CERIDWEN AND CHRIST:
AN ARTHURIAN HOLY WAR

THESIS

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Marion Zimmer Bradley's novel The Mists of Avalon is different from the usual episodic versions of the Arthurian legend in that it has the structural unity that the label "novel" implies. The narrative is set in fifth-century Britain, a time of religious conflict between Christianity and the native religions of Britain, especially the Mother Goddess cult.

Bradley pulls elements from the Arthurian legend and fits them into this context of religious struggle for influence. She draws interesting family relationships which are closely tied to Avalon, the center of Goddess worship. The author also places the major events during Arthur's reign into the religious setting. The Grail's appearance at Camelot and the subsequent events led to the end of the religious struggle, for Christianity emerged victorious.
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CHAPTER I

THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

The Arthurian legend grew from one paragraph in Nennius' *Historia Britonum* to the cycle of romantic episodes in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Since then the legend has appeared many times in many forms, including Tennyson's cyclic poem *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, but most treatments of the legend maintain the episodic, or quest, structure of the romance cycle. Marion Zimmer Bradley, however, in her novel *The Mists of Avalon*, has taken various threads of the legend and made of them a single, coherent narrative. The unifying theme of the novel is the struggle between the old religions, especially the cult of the Goddess, and Christianity for control over the lives of fifth-century Britons. The doctrines of the cult and the steps its leaders took to see the will of the Goddess carried out serve as both backdrop and contributing factors to the major events in the legend.

Bradley's treatment of the Arthurian cycle moves away from the medieval romance toward an almost epic form. She has replaced the seemingly unmotivated fighting typical of medieval romance with the "serious and well-motivated"
fighting which is characteristic of the epic (Holman 260). The entire plot is more serious and tragic than the usual light-hearted romantic plot. The most important difference between Bradley's work and the romance cycle, however, lies in the structural unity which she achieves. The episodes in her novel are not tied together simply because they describe what befalls a knight of Arthur while he is on quest. Each part of the story either contributes to later events or is a result of earlier ones.

The focus of Bradley's structural unity is the conflict between "cauldron and cross" (16), or the Mother Goddess cult and Christianity. Her story is set in the fifth century, in the years following the Roman occupation of Britain. At that time, Christianity had gained a firm foothold in Britain but had by no means replaced the native religions of the people there.

Bradley's cult of the Goddess is loosely based on the ancient Celtic religion of the Earth Mother. The author admits that she has taken the parts of the religion that suited her needs, especially in light of how little corroboration exists for most of the beliefs and practices associated with such a cult (vi). In my discussion I will try to make clear which parts of the religion described are based on other sources and which are found only in Bradley's novel.

Ceridwen was the Celtic Goddess who was also known as the White Sow, Barley-goddess, and White Lady of Death and
Inspiration (Graves 59). Bradley's Goddess has four faces—Virgin, Mother, Wise-Woman or Death-Crone, and Evil One (23). In primitive society, the divine was typically all, including both good and evil (Murray 2-3). She was "the basic Celtic goddess type . . . at once, mother, warrior, nag, virgin, conveyor of fertility, of strong sexual appetite, . . . giver of prosperity to the land, protectress of the flocks and herds" (Ross 233). Fertility and healing were associated with her cult as was common with Mother Goddess cults in all primitive societies (Murray 149).

The High Priestess of the Goddess was the Lady of the Lake and of the Holy Isle, who ruled Avalon and served as counselor to the kings of Britain (Bradley 45). The Lady's male counterpart was the Merlin of Britain, Druid, Bard. The duty of both was to see that the will of the Goddess and her consort, the Horned One, was done in Britain. The Goddess, through her High Priestess, had some influence in matters of warfare, usually of a magical nature, not a physical one (Ross 223).

The followers of the Goddess held annual festivals, primarily Beltane, celebrated on May 1, and Samain, celebrated on November 1. Other lesser festivals were held at Midsummer and at Imbolc, February 1, and Lughnasad, August 1. Beltane, in honor of the pastoral god Belenus, was the most widely celebrated of the festivals. At that time, fires were lighted throughout the land, especially on high mountains,
places thought to be particularly holy (Frazer 715). Since the purpose of the festival was to increase the fertility of the land, human sexual intercourse was considered essential (Frazer 157). Men and women paired off and moved away from the fire to unite for the good of the land. Some scholars believe that this practice also resulted from the idea that such a union was "justified, if not required, by some mysterious bond which linked the life of man to the courses of heaven" (Frazer 749). Children born of the festivals were considered children of the Goddess and of no earthly father. Thus among the followers of the Goddess, lineage was traced along maternal lines (Frazer 180). This made sense to them because, as Bradley puts it, "how could any man ever know precisely who had fathered any woman's child?" (7).

The Druids were also linked to the cult of the Goddess as bards (novice Druids) and teachers of wisdom (Owen 17). Their doctrines formed the basis for the worship of the Goddess. Their basic belief was that "all the Gods are one God, . . . and all the Goddesses are one Goddess, and there is only one Initiator" (Bradley x-xi). Some early sources on the Druids said that many Britons came to Christ through the Druid teaching of divine unity (Owen 62). A related belief was that truth had "many faces" and was shaped by one's will and thoughts (Bradley x). The Druids also believed in transmigration of souls, or metempsychosis. The cycle of Life, Death, and Rebirth continued for the soul until it reached
perfection. Such an achievement was rare, although some believed that Jesus had attained such a state and for that reason was called a deity. Another belief shared by all followers of the Goddess was that the deity (or deities) could not be properly worshipped in any dwelling made by man. Therefore their sacred places were oak groves and springs (Frazer 715).

Priestesses and Druids were trained on the Isle of Avalon, which was also Glastonbury (Bradley 21). In early Christian times, priests had come to set up a church on the island. They had been willing to worship alongside the followers of the Goddess, but later generations of priests had come who were unwilling to allow any worship but their own (13). They had threatened to destroy the sacred oak grove and the ring stones at the top of the Tor. The Druids, then, in one concerted effort of magic, had moved Avalon into a different dimension from the rest of the world, so that a coexistence was achieved (13). From then on, if one did not know how to go through the mists into that other dimension where Avalon lay, one would find only Glastonbury with its Christian chapel and abbey.

Kept on the Isle of Avalon was the Holy Regalia of the Druids: "dish of earth, cup of water, sword of fire, and the spear or wand of air" (89). Each piece represented one of the elements of the world. It was forbidden that anyone touch the Holy Regalia unprepared; the penalty for doing so was death.
Many young people came to Avalon for schooling, but only those who willingly accepted the call of the Goddess remained to become priestesses or Druids (Murray 97). The training of a priestess took about seven years, during which time the novice learned a controlled use of the Sight (ESP), natural magic (affecting weather and fertility), herb lore, healing, and songcraft (Bradley 137). She was allowed to eat only bread and fruit, sometimes fish from the Lake, and to drink only water from the Sacred Well of Avalon. Finally, at the end of her training, she was cast out of Avalon wearing only her shift and carrying only a small sickle dagger. She was then to return to Avalon by whatever means she could manage. If she was successful, the new priestess would receive "the kiss of Ceridwen," the mark of the crescent moon set between her brows supposedly by the Goddess herself (137).

During her training, a priestess might be called to make certain vows, much like the vows of the Christian nuns, of silence or chastity, for example. These vows were kept until the proper time. It seems that the Goddess always had a purpose for making such a demand, and the time for that purpose always arrived. The fate of the priestesses was very much in the hands of the Goddess. Bradley says, "A daughter of the Holy Isle must do as was best for her people, whether it meant going to death in sacrifice, or laying down her maidenhood . . ., or marrying where it was thought meet to cement alliances" (4).
According to Bradley, the religious practices on Avalon were remnants of a more ancient tradition (171). Avalon was a center of civilization and progressive learning, but practitioners of the older, more barbaric beliefs still existed and were tied to Avalon. The fairy folk were among these, but they too had been moved to a dimension out of the real world, one even farther out than Avalon, so that they would not be destroyed. The Tribes were the ancient folk who had remained in the world. These fairy people had a religion based on sacrificial balance. When the tribal folk had been nomads living off nature, the deer had sacrificed their lives for the tribe. In exchange, the consort of the Goddess, or the Horned One, had to run with the herd each year and risk being killed by the King Stag (170). An outgrowth of this tradition was that the king would pledge his life for the good of the land, and it was believed that, if he refused to make that sacrifice when it was called for, the land would perish. Traditionally this pledge was made with a ceremonial marriage and consummation between king and Goddess (Weston 31).

Bradley tells us that the ritual of running with the herd and uniting with the Goddess was no longer required of the kings in Britain by the fifth century, except "in times of great peril" (171). At those times, however, the future king, representing the Horned God, and the Virgin Huntress, representing the Goddess, came together in a day-long ritual.
The Horned One received the blessing of the Virgin Huntress and went to run with the herd. If he returned after successfully defeating the King Stag, a ritual feast was prepared, and then the Horned One and the Virgin Huntress consummated the triumph not as human beings but as God and Goddess (178-79). After the Sacred Marriage had been performed, the Tribes were bound to follow the king. The only way that a king thus enthroned could be removed from his position was for another (who had also made the Sacred Marriage and had the proper ties to Avalon) to challenge and defeat the king. This was the same kind of challenge that had occurred in the ritual between human and stag (Frazer 311). Avalon was a part of these ancient rituals because it represented the Goddess. The Lady of the Lake also believed that a simple folk, as the Tribes were, needed simple traditions, and this was such a one (Bradley 171).

Another form of ancient religion, known to Britons if only in legend, was the wisdom of Atlantis. The French astronomer Bailly and the Abbé Baudeau, eighteenth-century scholars who debated the existence of Atlantis, at least agreed that, if it had truly existed, it had been to the west of Britain and was associated with that island (Owen 85). According to Bradley, Stonehenge was built by the ancient people of Lyonnesse, Ys, and Atlantis when they learned that their own land was to be destroyed. They believed that the ring-stones would keep at least part of their
learning in the world (Bradley 57). This legend was well-known, especially in Avalon where Druids believed that their wisdom had come from Atlantis.

According to legend, Christ Himself had been schooled in the Druid wisdom on Glastonbury, or Avalon, and following Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimathea had come to Glastonbury and set up an abbey there with some of his companions (Treharne 6). Some scholars think that certain early Christian groups had ties to the pagan mystery religions through their shared belief that "Christianity, or rather the Good News of The Christ, was precisely the consummation of the inner doctrine of the mystery-institutions . . .: the end of them all was the revelation of the Mystery of Man" (Weston 153). The Druids saw early Christianity in this light, believing it to be simply another form of worship of the One God (Owen 60). According to Bradley, the real conflict between Christianity and the other religions in Britain came about from the Christian priests' refusal to believe in a Goddess because they taught that "through woman . . . Evil entered this world" (Bradley 11). They also refused to accept names for God or forms of worship different from their own.

During the period in which the events of Bradley's novel took place, the influence of the Christian church grew steadily while the native religions, especially the Goddess cult, lost their influence. Early in the novel, before Uther was made High King, he participated in a ritual vowing to
serve all people of Britain, not just the Christians. The symbol of that vow was the Pendragon banner he carried. At the time of Uther's death, Arthur had made the Sacred Marriage to gain the allegiance of the followers of the old religions, but he was also crowned by the Christian bishop at Glastonbury. He then carried the Pendragon banner of his father, but some years later, at the urging of his queen, Arthur put aside the Pendragon in favor of a banner depicting the cross of Christ. This action both resulted from and increased the strong influence of the Christian church. By the end of the novel, even Morgaine (then Lady of the Lake) realized that Christianity had become the religion of Britain and that all other religions were dying out, if not gone already.

The conflict between the Christian priests and the followers of older traditions forms the basis of Bradley's narrative. She has chosen the parts of the ancient religious practices which fit her purposes for the novel. Into this setting, she has placed various parts of the Arthurian cycle and, by tying them to this struggle, has made a unified story. In the chapters to follow I will trace Bradley's use of the elements of the Arthurian legend through her novel and show how the cauldron-cross conflict ties them together.
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CHAPTER II

KINSHIP, THE CAULDRON AND THE CROSS

The characters in *The Mists of Avalon* are the traditional characters from Arthurian legend but with some new family relationships (see Appendix).

At the center of these kinship ties is the matriarchal cult of the Goddess. By summarizing the relevant portions of Bradley's novel, I will show how she has used elements from the Arthurian tradition to achieve structural unity.

The Lady of the Lake is Viviane (Brewer 943), and in Bradley's story, she is half-sister to Igraine and Morgause (9-10). Their mother had been Lady of the Lake until her death shortly after Morgause was born. Viviane, the eldest daughter, had just lost a child; so she nursed Morgause and reared both of her sisters at Avalon. Igraine and Morgause had both been conceived at Beltane and were daughters of Taliesin, the Merlin. Viviane and Taliesin are traditionally connected as lovers (Brewer 943), but here she is half-sister and foster-mother to two of his daughters.

Viviane, as Lady of the Lake, remained unmarried, but she had two sons. One, Balan, was conceived at Beltane and put out to fosterage in a family which had another son Balan's age, named Balin (Bradley 11). This sets up the
traditional story of Balan and Balin from Malory. Viviane had killed Balin's mother "by her means," and Balin tracked Viviane down and killed her in front of Arthur's throne (Malory 41). Bradley explains that Balin's mother had been seriously ill and had asked Viviane to use her knowledge of herbs so that she might die quickly and peacefully. Balin did not understand this and sought revenge on Viviane (Bradley 341-42). In Malory, Balin and Balan later slew each other, each without knowing who the other was (57). Bradley's Balan fought the brother he loved to avenge his mother's murder (505).

Viviane's second son was a child of the Sacred Marriage made by King Ban of Benwick (Bradley 89). The boy, named Galahad, was later called Alfgar (Elf-Arrow) by the Saxons he fought against.² That epithet in French is Lancelet. Malory tells us that the great Sir Lancelet (usually Lancelot) was first named Galahad and then was christened with the other name (76-7). Traditionally Lancelet was the son of King Ban of Benwick, and Viviane had stolen him away to Avalon. For that reason, he was called Lancelet of the Lake (Brewer 536). According to Bradley, the boy was reared at Avalon until he was sent to his father's court at the age of six. At Benwick, Lancelet learned about warfare and was introduced to the use of cavalry troops, an idea that he passed on to Arthur after Arthur became king (Bradley 220).
Igraine, second daughter of the old Lady of the Lake, was reared in Avalon until she was fifteen years old. As she had chosen not to become a priestess, she was married to Gorlois, duke of Cornwall, to make an alliance between Avalon and Cornwall (4). Igraine's first child was Morgaine, a daughter. Morgaine resembled not her mother who was tall and fair-haired, but her aunt Viviane, who was little and dark "like one of the fairy folk" (158). For that reason the child was called Morgaine of the Fairies, or in French, Morgan le Fay (Malory 3).

When Morgaine was four years old, her mother married Uther Pendragon, the High King of Britain. The Lady of the Lake had told Igraine that she was to bear the next High King so he would have ties of allegiance to Avalon. The problem was that the father was not to be Igraine's husband, Gorlois, but Uther. Viviane prophesied that the son of Igraine and Uther would be "a leader who can command loyalty from all the people of both the Britains--the Britain of the priests and the world of the mists, ruled from Avalon" (Bradley 15). Bradley follows the traditional legend of Gorlois' making war on Uther while Igraine was secure at Tintagel and of Uther's going there disguised as Gorlois (Malory 3-5). In the novel, however, Igraine recognized Uther when he came to her and went to bed with him willingly. Both Igraine and Uther had dreamed that, in a past life, they had been priestess and priest of the race of Atlantis
who had brought the old wisdom to Britain when their land was being destroyed. The two of them, thus, accepted what they considered their destinies, believing that they had loved each other for ages (Bradley 58, 63).

Gwydion, later christened Arthur, was the child born of that first night Igraine and Uther spent together (105). Since they were not married until after his conception, there was some doubt among the people as to who Arthur's father was. Igraine had been married to Gorlois until he was killed that same night (Malory 3). This doubt was reason enough that Uther hoped to have other sons by Igraine who could rule after him, but he never did.

Traditionally, Merlin had taken Uther to Tintagel with the promise that the child then conceived would be given to him at its birth (Malory 4). In Bradley's story, however, because of the prophecy made by the Lady of the Lake concerning Arthur, there was no need for such a promise. Arthur and Morgaine both remained at court until Arthur's sixth year, when he was injured while riding his father's horse. Viviane believed that it had been no accident and persuaded Uther to let Taliesin take Arthur to be reared by Ectorius, one of Uther's trusted followers (Bradley 127). Then the situation matched with the legend (Malory 6). At the same time, Viviane asked that Morgaine, then eleven years old, be allowed to go with her to Avalon to be trained as a priestess. Uther finally agreed when Viviane told him to "put it about, if you
wish, that you have sent her for schooling in a nunnery" (Bradley 128-29). Thus Morgaine was put into the situation Malory writes of: "Morgan le Fey was put to scole in a nonnery, and ther she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye" (Malory 5).

Morgause, the third daughter of the old Lady of the Lake, had been reared on Avalon until she was twelve. Then she had been sent to live with Igraine at Tintagel. Viviane had recognized that her baby sister was not meant to be a priestess because Morgause saw "only power, not the unending sacrifice and suffering" of a priestess' life (Bradley 21). Morgause was married to Lot of Orkney, a man as ambitious as she, because Uther needed Lot as an ally. Lot and Morgause had four sons--Gawaine, Aggravaine, Gaheris, and Gareth. Here Bradley keeps to the legend (Malory 5).

In telling of Uther's death and Arthur's succession, however, she departs from the legend. Malory says that Uther Pendragon died only two years after Arthur's birth and that Britain was left in chaos until Arthur grew up (6). Bradley, however, puts Uther's death during Arthur's fifteenth year. Viviane had foreseen Uther's death and had prepared Arthur to be crowned king (Bradley 201-02). He had already performed the Sacred Marriage and had proven himself worthy to be king.

The Sacred Marriage also led to another part of the legend. Since Morgaine had been kept a virgin on Avalon,
she knew there was some special role she would fill for the Goddess. She was called on to make the Sacred Marriage with one who would be king someday (171). It turned out to be her half-brother, Arthur, but in the excitement and frenzy of the ritual, neither knew the other until the next morning. By then, Morgaine was already carrying the child for whom the Lady of the Lake had planned—the child who would be of the royal line of Avalon from both parents, Mordred (first called Gwydion after his father). Morgaine ran away to her aunt Morgause in Orkney to have the child because she was furious with Viviane for having sent her to commit incest with her brother. In the Goddess cult, the Goddess' consort was traditionally her brother or son (Stone 143); so of course Viviane saw nothing wrong with it and decided that Morgaine had been among Christians too long before coming to Avalon.

By means of tricks she had learned at Avalon, Morgause discovered who the father of Morgaine's baby was. She decided that it would be to her advantage to have control over Arthur's bastard son by his sister; so she helped Morgaine through the difficult birth and then offered to foster the boy. Morgaine agreed readily because she was not happy about having the child at all (Bradley 251). Finally, then, we have the traditional situation of Morgause, the evil and ambitious one, rearing Mordred, Arthur's son by incest with his sister (although usually Morgause herself is said to be Mordred's mother) (Malory 28-9).
By putting the cult of the Goddess at the center of the story, Bradley has made the family relationships much closer than they are traditionally. She has then used these ties of kinship to strengthen her novel structurally, bringing other parts of the legend closer together, while keeping the legend itself intact.
1 Bradley generally uses Welsh spellings for names. For the sake of uniformity, I have used Bradley's spellings throughout.

2 Although the Old English word "gar" is usually translated "spear," Klaeber translates it as "missile" or "arrow" in line 2440 of Beowulf.

3 The name "Gwydion" may come from Gwion, the boy who was born to Ceridwen and said to live on Glastonbury Tor (Ashe 200).
CHAPTER REFERENCES


Bradley uses the conflict between Christianity and the Goddess cult to explain some of the events surrounding Arthur's enthronement and subsequent reign. During that time, the cult lost most of its political influence and Christianity became the religion of Britain. By summarizing the related parts of the novel, I will point out Bradley's use of this change of influence to draw the elements of the legend closer together.

Before Uther's death, Arthur had already succeeded in the ritual running with the herd and had made the Sacred Marriage. Shortly after Uther's death, Arthur was taken to Avalon to receive the sword Excalibur of the Holy Regalia of the Druids (Bradley 203). In Malory, the Lady of the Lake gave Excalibur to Arthur in exchange for a boon to be granted later (35). Bradley's Lady of the Lake gave the sword as a sign of Arthur's vow to deal fairly with all Britons no matter which God they served (203-04). Bradley includes the traditional story of the scabbard which would prevent the bearer from bleeding (Malory 36), but Morgaine had made it for Arthur, weaving in spells and incantations as she worked.
Another symbol of Arthur's pledge to lead all Britons was the Pendragon banner that he carried. The Pendragon symbol was based on the dragon's position as ruler over all the animals. In the same way, the human Pendragon was the ruler and protector of all peoples (Brewer 695). As long as Arthur carried the Pendragon banner into battle, the Tribes and the fairy folk, as well as the Christians, were bound to fight alongside him.

Traditionally, Arthur was crowned High King in a Christian ceremony (Malory 10). Bradley uses Arthur's coronation to show that already the Christians would not accept a king just because Avalon had accepted him. In fact, no mention was made among the Christians of Arthur's ritual king-making (Bradley 213-14). The Archbishop of Glastonbury (St. Patrick of Ireland) presided at the ceremony because, according to Bradley, Glastonbury was the center of British Christianity (214), although Malory says that the Archbishop of Canterbury performed the coronation (10).

In The Mists of Avalon, one of the most important factors of the religious conflict is Bradley's characterization of Gwenhwyfar. Traditional sources say very little about her except with regard to her affair with Lancelet, but Bradley gives a fairly complete characterization of her. According to Bradley, Gwenhwyfar was primarily a Christian fanatic. She had been schooled at the convent on Glastonbury, and while there she had met Lancelet and Morgaine for the
first time (Bradley 157). Bradley portrays Gwen as a girl who was so insecure that she was perfectly willing to let the men around her take care of the world, just as she believed God had ordained it. Her affair with Lancelet continued as it did because of this belief. Her father had told her she should marry Arthur and she had, even though she was already in love with Lancelet. Once she had married Arthur, then she could not leave him. Thus she was immediately at odds with Morgaine and everyone else who came from Avalon, where women ruled equally with or independently of men (273).

Religion was the only area of life in which Gwenhwyfar tried to influence Arthur. She wanted him to serve only the Christian God and to ban the practice of any other religion in Britain. As she had been taught at Glastonbury that the dragon or serpent was the symbol of the wicked pagan religions, she despised the Pendragon banner, calling it a banner of sorcery (383). Arthur reminded her that he had vowed to rule fairly over all Britons.

Gwenhwyfar did finally succeed in getting Arthur to abandon the Pendragon banner. Before the battle at Mount Badon, she had woven a banner depicting the cross of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Arthur still refused to fight under the Christian banner until Gwenhwyfar suffered a miscarriage. Then to console her, since she believed the miscarriage had been God's punishment for Arthur's having a pagan banner,
Arthur agreed to carry the cross banner into battle (393). Traditionally the battle at Mount Badon was the first time Arthur fought under the cross of Christ (Brengle 7).

The Christians, of course, were thrilled at Arthur's decision, but all of Avalon reeled. The Lady of the Lake believed Arthur's new banner to be a sign that he had betrayed the oath he had sworn upon receiving Excalibur. Viviane resolved to approach Arthur on the next Pentecost, when he held an annual feast and allowed all petitioners to come forward (Bradley 498). When Viviane came forward to remind Arthur of his sworn duty to Avalon, Balin killed her to avenge his mother's death (see pages 13-14 above).

After Viviane's murder, Arthur furthered the Christian cause by commanding that Viviane be buried at Glastonbury and that a shrine be built for her there. Morgaine argued that Viviane did not belong anywhere within the sound of Christian church bells, but Kevin the Merlin reminded her that all Gods are One, and as long as people remembered Viviane's brutal murder and Arthur's justice, it did not matter which God reminded them (Bradley 504). So Arthur's orders were carried out, and Viviane's grave became a destination for pilgrims.

Morgaine knew that she should have been Lady of the Lake after Viviane, but she could not find her way back to Avalon through the mists. She did, however, become the voice of Avalon in Arthur's court. A few years after Viviane's death,
some Saxon kings came to swear allegiance to Arthur as overlord and fellow Christian (711). They asked to make their vows on the cross of the handle of Excalibur. Arthur agreed, but Morgaine was furious. Using the Sacred Regalia for Christian purposes was treason, in her reckoning, and she demanded that Arthur give up Excalibur since he no longer served all the people of Britain but only the Christians. He, of course, refused.

These events lead us, then, to the long episode of Accolon's treachery against Arthur. Accolon was a sworn priest of Avalon and had triumphed in the ritual running with the Herd. Traditionally Morgaine set Accolon against Arthur to overthrow him and gain the throne. Then Morgaine would rule beside him (Malory 49). In the novel, Morgaine had exactly that plan, but she wanted Arthur overthrown because he had forsworn his oath to Avalon (Bradley 595). Morgaine was determined that someone faithful to Avalon must rule Britain.

Traditionally, the three knights, Arthur, Uriens, and Accolon, had become lost as they chased a white hart through the forest and, by magic, ended up in Morgaine's enchanted castle (Malory 82). In Bradley's tale, Morgaine, her husband Uriens, and Arthur were on their way to Tintagel to defend Morgaine's claim to Cornwall against Duke Mark, her regent, who called himself a king (719-20). Morgaine had sent Accolon, Uriens' son by his first wife, ahead to await
them beside the Lake of Avalon. Then Morgaine deliberately led them into the fairy country which was in the world behind Avalon (see page 7 above).

According to Malory, Morgaine had already taken the magic scabbard from Arthur (49) and then took Excalibur after he had been imprisoned in her castle (82). According to Bradley, the land of fairy was the place where all one's secret fantasies came true (732). Arthur was allowed to lie with one who he thought was Morgaine, and while he was still sleeping, she took his sword and scabbard. When Morgaine learned from the fairy queen what Arthur truly wished for, she waited to see whether the fight with Accolon was really necessary. If Arthur awoke and called to her, she could reign beside him for Avalon. But when he did awaken, he shouted, "'Jesus and Mary defend me from all evil'," and denounced Morgaine's sorcery (734). Arthur then called for his sword but was given a false Excalibur, just as in Malory (85). After that, Morgaine belted Excalibur and the magic scabbard on Accolon (Bradley 734). Traditionally Morgaine had sent the sword and scabbard to Accolon with a message to do as he had promised--kill King Arthur--if he loved her (Malory 84). Both Malory and Bradley say that Uriens found himself back in Camelot with Morgaine before the fight even began (Malory 82; Bradley 735).

In both versions of the legend, Arthur had no idea that he was not carrying Excalibur until the fight actually began
(Malory 85; Bradley 739). Both men were wounded, but only Arthur bled. The fight went on and Arthur's sword broke. Then Malory says that Nimue, Lady of the Lake, who had been watching, caused Accolon to drop Excalibur (87). Bradley says that Arthur kicked Accolon, making him drop the sword (739). In both cases, Arthur then took Excalibur and the scabbard, and defeated Accolon (Malory 87). Both versions tell us that Accolon died of his wounds and that his corpse was sent to Morgaine at Camelot.

Traditionally Arthur was nursed back to health at an abbey (Malory 91). Bradley identifies the abbey as the one at Glastonbury (746). According to legend, when Morgaine learned where Arthur was and that he once again had Excalibur and the magic scabbard, she went to take them from him again. When she arrived at the abbey, Arthur was asleep but had Excalibur naked in his hand; so Morgaine only took the scabbard (Malory 91). Arthur awoke to find the scabbard gone and gave chase, but he lost Morgaine's trail when she used enchantment to blend in with the stones (92). Bradley tells the same story, except that Morgaine just hid in the forest of Avalon until Arthur gave up looking for her (750-51).

At this point in Bradley's novel, Morgaine went away to Tintagel to die, believing she had failed Avalon and the Goddess (751-52). Guilty of treason to the crown, she could not return to Camelot, where Arthur, the traitor to Avalon,
was still High King, and Morgaine believed there was no one left to challenge him.

In the novel, during Arthur's reign, Britain had moved from being a land where all were free to worship the Gods as they wished, to being a Christian land where all other religions were considered evil. In this way, Bradley has placed the events of Arthur's reign, especially his carrying of the Christian banner at Mount Badon and Accolon's treason, into the setting of religious conflict and struggle for influence.
CHAPTER REFERENCES


The last part of Bradley's narrative is her version of the Grail legend. The appearance of the Grail at Camelot set in motion everything that finally signalled the end of Celtic Britain and the end of Goddess worship as an accepted religion in Britain. In this chapter, I will trace Bradley's use of the traditional elements of the legend by summarizing the events of the Grail story.

Traditionally, the Grail appeared in Camelot at a time when the Knights of the Round Table had few quests to go on or battles to wage. A spiritual quest, like the search for the Holy Grail, was exactly what was needed to spur the knights into action. Bradley sets the same scene.

One of Arthur's customs, according to Malory, was that on Pentecost he would not sit down to his meal until he had seen some great marvel come to pass (516). Bradley tells of the same custom but says that Arthur usually planned for that great event (769). On this particular Pentecost, Arthur had planned to have the Archbishop celebrate mass at the great feast, so that the poorer folk who always crowded into the lower end of the hall might hear the service. The sacra-
ments were to be offered from the Cup and Dish of the Sacred
Regalia of the Druids. Kevin the Merlin had taken them from Avalon because he believed they should be out in the world among men to serve whatever God men worshipped, not hidden away in Avalon where they would be taken from men forever (770).

Morgaine, who had finally returned to Avalon, attended the feast with a sister priestess, both disguised as beggars. They had come to carry the Holy Regalia back to Avalon. They saw that the Archbishop carried the Holy Cup full of wine. Morgaine believed that to be profanation, and by the power of the Goddess, she felt herself moving forward to take the Cup. Then she went from person to person, allowing each one to partake of the Cup. Each person saw something different as she passed. Bradley uses all of the traditional descriptions of the Cup (770-71): invisible (Malory 522), covered in white samite (521), cauldron of plenty (Weston 74). Finally with her last bit of magic, Morgaine removed the Holy Regalia to Avalon.

When the miracle was over, Gawaine arose and vowed to search a year and a day for the Grail, and the other knights of Arthur did the same, except that Galahad swore to spend his entire life searching if necessary. Arthur knew that the Quest would rend the Table forever (Malory 522). Bradley tells the same story (775-76). Morgaine also realized that the Quest would mean an end to the Round Table and believed that would be a victory for the Goddess. Bradley's only change from tradition is that, in the novel, Mordred stood
up and asked permission not to go on the Quest but to remain with Arthur (777).

Bradley mentions only a few adventures of the knights on the Quest, while Malory follows several of them. Bradley does, however, place the traditional story of Lancelet's madness and wandering (Malory 490-97) during the Grail Quest (Bradley 810). Gawaine was the first to return to Camelot, after having a vision that he should serve his king while on earth and stop searching for heavenly things he would never find (Malory 558-59). Bradley's Gawaine told Arthur that he had not forsworn his oath to search a year and a day, "'for I last saw the Grail here in this very castle, Arthur, and I am just as like to see it here again as in this corner or that of the world'" (Bradley 834).

As in the traditional story, Galahad is the knight of innocence and purity who achieves the Grail (Malory 596). Bradley does not include Bors or Percival in her story of the Quest, although in Malory they achieve the Quest with Galahad. Bradley does, however, put Lancelet at the scene of his son's achievement (Bradley 812-13).

In Bradley's story, Lancelet (upon recovering from his madness) had gone in search of Galahad. He had heard stories of sightings of the Chalice in the well on Ynis Witrin (Glastonbury) and thought to find Galahad there. When he reached the shore of the lake, however, he found himself calling the Avalon barge and going there. On Avalon, he found Morgaine,
who led him to the ancient chapel of the Christians, which was on the same spot in Avalon as the chapel on Ynis Witrin was in that other dimension.

In the chapel, the mists thinned so that Lancelet saw Galahad in the other chapel (Bradley 812). The priest was offering communion from the Holy Grail, and when Galahad touched the Cup, he was struck down dead. Traditionally, Galahad was taken away into heaven after he achieved his quest (Malory 606-07). Lancelet saw the Quest achieved but was not allowed to touch the Grail (Malory 596). He was then charged to carry the message to Camelot that the Quest had ended and that Galahad, Arthur's heir, was dead (Bradley 812).

In Bradley's narrative, while most of the knights were away on the Quest, Camelot was the scene for another event from legend. After Kevin the Merlin had taken the Sacred Regalia of the Druids from Avalon and given them to the Christian priests, Morgaine decided that he must be punished for betraying the Goddess (763). Morgaine had learned that Kevin's weakness lay in the love of a beautiful woman because he was deformed and believed that no woman, especially a beautiful one, could ever love him.

Lancelet and Elaine's daughter Nimue had been reared on Avalon, as the payment for Morgaine's having helped Elaine get Lancelet to marry her (this had been achieved by trickery just as in the traditional tale in which Lancelet was found in bed with Elaine; Malory 480; Bradley 540-43). As Nimue had been kept in solitude during her years on Avalon, she
was unknown to all but a few priestesses. She was, therefore, chosen to be the instrument of the Merlin's punishment for betrayal. Traditionally, Nimue was the sorceress who learned all of Merlin's magic and then shut him away either in a cave or a tree (Brewer 606).

In Bradley's version of the legend, Nimue was to go to Camelot and win the love and trust of the Merlin (764). Once she had done that, she would be able to work a spell giving her control over him. When she had accomplished this, Nimue took Kevin back to Avalon where he was killed by a single stroke as punishment for his treachery. At that same instant, lightning struck the great oak in the midst of the Sacred Grove and broke it open. Kevin the Merlin was then buried inside (802). Thus we reach the same result as in the traditional tale (Malory 4), but by a somewhat different means.

One other major event occurred at Camelot while most of the knights were away on the Quest for the Holy Grail--Mordred's influence with Arthur grew tremendously. Arthur named Mordred his captain of the horse while Lancelet was away (Bradley 831). With most of the Knights of the Round Table gone off on the Quest, Mordred had to recruit Saxons as members of Arthur's cavalry troops. Thus Arthur's major fighting force was made up almost entirely of Saxons under Mordred's command. This is in keeping with Geoffrey of Monmouth, who said that Mordred called the Saxons to fight with him (Brengle 99).
By the time Lancelet returned with the news that the Quest was ended and Galahad was dead, Arthur had come to rely on Mordred even more heavily. As soon as the funeral of Galahad was over, Arthur announced that Mordred was to be heir to the throne (Bradley 838). Then in order to protect his future, Mordred decided to confront Arthur with evidence of Lancelet and Gwenhwyfar's affair. Many of the Saxon kings sworn to Arthur had been murmuring that a man who could not control his own wife could not be an effective ruler of a nation. Mordred's newfound influence with Arthur emboldened him to approach Arthur about this matter.

As in the traditional tale, Mordred put together a group of knights to try to catch Lancelet and the queen together. In Malory's version, Gawaine and Gareth refused to be part of it (673-74), but Bradley's Gawaine and Gareth joined Mordred just to be sure that the truth of what happened was told (855). Bradley's group of knights waited inside Gwenhwyfar's chamber for Lancelet to arrive (854). Malory's knights came to the door of the chamber after Lancelet had already gone in (677). In both versions Lancelet managed to defeat the dozen knights awaiting him and make his escape. Traditionally he returned to Camelot to rescue Gwenhwyfar from being burned at the stake, and in the process he killed Gareth without recognizing him (Malory 684). In Bradley's narrative, Lancelet was able to take Gwenhwyfar with him when he escaped the group of knights, but he killed Gareth unknowingly during that episode (857).
Malory tells us that Lancelet and Gwenhwyfar went to Joyous Garde after they fled Camelot (690). Arthur wanted to make up the quarrel as did Lancelet, but Gawaine would not allow it because he had sworn to avenge Gareth's death (697). Thus Arthur took his troops to lay siege around Benwick and left Mordred as his regent in England (705-06). Mordred then declared himself king, saying Arthur was dead (706). When Arthur learned this, he quit the siege and returned to England to try to recapture his throne (709).

Bradley's version is very different. She tells that Lancelet and Gwenhwyfar never went to Joyous Garde as they had intended to do. Gwen saw the trouble in the land and knew that Arthur needed Lancelet worse than she did. Therefore she asked Lancelet to take her to Glastonbury, where she joined the convent, sending Lancelet back to Arthur to make up (Bradley 862-63). Traditionally Gwenhwyfar did join a convent but only after Arthur's death (Malory 717-18).

As in the traditional tale, Gawaine refused to let Arthur make peace with Lancelet. Finally, though, when Gawaine was lying on his deathbed, he wrote to Lancelet, asking his forgiveness and urging him to come back to help Arthur (Malory 710). In both versions, however, Lancelet arrived too late to save Arthur's Britain. In the traditional tale, he did not come until after Arthur's death (Malory 719). Bradley's version is that the actual battle between Arthur and Mordred had not yet broken out when
Lancelet arrived back at Camelot, but too many of Arthur's troops now followed Mordred for Lancelet to gather a strong enough force to meet him (Bradley 865). Finally Arthur and Mordred faced each other on the battlefield. Of course, Bradley reminds us, the King Stag could properly be challenged by the young stag who wished to take his place. As in the traditional version, however, it was not Arthur but Mordred who was killed. Arthur, though, received a fatal wound (Malory 714). Then a barge arrived, carrying four fairy queens, according to tradition (Malory 717). Bradley tells us that it was Morgaine in the Avalon barge, come to take Arthur to Avalon. The four fairy queens were Morgaine in the four faces of the Goddess: Maiden, Mother, Queen, and Death-Crone (Bradley 867).

Traditionally, before Arthur was taken away on the barge, he gave Excalibur to Bedivere and told him to throw it into the lake (Malory 715). Bradley's Lancelet is the one who took Excalibur (867). We often find, in legend, that Lancelet replaced Bedivere in tales from earlier versions, and since in Bradley's version Lancelet had already returned to Arthur, it makes sense that he should have been the one given Excalibur. Bradley also says that Arthur told Lancelet to take Excalibur back to the battle and use it to rally his men, but Morgaine convinced him that the time of Camelot was passed and that no one should claim to take Arthur's place (867). She told Lancelet to throw the sword
into the lake. When he did so, Lancelet saw a hand come out of the water, catch the sword, brandish it thrice, and disappear with it under the water (868), just as Bedivere had seen in Malory's version (716). Then Arthur was placed on the barge and taken to Avalon.

After Arthur's death, Lancelet became a priest at Glastonbury (Malory 723), and his death was a miraculous event. Traditionally, he died with a smile on his face and the odor of sanctity about him (Malory 724). In Bradley's version, Lancelet died upon finding the Holy Grail once again (871).

Bradley's novel brings the legend to its usual end. The means for that end, however, was the coming of the Grail and the events that followed it: namely, the Quest, Galahad's death, and Mordred's influence over Arthur as well as over the Saxons. This series of events led to the end of Arthur's Britain and, ultimately, to the end of the conflict between Christians and Goddess worshippers. The Christians obtained the power and destroyed Goddess worship as a dominant religious force in Britain.
CHAPTER NOTES

1 In fact, Mary Stewart's Merlin Trilogy, based primarily on the early Celtic sources, has no Lancelet at all. Arthur's closest companion and Gwenhwyfar's lover is Bedivere (Bedwyr).
CHAPTER REFERENCES


CHAPTER V

THE ARTHURIAN ACHIEVEMENT

Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* is not a typical version of the Arthurian legend. Most versions of the Arthurian tales are placed in the religious, political, and social settings contemporary to or in the recent past of their authors.¹ There is no effort made to make the tales historically accurate. By setting *The Mists of Avalon* in fifth-century Britain, Bradley is able to use the religious and political situations of that time as the bases for her story. The Saxons are important figures in the events that shape her narrative, as are the religious leaders of both Christianity and the Goddess cult.

Another characteristic of Bradley's novel that is atypical of Arthurian retellings is the focus of her story. Bradley emphasizes Arthur and events at Camelot, and Morgaine and events at Avalon, the central characters and locations of the religious conflict. There are no long descriptions of battles. There are no detailed accounts of the knights' quest. We do not follow any of the knights on the Grail Quest. Upon their return to Camelot, Gawaine and Gareth briefly told of their adventures. Lancelet told his story to Morgaine after he had arrived in Avalon seeking Galahad.
The only part of the Quest for the Holy Grail that we are told of in detail is Galahad's achievement of the Quest, an event important within the context of the religious situation.

The novel does include some interesting interpretations for traditional parts of the legend. Merlin is not the name of a wizard but the title of the Chief Druid. The Lady of the Lake is the title of the High Priestess of the cult of Ceridwen. Nimue, who betrayed the Merlin, was the daughter of Lancelet and Elaine. The sacred chalice of the Druids became the Holy Grail. St. Patrick of Ireland was named the Archbishop of Glastonbury, after his great success in ridding Ireland of the Druids (sometimes called serpents of wisdom). These are all unusual interpretations for things well-established in the tradition.

Bradley has said that she intended to write the legend from the point of view of the women involved (Letter), but, I believe, the religious conflict overshadows the feminine interpretation of events. It is true that the story is told by Morgaine, with a few insights from Igraine, Gwenhwyfar, and Morgause. Bradley has also clearly characterized the two religions as gender-related: the cult of Ceridwen is the feminine-dominated religion and Christianity is the masculine-dominated religion. In the Goddess cult, women had the authority to rule because they bore children and thus seemed to have the power of the Goddess within them. A man might rule beside a woman only if she allowed it. On the other
hand, the Christian teachings of the fifth century set up the male as the authority figure. Since the Fall had resulted from woman's weakness and subsequent seduction of man, women were considered to be inherently weak-willed, if not completely evil. If the worshippers of Ceridwen revered women as life-bearing vessels of the Goddess, the Christians believed these vessels to be empty until filled with the life-giving seed of the male. The emphasis of the novel, however, lies more in the human struggle for religious domination than in the struggle for gender domination.

The religious conflict between Christians and worshippers of Ceridwen is at the center of the narrative. As the novel opened, the leaders of Avalon realized that the king who would unite all of Britain must be of both royal lines—-the Pendragon and Avalon. Otherwise, not all Britons would accept his rule (Mists 15). From this point on, the events of the novel follow the struggle of the Christians and the Goddess worshippers to gain power in Britain. The events during Arthur's reign, especially his choosing the Christian banner over the Pendragon for the battle at Mount Badon, highlight this struggle. The coming of the Grail to Camelot and the resulting events led Britons to the realization that the battle was finally over and Christianity had won out.

Bradley, apparently, wants her readers to accept this novel as historical to the extent that they accept Malory or some other source of the legend as historical. In the
Prologue, Morgaine said that she must tell her tale because she knew that the priests too would tell the tale as they saw it. Bradley implies that, if one reads The Mists of Avalon as well as the traditional versions of the Arthurian cycle, between them "some glimmering of the truth may be seen" (x).

The novel ends with an explanation of what Geoffrey Ashe calls the "Arthurian achievement" (260): that Britain was held against the Saxons until the Saxons could be civilized; that is, convinced of the value of something other than drinking, raiding, and wenching. This was accomplished, according to Bradley, by the Saxons' conversion to Christianity. Bradley, however, makes clear to us that this is not the only way such a civilization could have been effected, but that the conversion did accomplish that purpose. In the last pages of the novel, Morgaine realized that both she and Arthur had been faithful to their own Gods—Morgaine to Ceridwen and Arthur to the Christian God—and simply by remaining true to those beliefs, both had helped to accomplish the greater plan of all the Gods. Morgaine comforted herself that she had done the work of the Goddess "until at last those who came after . . . might bring her into this world" (Mists 876). Thus Morgaine believed that she had succeeded in achieving the purpose of the Goddess.

In an attempt to explain to Arthur exactly what he had achieved, Morgaine said:
"You did not fail, my brother... You held this land in peace for many years, so that the Saxons did not destroy it. You held back the darkness for a whole generation, until they were civilized men, with learning and music and faith in God, who will fight to save something of the beauty of the times that are past. If this land had fallen to the Saxons when Uther died, then would all that was beautiful or good have perished forever from Britain. And so you did not fail..." (868)

Thus Bradley offers a hopeful ending for what appears to be a thoroughly tragic tale. Arthur lay dying, Camelot was in ruins, and Celtic Britain was being overtaken by Saxons; yet Bradley offers us hope. Traditional versions of the legend end with an acknowledgement that Arthur and his Round Table will not be forgotten. Bradley's final point, however, assures the reader that Arthur's influence on the future lies not solely in memory but in civilization itself. The Anglo-Saxons, through whom we must trace our English heritage, were taught to appreciate, rather than destroy, the beautiful things in British culture, the arts and the humanities. Without Arthur, so Bradley tells us, we would not enjoy such things today.
T.H. White, while working on *The Once and Future King*, wrote,

I am trying to write of an imaginary world which was imagined in the 15th century. Malory did not imagine the armour of [an earlier] century (he imagined that of his own . . .) but he did imagine dragons, saints, hermits, etc. . . . You see, half of what Malory imagined in his 15th cent. was the stuff of [an earlier] cent. but the other half wasn't. So I am taking 15th cent. as a provisional forward limit . . . and often darting back to the positively Gaelic past when I feel that Malory did the same . . . Malory and I are both dreamers. We care very little for exact dates . . .

(Warner 133-34)
CHAPTER REFERENCES


APPENDIX

GENEALOGY OF PRINCIPAL ARTHURIAN CHARACTERS

AS FOUND IN BRADLEY'S THE MISTS OF AVALON

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? - Lady of the Lake - Taliesin
       | [Merlin]
? - Viviane * Ban
    | [Lady of
    | the Lake]
(daughter) Balan Galahad =Elaine Uriens = Morgaine * Gwydion = Gwenhwyfar Gawaine Aggravaine Gaheris Gareth
[died in [foster (Lancelet)]
infancy] brother to Balin]

Galahad Nimue Gwenhwyfar
[named [fostered
heir to at Avalon] Arthur]

Gwydion (Mordred)
[fostered
by Morgause,
later at Avalon]

* made Sacred Marriage
= married
- joined at Beltane

() other names
[] title or other information
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