learn without a man.

Morgaine also adds that according to the new Christian priests, no one could possibly see a woman’s body without going all into a rage to possess it (Bradley 149) and here is the core of the shaming of female sexuality. Instead of dealing with that rage to possess a woman’s body, the priests solve the problem by telling women to cover up, according to Morgaine. However, she herself uses even the harsh word “whore” about herself at one point, during her marriage with Uriens, as she tries to fulfill what is expected of her as a dutiful wife: “she thought with resignation that no doubt, before they parted, he would want to sleep with her this night. Well, she had endured it before this, she could do so again. What a whore I have grown!” (Bradley 625). Although Morgaine says she am not ashamed of what I do (Bradley 662), she is still fully aware that other people may shame her for her choices, and that she must not bring scandal on her name (Bradley 662). However, the reader also becomes aware that Morgaine is not the only character who fancies her a “whore”. Avalloch, the brother of Morgaine’s paramour Accolon, calls her an “incestous harlot” (Bradley 664), and Gwenhwyfar refers to her as an “unchaste harlot” [É] [who] would practice her whore arts on her own brother! (Bradley 550). This leaves the reader with a bit of a dilemma; we are not expected to side with Avalloch or Gwenwhyfar when they say Morgaine is a harlot but as Morgaine calls herself a whore, a problem arises. This is an obvious example of the dual morality which runs through the entire text, wherein women are simultaneously praised and condemned for making their own sexual choices.

The shaming of a woman’s sexuality or lack of sexuality is persistent throughout the story. Morgaine’s aunt Morgause is typically the one who is exposed to this, but there are several examples - a few mentioned above - when Morgaine is subjected to it as well. Lewis Webb defines slut-shaming as “the public exposure and shaming of individuals for their (perceived or actual) sexual behavior” (Webb), and perhaps the most evident example of this is when Arthur’s great hall is decorated with a painting portraying a small, dark-haired woman, stark naked, in the embrace of a huge horned devil, and all about her, accepting certain strange and disgusting sexual ministrations, were scrawled a group of naked men (Bradley 708). This woman is clearly Morgaine, who comments on the event with the words: “It is whispered indeed that I take devils to my bed, and what do I care?” (Bradley 709) however, she seems to be more affected by the event than her words indicate. Webb
theorizes that shaming women for their sexuality promotes sexual virtue, namely conformance to normative sexual behaviors, and supports the cultural suppression of female sexuality (Webb), which means that the painting of Morgaine would serve the purpose of making her quit her sexual behavior, as well as stating an example of what happens to females who dare consider their own will and pleasure.

However, the depiction rather seems to serve the purpose of breaking up Arthur’s court and rule, making Morgaine’s sexuality a way of dishonoring the king and queen. This indicates a sort of honor culture that we see in large parts of the world today as well, where a woman’s choice of sexual partners and situations affects the dignity of her whole family—something which the female reader is sure to recognize. This notion is declared at other points in the novel as well, through statements like “they think little of any king who is cuckold, who cannot rule his women” (Bradley 850), and, after Gwenhwyfar has been taken prisoner and raped by her half-brother, “no matter what he [Arthur] thought of her personally, for his own honor as High King he would have to make war on Meleagrant” (Bradley 515). Female sexuality is, in other words, not only the woman’s own business, but other people’s as well. Mary Lynn Saul points out that “Not only is [Morgaine] not controlled by her husband, but her attention appears to put her lovers in danger as well” (Saul 94) - referring to Accolon and Hemison in Malory’s story. This is applicable to The Mists of Avalon as well, where Morgaine’s lovers all meet tragic ends; Arthur is dying at the end of the book, by the hand of his own son; Kevin is punished with death for treachery; Lancelet goes mad and eventually dies; Urien passes away; and Accolon meets his end in a fight with Arthur. This sends a clear message to the reader—female sexuality is fatal.

There are also a few more subtle scenes of love between women, such as when Morgaine returns to Avalon after years at Camelot, and meets with Raven. In this scene, Raven returns a silver crescent and a small knife to Morgaine. Raven then takes the knife; “from the breastbone she pricked a single drop of blood” (Bradley 639), after which Morgaine makes “a slight cut over her heart” (Bradley 639). “Raven [then] bent to her and licked the blood away from the small cut; Morgaine bent and touched her lips to the small, welling stain at Raven’s breast, knowing that this was a sealing long past the vows she had taken when she came to womanhood” (Bradley 649). Marilyn Farwell comments this scene with the words “because this scene represents Morgaine’s return to her home, to her mother, the goddess, and, of course, a return to herself [É] it is a pivotal scene” (Farwell 320). Thus far in the novel, it might therefore be read that love between women being the right way to love—also relating back to Viviane’s view of men. Interestingly enough, though this happens
without shame, Raven follows the pattern of Morgaine’s previous lovers; towards the end of the book, she dies. The only place where making love seems to be entirely without shame or punishment is the Fairy Country, where Morgaine finds herself with one of the lady maidens. Once, to her surprise, she found the maiden twining her arms round her neck and kissing her, and she returned the kisses without surprise or shame (Bradley 405). The explicit mention of this happening without shame is a refreshing element in the novel, which is otherwise quite condemning although it could of course be noted that the word need not appear at all; the usage of the word implies that shame would be a natural, or at least culturally induced, reaction. Additionally, Wynn-Davies points out that the introduction of homoerotic elements into the Arthurian narrative was not initiated by Bradley, but the presentation of an open lesbian sexuality which caused no surprise or shame was first explored in *The Mists of Avalon* (Wynne-Davies 181), which increases the significance of this interaction between Morgaine and the maiden.

Interestingly, men tend to shame women less for their sexuality than women do each other in the novel *Gwenhwyfar* in particular insults Morgaine at several occasions, as we have already seen. Although this may be seen as an expression of religion especially when it comes to Gwenhwyfar, with whom the reader is not supposed to agree slut-shaming occurs between other characters as well. Morgaine calls herself a whore, and Nimue thinks about the “reckless virgins Gwenhwyfar has about her, with their minds between their legs” (Bradley 792), and since these two characters are both powerful women from Avalon which means the reader is supposed to be on their side their thoughts are again confusing to the reader. This degradation of other women is often viewed as internalized oppression: they apply disadvantageous sexual double standards established by men (Armstrong, Hamilton and Armstrong 100), but Armstrong’s study instead indicates that women use slut stigma to draw boundaries around status groups linked to social class while also regulating sexual behavior and gender performance. High-status women employ slut discourse to assert class advantage, defining themselves as classy rather than trashy, while low-status women express class resentment deriding rich, bitchy sluts for their exclusivity (Armstrong, Hamilton and Armstrong 100)

When applying this to *The Mists of Avalon*, one notices that Gwenhwyfar’s shaming of primarily Morgaine and Morgause might stem from her own desire to be seen as pure, seemly, and a good wife. Additionally, Morgaine uses her sexuality to express class resentment - she makes her sexual choices, and does not hide them, as a kind of protest
against the women at Arthur's court, whom she considers to be small-minded. However, her open expression of sexuality at least compared to the other women at Camelot not only marks her status as in somehow higher than the other women at the court in her own opinion, but also makes her an outcast to others. Following this line of thought, it is obvious that it is no longer a way for men to oppress women, but rather a way for women to oppress each other.

That being said, there definitely occur comments from men concerning female sexuality throughout the book. One example is when the character Kevin, a harper at Avalon and later the Merlin, is talking about his harp, to which he refers as My Lady. He says that like all women, she will respond to whatever hand caresses her, [é ] and being like all women lecherous, I am sure she loves me best (Bradley 185), implying that women will reciprocate touch no matter who is touching them, as well as explicitly stating that they are lustful by nature. This is a very interesting view coming from a man brought up on Avalon, as well as a major double standard. Considering that Kevin is crippled and incredibly insecure about his body, this aspect might be relevant to his attitude towards women at this point in the book, considering the previously mentioned connection between muscularity and sexist attitudes. He also says that he is content to have no mistress but My Lady here, who never chides me if I neglect her, but is always the same sweet paramour (Bradley 185), arguing that he expects to be met with praise even though he has disregarded his lover. Morgaine makes a comment about this, saying that there might be a chance that you treat her rather better than you treat a woman of flesh and blood, and she rewards you as is your due (Bradley 185). A far more explicit example is when Avalloch finds out about Morgaine's affair with Accolon, forces himself at her, and when she pulls away, accuses her for his behavior: You first bewitched me - harlot! (Bradley 665). Again, Morgaine defends herself, this time by simply asking Bewitch you? And why? (Bradley 665), proving that even though men might choose her, she ultimately chooses whom to be intimate with, and that there are reasons for her choices.

2.7 Male vs. Female Sexuality

Another interesting aspect of The Mists of Avalon is that it plays with the concept of the male gaze. This concept refers to a pleasure in looking which is split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly (Mulvey 837). In Bradley's novel, however, the men - especially Lancelet - are as sexualized as the women - something which is
uncommon in both film and literature. Quotes like “When [Lancelet] dismounted, the natural grace with which he moved, a dancer’s grace, took her breath away. Had she ever wished to be fair and rounded, when dark and slender could show this beauty?” (Bradley 141), “Lancelet was still, she thought, the finest-looking man she had ever seen; next to him even Accolon seemed too perfect, his features too precise” (Bradley 610), and “[Arthur] was tall and strong and beautiful” (Bradley 179) prove that men are gazed upon as much as women in Bradley’s text, which also adds to the acceptance of the notion that women have sexual desires as well as men.

There are rules for when these sexual desires are considered to be acceptable, though. Morgaine’s affair with Accolon is depicted as being acceptable to the reader, whereas Gwenhwyfar’s love for Lancelet is shameful in Morgaine’s eyes, and therefore also might give that impression to the person reading the book:

Gwenhwyfar was High Queen, and she had first taken a lover and it seemed to Morgaine that her heart hardened like stone. She and Morgause and Isotta were married to old men, and such was their life. But Gwenhwyfar had been married to a man who was handsome, and no more than her own age, and High King as well - what had she to be discontented with? (Bradley 621).

It seems like extramarital affairs are only acceptable if one’s husband is old, but Gwenhwyfar chose her husband no more than Morgaine. However, Gwenhwyfar feels shame for her feelings for Lancelet even though they are only carried through to action at a single occasion - and then with the permission of her husband. Gawaine says, in reference to Gwenhwyfar’s guilt, that perhaps Gwenhwyfar finds it hard to understand that a woman may have cause for wanting more of life than her marriage gives her (Bradley 615). This expectation of women to find their happiness inside marriage only is something which is carried through in various fairytales and stories, and Tyson states that “The plot thus implies that marriage to the right man is a guarantee of happiness and the proper reward for a right-minded young woman” (Tyson 89) - something which is not necessarily true. Avalon gives options to a life outside of marriage to a man but the novel still argues that the right path for a woman is to follow another: the Goddess.

The difference of opinions regarding men and women’s sexualities is also interesting. As Tyson points out, we use the negative word slut to describe a woman who sleeps with a number of men while we use the positive word stud to describe a man who sleeps with a number of women (Tyson 91), and this is true in The Mists of Avalon as well.
When Morgaine and Lancelet are literally caught in the hay, Morgaine wonders "What will this do to his reputation? Or is it to a man’s credit to be caught in the hay?" (Bradley 297), pointing out that there is certainly a difference in how men versus women are regarded in terms of sexuality as well as proving that his honor is more important than her own, since this is the first thing she thinks about. Morgaine also has an interesting thought during the act itself: "A princess, Duchess of Cornwall, a priestess of Avalon, tumbled in the stables like some dairymaid, without even the excuse of the Beltane fires" (Bradley 296), showing that everyone has right to an opinion about her sexuality; she cannot choose to be intimate with Lancelet without consequence, even though it is consensual. Perhaps this stems from what Morgaine points out in the first pages of the book: "For this is the great secret, which was known to all educated men in our day: that by what men think, we create the world around us, daily new" (Bradley ix), which can be linked to Tyson’s statement that "Men can act upon the world, change it, give it meaning, while women have meaning only in relation to men" (Tyson 96). That men have another entitlement to women’s bodies while women barely have entitlement to their own - let alone men’s - is also clear in the quote "Lot sat watching, one of Morgause’s younger waiting-women on his lap and his hand playing casually with her breasts" (Bradley 246).

Another difference is that men are allowed to have sex for pleasure or other reasons; such as when Lancelet seduces Morgaine and she realizes that "it is not me he wants, it is a moment of forgetfulness of Arthur and Gwenhyfar in one another’s arms this night" (Bradley 296). The only woman who initiates intimate relations with men with the sole purpose of enjoyment is Morgause. Morgaine seems to have split opinions on this matter; on the one hand she is "faintly disgusted" (Bradley 217) by Morgause’s behavior, but on the other hand she defends her: "such things are considered manly in a king, why should we criticize them in a queen?" (Bradley 615). This is another sign of the dual morality of the novel, where women are encouraged to choose their sexual partners, but are then degraded for doing so. Morgaine’s ambivalence reflects the dual moral of the entire novel, making *The Mists of Avalon* very ambiguous when it comes to slut-shaming.

### 2.8 Morgaine as Different from Other Characters

The one issue where Morgaine seems to have her own opinion, regardless of the sentiment of those around her, is beauty. Throughout the novel, we get many descriptions of Gwenhyfar’s beauty, in sentences like "The younger woman looked like an angel when she was clothed; her fine hair floated like spun gold in the sunlight, almost dimming the radiance..."
of the golden garland she had put on (Bradley 276). Others also comment on her beauty on numerous occasions - most commonly Lancelet: “Why, it is as if the sun went behind a cloud then - but you do as you will, lady. I hope you will shine out on us again another day perhaps” (Bradley 267). However, Morgaine finds people who are not considered beautiful by the majority of the characters to be so. In a conversation with Morgause, Morgaine says “I think Viviane very beautiful” (Bradley 216), to which Morgause snickers and says “I do not think you know what men desire for beauty in a woman” (Bradley 216) - but for Morgaine, beauty does not lie in what men find attractive.

Morgaine’s ambitions in life also differ from those of the women at Arthur’s court; she aspires to more than being someone’s wife. She herself gives Arthur a sarcastic answer when he asks what more she could ask from life than marriage: “What more could a woman desire than a good husband old enough to be her grandsire, and a kingdom to rule at the far end of the world - I should bow down and thank you on my knees, my brother!” (Bradley 620). The fact that Arthur acted as he did because he did what he thought would please you, sister (Bradley 620), and that it does not occur to him that she might want something else, is an example of the view that women transgress medieval limitations on feminine behavior when they act on ambition or desire, in women called “avarice” and “lust” (Saul 88). However, it is debatable whether Morgaine’s ambitions in life are wholly her own, or if she follows the path that someone else has given her just as much as the women at Camelot; it is, after all, Viviane who sets her on her journey, and even though Morgaine departs from this and spends some time at Arthur’s court, she ultimately returns to the mission she was given and fulfills it - and even repeats the action she so resented in Viviane, and uses Nimue’s sexuality as a means to a political end. And so, the ideological structure the text apparently sought to overcome is reinscribed. The desire for feminine autonomy is expelled from the text and from the world (Shaw 467).

The message that the novel might be supposed to convey is summed up in a line by Morgause: “Whatever she is thought by men, a woman must depend on the goodwill of other women” (Bradley 708). However, it is debatable whether or not this is actually achieved. On the one hand, all of the main focalizers are female, and the story is told entirely from a female perspective. On the other hand, no woman in the story is completely in charge of her own life - let alone her sexuality. The story being narrated by Morgaine, it is easy to believe that she has the power over her choices especially since there are parts focalized by Gwenhwyfar, who is greatly influenced by Christianity’s patriarchal views of women, and who provides a contrast to Morgaine. However, Morgaine’s choices are, just like
Gwenhwyfar, always influenced by someone else; Viviane takes her to Avalon and decides when, how, and to who Morgaine loses her virginity, Morgause decides to take her baby from her, Arthur marries her off to Uriens, and the Goddess guides her journey throughout the whole story. As we can see, Morgaine’s acts of autonomy are not without consequences, and seem to create more problems than solutions, which undermine the feminist message of the novel.
CONCLUSION

Marion Zimmer Bradley re-wrote the Arthurian legends from the perspective of the women, and gave them their own voices, something that is a feminist action in itself. However, all the women in the story are controlled by someone other than themselves in one way or the other. This is not necessarily a mistake; perhaps this is intended as part of the tragedy, or maybe it is born out of the intention to accurately portray life in a patriarchal society one cannot escape from — not even to an island of women. Nevertheless, the lack of female autonomy that especially concerns sexuality is problematic, whether or not it was intended to be tragic. The book demystifies lust in women and breaks the taboo not only on female sexual desire but also on homosexual feelings, but it also degrades women who exert sexual power, and shames women who make their own sexual choices. It gazes on men the same way that it does on women — but creating a problem for men does not solve the problem for women. Additionally, it objectifies women on several occasions — both sexually, and regarding things such as marriage or status — and takes away their integrity and possibilities to make their own choices. Therefore, The Mists of Avalon cannot be seen as a completely feminist novel — it is, however, an attempt to give women a voice and a place in history, which is still needed.
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