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RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON KING ARTHUR'S REIGN IN MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S *THE MISTS OF AVALON*

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While investigating the prevalent cultural allure of the Middle Ages, Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl note that this particular historical period is "continually reborn in new stories, new media, new histories. It continues to enthrall for its pageantry and its manners, for its ideals of courtly love and chivalry, for its literary and artistic accomplishments, in such plentitude that, although the Middle Ages did in fact end, medievalisms, it appears, will never cease to be reborn" [Pugh and Weisl 2013, 1]. Modern fantasy fiction, with its roots in chivalric romances[1] and secondary worlds grounded in medieval tradition, also contributes to the rebirth of the Middle Ages. Among the many themes and motifs which fantasists borrow from medieval sources, figures and events from Arthurian legends – the epitome of knightly adventures and courtly love – have been adapted particularly often. Marion Zimmer Bradley's[2] *The Mists of Avalon* (1983) has been praised as one of the most compelling and innovative retellings of Arthurian legends,[3] because its narrators are the female characters whose voices are so often neglected in other sources. Starting

[1] See William Morris's late prose romances, e.g. *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894), *The Well at the World's End* (1896), and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1897), and Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924), which significantly influenced J.R.R. Tolkien's creation of Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings*.

[2] Marion Zimmer Bradley (1930-1999) was a prolific American writer of fantasy and science fiction.

[3] Other notable retellings include T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958), Stephen Lawhead's *The Pendragon Cycle* (1987-1997), and Guy Gavriel Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry* (1984-1986).

with Igraine's marriage to Uther Pendragon, the novel chronicles the events leading to Arthur Pendragon's ascension to the throne, his subsequent rule as the High King of Britain, and his eventual downfall. While in the course of the novel many female characters – Igraine, Viviane, Gwenhwyfar, Morgause – serve as its narrators (thus allowing Bradley to follow various threads of the story), it is Morgaine's perspective that dominates a major part of the narrative. Morgaine, King Arthur's half-sister and a priestess of the Mother Goddess, is a natural foil for character of Queen Gwenhwyfar, whose piety and dedication to the Catholic Church eventually force Arthur into a state of conflict with Avalon which worships the Goddess. The aim of this paper is to investigate how in Bradley's adaptation of the Matter of Britain the clash between Christianity and the cult of the Goddess – represented respectively by Gwenhwyfar and Morgaine – shapes King Arthur's reign and contributes to his fall. By presenting the conflicting religions as one of the primary influences on Arthur's reign, Bradley's work offers a novel reading of Arthurian legends and highlight the author's religious and gender concerns.

It is worth analyzing the religious conflict depicted in *The Mists of Avalon* for several reasons. Firstly, Christianity and the biblical tradition are prominent elements in the structures of the fantasy genre. While many secondary worlds and religions are infused with Christian symbolism and morality (e.g. C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*), other fantasy texts explicitly oppose Christianity or are recognized by readers and critics as incompatible with Christian teachings (e.g. Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series). *The Mists of Avalon* represents a category of works which challenge Christianity by exploring different aspects of the conflict between Christians and those who prefer to worship the old gods and the natural world.[4] In Bradley's novel, the latter are presented not as primitive and ignorant people who do not grasp the depth of Christianity, but as people believing in religious freedom and trying to protect their culture in the advent of an alien tradition. Because both groups struggle for survival and domination, one is bound to yield to the other. In *The Mists of Avalon*, King Arthur is not only involved in this religious conflict, but – influenced by his wife – he also contributes to its escalation, which ultimately undermines his reign.

Such a portrayal of King Arthur is the second reason why Bradley's work is worth investigating. Little is known about Arthur as a historical figure; our knowledge of him is largely shaped by the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth,

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For an extensive analysis of a range of fantasy novels which rework Arthurian legends see Raymond H. Thompson's *Twentieth-century Arthurian Romance* (2004).

[4] Other works which explore this theme are, e.g. Poul Anderson's *The Broken Sword* (1954), Charles de Lint's *Greenmantle* (1988), and Robert Holdstock's *Thorn* (1986). See Weronika Łaszkiewicz's *The Anti-Christian Dimensions of Fantasy Literature* published in *The Light of Life: Essays in Honour of Professor Barbara Kowalik*, edited by Maria Błaszkiewicz and Łukasz Neubauer (Libron, 2017).

Chrétien de Troyes, and Sir Thomas Malory, as well as by numerous chivalric romances revolving around the quests of the Knights of the Round Table [Clute and Grant 1997, 57-60]. As far as religion is concerned, while Arthur is not presented as a king who has to negotiate between his duties towards Christianity and Avalon with its cult of the Goddess, spiritual themes such sin and penance are still prominent elements of these narratives, the motif of the Holy Grail looms large over Arthurian legends [Cotterell 2006, 100-101; Rudd 2006, 39-40], and some historical sources even directly link Arthur with Christianity. For example, in Nennius's *History of the Britons* (*Historia Brittonum*, c. 800) – "the first Latin chronicles to cite Arthur by name" [Pugh and Weisl 2013, 66] – Arthur is presented as a Christian ruler fighting under the banner of the Virgin Mary. Though, as Pugh and Weisl argue, Arthur's conversion to Christianity before Augustine of Canterbury's mission to England during the sixth century is questionable, "Niennus's account of the king's victory creates a unvanquishable Christian as the hero of this legend, proving the righteousness of his faith in a land of conflicting religious beliefs. For Niennus, Arthur's masculinity and military prowess are inextricably linked to his spiritual leadership" [Pugh and Weisl 2013, 66]. Since Bradley researched several historical sources before writing her novel [Bradley 2010, 1349], it is possible that her retelling was meant to enter into a dialogue with these sources and to investigate Arthur's Christianity. Nevertheless, this paper will not examine the degree to which Bradley reworked original historical sources, but focus on the analysis of the figures and religious conflicts present in her novel. *The Mists of Avalon* subverts the belief that a king, as God's anointed, derives his right to rule from divine will, by inviting readers to wonder which deity – the Christian God or the Mother Goddess – actually anointed Arthur as the High King of Britain. Because Bradley's Arthur is indebted to both sides, the protagonist is torn between conflicting duties.

In her attempts to restore the cult of the Goddess, Morgaine only aggravates the conflict. Bradley's reworking of the figure of Morgan Le Fay is the third reason why *The Mists of Avalon* deserves closer examination. Arthurian romances and legends depict Morgan Le Fay as an ambiguous figure: on the one hand, she is the King's sworn enemy who intends to orchestrate his downfall, and on the other, she is one of the women who take the wounded Arthur to Avalon [Cotterell 2006, 151; Monaghan 2004, 338]. Her portrayal undergoes significant transformations between the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Sir Thomas Malory, and Alfred Tennyson. Victoria Sharpe argues that this transformation was influenced by the Church's approach to wise women and female healers: "Because of the past view of Morgan as wise, mystical, and a healer, she was seen as evil by the Catholic church and portrayed as such" [Sharpe 1998, 43]. In her novel, Bradley explores Morgaine's multi-faceted image and presents her as a tragic figure who loves her half-brother Arthur, but fights against him to protect the cult of the Goddess from the supremacy

of Christianity. Thus, she is not wicked or malevolent by nature, only desperate to preserve the old tradition. Hence her conflict with Queen Gwenhwyfar who believes that Arthur, as a Christian king, should cleanse his kingdom of all pagan practices. All in all, it is Bradley's creative reconstruction of well-known figures whom she places in a religious (and gender) conflict that makes *The Mists of Avalon* such a compelling read.

To properly analyze how religious strife affects Arthur's reign, it is first necessary to examine the factors which led to his ascension to the throne. According to Bradley's retelling, the Christians and the worshippers of the Goddess share a long history. Taliesin, the current Merlin of Britain, claims that long ago Jesus of Nazareth visited the druids to learn their wisdom. After his death, Joseph of Arimathea came to Avalon and because the druids believed that all gods were one god – and because they loved Jesus – they allowed Joseph to build a chapel in Avalon [Bradley 2010, 182-183]. This period of peace and mutual respect lasted until the Roman invasion, during which the druids were persecuted and Christianity was eventually recognized as the only true faith. From that moment on, the discord between Christianity and the druids has continued to grow. Thus, the conflict which affects Arthur's reign developed long before his birth, and even his parents were part of it. Igraine, raised in Avalon, initially despises the church and its priests, and it is only later that she becomes a truly devout Christian woman who spends her final years in a cloister. Even so, at her deathbed she does not wish to see a priest, but continues to talk about the power of the Goddess [Bradley 2010, 550]. Igraine clearly yearns for a spiritual depth of life, yet she seems unable to decide where to place her faith. Arthur's father, Uther, has more practical reasons for being a Christian. Having recognized the growing power of the priests, Uther knows that to secure his reign he needs the support of the church, hence his decision to choose Christianity over Avalon (though he still respects both).

While the inhabitants of Avalon believe in religious freedom and tolerance, the Christian priests claim that there is only one God and they condemn all pagan beliefs. Aware of the growing danger, Viviane and Taliesin (who dreams of a – utopian – future in which priests and druids can celebrate their rites side by side) decide that the next High King should be one that will equally represent Avalon and Christianity [Bradley 2010, 25-37]. Thus, if it were not for their plan and magical support, Uther would not have seduced Igraine and Arthur – the prophesized High King – would not have been born. As a result, Arthur is born to a life conditioned by religious objectives. Over the years, the boy is instructed in the secret knowledge of the druids and, eventually, he has to participate in rites consecrated to the Goddess to prove that he is worthy of becoming king and to win the support of the tribes worshipping the female deity – he kills a stag during a sacred hunt and unwittingly joins Morgaine in a fertility rite (Mordred is the fruit of their union). Later on,

he receives the holy sword Excalibur, and the sword comes with an oath: Arthur has to promise that he will respect and protect everyone equally, and that he will not elevate one faith over the other. Only after he has the approval of Avalon is Arthur officially crowned by priests in Glastonbury. Thus, in Bradley's novel it is Avalon with its Goddess that is the original source of his royal power, and Arthur willingly accepts the heritage and duties of one connected to Avalon and its cult.

As the High King, Arthur initially supports religious freedom. While he expects his subjects to respect his laws, he does not wish to command anyone's conscience [Bradley 2010, 508]. Unfortunately, his commitment to religious tolerance gradually weakens since many, with Queen Gwenhwyfar among them, try to persuade him to favour Christianity. Though Arthur deeply cares for both women, he begins to embrace Christianity because it is Gwenhwyfar who is constantly at his side, not Morgaine. It should be noted that both women often treat each other with genuine respect and affection, but at the same time they endorse their own beliefs, openly criticizing the other tradition. Yet though their conflict only weakens Arthur's reign, perhaps Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar should not be criticized for their attitudes too severely, since their behaviour is conditioned by their upbringing. When young Morgaine – willful and independently-minded (e.g. she scolded a priest who tormented her mother, Igraine [Bradley 2010, 129]) – was brought to Avalon, she firmly discarded her Christianity and devoted herself to the Goddess. Consequently, the adult Morgaine cannot bear to witness how her people are condemned and stripped of their heritage. Gwenhwyfar, on the other hand, was raised in a cloister where she felt happy and protected from the threatening world outside. Yet while Avalon offered Morgaine self-confidence and education which empowered her in the patriarchal world, Gwenhwyfar was hardly taught to read and write, and she was mainly instructed about the her duties as a pious and obedient Christian woman. Consequently, the adult Gwenhwyfar is obsessed with thoughts of sin and penance, and she is jealous of Morgaine's freedom and privileged position – Charlotte Spivack and Roberta Lynne Staples go as far as to call the Queen a "narrow-minded Christian bigot" [Spivack and Staples 1994, 6].

While Gwenhwyfar knows of Arthur's duties towards Avalon, she believes that only as a truly Christian king will he be a good sovereign and protector of his subjects [Bradley 2010, 646]. Also, she believes that his un-Christian origins tainted his soul, and that it is her task to save him. Thus, she measures everything and everyone according to Christian morality, and wishes to convince Arthur that he should forsake Avalon and prohibit its pagan practices. The Queen reasons that if Arthur makes entire Britain the land of Christianity, he will redeem his sins. Though for the first few years of their marriage Arthur does not compromise his beliefs (and protects the inhabitants of Avalon from his wife's accusation of witchcraft), his love for Gwenhwyfar is possibly

the primary reason why he eventually yields to her demands. The fate of the banner of the Pendragon becomes the sign of his weakening resolve.

The banner marks Arthur not only as the rightful heir of Uther, but also as the leader of all people, since the symbol of the Pendragon is respected also by the tribes that worship the Goddess. Yet Gwenhwyfar is repulsed by the image of the flying dragon, as she associates it both with the heathenish Avalon and with the biblical serpent [Bradley 2010, 566]. When Arthur finally listens to her persuasions, it is because his rejection of the banner is intended as a manifestation of his love for his wife, not as a sign of his religious conversion. Like in earlier Arthurian works, in Bradley's retelling the Queen's greatest sorrow is her inability to give Arthur an heir. Seldom is she pregnant with a child, and even when that happens, her pregnancies always end in miscarriage. It is during one of her pregnancies that she begins to weave the banner of the Virgin Mary. After she miscarries the long-awaited son, Gwenhwyfar yields to despair and self-loathing. She is convinced that her miscarriage is God's punishment for her and Arthur, and that only after they reject all things pagan will God reward them with a child [Bradley 2010, 602-606]. Thus, in Gwenhwyfar's eyes God becomes a ruthless tyrant and penance is a form of transaction; she is deaf to all reasoning and to Arthur's dilemmas. Eventually, to soothe his wife's torment Arthur rejects the banner of the Pendragon in favour of the one bearing the image of the Virgin Mary [Bradley 2010, 604-606]. Though, as a result, some of the tribesmen worshipping the Goddess abandon Arthur, the majority of his warriors follow him anyway. And since Arthur eventually wins in the battle at Mount Badon (a reward from God according to Gwenhwyfar), few continue to object to the King's decision. Still, the change of banners marks the rift in Arthur's relationship with Avalon, and Gwenhwyfar is largely to blame for such a development, because, inarguably, it is to please her that Arthur begins to embrace Christianity. It is worth noting that the dispute over the banner might be Bradley's creative reworking of an episode from Nennius's *History of the Britons* in which, during the battle at Mount Badon, Arthur fights under the banner St. Mary, and which attributes his victory to Jesus and His mother [Pugh and Weisl 2013, 66].

At some point, Morgaine realizes that she could have done the same as Gwenhwyfar, i.e. make Arthur favour Avalon if only she had been wise enough to remain by his side after the fertility rite. Though by the laws of the Goddess what the siblings shared was a sacred event, some part of Moragine's conscience still deems their intercourse sinful (or improper at best). Her anxiety might stem from her Christian upbringing which she rejected, but which is nevertheless a part of her. In fact, on several occasions Morgaine proves that she has a better grasp of Christianity than Gwenhwyfar [Bradley 2010, 677]. When the other woman obsesses about her infertility and sinfulness, Morgaine chastises her for thinking about God as some monster who only waits for a chance to punish people for every minor transgression [Bradley 2010, 842].

It is through Morgaine – who is very progressive and revolutionary in comparison to the medieval-like setting of the novel – that Bradley voices some of her own doubts about Christianity and its approach to masculinity and femininity. In *Thoughts on Avalon*, Bradley explains that she did not intend to attack Christianity as a religion, only the bigotry and anti-feminism which have somehow become an integral part of it and which might have their source, as Bradley argues, in the way the Hebrews condemned female sexuality and in the Romans' rejection of female empowerment that was present in Celtic culture and society [Bradley, n/a]. Thus, Morgaine does not understand, for instance, why people think of God as interested in their sexual life or how the fact that women living in cloisters are virgins pleases Him. She believes that divinity is described with many names and can be worshipped in different ways. She perceives God/Goddess as kind and caring, and objects to the priests' depiction of God as cruel and vengeful towards anyone who does not follow His laws. Thus, her grudge is not against the Christian God, but against the priests with their condemnation of the Goddess and patronizing attitude to women in general (since women are perceived as particularly susceptible to sin because of Eve's transgression). As a result, Morgaine becomes Bradley's agent for female empowerment in a patriarchal religion and world.

Though Gwenhwyfar strives to be a pious Christian woman and obediently listens to the priests, she, too, experiences moments of rebellion against patriarchal supremacy, because her fear of sin and dedication to Christianity are constantly challenged by her desire of giving birth to a son and her equally strong yearning for Lancelet [Bradley 2010, 679]. Torn between contradictory feelings, Gwenhwyfar is emotionally unstable and prone to rash decisions. For instance, at some point she asks Morgaine for a magic charm, hoping that the Goddess will be more sympathetic towards her plight than the male God [Bradley 2010, 676-681]. When she, Arthur, and Lancelet spend a night together (partially driven by the charm, and partially by a hope that Gwenhwyfar will conceive a child), the woman is ecstatic, but also plagued by feelings of guilt arising from her fear of sin. Eventually, there comes a moment when she truly questions the validity of her beliefs – after she is imprisoned and raped by Meleagrant (presumably her half-brother). Gwenhwyfar reasons that since prayers and virtue did not save her from being violated (again relying on the assumption that a relationship with God is like a transaction), there might not even be any God, and she may as well give into her desires and invite Lancelet to her bed [Bradley 2010, 794]. Even so, when Lancelet is tricked into marrying Elaine, Gwenhwyfar reverts to her old habits: she sees Lancelet's marriage as punishment for her sins, and again elevates the dictates of the church over her own judgments [Bradley 2010, 832-837].

Upset with her own infertility, at one point Gwenhwyfar even criticizes Arthur for not having a son with another woman, so that she could raise the child as her own [Bradley 2010, 835]. Yet when Mordred's identity is revealed,

the Queen is horrified and certain that it is because of this ultimate grave sin that God has refused to bless her with Arthur's heir. Consequently, she forces Arthur to profess his sins to the Bishop Patricius and to perform penance [Bradley 2010, 842-848]. Though Arthur fears how the truth about Mordred and his public penance will affect Morgaine's reputation and his reign, he surrenders to his wife's demands. Striving to transform Arthur into the ideal Christian king of her vision, the Queen is blind to her husband's emotional torment and to the delicate power balance between Christianity and Avalon, which underlies Arthur's kingdom.

Afterwards, Gwenhwyfar's hopes and Morgaine's fears come true: Arthur's court and kingdom are irreversibly Christianized – and further patriarchized [Riggs 1998, 20]. The King often talks about his duties and reign in reference to God's will. Rites dedicated to the Goddess are substituted by Christian practices, and the priests are not punished for their ostracism of people worshipping the female deity. Though Christianity is presented mostly as the faith of the high born, common people – who have lived off the land and, therefore, worshipped the Mother Goddess in her aspect of fertility – eventually follow their masters and convert (and perceive the Virgin Mary as another incarnation of their Goddess). The institution of knighthood also becomes tied with Christianity, e.g. candidates for knights begin to hold a vigil in the church prior to their knighting [Bradley 2010, 1054]. What is more, they swear Christian oaths on Arthur's sword, Excalibur, because the sword symbolizes the cross – which is blasphemy, as far as Morgaine is concerned, since the sword belongs to Avalon [Bradley 2010, 1085]. Even Kevin, who is chosen the Merlin of Britain in Taliesin's stead, eventually admits that the days of Avalon's glory are over, and he supports the advent of Christianity [Bradley 2010, 772-773]. Given Kevin's conversion, Viviane's death, and Morgaine's absence from Camelot, Arthur has no advisor to remind him of his duties towards Avalon, whereas Gwenhwyfar constantly reminds him of his position as a Christian sovereign. Inevitably, the balance of powers is distorted, and Morgaine eventually concludes that Arthur has betrayed Avalon [Bradley 2010, 1029]. When he refuses to return Excalibur, she begins to plot against him – her readiness to sacrifice his life in the process shows the extent of her determination and outrage. Morgaine's intrigues significantly weaken Arthur before his fatal clash with Mordred: she takes away Excalibur's magic scabbard which has protected the King from death of battle wounds, and she disperses his knights by showing them a vision of the Grail. It is also worth noting that the malevolent Mordred challenges Arthur because he, at least initially, condemns the King's betrayal of Avalon. Thus, Avalon is the driving force behind both Arthur's ascension to the throne and his ultimate fall.

It is only after Arthur's demise that Morgaine discovers how mistaken she was in her pursuit to avenge Avalon. While she condemned the priests for their diminishment of women and strived to remind everyone of the Goddess,

she herself forgot the truth repeated in Avalon: that all gods are one god. This truth is made evident during the fateful event with the Holy Chalice [Bradley 2010, 1178-1185]. The Chalice, one of Avalon's sacred artefacts, is taken by Kevin and delivered to the Bishop Patricius who intends to use it during a Christian mass to emphasize the triumph of Christianity over false gods. Outraged by such blasphemy, Morgaine calls on the Goddess. Yet once she is clothed in divine power, the protagonist – now the incarnation of the Goddess – allows everyone to drink from the Chalice. Afterwards, the Chalice disappears. Regardless of how they conceptualize their deity, the participants of the ceremony experience a true encounter with the numinous and are genuinely moved by the miracle. Common people remember the taste of delicious foods, the Bishop Patricius believes that they drank from the Holy Grail, and even Gwenhwyfar is convinced that something so glorious could not come from anything evil. Whether they attribute the miracle to God or Goddess in no way diminishes their experience of the divine, because words are only meagre attempts at grasping the nature of the numinous and explaining the inexplicable in human terms. That is why, as Thelma J. Shinn points out, while Morgaine is enraged by the sacrilege of using Avalon's artefacts in a mass, "the Merlin knows that to keep them in the world even as part of the Christian ritual will preserve a link between the drifting worlds for the people – those pagans and heathens whose faith can survive the shifting surface of religions" [Shinn 1986, 34]. This is what Morgaine discovers when she visits the convent in Glastonbury [Bradley 2010, 1337-1347]. Having talked to the nuns, she concludes that by worshipping the Virgin Mary, they, too, worship the Goddess and that it was foolish of her to think that the Goddess was confined to Avalon. Thus, Shinn is right when she writes that "Morgaine must learn that, while the historical moment denies the existence of Avalon and constructs the abbey of Glastonbury on the very same spot, and while this denial pushes Avalon into the mists – into an existence on another plane only, yet the Goddess herself remains in the world" [Shinn 1986, 33]. Free of the arrogant assumption that she comprehends the nature of divinity, Morgaine is finally able to properly evaluate her own actions.

Yet it is already too late for Avalon. Ironically, while Arthur was supposed to be Avalon's saviour, his reign only sealed Britain's fate as a Christian country. Since in the course of the novel Arthur seldom talks about his spiritual needs, it can be assumed that it was not his own religiosity, but Gwenhwyfar's expectations that gradually transformed him into the Christian sovereign of her visions. What is more, Carolyne Larrington, who also concludes that in Bradley's novel Arthur was not a zealot, suggests that he separates himself from Avalon because he realizes that "Christianity has the historical momentum to succeed" [Larrington 2006, 191]. Moreover, it is possible that both Arthur and Uther before him are willing to embrace Christianity because it is a male-oriented system which elevates masculinity over femininity

(and liberates men from the domination of the priestesses). Yet had there been a different woman by Arthur's side instead of Gwenhwyfar, he might have been strong enough to firmly endorse religious plurality. Consequently, though he probably would have received less support from the church, Morgaine would not have plotted against him and she would have devoted her efforts to the preservation of the kingdom, not of Avalon only. Thus, Charlotte Spivack rightly claims that in Bradley's retelling of Camelot's tragedy it is not Gwenhwyfar's affair with Lancelet that contributes to Arthur's downfall, "but her dogmatic imposition of Christianity that alienates the king and drives the supporters of the goddess to plot his death" [Spivack 1987, 157]. Of course, even if Arthur had a different Queen by his side, he would still eventually die, since he was only a mortal man. Yet his legacy would have been different. As it is, Avalon becomes inaccessible to people and lost in the mists.

In conclusion, in Bradley's retelling of Arthurian legends it is the transition between religions that shapes King Arthur's reign and eventually contributes to his downfall, with women being largely responsible for the escalation of the ensuing religious conflict. Such an empowerment of female characters was Bradley's deliberate choice. While speculating why Malory only diminished the female characters instead of removing them from his tale (similarly to how he rejected other elements of the Celtic stories that formed the basis for his narrative), Bradley concludes that this was because the female characters were central to the transition from a Goddess-oriented system to the one that focused on a male deity (i.e. Christianity). To remove female characters entirely would mean to deprive the narrative of a key element, that is why, according to Bradley, Malory chose to diminish them [Bradley, n/a]. Moreover, Bradley believes that it is necessary to complement narratives which emphasize God's masculinity with those which highlight the female aspect of the divine [Bradley, n/a], since both are simply concepts with which people attempt to define the numinous. Consequently, in the course of her novel she highlights various attributes of femininity, which she develops not only in the portrayal of the priestess Morgaine, but through other heroines as well. That is why Spivack claims that "To read this book is to encounter the goddess manifested in convincingly realistic female roles" [Spivack 1987, 150]. All in all, in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, which interweaves history with myth and fantasy, "Arthurian legends are reclaimed from their masculine ethos" [Pugh and Weisl 2013, 76] and Arthurian women become central figures in the conflict between Goddess worship and Christianity – the conflict which, in Bradley's retelling, holds the key to understanding the development and the end of King Arthur's legendary reign.

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Summary

RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON KING ARTHUR'S REIGN IN MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S *THE MISTS OF AVALON*

The aim of the following paper is to examine the conflict between the cult of the Mother Goddess and Christianity, which affects King Arthur's reign in Marion Zimmer Bradley's original retelling of Arthurian legends – *The Mists of Avalon* (1983). The religious conflict presented in the novel is inextricably linked with representations of femininity and the figures of Morgaine (Morgan le Fay) and Queen Gwenhwyfar, who are dedicated, respectively, to Avalon and the Church. By investigating both women's beliefs, actions, and relationship with Arthur, this paper will demonstrate how in Bradley's retelling the transition from the worship of the Goddess to Christianity conditions King Arthur's reign and ultimately contributes to his downfall.

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