

Kate Wrigley
period 3

The Women Behind King Arthur

The Mists of Avalon, by Marion Zimmer Bradley, is not only an example of a Medieval Romance, but also tells the story of the women who stood behind King Arthur during his infamous reign in the Middle Ages. This novel explains the reasoning and decisions that Arthur made in the women's perspective. The Mists of Avalon is a twist on the Arthurian tales as told by the four women instrumental to the story: Gwenhwyfar, his wife; Igraine, his mother; Viviane, the Lady of the Lake, High Priestess of Avalon; and his sister and lover, heiress to Avalon, Morgaine. The story is told by each, as they saw it happen. The struggle between Christianity and the religion of Avalon is a central part of the story, and Arthur's loyalty to and betrayal of Avalon another part.

In this novel, the legend of King Arthur is for the first time told through the lives, the visions, and the perceptions of the women central to it. The Arthurian world of Avalon and Camelot with all its passions and adventures is revealed as it might have been experienced by its heroines: by Queen Gwenhwyfar, Arthur's wife; by Igraine, his mother; by Viviane, the majestic Lady of the Lake, High Priestess of Avalon; and, most important, by Arthur's sister, Morgaine, who has come down to us as Morgaine of the Fairies, a sorceress who, in this epic retelling of the story, plays a crucial role both in Arthur's crowning and destruction. Above all it is a story of profound conflict between Christianity and the old religion of Avalon.

The term 'Medieval Romance' does not necessarily mean that the piece using it contains any sort of 'romance.' Most Medieval Romance pieces told the tales differently from those of the realistic novel. In other words, the plots, like those of the romance, (1) divide into sharply separate episodes that often do not seem joined in any obvious causal fashion and (2) generally take the form of tests that they must pass to attain some goal. Frequently, (3) the generally male protagonist

fails tests, which often involve acts of moral and spiritual perception, until such point that he finally follows advice. Also, the pieces stress honor and courage, but use much emphasis on the characters rather than the over-all plot. Instead of concentrating on the women and the 'peasant folk,' or poor people, the piece concentrates on the 'gallant' knights or the kings and their courts. They also do not span over the entire life of a certain individual. This book contains the certain traits that a Medieval Romance contains. It has a heroine, in this case the female, Morgaine. It also contains the supernatural powers that were believed in during the Middle Ages. Also it has activity and adventure that the knights of the round table take part in. Though it is written in an entirely differently fashion than most Medieval Romances, I would consider it an example because over-all, it contains most of the important traits that those types of pieces contain. Even though, The Mists of Avalon also contradicts many of these typical traits that are commonly used/defined as writings of the Arthurian legends.

The Mists of Avalon, as stated before, tells the story of the women behind Arthur's throne, but in a different way. In this novel, the women have the strength and power to control their men, and unlike any other Arthurian legend/story, they are also the heroes. However, this novel does contain quests and the same heroes as most of the Medieval Romance stories, but the women are portrayed as the heroes over the strong and brave knights that actually did control High Britain in that era. The four women that tell most of the story, Morgaine, Igraine, Viviane, and Gwenhwyfar, feel that they are the reason why the men, who

were greatly honored back then, had positions in society as high as they did.

Most Medieval Romance novels only tell the story of certain individuals (males) and their great accomplishments either in battle or on a great quest. They do not follow a story over the years of many characters lives. They do not even follow the typical 'plot' where there is an introduction, a rising action, a climax, a falling action, and a resolution. This novel does, as it introduces all the main characters where were supposedly alive during the Arthur reign. In the beginning we meet not only the women who tell the story, but also the important knights that we learn of today. We learn of the love and jealousy that Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar feel towards each other, each having something the other wants. We also discover that, as a climax, Arthur will have no children by Gwenhwyfar and Avalon will lose its trust in Arthur and will begin to go against him so that his strength as a great king will not be as strong. In the end, we learn how Arthur pays for his sins of incest in the Christian world, but also how the people of Avalon defeat him and make him aware of his broken promise to remain true to Avalon.

Arthur, who was born later in the first or four books in *The Mists of Avalon*, grows up to be High King of Britain after his father, Uther Pendragon, dies. In this Era, there were two religions that the people studied. One was under the Christian vows, or the one God, that we know today. The other was under the Goddess, who the people in the mystical world of Avalon believed was responsible for man and all of its creations. In the Christian beliefs, the women were believed to be the ultimate sinners for first deceiving and disobeying the Lord's world. Under this belief, they were always made to feel as though they had sinned, while the men could do no wrong. In the beliefs of Avalon, the Goddess was not male as God was believed to be, and the followers of the Goddess believed that the women were good and should be the leaders of the lands. In the Christian beliefs there were 'priests,' and in the Avalon beliefs, there were 'priestesses.' The males were, obviously, the priests, as the females were priestesses. Even though the believers in Avalon thought well of the Christians, the Christians despised the people from Avalon and thought of them as evil.

Viviane, the High Priestess of Avalon (can be compared to the Bishop, who is male), also Arthur's grandmother, thought the reason Arthur came to be king was because of the people of Avalon. She believes that the reason he has lived through as many battles as he has, and because he remains king was because of the magic of Avalon. The Christians, however, feel that it was by the faith of God that Arthur has reigned so long with only minor injuries in his battles. Viviane, as well as Morgaine when she becomes a priestess, think that it was because of the women that Arthur remained so strong. In typical Arthurian legends, only the Christian male beliefs were talked about, because the women were not important.

In the old Avalon ways, the heir of the throne was given to the sister's first born son. In the Christian ways, the rights were given to the father's first born son. Once again, in the old Arthurian legends, the ways of Avalon were not mentioned simply because the women were not the heroes, nor did they play a major part in the legends. In *The Mists of Avalon*, Morgaine was brought up as a believer in the Goddess, and her virginity was given to a young man in a sacrifice called the 'Great Marriage.' Morgaine's great marriage was with a young man whom she thought she had known, but was not sure. When they were 'done,' the young man recognized her as his sister whom he had not seen in many years. Morgaine's virginity was given in sacrifice to her younger brother Arthur. After she realized what she had done, not by her choice, she fled from Avalon.

Unbeknownst to her the reason why Viviane had arranged this with her, Morgaine fled to the custody of her older sister Morgause. She was pregnant with Arthur's child, a child that she did not want. Viviane had purposely done this to Morgaine so that the old ways of Avalon could be protected, so that the sister's first born son would be king. Morgaine was not aware of this. She had the child, and then she left it to grow up in Morgause's kingdom to be fostered as one of Morgause's own children. As time grew on, the boy, Gwydion, grew strong and eventually became one of Arthur's knights, but no one knew of Arthur's only son

except for Viviane, Morgaine, and Morgause. Morgaine wanted to keep it this way, lest the court finds out of the incest, not thought of as incest in Avalon, but thought of incest in the Christian beliefs. So, Arthur reigned as king with no sons as Gwenhwyfar was barren.

Gwenhwyfar meanwhile, thought that the reason she could not have children was because of a mysterious sin of Arthur's or hers. Arthur just thought that maybe he could not 'plant the seed' properly. Even though Gwenhwyfar tried, she could not bare a child to Arthur. She did not even love Arthur, but she cared for him greatly. Instead her love was for Sir Lancelet, a famous knight we know of today even. Arthur knew of this love, and therefore allowed Gwenhwyfar to pursue it only because he wanted a son that he could call his own. In the falling action, Arthur learns of his son, and he also pays for his sinning by doing Christian penance, further betraying Avalon. After this, Morgaine must decide how to either make Arthur realize what he has done, or overthrow him.