NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Feminist Critical Analysis of Queen Guinevere

A Capstone Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With Honors

Department Of

English

By

Fiona Watkins

DeKalb, Illinois

June 5th, 2021
Capstone Title (print or type)

Feminist Critical Analysis of Queen Guinevere

Student Name (print or type)  
Fiona Watkins

Faculty Supervisor (print or type)  
Dr. Nicole Clifton

Faculty Approval Signature  
Nicole Clifton

Department of (print or type)  
English

Date of Approval (print or type)  

Date and Venue of Presentation  
4/20/2021 Undergraduate Research and Development CURE Conference

Check if any of the following apply, and please tell us where and how it was published:

☐ Capstone has been published (Journal/Outlet):

☐ Capstone has been submitted for publication (Journal/Outlet):

Completed Honors Capstone projects may be used for student reference purposes, both electronically and in the Honors Capstone Library (CLB 110).

If you would like to opt out and not have this student’s completed capstone used for reference purposes, please initial here:  __NC____  (Faculty Supervisor)
Abstract

Under the direction of Dr. Clifton, I will explore the depiction of Queen Guinevere, beginning with the medieval texts *Le Morte D’Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory, published in 1485, and *The Book of the City of Ladies* by Christine De Pizan published in 1405. *The Book of the City of Ladies* establishes what medieval society considered to be exemplary women. From these idealized women I am able to evaluate Malory’s Guinevere in terms not of feminism, given medieval women would not have been able to imagine the concept, but morality. There is no doubt that Guinevere’s similarities to the biblical women Christine describes makes her a mostly moral character. I am using *Le Morte D’Arthur* as a baseline for Guinevere, given it served as the inspiration for the two modern texts.

*A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* edited by Gill Plain and Susan Sellers provides more background on the evolution of feminism, and with this historical context I am able to examine the modern texts via a feminist critical approach while adhering to the feminist theory at the time each piece was written. When comparing Guinevere to more modern portrayals of Queen Guinevere in *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White and *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley it becomes evident that only Bradley’s Gwenhwyfar is a feminist character. Gwenhwyfar is not a distant or impassionate character; rather she is vulnerable and realistic. In addition, she is a focus of the story, which was written by a woman, satisfying two demands of the second wave of feminists. T.H. White’s Guenever is given more focus and dialogue, but ultimately falls short of the first wave feminist desire for a well-rounded, moral, female character. When comparing Malory’s Guenevere to modern texts, this allowed me to highlight more clearly how feminism, and Guinevere’s portrayal, has evolved.
Feminist Critical Analysis of Queen Guinevere

Queen Guinevere has been written about for centuries, so it is unsurprising that her characterization and feminist tendencies have radically changed with each author. In *Le Morte D’Arthur* written by Sir Thomas Malory, published in 1485, Guenevere is a regal medieval queen who is often spoken of, not shown. What makes her a proto-feminist character is that her personal agency and actions align with pious, especially Biblical, women in literature. T. H. White’s Guenever from *The Once and Future King* has none of the qualities expected of a feminist character in the 1920’s. Instead, White debases his queen to nothing more than a naïve, petulant girl. Gwenhwyfar in Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon* is a valiant attempt at a 1980’s feminist character; she displays a self-awareness and agency that is commendable; however, Bradley ultimately uses her as a tool to argue against the patriarchal nature of Christianity and Malory’s tale. To this end, Gwenhwyfar is not a symbol, which is so pivotal in Malory, but instead a genuine character capable of mistakes. It is impossible to call the abstract idea of Queen Guinevere feminist; although her iterations show how changes in feminist theory did or did not influence her portrayals.

The essays in *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* creates a timeline of feminist theory and the historical events that influenced those changes. During first wave feminism at the turn of the 20th century, women started to examine existing texts to determine what was lacking for female characters in literature, and by extension to question the patriarchal power dynamics of their lives (Goldman, 69). Second wave feminism began to emerge in the late 1960’s. The Civil Rights Movement had a profound impact on these feminists; they called for more women writers, especially Black writers, and encouraged a liberation from the canonical male perspective in literature (Carr 121). Starting in the 1990’s, third wave feminism focused on the
subjectivity and individuality present in women’s lives which opened the door for larger
cussions about psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and queer theory (Plain, 104). There is
some contention as to the name given to the theories prevalent today. We can easily consider
ourselves part of fourth wave feminism, but some critics will call the current era “post-
feminism” (Plain 1). The concept of intersectionality would be completely foreign to a first wave
feminist writer in the early 1900s, let alone a medieval writer. As such, we cannot hold these
writers to the modern standard, so in an effort to avoid presentism this essay will only evaluate
writers and their works based on the feminism popular at the time they were writing.

Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* provides numerous examples of
medieval pious women which, given she and Sir Thomas Malory were writing centuries before
feminism began, can be considered proto feminist. Christine’s work begins with three angelic
women approaching her in a time of deep despair. They help her reason through the lies men
have often spread about women and women’s slanderous depictions by men through a variety of
examples, primarily in the Bible. Christine was a medieval author like Malory; her book was
published in 1405, so her arguments lend both the perspective of a female writer as well as a
historically accurate basis for analysis. By examining the similarities between Christine’s women
and Gueneverie it is evident she is a moral character.

In order to clearly show the choices between authors, I selected scenes that establish
Guinevere’s dramatic changes in each iteration. I started with Guinevere’s introduction, which is
closely tied with her marriage to King Arthur in Malory and White. Mordred’s proposal to
Guinevere provides both contrast and context for Guinevere’s character. Patrisse’s death scene
was handled very differently by all three authors; Guinevere’s reaction, or lack thereof, to
Patrisse’s death in Malory and White, as well as Bradley’s choice to omit the scene entirely help
define Guinevere’s character. The Queen goes a-maying scene was a rare moment in Malory where Guinevere had agency, and future authors’ choice to keep or remove that agency speaks volumes to whether or not their Guinevere can be considered feminist. How the authors handle Guinevere’s fight with Lancelot shows how Guinevere uses her authority as queen. The Tower of London scene in Malory establishes Guinevere’s intelligence and forethought as a ruler, but the changes made by White and Bradley highlight how her future versions may not be feminist even though they are written during feminist eras. How Guinevere’s tale ends and why she makes the decision to join a convent, and the final image of Guinevere each reader is left with, is important to understanding if she is a feminist character in each text. These select scenes and their changes or omission from each author’s story provide both consistency and a clear foundation to examine Guinevere as a feminist character.

Queen Guinevere in Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* is a proto-feminist character as evidenced by the duality present in her characterization. She has agency which is in direct opposition of the reactionary nature expected of women during the medieval period, but she is often omitted from scenes where she is the focus. We cannot label Guinevere as a modern feminist character; “given that ‘feminism’ is the ideology of a modern social movement for the advancement of women, taking shape (in its Western European and US forms) in the eighteenth century and based on principles of equality and emancipation in secular societies, it could not have been known in, say, late fourteenth-century England in the forms in which it is known in the United States or Britain today” (Dinshaw 11). Dinshaw fails to take into account that first wave feminists examined female characters to understand what was lacking in their present society. Without female characters to critique, even flawed characters, first wave feminists would have had to start with their own experiences. While I agree it would not make sense to
impose modern feminist values on Queen Guenevere, that does not mean she cannot serve as a basis for comparison, or even an inspiration, to first wave feminists.

The differences in how Queen Guenevere reacts to King Arthur’s and Mordred’s proposals of marriage highlight the decorum expected of a medieval queen. Early in *Le Morte D’Arthur* Guenevere is often subjected to the choices of the men around her and has very little agency as displayed by Guenevere’s arranged marriage. Before Guenevere is married to King Arthur she is not shown and has no input on the decision. Her father makes the arrangements, “and Merlin went forth unto King Leodegrance of Cameliard, and told him of the desires of the king that he would have unto his wife Guenevere his daughter” (Malory 64). The first time King Arthur meets Guenevere is their wedding day. This is the complete opposite of how Guenevere reacts to, and takes action to avoid, Mordred’s proposal towards the end of the book. In addition, the way Mordred addresses Queen Guenevere, whose station is clearly above him, shows the lack of power women had in direct confrontation, “…and there he took the Queen Guenevere, and said plainly that he would wed her which was his uncle's wife and his father's wife” (Malory 377). Rather than request her hand in marriage or express any sympathy for the Queen who believes her husband has just died, Guenevere is told that Mordred will marry her. Guenevere accepts King Arthur’s proposal even without meeting him, but when Mordred demands her hand in marriage Guenevere ensures she has a choice.

The way Guenevere is written out of scenes where she is central to the plot in favor of the male perspective shows Malory’s focus on the men, not a lack of regard for Guenevere. Queen Guenevere is introduced through King Arthur, who has yet to meet her, “I love Guenevere the king's daughter, Leodegrance of the land of Cameliard, the which holdeth in his house the Table Round that ye told he had of my father Uther. And this damosel is the most valiant and fairest
lady that I know living, or yet that ever I could find” (Malory 64). Guenevere’s reputation precedes her even though she is not shown in the scene.

Guenevere undoubtedly plays a crucial role in *Le Morte D’Arthur*, though this is presented to the reader in the form of King Arthur’s and her knights’ dedication and not her own voice. When Guenevere holds a feast for the knights and one of them, Patrisse, is murdered by a poisoned apple, “Sir Mador stood still afore the king, and ever he appealed the queen of treason; for the custom was such that time that all manner of shameful death was called treason” (Malory 281). The reader understands Guenevere is present, but her reaction to being accused is never shown. The rest of the chapter focuses on arranging a knight to fight for the queen. Malory tends to convey Queen Guenevere’s importance through the actions of her husband and knights, but he fails to expose the reader to Guenevere’s perspective. Guenevere’s reaction, let alone her perspective, may have provided first wave feminists a better understanding of the expectations of medieval women.

In contrast, the Queen goes a maying scene was pivotal to Guenevere’s character because it was one of the rare times he gave her dialogue, “last, then for pity and sorrow she cried Sir Meliagrance: Slay not my noble knights, and I will go with thee upon this covenant, that thou save them, and suffer them not to be no more hurt, with this, that they be led with me wheresoever thou leadest me, for I will rather slay myself than I will go with thee, unless that these my noble knights may be in my presence” (Malory 320). While Guenevere doesn’t speak often in *Le Morte D’Arthur*, when she does, she is the embodiment of a level-headed, regal queen. She speaks eloquently and handles delicate situations, like finding a way to save her knights and keep them with her, with ease. Even when heartbroken, Malory’s Guenevere still keeps her composure. When Lancelot returns from the Grail Quest, many women are asking for
him to be their champion. This upsets Guenevere to the point she says, “Lancelot, now I well understand that thou art a false recreant knight and a common lecher, and thou lovest and holdest other ladies, and by thou hast disdain and scorn…I discharge thee from this court” (Malory 277). While emotionally motivated, Guenevere explains to Lancelot why she is discharging him in a proper manner. It is away from the other knights and spares King Arthur anything Lancelot may divulge. He grants her wish and leaves that night. This interaction, and specifically the fact it is dialogue, requires readers to empathize with Guenevere and see the logic in between the lines. Thomas Hanks explains, “Most readers of Malory are conditioned by the speed and simplicity of his narration to expect a similar lack of complexity in his dialogue. We tend to read his work for its action, and to take the words at face value. But… we must respond more slowly, more thoughtfully, to his dialogue.” (Hanks 11). Malory doesn’t need to explicitly state Guenevere’s pain in this scene—he’s already set it up by explaining their long-standing romance and the betrayal Guenevere feels when Lancelot begins to fight as other women’s champion. Lancelot’s decision not to reassure Guenevere of his love and instead justify his actions forces her hand. It is important to consider that Malory’s Guenevere is not acting rashly in either situation; her phrasing and clarity in the above scenes show her intelligence and ability to remain calm in emotionally charged situations.

When Guenevere is able to make decisions, they align with the virtues illustrated by Christine’s *The Book of the City of Ladies*. One of the honorable women Christine mentions is Lavinia, Daughter of King Latinus. When threatened after her husband’s death, Lavinia flees her kingdom and hides from her step-son (Christine 86). Similarly, when confronted with Mordred’s demand to marry him, Guenevere cannot challenge him directly, so she uses her wits to foil the marriage: “Then she desired of Sir Mordred for to go to London, to buy all manner of things that
longed unto the wedding. And because of her fair speech Sir Mordred trusted her well enough, and gave her leave to go. And so when she came to London she took the Tower of London, and suddenly in all haste possible she stuffed it with all manner of victual, and well garnished it with men, and so kept it” (Malory 377). Guenevere’s choice to protect herself, even without the guidance of her husband or any of the knights, shows she too is doing what respectable medieval women in her situation should. Guenevere displays this level of respectability again when she joins a convent at the end of the book. In this scene, Guenevere displays both the highest amount of agency provided to medieval women, as well as a significant, positive, moral turn. When King Arthur has died, Guenevere is left with a choice: marry Lancelot and rule with him, or go to a convent. She chooses the latter, “then the queen stole away, and five ladies with her, and so she went to Almesbury; and there she let make herself a nun, and ware white clothes and black, and great penance she took, as ever did sinful lady in this land, and never creature could make her merry; but lived in fasting, prayers, and alms-deeds, that all manner of people marvelled how virtuously she was changed” (Malory 389). Guenevere’s decision to honor her dead husband and repent for her affair with Lancelot takes Christine’s advice to widowed women a step further, “be humble and long-suffering and the grace of God will be magnified in you…As for you widowed ladies, be respectable in the way you dress, speak and hold yourselves. Be devout in your words and deeds, prudent in the way you run your affairs, and patient, strong and resilient in the face of suffering and aggravation, for you will have sore need of such qualities” (Christine 239). Guenevere’s penance in the convent has such a profound impact on her character, which to this point was seen as corrupted by her affair with Lancelot, that her people are astonished. In accordance with Christine’s advice for widowed women to dress respectably, a nun’s habit and dress cannot be seen as anything other than modest. Ellie Crookes notes, “The fact that
Guinevere’s newfound religiosity is autonomously orchestrated is particularly significant (she ‘lete make herself a nunne,’ she ‘toke uppon her’ great penance), as it depicts the queen not as a figure cowed and forced into a cloister, but as a woman with personal agency, actively repenting her past ‘sinful’ actions and setting herself on a new and holy path. In Malory’s hands, Guinevere arguably becomes a symbol of the power of Christian absolution” (Crookes 125). Through her devotion to God and separation from Lancelot, Guenevere reclaims her virtue.

Christine also spends time recounting the tale of The Blessed Virgin Euphrosyne whose dying wish is identical to Guenevere’s. When faced with the prospect of marriage, Euphrosyne flees to a monastery and lives there until her death, when her last request is that the man closest to her bury her body (Christine 228). Similarly, Guinevere wants to be buried next to the man she is closest to, King Arthur; “the ladies [of the convent] told Sir Launcelot that Queen Guenevere told them all or she passed, that Sir Launcelot had been priest near a twelvemonth, And hither he cometh as fast as he may to fetch my corpse; and beside my lord, King Arthur, he shall bury me” (Malory 394). It is with her final act Guenevere solidifies her morality. By not seeing Lancelot again, she is faithful to King Arthur even after he passes.

Guenevere is not a feminist character, but given she was written by Malory in the 15th century she doesn’t need to be. Instead, it is crucial that she is, by the medieval standards outlined in The Book of the City of Ladies, a virtuous woman. The characteristics that seem antifeminist, like having decisions made for her and not being the focus of the action, add to her standing as an exemplary medieval queen. Her eloquence and forethought, when shown, give her agency within the rigid structure of her station. Guenevere’s decision to avoid Mordred and the temptation Lancelot provides after King Arthur’s death solidifies her as a proto-feminist character. In short, Guenevere’s character arc and moral resolution serve as inspiration to first
wave feminists who examined her character. Blanton notes “those who have been Guinevere’s harshest critics are male; female scholars, by contrast, are more willing to accept Malory’s presentation of Guinevere’s adoption of the religious life and to read her penance as genuine” (Blanton 53). Male scholars’ resistance to Guinevere’s moral turn exemplifies why first wave feminism gave way to second wave; the male gaze in both novels and literary criticism was incredibly limiting to the female experience.

Though written centuries later, T.H. White’s portrayal of Guenever as a reactionary and short-sighted ruler is distinctly less feminist than that of Malory. When White wrote The Once and Future King, first wave feminism was sweeping the United Kingdom where he lived. Women were using men’s writings about women to explore the social confines of their own lives. White’s portrayal of Guenever, from her whiny tone to her lack of redemption takes away any opportunity for her to be a feminist character. White makes two radical decisions that strip Guenever of agency, and in turn her feminist qualities: she is told almost exclusively through the male gaze, often of a male narrator, and the final scene in which she is present leaves her at the mercy of Mordred. The agency and intelligence Malory affords Guenever is omitted from White’s narrative.

White cuts any proposal to Guenever in the first half of his book. Her first mention is in passing, not the focus of the passage, and she remains unnamed. Lancelot reflects on his relationship with King Arthur, “[Lancelot] has already fallen in love with Arthur on the night of the wedding feast” (White 316). The reader is not informed of King Arthur’s opinion on his wife, or how she came to be his wife in the first place. It isn’t until 15 pages later that White cares to introduce the reader to Guenever. He describes her physically and makes no mention of her personality, “he was introduced to Guenever the same evening. There is a story that her hair was
yellow, but it was not. It was so black that it was startling, and her blue eyes, deep and clear had a sort of fearlessness that was startling too” (White 331). This objectification of Guenever is a far cry from her enticing reputation in Malory. Guenevere is respected, and while it is mentioned she is beautiful, it is ultimately that she is “the most valiant and fairest lady” (Malory 64) that makes Arthur propose. Where Malory introduces Guenever a little over 60 pages into his epic, White leaves Guenever out until over halfway through his text. Reducing Guenever to a pretty prize rather than a respectable woman strips her of both dignity and feminist quality. This Guenever cannot be feminist because she has no ability to outwit Mordred or repent in White’s novel. Earlier in the novel White seems to foreshadow Guenever’s decision to join a convent, “Nay, Launcelot, said the queen, wit thou well I will never live after thy days, but an thou be slain I will take my death as meekly for Jesu Christ's sake as ever did any Christian queen” (White 343). This statement seems to align with Malory’s Guenever—she is devout in her faith and refuses to run away with Lancelot; however, White completely disregards this statement in favor of a tragic ending. The final scene where Guenever is present rather than talked about ends with her remaining silent and Mordred has the last vile words, “Yes. My father committed incest with my mother. Don’t you think it would be a pattern, Jenny, if I were to answer it by marrying my father’s wife?” (White 616). The agency and moral fortitude Malory granted Guenever is lost, and the prospect of White’s Guenever being a feminist character along with it.

White’s choice to omit Guenever’s reaction to being accused of treason is even less feminist than Malory because he does so through a male narrator. “Poison is a bad weapon. It went astray in this case, as it often does, and an Irish knight called Patrick ate the apple which was intended for Gawaine…Everybody knew of Gawaine’s foible. His family had never been
favourites with the now unpopular Queen. She herself had given the dinner…Sir Madore de la Porte—more pompous than the rest, or more malevolent, or more of a stickler—ended by voicing the thought which was in every mind. He accused the Queen of treason” (White 480). White further removes the reader from the emotion of the scene by narrating the events rather than showing how they unfolded. Sprague notes this distance from Guenevere is common for all of White’s work “the tone in which White discusses women has a resemblance to the tone in which he discusses…the idiosyncrasies of different aircraft. White knows he is writing about women, but they seem to be worthy of his attention as creatures of another species, not as the female of his own kind” (Sprague 111). Like Malory, Guenever’s reaction is completely absent. Where in Malory this forced male perspective was a loss for first wave feminists, for White it becomes a slight against what second wave feminists were fighting for.

Whereas Malory gave her the space to speak when she goes a-maying, White omits Guenever’s dialogue. White doesn’t allow Guenever to deescalate the situation; instead he tells the event from the perspective of an omniscient narrator who recounts the message the boy explained to Lancelot, “at that moment the messenger arrived…It was about the Queen who had gone a-maying—for it was the first of May…Well, they had been riding home cheerfully, all chattering and bloomy and branchy, when sir Meliagrance had leaped up at their feet, in an ambush…[Guenever] had beckoned the little page, who had a fresh and fast pony, and she had secretly slipped him her ring, with a message for Lancelot” (White 498). White silences Guenever instead of affording her the opportunity Malory did to use her charm to her advantage. In the instances where Guenever does speak, it supports the patriarchal male gaze.

White adds exposition surrounding Guenever and affords her more dialogue, but it frames her not as a regal queen, but a tempestuous, irritable woman. White sets up her absurd
behavior in multiple scenes leading up to her main fight with Lancelot. When Guenever is lamenting over Lancelot leaving after he leaves for the grail quest, “She was not an insensate piece of property, to be taken up or laid down at his convenience. You could not give up a human heart as you could give up drinking. The drink was yours, and you could give it up: but your lover’s soul was not your own: it was not at your disposal; you had a duty towards it.” (White 475). Her fixation on their tiff after Lancelot leaves, and White’s choice to have her focus on anger rather than the sorrow Malory describes in this moment, makes Guenever come off as a child stamping her foot at something she doesn’t like. It is certainly not the calm or reserved demeanor expected of a medieval queen. This is seen again midway through the novel where White adds a scene not present in Malory. He makes a point to mention they often fight, and usually over things that are inconsequential.

“Your toes are like the little pigs which went to market.” [Lancelot]
“I wish you would not say things like that. It is not respectful.” [Guinevere]
“Respectful!”
“Yes, respectful. Why shouldn’t you be respectful? I am the Queen, after all.”
“Do you seriously mean to tell me that I am supposed to treat you with respect? I suppose I am to kneel on one knee all the time and kiss your hand?”
“Why not?”
“I wish you wouldn’t be so selfish. If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it is being treated like a possession.”
“Selfish indeed!” (White 381-382)

The tone of this interaction frames Guenever in a negative light—she makes a fuss over a simple statement. The heart of her argument rings true for a queen: Lancelot should be more respectful of her station regardless of their relationship. Guenever’s irrationality comes to head
Watkins, 14
during her final fight with Lancelot. ‘The Queen began pointing at the door. She made stabbing
movements at it with her finger, and, in her trembling, her hair became to come down. She
looked hideous. “Get out! Get out! …Get out of my castle,” screamed the Queen at the top of her
voice. “Never show your face in it again. Your evil, ugly, beastlike face.”…When the door was
closed, Guenever sat down. She dropped her tattered handkerchief. Then—slowly, deeply,
primitively—she began to cry. She put her face in her hands and throbbed with sorrow’ (White,
395-396). The composure Malory’s Guenevere displayed is completely lacking in White.
Guenever rapidly shifts from fierce anger to sorrow with no clear explanation why. Without
Guenever’s perspective, or at the very least a clear reason for her emotional shift, Guenever
reads as unreasonable and moody. Guenever’s consistent emotional escalation, coupled with
Lancelot’s reaction suggests Guenever is simply a ridiculous woman Lancelot chooses to put up
with.

T. H. White published The Once and Future King in its entirety in 1958. In the early
1900s, women were just beginning to examine the inherent power structure they operated within,
especially in heterosexual couples. By the time The Once and Future King was published,
feminist women were focusing on the shortcomings of 19th and 20th century female characters
written by men, as well as the lack of female authors. Despite this climate, White still ends his
novel with a silent, obedient Guenever. This is a prime example of what Mary Eagleton explains
as the second wave feminist focus in A History of Feminist Literary Criticism, “the American
canon is largely unreadable for women since so many texts demonstrate man’s power over
women, while the narrative strategies of these texts oblige the woman reader to identify as male.
The problem of American culture, says Fetterley, is not the emasculation of men but the
‘immasculation of women’” (Eagleton 107). Stripping Guenever of her ability to avoid an
incestuous relationship and reside in a convent after King Arthur’s death is an undeniable “immasculation” in favor of spectacle. By only providing a consistent male perspective, readers cannot identify with Guenever because she lacks the dimension White’s men do.

The critical reception of White’s *The Once and Future King* when it was released in its entirety varied. Male critics raved over the novel, but once the final installment was released female critics made no comment. One male critic has the same view as White, “Arthur paid in woe for the sin of incest, but he also paid for the fault of innocence. The moral of his story, as related by Mr. White, is that innocence and good intents are not enough in the struggle of good against evil, of right against might. There must also be wisdom. Arthur failed in his attempt to establish virtue upon earth. But, as the book’s title suggests, Mr. White finds it hard to believe that he will not return—*rex quondam atque futurus*” (Redman 1958). This reviewer focuses entirely on the men in the tale and makes no mention of Queen Guenever. In contrast, a female critic wrote a few years before White’s final installment *Candle in the Wind* was published, “After reading “The Ill Made Knight” anyone who has not read the previous books in this series derived from the “Morte d’Arthur” will probably want to do so, for it is amusing and thoughtful as well…The book does not carry on to the end of the complicated and tragic story of Lancelot and the Queen, and the doom that overshadows them all, but ends with the touching incident of the cure of Sir Urre of Hungary” (Sturch 273). Her positivity seems to stem from the assumption that if White had kept writing, he would have included the traditional ending from *Le Morte D’Arthur*. It was likely disheartening to discover White’s rushed resolution in the following decade.

T.H. White’s life likely influenced how he wrote Guenever and her romance with Lancelot. When reflecting on White’s autobiography Sadie Stein comments, “White had no
known relationships with men or women. Townsend Warner speculates that White was “a homosexual and a sado-masochist,” although others disagree on the question of his sexuality. In any case, he was profoundly alone; Townsend Warner wrote, “Notably free from fearing God, he was basically afraid of the human race” (Stein 2014). White’s isolation likely contributed to his lackluster descriptions of love and emotion. White presents Lancelot’s love in the same way a collector might show off a prize painting—he is only interested in Guenever’s beauty, not her mind.

In many ways Bradley was a product of her time, and Gwenhwyfar’s characterization in The Mists of Avalon reflects the duality in feminist theory during the 1980’s. When the Mists of Avalon was initially published in 1983, there was a renewed focus on literature written by women. “On the one hand, there was the recuperation of women omitted from standard male-dominated accounts, and on the other, a consciousness, not just of women’s oppression, but also of the degree to which women resisted and challenged their position” (Carr, 125). Bradley’s novel explores the perspectives of several women present in Malory’s Le Morte D’Arhur, and Gwenhwyfar is a realistic, well rounded character, but not one representative of all women. This individuality is magnified by Gwenhwyfar’s difference in opinion and action from the other women of the novel, a distinction that second wave feminists adored.

Bradley’s choice to introduce Gwenhwyfar as a child instead of a grown woman adds a level of realism; women do not appear fully grown out of thin air. This element of realism fulfills one aspect of what third wave feminists were looking for: a true view of women unclouded by the patriarchy. When Lancelot and Morgaine find Gwenhwyfar in the woods she is a scared, lost, child. It is in this moment Bradley establishes Lancelot’s love for Gwenhwyfar, “Morgaine, her heart sinking, saw that [Lancelot] now looked upon the stranger as he had looked at her only
minutes before, with love, desire, almost worship” (Bradley 158). Malory never speaks of Guenever’s childhood, suggesting she was only of worth when she had established herself as a woman worthy of Arthur. Bradley effortlessly sets up both Gwenhwyfar’s adultery with Lancelot and an authentic glimpse of her initially timid nature.

Bradley took into account Gwenhwyfar’s young age, lack of experience, and sheltered life to add not only Gwenhwyfar’s perspective, but an element of truth to her experience that speaks to the second wave feminist concerns about equal and accurate representation in literature. Where Malory focused on King Arthur and Merlin, Bradley shows Gwenhwyfar’s journey, and more importantly her reasonable concerns about being married to a man she has never met. “The knot in her belly pulled tighter and tighter…She was not herself, there was nothing for herself, she was only some property of a High King who had not even bothered to come and see the woman they were sending along with all the horses and gear” (Bradley 268). Gwenhwyfar’s reactions are appropriate for her situation, and this creates a believable character. While this consideration undoubtedly makes Bradley a feminist writer, it fails to establish Gwenhwyfar as a feminist character.

Bradley’s realistic depiction of Gwenhwyfar, and her growth throughout the novel, is in a feminist effort to humanize her. Towards the end of the novel, rather than proposing to Gwenhwyfar Bradley’s Mordred threatens her. In The Mists of Avalon Mordred is part of the party that catches Gwenhwyfar and Lancelot together “‘Lie still,” he said, “There is a knife at your throat my lady’” (Bradley 854). Bradley increases the stakes of the encounter and allows Gwenhwyfar to take a risk at knifepoint—warn Lancelot of the intruders hidden in the room. This agency in the face of danger, and Gwenhwyfar’s contradiction of Mordred’s direct order
gives her power. Malory’s Guenevere couldn’t refuse Mordred, but Bradley’s Gwenhwyfar is brave. Even outnumbered, she is determined to give Lancelot and herself the best chance of survival.

Bradley omits Guenevere being accused of killing Patrisse entirely because it doesn’t give any realistic merit to the women of her novel or in the real world. If Bradley had given Lancelot the opportunity to come save Gwenhwyfar like Malory did, she would be feeding into the patriarchal idea women need men to defend them. This choice highlights Bradley’s true intent—to show that even queens are individuals. We see this clearly with her radical changes to the scene with Meliagrance. Gwenhwyfar makes the choice to go speak with Meliagrance at his castle. Once captured and assaulted she thinks, “Morgaine would never have fallen into his hands, she would have guessed it was a trap; and she would have used that little dagger of hers, too—she might not have killed him, but he would have lost his desire, and perhaps his ability to ravish any woman!” (Bradley 516). With this comparison Bradley shifts the focus from Malory’s tales of Lancelot appearing just in the nick of time, to how different women approach dangerous situations. While Bradley does ultimately let Lancelot rescue Gwenhwyfar, it is more truthful in his inability to save her before she comes to any harm.

Bradley uses the fight about Lancelot leaving as an opportunity to show their love through mutual vulnerability and highlight Lancelot’s, albeit not ill intentioned, inability to see things from Gwenhwyfar’s perspective. The tone of their discussion is somber and painful, not angry. When Gwenhwyfar and Lancelot fight about him leaving it is not because she casts him out. Instead, Lancelot is trying to be noble and avoid his best friend’s wife to spare either of them the torment of seeing each other. He confesses he had moments where he wished he had died in
battle so he would not have to watch Gwenhwyfar and Arthur together. She responds with her frustration at being Arthur’s wife “at least you can choose whether to stay or go, but I was given into Arthur’s hands without even so much as a ‘will you or no?’ Nor can I rise and ride forth from court when things go not to my will, but I must stay within walls and do what is expected of me” (Bradley 432). While Gwenhwyfar frames this as the confines of her marriage, it is evident Bradley is also making a point about the societal view of queens. Even in Malory, Guenevere is not a rounded woman, rather a representation of an unrealistic standard. That Guenevere only has the flaw of adultery, and even then, she absolves herself before her death.

Gwenhwyfar’s’ view of her position as queen foreshadows the end of the novel where Bradley uses Morgaine to show how Le Morte D’Arthur fed into a patriarchal view of women: both women are married, both are cheating on their husbands, both husbands are aware of the affair. Morgaine is free to do as she pleases with her husband’s leave, but Gwenhwyfar is the queen, so she would have been killed if there was proof of her affair with Lancelot, entirely because Arthur could not be seen as a cuckolded king. This hypocrisy is magnified by the fact Morgaine has committed incest twice, once with Arthur and again by sleeping with Urrien and his son Accolon (Bradley 742). In this light, the strength in Gwenhwyfar’s commitment to the convent is completely different to that of Malory’s Guenever, “When I had freedom, she thought, I desired it not, and feared it. And now, when I have learned to love it and long for it, I am renouncing it in the name of my love. Dimly she felt this was right—the acceptable gift and sacrifice to bring before God. But as she walked through the nuns’ cloister, she looked at the walls closing her in, trapping her” (Bradley 864). Where Malory’s Guenevere found peace and redemption in joining the convent, Gwenhwyfar simply trades the confines of being the king’s wife for the walls of Glastonbury. The agency and freedom Ellie Crookes applauded in Malory’s
Guenever is reframed as a prison for Bradley’s Gwenhyfar. Gwenhyfar trades in a patriarchal structure at Arthur’s side for what Bradley argues is an equally patriarchal, male dominated, religion. By making this decision feel like a last resort to Gwenhyfar, a moment that brought closure in Malory takes on a darker, and less feminist air.

Like White, Bradley makes some significant changes to Malory’s plot, but her feminist aim is evident throughout. In White’s introduction to Guenever, she is seen through Lancelot’s gaze, and instantly objectified. Bradley instead affords Morgaine’s perspective, “She was very young and dazzlingly pretty; she seemed all white and gold, her skin pale as ivory just stained with coral, her eyes the palest sky-blue…somehow she seemed to shed tears without any ugly distortion of her face, so that, weeping, she only looked prettier than ever” (Bradley 156). Morgaine’s observations have no sexual undertone, instead she begins to compare her own appearance to that of Gwenhyfar. In this moment Bradley provides the reader both a physical description to better envision the character as well as insight into the insecurities Morgaine has. Like all women present in her novel, Morgaine is humanized by her range of emotions.

While *The Once and Future King* and *The Mists of Avalon* both lack the Tower of London scene, Bradley omits it for more feminist reasons. White uses Mordred’s incestuous desire as a fate that Guenever can’t possibly escape. He seems to perpetuate, intentionally or not, the idea women are consistently subject to the patriarchy with no hope of escape. In contrast, Bradley clearly states that Mordred has no sexual interest in Gwenhyfar (Bradley 854). She does, however, give Gwenhyfar a scene where she fortifies herself in a single room in Caerleon. The Saxons are preparing to attack, but after two miscarriages she refuses to risk losing her child on the journey to Camelot. This is the first time we see her speak out directly
against Arthur, “I will stay with no more than one waiting-woman and a midwife, my lord, but I will ride nowhere—not so far as to the banks of the river—before our son is born!” (Bradley 380). The message Bradley conveys in this scene is exactly the opposite of White: women have the ability to speak out, and should.

When Bradley published The Mists of Avalon it was an instant sensation, but it was also ahead of its time. Diana Paxson’s observes, “One of the aspects of Mists of Avalon which was initially most striking and attractive to readers is its focus on the female point of view. By telling the Arthurian legend from the perspective of its women, Bradley 'reclaims' a story which had always been driven by the actions of the male characters...In that regard, the book is a product of the same school of thought that in recent years has led to a re-examination of women's roles throughout history” (Paxson, 118). Bradley’s narrative fits much better in light of what third wave feminists strive for: intersectionality and self-discovery.

Malory’s Guenevere cannot be a feminist character because of when she was written, though she is a reborn, virtuous women by the end of his novel. T. H. White’s Guenever is not feminist as evidenced by her portrayal as irrational and without agency. Bradley’s Gwenhwyfar is far more realistic, and she is not intended to be representative of the best qualities of all queens, unlike Malory and White. While Gwenhwyfar would not exist without her previous iterations, her weaknesses become her feminist strength.
Works Cited


