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King Stags and Fairy Queens

Modern religious myth in
Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*

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Introduction

The Mists of Avalon is a retelling of the Arthurian saga, seen from the perspective of the female characters. Set at the time of the Saxon invasions, it focuses on the conflict between the Old Religion of the Druids and priestesses of the Goddess, and the spreading Christianity. Christianity is gaining strength, and the only hope of the pagans in Avalon is to put a pagan king on the throne, namely Arthur. To gain the loyalty of the people who follow the Old Religion, Arthur undergoes a ritual kingmaking and makes the sacred marriage with the land. In return for the sacred sword Excalibur he swears to honour Christian and pagan alike, but years later when he breaks that oath, the people of Avalon plot to bring him down and put one of their own on the throne.

In this essay, I am going to focus on the influences Bradley has used to construct her historical setting, specifically the pre-Christian religion that she describes in the novel. During the 19th and 20th centuries different views of pre-Christian religions emerged, some of which have been proved to be false. The view that Bradley presents in *The Mists of Avalon* was introduced by some groundbreaking but controversial scholars. Although their theories have been refuted they were adopted by religious movements, and have been used in the historical myth of modern neopagans. Since I find Bradley's historical setting very believable, it is interesting to study how this religious aspect affects the ideology of the novel.

Marion Zimmer Bradley (1930-1999) is best known for her numerous novels in the genres of science fiction and fantasy, but she also wrote gay and lesbian fiction. Even though she was not a feminist writer, her novels often deal with the situation of women and issues of sexuality ("Marion Zimmer Bradley"). In the Acknowledgements of *The Mists of Avalon*, she lists different sources used for the novel, among others *The Golden Bough* by J. G. Frazer, the works of Margaret Murray, books about Gardnerian Wicca and *The Spiral Dance* by Starhawk (vii-viii).

Marion Zimmer Bradley has combined two myths in *The Mists of Avalon*: the Arthurian myth and the myth of origin of modern neopagan movements. In *Mythology in the Modern Novel*, White outlines four methods of using myths in a novel. I would put *The Mists of Avalon* in the first category, "the complete renarration of a classical myth," where the author "names his chosen mythological characters and settings, so the myths involved are not the subject of doubt" (52). We have to take into consideration that neither the Arthurian myth nor the neopagan myth of origin are classical myths, and that the neopagan myth of origin does

not actually have characters as such. Nonetheless, my opinion is that both myths are clearly stated in the novel. Another argument for this interpretation is that Bradley has used the actual historical setting of the myth rather than a contemporary one.

The above mentioned neopagan myth of origin is referred to by Carrol L. Fry as “the Neo-Pagan monomyth” (9), while Starhawk calls it “the Origin Story of Contemporary Goddess Worship” (4). There exists a wide variety of neopagan groups, and it is difficult to determine exactly which of them use this myth. Other neopagan groups than Goddess worshippers draw on the myth, but far from all, and even within these groups there are many that do not. Because of these difficulties in determining who uses it, I will use the term “the neopagan myth of origin” in a general sense. The myth is to a great extent based on the research of Egyptologist and anthropologist Margaret Murray, and the archaeological tradition of the 20th century (Allen pars. 8, 16-21).

Margaret Murray began her career as an Egyptologist, but during World War I she started to research the history of witchcraft in Great Britain (Simpson 89). By using records from witch trials and other contemporary sources, she concluded that the witches belonged to a surviving pre-Christian fertility cult that was in fact the “ancient religion of Western Europe” (1921, 12). “Witch” was the name the Christians used for the pagan worshippers, and “the Devil” was what they called their god, since “the God of the old religion becomes the Devil of the new” (1931, 9). Her theories are mostly centred around the pagan god and the nature of the worship, but she presented other hypotheses as well. One of them concerns fairies, who she claimed were a dwarf race that once inhabited Europe and survived until the 16th century (1921, 238; 1931, 34). Another of her subject matters is “the Divine Victim,” inspired by James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. Murray’s research was very criticised and disputed, as it was “based on deeply flawed methods and illogical arguments” (Simpson 89). Despite this, her ideas have survived, partly because she in 1929 wrote the entry on “Witchcraft” for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, in which she presented her own theories as undisputed truth. This made them available to the public, and they consequently had a great influence on popular culture. Gerald Gardner, who founded the religion of Wicca, also adopted her ideas, which meant a lot for their survival.

Gardner claimed that he was initiated into a coven (a term for a gathering of witches, resurrected by Murray from the trial records) of witches that had preserved the religion for centuries. Today it is believed that he created the religion himself, inspired by different sources. One of the most important sources he used was Murray’s theory of a surviving primitive fertility cult. Furthermore, he borrowed many elements from Murray’s description

of the witches' worship of the pagan god. He made one important change, however. While Murray's theories concern the worship of the Horned God, Gardner emphasised the importance of the Goddess to the point that she became the central divinity (Simpson 92). This is consistent with the archaeological tradition from the 19th century until the 1980's, where archaeologists frequently found evidence of ancient matriarchal cultures and worship of a "single goddess figure from antiquity" (Allen pars. 18-19). As a result, Wicca became attractive to feminists, and soon new feminist traditions appeared. One of the most influential writers of these traditions is Starhawk, although she prefers to call her religion Witchcraft, not Wicca (Allen pars. 1-2).

In her book *The Spiral Dance* from 1979, Starhawk wrote a chapter about the neopagan myth of origin. Although she described this myth as a legend, she presented it as the history of witchcraft. With time, as more and more scholars have rejected the facts of the neopagan myth of origin, even neopagans have begun to view it as myth, not history (Allen pars. 24-26). A surprisingly large part of Starhawk's version of the neopagan myth of origin can be traced back to Murray. While Murray's aim was to demystify medieval witchcraft and to discuss it rationally from a new and refreshing point of view, Starhawk uses Murray's theories as a religious myth to lend authenticity to her beliefs. In *The Spiral Dance*, she claimed that Witchcraft is "perhaps the oldest religion extant in the West" (26).

This naturally raises the question why Bradley chose to use this controversial myth, which can be seen as either scholarship or mythology, in her novel. In her Acknowledgements, she stated that "scholars differ so much that I make no apology for selecting among varying sources, those that best fit the needs of fiction" (viii). I do not think that this is the whole truth, however. If she, as she claimed, regarded the myth as scholarship, she could easily have found scholars contemporary with Murray that refuted her theories because of her flawed methods. Since she writes about a religion very similar to modern neopaganism in an actual historical setting, it would be easy to assume that her motive was similar to Starhawk's; she used the neopagan myth of origin in her novel because she wanted to give modern neopagan religions some sort of authenticity. Her use of Murray's theories, which I will discuss later in the essay, supports this. There is no way to know for certain if Bradley herself was a neopagan, or if she agreed with the values she portrays in *The Mists of Avalon*. According to Bradley's sister-in-law Diana Paxson, Bradley was trained in the school of Dion Fortune, a famous occultist who has had considerable influence on neopaganism, and used that knowledge in *The Mists of Avalon* (qtd. in Hildebrand 95). At the same time, Bradley stated in an interview with Carrol L. Fry that she did not know that much about

neopaganism and that she was a practicing Christian, although she had had an interest in the occult since an early age (Fry 76-77).

At first glance, it is quite obvious that Bradley's pre-Christian religion is very similar to modern neopaganism. The examples of this would be too many to include in this essay. Fry writes that "Paganism as it exists in the novel is clearly modeled on Neo Paganism as it is most frequently practiced today" (73). Hildebrand thinks the same thing, and both authors see this as an ideological statement, because the message of the neopagan myth of origin is that it is not new, but has survived since ancient times (Fry 75; Hildebrand 111-112).

In this essay I will study more closely how Bradley has used the theories of Margaret Murray. I will focus on the aspects of the novel that concern the portrayed history of paganism. The questions I will try to answer are: How has Bradley used the theories of Margaret Murray and the neopagan myth of origin? What is their function and importance in the plot? What effect does this have on the ideological statement of the novel? To do this I will discuss three aspects of the novel: the sacrifice of the Divine King, fairies as keepers of the Old Religion, and female power and religion. I aim to prove that Murray's theories and neopagan mythology are very important in the novel, and that Bradley's use of them in creating the historical background gives the novel a religious message.

Sacrifice of the Divine King

From historical accounts of accused witches Murray concluded that the pagan god was incarnate in a man, woman or animal, and that the god often dressed in the skin of an animal (1921, 12). In *The God of the Witches* she presented evidence of numerous gods from various places in the world that have the common attribute of horns, which led her to believe that it was in fact worship of the same deity: the Horned God. She traced the worship of the Horned God back to the late Palaeolithic period, when he was depicted on the wall of a cave in France. The man is described as wearing the skin of a stag and wearing its antlers on his head (9). She also declared that "the stag-man is the most important of the horned figures of the Palaeolithic period" (10). Later in the book she lists many different animal disguises for the god, the bull and the stag being the most common (20).

Bradley has chosen to depict the god, called the Horned One, as a stag. In ritual, his place is taken by real men, wearing horns and other attributes, described as actually becoming the god. At Arthur's kingmaking, his sister Morgaine describes how the tribesmen paint "the

youth's body from head to toe with blue woad, covering him with a cloak of untanned raw skins, smearing his body with the deer fat. On his head they [fix] antlers" (200). She also describes a cave with paintings of a stag-man, similar to those that Murray used to prove the Palaeolithic worship of the Horned God.

Murray claimed that she had found convincing evidence that the god was sacrificed in the primitive cult of Western Europe (1931, 122). Originally, the god was incarnate in the king or chief of the tribe, and thus the king was sacrificed. Later he was replaced with a human substitute, first a volunteer, then a criminal, and in later times an animal was used (1931, 122; 1921, 160). In *The God of the Witches*, Murray stated that the purpose of the ritual is that the incarnate god "becomes the giver of fertility to all his kingdom. When the divine man begins to show signs of age he is put to death lest the spirit of God should also grow old and weaken" (123). In Britain, this supposedly happened every seven years. Murray claimed that this tradition survived in secret, and counts among the martyrs of the Witch-cult William Rufus, Thomas à Becket and Joan of Arc.

In *The Mists of Avalon*, this practice is described as almost extinct, but traces of it remain with the Tribes who still follow the Old Religion. Before Arthur's kingmaking, Morgaine's aunt Viviane describes it like this:

In the ancient days, long before the wisdom and the religion of the Druids [...], the fairy people [...] lived here on the shores of the inland sea, and before they learned how to plant the barley and reap it again, they lived by gathering the fruits of the land, and by hunting the deer. And in those days there were no king among them, but only a queen [...] And since they lived by hunting, their queen and priestess learned to call the deer to her, and ask of their spirits that they sacrifice themselves and die for the life of the Tribe. But sacrifice must be given for sacrifice—the deer died for the Tribe, and one of the Tribe must in turn die for the life of the deer, or at least take the chance that the deer could, if they chose, take his life in exchange for their own. [...] So the Mother of the Tribe chose, every year, her consort. [...] [W]hen the year was past—every year in those times—he would put on the antlers of the deer, and wear a robe of untanned deerskin so that the deer would think him one of their own, and he would run with the herd as the Mother Huntress put the spell upon them to run. But by this time the herd had chosen their King Stag, and sometimes the King Stag would smell a stranger, and turn on him. And then the Horned One would die. [...] Well, time has moved on, [...] and now those old rites are no longer needed, for the barley grows and the sacrifice is bloodless. Only in times of great peril does the Tribe demand such a leader. And Raven has foreseen that this is a time of such peril. [...] [T]he chosen one will be tested by the ancient rite. And if he survives the testing [...] then he will become the Horned One, the King Stag, consort of the Virgin Huntress, crowned with the antlers of the God. (196-97)

In the passage above, the similarities between Murray's Divine Victim and Bradley's sacrificed king are obvious, although Bradley introduces the idea of an exchange with the deer, and a *possible* sacrifice. Another difference is that the sacrifice used to happen every year, instead of every seven years. Earlier in the novel, however, in the prophecy referred to

in the quote above, the priestess Raven speaks of an interval of seven years: “Ah—seven times the Wheel, the Wheel with thirteen spokes, has turned about in the sky ... seven times the Mother has given birth to her dark son ...” (193). There are no other references to an interval of seven years, and it does not have any significance in the story. It is possible that Bradley mentioned it because she wanted her version of the ritual to be compatible with Murray’s.

We know that Ban, High King of Less Britain, made the Great Marriage with the land. Furthermore, Arthur’s father, Uther Pendragon, went through a kingmaking ritual on Dragon Island when he was crowned High King, but he was not tested by the ancient rite, and he did not have to make the Great Marriage with the land. Two reasons are given for this; he was already a warrior, so he did not need to be tested, and the Merlin had already pledged to die for the land, so there was no need for Uther to do the same (119, 188). Arthur, on the other hand, is a young, “unbloodied” boy, and he needs to go through both rites.

The reason for the ritual is to gain the loyalty of the people who follow the Old Religion. Uther describes his own kingmaking as rites “such as no Christian man should know; but the Old People, who were here long before ever the Romans came to these isles, would not acknowledge me king without them” (119). After Arthur has become king, he swears an oath to Avalon “to deal fairly with all men, whether or no they follow the God of the Christians, and always to reverence the Gods of Avalon” (235). This puts Arthur in a difficult position, since the Church wants to destroy all traces of the Old Religion, and Arthur is supposedly a Christian king. In the end, it is Arthur’s pious queen Gwenhwyfar that convinces him to break his oath. Arthur is torn between two forces: the Christians, who want Christianity to be the only religion, and the pagans, who want to continue to practice their own religion. Throughout the novel, Arthur’s inner conflict mirrors the conflict of Britain’s conversion to Christianity.

The ritual is important because it brings on Arthur’s downfall. When Arthur makes the Great Marriage, Morgaine takes the role of the Virgin Huntress, although neither of them recognises each other. Since the ritual is a fertility rite, the inevitable result is a son, Mordred. The reason why Viviane arranged this incestuous union was to “make certain of the royal blood” (189). The son of Arthur and Morgaine would be heir to both Uther Pendragon, which the Christians would recognise, and to Avalon, which the pagans would recognise. Furthermore, Arthur’s love for Morgaine would make her the power behind the throne. The plan fails, however, when Morgaine, horrified to discover herself pregnant with her brother, leaves Avalon for the dubious care of her scheming aunt Morgause. Morgause makes sure that Mordred is estranged from both his parents and has no love for them. Morgaine’s

rejection of Arthur is a large part of the reason why he turns away from Avalon. Towards the end of the novel he tells Morgaine, “What is the Goddess to me? [...] I saw her always in your face, but you turned away from me, and when the Goddess rejected me, I sought another God...” (998). When Arthur breaks his oath to protect the Old Religion, the rulers of Avalon are outraged. They try to remind him of his oath, but their efforts are in vain. Finally, Morgaine challenges him with the help of her lover and champion Accolon.

A phrase that is repeated throughout the book is “what of the King Stag when the young stag is grown?”. Traditionally, when the king grew old he was challenged and defeated by a younger man, and the land was renewed. In this case, Arthur wins and Accolon dies. Later Mordred challenges Arthur, even though he knows it is a lost cause. He says,

For what else was I begotten and born, but for this moment when I challenge you for a cause that is no longer within the borders of this world? I no longer even know why I am to challenge you—only that there is nothing else left in my life but for this hatred. (997)

Arthur manages to kill Mordred, but dies himself from his wounds. Morgaine knows that the days of the Old Religion are past, that it is “the end of an age. [...] [T]he King Stag had killed the young stag, and there would be none after him...” (999).

Another consequence of Arthur’s betrayal is that his court is broken up. When Morgaine finds out that Arthur is going to use the cup of Avalon’s Holy Regalia to celebrate the Christian mass at Pentecost, she takes the role of the Goddess and lets those present drink out of it. Everyone sees a different vision depending on his or her religion. Arthur’s Christian knights are convinced that they have seen the Holy Grail, so they go on a search for it, and the Knights of the Round Table are scattered. This is the beginning of the end of Arthur’s great reign, and consequently the ritual that made Arthur king also brings about his betrayal and downfall.

The motif of the sacrificed king gives the narrative a sense of destiny; the young stag will inevitably grow up, and the King Stag must be sacrificed. Unsurprisingly, the novel ends with a sense of loss; the Old Religion is disappearing and Arthur’s great reign has come to an end.

As mentioned above, the ritual that Arthur participated in was required to gain the loyalty of the Tribes, who are the pagan population in *The Mists of Avalon*. In the quote above, Viviane also mentions the fairy people who lived in Britain in ancient times. In the next section I will examine the different peoples who follow the Old Religion, and show how they are related to each other.

Fairies as keepers of the Old Religion

Murray described fairies as “the descendants of the early people who inhabited northern Europe.” This primitive people used stone in the Neolithic period and metal in the Bronze Age to make their tools and weapons (1931, 34). Successive invasions forced them to live in less hospitable parts of the country, or to live in mounds on heaths and moors, and to stay hidden except at night (1931, 34; 1921, 14). According to Murray the fairies became known as powerful magicians because “the conqueror always regards the religion of the conquered as superior to his own in the arts of evil magic” (1921, 14). By looking at Neolithic skeletal remains, Murray concluded in *The God of the Witches* that fairies were “short in stature, the height of the men being about 5 feet 5 inches and the women proportionately less. They were long-headed and probably had dark complexions” (33). In *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, Murray stated that the cult of this primitive people survived until the 16th century. Witches and fairies were closely connected, in fact the people of the cult, or the fairies, were also known as witches (238). To Murray, the surviving primitive people, the fairies, and the witches (or pagans) were the same.

In *The Mists of Avalon*, there are three kinds of people who could be associated with Murray’s fairies. All three peoples are short and dark, like Murray’s fairies, and while Bradley makes a distinction between them, it is not entirely clear what it is. The three peoples are the Tribes, the Old People and the fairies. Bradley also mentions “the little people” or “the little folk,” and it seems that she thereby sometimes refers to the Old People and sometimes to the Tribes. We know that Murray’s fairies and Bradley’s peoples are the same because of a number of things: their appearance, their primitive tools of an earlier civilisation, and their function as preservers of the Old Religion as well as their close connection to the witches (see fig. 1).

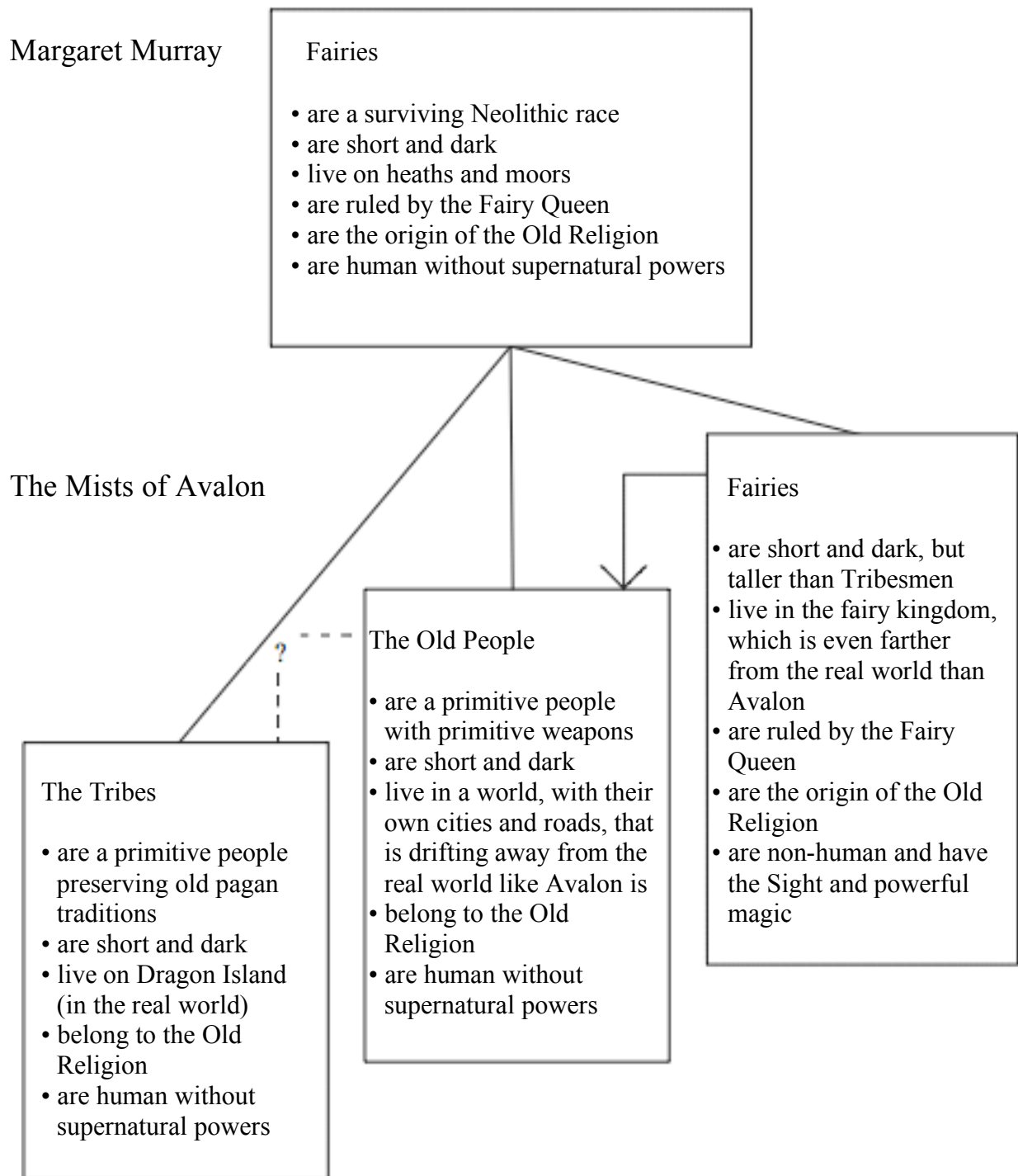


Fig. 1

Sometimes the three groups seem to be different from each other, and at other times they appear to be almost the same. That there is a distinction between the three is made clear in this paragraph: “The Tribes were sworn to follow the banner of the Pendragon [...] and the little folk of the days before the Tribes, they came too, with their bronze axes and flint hatchets and elf-arrows—no more than the fairy folk can they bear cold iron” (478). There are

other instances when there seems to be a difference between them, for example when a fairy is described as “like to one of the little Tribesmen, only taller” (465).

On several occasions it is difficult to know the difference between the peoples, however. Viviane, who is called “[a] fairy woman, indeed: a woman of the Old People” (11), speaks of the Tribes as “[t]he Tribes of the fairy folk” (197). At one point in the novel the “little folk” of the Welsh hills bring Morgaine flowers from the border of the fairy country and she says, “It was not for nothing that I had been given that old name, Morgaine of the Fairies . . . and now they acknowledged me as their priestess and their queen” (681). The Queen of Faerie furthermore tells Morgaine that she “bear[s] the royal line of the Old People, and thus [is her] far kinswoman.” From this I conclude that the Old People are the descendants of the fairies and that the Tribes came later, but Bradley does not clarify how the Tribes are related to the others.

One important difference between the peoples is where they live. Viviane tells her sister at the beginning of the novel that “[t]here are now two Britains [...] [the world of the Christians] [...] and, beside it and behind it, the world where the Great Mother still rules, the world where the Old People have chosen to live and worship” (15). This is the same world as Avalon; it is no longer part of the real world, and it drifts farther and farther away. The fairies live in a country even farther from the real world than Avalon, so far that they are only legend to most people. Lancelot states that “never did I know of living man or woman who had seen either dragon or fairy” (361-362). It is reasonable to assume that the Tribes still live in the real world, because their island, Dragon Island, is invaded by Saxons at the end of the novel, and the people are hunted down and killed.

We find evidence in the novel that Bradley’s Old People, just like Murray’s fairies, are human beings, with similar characteristics. Murray wrote that fairies

had a disconcerting habit of appearing and disappearing when least expected, a habit which seemed magical to the slow-moving heavy-footed agriculturists of the villages. Yet dexterity in taking cover was only natural in a people who must often have owed their lives to quickness of movement and ability to remain motionless. (1931, 36-37)

Bradley’s little dark men have the same ability. When pursued by Arthur, Morgaine tells the men to shatter, and “one by one it was as if they melted into the trees and mists . . . they could move like shadows if they must, and no man alive could find them if they did not want to be found” (864). Both examples describe extraordinary, but not supernatural, abilities.

The fairies are important because they provide a historical background for the novel. They are the source of the Old Religion in ancient times long forgotten, and they preserve it

for all future. They function as a stronghold for the Old Religion, just like Murray's fairies. In *The Mists of Avalon*, the fairies are the only followers of the Old Religion who appear unaffected by the conversion to Christianity; only at the end do we get the impression that their existence might be threatened. They are tangible, yet they do not have the limitations that humans have. Their religion is not dependent on the fallible structures that humans need; the Queen tells us that fairies "know neither Gods nor Goddesses, but only the breast of [their] mother who is beneath [their] feet and above [their] heads, from whom [they] come and to whom [they] go when [their] time is ended" (260). Bradley's fairies are not wholly human, and they are the ancestors to the Royal line of Avalon. It is from them that the priestesses of Avalon have inherited the Sight, i.e. the ability to see into the future and the present. The Queen of Faery tells Morgaine, "I had forgotten that where the fairy blood is dilute, the Sight comes down to you maimed and incomplete" (259). In other words, the fairies are more powerful and can see the future even better than the priestesses of Avalon can. In this respect Bradley's fairies differ from Murray's fairies, as Murray did not see fairies as non-human with supernatural powers.

The fairies are clearly allies with Avalon; they are instrumental in Morgaine's plot to overthrow Arthur. The first time Morgaine meets the Queen of Faery she tries to stop her from killing her unborn child, and offers to foster it in the fairy country because of her foreknowledge of what is to happen. Later, the Queen of Faery helps Morgaine when her lover Accolon needs to be tested before he challenges Arthur. She also helps Morgaine when she leads Arthur into the fairy country to take his sword Excalibur. At the same time, there are times when the fairies' motives seem less helpful. At one point in the novel, they trick Morgaine into staying five years in their country against her knowledge and will, for reasons they keep to themselves.

At the end of the book, Avalon and the fairy country come even closer to each other; it is easy to stray from Avalon into the fairy country, and Morgaine becomes the Queen of Faery: "[N]ow she knew why she had never again caught sight of the queen within the land of Fairy. *I am the queen now. There is no Goddess but this, and I am she...*" (938).

According to Murray, the fairies were ruled by a woman. She also connected fairies and witches, which would suggest that the pagan women also had a strong position in their community. In the next section I am going to look at the position of women in Murray and Bradley's pre-Christian religions.

Female power and religion

Simpson claims that Murray's witchcraft was "a thoroughly patriarchal affair," and that its only god was male (92). This is true to an extent, because Murray's theories do concentrate on a male deity. She explained it, however, with the fact that "at the time when the cult is recorded the worship of the male deity appears to have superseded that of the female," and consequently the God appears in female form only on rare occasions (1921, 13). This seems to indicate that a female deity could have had a more important position in the cult in the past. Furthermore, Murray mentioned the two-faced god Janus/Dianus as another form of the god, and connected the cult to Diana, the female form of the name, which is the name of the female deity or leader of the witches. This is the reason why she called the religion "the Dianic cult" (1921, 12). The position of the most important woman in the cult is not clear. Murray agreed with another scholar who claimed that she had been worshipped by women as a Mother-Goddess, but at the same time she stated that when women had a divine position it was mainly as a substitute for the male god (1921, 13-14).

While it is difficult to find a goddess in Murray's cult, female worshippers were important. The Incarnate God was the leader, also called Chief, of the Coven, but a woman or man could act as a substitute. The positions in the organisation were usually filled by men, but all of them, including Chief, could be filled by women as well (1931, 47-48). Murray wrote about religion in general that

[e]arly priesthoods appear to have been largely composed of women; as the religion changed, men gradually took over the practice of the ritual. [...] But when a religion is decaying and a new one taking its place the women often remain faithful and carry on the old rites, being then obliged to act as priestesses. These changes are seen in the cult of the Horned God. (1931, 44)

According to Murray the most important woman in the cult was often called the Queen of Faerie, or the Elfin Queen (1921, 14). As discussed above, Murray's fairies and witches were closely connected, if not identical, and the fairies were said to have a matriarchal society. In *The God of the Witches* Murray wrote that the queen seemed to be the real ruler in the fairies' society, and that the king had a secondary place, at least in times of peace (37). Since Murray maintained that fairies were known as witches, it would be reasonable to infer that witches had a matriarchal society, at least in the past. Another important female in the cult was the Maiden, who was the next most powerful person in the Coven, and always sat at the right

hand of the God at feasts. According to Murray, one famous Maiden was Joan of Arc, who was known as the Maid of France (1931, 47-48). She belonged to the Old Religion and was sacrificed as a divine substitute (1931, 146). Murray also mentioned the Queen of Sabbath, and she came back to the female deity by stating that “[t]he Queen of Sabbath may perhaps be considered as an official during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though in early times she was probably the chief personage in the cult [...]” (1921, 189). In summary, Murray stressed the importance of female worshippers, despite the patriarchal structure of the cult, and did not exclude a female deity; she even found it probable that the deity of the cult was female in earlier times. She also connects witches to fairies, who had a matriarchal society.

When Gerald Gardner adopted Murray’s ideas he gave the female deity a superior position to the male, and made the leader of the coven a woman. The Goddess movement, with authors like Starhawk, also gave the Goddess a greater importance than the God, and it is this view we find in *The Mists of Avalon*.

The Royal line of Avalon is matrilineal, and it is the women that hold the power among the pagans. Viviane became the Lady of Avalon after her mother, and since Viviane has no daughter, only sons, her sister’s daughter Morgaine is to succeed her. The Christians, on the other hand, are of course patriarchal, and it is not accepted for women to hold any power among them. Both Morgaine and her aunt Morgause marry kings who are not good Christians, and while the kings still have a higher position than their queens, they do not mind having them as co-rulers. Igraine explains the importance of the queen by describing her as a symbol “of the central strength behind all the armies and the wars—the home and center for which the men rall[y] their strength...” (318). Arthur offers his queen Gwenhwyfar to rule by his side, but as she is deeply Christian she does not feel that it is a woman’s place, and says, “I could never presume so far, my lord and my king” (314). Christianity is portrayed as a religion of men in the novel, but the Old Religion has a place for both men and women.

The priestesses of Avalon only accept women for training, while the Druids, who also live on Avalon but separate from the women, only train men. The Lady of Avalon is the leader of the priestesses, and the Merlin, or the Messenger of the Gods, is the leader of the Druids. Their religions are different, and yet they work together, celebrate holidays together and worship the same gods, at least partly. The worship of the Goddess is described as older than the religion of the Druids, and the priests and priestesses learn different things. In several ways the women seem superior to the men. The Goddess is the major deity, and the priestesses learn about her will through the Sight. This ability is inherited from the fairies, and although diluted, it is more developed in the Royal line of Avalon than in other people. The

Merlin, despite being the Messenger of the Gods, does not have the Sight: “The Goddess does not make her will known to me” (188). He defers decisions to Viviane, saying, “That I leave to your wisdom. You, not I, are the voice of the Goddess” (198). Not only do the women know the Goddess’ will, they are also goddess-like by nature. Morgaine tells us that “a lady of Avalon bends the knee to no human power. Merlin would kneel [...] [to Arthur]; Viviane, never, for she was not only the priestess of the Goddess, but incorporated the Goddess within herself in a way the man-priests of male Gods could never know or understand” (231). This superior power of women also translates to other areas in life.

Murray wrote that among the fairies “marriage laws were non-existent, as was the case among the Picts; and the fairy-queen in particular was never bound to one husband only. This laxness of morals may have been one reason why the Christian Church [...] so hated the fairies” (1931, 37). The pagan women in *The Mists of Avalon* are likewise free to choose their own partner. Niniane, the Lady of Avalon, calls it “the right the Goddess has given to all women, to choose what man she will” (980). It is accepted for women to have sexual relationships even if they are not married. Igraine tells her flirtatious sister Morgause that among their own people “maidenhood is of no great consequence—a woman of proven fertility, swelling with a healthy child, is a most desirable wife. But it is not so with these Christians, I tell you; they will treat you as one shamed” (84). Viviane has several sons with different men, and because she is a priestess she cannot belong to one man.

Since power is inherited through the female line, it is the queen who chooses the king, not the other way around. From Avalon’s point of view they put Arthur on the throne, and they can take him down. After Arthur’s betrayal, Morgaine seeks to be queen so that she can put her lover Accolon on the throne. Mordred is outraged at Gwenhwyfar’s adultery and says that “[b]y Avalon’s laws, Gwenhwyfar has done no more than is right—the lady shall choose who she will for her consort, and Arthur should be overthrown by Lancelot!” (979). Earlier in the novel, Queen Gwenhwyfar was held hostage by a man who hoped to become king by forcing the queen to take him as her lover, which would be possible with the old laws.

According to Murray, another important part of the ancient cult was the sexual rites. She wrote that the Sacred Marriage usually took place once a year, but that there were other sexual rites as well, which did not happen at a fixed season. The Sacred Marriage is defined as “an attempt to influence the course of nature by magic, the people who practise the rite believing that thereby all crops and herds as well as the women were rendered fertile, and that barrenness was averted” (1921, 177-178).

The people of Avalon, the people on Dragon Island and many of the common people still follow these traditions, although the Christian priests do their best to stop them. At specific holidays they perform sexual rites. If the ritual results in a child the child is known as a child of the Goddess; often the father is not even known. When the Merlin tells Igraine that he fathered her, she is surprised, because “no pious man should claim fatherhood to a child of the Goddess” (20). The women, however, keep their usual parental rights.

Virginity has great significance among the priestesses of Avalon. Some rituals seem to require that the priestess is a virgin, as when Morgaine is the Virgin Huntress at Arthur’s kingmaking. Ironically, the only women who do not have the Goddess-given right to choose “what man [they] will” are her priestesses. Many maidens of Avalon are ordered to preserve their virginity, “till the Mother makes her will known” (156). This way the Lady of Avalon can use the maidens for her own political agenda. There is a clear resemblance between Bradley’s maidens and Murray’s Maiden of the Coven, even though Bradley does not always use the Maiden as a position, as Murray does.

In the novel, Bradley describes a culture with few sexual taboos. Viviane does not hesitate to let Morgaine bear a child to her own brother, and although Morgaine is ashamed at first, she later realises that she has been influenced by Christian rules. As mentioned earlier, it is also accepted for women to have sexual relationships when unmarried, and to bear children to many different men. When examining this aspect of the novel, it is obvious that *The Mists of Avalon* contains heavy criticism of patriarchy in general, and Christianity in particular. The still surviving Roman culture is the stronghold of patriarchal values in the novel, together with the Church. The pagan view of women and female sexuality is described as much better than the Christian view, especially for women but also for men, and the disappearance of the Old Religion is portrayed as a great loss. Hildebrand suggests that the superior position of women in the novel and the way that men are described as the Other makes the novel more accessible to a female reader (122-123).

The feminist message of *The Mists of Avalon* is perhaps its most prominent message, and it has been commented on by many critics. It is clearly a criticism of patriarchy, but it is not easy to define exactly what Bradley’s intention was. Since the novel is written from a female perspective, and the women of the Old Religion have a superior position to men, it is easy to take for granted that Bradley is portraying an alternative society that is preferable to patriarchy. Interestingly, Hildebrand, among others, accuses *The Mists of Avalon* of containing inherent patriarchal views, although Hildebrand disagrees with earlier critics on several points. Morgaine’s aunt Morgause, for example, could be seen as perhaps the only

truly evil character in the novel. She is characterised mainly through her promiscuous sexuality, and is, according to Hildebrand, “link[ing] evil with female sexuality” (121). Hildebrand also finds Bradley’s portrayal of Morgause “and the prudery and condemnation displayed by Morgaine [...] deeply disturbing” (122). I do not agree with this interpretation. The scene Hildebrand refers to occurs early in the novel when Morgaine is still affected by her Christian upbringing, as we can see from her reaction to the fact that she is pregnant with her brother. The paragraph in question continues with Morgaine contemplating virtue and the fact that it means opposite things to pagans and Christians. She concludes with the thought that to a Christian she herself must seem no better than a harlot (250-251). Later in the novel, she has come to terms both with the incest and her own affair with her elderly husband’s son, and has no reason to condemn Morgause for doing similar things. Additionally, I think her condemnation can be traced to something else, namely the fact that Morgause’s behaviour is perhaps best described as hedonistic, while Morgaine is a priestess trained to have rigorous control over her own body and needs. Throughout the novel, Morgause’s evilness is connected to her ruthless ambition. It cannot be denied, however, that she has the most overt sexual behaviour of all the female characters. The question is if that is necessarily linked to her evilness, or if it is just another aspect of her most dominant character trait, to take whatever she wants, using any means?

Hildebrand writes that “[d]espite its attack on patriarchal understanding of power, *The Mists of Avalon* condones certain hierarchical structures” (116). In the novel, the usual sexist hierarchy where men hold all the power is replaced with another, where women dominate. I do not think, like Hildebrand and the critics she quotes, that it is condoned in the novel. The question of power and who has the right to rule others’ lives is one of the big moral questions of the narrative. The absolute power of the Lady of Avalon is not described as a good thing; in the end it leads only to death and defeat. Therefore, I claim that the novel could be seen as a criticism of authoritarian power structures, whether it is women or men that uphold them. Matriarchal non-authoritarian societies, on the other hand, are described as good, or at least completely natural, and so is the separation of the sexes in religious ritual (except, of course, in the sexual rites). This can hardly be seen as patriarchal. On the contrary, a clear division of the genders seems to have been a common thought among Goddess-worshippers at the time the novel was written¹.

¹ For an account of Goddess worship and how its view of gender has developed over time, see Starhawk’s *The Spiral Dance*, especially chapter 2, *The World View of Witchcraft*, and *Introduction to the Tenth Anniversary Edition*.

Conclusion

The Mists of Avalon is set in an actual historical period of time, and describes an event that actually took place: the conversion from paganism to Christianity. Other events are mythical: the legend of king Arthur, and the neopagan myth of origin. In this essay I have studied how Bradley has used the theories of Margaret Murray and the neopagan myth of origin, what importance and function they have in the plot, and what effect they have on the message of the novel.

The Sacrifice of the Divine King is the main motif of the novel. It is obvious that Bradley has borrowed Murray's ideas about a Horned God that is sacrificed for the good of the land. At Arthur's kingmaking he takes the place of the God, later to be sacrificed. The ritual that Arthur participates in when he is made king results in a son, who later kills him when he breaks his oath to treat Christian and pagan alike. Hence the same ritual that makes Arthur king also brings him down.

The fairies, who have belonged to the Old Religion since ancient times, provide a historical background to the narrative. Murray described fairies as a surviving Neolithic race who belonged to the Old Religion. Bradley has divided Murray's fairies into three groups with slightly different characteristics: the fairies, the Old People and the Tribes. As the ancestors and helpers of the people of Avalon, all three are closely connected to the pagan side of the conflict.

In *The Mists of Avalon* the pagan women have a higher position than the men. They have a close relationship to the Goddess, the major deity, which men do not have. Their society being matriarchal and matrilineal, women have a lot of freedom in their sexual behaviour. Bradley depicts a society that speaks to a female reader, and that is presented as a positive alternative to patriarchal Christianity. This kind of society is very similar to Murray's description of the fairies' society, and is regarded as ideal by many modern Goddess worshippers.

These three subjects are all of vital importance in the narrative. Together they form the foundation of the story, with the events of the Arthurian myth taking place on the surface. They help create the moral message of the novel as well as a sense of destiny and loss, but more importantly they construct a historical view of paganism that is far removed from what scholars believe today. The fact that Bradley chose to use this controversial scholarship in her novel is quite odd, but her reason for using it will probably never be known. Other conclusions can be drawn from her use of the myth, however.

Since the neopagan myth of origin asserts that the Old Religion has survived since ancient times, and since *The Mists of Avalon* contains many of the most important elements of this myth, I have to conclude that the novel represents this myth as truth. Bradley had a choice to use more accurate scholarship to create the historical background of her novel, but she chose to use Murray's theories. Whether it was intentional or not, the only possible conclusion is that *The Mists of Avalon* is a novel with an obvious religious message.

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