Rape and Male Identity in Arthurian Romance, Chrétien de Troyes to Marion Zimmer Bradley

Anna Angeli

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RAPE AND MALE IDENTITY IN ARTHURIAN ROMANCE, 
CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES TO MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

BY

ANNA ANGELI

BACHELOR OF ARTS

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the 
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts
Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This work explores the evolution of troped rape in Arthurian literature from the 12th century to modern day. I focus on three works: Chrétien de Troyes’ *Erec et Enide*, Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, and Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon*. In each, I examine the five functions of troped rape – the establishing of military prowess, the encoded patriotic message, the moral test, and the aesthetic and class marker. These five functions remain intact but evolve in accordance with historical and social context, the real societal conditions and common perception of women influencing each work’s representation of rape. In the 12th century, Chrétien de Troyes’ atypical Arthurian romances were still largely focused on the male characters, favoring their development over the female characters’. In the 16th century, Spenser also favored the male point of view but problematized his re-imagined Arthurian legend with male anxiety about women in power and the changing colonial military understanding of Elizabethan England. In the late 20th century, Bradley injected the myths with the female voice, undermining the phallocentric take on rape by writing it from the victim’s point of view.
Introduction: Rape and Arthurian Romance

The telling of the legend of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table is part of a literary tradition dating back almost nine hundred years, to Geoffrey of Monmouth's 1138 document *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Since Geoffrey’s conception of a heroic king who, with the help of his companions, his wizard Merlin, and his sword Excalibur, drove the Saxons out of Britain and established a flourishing kingdom, the story has been recycled and used by myriad authors through the ages¹. Chrétien de Troyes, writing in the later half of the 12th century, first worked the legend into the form of Arthurian romance, written in the vernacular for maximum audience consumption. Arthurian romance has survived as one of the most popular fantastic genres to this day, with a surge in popularity in the 19th and 20th centuries boosting the genre to an all-time high in literary and popular culture. Beginning in the early 20th century, the genre expanded into new kinds of media such as film, theater, comic, television, and musical, its popular appeal skyrocketing to its current status as one of the best-known stories in the fantasy genre.

Just as other fantastic genres, the Arthurian legends give voice to common societal anxieties and serve as a way to work through period-specific issues and concerns. According to Lee McClain, the genre specifically targets concerns about gender roles in society: “In each era the Arthurian legend serves as a sort of Rorschach test onto which societies project their anxieties about proper gender roles... Now that women have entered the scene as writers, the landscape of Arthuriana has changed. In the women's

¹ Some notable examples are Thomas Malory, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Mark Twain, T. H. White, Walt Disney, and Monty Python.
version of the story, male anxiety is decreased and female anxiety increased” (198).

McClain claims that the present day is the new golden age of the Arthurian myths precisely because “we live in an era pervaded by questions about how to define gender roles” (197). One of the aims of this thesis is to explore this function of the genre, or more specifically the relationship between the representation of women in Arthurian works and the reality of gender roles in society during specific periods. The three major works I use to examine these questions are Chrétien de Troye’s *Erec et Enide*, Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, and Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon*. A specific literary device, troped rape, demonstrates the relationship between each work’s representation of women and its historical context.

Rape trope, as defined by Kathryn Gravdal, is:

>a literary device that presents an event in such a way that it heightens figurative elements and manipulates the reader's ordinary response by suspending or interrupting that response in order to displace the reader's focus onto other formal or thematic elements. The mimesis of rape is made tolerable when the poet tropes it as moral, comic, heroic, spiritual, or erotic. (13)

In short, troping rape is the act of representing rape, or the threat of, in a way that diffuses the inherent horror and violence of the act and shifts attention to its narrative function. Most often, this shift means a shift away from the victim/female and towards the savior/male as he proves his mettle, learns an important lesson, or is shown making sound moral judgments. Accordingly, my aim is not to offer criticism of medieval methods of representing rape. I use the functions of troped rape in Chrétien de Troye’s Arthurian romance as a foil for the two later works in an effort to show the evolution of the literary device since the 12th century, and to offer some insight into how and why its use has
changed. Specifically, I use it to illustrate how the injection by Bradley of the female voice into the genre is revolutionary.

One of the problems with objectively studying a specific crime, especially a largely gender-specific and politically charged one, is that it is hard to define the crime itself. One has to be aware of the changing definition of rape through time, and the laws and customs that dictate the understanding of the crime in each period. As many scholars have pointed out, forcing our modern definitions of rape onto a medieval text is problematic. As Evelyn Vitz writes: “rape is always understood within a conceptual context which is based on implicit underlying metaphors. Thus, rape can be seen as "damage" (to the honor of the individual or the family, or to the physical person), or as "theft" of an asset (virginity), etc” (3). She also points out that our own underlying construct of rape, that of the infringement on one’s right to determine her own sexual partners, is vastly different from the medieval understanding of rape, which revolved more around which man had sexual rights to which women than around personal choice and taste. Furthermore, she points out that the understanding of love was itself a more violent concept in the Middle Ages, when “love was most often conceived of as a violent experience which happened to you—entered or penetrated you, took possession of you, corrupted your reason and imprisoned you” (4). In this “assault-based concept of love,” using force to carry out a desire that was already seen as being forced on individuals had very different meanings.

Looking back at medieval representations of rape with a modern, post-feminist revolution sensibility, it is sometimes tempting to criticize it as demeaning to women. Medieval Arthurian texts often exploit the eroticism presented by sexual threats against
women and in large part ignore the trauma experienced by these victims. In defense of the medieval rape trope, however, one can point to the vastly different aesthetic at work in the Middle Ages. Not only were gender roles defined differently, but so was masculine and feminine perfection:

We would do well to keep in mind the concepts of male and female perfection that were widely accepted in the Middle Ages and that pervade medieval romance and poetry. A woman worthy of love is inevitably described as beautiful, with golden hair and all the trimmings; she may or may not be "wise," or have other useful skills or endearing features: this varies according to the genre, the poet, the audience, the patron or patroness, the place and the period. An aristocratic male--a knight--worthy of love is, inevitably, preux: strong, bold, fearless; also handsome, and sometimes with other charms as well. But in any event, as an excellent male, he is defined by his ability to use force. (6)

Keeping this definition of the “perfect” man in mind, the use of force in a sexual situation becomes harder to define as always amoral and criminal. The audiences of medieval Arthurian romance may have had a very different view of rape and consequently interpreted many of the “objectionable” scenes in Chrétien’s romances in a different manner. Both the definition of rape and the reception of its representation by consumers of literature become malleable when one takes into account a period’s aesthetic and legal sensibilities.

Several hundred years later, in the late Elizabethan period, Edmund Spenser uses the same functions of troped rape to illustrate the moral development of Guyon, a knight of the Round Table bent on conquering the sins of temptation and lust, in his poem *The Faerie Queene*. This use of troped rape in a later Arthurian romance serves as an excellent example of how these functions evolve over time to reflect period-specific anxieties and societal conditions. In *The Faerie Queene*, the male anxiety over women in power, most notably an aging Queen Elizabeth I, is apparent in Guyon’s destruction of
Acrasia’s Bower of Bliss in Book II, canto xii. The rape of the bower is an aestheticized, romanticized act of violence represented in a way that directs reader attention away from the victim (except to admire its/her beauty) and towards Guyon himself. Even in the 16th century, it is apparent that the functions of rape are not unchanging, as the scene is significantly problematized by the fact that two rapes are being represented – the rape of the bower by Guyon, and the “rape” of Verdant, the latest naïve knight to fall victim to Acrasia’s lust. The rape of men by women is one theme that appears more widely in later re-imaginings of the myths, although some of Chrétien’s more ambiguous rape scenes have elements alluding to this manifestation of female power. Bradley, in *Mists of Avalon*, uses this theme of female rapist in provocative and thoughtful ways when undermining the male rape discourse.

While it is important to note the historical evolution of defining rape, the rape trope in Arthurian literature can be used as an invaluable tool in deciphering societal gender roles and anxieties. We have established that Arthurian romance addresses societal concerns about gender, and since rape is a driving narrative causal force in most re-imaginings of the legends, investigating this particular literary tool can yield a wealth of information. How each period’s Arthurian literature presents rape, and the ways in which the trope evolves (or does not), can be indicative of societal conditions for women, anxieties about changes in gender roles, and the state of current politics. In this thesis I illustrate how even in the 20th century, in mainstream Arthurian texts and films the basic elements of rape trope are unchanged. I argue that *Mists of Avalon* is the notable exception to this rule, and that with its gender-bending undermining of the rules of rape

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2 For example, both the Lovesome Damsel and Guinevere in *Lancelot, ou le chevalier de la charrette* manipulate Lancelot in sexual situations.
trope, it redefines Arthuriana and serves as a prime example of how the genre can potentially reflect the new direction our societal anxieties about gender inequality have taken.
Chapter 1: Erec et Enide and the Representation of Women

Chrétien de Troyes wrote his first Arthurian romance, *Erec et Enide*, in 1165. Written in the Old French vernacular, *Erec et Enide*, established a new style of storytelling rich with nuanced meaning. In this poem, Chrétien struggles with some of the major questions of his time, namely the changing role of chivalry in court, an emerging individualism thrown into conflict with the community, and shifting gender roles. In *Erec et Enide*, as in all the others he wrote, Chrétien tropes rape in several different ways. The narrative is dependent on sexual threats made against ladies, as is most medieval literature in general and Arthurian romance in particular. The use of rape in medieval literature adds an often ambiguous complexity to the issue of gender roles and the representation of women.

According to Kathryn Gravdal in her book *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*, the two most common kinds of rape scenes in Chrétien’s poems are the “pucelle esforciée,” or the simple raping of a maiden, and the “raptus mulieris,” the abduction of a maiden with the implicit or explicit purpose of ravishing her. The difference is a function of the rapist’s motives, the outcome of the rape, and the meaning ascribed to it. Both kinds, however, are troped to deflect attention from the physical violence being performed or plotted and to direct attention to specific moral or aesthetic issues. Gravdal, in her book, outlines how “sexual violence is a powerful motor in the romance genre, both in plot and in audience interest … In romance, “ravishment” becomes aestheticized and moralized” (14). Both kinds of rape, however, fulfill all or most of the five functions she ascribes to rape in Chrétien’s work. First and foremost, the rape or threat of rape serves as “a trope for military prowess” (44).
The successful defeat of a would-be or actual rapist serves to elevate the hero in the audience's eyes. When the knight successfully vanquishes his foe and saves the pucelle, he proves his physical and technical skills of knighthood. Secondly, the rape trope serves as a proof of the knight's moral standing. Chrétien often places his knights in a position of making difficult or ambiguous decisions, and the rescue of a threatened lady serves as one of the most common of these. Chrétien explores the theme of conflicting knightly duties in all of his work, and forcing a knight to decide between two conflicting duties makes for nuanced character development. The choice is often one between saving a threatened lady and being detained in a quest or to rushing to her rescue regardless of how much time may be wasted in consequence. When the knight chooses to fulfill his ethical duty to save a damsel in distress, he shows that his priorities are in order and that he is worthy of the audience’s respect and admiration. In effect, this function of rape also shifts attention away from the victim and towards the knight:

Rather than linger to inspire in the audience pity for the victim of an attack, and rather than allow the audience to take too great a pleasure in the representation of an erotic scene, Chrétien consistently displaces the attention of the audience toward the male character in the sequence. He thus creates sympathy for the knight and justifies the audience’s interest in rape by leading it toward an intellectual analysis of moral dilemma. (Gravdal 45)

The third function of rape is to be a social marker, “to distinguish the nobility from other classes” (44). The rapist is almost always of a lower social class than either the victim or the savior. Placing characters in these three roles serves to reaffirm the social hierarchy and to assign moral value to each character based on rank. The fourth function is one that is closely related to the third. The defeat of a rapist by a rescuing knight sends a patriotic message about warring kingdoms. Often, the lady is abducted as a test of the strength of a
kingdom, and winning her back is indicative of the “good” kingdom’s superiority over the “bad” kingdom. As Gravdal writes: “through this sentimentalized adventure of kidnapping, the audience learns a lesson in political hegemony” (44). The last function of rape is to establish the beauty of the victim. With this function, rape is troped “as an aesthetic marker of and testimony to physical beauty” (44). Only beautiful women get abducted and threatened with rape. Paradoxically, the victim’s beauty very often also serves to justify the threat of rape, especially when put on display by a well-meaning male relation. The victim’s beauty also serves to aestheticize the rape itself, since a struggling, scantily-clad beauty was always an enjoyable image for readers. The image of a threatened, beautiful female body is still used to titillate audiences, especially in modern film versions. This last way of troping rape is one of particular interest in this paper, as it the most pervasive in modern imaginings of the Arthurian myths.

One can see the troping of rape very clearly in the multiple threatened rape scenes in Chrétien de Troye’s first romance, *Erec et Enide*. Erec, after winning the love of Enide through a contest, becomes completely enthralled with the joys of married life, neglecting his chivalric duties of war, adventure, and questing. When Enide reveals to him that his reputation is suffering due to his exceeding interest in his wife and his married duties, Erec is deeply distressed and immediately strikes out in search of adventure. In a twist to the typical storyline, Erec also takes along Enide, dressing her in magnificent robes and forcing her to ride in front of him. Essentially, Erec needs Enide to save him from the fact of his failed knighthood: “Salvation is through her body, which attracts the proofs necessary for Erec to accomplish his mission. Her body, excessively ornamented for such a difficult journey in her "robe la plus bele" (2576), is a lure which Erec knows will be
effective” (Ramey 382). Using her as bait is doubly effective, as it both ensures that danger will find them and neutralizes the threat that Enide poses to Erec’s manhood. He harnesses her dangerous sexuality, which has already had such a devastating effect on him, by using it as a tool against other men. As Gravdal writes: “In truth, he will use his wife as a kind of lightening rod: an invitation to crime” (55). In addition, Erec forbids Enide to talk, even if she wants to warn him of danger. By doing this, he not only transforms her into a sexual object to attract would-be rapists and other villains, he denies her any speech act by which she could influence the outcome of these struggles. He forces the action to pertain only to him, and for himself to have ultimate power in any situation that might arise. By denying Enide a voice, he not only denies her agency in their quest to earn him back his knightly reputation, he also denies her access to the privileged male world of chivalry. This denial is particularly ironic because she not only is directly responsible for his abandonment of his duties after marriage, she is also instrumental in helping him regain that which he has lost. Erec chooses to use her as a tool toward this goal rather than an active participant in his salvation.

Erec’s plans set a series of actions into play, as the rumors soon spread and a host of villains flock to see for themselves the famous knight who travels with a strikingly beautiful lady. When describing Erec and Enide to the villainous Count Galoin, one of his vassals sings their praises in exaggerated terms:

Vos estes assez biaus et janz.
N’a chevalier an cest pais
Qui de la terre soit naïs
Que plus biaus ne soiiez de lui ;
Mes bien os dire de cestui
Qu’il est plus biaus de vos assez,
Se del hauberc ne fust quassez
Et quamoissiez et debatuz.
Enide is threatened on multiple occasions, most significantly by two lustful counts who seek to marry her to force her consent. The first count, Count Galoin, has heard of her beauty and comes to investigate. When he finds that she is, indeed, as beautiful as he has heard, he covets her and threatens to kill Erec to win her:

Ne me deigneriez amer.
Dame ? » fet it, « Trop estes fiere.
Por losange ne por proiire
Ne feriez rien que je vuille ?
Bien est voirs que fame s’orguelle
Quant l’an plus la prie et losange ;
Mes qui la honist et leidange,
Cil la trueve mellor sovant.
Certes je vos met an covant
Que, se vos mon talant ne feites,
Ja i avra espees treites.
Ocirre ferai or androit,
Ou soit a tort ou soit a droit,
Vostre seignor devant voz iauz.4 (3346-3359)

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3 There is not a knight in this country, a native of this land, whom you do not excel in favour. But I dare maintain concerning this one that he is fairer than you, if he were not beaten black and blue beneath his hauberk, and bruised. In the forest he has been fighting single-handed with eight knights, and leads away their eight horses. And there comes with him a lady so fair that never lady was half so fair as she.

4 You disdain to love me, lady?" says he; "upon my word, you are too proud. Neither for flattery nor for prayer you will do my will? It is surely true that a woman's pride mounts the more one prays and flatters her; but whoever insults and dishonours her will often find her more tractable. I give you my word that if you do not do my will there soon will be some sword-play here. Rightly or wrongly, I will have your lord slain right here before your eyes.
Erec naturally foils the count’s plans, and the pair is free to travel on, searching for more adversaries. They encounter another lusty count, the Count of Limors, later in the story.

At this point, Erec is assumed dead and the Count tries to convince Enide to remarry.

Enide, though also believing Erec to be dead, refuses repeatedly, driving the count to use force:

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Teisiez vos an tuit! » fet li cuens,
« La dame est moie, et je sui seuns,
Si fera de li mon pleisir. »
Lors ne se pot cele teisir
Ainz jure que ja soe n’iert.
Et li cuens hauce, si refiert,
Et cele s’escria an haut:
« Ha! fel » fet ele, « ne me chaut
Que tu me dizes ne ne faces !
Ne criem tes cos ne tes menaces.
Assez me bat, assez me fier !
Ja tant ne te troverai fier
Que por toi face plus ne mains,
Se tu or androit a tes mains
Me devoies les iauz sacher
Ou trestote vive escorchier.5 (4837-4852)
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Here, the threat against Enide is more explicit, the count preparing to physically force her if she will not accept his advances. Erec wakes from his coma-like trance just in time to kill the count and to rescue Enide from the rape. Both counts justify their aggressive advances on Enide with her “ravishing” beauty, and both are ultimately defeated by Erec.

The counts’ defeat provides Erec with the chance to prove his military prowess.

His defeat of his enemies, especially enemies with high military and social rank, firmly

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5 “Keep silence, all.” the Count replies; “the dame is mine and I am hers, and I will do with her as I please.” At this she could not hold her peace, but swears she will never be his. And the Count springs up and strikes her again, and she cries out aloud. “Ha! wretch,” she says, “I care not what thou say to me, or what thou do! I fear not thy blows, nor yet thy threats. Beat me and strike me, as thou wilt. I shall never heed thy power so much as to do thy bidding more or less, even were thou with thy hands fight now to snatch out my eyes or flay me alive.”
establishes his skill and strength in the eyes of the audience, as well as in the eyes of the knights who had ridiculed him earlier for losing himself in matrimonial bliss: “the attacks on Enide serve as a test of Erec’s chivalric strength, enabling him to vindicate himself from the charge of uxoriouness made against him earlier in the story” (Gravdal 57). These two cases of threatened *raptus* also serve to reaffirm Erec’s proper assignment of priorities. While the decision is not as morally complex here as in other poems, where the knight’s rescuing of pucelles is not his only quest, Erec nonetheless fulfills his knightly duty to protect the vulnerable lady from lecherous villains. The bigger moral quandary in *Erec et Enide* – how to balance one’s romantic and epic duties – is resolved bit by bit as Erec defeats his adversaries and simultaneously tames his outspoken lady. The threatened rapes of Enide fulfill both of these functions. The third function, that of serving as a social marker, is not as clearly defined as in instances when common villains attack the pair. The counts are both of high social rank, so their base actions cannot be attributed to their base origins. At the end of the story, Erec is made king by Arthur, and thus outranks both his adversaries. During the attack, however, the counts rank nearly the same as Erec, and it is only their actions which give away their low moral fiber.

The fourth and fifth functions of troping rape can both be seen very clearly in *Erec et Enide*. Erec’s defeat of would-be rapist counts serves to send a patriotic message about Arthur’s court’s superiority over neighboring kingdoms. Erec is linked politically to three different courts, yet his allegiance to Arthur’s is shown in the story repeatedly. He brushes his own parents aside, abandoning them in favor of Arthur: “Upon Erec’s final return to Arthur’s court, Erec volunteers to remain at court two to three years (6444), with no suggestion of returning home. In addition, messengers do not know
where to find him upon his father’s death (6456-6461), a fact perhaps explained by
Arthur’s continually mobile court, but certainly not clarified in the text. Most important,
one cannot help but feel that the coronation would have taken place in Carnant rather
than Nantes had not Chrétien wished to divorce Erec altogether from his origins, from his
father’s kingdom, city, and lineage” (Brumlik 187). As the ultimate rejection of his
origins, he is crowned at Arthur’s court and never again returns to his parents’ court. In
this way, Chrétien shows him to be aligned solely with Arthur’s kingdom, and to be a
representative of that kingdom when he is adventuring with Enide. His military conquest
of the lusty counts can be counted as a conquest for the “good” kingdom of Arthur
against “bad,” or immoral, neighbors.

The fifth meaning ascribed by Gravdal to troping rape, testimony to the victim’s
beauty, is very evident in the text. Erec himself realizes the power of Enide’s physical
appearance, forcing her to ride ahead of him and dressing her in the finest dresses she
owns. Enide’s beauty is then repeatedly stressed in the text, justifying the attacks made
on her. When Erec first meets Enide, she is dressed in torn undergarments, with bits of
her beautiful figure showing through:

La dame s’an est fors issue,
Et sa fille qui fu vestue
D’une chemise par panz lee,
Deliée, blanche et ridee.
Un blanc chainse ot vestu dessus;
N’avoit robe ne mains ne plus.
Mes tant estoit li chainses viez
Que as cotes estoit biaus le cors. ⁶ (401-410)

⁶ The lady came out with her daughter, who was dressed in a soft white under-robe with wide
skirts hanging loose in folds. Over it she wore a white linen garment, which completed her attire.
And this garment was so old that it was full of holes down the sides. Poor, indeed, was her garb
without, but within her body was fair.
Erec is enthralled, just as in later scenes, various villains are drawn to Enide’s overpowering, “ravishing” beauty. The description continues for another forty lines in grandiose terms, Chrétien describing Enide as being Nature’s greatest achievement:

MOUT estoit la pucele jante,  
Car tote i ot mise s’antante  
Nature qui faite l’avoit.  
Ele meïsme s’an estoit  
Plus de cinc çanz foiz merveilliee,  
Comant une sole foiiée  
Tant bele chose feire sot,  
Ne puis tant tener ne se pot  
Qu’ele poïst son essanpleire  
An nule guise contrefeire.  
De cesti tesmoingne Nature,  
Qu’oonques si bele creature  
Ne fu veü an tot le monde.  
Que diroie de sa biauté?  
Ce fu clele par verité,  
Qui fu feite por esgarder⁷ (411-439)

Chrétien makes much of her beauty, describing her every chance he gets. Every time a villain appears, he is shown appreciating the lady’s beauty and succumbing to lust.

Enide’s main purpose in the story, after spurring Erec on his knightly way, is to be beautiful and rapable.

Despite Gravdal’s assumption that Chrétien is a typical medieval writer in his troping of rape, one must take into account all the scholarship about Chrétien’s work that calls for a more nuanced reading of the 12th century poet. Although Chrétien was treating

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⁷ The maid was charming, in sooth, for Nature had used all her skill in forming her. Nature herself had marveled more than five hundred times how upon this one occasion she had succeeded in creating such a perfect thing. Never again could she so strive successfully to reproduce her pattern. Nature bears witness concerning her that never was so fair a creature seen in all the world… What shall I say of her beauty? In sooth, she was made to be looked at.
typical subjects, such as chivalry, courtly romance, and adventure, his treatment of the issues involved in each is often shown to be more complex than just simple, mindless entertainment for his patroness and her court. Chrétien struggled with some of the issues complicating feudal life in his time, such as changing gender roles and a shift in the meaning and use of chivalry. Köhler writes: “Le phénomène négatif de cette disjonction, cette prise de conscience par l’individu de la tension existant entre ces deux mondes dont chacun exigeait d’être reconnu, produisit une énergie positive, créatrice d’une nouvelle conception de l’homme, celle d’un individu qui évolue et se perfectionne et qui de ce fait constitue la communauté” (Köhler 103). He posits that the emphasis in Chrétien’s work on the emerging individual is a reflection of the conflict between the individual and the community that was fast developing in the 12th century. He describes the successful trajectory of Chrétien’s knights in their struggle with the court: first, the knight must leave court in order to prevent the court’s destruction due to its internal contradictions. These contradictions are often a function of outdated customs that are not cast aside, such as the king abusing his power or the inherent tension in chivalry between epic and romantic duties. In all cases, however, the individual knight is somehow complicit in the court’s crisis, and leaving is the only solution. The knight, after leaving court, must travel into the antimonde, a world not subject to the rules of the monde, the normal world of the court. This antimonde is inhabited by mythical creatures and nonhuman humanoids, such as witches, fairies, giants, and dwarfs. These creatures are often evil, and successfully navigating their malicious plots is one of the many tasks facing the knight. Sometimes, as

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8 The negative phenomenon of this disjunction, this realization by the individual of the tension between these two worlds, each of which demands to be recognized, produces a positive energy that creates a new conception of man, that of an individual who grows and develops, and which therefore constitutes the community. [my translation]
in *Lancelot, ou le chevalier de la charrette*, the *antimonde* can be seen as a sort of dream-world of the knight constructed by the knight himself as he struggles with the tension between his conflicting duties. In all cases, however, the *antimonde* is where the knight comes to terms with his individuality and his role as individual in Arthur’s court. This initiation always leads to a return to court (the glaring exception being *Lancelot*, which Chrétien did not finish and in which Lancelot is left in the *antimonde* with no clear solution to the problem of his adulterous relationship with the queen), and to the successful reinstallation of the individual in the community. The return is also necessary for the court, which is always on the verge of imploding without the knight. This trajectory of expulsion from the court, journey through the *antimonde*, and successful reunion is the literary manifestation of the anxiety surrounding an emerging individual subject in feudal world of the late 12th century. The conflicts engendered by the changing order are treated in a nuanced, atypical way by Chrétien, and it is not possible to treat his texts as typical of the medieval style.

Other scholars have pointed at Chrétien’s treatment of chivalry as indicative of chivalry’s changing role in the 12th century. As is evidenced in the struggle faced by all of his knights to reconcile the different facets of their chivalric duties, Chrétien was concerned with the shifting definition of chivalry in his time. His poems portray a shift from war-based to romance-based chivalry, in other words, from an epic to a romantic understanding of chivalry. Vance writes: “The errant knights of Chrétien’s romances who bring back to the court fine tales of heroic adventures (and finer women to wed) may be a poetic fiction, but underneath this fiction was an encoded message to Chrétien’s aristocratic audience: the altar, the wedding bed, the cradle, and the inheritance – not the
battlefield – were now the sure paths to power” (45). The knights’ preoccupation with high-born maidens, marriage, and married life clearly shows the shift from earlier, epic treatments of knights, in which women were hardly mentioned and played little to no role in the unfolding of the action. Chrétien’s heroes are not only influenced by women, their main goal in questing is often to win one for a wife: “Thus the new heroism favored warriors-turned-breeders” (45). This reading of Chrétien’s work complicates his treatment of women; they are more important than in earlier medieval literature, yet can still be seen as tools used to develop the knights’ changing identities. Brumlik also points to the influences of Chrétien’s period on his treatment of chivalry: “Chrétien has moved Arthur’s court from the mists of legend into the 12th century, where the fiction of ‘the once and future king’ still has an appeal, but must share space with Arthurian romance redefined in terms of fair women and brave men. The hybrid nature of Erec is demonstrated as the concerns of epic and romance vie for position with Arthurian lore” (190).

In light of these historical readings of his poetry, some scholars have suggested that Chrétien’s poems are not misogynistic and offer many strong female characters to empower a female audience. The debate about Erec et Enide is divided between those who view Enide as Erec’s savior, thus as the force behind his eventual ascension to kingship and wisdom, and those who view Enide as a woman whose subjecthood and sexuality must be conquered in order for Erec to find his way. The period in which Chrétien was writing offers some insight into the ambiguous nature of his female characters. During this period, women in all social ranks were gaining power. Among the aristocracy, many women were left in charge when their fathers, husbands, or brothers
left for years to fight in the crusades. This phenomenon has been compared to the one that occurred in the United States during and after World War II, when women were left to manage all aspects of society in the absence of the men who were fighting the war. In similar fashion, women in the 12th century were left to rule estates and control all business when their male relations disappeared for years to recapture the Holy Land. Chrétien saw the empowering effects of this absence on women up close and personal. He wrote at the court of Marie de Champagne, daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine, who in turn was one of the most influential and powerful women of the Middle Ages. Marie was herself a highly influential ruler and patroness of the arts. Chrétien was sponsored by Marie and often wrote on subjects she requested. Not much is known of their relationship, but based on his description of her in his dedications, it was not without tension: “In a later romance, Perceval, ou le conte du Graal… Chrétien identifies Marie, countess of Champagne, as a patroness with a strong will and, indeed, with a few too many ideas of her own” (Vance 44). His dedication and his treatment of women characters in his poetry betrays an anxiety about women in power.

In Erec et Enide, Enide has significant influence on her husband. Some scholars have pointed to her power over him as proof of her strength, and have argued that Chrétien favors strong women characters: “Chrétien’s ladies frequently attempt to impose their view of what the uses of chivalry are to be. Enide is no exception” (Brumlik 190). In the new chivalric code that Chrétien is exploring, the knight’s responsibility to his lady, and to love in general, can sometimes be seen as dominating his military responsibilities.

9 Joan Ferrante discusses the phenomenon and makes this comparison in her analysis of Marie de France in A New History of French Literature. (Marie de France, p.52)
Vance goes as far as to say that in their relationship, Enide’s influence over Erec makes her the stronger character of the two:

The parallel strands of the erotic hunt and the erotic quest have now converged and are fulfilled in the marriage of Erec and Enide. Up to now this has been a story of male victories. In the sweeter skirmishes of the wedding bed, however, Enide will prove herself the hardier of the pair. In all his romances, Chrétien is intrigued by strong women. (Vance 43)

These same strong attributes are sometimes assigned to Guinevere with the claim it is she who keeps Arthur’s court in balance:

While the stable and strong relationship of the king to his wife and nephew make no contribution to Arthur’s actual posterity, they do have an important literary function: Gauvain keeps alive the court’s reputation for chivalry and preserves with Guinevere the image of Arthur’s kingship. Arthur is indebted to both for the fact that he emerges relatively unscathed from the problems created by the stag hunt. (Brumlik 181)

What both these observations ignore is the fact that taming the female influence in court is the quest at the heart of *Erec et Enide*, and in fact of most of Chrétien’s poems. Erec must objectify and silence Enide in order to vanquish the emotional and sexual hold she has over him. Enide does have influence over him, initially, but this is the central conflict of the poem, and through the course of the quest to bring Erec’s romantic and epic duties into balance, it is eventually resolved. In addition, by subjugating Enide to be a rapable, sexual object, and forcing her loyalty in extreme situation, Erec creates a martyr of his wife:

While some may considered Enide to be a good wife, both in modern terms and eventually in Erec's, the point remains that she is obligated to prove that she is an exception to the rule. Her talking must be verified to be only in the interests of Erec, and her fidelity to him must be established under the most rigorous of tests. Her beauty must be rendered non-threatening. By making her such a paragon, so inimitable, Chretien
presents a role model who, like Mary, cannot realistically be expected to exist. (Ramey 384)

Enide becomes the perfect wife only once she becomes inimitable and behaves in a counterintuitive, unnatural manner. In addition to Enide’s role as capable lady, Chrétien offers a few other female characters whose role as “empowered” woman are suspect. Most striking is the lady who has trapped the knight Mabonagrain in the Joie de la Cour episode near the end of the poem. The pair eloped from her father’s court years ago, and in order to prove his loyalty to the lady the knight is forced to fight anyone who enters their courtyard. The lady has made him swear to this duty, and he is held prisoner by his oath. The whole scene is a painful parody of romantic chivalry, and of how important a knight’s parole to his lady should be. The only one who is saddened when Mabonagrain is defeated and is finally free to leave is the lady herself, who seems to grieve her power over him more than his loss. While the lady is clearly shown to have power over her knight, Chrétien shows the power to be misplaced:

By placing women on a pedestal, William IX effectively restates his misogyny more insidiously by saying that woman is too beautiful, weak and fragile to be wielding power. In rereading the medieval text, one must take care to note, therefore, that what on the surface seems empowering can, in light of the cultural and political situation of the time, be detrimental to the real advantages women may have had at the time. In other words, keeping in mind that there were real women exercising real power in 1170 when Chretien was writing, what message, what cultural model does Chretien give his audience through the Joie de la Cour scene? (Ramey 385)

The powerfully lady in this episode is portrayed as corrupt and out of control. The whole scene is set up as a cautionary tale to Erec and Enide, whose marital bliss almost drove Erec to the extreme conditions that Mabonagrain endured under the guise of romantic
chivalry. Although the lady is empowered, her power is a negative force to be conquered in order to set the chivalrous world right.

Especially with his troping of rape, Chrétien de Troyes shows his anxiety about strong women. Rape, in his world, is a romantic event that focuses entirely on the male characters and is aestheticized to be pleasurable to his audience. The women who are threatened by rape are inherently rapable, a characteristic that often defines them more than any other: “Far from empowering a female audience, Arthurian romance transforms rape into a romantic adventure: the heroine who is subjected to the threat of assault both enjoys the great compliment to her beauty and basks in the reflected glory of the triumphant knight who protects her” (Gravdal 67). While his poetry can be shown to be atypical of medieval romance, his treatment of women is not. The women in Chrétien’s poetry must be tamed, physically and mentally, in order to become suitable wives for the individualistic, chivalrous knight emerging as the new romantic hero.
Chapter 2: Self-Fashioning and Rape in the Destruction of the Bower of Bliss

As seen in the previous chapter, sexual violence as a literary construct was used in medieval literature to establish the patriarchal paradigm. In medieval literature especially, woman’s sexuality is often portrayed as a dangerous and corrupting force. In her analysis of rape in Medieval French literature, Kathryn Gravdal points out an inherent paradox in the common retellings of Arthurian myths: “In a curious tension, the genre [Arthurian romance] both forbids rape and sentimentalizes it as a weak man’s response to overpowering female attractiveness” (58). In the genre, rape is commonly treated as a didactic tool for discouraging violence against the female body, therefore upholding social taboos against rape, at the same time as letting audiences enjoy the thrill of the intended violence and detailed descriptions of the female body. In this chapter, I argue that in the late 16th century, Edmund Spenser uses the same central battleground of the sexes in his epic poem *The Faerie Queene*, and I show how his interpretation of rape is informed by the period-specific renaissance concepts of self-fashioning and colonial expansion. In this analysis, I expand upon Gravdal’s definition of the five major ways in which the threat of rape creates meaning for the medieval audience in Chrétien de Troye’s poetry in the order to study the effect of threatened sexual violence in a re-imagined Arthurian romance written more than 400 years later. More specifically, in the Bower of Bliss episode in Book 2, Canto XII, we can see how Spenser uses the theme of rape to establish military superiority, to construct male identity and moral status, to convey a patriotic message about British colonial expansion, and as an aesthetic marker that serves as testimony to physical beauty. Spenser uses the same functions of troped
rape as Chrétien, but he makes some radical changes that change the meaning of these scenes for his reader, connecting them to societal concerns and anxieties of Elizabethan England, such as colonization and male anxiety about indefinite female rule.

The paradoxical nature of rape in Arthurian legend can be seen in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* as a continuation of the discourse on sexuality and violence seen in Chrétien de Troyes’ romances. Spenser uses the device of rape in similar ways, although the political and social context of his period is reflected in the problematization of rape in the Bower of Bliss episode. Where Chrétien de Troyes uses rape simply as a device for showing military prowess, Spenser complicates the question of military might to reflect the Elizabethan understanding of chivalry. In Chrétien’s poetry, rescuing a damsel serves to establish the ethical judgment of his heroes with relatively little input from the lady herself. Spenser’s knight has to fashion himself in relation to an Other, in this case a woman who holds the power to shape his identity and who must therefore always exist as a menace to overcome. Both interpretations of the Arthurian legends use rape as an allegory for a patriotic message about victory over one’s neighboring kingdoms, but Spenser’s allegory of British colonial conquest and rule of Ireland is more nuanced and specific to his era. Lastly, both poets use the reciprocal relationship between description of feminine beauty and rape to justify the intent of rape and to establish aesthetic beauty. In other words, rape serves to establish beauty and beauty serves to justify the intent of rape in both works. In *the Faerie Queene*, this device is extended to the encompass the physical surroundings of the woman, allowing Spenser’s hero to commit the taboo of forced sex symbolically and justifying it with the lush description of the Bower. Spenser
also uses erotic description of the female body in a more specific way, making it a moral marker and linking rape to primarily evil women.

As mentioned earlier, Gravdal posits that Chrétien de Troyes uses the threat of rape in his Arthurian romances to establish the physical or military superiority of his hero over the enemy. As a trope for military prowess, rape becomes a tool to personify and glorify the male character with very little accent put on the female who is threatened. When a knight on a quest confronts a would-be rapist, he has to physically defeat him in battle, which in Chrétien’s poetry largely takes place on horseback and using medieval weaponry such as swords, spears, and javelins. Once the villain has been defeated, the damsel can be rescued from captivity and the knight earns a stripe on his armor, so to speak. Chrétien uses the threat of rape as a tool to help characterize his knights as brave, apt, and physically competent in battle.

Guyon’s attack upon the Bower of Bliss and Acrasia can be seen as the military act by a knight to save an overpowered individual from the threat of sexual violence. Spenser reverses roles in that Acrasia, a witch and a woman, is targeted as the rapist from whose grasp a young knight, a man, must be saved. Although parallels can be drawn between Chrétien’s knights and Guyon as they rush to do battle with a would-be sexual predator, this trope of military prowess is considerably problematized in the Bower of Bliss episode by the gender role reversals. Because of the double understanding of rape in the scene, there are two simultaneous threats: one posed by Acrasia against the “damsel” Verdant, and the other posed by Guyon against the Bower itself in defense of said “damsel.” The analogy of military prowess to defeat a would-be rapist is only applicable to the first, yet paradoxically it is precisely this show of power that constitutes the second
rape, the one committed against the witch and her garden. The question is further complicated by the fact that the so-called rape in the first scenario has already taken place, and Verdant is sleeping peacefully in Acrasia’s arms. Nonetheless, the instrument of military conquest in response to threatened rape can be seen in both Chrétien’s and Spenser’s poems as reflective of their respective period’s understanding of warfare. Whereas 12th century Arthurian romances portrayed knights engaging in hand-to-hand combat and adhering for the most part to the chivalric code, Spenser’s 16th century reimagining of the myths is complicated by England’s growing imperial power and the consequent public shift in understanding of warfare, as well as by a new understanding of chivalry as ceremonial as opposed to practical. Spenser plays with the theme of rape with the gender and role reversal, but also upholds many of the same medieval functions of troped rape.

In the scene, Guyon and his party descend upon the Bower with the intent of capturing Acrasia, whose latent sexuality they see as a threat to their ethical code and whose sorcery has enslaved countless “damsels” against their will. The violence of the destruction of the Bower is quick and merciless, coming at the very end of the Canto and encompassing only a few stanzas. After overpowering and capturing Acrasia in a net, Guyon destroys the Bower itself:

But all those pleasant bowres and Pallace braue,
Guyon broke downe, with rigour pitilesse;
Ne ought their goodly workmanship might saue
Them from the tempest of his wrathfulnesse,
But that their blisse he turn’d to balefulnesse:
Their groues he feld, their gardins did deface,
Their arbers spoyle, their Cabinets suppresse,
Their banket houses burne, their buildings race,
And of the fairest late, now made the fowlest place. (2.12.83)
The ultimate conquest itself is not long, but the attack of the Bower comprises the whole of Canto XII, in which Guyon is seen sailing past and overcoming a slew of obstacles on his journey to the Bower. The offensive is launched at the very beginning of the Canto and lasts until the defeat of Acrasia. Yet Guyon is not shown battling the dangers of the Bower with traditional medieval methods; the attack of the Bower occurs in a nautical sphere and not simply on an individual level, but as the conquest of a whole land. Guyon overcomes both sea and land creatures, anthropomorphized natural formations such as whirlpools and boulders, and tempting maidens. He and his crew pass through “perils great” to reach their goal and capture the witch at the heart of the Bower, but they do so in a manner very unlike the military tactics of Chrétien’s knights.

In Spenser’s time, war was being redefined by the beginnings of colonial expansion and by considerable advances in weapons and nautical technology. As Paul Rovang points out, war was changing from a noble and idealized pursuit to more of an applied science, with military books on the rise and increasing public interest in matters that used to be the domain of noble birth. He writes: “The continual development of military technology, then, forced the transition from a practical, essential chivalry to an ideological, ceremonial one” (66). The warfare of the knights in Chrétien’s romances is a reflection of warfare in Chrétien’s time, just as the war waged by Spenser’s Guyon reflects the changing nature of war in the late 16th century. Both poets use the threat of rape to orchestrate a chivalric rescue by a knight in shining armor, but the methods of conquest differ in light of the historical context of the poems.

The notion of chivalry in warfare also differs in the two poems. Chivalry was not completely demoded in Spenser’s time, but it had taken on a very different meaning.
Rovang states “it was yet in the living memory of Elizabethans and held a special romantic attraction for them, a fact which made its trappings useful for propaganda and for adorning and dignifying governmental structures; and the theme of knighthood could still, as it did in Malory’s day, provide reinforcing examples of virtuous conduct” (50). But unlike in the 12th century, when chivalry was seen as integral aspect of warfare, the Elizabethans viewed it as more of an allegorical device than a practical application of ethics. In other words, in Spenser’s time the chivalric code simply did not apply in the same way as in the Middle Ages. The attack on the Bower of Bliss illustrates this in that it does not adhere to strict codes of chivalry; Guyon destroys a beautiful place, one that was described in lush detail as sympathetic and admirable, a description that in medieval poetry would have delineated it as virtuous. The violence and chaos inflicted by Guyon is only pardonable in an era in which warfare has been complicated by advances in technology and a changing worldview. As Rovang sums up:

In Spenser’s moral universe, in order to follow virtue one must at times not abandon, but set aside, aesthetic and humane sensibilities … The allegorical expression of such a dualistic vision of justice is supported by a dualistic conception of chivalry, made possible for Spenser by a number of changes which took place between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in the technology and theory of war. (62)

Ironically, one of the reasons that chivalry as connected with warfare was still viable at all nearly 400 years after Chrétien’s poetry is precisely the condition that was rapidly changing views on war: the expansion of England by colonization, specifically the colonization of Ireland. Rovang points out that during Spenser’s time, England was involved in a drawn out and bloody struggle with Ireland which involved guerilla warfare, forcing soldiers to counter with more old fashioned means of warfare such as swords and other close-range weaponry. In this way, in the 16th century the political
situation served as a reminder of past times and kept the idea of chivalry from becoming completely obsolete. Spenser lived most of his life in Ireland, where he likely internalized the idea that the dated hand-to-hand combat being used was part of being a gentleman. Spenser can utilize a “dualistic vision of justice” in his poem because of his era’s confused mélange of past and present warfare and the consequent public nostalgia for the past. Guyon’s brutal destruction of a beautiful place is steeped in chivalric tradition and is seen as taking part in a noble past even as it directly contradicts it.

One of the other meanings Gravdal attributes to rape in medieval Arthurian romance is the illustration of the knight’s ethical standing. When faced with the difficult choice of pursuing his quest or saving a damsel being threatened by a villain, a knight must always choose the damsel. By peppering his poems with episodes in which his knights make the right decision and rescue the damsel (even when, as in the case of Lancelot, they would much rather stay on course to complete their original quest, which, coincidentally, is often the rescue of a more important damsel) Chrétien establishes his heroes’ sound ethical judgment and moral character. In essence, the rescue of damsels from rape forms a key part in forming the identity of Arthurian knights in the medieval genre. Their good example was a way of showing medieval audiences virtuous action and inspiring virtue in them.

Spenser’s knight also makes a sound ethical decision in rescuing the “damsel” Verdant from the clutches of Acrasia. In fact, Guyon attempts to free all of the knights who have fallen under Acrasia’s spell, performing an admirable chivalric task in keeping with the tradition. Where Guyon’s actions come under scrutiny is his descent into a hysterical fit of frenzied violence when destroying the entire Bower of Bliss. To
understand how this act ultimately shapes Guyon’s identity, we must look at Stephen Greenblatt’s analysis of self-fashioning in the Renaissance. It is important to keep in mind that in his prologue to *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser claims that the aim of his poem is to fashion gentlemen, that is, it is to be of didactic value in that it will help cultivate moral virtue in his readers. One of Greenblatt’s stipulations about self-fashioning in the Renaissance is that it occurs at the encounter between an authority and an alien. In order to “fashion” an identity that was in line with socially accepted standards of the period, the Renaissance gentleman had to encounter a morally difficult situation and respond well. In Guyon’s case, the authority is Temperance, and the alien must necessarily be the witch Acrasia and all that she represents. Acrasia is the Other that must be conquered, but she herself cannot be destroyed. When bursting in on the post-coital Acrasia curled up with her victim, Guyon acts quickly to capture her but does not try to kill her:

> And eke her louer stroue: but all in vaine;  
> For that same net so cunningly was wound,  
> That neither guile, nor force might it distraine.  
> They tooke them both, & both them strongly bound  
> In captiue bandes, which there they readie found:  
> But her in chaines of adamant he tye;  
> For nothing else might keepe her safe and sound; (2.12.82)

In order to maintain the tension between the Other and the Authority, as defined by Greenblatt, Guyon needs Acrasia to exist. Without the sexual and sensual excess she represents, temperance has no meaning. In order to keep Guyon temperate and a good example of virtue and chivalry, the external enemy has to constantly pose a threat. The destruction of the Bower of Bliss is an act of regeneration and construction of a new self, one that serves to substitute for the destruction of the enemy herself. Guyon projects the bad qualities he wishes to destroy in himself onto the body of the female Other Acrasia,
but since Acrasia herself cannot be destroyed, he directs his violence onto the Bower, constructing his new self through the destruction of an externalized vice. In this way, Guyon emerges from the violence of his action as a temperate, ethical knight cleansed of his vice and once again well suited to serve as an example of virtue to the poem’s audience.

Spenser’s women can be seen as having more of an influence than Chrétien’s women over the knights’ identity formation, and thus their ethical conduct. Whereas Chrétien’s knights’ moral standing is established by being pitted against men who have kidnapped or are threatening women, Spenser’s Guyon is pitted against a woman guilty of the same crimes. As Catherine Canino claims: “The Faerie Queene is the story of men whose identities are forged, and whose destinies are decided, by women” (114). She argues that this increased importance of women in male identity-formation is in direct correlation with Elizabeth’s power as ruler of England. Anxiety over Elizabeth’s failure to either produce or name a successor was predominant in Spenser’s time, and this anxiety can be seen in the way women shape men in The Faerie Queene. Canino argues that Elizabeth had both direct and indirect power over English men of the period, and that the indirect power of being able to name a successor to the throne was the source of the anxiety seen in Spenser’s work: “Each female character is given the prerogative not only to shape a man’s identity and future but also to bestow an identity upon him. This makes every female in the book analogous to Elizabeth who, as we have seen, held the same prerogative for England” (114). Both Una of Book One and Duessa of Book Three serve similar roles as Acrasia; Duessa especially serves to underscore Canino’s claim in that she, like Acrasia, physically transforms her lovers after capturing them. Both characters
also play the role of the would-be-rapist by kidnapping young men and becoming the Other that has to be faced in order to prove one’s virtue.

In Chrétien de Troyes Arthurian romances, the threat of rape also serves as a patriotic message to audiences. Often in these narratives, a noblewoman is abducted, and winning her back becomes a test of a kingdom’s strength. Gravdal states that “through this sentimentalized adventure of kidnapping, the audience learns a lesson in political hegemony” (44). In Spenser’s reimagining of the myths, the political message bears traces of England’s budding colonial experience. The argument has been made that Spenser, having lived in Ireland, was particularly sensitive to the colonial situation there. Since Ireland was one of England’s first experiences in colonial rule, Spenser argues in *A View of the Present State of Ireland* for the civilizing of Ireland using such drastic measures as wiping out native culture in order to gain control of the land. He specifically targets women as the bearers of culture and condemns intermarriage. In light of this text, the purging of the Bower of Bliss can be seen as a heroic act of civilizing in which the native threat is eradicated. The conquest of Acrasia the sexual predator is especially heroic in that it prevents her from mixing her own savage genes with those of the British knights she has captured. Jennifer Munroe points out that “whereas Guyon’s ‘wrathfulnesse’ might suggest an intemperate response, his violence is commensurate with the excesses of the space and is fully in line with the violence proposed in the *View* vital to turning Ireland from ‘savage’ to ‘civil’” (63). So while the act of attacking the Bower serves the function of establishing Guyon’s military prowess and his moral identity, it also serves as an allegory of England’s continued struggle to “tame” Ireland. Munroe draws an even more specific parallel between the conquest of the Bower of Bliss
and the colonization of Ireland, claiming that “Guyon’s destruction of the Bower of Bliss mimics the scorched earth policy in Ireland, which entailed burning fields and villages to forcibly depopulate areas that would later be reclaimed by New English settlers, the land redistributed and cultivated by English men and women” (63).

The Bower of Bliss has to be destroyed in order to be tamed, just as Ireland has to be physically razed in order to be bent to British colonial rule. In Book 3, an alternate garden is offered as a model for the successful taming of foreign lands. The Garden of Adonis is everything the Bower of Bliss is not – temperate, controlled, and safe. It is offered as a contrast to the Bower of Bliss to establish the possibility of British colonial success. Unlike the Bower of Bliss, the Garden of Adonis is not a female space; that is, it does not belong to the Other. Both Venus and Adonis are subjects there, but neither controls the garden as Acrasia controls the Bower. In this way, it is offered as a model of temperance and peace. Spenser projects a vision of English triumph over Ireland at the same time as inspiring virtuous action in his readers. His experience as a colonial administrator shaped his view of British colonialism, and his anxiety about Ireland is reflected in the destruction of the Bower. As Munroe states, “In short, Spenser helped develop another England on an island across the sea at the same time he helped define Englishness through the knightly virtues of Temperance and Chastity” (Munroe 74). The conquest of the sexual deviant, Acrasia, becomes symbolic of English conquest over Ireland.

The fourth and final way in which rape is given meaning in the medieval Arthurian romances is as an aesthetic marker. Spenser uses a similar device when describing in great length the charms of the Bower of Bliss and of Acrasia herself.
Verdant, the captured knight, is not given as much attention and detail in the narrative as Acrasia; this device of using rape as an aesthetic marker and of justifying sexual violence by beauty is only applicable to the second rape at the end of Canto XII, that of the Bower itself, and symbolically of Acrasia. From the initial entry into the Bower, Spenser makes clear that it is a wondrously beautiful and pleasing place. His descriptions of the place offer a lush image of an Eden-like paradise:

Thence passing forth, they shortly do arriue,
Whereas the Bowre of Blisse was situate;
place pickt out by choice of best aliue,
That natures worke by art can imitate:
In which what euer in this worldly state
Is sweet, and pleasing vnto liuing sense,
Or that may dayntiest fantasie aggrate,
Was poured forth with plentifull dispence,
And made there to abound with lauish affluence (2.12.42)

Spenser takes care to create the most pleasurable description possible of the Bower. The garden is described with continual references to “pleasure,” “wanton,” “joys,” and many things that are “pleasing” to the eye. The water flowing from a fountain is “a silver flood,” “purest gold” is spread on the ground, and the flowers “drops of Christall seemd for wantones to weepe.” Precious stones and metals are referenced to create an environment of excess and pleasure that, though sinful, is exciting and intoxicating. The landscape itself provides only half of the aesthetic appeal of the Bower; the inhabitants are just as, if not more, desirable than their luscious surroundings. The two naked Damzelles bathing in the fountain are described in six whole stanzas, their “snowy limbs,” “amarous sweet spoiles,” and “lilly paps” displayed titillatingly for both Guyon and the reader. Both the “sweet and holesome” garden, described as “the most daintie Paradise on ground,” and its “wanton Maidens” are described in great detail as
aesthetically and sensually pleasing. Spenser sets the stage for the violence to come by creating an exciting and beautiful place that is ripe for the taking, at the same time justifying the violence by this aesthetic appeal.

The ‘rape’ of the Bower is a displaced action that substitutes for the rape of Acrasia herself. The violence inflicted on the garden by Guyon can be seen as sexual because of its sudden and emotional onset, the sense of urgency with which it takes place, and the sexual descriptions of the Bower itself. There are also direct references to rape in the brief destruction scene; when Guyon has finished inflicting his “tempest of wrathfulnesse” on the Bower, it is described as “the fowlest place,” a place violated and left in a pitiful state. He is destroying the beauty of the Bower, but even more than simply undoing it, he is also desecrating it: “Their groues he feld, their gardins did deface.” Interestingly, the same word is used a few stanzas earlier to describe the condition of Verdant after his sexual transgression with Acrasia: “Him his nobilities so foule deface.” Both the ‘raped’ youth and the garden have been defaced, humiliated, and stripped of their essential virtues. Spenser in this way both gives his audience the sensual pleasure of taboo sex and denies them the description of actual violence inflicted on the female form, displacing it onto the garden and imitating Chrétien’s clever dance of titillating his audience yet upholding the taboos of rape.

Acrasia is not herself physically raped, only symbolically violated through the rape of her Bower. Yet the descriptions of her beauty and charm seem to be the tipping point for Guyon, inspiring his urgent reaction and his displaced sexual violence. When the knight comes upon her, she is lying on a bed of roses, “All in a vele of silke and siluer thin / That hid no whit her alabaster skin / But rather shewd more white, if more might
bee.” Her “snowy brest” is uncovered, and Spenser goes even farther in his sensual
description of her in describing the sweat, “more cleare then Nectar” and the physical
sign of her “late sweet toyle,” shining “like pure Orient perles” on her bare body. Anne
Paolucci makes the point that after this description of her beautiful body, the reader is
directed to Acrasia’s face, an especially telling move in view of Spenser’s preoccupation
with facial expressions and features throughout the poem. We are shown Acrasia as she
smiles down at her victim, “her faire eyes sweet smyling in delight.” Her beauty is
emphasized by her sweet expression, and the overall image is both pleasing and exciting,
serving to tempt Guyon and the reader.

Gravdal claims that the treatment of beauty as inspiring rape in Chrétien’s poems is
dependent in part on the importance of the female character in question. The important,
good female characters that are threatened with sexual violence are described in more
detail, as it is more important to establish their physical beauty in the audience’s mind.
Also, she claims that “good” female characters are never allowed as close to the violence
of the rape act as unimportant, or “bad” female characters. In Lancelot: le Chevalier de la
Charrette, the Lovesome Damsel frames her own rape, and is revealed to be manipulative
and morally suspect. Chrétien’s description of the rape scene, which Lancelot heroically
stops as is befitting of his duties as a knight, is much more detailed and sensuous than any
description of intended violence against Enide of Eric et Enide. Because the Lovesome
Damsel is not the heroine, and especially because she is of ambiguous moral status,
Chrétien can stretch the device of taboo sex to near breaking point; Lancelot arrives in
time to witness an almost-rape, with the Lovesome Damsel stripped and overpowered by
her accomplices. Gravdal states: “When we compare this close-up view of rape to the
careful distancing of Enide’s titillating nudity from the violent assaults in Eric et Enide, we realize how much more boldly Chrétien can exploit the potential of sexual violence to excite the audience when the female character is not the heroine” (60). The same can be said when the female character is a witch, the epitome of the evil female Other. Acrasia can be portrayed sexually and she can be symbolically raped because she is a witch and a temptress. Throughout *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser gives detailed eroticized descriptions of primarily evil female characters such as temptresses and beast hybrids, with the only two exceptions to this rule being Belphoebe and Serena. Spenser takes Chrétien’s device of justifying rape with beauty one step further in that he reserves his eroticized descriptions for characters he deems deserving of violence. As Paolucci states, “This relationship between description and moral purpose is especially evident in Spenser’s particularized representation of the naked body of the temptress, in the Bower of Bliss” (24).

In conclusion, in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, we see the device of rape as transformed and informed by Elizabethan worldviews and the influence of colonization, advanced technology, and changes in perceptions of sexuality. This transformation, though formative, is in the 16th century still cosmetic; we see in Spenser’s re-imagining of the myths that the essential purpose of the rape narrative to form the identities of the male heroes is still in place in the genre. It is in the 20th century that the rape narrative in Arthurian romance truly comes under attack and is transformed by the rise of feminist thought and a consequent shift in popular perceptions of femininity.
Chapter 3: *The Mists of Avalon* and the female voice in Arthurian romance

Marion Zimmer Bradley’s 1982 novel *The Mists of Avalon* is the most influential written work of the 20th century that deals with Arthurian myths. Its radical departure from the patriarchal institution of the Arthurian tradition is apparent from the start in the prologue, in which the reader finds out that the story is being told by Morgan le Fay. She is traditionally cast as Arthur’s enemy and is often portrayed as evil, seductive, and a witch. Morgaine, as she calls herself, is this novel’s protagonist, and by instituting her voice as the dominant one, Bradley stakes out a new space in the genre for women characters to have both voices and agency.

Her novel infuses the legends with many issues not traditionally associated with them, such as religious persecution and strife in the context of Christianity’s expansion into the British Isles and with a disappearing Celtic religious tradition’s dying days. The matriarchal pagan religion described by Bradley – usually referred to as Avalon, the name of the religion’s island spiritual headquarters – is being threatened by the ever-growing popularity of Christianity, and many of the novel’s main conflicts center around the changing cultural understanding of religion. This changing understanding focuses on the question of gender, as Avalon is run by priestesses and follows a matriarchal tradition of inheritance. In addition, the deity around which this old cultural and religious tradition centers is a goddess, one who favors women with special powers and who incorporates men into her power hierarchy only one at a time in the form of a Merlin, who counsels the ruling political body but takes orders from the High Priestess. Thrown into conflict with this matriarchal tradition is the new, invasive masculinity of Christianity, a tradition
ruled by priests and centered around a male deity. Arthur, who is king by decree of Avalon but who increasingly turns to god and Christian priests for advice, is in the middle of this gendered power struggle. The crisis of tradition versus modernity, of woman against man, forms the backdrop to a family drama that encompasses everything from betrayal, rape, incest, and shame, to sexual awakening and religious zealotry. As Lee Tobin McClain writes:

Bradley's contemporary presentation of the legend has its basis in gender, and from examining the importance of masculinity in earlier versions of the legend we can see that Bradley is following a popular strand of the Arthurian story. However, she reverses it, blaming chivalric masculinity for the difficulties women have experienced in Western culture. She rewrites the Arthurian legend from the female point of view, exposing the oppression inherent in chivalric and Christian systems and exploring the homoerotic implications of Arthur's male brotherhood. Her recreation of the legend in terms acceptable to a liberal and feminist readership reflects twentieth-century culture's increased support of female strength and power but brings up its own set of attendant anxieties. (197)

Through this complex web of familiar tropes, Bradley complicates and subverts the themes that she borrows from earlier retelling of the Arthurian myths, such as the Knight’s quest and consequent identity formation or the Damsel’s kidnapping by a villain. In this chapter, I will show that the theme of threatened sexual violence is one of the themes that Bradley uses to undermine the patriarchal nature of traditional Arthurian retellings. Instead of functioning in the ways outlined by Gravdal, rape functions in *The Mists of Avalon* to give female characters agency. Bradley radically subverts the traditional functions of rape in Arthurian romance in a reflection of early 1980s feminism and popular culture. This chapter will accordingly discuss two rape scenes: the rape of Gwenhwyfar in Chapter Four of Book Three and the rape of Kevin in Chapter Eleven of Book Four.
Of the two rapes in *The Mists of Avalon*, the more traditional – at least at first glance – is the rape of Gwenhwyfar by the villain Meleagrant. It is more traditional in the sense that it occurs after an incident of *raptus*, in which Meleagrant sets a trap with the sole intention of capturing the queen, carrying her off, and impregnating her in order to seize Arthur’s kingdom. It can also be seen as more traditional than the rape of Kevin because of the positioning of gender roles in the dichotomy of female/victim versus male/aggressor. Lastly, Gwenhwyfar’s rescue and Meleagrant’s death at the hands of the heroic Lancelet serve as a fitting ending to the traditional rape narrative. However, the style used to describe the scene, as well as what happens with the characters after the rescue, reveal that this is not a typical case of *raptus* and rescue. More importantly, it does not serve to forward the male character’s emotional or moral development, a key function of *raptus*. Rescuing the queen from *raptus* is the quintessential example of the importance given women in scenarios previously reserved for male character development. The rape of Gwenhwyfar leads directly to her sexual awakening and self-discovery, and conversely to her fulfilling willingly the role of adulterous queen, the often-unrealized threat of which drove many previous versions of the myth.

When applied to this first rape, Gravdal’s postulations about the functions of threatened rape within the Arthurian narrative inform Bradley’s reimaging of the myths. It can be shown that Bradley’s usage is a reaction to the traditional uses of sexual violence in the genre. By constructing a situation that is, at first glance, very Arthurian, she establishes her familiarity with the genre. She gives her readers the impression that they are experiencing a *raptus* in its traditional sense by engaging with the expected functions of one. Gravdal’s claim that in Arthurian romance, the threat of rape is needed
for knights to flex their military muscles and establish their prowess is completely upheld in Bradley’s 20th century version. Gwenhwyfar is tricked into captivity in a remote castle by her half-brother Meleagrant, who covets Arthur’s power and wishes to rule Camelot. When captured, Gwenhwyfar expresses concern for her safety: “When she thought of his rapacious grin and huge presence, she was terrified; he might easily abuse her or try to force her to acknowledge him as regent of this country” (512). Meleagrant poses a physical threat to the lady’s safety, a fact underlined by Gwenhwyfar’s description of him; not only is he physically domineering, his smile is “rapacious.” Meleagrant’s character is set up as predatory even before he attacks the queen and confirms the reader’s expectations. With the threat of violence thus established, Lancelet’s rescue mission fits exactly into the traditional mold, in which military prowess is displayed in conquest of a villain threatening a maiden. Following in the steps of Chrétien de Troyes’ knights, Bradley’s Lancelet is shown to be an exceptional fighter. He rides after Gwenhwyfar alone, single-handedly defeats Meleagrant’s men, and kills the villain as he is preparing to harm the queen:

He followed her, his hand on the sword, and Gwenhwyfar flinched, her whole body cringing in anticipation of the stroke...would he kill her now, or hold her as hostage for his own escape? She never knew his plan. Meleagrant’s head suddenly exploded in a spray of blood and brains; he crumpled with a weird slowness, and Gwenhwyfar sank down, too, half fainting, but before she reached the floor, she was in Lancelet’s arms. (517)

The dramatic entrance of Lancelet at the last possible moment, his violent and brutal murder of the villain, and the intense visual description of the rescue provided by the vulnerable victim all serve to ground the scene firmly in the tradition of Arthurian
romance. The passage establishes Lancelet’s military and physical superiority over the villain, Meleagrant.

Another traditional function of rape that this passage fulfills without problematization is the display of the “good” kingdom’s defeat of the “bad” kingdom. While Meleagrant does not rule a kingdom, he is threatening Arthur’s rule. His plot, to kidnap and impregnate the queen and thus rise to power, is one directed not only against the body of the queen but also against the authority and political body of the king: “When I am done with you, he will not have you back. In the old days, lady, the consort of the queen was king of the land, and if I hold you and get sons on you, no man will gainsay my right to rule” (513). By crushing this political opponent, Lancelet legitimizes the power of Camelot, as led by Arthur, in the reader’s minds. Sharon Stockton, in her book *The Economics of Fantasy: Rape in Twentieth Century Literature*, claims that the rapability associated with representing women can also represent social mobility, in that the rapist disrupts the transfer of wealth between father and son-in-law that happens through the body of the woman: “in a culture that depends upon the female vessel for the transmission of wealth … the aestheticization of rape can come to articulate, whether in celebration or fear, the ability of the man of powerful agency to erupt into the sealed transaction between father and son/son-in-law, to insert himself by virtue of violence into an otherwise frozen class system” (9). Meleagrant is aiming for precisely this insertion, and it is not coincidence that he is a bastard son of Gwenhwyfar’s father. Apart from physically forcing himself into the system, Meleagrant has few options to rise above his low birth rank. In fact, his low class status is in accord with the *raptus* rules of rapable and rapist types; a noble woman must always be the target, a lower class man must
always be targeting her, and a noble-born knight must rescue her. Aristocratic knights rescuing maidens from low-class rapists not only establishes the superiority of one kingdom over another, it also reinforces the class system by preventing the violent disruption of the hereditary flow of wealth.

At first glance, therefore, the rape and rescue of Gwenhwyfar fits into the standard formula of *raptus*. Where Bradley starts to problematize a traditional Arthurian rape scene is with the aestheticism, or lack thereof, of rape. In Arthurian romance, the threat of sexual violence against a maiden always means that the maiden is exceptionally beautiful, and she is usually described in detail as such during or immediately before the attack. Although Gwenhwyfar is described as such in earlier or later scenes, there is no mention of her physical appearance immediately before or during her rape. As stated earlier, Gravdal posits that the threat of rape serves as a “poetic demonstration of her attractiveness” (44), and that conversely, this attractiveness justifies the villain’s plan of rape. She argues that Chrétien describes the maidens in all their vulnerable sexiness in order to give his audiences the pleasure of objectifying an attractive female body. Added to this pleasure is the “less acceptable source of pleasure: imagining a forbidden erotic scene” (45). Chrétien never describes an actual rape in the present tense. Rape has either already happened or is only threatened when the knight arrives to rescue the damsel, and thus the actual violence of the act is never shown. This literary strategy allows audiences to enjoy both the female figure and the *idea* of rape without being shown the horror of it: “Chrétien’s troping of rape leads the audience to ignore the physicality of rape and its literal consequences so that the audience will focus instead on the ideology of chivalry” (43). It also allows the readers, or audience, to come up with their own titillating images,
immune from public scrutiny. Traditionally, the threat of rape in Arthurian legends is aestheticized to remove the female from the scene except as a beautiful object of desire and to direct attention to the moral considerations of the rescuing knight.

The rape of Gwenhwyfar by Meleagrant does not follow this tradition. The most striking of the deviations from former Arthurian retellings is that although the rape does, in fact, happen before Lancelet arrives on scene, the reader is present for it. The chapter is written in a third person limited point of view, allowing the reader to experience only what the queen herself does. This narrative choice means that while Lancelet’s heroic quest to find the queen, his successful entry into Meleagrant’s castle, and his defeat of Meleagrant is not ever shown the reader (except for the climactic cleaving of Meleagrant’s head), Gwenhwyfar’s capture, rape, and detainment are. When she is initially captured and locked into a filthy room in the castle, the reader is present for the agonizing hours of fear she endures as she waits for something to happen. For the lengths of these pages of suspense, the reader is held in a state of discomfort as she shares the mental torture of the queen. The inner dialogue shows Gwenhwyfar in a realistic, not romanticized, state of panic as her limited options, the events leading up to her capture, and her fear of her captor preoccupy her thoughts entirely, and as she dizzyingly leaps from one to the other. Her fragile emotional state is revealed as she vacillates between confidence that her status will protect her from rape, and a deep insecurity about her true worth to Arthur. As the entire episode is told from her point of view, the reader is denied the objectified image of the victimized beauty enslaved in a tower, and is instead left with a close encounter with the palpable mental suffering of a terrified woman.
The rape itself is described from Gwenhwyfar’s point of view, forcing the reader into close proximity with her physical and mental anguish. The reader is not removed from the horror of the scene as in more traditional Arthurian stories, nor is attention deflected from the body of the victim in any way. This method of writing rape prevents the reader from gaining any viewing pleasure from the taboo sex being described, and instead encourages her to relate to the horror of the victim. The rape comes only after a brutal scene in which Meleagrant beats her and abuses her verbally, and as it also is told from her point of view, the reader is anything but titillated by the violence to come: “He shouted as her elbow struck his nose, grabbed her arm and shook her, hard; then hit her with his clenched fist across the jaw. She felt something snap and tasted blood bursting in her mouth. He hit her again and again” (514). After enduring the beating with the queen, the reader is acutely aware of her torment and humiliation. When Meleagrant overpowers her, the resulting scene is even more horrific:

Shaking, sobbing, with trembling fingers, Gwenhwyfar pulled her gown over her head, knowing that she should fight, but too terrified of his fists and blows to resist. When she had done he pulled her down, held her down on the dirty straw, pushing her legs open with a rough hand. She struggled only a little, frightened of his hands, sickened by his foul breath, his huge hairy body, the big meaty phallus that thrust painfully into her, pushing and pushing until she felt she would break in two. (514)

The immediate effect of the rape on Gwenhwyfar is also a realistic one. She is thrown into shock and depression, and even initially blames herself for what has happened. She is debased further by Meleagrant’s treatment of her after the attack, when he continues the verbal abuse and humiliates her. The reader is shown the full extent and effects of the trauma inflicted on her in her reaction: “She stood weeping, exhausted, shamed, sickened” (515). When she is left alone in her cell, the reader is once again privy to her
wild stream of consciousness thought process, which reveals her mental anguish and prevents the reader from either romanticizing or deriving pleasure from the taboo scene. Part of the reason that this stream of consciousness effect is so novel is that the injection of psychology into literature is a relatively recent development, one that arguably was not on the horizon in older Arthurian texts. Although even in Chrétien’s writing, an occasional psychological moment can be found, Bradley uses this narrative function to a much greater degree. She makes maximum use of the narrative advantage of a literary discourse that has developed individualized, psychologized characters, a tool that was less available and therefore used less frequently previously.

Telling rape from the woman’s point of view is one strategy to de-aestheticize it, and feminist writers have often cited it as one of the ways in which women can regain control over the rape narrative. Sharon Stockton shows that presenting rape through the victim’s eyes prevents the use of the victimized female as simply a narrative device. In her book, she examines the work of female authors who engage in this “resistant narrative form” to reclaim the rape narrative for feminist purposes. She posits that female authors who do this “rework the sado-masochistic narrative in ways that call into question the ways the presumed feminine subject has been traditionally represented” (23). When rape is used as a metaphor and ignored as a concrete act of violence, the woman becomes rapable-by-definition and is defined by her violability. By “pushing the reader into a position of discomforting proximity to the victim’s vulnerable body … collapsing the distance between a disembodied reader and a victim defined by embodiment” (23), this resistant narrative does not allow for the victim to be brushed aside in favor of the male
participant’s emotional world. In short, Bradley engages in this form of narrative in order to undermine and de-aestheticize the typical rape narrative.

While the reader’s up close and personal experience of the rape itself is a significant deviation from the medieval treatment of rape, the biggest change that Bradley makes to the rape trope is to shift the narrative motivation from the rescuing knight to the victim, thus from man to woman. In both examples of Arthurian romance explored earlier in this work, the rape/rescue of rape victims leads to the establishment or affirmation of the knight’s sound moral judgment, and often to some specific personal development exemplifying this. In *Mists of Avalon*, Bradley turns this rape trope on its head in multiple ways, most significantly by focusing on the change in the woman’s psyche after a rape has occurred. In the case of Lancelet, Meleagrant, and Gwenhwyfar, the woman is the victim, yet the narrative focuses on her changing emotional world in lieu of the heroic knight’s. In this example, not to be taken as indicative of all the rapes in the novel, Gwenhwyfar replaces the knight as the subject of a moral investigation culminating in a personal epiphany. Her rape leads to the development of her identity, to her empowerment in the face of a dominating spousal and political situation, and at least in part to her sexual awakening. Bradley turns the tables on the trope’s traditional function of male identity formation, giving her female characters the unprecedented ability to grow from their trauma as victims of sexual violence.

Gwenhwyfar is, as many of the strong women characters in the novel are, conflicted and struggling to find her role in Arthur’s court, in religion, and in her relationship with the men around her. She feels loyalty, respect, and affection for her husband, but his unrequited love for his half-sister Morgaine as well as Gwenhwyfar’s
inability to produce an heir puts stress on their relationship. Gwenhwyfar vacillates between feeling guilty for her barrenness, anger at her husband for loving Morgaine, and hopelessness at being trapped in her loveless marriage. Bradley portrays all of her female characters as strong, but imperfect. McClain writes:

For centuries, women helped to cause the downfall of chivalric masculinity; in *The Mists of Avalon*, masculine Christianity causes the downfall of both the chivalric brotherhood and women's equal power. However ... Bradley's idealization of her own gender is not unmixed: when her women gain power they become controlling, and when they become too angry they literally miscarry, thus figuratively losing their womanhood. So Bradley, writing from the woman's point of view, uses the Arthurian legend to address a whole new set of gender anxieties. (198)

The queen is certainly too controlling in certain spheres of life, such as her incessant proselytizing of her chosen religion, Christianity. She is portrayed as a major force behind Arthur’s conversion from paganism to Christianity, and consequently his court’s and his country’s drift in that direction. The queen is also portrayed as headstrong and domineering in her bitter love/hate relationship with her sister-in-law Morgaine. For all her strength, however, Gwenhwyfar is shown as a labile character throughout the novel in certain senses; her relationship with her husband especially causes her angst and leads to a deeply rooted insecurity regarding her femininity and sexuality. During her captivity in Meleagrant’s castle, the thoughts that haunt her in her delirium are that Arthur will not save her, does not want her, and does not love her. She blames herself for this:

But, she asked herself in her misery, would Arthur really care? Although he had been kind and loving to her all these years and treated her with all honor, still he might not be sorry to be quit of a wife who could not bear him a child – a wife who was, furthermore, in love with another man and could not conceal it from him. If I were Arthur I would make no move against Meleagrant; I would tell him that now he had me, he might keep me, for all the good it would do him. (512)
She feels that she is being punished for everything from her barrenness to her love for Lancelet, all the while blaming herself for her imprisonment. It is only when Lancelet appears to rescue her that she undergoes a radical change in interpreting her role in the world, and especially her own sexuality. The reader is present for the transformation; her inner dialogue betrays new confidence as she gives in to her desires and throws consequences to the wind:

And for all her faithfulness, she had only come to this; God had rewarded her for her virtue and self-restrain by betraying her into Meleagrant’s hands for rape and brutality! And Lancelet, who had offered her love and tenderness, who had scrupulously stepped aside that he might not betray his kinsman – he had to witness it! She turned in his arms, embracing him. (519)

It is in this short passage after her rape, when she has been rescued by her knight in shining armor, that Gwenhwyfar allows her sexuality to reign free. She is not troubled by her barrenness or self-doubt, giving herself to Lancelet “without fear and without shame” (519). When she and Lancelet have consummated their love, the reader sees Gwenhwyfar at her freest, sexually:

They rode out of Meleagrant’s castle two hours later, side by side, their hands reaching out between their horses to touch as they rode, and Gwenhwyfar no longer cared; she looked straight at Lancelet, her head held high with joy and gladness. This was her true love, and never again would she trouble herself to hide it from any man. (519)

Perhaps even more telling of the transformative power of the raptus on the queen than her newfound freedom to love Lancelet is her brief flash of doubt in her religion. This post-raptus period marks the one time she strays from her zealousness: “God did not reward me for virtue. What makes me think he could punish me? And then a thought which frightened her, perhaps there is no God at all, nor any of the Gods people believe
in. Perhaps it is all a great lie of the priests, so that they may tell mankind what to do, what not to do, what to believe, give orders even to the King” (519). Gwenhwyfar does, in the end, return to her religion, as well as to her doubts. But immediately following her raptus and her consequent affair with Lancelet, she is a transformed character, following a new set of morals that involve being entitled to her own delayed happiness in a romantic relationship and her questioning of her controlling, patriarchal religion. Later in the novel, when she once again relapses into her “sin” with Lancelet, a sin that is a direct outcome of her rape, she is shown entertaining similar thoughts. When Lancelet returns from the Grail quest, she comforts him for the loss of his son, Galahad, and decides that it would be a bigger sin if she left him to his distress: “Even if we are both damned for it, she thought, never shall I turn aside from him. God is a God of love, she thought; how then could he condemn the one thing in her life that was born of love? And if he did, she thought, terrified at her blasphemy, he was not the God she had always worshipped, and she did not care what he thought!” (841).

Lancelet’s rescue of Gwenhwyfar after she is raped by Meleagrant is also an example of how little the knight’s emotional development counts in Bradley’s story. He is coveted by many women, but is always defined by his relationship to them and serves more as an impetus for female competition, female sexual awakening, and female character development than as a character in his own right. His story, though tragic and potentially ripe for the kind of treatment that he is traditionally given in the Arthurian tradition, serves only as a backdrop for the drama that unfolds in the lives of the women who surround him. Even his ambiguous sexuality, an element that Bradley plays with throughout the novel, serves mainly as motivation for Gwenhwyfar’s actions. In perhaps
the most shocking scene of the novel, Arthur, Lancelet, and Gwenhwyfar engage in a
drunken threesome, in which the men are described by the queen as being considerably
more absorbed in each other than in her: “Your heart was always with Arthur, my
dearlest. I often think the only sin we did was not that we loved, but that I came between
the love you had for each other” (864). Bradley largely ignores the implications of such a
revolutionary reimaging of the relationship between Arthur and his first knight, instead
focusing on the queen’s emotions during and after the scene. Throwing the three
characters into such a revolutionary scene also serves to modernize their characters,
giving Gwenhwyfar agency beyond the scope of her character’s previous representations.
McClain claims that apart from modernizing the queen, the understated, ambiguous
treatment of her lovers’ rivalry over her also relieves her of blame, often attributed to her,
for the implosion of Arthur’s court:

Bradley also downplays the contest between Arthur and Lancelot over
Guinevere, thus decentralizing Guinevere's role in breaking up the Round
Table. Indeed, the homoerotic ménage à trois during which Lancelot and
Guinevere consummate their love in Arthur's presence makes the
relationship seem quite modern and cooperative. (198)

When the two lovers are eventually found out and have to flee Camelot (and they are well
into their fifties at this point), Gwenhwyfar realizes the harm their elopement could cause
the court and Arthur’s authority. She sadly concludes that she is the stronger of the two,
and that she must resolve the situation: “She knew, for the first time, that she was
stronger than he, and it cut at her heart with a deathly sword” (862). She convinces
Lancelet to take her to a convent, where she will live the rest of her life, and to reconcile
with the king. In the end, their affair has little to do with Camelot’s fall, thanks to the
queen’s strength of character.
The change in Gwenhwyfar’s ethics is problematic in several ways, but in keeping with the role of *raptus* in medieval literature, it can be seen as a positive one nonetheless. This transformation on her part is disastrous for the court in the short-term, and for the duration of her affair the questions of adultery, treason, and court dissent become central issues in the novel. These issues, while at the heart of most Arthurian drama concerning the queen and Lancelot’s affair, are minor points in *Mists of Avalon* except for their brief treatment after the queen’s rape. Even here, the issues serve more as the catalyst for more conflict between Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar and the further development of these female characters and their complex relationship with one another.

Morgaine, seeing the potential for scandal and the risk it poses to Arthur’s authority, steps in and resolves the situation by forcing a marriage between Lancelet and Elaine, throwing the queen back into emotional tumult and frustration yet effectively neutralizing the threat against Arthur’s pride. While Gwenhwyfar’s transformations can be linked to her involvement with men in general and Lancelet in particular, the fact remains that Lancelet’s development throughout this drama is left almost entirely to the imagination. Bradley does not treat it except when it relates directly to one of her female characters.

The other problematic aspect of Gwenhwyfar’s moral transformation is the possibility of it being based in displaced guilt. She is deeply troubled by the act of violence committed against her by Meleagrant, but in keeping with her unyielding understanding of her faith she displaces the guilt of the rapist onto herself. Morgaine perceives this contradiction in the queen’s actions and her faith: “Somewhere in her mind, dismiss it how she might or try to smother the knowledge in Lancelet’s arms, she truly believed it was her fault, that she merited death for the sin of having lived to be
ravaged. And she had not died first, Arthur had the right to kill her for it … no reassurances would ever quiet that voice in Gwenhwyfar’s mind” (527). Even as she questions her faith and her own beliefs about her role as woman and wife, Gwenhwyfar cannot completely reject the teachings of her misogynistic religion. Her transformation is therefore temporary, and her deeper religious beliefs surface as soon as Lancelet is taken from her.

Despite these problematic aspects of the queen’s epiphany, both her newly gained agency in her own sexuality and the questioning of her religion are portrayed as empowering. In fact, it is only in this brief segment of the novel that she is seen as reasonable. Her usual insecurity is cast in stark contrast with Morgaine’s freer, more natural confidence in her sexuality and her decisions. When Gwenhwyfar takes control of her love life, she more closely resembles Morgaine, who despite her flaws is a sympathetic and strong character. Gwenhwyfar’s doubt in Christianity and its understanding of justice is also a positive development, however fleeting. The novel very clearly portrays Christianity as an invasive, domineering, and unwelcome power. Gwenhwyfar’s zealous faith usually works against her, and in comparison with Morgaine’s organic spirituality she is portrayed as bigoted and intolerant. During her brief affair and her “enlightened” state, Gwenhwyfar is troubled by her sin but accepts it nonetheless, giving the reader hope that she will not fall back into bigotry and intolerance.

Having established how Bradley departs from the usual ways of troping rape, the question of why remains; what is Bradley’s motivation for this shift in focus from man to woman, both in the representation of the rape itself and the its consequential contribution
to identity formation? When read in the historical context of the period it was written, *Mists of Avalon* can be seen to fit into the tail end of the second-wave feminist dialogue about women’s sexual rights of the 1970s and 1980s. When one considers this era’s preoccupation with sexuality and reproductive rights, including the move to reform pornography, rape, and abortion laws, Bradley’s radical re-imagining of the knight-damsel story fits right into the discourse. Catherine MacKinnon, in her legal feminist treatise *Toward a Feminist Theory of State*, treats similar questions of the rape experience as Bradley. One of the many reforms MacKinnon pushes for is a shift in rape law away from the rapist’s perception of the rape, i.e. his (mis)understanding of the victim’s consent, toward the actual harm committed against the victim herself. She argues that rape law, as it stood at the time, considered rape from a male viewpoint at the cost of the victim’s perception of her violation: “The level of acceptable force is adjudicated starting just above the level set by what is seen as normal male sexual behavior, including the normal level of force, rather than at the victim’s, or women’s, point of violation” (173). MacKinnon argues against defining rape by men’s terms and redefining it by what the woman experiences. She wants to solve the injustices in the legal system by tipping the scale in women’s favor, finally letting their experience of violence dictate the offense. She writes a scathing critique of the justice system as it stands in the early 1980s, claiming that law legitimizes and reinforces inequality under the guise of objectivity: “The one whose subjectivity becomes the objectivity of ‘what happened’ is a matter of social meaning, that is, a matter of sexual politics” (183). When placed in dialogue with this feminist discourse about rape law raging at the time of its publication, Bradley’s novel can be seen to uphold many of the same basic principles about how rape should be
dealt with. MacKinnon’s book demands legal change, which she relates closely to social change. Bradley offers a new model of rape in literature, which is especially provocative when placed in a long-standing literary tradition dominated by masculine views of rape and femininity. Bradley writes herself into the Arthurian tradition by injecting it with the female voice that MacKinnon calls for in rape law, and by hijacking the very tools with which women are traditionally objectified in the genre for her own feminist purposes.

The second rape that is explicitly described in *The Mists of Avalon* pushes the limits of the Arthurian tradition even further; in Chapter Eleven of Book Four, Kevin the Merlin is raped by Nimue, Lancelet’s daughter and a young priestess-in-training who is sent by Morgaine to capture the traitor Merlin in order to bring him back to Avalon. To do this, Nimue uses both a spell and her own feminine charms to first seduce, then subjugate Kevin to her will. At first glance, this act might not necessarily be categorized as “rape,” but upon further investigation it becomes clear that Kevin is led into the act by magic and by coercion. It also becomes clear that the act has a very clear political purpose, that it has less to do with sex and more with power, and that the catastrophic consequences it yields offer a criticism of all rape, not just the act in question. This act of rape can also be seen as *raptus* in that Nimue has only one goal in mind when carrying out her plan; to fulfill her oath to Morgaine by bringing Kevin from Camelot to Avalon. Carrying him off by physical force is not an option in light of her limited physical strength, so she must enchant him and force her will upon him. To do this, the sexual act is necessary, and so Nimue orchestrates a complex courting ritual in which she, the blushing virgin, manipulates Kevin’s desire with both magic and psychology to achieve
her ends. Kevin unwittingly contributes to his own demise when he accepts her offer and meets her for the clandestine tryst.

Bradley plays this rape off of the earlier one and off of the traditional rape trope in Arthurian literature. She is aware of the rules and conventions and twists them for her own purposes, upholding just enough of them to show that she is manipulating the system on purpose. The first outcome of rape, that of establishing military prowess, is here upheld in direct challenge of the traditional themes of the genre. Nimue, aggressor, rapist, and woman, is shown to conquer her nemesis. But the “military” conflict here is not between rapist and challenging knight. Not only does a knight not appear on scene to save Kevin from this predator, Nimue herself is portrayed as the opposite of the barbaric, low-class rapist. She is a young, beautiful, highborn lady of Avalon, picked by Morgaine to eventually replace her as Lady of the Lake, or high priestess of Avalon. She is also Lancelet’s daughter, claimed for Avalon by Morgaine and of high birth both in Camelot’s and Avalon’s terms. Also, Nimue displays superior skill and mental capacity in a power-oriented, politically driven act, but it cannot be called a traditionally military conquest. She uses magic and her own sexuality to conquer her foe, forms of power not typically associated with military action. The conflict, thus, is not nearly as black and white as it usually is in cases of raptus. Nimue, the rapist, successfully rapes Kevin, the victim. Seeing as how the events leading up to the act, the act itself, and the immediately following scenes are all told from Nimue’s point of view (and in fact the whole novel follows the women of Avalon in their ventures), her character is sympathetic to the reader and her victory is applauded just as the rescuing knight’s usually is. Despite the
complications, this rape adheres to the trope of displaying the hero(ine)’s “military” prowess.

The conflict between Nimue and Kevin occurs on the plane of the supernatural: both characters use the magic of Avalon in place of physical weapons. Kevin is a Merlin, an Avalon-trained wielder of magic sent into the world to oversee politics and offer Avalon’s counsel to the rulers. He has betrayed Avalon by converting to Christianity, stealing the Holy Grail from Avalon, and taking it to Camelot. For this crime he is to be tortured and killed, but first, the priestesses must get him back to Avalon. Enter Nimue, a promising priestess-in-training who infiltrates the court under the guise of one of Gwenhwyfar’s ladies in waiting. She pretends to be Christian, and over the course of several weeks lures Kevin into her trap. After a series of oaths that Kevin is unaware of swearing, the consummation of their “love” serves as the final seal of her power over him: “She murmured, bending her head close to him, her hands moving through the sweet clean curliness of his hair, ‘The Christian God does not like lovers and hates it when women lie with men … swear it by your God, Kevin, swear it by the serpents around your wrists…’ He whispered, ‘I swear,’ and the meaning of the oath seemed to ripple the air around them both” (794). As the weeks progress, Nimue works her spell with a combination of magic and seduction, besting Kevin in both the realm of the supernatural and the realm of human emotion: “Day by day she wove her spell, with touches and whispered words, as the moon waned away towards darkness” (791). Though her spell rebounds on her, and she begins to fall in love with Kevin, she remains the stronger of the two characters: “But a man so nakedly at the mercy of desire is contemptible… I too tremble, I am torn … but I will not be at the mercy of my body’s hunger” (792). And in
the end, when she makes him swear that he is hers three times during the act of sex, she
conquers his body, soul, and mind, and he blindly follows her orders and rides with her to
Avalon, “slack and lifeless” (797).

In the aestheticization both of the rape and the victim, Bradley once again
diverges from the rules. The first complication manifests itself in the body of the victim;
Kevin is deformed and hideous. It is in part because of his repulsive exterior that Nimue
so easily seduces him. He is emotionally malleable because of his insecurity about his
appearance and his relatively little experience with love. In this way, his physical
appearance does not justify, but rather facilitates his rape. Nimue, on the other hand, is
described in detail several times, and her beauty contributes to her ease in capturing
Kevin’s imagination. In fact, both characters are glad for the darkness of the moonless
night when they have sex; she, for hiding her growing unease at betraying him, and he for
hiding his repulsiveness from her: “‘I am glad it is dark … that my misshapen body will
not terrify you …’” (797). Apart from contributing to his betrayal, Kevin’s body also
serves to de-aestheticize the rape itself: The reader will find none of the titillating
descriptions of half-clad beauties that serve to aestheticize rape in medieval accounts of
rape. Here, the victim is wanted only for political reasons, and his ugliness is emphasized
enough to diminish reading pleasure in taboo sex. Although the reader sees the rape
through the eyes of the rapist, not the victim, this also does not contribute to reading
pleasure. Though she is beautiful, Nimue is so engaged in her own mental turmoil and
guilt that in her description of the act, the physical events are pushed to the background
by her inner monologue. Afterwards, Nimue reflects on the expediency of the act: “There
was none of the pleasure she had heard spoken of, but there was something greater than
pleasure – a vast triumph. For the spell was heavy around them both, and she had his spirit and soul and essence” (797). The spell rebounds on her, creating in her an emotional attachment to her deformed victim. But the rape itself, the violence committed against the body of Kevin, is a political act that is much more about power than about sex. Consequently, it is portrayed more as a power struggle, one complicated by Nimue’s split allegiances, than as the taboo sex that it is.

In the themes of the hero’s moral development and the patriotic message to be learned by the audience when the “good” knight defeats the “bad” knight, Bradley stretches the genre’s rules to the limit. Nimue is clearly greatly affected by the rape, and her moral development is shown both as she is plotting and after she has committed the act. Her inner dialogue becomes plagued by doubt as her spell rebounds on her, and as she realizes the extent of the betrayal that she is planning: “Ah, Goddess, how can I do this to this man who loves me, who has put his whole soul into my hands ... I have sworn. I must keep my oath or be as much a traitor as he is” (795). After she has successfully worked her magic against Kevin and subjugated his will to hers, she thinks that she detects the gleam of understanding in his vacant eyes. This knowledge drives her to a violent episode of guilt and doubt: “Her throat tightened with agony and a wild tenderness, she wanted to pull him down again and take away the spell and cover his broken face with kisses, and weep and weep for the betrayal of their love. But I too am sworn and it is fate” (798). In the end, despite her raging emotions, she fulfills her “fate” and takes Kevin to Avalon. After handing her victim over to Morgaine, Nimue commits suicide. The strain of her guilt and the knowledge that she has committed a serious crime against Kevin, a man she loves, drives her to drown herself. She does something no male
Arthurian rapist does – accept her guilt and self-punish. The other women find her floating Ophelia-like in the lake, “her long hair … spread out on the surface like water weeds” (802). In this rape, just as in Gwenhwyfar’s, Bradley directs the reader’s gaze towards the moral development of the woman involved. In Nimue’s case, however, the woman is the rapist, and her growing comprehension of the monstrosity that she has committed leads to her self-destruction.

The patriotic message about Avalon’s conquest of the Christian traitor also turns bitter. When Kevin is questioned about his motivation for stealing the Grail, he gracefully defends himself: “Lady, I said it once to you before this – the day of Avalon is ended… Even if Avalon must perish, I felt it right that the holy things should be sent forth into the world in the service of the Divine, by whatever name God or the Gods may be called” (800). Morgaine appreciates the logic of his words, but out of stubbornness nonetheless orders his execution. After Kevin’s execution, Avalon’s Goddess expresses her anger in the form of an omen, a natural disaster visited upon Avalon: “‘He was slain with a single stroke, Lady of the Lake,’ Niniane whispered, ‘but with the very stroke came lightning from the sky and struck the great oak – cleft it in twain. There is a great rift in the sacred oak, from the sky to the ground’” (802). A few hours later, Nimue’s body is found. Avalon drifts farther out into the mists, no future Lady of the Lake can be found to take Morgaine’s place, and the era of Avalon comes to an ambiguous, anti-climactic end. Camelot, in the meantime, also flounders. Arthur grows old, the companions scatter to quest for the grail, and Arthur and Morgaine’s evil son Mordred becomes the heir-apparent to the throne. In the end, the women’s actions are not justified, and the epic battle between Avalon and Camelot, which can also be understood as the
battle between woman and man, is seen as futile and mutually destructive. Morgaine is left searching for meaning in her devastated world: “Morgaine thought often, in the bleak days which followed upon Kevin’s death, now indeed the Goddess had taken it upon herself to destroy the Companions of the Round Table. But why had it been her will to destroy Avalon too?” (802). In this way, Kevin’s rape is the catalyst for an implosion of both Avalon and Camelot, with no patriotic marker to elevate one over the other.

Bradley has been accused of having written a neopagan hate fest against Christianity and men, but in fact she draws much more nuanced conclusions in her novel\(^\text{10}\). She does contribute to the discourse on rape law reform that was raging around the time of the publication of *Mists of Avalon*, but by creating flawed woman characters and showing the self-inflicted demise of Avalon, she seems to suggest that an inability to compromise led to the fall of both Camelot and Avalon. Since these two locales serve as symbols of male and female power, one can draw deeper conclusions about Bradley’s stance on the battle of the sexes. She condemns the use of sexual violence and manipulation through the voice of Nimue, the conflicted rapist of Kevin: “Which is the greater falsity, to break my oath to Avalon, or to lie to Kevin thus? Both are false ... is a lie ever right?” (796). She also comments on rape in general by reversing the roles of rapist and victim. The rape of Kevin mimics the real effect of rape on women; when Nimue takes Kevin’s “spirit and soul and essence,” she robs him of both his agency and something essential to his subjecthood. By showing the rape leading to a chaotic situation reminiscent of a Greek tragedy, in which everybody dies and leaves the tragic hero

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\(^{10}\) Two examples are Carrol L. Fry in *The Goddess Ascending: Feminist Neo-Pagan Witchcraft in Marian Zimmer Bradley's Novels* and 'What God Doth the Wizard Pray to': Neo-Pagan Witchcraft and Fantasy Fiction.
grasping for meaning, Bradley condemns Morgaine’s plot against Kevin and her use of Nimue to carry out the rape. Even when used with the intention to benefit Avalon, the rape is unforgiveable, and Avalon and Morgaine are severely punished. The women of Avalon, when they dabble in a form of violence associated with men, are just as morally suspect as the men. Bradley attempts to come to terms with new representations and a new social meaning of rape, but she also falls into the same trap as many other women writers of her time. As Jyotika Virdi states: “As feminists we are caught between a rock and a hard place: the erasure of rape from the narrative bears the marks of a patriarchal discourse of honour and chastity; yet showing rape, some argue, eroticizes it for the male gaze and pursues the victim myth. How do we refuse to erase the palpability of rape and negotiate the splintering of the private/public trauma associated with it?” (quoted in Zoe Brigley Thompson and Sorcha Gunne, 133). Bradley’s attempt to de-aestheticize and complicate rape through the methods outlined in this chapter is one possible solution to the rape in literature dilemma.

_Mists of Avalon_ is a radical approach to the Arthurian literary tradition, one that injects it with the female voice to mirror increased sexual equality in society. It is not, however, indicative of a larger trend in the genre. Much of the Arthurian literature and film produced in the 20th and 21st centuries does not follow Bradley’s example in its representation of women and rape. The same themes that Bradley subverts to mirror the changing role of women in the early 1980s are upheld almost religiously by the narrative in two filmic versions of the Arthurian legends, _Excalibur_ and _King Arthur_. This could be a function of the author’s gender, _Mists_ having been written by a woman and both films by a man, or of media – film targets a larger, and different, audience than print. One year
before the publication of *The Mists of Avalon*, a filmic version of the Arthurian legend was released to widespread critical and public appeal. John Boorman’s 1981 film *Excalibur* is to this day one of the most well-known Arthurian films and in its release year was nominated for an Academy Award and won the prize for Best Artistic Contribution at the 1981 Cannes Film Festival. When comparing *Excalibur* to *The Mists of Avalon*, one finds numerous glaring differences between the two in the treatment of women, sexuality, and sex. Especially in the realm of the rape trope, the two works are polar opposites in their approach. Boorman follows a much more traditional, medieval representation, adhering almost exactly to the methods Chrétien de Troyes uses for male identity construction through the body of the female. The titles of the two works are indicative of their main focus; both opt for inanimate symbols of power, but the film chooses the phallic, masculine weapon which symbolizes Arthur’s divine right to rule, while the novel references the matriarchal pagan religion which grants women more power than men. Making Arthur’s sword both the title and the dominant imagery on the film poster emphasizes the importance of his character, of the male-dominated tradition of war, and of the chivalric code. The reference to Avalon, as well as the figure of Morgaine riding a horse and holding Excalibur, immediately sets up the importance of women in Bradley’s telling of the myth. The fact that Excalibur still makes an appearance is crucial, as it bases the story in the Arthurian myth, but to have a woman carrying it on horseback (and not just a feminine arm holding it majestically and anonymously out of a body of water) is significant. This radical departure from the traditional myth signals the importance of women characters who have agency and subvert traditional gender roles.
The first woman shown in the film, Arthur’s future mother Igrayne, fulfills two functions. She dances during a diplomatic feast and quickly becomes the object of Uther Pendragon’s lust, inadvertently becoming a catalyst for war between the Duke of Cornwall, her husband, and Uther. Much as Erec does with Enide in Chrétien’s story, the Duke flaunts Igrayne’s beauty, dressing her in see-through white robes and making her dance for the men at the feast. When he notices Uther’s interest, he taunts him proudly: “You may be king Uther, but no queen of yours will ever match her!” In this way, Igrayne is set up as an object, an attractive body on which male rivalry can play itself out. Furthermore, the emphasis on her beauty underlines that it is her physical appearance that serves as the justification of her rape by Uther a few scenes later. Her first function, then, is the role of rapable maiden, and thus by definition the victim over whom a battle between opposing masculine powers must be fought. Igrayne’s second function is to give birth to Arthur, which she does very prettily. Within minutes of giving birth, the baby is taken by Merlin, and Igrayne descends into predictable feminine hysteria and is never seen again.

Igrayne’s rape closely follows the medieval formula in several ways. The victim’s beauty both causes and justifies the rape, the woman’s trauma is completely ignored during and after attack, and finally, the whole situation leads directly to the moral development of both Uther and Arthur, the male agents. The narrative conflates the two players in medieval rape scenes, the evil rapist and the good knight, into one character, Uther. He is the heroic knight in that he “defeats” the Duke of Cornwall and establishes his own military superiority with his act. In fact, as it is Merlin who helps him enter the Duke’s castle, Uther is seen to be sanctioned by higher powers and to be in the right
against a villainous character. In addition, the aftermath of the attack sees a very noticeable change in Uther’s morals, as he repeatedly rejects his warring lifestyle and swears to become a peaceful, just man. He tells Igrayne after the birth of his son: “all I know is how to butcher men, from now on I shall learn to love them – I’m weary of battle. I shall stay by his side, and his mother’s.” The rape serves to establish the knight’s sound moral judgment, and in this case, his compassion. Uther is also, however, the evil rapist. As he is shown riding towards the castle, his dragon-shaped helmet appears wolflike, giving him a predatory look. In the guise of the Duke, he enters Igrayne’s chamber and forces himself on her without even taking off his armor. Igrayne does not recognize Uther and believes that she is having sex with her husband, but the act is still undoubtedly rape. The shots of Uther on top of Igrayne are juxtaposed with shots of the Duke’s last moments, spasming as he is cut down by Uther’s men. The act is clearly a military act, male-centered and completely removed from the physical trauma of the woman. The film takes initiative in combining the characters of the knight and the villain to make a complex, unlikeable hero of Arthur’s father, but the basic treatment of rape remains in essence the same; it is instrumental in shaping the identity of the males involved while objectifying the victim and denying her not only agency but also any treatment of the suffering inflicted on her.

The film *King Arthur*, (2004) directed by Antoine Fuqua serves as yet another example of how modern film adaptations by male directors of the Arthurian legends follow in the vein of the medieval tradition when representing women. Though produced more than twenty years after *Excalibur*, *King Arthur* gives women the same medieval treatment. One of the first woman characters the viewer meets is a nameless victim about
to be raped by a plundering Saxon, one of thousands invading Britain and comprising the main threat against the film’s heroes. This woman is saved from rape by Cerdic, the leader of the Saxons, who demands that his soldier release the woman in order to “not mix with these people.” After being thanked profusely by the woman, he orders her killed, and she is dragged off screaming. In this short scene, she is saved from the sexual violence intended against her only to be butchered seemingly on a whim. In actuality, she serves two functions: her “rescue” by Cedric establishes his contempt for the people he is invading, thus enhancing the viewer’s understanding of the political situation depicted. The viewer is made to understand that the invading army wishes to destroy the local kingdom, not simply take over rule. The second function of this thwarted rape scene is to establish Cedric as a ruthless leader and to give his character more depth. Instead of showing his military prowess, the “rescue” shows his complete military control over his army. Ordering her execution is a perversion of the rescue motif laid out by Gravdal, showing his lack of morality instead of establishing his sound moral judgment.

The only woman of any importance in the film is the character of Guinevere, portrayed by Keira Knightley. Arthur finds her in a dungeon, a victim of religious persecution who, along with her fellow nubile pagans, had been walled in with fanatic priests in a mass torture-fest bordering on the sexual. She later describes this rescue to Arthur, telling him that she was tortured, and then she “heard your voice in the darkness.” In many ways this rescue is typical of the medieval formula; the rape (or torture) itself is not seen, as the reader/audience arrives with the knight either in time to stop it, or just after the fact. In this way, the horror of the act itself is never seen. Also, just as in Excalibur, the purpose of the act is to develop the knight’s character as he struggles with
big moral questions and is forced to reconcile the conflicting duties of being a knight. It adheres to the traditional, medieval functions of rape with even less attempt to bend or change the rules than *Excalibur*.

The film masquerades as an empowering experience for women by portraying Guinevere as a fighter who participates in battles with her men. Even as it pretends to empower the female characters, the narrative undermines their supposed equality by denying them the honorable warfare of the men. In the final battle sequence, which lasts for a considerable portion of the film’s second half, Guinevere and her fellow ‘warrior’ women are clad in leather bikinis, stomachs, legs, and shoulders bare to their enemies’ blows. To further problematize their roles, they are also denied real weapons, relying mainly on their hands and teeth to bring down heavily armed and armored foes. The women are seen to team up and rush at the men in a hysterical fashion, screaming, biting, and clawing their enemies to death. In a genre that dictates sword-to-sword combat for the most significant, honorable characters, fighting in unarmed packs much like animals is debasing to the extreme. Arthur and his knights all pair off with Cedric and his men in a well-choreographed dance that determines battlefield rank; if a character is high ranking, he throws his axe or other such crude weapon to the ground, draws an enormous sword saved for the right foe from a sheath, and rushes at a designated enemy who has done the same. The bikini-clad, hysterical “warrior” women of the film are given gender-specific, debasing fighting techniques that limit their participation and undermine their role in the battle.

These two filmic versions of the Arthurian myths are indicative of a trend of representing women characters within the genre as rapable objects, devoid of agency and
placed strategically into victimized roles to aestheticize the suffering woman. Bradley, following in the vein of feminist like MacKinnon and others, fights against this type of representation by allowing the female voice to come out in – in fact, to dominate – the narrative. She subverts traditional troping of rape by bringing the reader into close proximity with the suffering of the victim, and by not shifting narrative focus away from the horror of the violence. The attitudes against women taken in both *Excalibur* and *King Arthur* are typical of male-authored re-imaginings of the myths, but Bradley shows us that they are not the only possible interpretations, nor necessarily the most indicative of modern societal conditions for women.
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