From Sterility to Fecundity:

a Study of Some Rewritings of Guenevere from Medieval Sources to Rosemary Sutcliff's *Sword at Sunset*

Which story has retained its power to accommodate so many different sentiments and systems of belief? Which story has been told and retold in different ways so as to reflect, embody and shape the cultural and social values of different periods? More than almost any other mythos, the Matter of Britain—the Arthurian Cycle—has lent itself to reinterpretation and rewriting. The rewriting of these Arthurian stories by medieval authors and late twentieth-century authors can lead to an examination of a whole host of cultural and social concerns, including, for example, that of gender roles. The intertextuality present in such rewritings forces readers to compare the different versions and thus to make comparisons highlighting the concerns with gender roles underlying the rewritings.

This article will examine Guenevere as she is found in earlier versions of Arthurian literature (my primary text here will be Malory), in conjunction with one late twentieth-century rewriting of the Arthurian world—namely Rosemary Sutcliff's *Sword at Sunset*—in order to throw light on a consideration of gender roles. The aim of this paper will be to examine a typical early presentation of Guenevere, then analyse how a later rewriting attempts to legitimise female power, traditionally portrayed as dangerous and destructive; a key element in Guenevere's role is the attribution of either sterility or fecundity to her character. As the

objective of this paper is simply to provide an overview of a specific aspect of a single character's development, I have consciously chosen to limit references to the vast body of contemporary mediaeval scholarly work. Similarly, as an article of this length cannot include every retelling of the Arthurian legend, I have had to restrict my choice of texts, and to limit myself to written texts rather than other forms of expression: Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot* and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon* are obvious choices for a more extensive survey, as would be the numerous cinematic interpretations of the tale.

A brief consideration of the genesis of the Arthurian tradition will help to throw some light on the development of the Arthur and Guenevere characters. By medieval times, legends about Arthur had been circulating orally for centuries. The first references to the prowess of a warrior called Arthur were found in a poem called *Y Gododdin* composed by the Welsh bard Aneirin in circa 600 AD.[1] The *Historia Brittonum* (The History of the Britons), composed by Nennius in circa 830 AD, described Arthur as *dux bellorum* (leader in battle) and lists twelve great battles, finishing with Arthur's triumph over the Saxons at Mount Badon. In 1125, the 12th century historian William of Malmesbury wrote *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (Deeds of the Kings of England), and referred to the distinguished service of the warlike Arthur. In 1129, Henry of Huntingdon wrote *Historia Anglorum* (History of the English), and changed Arthur's rank. He was now described as *dux militum et regum Britanniae* (leader of soldiers and kings of Britain). The biggest positive push to Arthur's reputation, however, came in c.1139 with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historium Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain), which reflected the by now popular conception of Arthur as a great and mighty king. Many of the later themes associated with our contemporary conception of Arthuriana were still missing: there was no sword in the stone, no Round Table or Grail Quest, no Lancelot, Lady of the Lake, Morgana or indeed Excalibur. Mordred existed, but as a

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[1] The history of the Arthurian Legend was taken from *The Flower of Kings: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in England Between 1485 and 1835*, by James Douglas Merriman.

treacherous nephew who usurped Arthur's throne in Britain whilst the latter was campaigning overseas, and forced Guenevere, who had but a cameo role, to live with him. In fact, Guenevere is a minor character whose birth and beauty are mentioned when Arthur weds her, but who receives little other mention until Mordred seizes the throne and abducts her. In his *Historium*, Geoffrey chronicled the exploits of the British race from the time of their settlement on the island of Britain. In a work of twelve books that records events from the Trojan War to the reign of Athelstan, he spends five books depicting the time during which Arthur's family, and then Arthur himself, came to power. Some of Geoffrey's information was already known: Vortigern's story, for example, was already to be found in Nennius. However, Geoffrey added characters and events of his own making, and clearly shaped Arthur into a national hero with international importance. Geoffrey's chief contribution to later rewritings of the legend were the role of Merlin, the theme of war with the Saxons and the names and roles of Arthur's family, especially that of his nephew.

It seems, therefore, that in terms of the British earlier versions of the legend, the gendered orientation of the texts was a consequence of contemporary political overtones. Arthur was a fighting man, and the stories centred around battles, territories lost and gained, and political intrigue. However, the legend had also reached continental Europe between the 6th and 8th centuries through populations who began emigrating from Britain to escape the invading Saxons and Angles. As the legend evolved, it began to lay more importance on courtly love than on feats on the battlefield. Arthur's traditional British character—the battle-hero—did not translate well, and consequently Arthur began to recede into the background while previously minor characters began to take on more importance and illustrate the new, romance approach. These were 'ideal' knights, strong, brave, and courtly. The ethos of courtly love and chivalry thus became an important factor in the progression of the legend.

The introduction of chivalry and courtly love, and by extension the expanded role of Guenevere, was partly due to the influence of a female readership. Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter Marie de Champagne, for example, became patrons of the

romances. By the late twelfth century, Chrétien de Troyes became a leading writer of the new romances as a retainer of Marie de Champagne's court. He made five contributions to the Arthurian cycle, in which Arthur shifted from being the principal character to becoming a background figure while the individual knights and women at his court were highlighted instead. In brief, there were now two Arthurian traditions to choose from: firstly, the chronicle or historical tradition, where King Arthur played an active role, bringing peace to his kingdom while affirming his power. He was the central character, the conqueror. Secondly, there was the romance tradition, which presented a much more passive Arthur. In this case, as king, he presided over the Round Table and was the guardian of traditions and customs.

Since the focal point of the Romance version was chivalry, it was the knights and ladies who starred in these adventures. Arthur was now an altogether weaker, lethargic and almost minor character, but this shift in emphasis would allow for a much wider, more varied Arthurian tradition, including the incorporation of stronger, more prominent female characters.

By the 15th century, Thomas Malory had obviously recognised the need for a plausible sequence to the legend. While imprisoned, Malory collected nine principal sources in order to write his *Morte d'Arthur*. He completed his work in 1470, and it was printed by William Caxton in 1485. While Chrétien's subject matter was chivalric adventure, religious allegory and courtly love, Malory's account chose to emphasise the brotherhood of the knights rather than courtly love, and the conflicts of loyalty brought about by Lancelot and Guenevere's adulterous relationship.

In Malory's work, therefore, the concept of a brotherhood, of knights fighting for a common cause, a common good, became a major motif. These fraternal links, both real and assumed, were created by the strongest bonds of friendship and honour as represented by the fellowship of the Round Table, but also by links of kinship. Consequently, family ties are of the utmost importance and complex family trees can be found, or are at least implied, in Malory. In this context, Guenevere may be highlighted for presenting the reverse side of the situation: she is the only major

character in Malory who does not abide by the unwritten code of necessity of procreation, the need to provide the Fellowship with future contenders, indeed, to provide Arthur with a legitimate heir, nor does she bring a kinship group with her. In fact, Guenevere's childlessness, given its drawbacks, is so startling that it deserves investigation.

Malory's version of the legend can reasonably be assumed to have been influenced by the collective consciousness of countless generations and to their inherited religious and cultural practices. Malory's work would therefore present surface manifestations of many an underlying mythology—which in turn would raise countless questions as to why the legends have preserved, rejected and modified the aspects that they have. Nonetheless, Malory's and other medieval versions, written in the Christian era and awash with heavy Christian overtones, do have their roots in pagan traditions—as revealed by the work of, for example, Rutherford (1987) and Darrah (1981).

The combat between knights, which in Malory, for example, may be seen simply as an instance of casual violence so prevalent in the Arthurian cycle, actually has its roots in pre-Christian religions that incorporated powerful divine female figures. The deification and worship of the female divinity in areas as far apart geographically and chronologically as the earliest records of Sumer to classical Greece and Rome, all reveal the relationship of the goddess to the son/lover who dies and is mourned annually. First of all, the Arthurian combat in Malory almost always took place by a spring, ford, forest clearing or solitary tree, all essential elements to goddess-centred worship in most of Europe and Asia Minor. Identifying features of these combats are the same as those which characterise, for instance, the cult of Diana at the sacred grove in Nemi, Italy. Secondly, Mallory's Arthurian combat required the presence of six fundamental steps or characteristics:

1. A sacred site
2. which contains a significant natural feature
3. is defended by an individual with his life.
4. An opponent may challenge the defender to fight.
5. If the challenger is successful, he takes over the defence of the site
6. and takes the defendant's title and possessions.

We see the same series of steps at Nemi where the son/lover had to keep watch over the sanctuary and, if challenged, had to fight (see Stone 1976). A contender was allowed to break a bough off the sacred tree and then fight the son/lover in single combat. If he won, he reigned. Often in Malory, and elsewhere—the *Gawain poet*, for example—the challenge takes place at a fixed time (within a year and a day), or else the task of defending the site is imposed for a fixed length of time. The periodicity of these events also finds its roots in the pre-Christian era: the success of the goddess' consort in encouraging abundance would, if it depended on his virility, clearly decline as he grew older and more infirm. Systems were therefore adopted which led to his replacement while still young and strong, either by a trial of strength or by limiting the period of kingship.

Malory, however, had suppressed the folklore, mythological and pagan elements which were clearly in evidence in "The Matter of Britain." Malory's characters as we know them are the result of naturalisation, belonging to a new tradition which could be considered as the origins of current Arthurian mainstream. In discussing this naturalisation process, it is important to take into account the prevailing social context of that time of transition from the probable period of origin of the tales to the form as can be found in Malory. As previously stated, Arthur's Celtic roots originate from 5th or 6th century Britain as the first historical appearance of the legends. Since Britain was Christianised in the 8th century, the tales had at least two or three hundred years of refinement in the oral tradition before coming into contact with Christianity. Another four hundred years were to pass before we have a written trace of Arthur, either from Geoffrey of Monmouth or from the French "Matter of Britain" in the early twelfth century. Those four hundred years were critical in the formation of the legend, given the social climate which was changing all the time. What took place during that period was essentially a revolution of values. Any wholesale transformation of religious and moral values is going to engender a period of social upheaval (or *vice-versa*), particularly when the two value systems were as diametrically opposed as goddess worship and Christianity. We can assume that the stories that came out of that period were

influenced by, and therefore reflect, the socio-religious confusion of the period. How did the modification of those Celtic roots influence the role of Guenevere? Fecundity is one of the most important attributes of the goddess—but Guenevere is barren.

By the time we reach Malory's Guenevere, she is controlled from birth by a patriarchal society and her church. She is wedded to the Saviour/King, strays and brings down one of the most highly-placed Christian knights with her, repents and submits herself to her church again. It is obvious that a Christian-based rewriting of the legend has taken place, transforming references to the earlier values into symbols of either elevated Christian value or of inherent evil. However, Chrétien de Troyes' Guenevere, written three centuries before Malory, had not yet been totally deprived of her pagan origins—the Christianization process was not fully complete. In Chrétien's tale *Eric and Enide* (1-91), Guenevere assumes the role of giver of life, of goddess of fecundity, for she personally clothes Enide in her bridal wear and takes charge of the preparations for the wedding night. In the tale *Cligés*, Guenevere is actually responsible for bringing together the two lovers, Alexander and Soredamors, and again arranges their wedding night. We are then informed of the fruitfulness of their union, resulting in the birth of Cligés (Chrétien 91-180).

Earlier on in this paper, it was stated that in the pre-Christian cults, the goddess accepted the son/lover figure who died and was mourned annually. If Guenevere has her roots in the goddess figure, then Arthur corresponds to the son/lover. It is imperative to bear in mind that the goddess figure in antiquity represented fertility, but was not actually required to procreate, since her consort was at one and the same time husband, lover and child. In this way, Guenevere the barren spouse finds her roots in the goddess figure who, since her consort was both lover and child, did not physically need to give birth. As previously mentioned, the last strong traces of pre-Christian roots are to be found in Chrétien's version, in which we find Guenevere bestowing the couples with the gift of fecundity. We also, incidentally, find an Arthur figure who is obviously considered as subordinate to his queen. In both *Eric and Enide* and in *Cligés*, it is significant to note that it is

Guenevere who is approached for advice or mediation, whilst Arthur is not taken very seriously.

As the legend moved further into the Christian tradition, Guenevere lost more and more of her goddess traits and simply became a barren consort. In keeping with the domination of a patrilinear society, Arthur becomes the saviour/king. It is perhaps hardly surprising that Guenevere did not evolve into a child-bearing spouse. As her character moved forward chronologically and was adapted to fit into the norms of the Christian tradition, it seems reasonable to assume that there had to be some reaction against the once-powerful childless figure. In the Christian context, the woman's role is to provide legitimate offspring within the patrilineal tradition. What better punishment, for a figure who had her roots in the dominant matriarchy, than to be branded barren in the ensuing patriarchy where an upstanding woman would only acquire her status from her position as faithful and fecund wife?

Many of the Arthurian legends available today are therefore Christianised rewritings, to a greater or lesser degree, of the original pagan myths. Until the middle of this century, much of the historical fiction was inspired by the romanticised Middle Ages portrayed in Malory and set in the familiar world of questing knights, damsels on white palfreys, chivalric codes, tournaments and so on. However, some creative work was also being done on that period of transition from the first set of values to the later set, and the 1960s saw some of the first non-Christian, non-patriarchal rewritings of the legend. We shall turn our attention, within this context, to the work of Rosemary Sutcliff and her rewriting of Guenevere in the novel *Sword at Sunset*, first published in 1963.

Sutcliff's work established a new trend and new conventions in historical fiction: a historical setting of interest to modern readers for some parallel with contemporary times; competent scholarship into the historical period; and characters of ordinary rather than heroic stature. The legend was now more realistically set in its Dark Age Britain context, a picture of Roman Britain in its last stages, and Arthur (called Artos, in Sutcliff) was a Romano-Celtic warlord. The challenge to a rewriting of this nature was great, partly because so little is known of the period, and mainly because what we think of as the traditional elements of the

legend—cloaked in the trappings of the Middle Ages—were stripped away, thus posing a problem in terms of the 'integrity' of the legend for the reader. The motifs and symbols which had their origins in medieval romance literature and which the Arthurian readership had come to expect, would either be missing or, transposed to a Dark Age setting, would be shockingly anachronistic. One of Sutcliff's solutions to the problem was to look to early Welsh literature, in which Bedwyr is one of Arthur's chief companions. Since Lancelot—a product of French romance—more properly fit into stories set in the Middle Ages, Bedwyr was cast in the role of the queen's lover (who, in Sutcliff, bears the more appropriate name of Guenhumara). Similarly, the villain in Arthurian fiction, Mordred, first appeared in early Welsh literature as Medraut, a British warrior who fell at Camlann. His relationship with Arthur is an addition of later French romance. However, since his role as Arthur's son is now firmly established in the reading public's mind, Sutcliff retained his filial links and antihero status, nonetheless changing his name to Medraut.

One of the most striking aspects of *Sword at Sunset* is the focus on the female point of view. By incorporating the woman's perspective, Sutcliff 'reclaimed' a story which had always been driven by the actions of the male characters, even though after the advent of courtly love, romantic entanglements became crucial parts of the plot. The woman's perspective was achieved, in a great part, due to the new twist that Sutcliff gave to Guenhumara's persona—in a bold move, she broke with all previous convention and allowed her heroine to bear a child. In a sense, the book engages with feminism through the characterisation of Guenhumara and the representation of her strength.

Earlier on in this paper, it was postulated that the traditional, childless Guenevere figure was the result of punishing patriarchal rewritings. To what extent, therefore, was Rosemary Sutcliff redeeming Guenevere? First of all, a word of caution: it would be a mistake to cast Sutcliff as a 'feminist' writer. *Sword at Sunset* was composed in the 1960s before late twentieth-century feminism—in either a political or critical sense—became a recognised concept, and the book's narrative voice is Artos himself—a male, first-person narration. Additionally, the child Guenhumara bears, Hylin,

dies when she is only two years old, thus limiting the impact of her fecundity. Also, Sutcliff creates a predominantly masculine society: even if Hylin had survived, as a woman she would have been unable to fight as a warrior alongside her father, and in the context of a patriarchal lineage, she could not have carried Arthur's name to the ensuing generation. But these are, in effect, details, and the issue at stake is to examine the deeper consequences of Guenhumara's fecundity.

In the patriarchal rewritings, the earlier Guenevere had always ended life as essentially unfulfilled, having failed to achieve her potential maternity. Her sterility was always experienced as a block in finding an outlet for her instincts, and as a consequence, she often ended up by attempting to cripple all around her. In other words, she was traditionally portrayed as dangerous and destructive. Does Sutcliff, by making Guenhumara fertile, succeed in legitimising female power? First of all, Guenhumara's fecundity allows this female character to be perceived in a new way—it interrogates her traditional role in the legend, and plays with our expectations of the legend. She becomes a focalizing agent, through whose point of view the narrative perspective is oriented.[2]

The acquisition of traditional symbols of power is also reoriented in terms of gender. In the Arthurian context, Arthur's sword legitimises Arthur as king. There is a connection between Arthur's kingship and his possession of the sword, in the same way that there is a connection between kingship, ability in battle, battle being associated with men (not women), and swords, interpreted as phallic symbols, and identified with male power. Rosemary Sutcliff also gives Artos a sword—it is not pulled from a stone, but rather is given to him by the Emperor Ambrosius. But Sutcliff also gives Guenhumara a child, a child who gives status and authority to the mother and in this way appropriates the symbol of power to her, and makes her Artos' equal. After Hylin's death—a death which the mother blames on the father—it is Artos who looks to his wife for intelligent decision-making and administrative policy-

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[2]   As opposed to the narrator who tells the events. See G. Genette's *Narrative Discourse*.

making; indeed, who looks to her for direction. The traditional symbols of power have therefore been undermined, but for Artos it is too late, for Guenhumara has taken her independence and, albeit physically present, has all but left him. The loss of Artos' sword would signify loss of power, whereas Guenhumara's loss actually allows her to appropriate power.

Guenevere is perhaps best known in the Arthurian tradition as a lover and a queen. She is often Lancelot's lover and Arthur's wife, and her relationship to these men helps to propel the plot. Rosemary Sutcliff also places Guenhumara and Bedwyr (Artos' friend and captain), in a romantic relationship which slowly begins to blossom some time after Hylin's death. However, in earlier versions, Guenevere never focalised the action. The events and consequences were never *her* story, for the adventures, quests and retributions, in other words, the knightly action that was undertaken on her behalf was inspired by her, but she was never the subject of it. The adventures did not belong to her. Guenevere's knights in shining armour never lacked the ability to step forward and accept the danger and the challenge of such tests as mark the knight as heroic. Sutcliff's Guenhumara, however, is tested by temptation just as Bedwyr is, and recognises that it is she, not Bedwyr, who is at risk. It is her virtue, not the man's, that is tested. Bedwyr is not asked to defend Guenhumara's virtue before the assembled company of Artos and the companions. The couple simply leave, in a quiet and dignified manner, Guenhumara very much in the spotlight and Bedwyr very much in the shadows. In this rewriting, Guenhumara is without a doubt the focalising agent of the action.

While her strength as a character is worthy of her origins in pagan tradition, Sutcliff situated her clearly within the context of Christian tradition. Unlike previous Gueneveres, Guenhumara is fertile, a giver of life, mother to a daughter, Hylin. It is in her association with the Christian paradigm that she gives birth. When Guenhumara goes into labour prematurely in the middle of a long march, Artos takes her into little-known hills to the pagan 'Dark People' of the Hollow Hills village and to the shelter and help that she so desperately needs. Although her distancing of herself from pagan "darkness" allows her to claim her fecundity, the distance is

insufficient for her to claim maternity as the child dies. When Artos leaves her and newly-born Hylin for three days to regain strength before he returns, Guenhumara's anguish is palpable. Later, when Hylin dies, Guenhumara will squarely place the blame on Artos, claiming that during the three days in the village "they were drawing the life out of her. They were drawing her life out, to give it to their own sick child—it began to mend the next day—and they left her not enough for three years" (Sutcliff 323). The conflict opposes the deepest convictions of Artos and Guenhumara; Sutcliff thus ascribes gender to this binary opposition, suggesting an association between Light and female, Darkness and male. Light is victorious in that Guenhumara does in fact give birth to a child, but the victory is ambiguous in that, although she acquires power through Arthur as a result, pagan darkness takes the child from her.

Guenevere has provided writers with a female character whose importance is established, yet she also provides an opportunity for these writers to elaborate their own rewriting of her story or psychological motivation. This paper has examined how the medieval, patriarchal rewritings whose roots were still firmly embedded in the older, oral tradition, punished Guenevere by making her sterile. Rosemary Sutcliff's book offered a new approach, which proved to be a vehicle leading to a discussion about the new possibilities open to Guenhumara as a focalising agent and as a personage who claims her own story and makes it hers. Whilst not a feminist writer, Rosemary Sutcliff undoubtedly paved the path for the next wave of writers, notably Marion Zimmer Bradley and Gillian Bradshaw amongst others, to concern themselves with themes such as culture, sexuality and sexual freedom in the exploration of the multi-faceted character of Guenevere.

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