

Multi and Interculturality**In This Tale of Arthur the Women Do Shine****Carlos Sanz Mingo¹**

Abstract: This paper aims at analyzing the role of some Arthurian feminine characters in contemporary Arthurian literature. Whilst their medieval counterparts had a mainly passive role and they did seldom take part in the action of the text, current Arthurian literature has turned this idea upside down. The first hints at this change could be observed in a few Victorian poems, but it has been in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that this trend has shown more popular, not only in texts written by women, as the popular *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley, but also in those written by male authors, as it is the case of Bernard Cornwell's trilogy "The Warlord Chronicles", on which this paper focuses. The study deals with the four most important feminine characters of the trilogy and how they interact in the political and religious upheavals of the time.

Keywords: Arthurian Literature; Bernard Cornwell; Feminine Characters; Religion; Politics

Whenever the word *Arthuriana* is mentioned, it conjures up a selection of characters, mainly masculine, such as Arthur, Lancelot, Gawain, Merlin, Mordred or Uther Pendragon. However, the stories of Arthur and his men would not have developed were it not for the part female characters played, since they are the ones urging the men into action. Who bewitches Accolon in order to kill Arthur with his own sword? Who turns Sir Bercilak into a horrendous green giant? Who puts Merlin into a glass tower – or within a mountain, depending on the version – and keeps him there until the end of time? Who provokes, indirectly, the doom and fall of the Round Table? For better or for worse, the answer to these questions is a woman's name.

In medieval literature women were, in most of the cases, the responsible ones for the hero's doom. Guinevere, in order to atone for her sins, became a nun, while evil Morgan either died or suffered accordingly. However, the importance of their roles

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in literature has been either neglected in many cases or presented as very negative in others.

Contemporary Arthuriana has shifted from this traditional masculine viewpoint to another where women occupy a more determining role. It was during the Victorian period that the first examples of this change were hinted at, such as William Morris's (1834-1896) long poem "The Defence of Guinevere" (1858). In the early twentieth century this new wave became more evident: the American poet Sara Teasdale (1884-1933) wrote "Guinevere" in 1911, where the queen, in a wonderful monologue, comments on her affair with Lancelot. Teasdale also wrote other poems with women as central characters, such as "Galahad in the Castle of Maidens" (1911) or "At Tintagil" (1926), where Iseult remembers her love for Tristan. The British author Rosalind Miles (b. 1943) also chose Arthur's wife as the main character in *Guinevere: Queen of the Summer Country* (1999). Other modern writers who have paid attention to women in their novels are Rosemary Sutcliff (1920-1992), whose *The Lantern Bearers* (1959) deals with the Roman withdrawal from the British Isles. The subsequent Saxon invasion is seen through the eyes of Aquila, a Romano-British soldier haunted by two women: his sister, whom he fails to save from a marriage to a Saxon chieftain, and Ness, his wife, the daughter of a Nationalist chieftain who supports Vortigern. Joan Wolf (b. 1951), in *The Road to Avalon* (1988), concentrates on Arthur's infatuation for his aunt Morgan. Marion Zimmer Bradley's (1930-1999) *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) is a reflection on the rise and fall of Arthur through the eyes and lives of four women: devout Guinevere, his beautiful aunt Morgause, Viviane, Priestess of Avalon, and Morgaine, Arthur's sister and lover.

This trend has shown little sign of abating. Indeed, it continues even in literature written by men, as in the case of *The Warlord Chronicles*, a trilogy written by Bernard Cornwell (b. 1944). It is formed by *The Winter King* (1996), *Enemy of God* (1997) and *Excalibur* (1998). This trilogy resuscitates some commonplaces and long-forgotten characters in the Arthurian tradition. The (hi)story of this kaleidoscopic group of novels is retold by Derfel Cadarn, one of Arthur's soldiers and best friends, in his final years in a monastery in North Wales, where he puts onto parchment Arthur's life after the command of Queen Igraine of Powys.¹ The time that Derfel covers in his retelling begins with Mordred's birth on a cold winter

¹ Derfel Cadarn (the *Strong* in Welsh) is one of those characters disregarded throughout the ages and restored back to literature by Cornwell. In the Welsh tradition, he is one of the seven warriors who survived the Battle of Camlann, where Arthur himself dies.

night (hence the title of the first book) and finishes with the famous battle of Camlann, where Arthur kills his nephew and the latter mortally wounds Uther Pendragon's son, whilst Excalibur sinks forever in the water.

Along the pages of the trilogy, there is a long parade of characters amongst whom four women are at the core. Three of them are regulars in Arthuriana (Guinevere, Morgan and Nimue), while the fourth is another of those "rescued" characters from Welsh hagiographies: Ceinwyn. Each of them stands out for different reasons, but all of them are the actual driving forces in the trilogy. The paper concentrates on the study of each of these characters in order to show the importance of feminine roles in modern Arthuriana.

Derfel confesses in one of the many digressions in the trilogy that, even though he thought that he would be writing, "a chronicle of swords and spears, of battles won and frontiers made, of ruined treaties and broken kings [...] in this tale of Arthur, like the glimmer of salmon in peat-dark water, the women do shine." (Cornwell, 1998, p. 3) Each of these four characters undergoes an interesting change, less obvious in Ceinwyn, and more visible in the other three, but especially abrupt in Morgan, far from her usual medieval depiction as an evil sorceress.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle stated that women were women due to a lack of qualities and added that they "have nothing which is by nature fitted to rule" (Sanders & Sinclair 1981: 57), while the medieval Italian philosopher Saint Thomas Aquinas defended the idea that a woman was an imperfect man. The new wave of feminist literary criticism has given way to a different perspective on the female Arthurian characters. Bernard Cornwell is no exception to this and he proves both Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas wrong in their assumption on the feminine gender, by creating strong female characters able to stand up against any man. They are fitter to rule and make judicious decisions than their male colleagues.

Women were highly esteemed in the Celtic world if compared to their Roman and Greek counterparts. Three sources can attest to this: Iron Age archaeology, the observations of classical writers, and the early literature in Ireland and Wales – mainly annals, chronicles and some legends. We are mainly interested in these two latter sources since they are closer to the Arthurian period.

Among the historical Celtic texts, we have the Welsh laws of King Hywel Dda (Hywel the Good), who became king of almost all Welsh kingdoms in AD 942. Although these laws postdate the Arthurian period by 400 years, they are a

compilation of former laws which mark a transitional period from the earlier Celtic world to the Christian and patriarchal society brought in by the Romans. According to these laws, women had the right to inherit, they could take control of property and they could also claim equality on the goods shared with their husbands in marriage. However, their legal status is always defined in reference to their male relatives.

On the other hand, classical Latin and Greek writers (the latter having a great influence over the former) seem surprised at the women's freedom in Celtic society. Tacitus (c. 55-c. 120) stated in his *Annales* that the Britons made "no distinction of sex in their leaders." (Green, 1995, p. 22) He elaborates this assertion by saying that some women led their armies. We have the historical confirmation of this with Boudicca, leader of the Iceni, and Cartimandua of the Brigantes. Some of these women of high birth could even choose their spouses, such as Cartimandua, who left her husband Venotius for her armour-bearer Velloctatus. Ammianus Marcellinus (c. 325- c. 395), the last greatest Roman historian, described a Gaulish woman as much stronger than her husband "and with flashing eyes [...] poising her huge white arms, proceeds to rain punches mingled with kicks, like shots discharged by the twisted cords of a catapult." (Henderson, 2005, p. 195) However, these facts expounded by different authors, such as Caesar, Tacitus, Plutarch, Dio Cassius or Ammianus Marcellinus, could be a propaganda exercise against the Celtic world, as Green suggests. The image of a society focused on women might be linked to an idea of primitiveness. The Greek historian Strabo (c. 63 BC- c. AD 23) in his *Geographia* defended the idea that in the Celtic world the roles of women were contrary to those identified with their counterparts in the Mediterranean area, "as in many barbarian societies." (Green, 1995, p. 24)

The first of the characters we are going to deal with is **Ceinwyn**, Derfel's partner and the daughter of the Powysian king, Gorfyddyd. Cornwell's Ceinwyn is based on a St Keyne, also rendered as St Ceinwen, who was of royal stock; her father was king Brychan Brycheiniog, the founder of the medieval kingdom of Brycheiniog, which later evolved into the county of Brecon (south Wales). She is considered to be the founder of a church on Anglesey, and the Welsh hagiographies highlight her virginal status; her cult is linked to three wells: one in Cornwall, another in Somerset and another in southern Powys, Wales.

As a princess, Cornwell's Ceinwyn was considered a kind of barter in her father's businesses and affairs, an idea which became paramount in later medieval history.¹ She has been betrothed four times with four different princes (one of them Arthur himself) and three times the bridegroom has failed to keep his promise to marry her. It is the fourth time that she stands Lancelot up and decides to elope with Derfel. She decides to learn the common and daily chores of household, such as cooking or weaving. However, this should not lead us to erroneous conclusions about her: Ceinwyn has made up her mind and she decides to follow her own resolutions, as she plainly tells Derfel: "I already knew I didn't want to belong to any man. I've belonged to men all my life [...] I will love you," she promised me, looking up into my face, "but I will not be any man's possession." (Cornwell, 1997, p. 71) Indeed, she does so: they have three daughters in common and spend their lives together until she dies of a fever. It is interesting to point out that, under the Welsh law, those people cohabiting for more than seven years had the same rights as married couples.²

Ceinwyn is one of the most positive and favoured characters in the trilogy. The fact that the narrator is her partner makes the reader see her with kindness. One of her most definite characteristics is her beauty. In the wedding ceremony with Lancelot, she is wearing no jewels and she is walking barefoot. This image reminds us that of the Virgin Mary, especially since white and blue, the colours the princess is wearing, are the colours associated with the Holy Mother:

At her other betrothals, as befitted a Princess, Ceinwyn had come in jewels and silver, in gold and finery, but this night she wore only a simple bone-white gown that was belted with a pale blue cord that hung by the dress's simple skirt to end in tassles [...] she wore no precious jewels anywhere, just the linen dress and, about her pale blonde hair, a delicate blue wreath made from the last dog-violets of the summer. (Cornwell, 1997, p. 61)

In Cornwell's trilogy, it is her virginity that makes Merlin take her on to Anglesey, in one of the most dangerous adventures that also Derfel, Nimue and Galahad

¹ Despite what we have stated about the women's liberties, some chieftains married their kinswomen to other chieftains and their relatives to settle alliances between tribes. Dumnorix, the leader of the Gaulish tribe of the Aeduan, married his mother to one of the close relatives of the ruler of the Biturges. There are also literary examples of this practice: in the Welsh *Mabinogion*, Pryderi, lord of Dyfed, gave his widowed mother Rhiannon in marriage to Manawydan, son of the Welsh sea god.

² The laws of Hywel Dda clearly stated that if a man takes a woman "to his house and home and she is with him until the end of seven years, he is bound to share with her from then on as with wife with bestowers" (Jenkins (ed.), 2000: 50).

embark on: the search for the Cauldron of the Clydno Eyddyn. Here, Cornwell presents the readers with a remake of one of the best known Celtic myths, which in the Middle Ages evolved into the Holy Grail. In traditional Welsh accounts only a few men went with Arthur to the Otherworld in order to fetch the cauldron, as referred to in the Welsh poem *The Spoils of Annwfn* (dating c. 900). Cornwell changes the story to include two women: a druidess (Nimue) and a virgin (Ceinwyn). The latter is put into trance after drinking a drugged drink; consequently, she dreams of the place on Anglesey where the Druids hid the magical cauldron following the Roman massacre of Druids in AD 60.¹ It has to be said that, to the best of our knowledge, no former account included women in the actual search of the cauldron (or the Grail) except as a means to achieve it.

Of the most important characters in the trilogy, Ceinwyn is the sweetest and best tempered one. Although she makes her own decisions, she might seem a conformist if compared to Cornwell's **Guinevere**, very different from the character depicted in the medieval texts. Although her role in medieval literature varies from text to text, she is normally considered the ultimate responsible for the downfall of Camelot. In fact, Cornwell states in one of his comments on Guinevere: "The Gods alone know how many men died because he (Arthur) saw that head of red hair." (Cornwell, 1997, p. 55) In the traditional texts, after the battle of Camlann, she takes refuge in a monastery, where she dies. In Cornwell, we are not going to find such a pious Guinevere at all. In fact, she hates Christians. She worships both the Celtic gods and the Egyptian goddess Isis, who will provoke Arthur's misery (not her affair with Lancelot) after Uther's son observes his own wife playing the role of the goddess in an orgy with two druids.

Guinevere's first appearance in literature is in the Welsh *Triads* and in the tale *Culhwch ac Olwen*, where she is called Gwenhwyfar. In the *Triads*, she is one of the three unfaithful wives of Britain as well as the agent provocateur of the final battle, Camlann, after an argument with her sister Gwenhwyfach. Geoffrey of Monmouth later attached her some religious nuances. She seems willing to accept her marriage with Mordred after he seizes the throne, an action which causes the

¹ The Romans killed the Druids, the Celtic intelligentsia who could organize the population against the invader. They carried out this slaughter on Ynys Mon (Anglesey), from where they thought that the druidic power emanated. This massacre seems to corroborate the importance of Britain in general, and of Anglesey in particular, regarding the Druidic world. It seems that whatever was decided on Anglesey influenced the rest of the Celtic world. In year 60 Claudius tried to wipe out this Celtic cast. Even though he and his troops managed to kill scores of them, they could not do away with their knowledge.

war against his uncle. After Mordred's death, she decides to avoid Arthur's rage by taking the veil. Along with this religious touch, there are two topics commonly applied to Guinevere in medieval literature: her abduction and her infidelity. In some texts both are tangled, as in Chrétien de Troyes's *Lancelot* (1180), where she is first implicated in an affair with another knight (apart from that mention as an unfaithful wife in the *Welsh Triads*) – maybe a last remembrance of the privileges that the ancient Celtic women had previously enjoyed.

Bernard Cornwell's trilogy retains these two motifs mentioned above, albeit applied in a very different way. Both in *The Winter King* and *Enemy of God* she is ambitious. Derfel's descriptions of Guinevere are negative, and these influence the reader's opinions. Some of her actions are actually cruel: sometimes she finds people as toys to play with and, in fact, Cornwell applies the verb "toy" to some of her actions.

She is negatively described in a prolepsis before she actually takes part in the action, where Derfel says: "There had been many beautiful women, and thousands who were better, but since the world was weaned I doubt there had been many so unforgettable as Guinevere, eldest daughter of Leodegan, the exiled king of Henis Wyren. And it would have been better, Merlin always said, had she drown at birth." (Cornwell, 1996, p. 199)

In a dialogue with Derfel, she is dressed very provocatively in a white linen robe. He is bringing Guinevere some jewellery that Arthur has won for her in a battle against the Saxons. According to Derfel, "White clouds heaped in the blue sky, but what made my breath catch in my throat was that the sunlight was now flooding through Guinevere's white linen shift." (Cornwell, 1996, p. 242) Guinevere plays with her femininity in order to get what she wants. She confesses that the Powysian king, Gorfyddyd, Ceinwyn's father, tried to rape her and that she was "reeking with slobber, all down here" (Cornwell, 1996, p. 235), she says while rubbing her breasts. She then tried to get help from Iorweth, the Powysian druid, to cast a spell on the king although she did not tell the Druid that "it was against the king, of course, though it probably wouldn't have mattered if I had because Iorweth would do anything if you smiled at him." (Cornwell, 1996, p. 235)

Her ideas on Christianity and the Christians might shock an Arthurian reader if compared to the medieval, religious Guinevere, or the character in Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1982). She is one of the firmest enemies of Bishop Sansum, a greedy and ambitious Christian, to whom she plainly shows her hatred when he is

having a church built in honour of Saint Joseph. She yells at him how “will a dead carpenter give us good crops, tell me that!” (Cornwell, 1996, p. 238) In fact, Guinevere is, along with Merlin and Culhwch, Arthur’s cousin, the most violent character regarding Christianity, the difference lying on the fact that Merlin’s comments are witty, Culhwch’s hard – but never directed face to face – and hers are witty, hard and directed to the Christian talking to her. While Sansum is supervising the construction of the church, Guinevere takes Derfel to the site. Sansum smiles at them as they are approaching, but she quickly replies: “I’m not doing you honour, you worm. I came to show Derfel what carnage you’re making.” (Cornwell, 1996, p. 239) Even when on the eve of a battle against the Saxons, Sansum is praying for Arthur’s victory, Guinevere snaps at him to pray for Arthur’s enemies “and maybe we’d win more quickly.” (Cornwell, 1996, p. 240)

As stated above, Cornwell mixes up the topics of infidelity and abduction in a new, really interesting remaking, as here it becomes entangled with her ambition. She elopes with Lancelot to the Sea Palace (another twist to the Joyous Guard), after Lancelot’s rebellion against Arthur. She sees in this a way to become more powerful and influential and, eventually, to become Lancelot’s queen. She does not love him: in fact, she shows no interest in him at all. However, Lancelot’s ambition leads him to conspire against his only and true friend. But Lancelot’s only aim in taking Guinevere is to use her as a shield against Arthur’s attack, in a wonderful U-turn from the medieval texts. As a consequence, her intelligence, her ambition, and the freedom she longs for in a fifth century world ruled by men will bring disastrous consequences.

An orgy in that Sea Palace will bring Arthur his misery after finding Guinevere playing the role of Isis with twin druids Dinas and Lavaine playing Seth and Osiris. From a proud woman sitting on a throne with her hair “coiled on her head and held in place by a ring of gold from which two horns jutted straight up” (Cornwell, 1997, p. 438), she becomes totally frightened after Arthur’s intervention. He flicks “the snakes off the black pelt which Excalibur’s tip, then drew back the fur until he could see Guinevere’s face. She stared at him, and all her fine pride had vanished. She was just a terrified woman.” (Cornwell, 1997, p. 445) As retaliation, Arthur puts her in jail and marries princess Argante, the daughter of the Irish king of Dyfed and one of Arthur’s closest allies, Oengus Mac Airem. In her new place, Guinevere undergoes a catharsis, which sweetens her and makes her kinder and friendlier in the reader’s eyes. First, she wants Derfel to persuade Arthur to let her go to the continent, but Arthur refuses to do so by saying that she must be kept in

prison. Derfel comments that “she could have expected death, but the promise of imprisonment seemed even worse to her.” (Cornwell, 1997, p. 468) According to the law, he should burn her to death, but Arthur decides to keep her alive in the shrine of one of her fiercest enemies: Morgan’s Christian nunnery. This is another turn from medieval literature, where, once her affair with Lancelot is uncovered, she is taken to be burnt at the stake, only to be rescued by Lancelot, who takes her to his Joyous Guard. As we can see here, the story almost reverses, the main difference being that Guinevere will be secluded in a convent, in a twist devised by Cornwell off the traditional end of Guinevere in the medieval texts. It is also necessary to point out that, while in medieval literature Morgan imprisons Lancelot by force, she does it here with Guinevere after her brother’s formal request.

This new Guinevere will remain loyal to Arthur after her catharsis. The first hint of this is when she is talking to Derfel, who has just gone to Morgan’s nunnery to bring her a letter from Arthur where he explains that he will be marrying again soon. When they talk about Guinevere and Arthur’s relation we can read between the lines the reasons for her betrayal:

“He was proud of you, Lady,” I said awkwardly. “He revelled in your beauty”

“He could have a statue made of me if that’s all he wanted! A statute with milk ducts that he could clamp his infants onto!”

“He loved you,” I protested.

She stared at me and thought she was going to erupt in blistering anger, but instead she smiled wanly. “He worshipped me, Derfel,” she said tiredly, “and that is not the same thing as being loved.” She sat suddenly, collapsing onto a bench beside the wooden chest. “And being worshipped, Derfel, is very tiresome.” (Cornwell, 1998, p. 124)

It is here that Guinevere gathers her wits. While Derfel defends Arthur’s marriage to Argante, arguing that a man needs a woman to have children and be looked after, Guinevere’s answer puzzles him: “He’s marrying, Derfel, to prove that he doesn’t love me.” (Cornwell 1998, p. 125)

Due to the impending war against the Saxons in the spring, Guinevere asks Derfel to tell Arthur to move her to a safer place since she fears for her life, but Derfel does not understand. She explains what the Saxon strategy is going to be like, thus showing a practical intelligence:

The first attack will be on the Thames, and that will be large enough to make you think it is their main attack. And once Arthur has gathered his forces to oppose that army, Cerdic will march in the south. He'll run wild, Derfel, and Arthur will have to send men to oppose him, and when he does, Aelle will attack the rest. (Cornwell, 1998, p. 124)

Derfel replies to this by saying that she has friends within the Saxon lands, hinting at Lancelot, but her answer enlightens and explains many misunderstood points in the trilogy. Guinevere laughs at Derfel's idea that she is in love with Lancelot and wanted him to be the king:

"I wanted him to be a king because he is a weak man and a woman can only rule this world through such a feeble man. Arthur isn't weak". She took a deep breath. "But Lancelot is, and perhaps he will rule when the Saxons come, but whoever controls Lancelot it will be not me, nor any woman now, but Cerdic, and Cerdic, I hear, is anything but weak." (Cornwell, 1998, pp. 126-7)

After being taken from Morgan's convent to Derfel's place for her safety, we get to know a new Guinevere, still bitter against the Christians, of whom she says that being with them is "like watching a herd of cows threatened by wolves." (Cornwell 1998: 171) However, she shows a maternal side that she had not shown with her own son. In a comic scene, Argante, Arthur's new wife, is crying because Derfel has ordered her wagons, loaded with gold, to be left there as they are too heavy and will slow down their march. Guinevere tries to calm Argante down:

"Come here, child," she said, and pulled the girl towards her and used a corner of her drab cloak to wipe away Argante's tears. "You did quite right to try and save the treasury," she told Argante, "but Derfel is also right. If we don't hurry the Saxons will catch us." (Cornwell, 1998, pp. 182)

Derfel's refusal to take the gold makes Argante have a new tantrum, only to be placated by Guinevere once more: "It doesn't become Princesses," Guinevere murmured softly, "to show anger in public. Be mysterious, my dear, and never let men know what you're thinking. Your power lies in the shadows, but in the sunlight men will always overcome you." (Cornwell, 1998, p. 183) Despite all these positive and maternal features, Guinevere still keeps some of her feeling of superiority: she addresses Argante as "child", but, in an even more comic scene, Guinevere brags. Derfel describes how Argante was sobbing while the gold was done away with and she protested that it was hers.

“And once it was mine, child,” Guinevere said very calmly, “and I survived the loss just as you now will.”

Argante pulled abruptly away to stare up at the taller woman. “Yours?” she asked.

“Did I not introduce myself, child?” Guinevere asked with a delicate scorn. “I’m the Princess Guinevere.”

Argante just screamed, then fled up the road where her Blackshields had retracted. (Cornwell, 1998, p. 183)

Thus we can see that she has lost none of her pride, despite the fact that she is now presented as a more sympathetic character whose intelligence is shown at its best at the battle of Mount Baddon. On the eve of the biggest and more important combat fought there, she declares to Derfel that she was the one who provoked the Powysian king: “I wanted gold, honour, position ... But I didn’t get from him. He knew exactly what I wanted, but knew better what he wanted for himself, and he never intended to pay my price. Instead, he betrothed me to Valerin.” (Cornwell, 1998, p. 247) We must understand this as a new direction in Guinevere’s makeover. Admitting that she “prostituted” herself in order to get more power must have not been an easy thing for a woman like her to confess.

Before the start of the battle, Guinevere kills an enemy wizard and the Saxons start insulting her and launching against the Britons. To make amends, she asks Derfel for twenty of his best men. However, he only gives her twenty of the levied ones, with whom Guinevere will give the Britons a victory. This warrior aspect should not strike us as strange, as we have since that Celtic women fought against the enemy in wars. Nimue, talking about Guinevere, says: “If she’d been born to Uther instead of that fool Leodegan, then everything would have been different. She’d be another Boudicca and there’d be dead Christians from here to the Irish Sea and dead Saxons to the German Sea.” (Cornwell, 1997, p. 452) The description that Derfel makes of Arthur’s wife, standing upon the summit of Mount Baddon takes us back to those times when women had a say in society: “She stood tall and long-legged in the hunter’s clothes, crowned with a mass of red hair and with her bow across her shoulders so that she looked like some Goddess of war.” (Cornwell, 1998, p. 223)

Those of Boudicca and Cartimandua are not isolated examples within the Celtic world. On both sides of the Irish Sea and the English Channel there were women who led their men to victory. The Irish sagas are full of examples which may have

been based on actual events: Mebd of Connacht, Aoife or Credne are examples of warrior queens. In other parts of Europe, Onomaris, a Gaulish queen, led her tribe in some successful raids into the Iberian Peninsula. Another example is that of Eponina, whose husband, Sabinus, rebelled against the Romans. It is quite clear that women “occupied a more significant position in Celtic society than they did in the Graeco-Roman world.” (Cunliffe, 1999, p. 109) In the trilogy two women seek to reclaim this significant power back by two different means: Guinevere uses intelligence, woman’s seduction and diplomacy; Nimue does it through religion and bloody rites. Neither of them achieves their goal: Roman patriarchal society had already permeated deep into the Celtic society by then.

After the victory of Mount Baddon, Arthur and Guinevere come back together, as she herself had predicted. In an attack against the bards, whom the narrator constantly scorns, Derfel complains about the fact that Queen Igraine is bound to have their reunion changed: “Tales of men fighting can get very boring after a while and a love story makes it all a lot more interesting” (Cornwell, 1998, p. 282), to which he later adds, in a mockery of sentimental novels and tales:

I know what Igraine wants: she wants Arthur to run through the corpses, and for Guinevere to wait for him with open arms, and for the two of them to meet in ecstasy, and maybe that is how it did happen, but I suspect not, for she was too proud and he was too diffident. I imagine they wept when they met, but neither ever told me, so I shall invent nothing. I do know that Arthur became a happy man after Mynydd Baddon, and it was not just victory over the Saxons that gave him that happiness. (Cornwell, 1998, pp. 283)

Thus, the change in Guinevere from the Christian queen in medieval texts is very interesting. Medieval Guinevere –unfaithful, Christian, kidnapped and retired to a convent – has been substituted by a modern Guinevere, living in a world led by men, who prove to be her rivals. Nimue, the druidess, could not have been more right when she says of Arthur’s wife that she is “a strong woman who was born with a quick mind and good looks, and Arthur loved the looks and wouldn’t use her mind.” (Cornwell, 1997, p. 453)

Feminist literary theories have gone beyond feminine boundaries in order to be applied by male authors, then, who work with powerful feminine characters. Both Guinevere, in the field of politics, and **Nimue**, in religion, are excellent examples of the newly acquired importance of feminine characters in the plot of Arthurian texts, which reflect the change in the role of modern women in western society,

their carrying out tasks traditionally ascribed to their male equals. Nimue goes through another change, this time in the opposite direction to that of Guinevere: from being one of the reader's favorite characters, she becomes one of the most hateful ones. Even though she is positively described at first, one of her personal features is that she can carry out some of the most spine-chilling tricks:

She was naked and her thin white body was raddled with blood that had dripped down from her hair to run in rivulets past her small breasts and to her thighs. Her head was crowned with a death-mask, the tanned face-skin of a sacrificed man that has perched above her own face like a snarling helmet and held in place by the skin of the dead man's arms knotted about her neck [...] while in her hands she had two vipers. (Cornwell, 1996, p. 34)

Nimue is a fanatic representative of druidism and, along with Bishop Sansum and Meurig, the Christian king, she becomes one of the most negative characters at the end of the trilogy because they all symbolize the extreme and dangerous ideas of each faith. In *The Winter King* she stands out as a positive role, for Derfel loves her. Both of them have endured a similar ordeal in their childhood: Derfel, the narrator, came out alive from a sacrificial death-pit, while Nimue is the only survivor of a shipwreck. Merlin interpreted these two events as a sign of the gods. Unlike Guinevere, who depends ultimately on Arthur, Nimue does not depend on anyone, which gives the druidess the chance to act freely. Merlin also gives her plenty of liberty, for she is an eager apprentice of magic, something to which the magician attaches lots of importance.

In her aim to become the perfect druidess, Nimue has to suffer what she calls the "Three Wounds": that to the Body, the one to the Pride, and that of the Mind. According to her, only a person receiving the Three Wounds can be in direct contact with the Gods: "Merlin has suffered all three, and that is why he's such a wise man. Morgan had the worst wound to the Body that anyone can imagine, but she never suffered the other two wounds." (Cornwell, 1996, p. 43) Nimue indeed suffers all of them: while she is being raped by King Gundleus of Siluria, one of her eyes is gouged out. To these two, Nimue adds the one to the mind when forced to exile on the Isle of the Dead, a place to where mad people, criminals, and all the marginal were sent. Derfel's decision to go to the isle and save Nimue is triggered by his love for her and because they have made a pact of blood between them by cutting the palms of their hands and mixing the running blood.

In Arthurian literature, Nimue has appeared under different names: Viviane or Niniane, and she has even been associated with the Lady of the Lake. However, in modern literature those characters are presented independently, as in the case of Madeleine E. Robins's poem "Nimue's Tale" (1998). In some texts Nimue, as the Lady of the Lake, acts as a protectress of Lancelot while Morgan is the evil character who wants to bring him down. The rivalry between both druidesses in the trilogy is shown by making them compete to become Merlin's favourite. In a comic scene during the High Council which will decide who shall act as Mordred's guardians after Uther's death, both women try to get the upper hand by pretending that the gods are speaking through them. Derfel describes Morgan's act as follows: "Firelight glinted off the golden helm. "So long!" she cried again, then remembered to sway to and fro in the brazier's smoke as if to suggest that the Gods were taking over her body." (Cornwell, 1996, p. 72) The enmity between them flows throughout the trilogy and it is starkly obvious in *Enemy of God*, when the Thirteen Treasures of Britain disappear;¹ Nimue, without Merlin now, blames Morgan for that: "As far as I could see, that conviction was solely based on Nimue's hatred for Morgan whom Nimue considered the greatest traitor of Britain [...] and Nimue, whenever she saw Morgan, spat and hurled curses that Morgan flung back at her." (Cornwell, 1997, p. 265) But Nimue's obsession about recreating a pre-Roman Britain free of Christians make her a negative character, mainly because of the means she wants to use to achieve it. In another twist of the legend, she will kill Merlin to achieve this purpose.

Unlike other texts, where she is presented as a beautiful woman who brings Merlin his end, in *The Warlord Chronicles* she is no beauty at all. Derfel says that she was *filthy these days, filthy and thin and almost as crazed as when I rescued her from the Isle of the Dead [...] Whatever intriguing beauty she had once possessed was now hidden under dirt and sores, and lost beneath her matted mass of black hair that was so greasy with filth that even the country folk who came to her for divination or healing would often recoil from her stench.* (Cornwell, 1997, p. 270)

This description runs parallel to the one of her place, the Tor, full of mad and crippled people. Derfel, in his portrayal of the place, seemingly taken from a book

¹ The Thirteen Treasures is one of the most common topics in Celtic literature in general and the Welsh tradition in particular, especially from the fifteenth century on, although the motif has an older background. They are a group of fabulous objects, only two of which are specifically Arthurian: Arthur's cloak of invisibility and Eluned's ring. For further information about these treasures and their attributes, we refer to Bronwich (2006, pp. 258- 65) and Roberts (Bronwich et alii (eds.), 1991, pp. 85-8).

on witchcraft, says that the place was full of “*sprigs of mistletoe, a pair of bat wings, the sloughed skin of snakes, a broken antler and branches of herbs.*” (Cornwell, 1997, p. 315)

Derfel suggests that Merlin beds the druidess to satisfy his lust. Malory was the first one to include an affair between them while they travelled together through Brittany and Cornwall. She is an intelligent woman, and this is what precisely infatuates Merlin, despite his knowing that she will do away with him. The first hint of this comes when the bard Taliesin tells Derfel about a strange dream he has had of Merlin in a wood, where he could not “find his way out; indeed, whenever a path opened before him, a tree would groan and move as though it were a great beast shifting to block his way.” (Cornwell, 1998, p. 351) The bard adds a touch of mystery which helps to build up to the climax of the wizard’s fate: “I talked to him in the dream, but he could not hear me. What that tells me, I think, is that he cannot be reached [...] But he wants help, that I do know, for he sent me the dream [...] The wood, I think, tells me that Merlin is imprisoned.” (Cornwell, 1998, p. 351) Derfel immediately thinks of Nimue, as he says he “could think of no one else who would dare challenge the Druid.” (Cornwell, 1998, p. 351) This idea mirrors the medieval tale in which Merlin is imprisoned by a woman with whom he is in love or by whom he has been deceived. Nimue is trying to get all his knowledge after seducing and locking him up:

She despises him because he failed, and she believes that he conceals knowledge from her, and so even now, Lord, in this very wind, she is forcing Merlin’s secrets from him [...] It might take months or years for her to learn all she needs, but she will learn, Lord, and when she knows, she will use the power. (Cornwell, 1998, p. 353)

Nenive’s reasons to get rid of the wizard are different from those of Nimue, and have a religious background; Neniove “was afraid of him for cause he was a devil’s son.” (Cooper, 1998, p. 59) However, the outcome is the same:

Merlin went with her evermore wheresoever she yede, and oftentimes Merlin would have her privily away by his subtle crafts. Then she made him to swear that he should never do no enchantment upon her if he would have his will, and so he swore [...] And so on a time Merlin did show her in a rock [...] she made Merlin to go under that stone to let her wit of the marvels there, but she wrought so there for him that he came never out for all the craft he could do. And so she departed and left Merlin. (Cooper, 1998, pp. 58-9)

Thus, there are differences between Malory's Nenie and Cornwell's Nimue and their reasons for destroying Merlin: Cornwell's Nimue plots against Merlin rather for personal reasons, namely, her ambition for the wizard's knowledge and the restoration of the ancient gods in the British Isles. She behaves brutally towards the wizard: she removes his eyes and he goes mad while imprisoned. The origin of all this hatred lies on the night when they celebrate Samain, when Nimue and Merlin set out to carry out a series of rites and sacrifices to restore the pagan gods. Arthur puts an end to these rituals despite the fact that he cannot impede Gawain's death; meanwhile, Nimue wants to continue with the ritual, even when it means killing Arthur himself, but Merlin steps aside. From then on, the image of the druidess gets more and more negative and vengeful, reaching its climax at the end of the trilogy. In order to get Derfel to her, she puts a curse on Ceinwyn: she has got a figure made of clay representing her. The druidess constantly plays with the figure: "You can judge me? Oh, pain!" And she stabbed the knife into the clay breasts. "Pain! Pain!" The mad things behind me joined in her cry. "Pain, pain!" they exulted, some clapping their hands and others laughing with delight." (Cornwell, 1998, pp. 399-400) Nimue wants Derfel to bring her Gwydre (Arthur and Guinevere's son) and Arthur's sword. Only then the curse on Ceinwyn will disappear. Cornwell introduces here a new element of surprise in the plot, since there is only one person who can help Derfel in this matter: Arthur's sister.

The medieval Christian texts depicted **Morgan** as an evil sorceress whose only aim is to do away with Camelot and Arthur. In Cornwell's trilogy, however, she is a good sister to Arthur. She is happy to see her brother again after his long years in Benoit. Morgan's first literary appearance was in the Welsh *Mabinogion* (c. 1050), where the character is a male doctor. From there, she evolved into the fairy who takes Arthur on the barge leading him to Avalon, where his wounds will be healed, only to become, at a later stage, the evil sorceress of the medieval Christian texts. In modern texts she has undergone a makeover for the better: in *The Mists of Avalon*, she is Arthur's real love and his only true friend. In the medieval texts her looks varied from a lusty beauty to the most repugnant ugliness. We can establish that in Cornwell's trilogy she is distorted, if we must describe her with one word. Derfel states that she "prostrated her stocky body in front of the High King." (Cornwell, 1996, p. 12) Some lines below, the narrator adds that Morgan "of all the weird creatures in Merlin's house was the most grotesque." (Cornwell, 1996, p. 18) One of the most notable points about her is the golden mask she wears to cover the left hand-side part of her face, burnt in a fire. At the beginning, an image of the god

Cernunnos decorates the mask, but it will be later replaced by a Christian cross.¹ Despite this terrifying impression, it seems that her reputation as a healer and her gifts of prophecy are well known, and this attribute is applied to her in almost every work.

Derfel also comments that she “was the worst-tempered woman I ever met.” (Cornwell, 1996, p. 18) This characteristic is present not only throughout the trilogy, but also in the Arthurian literature. This feature might derive from one of the possible origins of the character, the Irish goddess of war, Morrigan. Morgan’s words in *The Warlord Chronicles* are often offensive and full of imprecations; for instance, at the opening of the trilogy, Gundleus, the Silurian king destroys Merlin’s place, kills Mordred’s mother and attempts to kill the future king. However, he kills another baby after a plan devised by Morgan, who shouts at an incredulous Derfel: “Do you think, fool [...] that I would permit our King to be killed?” (Cornwell, 1996, p. 91) Another example is when, after becoming a Christian, she complains about the fact that women are accompanied by men in the rites of Isis:

They come by night, you fool, and worship their filthy goddess naked. Men and women together, sweating like swine! [...] I tell you, Derfel, they lie together in their own sweat, naked woman and naked man. Isis and Osiris, woman and man, and the woman gives life to the man, and how do you think that’s done, you fool? It’s done by the filthy act of fornication, that’s how! (Cornwell, 1997, pp. 267-8)

That is what Morgan seems not to practice in her marriage with Bishop Sansum since, as Derfel plainly states, “*Morgan received tenderness, Sansum received protection and advice, and as neither of them sought the pleasure of each other’s flesh, it had proved a better marriage than most.*” (Cornwell, 1998, p. 378)

One of the most striking characteristics in Cornwell’s Morgan is her sincerity and honesty, sometimes abrupt and sometimes tender, when she defends her beloved ones. She does so several times with her husband – prone to plotting against any of his kings and masters in order to benefit from it. Even though her temperament is acid, she is the one helping out in the most difficult situations. When they leave the Tor to go southwards, Arthur’s sister leads the rest of the inhabitants to salvation,

¹ Cernunnos was one of the most important gods for the Celts. He was the lord of all the natural things: nature, animals, fruit, grain and prosperity. His name means “the Horned One” and, indeed, he is invariably portrayed with the horns of a stag. Once Christianity became important in the Celtic area, he was linked to the Devil because of the horns. Interestingly, a Breton saint, St Kornelli, is represented like the god.

especially Mordred, who is crying in her arms. In a catch-22 situation at the end of the trilogy, this time Mordred is the pursuer, while Morgan helps Arthur's men to escape northwards on boats just when the king's men are about to catch them.

Morgan's final act in the book will bring in her revenge against Nimue. As stated above, the druidess has put a curse on Ceinwyn and Morgan is the only person who can cure her. At first, when Morgan is summoned to lift the curse on Derfel's partner, she refuses, since that is an offence to her Christian faith. However, when he mentions Nimue, she becomes interested. After knowing what the figure representing Ceinwyn is made of, Morgan tries to find the charms the druidess is using. The dialogue shows Cornwell's skill to create a sense of mystery by building up a slow climax:

"Berries," I said, "sliver of bone, embers"

"No fool! What charms? How does she reach Ceinwyn?"

"She has the stone from one of Ceinwyn's rings and one of my cloaks"

"Ah!" Morgan said, interested despite her revulsion for pagan superstitions. "Why one of your cloaks?"

"I don't know"

"Simple, fool," she snapped, "the evil flows through you"

"Me?"

"What do you understand?" she snapped. "Of course it flows through you. You have been close to Nimue, have you not?"

"Yes," I said, blushing despite myself.

"So what is the symbol of that?" she asked. "She gave you a charm? A scrap of bone? Some piece of pagan rubbish to hang about your neck?"

"She gave me this," I said, and showed her the scar on my left hand. (Cornwell, 1998, p. 412)

Morgan performs the ritual dressed in black, without a mask covering her scarred face and makes another figure with clay, blood and dew. In the womb of that figure, she puts the charm to counter-attack Nimue's curse: Derfel's hand.

We have said that Morgan is presented as a very intelligent and perceptive woman in Cornwell's trilogy. She shows that intelligence when she makes Derfel not only

lose his left hand, but also his pagan faith, by signing a contract stating obedience towards one of Derfel's nemeses: Bishop Sansum, Morgan's husband. With this, Cornwell creates an interesting parallel between Morgan and Derfel since both, in different ways, have to undergo a baptism of fire, a symbol of purification. Morgan becomes a Christian after salvaging part of the Celtic treasures kept in the Tor, set on fire, and giving them to Sansum. Derfel's hand has to be burnt so that the curse on Ceinwyn can disappear. Morgan, obviously, performs this act by throwing Derfel's left hand into a brazier, which directly links to the Christian idea of hell. As a pagan, he was supposed to burn in the flames of hell. Here, the fire is a purifying element saving him from his sins.

This is the last scene where Morgan appears. Nimue, Guinevere and Ceinwyn still perform in the very last scene of the trilogy, after the famous battle of Camlann, where Arthur kills Mordred and he is, in turn, fatally wounded by his nephew. Guinevere waits for her dying husband on the ship which will carry them towards the unknown place that Merlin has chosen for them. In Cornwell's trilogy, the novelty lies on the fact that Guinevere also disappears on the same barge, rendering the etymology of her name: Gwenhwyfar, means "white ghost" (Bruce, 1999, p. 243). Sweet and loyal Ceinwyn jumps out of the boat into the sea to join her partner, even when this means putting her life in danger. Nimue sees how Excalibur sinks into the sea forever, never to be rescued again. The idea that Cornwell poses has a deeper meaning: with Excalibur disappears the last of Britain's Thirteen Treasures. It also means the total rupture with the old pagan religion and the final triumph of the Christian faith. Morgan, in her last "pagan act", manages to beat her greatest enemy, Nimue, another symbol for the absolute victory of Christianity over Paganism.

An interesting fact is that Christianity beats the native Celtic religion using the latter's own beliefs, weapons and means. Around a century after these events happened, Pope Gregory I forbade all the Christian missionaries in Ireland to destroy the pagan sites of worship. He insisted that they should be converted into Christian sites; the waters (wells, lakes, springs), which had been so commonly venerated by the Celts, since they thought that the Goddess Mother, Danu, lived in them, became prominent Christian shrines in Ireland. Even Saint Patrick, in a contest against some Irish Druids, had to resort to magic druidic-like tricks to win.

The whole trilogy spins around religion and how it interacts with politics; but, above all, it focuses on four strong women who, nonetheless, cannot escape its force. These women are mistresses of their own acts and destinies, unlike their

medieval literary representations, and they challenge the masculine notion of authority by showing themselves as intelligent, shrewd politicians and thinkers. The four of them represent, until the very end of the trilogy, different attitudes towards Christianity. Nimue totally opposes it. Morgan becomes a dangerous fanatic, while Ceinwyn and Guinevere show certain indifference, but in different ways. These four women are the ones who actually and actively engage in the plot. None of them, even when we dare to contradict Aristotle's thoughts, lack any of the man's qualities. Does this make Cornwell's trilogy imperfect? It is quite clear that it does not.

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