

Guinevere, the Superwoman of Contemporary Arthurian Fiction

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In a perceptive article published in 1987, Elisabeth Brewer explores attempts by early twentieth-century dramatists and more recent novelists to transform Guinevere from a peripheral into a central figure in the Arthurian story.¹ Although she does not see any of these efforts as improving upon the better known, though decidedly more misogynist, depictions of Guinevere by Malory and Tennyson, what Brewer has to say in her article has some interesting implications for revisionist treatments of the Arthurian legend published since the early 1980s, the point at which her study ends.

Foremost among the trends identified by Brewer is the attempt by writers like T. H. White in *The Once and Future King* (1958) and Godfrey Turton in *The Emperor Arthur* (1967) “to depict Guenevere with the psychological realism of the modern novel.”² Brewer credits these novelists with creating a Guinevere who is psychologically complex, albeit neither as physically nor as emotionally appealing as the Guinevere who is to be found in the more recent novels of Victor Canning (*The Crimson Chalice*, 1976), Catherine Christian (*The Pendragon*, 1979), and Mary Stewart (*The Last Enchantment*, 1979, and *The Wicked Day*, 1983). Though also aiming for psychological realism, Canning, Christian, and Stewart represent a fictive trend that, according to Brewer, seeks to “update the figure of Guenevere in terms of the images created by the modern media,”³ particularly “The image of the athletic, healthy young woman, so familiar in the cinema and on

1 Brewer, “The Figure of Guenevere.”

2 Brewer, “The Figure of Guenevere,” 283.

3 Brewer, “The Figure of Guenevere,” 285.

the television screen” and the image of the mature and self-possessed woman, a character Brewer dryly terms “the *Vogue* Guenevere, one might almost say the Laura Ashley Guenevere.”⁴ Attesting to a still further and more significant evolution in the characterization of Guenevere in the early 1980s, however, is the figure typified by the heroine of Gillian Bradshaw’s *In Winter’s Shadow* (1982) and described by Brewer as “a superwoman, a successful executive and administrator whose role is not merely to attend state functions as a graceful consort, but to rule.”⁵ As Brewer goes on to suggest, however, for this Guenevere “it is not enough to be efficient as an administrator and stateswoman. The Arthurian superwoman must also have experienced pregnancy and childbirth.”⁶ Hence it is, Brewer argues, that Parke Godwin (*Firelord*, 1980) sees to it that his Guenevere “has a stillborn baby daughter early in the course of the novel, so that she has been a mother, at least technically.”⁷

Brewer’s findings speak tellingly to the heroine who is to be encountered in three Guenevere trilogies published since the early 1980s: Sharan Newman’s *Guinevere*, *The Chessboard Queen*, and *Guinevere Evermore* (published between 1981 and 1985);⁸ Persia Woolley’s *Child of the Northern Spring*, *Queen of the Summer Stars*, and *Guinevere: The Legend in Autumn* (published between 1987 and 1991); and Rosalind Miles’s *Guenevere: Queen of the Summer Country*, *The Knight of the Sacred Lake*, and *The Child of the Holy Grail* (published between 1998 and 2001). In their respective efforts to depict Guenevere with the psychological realism to which Brewer directs our attention, all three authors provide the character we know from Malory and Tennyson with a childhood intended to shed light on her identity as an adult, particularly her sexual identity as the latter comes to be defined in her relationships with Arthur and Lancelot. In due course, the youthful (and, as Brewer suggests, attractive, healthy, and athletic) Guenevere of these trilogies becomes a “superwoman,” a competent queen in her own right and a mother figure, although not necessarily a biological mother. Indeed, the

4 Brewer, “The Figure of Guenevere,” 286.

5 Brewer, “The Figure of Guenevere,” 286.

6 Brewer, “The Figure of Guenevere,” 287.

7 Brewer, “The Figure of Guenevere,” 287.

8 In an interview with Raymond H. Thompson, Sharan Newman reveals that she did not set out to write anything as “trite” as a trilogy. Instead, her 1981 novel *Guinevere* was meant to be a fantasy “set on the fringes of the legend and [...] intended to be a prologue to the Arthurian story, dealing with an aspect that had never been done before: the childhood of Guenevere.” The success of the novel prompted Newman to write a sequel that was ultimately to take the form of two additional novels published in 1983 and 1985 and treated in this essay as the second and third volumes of the Newman “trilogy.” See Raymond H. Thompson, “Interview with Sharan Newman.”

emphasis attached in these trilogies to Guinevere's experience of motherhood far exceeds Godwin's toying with the concept in *Firelord* and suggests that this dimension of the "superwoman" figure has become central to the characterization of Guinevere in the past twenty-five years. In all three trilogies, Guinevere ends her life as a resourceful, independent dowager queen, widely respected for her wisdom and accomplishments and reminiscent in many respects of the heroine of Parke Godwin's *Beloved Exile* (1984).

Although the treatment she accords her heroine Morgaine suggests that Marion Zimmer Bradley was well acquainted with the concept of the fictional "superwoman," the Guinevere to be encountered in *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) seems in many respects the antithesis of the heroine featured in the trilogies of Newman, Woolley, and Miles. A timid girl, a shrewish wife and lover, a religious fanatic, and a queen who has no interest in ruling, Gwenhwyfar is, for all intents and purposes, the villain of Bradley's novel and a character with whom few readers find it easy to empathize; however, the Gwenhwyfar who figures in the fourth and final section of *The Mists of Avalon* actually has more in common with the Arthurian "superwoman" than one might initially suspect. Although the similarities in question may do little to make Gwenhwyfar a more likeable character, they do seem to point to an attempt on Bradley's part to exonerate the figure she has gone to such extraordinary lengths to vilify during the course of the first 650 pages of her prolix narrative.

The revisionist material Bradley provides in *The Mists of Avalon* to tell us who Gwenhwyfar is and why she behaves as she does seems meant from the outset to portray a woman who conforms without apology to patriarchy's notion of what a woman should be. As a child, Bradley's Gwenhwyfar is educated in a convent school and afforded the type of learning deemed appropriate for a Christian woman — just enough reading to be able to make sense of her mass book and "such things as women learn — cookery and herbs and simples and the binding of wounds."⁹ As an adult, Gwenhwyfar is to feel "dull as a hen" when in the company of women as well educated and accomplished as her sister-in-law Morgaine.¹⁰

As a child suffering from both myopia and agoraphobia, however, Gwenhwyfar enjoys her life in the convent school and much prefers the safety of monastic enclosure to the terror she experiences in open spaces.¹¹ Indeed, Bradley informs us that Gwenhwyfar would have preferred to remain in the convent, become a nun, and learn to read

9 Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, 255.

10 Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, 440.

11 Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, 251.

and illustrate manuscripts¹² but is obliged to leave her secure environment because of her father's determination to marry off the daughter he dismissively refers to as his "pretty little featherhead."¹³ Without ever consulting her about the prospect, Leodegranz arranges her marriage to Arthur and packs a frightened Gwenhwyfar off to Caerleon, with the Round Table and a dowry of men and horses that Arthur needs to establish a cavalry. That she is little more than a commodity being transferred from the hands of her father to the hands of her husband does not escape Gwenhwyfar, who responds to Arthur's words of welcome with the comment, "As you can see, I have brought you the promised dowry of men and horses." Arthur's instant response is "How many horses?"¹⁴

As she makes the terrifying trip to meet her future husband, hiding behind the curtains of the litter and clinging to Igraine's hand for comfort and assurance, Gwenhwyfar finds herself raging at the treatment patriarchy affords her as a woman but at the same time struggling to suppress her wrath because her convent education has taught her that "it was not seemly to be angry [...] that it was a woman's proper business to be married and bear children," and that "she must obey her father's will as if it were the will of God."¹⁵ Indeed, Bradley goes so far as to have Gwenhwyfar remind herself that

Women had to be especially careful to do the will of God because it was through a woman that mankind had fallen into Original Sin, and every woman must be aware that it was her work to atone for that Original Sin in Eden. No woman could ever be really good except for Mary the Mother of Christ; all other women were evil, they had never had any chance to be anything but evil. This was her punishment for being like Eve, sinful, filled with rage and rebellion against the will of God.¹⁶

Given the range of possibilities available to her, Bradley's characterization of Gwenhwyfar as a girl and young woman can hardly be seen as anything but a concerted attempt to depict Arthur's future queen as a victim of the patriarchal culture to which she has been exposed in both her father's house and the convent. That a young woman with such a background should set out for Caerleon raging at the marriage that has been arranged for her and at the same time wracked by Christian guilt because she finds herself incapable of containing her anger does not bode well, and obviously is not meant to bode well, for Gwenhwyfar's future as a wife and queen.

¹² Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, 268.

¹³ Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, 256 *et passim*.

¹⁴ Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, 272.

¹⁵ Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, 268.

¹⁶ Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, 268.

The youthful Gwenhwyfar of Bradley's novel could hardly stand in sharper contrast to the young women we encounter in the trilogies by Newman, Woolley, and Miles. These adolescent heroines are all "superwomen" in the making, girls who instinctively rebel against the constraints that patriarchy imposes upon them and from which Bradley's Gwenhwyfar finds it impossible to extricate herself. In all three trilogies, Guinevere enjoys a happy childhood spent largely in the outdoors. The twelve-year-old girl to whom we are introduced in Newman's novel *Guinevere* has a deep affinity for nature and escapes whenever possible from the domestic training her mother deems so important to spend time in the forest with a unicorn she manages to befriend.¹⁷ In *Child of the Northern Spring*, Woolley introduces us to a young Guinevere who is no fonder of "the women's world of carding and spinning, weaving and sewing" than is her counterpart in Newman's novel but whose mother is no less insistent than Newman's Guenlian that her daughter be trained to take on the role of chatelaine.¹⁸ In Woolley's novel, after her mother dies and as Guinevere is approaching the age to marry, her father employs a governess to instruct his daughter in the ways of court life so that she will one day be able to take her place as queen in a court of her own. Unlike their counterpart in *The Mists of Avalon*, the youthful heroines of both Newman's and Woolley's trilogies benefit from a sound education by household tutors: Newman's Guinevere enjoys the time she spends studying Latin texts with her tutor Tenuantius, and the young Guinevere of Woolley's novel finds her sessions with her tutor Cathbad sufficiently stimulating to be able to return to her duties in the weaving loft "mulling over matters far different from the domestic concerns of the women [she] joined" there.¹⁹ When Arthur broaches the subject of marriage to her parents in Newman's trilogy, Guinevere is given the choice whether or not to accept his proposal. Similarly, Woolley's young Guinevere is allowed to make her own decision about marrying Arthur; with the help of her father, she weighs the pros and cons of all the marriage options available to her and decides, pragmatically, that the proposal from Arthur is the least fraught with difficulties.²⁰ As the daughter of, and intended successor to, Queen Maire of the Summer Country, the youthful Guinevere of Miles's trilogy spends an idyllic childhood being trained by her mother for her future as a queen. A strong woman who has never admitted fear and who has faced death in battle fighting from her chariot, Queen Maire schools her daughter to be as strong as she herself has always been. Guinevere's training is put to the test early on

17 Newman, *Guinevere*, 102.

18 Woolley, *Child of the Northern Spring*, 44.

19 Woolley, *Child of the Northern Spring*, 49.

20 Woolley, *Child of the Northern Spring*, 253.

when her mother suddenly dies and she finds her father Leogrance supporting her cousin Malgaunt's bid to become the new queen's champion and consort. Although she would have preferred to remain single, "to own," as she says, "my own soul, to rule my body, to do as I choose, to enjoy the freedom that married women have to forgo,"²¹ Guenevere realizes that she will have to choose a consort or have one chosen for her. When Arthur appears unexpectedly at her queen-making and offers to become her champion, Guenevere chooses him to be her husband as well. In short, the youthful heroine of the trilogies authored by Newman, Woolley, and Miles is an intelligent, well educated, and self-assured, if still somewhat naive, young woman who stands more than a fair chance of proving to be a successful wife and queen.

Bradley's Gwenhwyfar, by way of contrast, is so much a product of her patriarchal upbringing that she immediately declines Arthur's offer to rule at his side once they are married:

Panic clutched again at Gwenhwyfar's stomach. How could he expect that of her? How could it be a woman's place to rule? What did she care what the wild barbarians, these northern Tribesmen, did, or their barbarian women? She said, in a shaky little voice, "I could never presume so far, my lord and my king."²²

Instead, Gwenhwyfar believes that her main responsibility as a Christian wife is to provide Arthur with a male heir. Two years into her marriage, we find Gwenhwyfar reminding herself that "Whatever else a queen might do for her lord, her first duty was to give him a son, and she had not done that duty, though she had prayed till her knees ached."²³ Although she is capable of conceiving, Gwenhwyfar's inability to carry a child to full term leads her to believe that God is punishing her for loving Lancelot (Lancelot). When she learns of his incestuous union with Morgaine at his king-making, however, Gwenhwyfar concludes that it is this sin on Arthur's part for which God has long been punishing them both with childlessness and takes it upon herself to rail at him ceaselessly until Arthur finally agrees to submit himself to the will of Gwenhwyfar's priests and take upon himself whatever form of penance they impose. Although Maureen Fries and Barbara Ann Gordon-Wise have sought to interpret her success in imposing her Christian value system on Arthur and his subjects as evidence of Gwenhwyfar's empowerment as a woman, both critics resort to the kind of faint praise that ultimately does more to damn than condone: Fries, for example, claims that "real empowerment escapes all of

²¹ Miles, *Guenevere: Queen of the Summer Country*, 103.

²² Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, 273.

²³ Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, 309.

the women in the book except perhaps (and indirectly) Gwenhwyfar, whose narrow Christianity Arthur adopts,²⁴ whereas Gordon-Wise argues that “In this retelling we have no fateful queen, for [as] unpleasant as her intolerant character is at times, this Gwenhwyfar, through her indomitable will, sets into motion the events that will destroy Arthur.”²⁵ Although the power to destroy can be as much the mark of a “superwoman” as the power to create, the Christian value system Gwenhwyfar ultimately succeeds in imposing on her husband and her subjects is, at least within the context of Bradley’s novel, oppressive and limiting for both genders, but especially so for women. That she should use the prospect of an heir to accomplish her objective may speak to Gwenhwyfar’s sense of duty as a Christian wife and queen but is hardly the behaviour one might expect of a liberated Arthurian “superwoman.”

The young bride in Newman’s *The Chessboard Queen* resembles Bradley’s Gwenhwyfar in that she initially proves incapable of comprehending Arthur’s vision of Camelot and has no interest in becoming involved in affairs of state. Instead, like Bradley’s Gwenhwyfar, Newman’s queen thinks her primary duty to Arthur is to provide him with an heir:

Dimly she felt that his need for a visible manifestation of his reign was somehow tied to her and her failure. Five years they had been married and still they had no children. Guinevere did not wish to think of that. It embarrassed her that so many people had such a vital interest in the workings of her body. And it angered her that she had done nothing she knew of to deserve such divine punishment. She knew it was her duty to provide Arthur with children and, though she hadn’t cared much for the process, she had obeyed as best she could.²⁶

In a significant revisionist twist to the traditional storyline of the Arthurian legend, however, when Elaine brings the infant Galahad to court and leaves him in the care of his father Lancelot, Newman’s Guinevere immediately claims the child as her own: “You are my child,” she says to the baby, “Lancelot’s and mine. It was his love for me that conceived you. You have my hair, my skin, and I claim you for my own. [...] Oh, Galahad! You must come to love me, for I am truly your mother!”²⁷ The experience of raising Galahad proves such a fulfilling one for Guinevere that, when the time comes for her to mourn his death during the grail quest, she does so as a grief-stricken parent:

24 Fries, “Trends in the Modern Arthurian Novel,” 2:220.

25 Gordon-Wise, *The Reclamation of a Queen*, 146.

26 Newman, *The Chessboard Queen*, 9.

27 Newman, *The Chessboard Queen*, 283.

“Galahad was always more than this imperfect earth could bear. But God is being terribly selfish to take him for Himself. Couldn’t He see how much I wanted my child? Didn’t He ever wonder how I would survive without him? I loved him more than anyone in the world. God must be very wicked to take a child from his mother like that. Whatever use could he be in heaven?”²⁸

The intensity of emotion reflected in this passage and in the preceding one attests to the importance Newman attaches to liberating Guinevere from what Brewer has termed “the charge of sterility.”²⁹ Guinevere’s inability to conceive is a fate shared by most of her counterparts in the Arthurian tradition and modified only slightly in novels like *Firelord* and *The Mists of Avalon*, where Guinevere proves capable of conceiving but not of carrying a child to full term. In Newman’s trilogy, however, we witness a shift in the paradigm that has for centuries prevented Guinevere from experiencing motherhood at all. Although she may continue not to qualify biologically, Newman’s Guinevere is in every other sense of the term a mother to Galahad.

Having experienced “the confusion and hurt barrenness brings forth” as well as “the soul-searching and recriminations, anger and fear and silent, desperate bargaining with the Gods,”³⁰ the Guinevere of Woolley’s trilogy feels only too keenly “the charge of sterility.” Indeed, in the hopes of becoming pregnant, Woolley’s Guinevere puts herself at great personal risk in seeking out a Saxon wicca reputed for the efficacy of her spells and charms, and subsequently conceives. Although Guinevere soon falls victim to the treachery of her sister-in-law Morgan and miscarries, and, later, as a consequence of being raped by Maelgwn, develops an infection that puts an end to her hopes of ever bearing Arthur an heir, Woolley is no more willing than Newman to deny her heroine the experience of motherhood. When his mother sends the eleven-year-old Mordred to Arthur’s court, Guinevere takes it upon herself to raise the child as her own. She devotes her mornings to the boy, giving him riding lessons, taking him with her on errands, and teaching him Latin, so that it is not long before he becomes what she describes as “the child of my heart, if not my loins.”³¹ As he grows to manhood, Guinevere takes a maternal pride in Mordred’s accomplishments and attempts to compensate for the little interest Arthur shows in his son. Although she is ultimately perplexed and deeply disappointed by Mordred’s attempt to usurp Arthur’s throne, Woolley’s Guinevere consoles herself on this occasion with the

28 Newman, *Guinevere Evermore*, 146.

29 Brewer, “The Figure of Guenevere,” 287.

30 Woolley, *Guinevere: The Legend in Autumn*, 44.

31 Woolley, *Guinevere: The Legend in Autumn*, 52.

knowledge that she had given him the best childhood she could possibly have afforded him.³²

Significantly, however, in Woolley's trilogy the experience of woman as mother is not restricted to the experience of rearing children. As the High Queen of Britain, Woolley's Guinevere deems herself to be mother of the land she rules. Arthur notices early on Guinevere's ability to relate to the common people of the realm as well as his courtiers and the ready respect she garners from both groups. Considering her his co-ruler, Arthur includes Guinevere in all discussions and activities related to the building of his new order of knighthood and, in Arthur's absence, she presides at court functions, ratifies treaties, and settles legal disputes. After her arrest for treason, Arthur offers to override his newly established judicial system and grant Guinevere a pardon, but she refuses the offer, arguing that his new rule of law is important for their subjects and that "the needs of the people come first, no matter the personal cost. They need you, need your law, need to believe in all you've done. I will not deny them that."³³ During the few months she spends with Lancelot at Joyous Gard after he has rescued her from the stake, Guinevere comes to the realization that, when they call her, her sense of duty to her people will compel her to return to Camelot; indeed, when she does return, Guinevere takes comfort in the assurance that her subjects have remained as loyal to her as she has always been to them and that they had threatened to rise up against Arthur if he had delayed any longer in returning her to her rightful place on the throne. As Guinevere remarks on this occasion, it has been this longstanding bond with the people of the land that has sustained her over the years: "It was this that gave me purpose, reflecting in my actions the very nature of my soul. It was this that balanced Arthur's capabilities — this that made us what we were together."³⁴ If Newman is to be credited with liberating her heroine from "the charge of sterility" by casting her in the role of an adoptive mother, surely Woolley is to be recognized for taking this experiment one step further and transforming Guinevere into a "superwoman" capable of mothering not only an adopted child but also the people of the realm over which she and Arthur jointly rule.

The Guenevere of Miles's trilogy is a woman cut from the same cloth as Woolley's heroine. Expecting to rule at Arthur's side when she marries him, it is, in fact, Guenevere,

32 Woolley, *Guinevere: The Legend in Autumn*, 317. The maternal relationship Guinevere experiences with Mordred in Woolley's trilogy is very similar to the experience the same two characters share in Nancy McKenzie's *Queen of Camelot* (2002), originally published in two books, *The Child Queen* (1994) and *The High Queen* (1995).

33 Woolley, *Guinevere: The Legend in Autumn*, 319.

34 Woolley, *Guinevere: The Legend in Autumn*, 375.

not Arthur, who proposes to address the lawlessness prevailing in the land at the time of their marriage and who suggests that they attempt to build together a great nation in which they can rule as High King and High Queen.³⁵ To this end, Guenevere gives Arthur the Round Table she has inherited from her father and establishes an order of knighthood in which her knights and Arthur's can serve together in a common cause. Plagued initially by a series of miscarriages, Miles's Guenevere ultimately gives birth to a son and, temporarily, retreats from the affairs of state to be able to spend time with him. When the boy is killed at the age of seven, Guenevere flees to Avalon determined to forsake her life as Arthur's wife and as High Queen; on the advice of the Lady of the Lake, however, she ultimately returns to Camelot, having come to realize that Arthur and the realm need her. In the third volume in Miles's trilogy, after having been rescued from the stake by Lancelot, Guenevere returns to Arthur a second time and, once again, out of a sense of duty: "Arthur is my husband," she tells herself as she contemplates a return to Camelot, "and I am wedded to the land. Neither of these bonds may I break."³⁶

Nowhere in Miles's trilogy is Guenevere's commitment to her subjects more boldly underscored than in the epilogue where, upon the death of Arthur, Guenevere declines Lancelot's offer to join him in France and rule as his queen. Instead, she sets about to restore the health of the kingdom which she and Arthur had ruled together: "You are the love of my life," she tells Lancelot, "But I am the Mother of the land."³⁷ In this capacity, Guenevere exiles Mordred's followers and travels the length and breadth of Britain garnering the support of its chieftains and nobles and proclaiming throughout the land her right to rule as High Queen. She calls up knights to re-establish the Round Table and encourages her subjects to plant crops and nurse the land back to health. When she has accomplished her objectives for the realm, Guenevere becomes pregnant and gives birth to a daughter whom she names for the warrior queen Maire and whom she raises as a single parent. Like Woolley's "superwoman," Miles's Guenevere thus proves herself capable of mothering — in her own right and on her own terms — not only a child but also a nation.

Newman's Guinevere makes the transition to "superwoman" status when Modred (Mordred) seizes Arthur's throne and she finds herself for the first time in her life without a man to protect her. Having never shared in Arthur's vision of Camelot, the Guinevere of Newman's trilogy has never thought of herself as mother of the land. Significantly, however, when the women and children of Camelot begin to fear for their safety

35 Miles, *Guenevere: Queen of the Summer Country*, 115.

36 Miles, *The Child of the Holy Grail*, 342.

37 Miles, *The Child of the Holy Grail*, 420.

at the hands of Modred's supporters, Guinevere intercedes with Modred on their behalf, securing their safe passage to her family home at Cameliarde in return for agreeing to become Modred's wife. When she ingeniously succeeds in escaping from Modred's clutches, Guinevere discovers that she is no longer in need of a male protector because she has learned to take care of herself.³⁸ Hence it is that she refuses Lancelot's offer to return with him to Banoit after Arthur's death and, instead, returns to Camelot on her own. Illustrative of her new status as a woman capable of taking care of herself is the comment Guinevere makes to Lancelot when they part:

"All my life, I've waited patiently for someone to come along and rescue me. But with Modred I knew no one could. And I stopped waiting. After all these years, I finally rescued myself! So you see, I need you now only by right of love. I always will. But I want so much to find out what else I can do, all alone."³⁹

After the death of Arthur and Mordred, Guinevere stays on for a time in Camelot as the dowager queen, offering advice to the many who come to her seeking her opinions on matters great and small, and then retires to Cameliarde. Discovering the songs her nurse had sung to her as a child to be holistic charms and spells, Guinevere becomes a healer of some repute when her community is stricken by the plague. She subsequently learns to run her estate efficiently and succeeds in integrating Arthur's former enemies, the Alemanni, into her community as farmers. To compare this very competent dowager queen with the young bride who had proven incapable of grasping Arthur's dreams for Camelot is to recognize how much the "superwoman" Guinevere has become during the course of Newman's trilogy.

Newman's treatment of Guinevere in the third volume of her trilogy invites comparison with the narrative strategy to which Bradley resorts in her treatment of Gwenhwyfar in the final section of *The Mists of Avalon*. Although she initially views Galahad's arrival at court as "a living reproach to an aging queen whose life had been without fruit,"⁴⁰ Gwenhwyfar soon comes to wish that the young son of Lancelet were her own child. The maternal instinct that awakens in Gwenhwyfar as she spends time with Galahad and comes to accept the fact that she will never bear Arthur the son she has so desperately attempted to give him is further nourished by the arrival at court of Nimue

38 Although I do not find his argument particularly convincing, Harold J. Herman has suggested that Newman would have us see the inner strength which Guinevere exhibits in rescuing herself from Modred as a strength she has always possessed but never before been called to draw upon. Herman, "Sharan Newman's Guinevere Trilogy," 301.

39 Newman, *Guinevere Evermore*, 248.

40 Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, 680.

and Gwydion (Mordred): “as the days passed in the near-empty court at Camelot,” Bradley notes, “Nimue came to seem more and more like the daughter [Gwenhwyfar] had never had.”⁴¹ Not much further along in the narrative, Morgause’s servant informs her mistress that Gwenhwyfar “is much alone since Lancelot has gone, but often calls young Gwydion to her. She has been heard to say that he is like the son she never had.”⁴²

If the maternal relationships into which Gwenhwyfar enters with Galahad, Nimue, and Gwydion is reminiscent of the motherhood experience of the Arthurian “super-woman,” so, too, are Gwenhwyfar’s decision to end her days within the confines of the convent at Glastonbury. Upon escaping from Camelot after Gwydion and his fellow conspirators have succeeded in exposing her adulterous relationship with Lancelot, Gwenhwyfar initially thinks about fleeing to Brittany with her lover; once she has had time to reflect on the matter, however, Gwenhwyfar knowingly acts — for the first time in her life, as Bradley adds⁴³ — without thought for herself. In the certainty that Arthur will need his friends around him to deal with Gwydion’s treason, Gwenhwyfar asks Lancelot to deliver her to the convent and then return to Camelot to fight at Arthur’s side. Having been cured by the grail of her myopia and agoraphobia,⁴⁴ Gwenhwyfar finds herself terrified by the prospect of confinement within the walls of a nunnery but accepts her fate for the sake of the two men she has loved and for the good of the realm. As Alan and Barbara Tapa Lupack have argued, “Though Gwenhwyfar is still sacrificing her happiness for others, it is now her choice to do so, a mature sacrifice for a higher good rather than a frightened child’s acquiescence to authority figures.”⁴⁵

Although Gwenhwyfar’s experience of motherhood and the maturity she exhibits at the end of the novel may speak to nothing more than an attempt on Bradley’s part to temper her hitherto unrestrained vilification of Gwenhwyfar, it seems equally possible that her delineation of Gwenhwyfar’s character speaks to and originates in the ideological underpinnings of the novel as identified by Barbara Ann Gordon-Wise: “The image of the archetypal goddess,” Gordon-Wise writes, “is primary in this novel. Viviane notes that she and her sisters, Morgaine, Igraine, and Morgause represent the aspects of the ancient triple goddess with Igraine functioning as Mother, Viviane as Wise Woman, Morgaine as Maiden, and Morgause as the dark fourth side.”⁴⁶ A careful reading of *The*

41 Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, 781.

42 Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, 817.

43 Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, 864.

44 Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, 775.

45 Lupack and Lupack, *King Arthur in America*, 294.

46 Gordon-Wise, *The Reclamation of a Queen*, 142.

Mists of Avalon suggests that the patterning to which Gordon-Wise alludes is actually more complex, given that each of the four characters to whom she directs our attention succeeds in manifesting at different points in the novel all three faces of the goddess rather than only one face each. Hence arises the temptation to interpret Bradley's affording Gwenhwyfar the experience of motherhood and the wisdom of the crone as a deliberate attempt to suggest that, ultimately, the triple goddess manifests herself in the lives of *all* women, not only those like Morgaine and her sisters who serve and honour the Great Mother, but also women like Gwenhwyfar who do not. Reading Bradley's Gwenhwyfar as a representative of the archetypal goddess may seem a bit of a stretch but is not entirely implausible, given the ideological underpinnings of the book.⁴⁷ Indeed, one cannot help but wonder if it is not the mythology of the triple goddess that ultimately also gives shape to the trilogies by Newman, Woolley, and Miles, each of whom makes a point of affording her heroine a "maidenhood," a profound experience of motherhood, and what Malory would have been certain to describe as "a good ende" as a wise woman. Whether or not this pattern is actually at work in the trilogies, the fact remains that Bradley's Gwenhwyfar ultimately proves to have more in common with the Arthurian "superwoman" celebrated by Newman, Woolley, and Miles than might seem to be the case.

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47 For a further discussion of these underpinnings, see Wynne-Davies, *Women and Arthurian Literature*, 181-84, and my two articles "Feminism, Homosexuality, and Homophobia in *The Mists of Avalon*" and "*The Mists of Avalon*: A Confused Assault on Patriarchy."

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