Women's Medicine and Female Embodiment in the *Morte Darthur*, a Middle English Trotula Treatise, and *The Mists of Avalon*

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
August 2016

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Abstract

This thesis compares the representation of women's medicine in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, a Middle English Trotula treatise, and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon.* Specifically, it uses the portrayal of women healers in the Trotula treatise and *The Mists of Avalon* to perform a reparative reading of the *Morte Darthur*, filling in the gaps of women's embodied experience that are mostly absent from Malory's text. The intention of this thesis is not to criticize Malory for misogyny, or to rank these three texts according their level of feminism. Rather, it is to show that reading a variety of genres beside each other – a romance next to a medical treatise, next to a contemporary novel that uses *écriture féminine* – can reveal aspects of women's experience in the texts that would not otherwise be visible. In short, it explores how Bradley draws on the seeds of feminism in the Arthurian legend to attempt to represent women's embodiment more fully.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Much of the feminist criticism of the *Morte Darthur* has focused on Malory's representation of women: is it misogynistic or feminist – or neither, praising some women while vilifying others? What critics have rarely noted about the *Morte Darthur*, however, is its general neglect of women's health. In this essay, I will read the *Morte Darthur* alongside the Middle English Trotula treatise, a fifteenth-century gynecological handbook, and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, a twentieth-century fantasy adaptation of the Arthurian legend. Although the genres of these texts vary widely, reading them together reveals feminism is multifaceted; each text throws into relief the others' representations of women's medicine. As a twentieth-century text, Bradley's novel is of course the "most feminist" of the three, especially in its focus on abortion rights and redeeming the villainous female characters of medieval Arthurian texts. The novel's focus on women performs a reparative reading of the sometimes misogynistic representation of women in the *Morte Darthur*. However, in this essay I will argue that placing *The Mists of Avalon* beside the *Morte Darthur* and the Trotula treatise shows that the feminism of Bradley's novel is, alone, inadequate: the practical information provided by the Trotula treatise supplements the free-flowing style of *The Mists of Avalon* and, together, they present a fuller picture of women's experience of their bodies.

I have chosen to write on these three texts both because they are representative examples of their genres, and because of what they reveal when read alongside each other. Among contemporary adaptations of Arthurian legend, Bradley's was one of the first to be overtly feminist in its purpose, since it tells the story from the perspective of its female characters. Although *The Mists of Avalon* is based on other medieval texts in addition to the *Morte Darthur*, Malory's work combines many strands of the mythology into a single narrative, putting the Arthurian legend in the shape that is best known today. The Trotula treatise is the first translation

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into English of a Latin medical treatise; since it was translated in the fifteenth century, it reflects the medical knowledge that existed at the time of Malory's writing. More importantly, though, these three texts form a complementary triad: the *Morte Darthur* and the Trotula treatise are fifteenth-century texts; the *Morte Darthur* and *The Mists of Avalon* are Arthurian texts; and the Trotula treatise and *The Mists of Avalon* focus on women's medicine. In this way they balance each other, revealing aspects of each text that might not otherwise be visible.

Reading *The Mists of Avalon* beside Malory, for instance, shows that Malory, for the most part, is not interested in childbirth or other aspects of women's reproductive health. Reading the Trotula treatise next to Malory, on the other hand, shows that Malory's omission of women's medicine is not a function of the *Morte Darthur*'s medieval-ness; the Trotula treatise goes into great detail about women's health, which shows that such knowledge was available in the fifteenth century. Reading the Trotula treatise beside *The Mists of Avalon* shows that, while the treatise provides practical knowledge of women's medicine, it still considers the female body to be shameful; it does not directly address abortion, for example, and it does not allow space for female desire to exist outside of marriage. I will use the theory of *écriture féminine*, as defined by Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, to show how Bradley uses overflowing language and stream-of-consciousness writing to not only access Morgaine's inner thoughts, but to embody her experience of femininity, including her sexual desire and her desire for an abortion. Bradley's *écriture féminine* also illustrates the limitations placed on medieval women; although Morgaine can access the kind of medical knowledge provided by the Trotula treatise, the real conditions of her life prevent her from using it. In this way, the Trotula treatise may be "more feminist" than *The Mists of Avalon*, since it actually provides the information needed to induce abortion or increase fertility, freeing literate women from the need to consult a male doctor. In

short, while *The Mists of Avalon* is empowering in its representation of women's embodied experience, so too is the Trotula treatise, in its attempt to give women control over that embodied experience.

Chapter 2 "Softely handel þe moder": Women's Medicine in Malory and a Middle English Trotula Treatise

In this chapter, I will read Malory's *Morte Darthur* alongside the Middle English Trotula treatise, to see what the medical treatise reveals is missing from Malory. Specifically, although conception and genealogy are of concern to Malory, he rarely discusses childbirth; only Tristram's mother's labour is described. Perhaps like other feminists, I am at risk of reading Malory with paranoia, wary of misogyny in his representation of women like Morgan le Fay and attuned to the absence of women's medicine thanks to my reading of the Trotula treatise. Eve Kososfky Sedgwick argues that queer and feminist critics often perform "paranoid" readings of texts, looking for harm and oppression that does not necessarily exist in the text. She writes of "the widespread adoption by some thinkers of an anticipatory mimetic strategy whereby a certain, stylized violence of sexual differentiation must always be *presumed* or *self-assumed* – even, where necessary, imposed – simply on the ground that it can never be finally *ruled out*" (132-3). This kind of paranoia stems from a faith that the violence or harm of oppression can be exposed in the text, and therefore potentially repaired (139). While Malory's text *is* at times misogynistic, I will also look at the moments when women give birth or breastfeed, moments in which Malory seems to empathize with women's embodiment. These moments will form the basis for a reparative reading of Malory, filling in the aspects of women's embodiment which he does not represent and with which he does not empathize. This is not to say that I will intentionally read the *Morte Darthur* in a paranoid – literally delusional – way. To the contrary, I will try to avoid reading misogyny into Malory's text where it does not exist, instead looking for the kind of potentially feminist representations of women's medicine that inspire writers like Bradley to reimagine the Arthurian legend.

This kind of reparative reading is important, as Sedgwick writes, because it allows the reader to believe that the medieval past, which did oppress women, could have happened differently than it did – and that there is the possibility of difference in the future (Sedgwick 146). Robert Mills performs such reparative readings of medieval depictions of torture and discipline. He argues that images of pain were usually normative, reinforcing the power of authorities to inflict punishment, but that they sometimes had subversive possibility, allowing the viewer to empathize with or oppose the pain (17). He looks for elements of queerness, masochism or pornography in these images (17). I will make a reparative reading of women's representation in Malory, supplying the wide variety of women's embodied experience that Malory hints at in his occasional depictions of women's medicine. This reparative reading will be performed using the Trotula treatise and, in the second chapter, *The Mists of Avalon*, both of which make women's embodiment their main focus.

The *Morte Darthur* does not neglect childbirth simply because it is a medieval text. The Trotula treatise describes the process of childbirth, as well as many other women's health issues, in great depth. Nor is Malory's neglect of childbirth – key births such as Arthur's, Mordred's and Galahad's – necessarily due to anti-feminism. Although the *Morte Darthur*'s representation of Morgan le Fay is misogynistic in its vilification of female sexuality, Malory's text also includes potentially feminist characters like Nineve. While the Trotula treatise may be termed more feminist than Malory, since it is a text directed at women, reading these two texts together shows the complexity of reading in search of feminism in medieval texts. In order to show that the Trotula treatise provides a valuable and needed addition to the *Morte Darthur*'s representation of women, I will review the critical debate over the author of the treatise's identity and sex. I will argue that, although the Trotula treatise gives detailed insight into medieval women's knowledge

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of childbirth and other women's health issues, it is ultimately, like the *Morte Darthur*, ambivalent towards the female body.

The identity, and specifically the sex, of the author of the Trotula treatise has been a matter of much debate among critics and historians. The thinking behind this debate is that the feminist purpose of the text would be less authentic if it were written by a man. I will return to the significance of *who* is doing the writing in my second chapter, where I will argue that *The Mists of Avalon*, another Arthurian text, is an example of *écriture féminine*, a form of writing that stems from the embodied experience of women. The Trotula treatise is not an example of *écriture féminine,* however, because it follows the technical form of a medical treatise; it does not overflow, using stream-of-consciousness or a non-chronological form to convey experiences like female desire or motherhood. It therefore should not matter whether the author of the Trotula treatise had the embodied experience of a man or a woman: what matters is whether the treatise helped medieval women to understand and take control of their reproductive health.[1]

The debate over the author's identity is still interesting, since the attribution of the Trotula treatise to a female author has several possible implications: that a woman would be more authoritative than a male physician on matters of female health or, in contrast, that women's medicine was not considered to be worth the time of male doctors. There are three main theories on the identity of the author of the three Latin Trotula treatises: *Cum auctor, Ut de curis* and *De ornatu.* The Middle English Trotula treatise is a translation only of *De ornatu,* which addresses a female audience rather than male doctors (Benton 34). Kate Campbell Hurd-Mead argues that Trotula was a historical figure of eleventh-century Salerno, possibly the first female professor of medicine, and that she actually wrote the treatises attributed to her; Hurd-

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[1] A feminism that suggests that only writing by women can be feminist is overly restrictive. Much of the criticism of *écriture féminine* has been that it limits who can participate in it: women who have not had children, as well as men, have not had the right embodied experience to produce *écriture féminine* (Lindsay 52, Jones 252)

Mead recognizes the "gentle hand of a woman" in the language of the medical texts (364). Conrad Hiersemann argues that there is no historical basis for assuming that a woman named Trotula from Salerno wrote the treatises; he attributes them to a man named Trottus, based on the abbreviation Tt used throughout a Trotula treatise from Salerno (cited in Benton 36). Beryl Rowland theorizes that Trotula was not necessarily a real person, but a legendary figure whose names comes from the word "trot," meaning an old, unattractive sorceress who wishes to associate herself with sexual pleasure (1979, 49). After summarizing these three theories, John F. Benton argues that none of them is correct: he says that because there were few educated women in eleventh-century Salerno, it has been taken for granted without sufficient historical evidence that an educated woman named Trotula, of whom there is a record, actually wrote the treatises attributed to Trotula (38). On the other hand, since there *is* evidence of the existence of a woman named Trotula, Benton rejects Rowland's and Hiersemann's theories that the title Trotula comes from somewhere other than an actual woman's name (39) – indeed, looking for another source of the title Trotula may itself be misogynistic, since it suggests that a woman could not have written the actual treatise. Benton maintains that the real Trotula did not necessarily write the treatises, because there is no way to detect the "gentle hand of a woman" in them (47). Indeed, because women would have had same Galenic conceptual framework for thinking about medicine as men, which treats women as deficient in heat and therefore inferior (Amtower and Vanhoutte 364), it is impossible to know whether the author was a man or a woman. Yet the debate over Trotula's identity has been important to historians because the treatise's attribution to a woman may suggest that a woman's expertise on gynecology was more trusted by medieval readers than a man's would be (Benton 47). Whether the debate reflects an awareness that the topic of

gynecology requires the "gentle hand of a woman" to understand and properly express, or that women's medicine was ignored by licensed male doctors, is unclear.

The *Morte Darthur* displays a similar ambivalence towards women's medicine in its representation of female characters. Conception and birth are integral to the plot, yet the text mostly fails to represent women's reproductive health and, where it does touch on women's sexuality and childbirth, it often represents the female body as shameful. A possible exception to the misogynistic representation of women is when Sir Ector's wife "nourysshed [Arthur] with her owne pappe" (6.42). Here, Sir Ector's wife's body is represented in a positive way: she cares for another woman's child using her own body. However, although the *Morte Darthur* pays attention to Sir Ector's wife's embodiment, her body is ultimately a tool to ensure the well-being of Arthur, and by extension the future of Camelot. Like the *Morte Darthur*, the Trotula treatise does not discuss breastfeeding extensively. It devotes only one short section to it, which is not translated from Latin into English, called "*De tumore mamille pro multitudine lactis*," or "Concerning tumor of the breast due to copious milk" (160-1).[2] This section shows concern not primarily for the well-being of the baby but for the mother, and the complications she may experience as a result of breastfeeding. The treatise differs from the *Morte Darthur* which, while it is sympathetic to Sir Ector's wife, is more concerned for the survival and well-being of Arthur. These two depictions of breastfeeding are representative of the texts' overall attitudes to women's bodies: while the *Morte Darthur* often treats them as instruments for creating desired genealogies, the Trotula treatise is more sympathetic towards the medical details of women's embodiment.

The *Morte Darthur* is, of course, not a medical text, so it would be unreasonable to expect it to provide instruction on midwifery or herbal medicine. Yet it is consistent with

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[2] This section is not translated into Middle English; the reason is unknown.

medieval medical treatises written by men, which also tend to gloss over women's reproductive health. Rowland points to a treatise by Vincent de Beauvais, for example, whose only advice on the topic of childbirth is to make the woman in labour sneeze (1986, 64). The Trotula treatise also offers this advice (Hughes 1968, 106), but its treatment of childbirth is much more detailed. It explains, for instance, how to deal with many irregular presentations during labour (123-34).

Since it is not a medical treatise, the *Morte Darthur* is not concerned with birth as a topic in itself. It is, however, interested in kingship, so birth is important for how it affects genealogy. Several births in the *Morte Darthur* are orchestrated to manipulate genealogy, including Merlin's and Arthur's. Rape ensures that Merlin and Arthur are born, but prevents Malory from having to attribute illicit sexual deaire to their mothers, in order to for them to be conceived (Carvajal 42-3).[3] Malory omits a description of Merlin's birth, which occurs in most of his sources. Merlin is born after Christ's Harrowing of Hell, when devils conspire to send their satanic version of Jesus to earth. Richard Fehrenbacher argues that the omission of Merlin's birth justifies Arthur's genealogy; by leaving out the fact that Merlin's knowledge of history and genealogy is a result of having a devil for a father, Malory makes his role in Arthur's birth less nefarious (7). Fehrenbacher argues that Malory would have wanted to justify Arthur's genealogy because lines of descent were an important concern in the Middle Ages, a concern foregrounded by the War of the Roses (8-12), but the omission of Merlin's birth also has implications for the representation of birth and of women's health in the *Morte Darthur*. Merlin's mother is raped by a devil, and that it is rape is made clear in Malory's sources, because of the purity of Merlin's mother

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[3] Contrary to Carvajal's argument, Catherine Batt notes that medieval thinkers believed that a woman had to desire sex in order for a child to be conceived (87). Any intercourse that resulted in pregnancy would not therefore fall under the definition of rape, and medieval audiences may not have considered Igraine's and Merlin's mother's experiences to have been rape. However, that Merlin's father is a devil suggests that his mother *was* raped, and the structural similarities between her story and Igraine's implies that Igraine is a survivor of rape as well. Malory may not have subscribed to the theory that women had to desire sex in order to conceive; perhaps this is why he omits the story of Merlin's birth.

(Carvajal 37-8). Yet even Merlin's mother blames herself for her rape, an attitude of internalized misogyny which is repeated when Igraine is raped by Uther in order to conceive Arthur (Carvajal 42). She "held hir pees" (5 l.26-7) about her rape because she feels it is dishonourable to have slept with someone other than her husband; nevertheless, she does articulate her innocence, saying, "ther came into my castel of Tyntagaill a man lyke my lord in speche and in countenaunce… And soo I went unto bed with hym as I ought to do with my lord" (6 l.11-15). Igraine's experience would not necessarily have been considered rape in the Middle Ages, since it was not forced. Yet the structural similarities between the stories of Merlin's mother and Igraine in Malory's sources suggests that medieval audiences would see Igraine as having been raped, even if it would not usually be considered so. The omission of Merlin's mother's more obvious rape from the *Morte Darthur* therefore makes Igraine's rape seem less like one.

Mordred's birth provides an interesting foil for the rapes that produce Merlin and Arthur. His mother Morgause, Arthur's sister, actively desires her sexual encounter with Arthur. Morgause's consent contrasts with Igraine and Merlin's mother; Dorsey Armstrong suggests that it is her unacceptable female desire that makes Mordred a traitor who will kill Arthur and cause the fall of Camelot (152). Douglas Bruce notes that up until the thirteenth-century *Mort Artu*, Mordred was only Arthur's nephew. The incest between Arthur and Morgause is a later addition, one which Malory retains, although he does not say whether Morgause knows she is committing incest (Bruce 197-8). Malory makes it clear that the incest is unconscious on Arthur's part; he does not do the same for Morgause, leaving open the possibility that she knows she is having sex with her brother. This possibility suggests that women's desire is dangerous, leading to taboo couplings and monstrous children who betray their fathers.

One birth that Malory does explicitly depict is that of Tristram. Tristram's mother and her gentlewomen pursue her husband Melyodas in the forest, as he hunts an enchanted hart. The stress of the pursuit induces Tristram's mother's labour, and after she gives birth she says, "Whan ye se my lorde, Kynge Melyodas, recommaunde me unto hym and tell hym what paynes I endure here for his love, and how I muste dye here for his sake *for defawte of good helpe*" (229.4-7, emphasis mine). This representation of childbirth shows empathy for Tristram's mother's suffering: that this stressful experience could send her into labour; that medical knowledge is required to deliver children; and that men, like Melyodas, must have often neglected the importance of this medical knowledge. This passage also acknowledges that such medical information is absent from the *Morte Darthur*. Tristram's mother dies for lack of "good helpe" – and indeed, the good help of midwives is missing not only in the scene of Tristram's birth, but from the entire romance. Tristram's mother's death is also an example of women using magic to the detriment of other women. The hart that Melyodas is hunting was enchanted by a woman who loves him, in an attempt to seduce him; like the other enchantresses I will discuss, who use their magic in service of patriarchy or to achieve their own desires, this woman uses her magic not to help or heal other women, but in a way that results in Tristram's mother's death. No enchantress is there to use her magic as a midwife, to help Tristram's mother.

Midwives, and women healers who help other women, may be absent from the *Morte Darthur* because, as Maureen Fries argues, Malory's text is not concerned with women except as they affect the men of the story. In Fries' article on the evolution of the Lady of the Lake and Morgan le Fay throughout Arthurian legend, she writes:

> The Lady, no more than Morgan, occupies no crucial role at the center of the
> *Morte*. Indeed, outside of the episode of Lancelot's entrapment, both female

figures appear literally near the narrative margins of the book... Malory's *Morte*,

after all, like all Arthurian romance, is not really about women, but about

aristocratic men and their adventures, feuds, and often hazardous exchanges of

females. (Fries 15)

Does it make sense, then, to object to the lack of women's reproductive health from the

narrative? Men's reproductive health is not explicitly represented either – yet men's sexuality is

not vilified in the same way as women's. It is true that in the "Sankgreal" section, any knight

who has had sex is impure, but that means that they are sinners who cannot complete the grail

quest, not that they are evil. Women's sexuality, on the other hand, is for the most part

represented as evil. The mothers of Arthur and Merlin did not express sexual desire; when

Morgause desires sex, the result is incest and Mordred, who causes the fall of Camelot.[4] Female

desire is vilified within the *Morte Darthur* and women who express desire are witches, evil or at

best ambiguous. Morgan, because of her hypersexuality is "the perfect repository for...

gynophobic anxiety" (Sklar 27). Myra Olstead argues that it is *because* the *Morte Darthur* is so

masculine in "temper" that Morgan's overtly sexual femininity must pose such a threat to the

Round Table: she cannot be allowed to be a powerful healer who rules Avalon without also

being represented as dangerous (128-31).

Other healer-enchantresses in the *Morte Darthur* are less vilified for their sexuality, but only

because they use their magic and healing at least partly in the service of the Round Table. These

include Nineve and Lyonesse. Dame Lyonesse, for instance, uses her magic to both wound *and*

heal Sir Gareth, guiding him so that he can become a respected knight. She uses her "subtyle

craufftes" (206), or her magic, to make a phantom knight that attacks Gareth in his sleep (206),

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[4] An exception to this rule is, of course, Elaine, who desires Lancelot yet still conceives the sexually pure Galahad. See Carvajal's argument that Elaine and Dame Brusen rape Lancelot (47-8).

when he is in bed with Lyonesse's sister Lyonette, in order to prevent them from consummating their love before marriage. The magic knight wounds Gareth, and Gareth beheads it in turn. Lyonesse uses her magic to heal them both: she places the head back on her magic knight, and "anoynted hit with an oyntemente" to reattach the head to the body (207). She also heals Gareth, so that he "waxed lyght and jocund, and sange and daunced" (207). That Lyonesse wounds Gareth before she heals him seems to suggest that she uses her magic *against* the patriarchal structures of chivalry yet, as Lyonesse tells Gareth, she wounds him "for [his] worship" (207). That is, by preventing him from having a pre-marital relationship with Lyonette, Lyonesse ensures that he will be focused and able to perform well at tournaments, so that he can prove his worth as a knight, as well as that her sister is chaste and marriageable. Her healing magic is ultimately in the service of chivalry, and not women's medicine.

Like Lyonesse, Dame Brusen uses her magic in support of the Round Table. She helps Elaine seduce Lancelot, which leads to Galahad's conception and birth. Yet Dame Brusen's magic operates on Lancelot rather than on Elaine. She gives Lancelot a potion in his wine to make him "asoted and madde that he myght make no delay, but wythoute ony let he wente to bedde" (465.16-8). This magic ensures that Lancelot and Elaine sleep together, but it does not ensure that Elaine will become pregnant. Nevertheless, Elaine knows "that that same nyght sholde be bygotyn Sir Galahad upon her" (465.21-2). She knows this because of the prophecy of Galahad's birth, yet Malory's choice to attribute Elaine's certainty to prophecy rather than Dame Brusen's magical control of reproduction is in keeping with his omission of childbirth. Women healers like Dame Brusen would have known how to increase fertility. In the Trotula treatise, there is a chapter "*to make a woman able to conceyven child yf God wyll*" (146). This chapter shows that women medical practitioners had a knowledge of fertility; Malory's omission of this knowledge

even in episodes that centre on fertility and conception demonstrates that his representation of women is not concerned with their embodied experience.

The *Morte Darthur*'s representation of another enchantress, Nineve, is ambivalent, since she is responsible for imprisoning Merlin (Berthelot 99, Holbrook 1996, 84). She is a potentially feminist figure, since she uses her magic to achieve her own desires and not simply to serve the Round Table. She ousts Merlin, seducing him in order to gain his magical knowledge rather than out of sexual desire for him (Berthelot 98-9, Fries 10). Sue Ellen Holbrook writes that, through her entrapment of Merlin in a megalithic stone structure, Nineve renews the cycle of life in a way that hearkens back to the pagan worship of goddesses (Holbrook 2001, 79-81). However, throughout her character's progression in different versions of Arthurian legend, Nineve is consistently much more compatible with chivalric norms than Morgan (Fries 8); this detracts from her potential as a feminist figure, since she ultimately serves the patriarchy. Malory adds her role in the poison apple episode, for instance, in which she absolves Guenevere of blame in Morgan's plot to poison Gawain (597-8), and invents her presence on the barge that takes Arthur to Avalon (689, Holbrook 2001, 176). Both of these episodes present her in a favourable light since she helps the Round Table, winning the narrator's praise (Fenster 176): "ever she ded grete goodnes unto Kynge Arthure and to all hys knyghtes thorow her sorsery and enchauntementes" (597). Malory also invents her role in the Pelleas and Ettarde episode (Holbrook 2001, 180-1). Her insertion into this story is interesting because in it, she uses her magic on another woman. Whereas she uses magic to heal or protect the men of the romance, she uses it to injure and manipulate Ettarde, putting a spell on her so that she will have eternal unrequited love for Pelleas (106). Here, Nineve does not use her magic to *heal* Ettard of anything – rather, she uses her magic to make Ettard love*sick*, although she cures Pelleas of his own lovesickness. Nineve then

marries Pelleas, using her magic to achieve her own desire, contrary to the desire of another woman. While Nineve does not here serve the patriarchy in the same way as Lyonette, neither does she use her magic to create a healing community of women as the Trotula treatise attempts to do (Gaudet).

Morgan, similarly, uses magic to achieve her own desires and not to help or heal other women. In order to lure Sir Lancelot into her castle, for instance, she submerges a beautiful lady in a vat of boiling water for "many wyntyrs and days" (463). Healers in the *Morte Darthur* are not shown being kind to other women; they do not have Kristeva's "Complicity in the unspoken, connivance of the inexpressible" that would allow them to form a community, nor do they enact Cixous' metaphorical motherhood, giving the best of themselves to other women. This vilified version of Morgan is different from her original representation as a benevolent healer with roots in the Goddess of the Celtic tradition, who rules Avalon without the help of men (Spivack 18, Fries 1-2). In earlier Arthurian texts like the *Vita Merlini*, Morgan is said to have learned the seven liberal arts in a convent; in contrast, in the *Morte Darthur*, she learns necromancy, and she uses this black magic to seduce, entrap or kill men (Spivack 18, Fries 10-12). In one episode, she tries to kill Arthur by giving Excalibur to her lover Accolon, and setting up a duel between him and Arthur. Morgan is motivated, here, by sexual desire. Accolon also says that Morgan "lovyth me oute of mesure as a paramour . . . and if she myght bryng hit aboute to sle Arthure by hir crauftis, she wolde sle hir husbonde lightly" (145–6). She wants to kill Arthur, then, so that she can also kill her husband without punishment, and fulfill her desire to be with Accolon (Gaudet). Similarly, she uses her magic on multiple occasions to try to entrap and seduce Lancelot, whom she desires. In "Sir Launcelot du Lake," for instance, she and her three queens abduct the sleeping Lancelot. Morgan says, "I shall put an enchauntemente uppon hym that he shall nat

awake of all this seven owres, and than I woll lede hym away unto my castell: And than when he is surely within my holde, I shall take the inchauntemente frome hym and than lette hym chose which of us he woll have unto paramour" (256), showing that her magic gives her access to Lancelot's body. In the *Morte Darthur* Morgan still occasionally uses her magic to heal, but it is for self-interested reasons. She heals Sir Alisaunder, for example, but only after using an ointment to worsen his wounds, drugging him to make him sleep for three days, and making him promise to live with her for a year (384-5, Hughes 1968, 5). Here, Morgan uses her healing magic in service of her sexual desire (Morgan 152); she is not a benevolent healer who helps other women.

Maureen Fries attributes the deterioration of Morgan's representation over the course of the Arthurian tradition to male authors' "increasing inability… to cope with the image of a woman of power in positive terms" (Fries 2). Male authors were also increasingly unable to associate her magic with healing (Morgan 152, Fries 5). This may be due to the declining view of herbal medicine: in the fourteenth century, healing with herbs began to be associated with older women who were accused of witchcraft (Spivack 19). Many women who practiced medicine and midwifery did, in fact, use charms and incantations along with herbal remedies (Arber 36, Riddle 67). John M. Riddle writes that some women probably *did* invoke Satan in their incantations (110), yet a broader association between women's medicine and black magic probably came about because knowledgeable women posed a threat to the professionalization of medicine (Hughes 1968, 93, Riddle 122-3). Women did practice medicine in medieval England, despite increasing opposition. Benton writes that, beginning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a greater emphasis was placed on professionalism and training in medicine, rather than on practical experience of the kind that midwives had, and that sanctions were put in place for

practicing medicine without a license (30). While there are only five recorded female leeches, there were many more unlicensed and undocumented female medical practitioners; there were also many unlicensed male health workers, but the problem was exacerbated for women by their lack of access to education (Rowland 1986, 60). In the fifteenth century, physicians petitioned parliament to limit the practice of medicine to university graduates; this put anyone without access to university education at a disadvantage, but especially women, who were banned from attending universities (Rowland 1986, 60). Instead, women had to rely on experience, and perhaps on the knowledge of relatives, to learn to treat illnesses at home (Rowland 1986, 60, Hughes 1968, 88). This very decline in respect for women's medicine, of course, is what reduced access to reproductive health care, and created the need for a resource like the Middle English Trotula treatise (Eccles 1977, 379).

Perhaps surprisingly, the author-translator of the Trotula treatise is likewise ambivalent towards women's medicine, writing:

> And thowgh women have diuers evelles & many greet greuaunces mo than all men knowen of, as I seyd, hem schamen for drede of repreving in tymes coming & of discuryng off vncurteys men þat loue women but for her lustes and for her foule lykyng. And yf women be in dissese, suche men haue hem in despite & thenke nought how moche dysese women haue or þan they haue brought hem into þis world. And therfore, in helping of women I wyl wright of women prevy sekenes the helpyng, and that oon woman may helpe another in her sykenesse & nought diskuren her previtees to suche vncurteys men. (58)

Women were meant to be able to read the vernacular treatise, or have it read to them, and heal each other without the embarrassing presence or help of a physician (Rowland 1986, 64). This

statement of purpose reveals that, while midwifery and herbal medicine were increasingly associated with witchcraft in the fifteenth century, they were still accepted and practiced because there was a need for them. At the same time, women's medicine was not freed from the shame associated with women's bodies. Rowland comments on the treatise's stated aim of *concealing,* as well as healing, women's ailments (Rowland 1979, 43), saying that women's ailments had to be concealed only from men, not from other women; this creates the potential for a healing community of women. Rowland writes that "The most important palliative lay in a sense of solidarity with other women, in a mutual sympathy expressed simply in words" (1986, 66). In other words, as much as the Trotula treatise provided practical advice on women's health, it may also have created a space for women to feel less ashamed of their embodiment.

One moment in the Trotula treatise that focuses on a visceral bodily experience is a description of how to care for women suffering from uterine prolapse. Most of the medical advice is practical. Lists of herbs tell readers how to regulate menstrual flow (74) or to ease cramps, for instance, with little attention to the physical or emotional pain of the women suffering these ailments; it is a practical medical handbook. The instructions on caring for a prolapsed uterus, in contrast, use explicitly caring language. The instructions are to bathe the prolapsed uterus (here called the "moder") in a mixture of butter and wine, then to gently reintroduce it into the body, and to secure it with stitches:

> [S]ume women haue so gret penaunce in beryng of a childe that þe skynne þat is bitwen the two prevy membres brekith atwo & all is an hole, & so þe moder fallith out beratte & wexith hard. To helpe women of þis mischief, first sethe butter & wynne togedre halfe an houre; and all warme lete legge it to þe moder & softely handel þe moder & softely tawen it with þat wyne a good whiles to make

þe moder nesshe, & sithen putte it in softely ayen & sowe togeder þat pece that is

tobroken with a silken threde with a quarell nedell in thre places or in foure, and

sithen do picche on a softe lynnen clothe & leye it to þe prevy member & þe

stynche of þat pitche shal make hyr to drawen hir inward to hir owne place. (102)

What distinguishes this passage from other medical advice in the treatise is the tone in which it is

given. Even the instructions for delivering a child are matter-of-fact. If a baby is presenting the

wrong way in the womb during labour, for instance, the author writes: "We comaunde þe

mydwifes honde putte in, dressynge þe childes schuldres to be put backwards & her hondes

riȝtlyche dressed to her sides. And than þe hed of the child take; than so lete brynge hym forth"

(126). These instructions are pragmatic; the words "comaunde" and "let" suggest a matter-of-fact

attitude to childbirth, one which may acknowledge but does not dwell on the pain of the mother

in labour. In the passage on uterine prolapse, however, the author uses the word "softe" and its

variations three times. The tenderness that healers are directed to use towards a prolapsed womb

– which would, of course, be painful – suggests a degree of care for women's bodies that is

absent from most of the treatise. Yet it is unclear whether this care is treats women as

individuals, or whether it relies on conflating women with their ability to reproduce – that is,

conflating them with their bodies, and with the womb in particular.

In a section of the Trotula treatise that explains how to cure an aching womb, the author

writes, "Wherefore þe *moder* hath a grete lyking & a comfort of þe chylde þat is within her, and

when she lesith it she makith a kendeliche morning & a sorewyng riȝt as a kowe doth when she

hath lost her calf, & that sorewyng is ache of þe *moder*" (118). At first glance, this passage

seems to discuss the pain that a mother feels at the loss of a child. The word *moder*, however, in

addition to meaning mother, means uterus. This secondary meaning of *moder* is shown explicitly

later in the same section of the treatise: "þe moder walkith in þe wombe" (120). Here, *wombe* refers to the abdomen in general, not just the womb (Middle English Dictionary), and to the uterus' displacement within the abdomen. The former passage therefore states that there is a physiological cause for a mother's grief, and that it is found in the uterus. The treatise acknowledges the pain of a grieving mother, yet it also undercuts this grief by linking it so closely to the female body as to negate the individual context and circumstances of the mother, and by comparing the mother to a grieving cow. Motherly emotions are reduced to a physical condition, rather than being portrayed as complex feelings that have their root in embodiment. Although the treatise may have helped to create a community of women that allows them treat themselves and each other in a caring way, it does so at the cost of conflating femininity with the body, a body towards which the author of the Trotula treatise feels ambivalent. The treatise explicitly states, after all, that the purpose of the treatise is to help women cope with the shame that comes from having a female body.

In short, although the stated purpose of the Trotula treatise is to help women take control of their reproductive health, its feminism is more complex than providing a simple antidote to the lack of representation of women's medicine in the *Morte Darthur*. The Trotula treatise aims to make space for what is often missing from Malory's depiction even of potentially feminist figures such as Nineve: the knowledge and practice of midwifery, contraception, abortion, and other aspects of women's medicine. The treatise succeeds in providing information about these topics, but it does so in the patriarchal form of a medical text. It retains patriarchal language; it also retains a misogynistic ambivalence towards the female body. In the next chapter, I will examine an Arthurian text, *The Mists of Avalon*, that does not use only the patriarchal genre of romance, but also *écriture féminine*. The overflowing, stream-of-

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consciousness style of *écriture féminine* tries to convey women's embodied experience in a way that patriarchal language can never do. Perhaps one moment in the Trotula treatise that approaches *écriture féminine* is the excessive, overflowing use of the word "soft" in the section on uterine prolapse. Bradley takes the overflowing language further and demonstrates how both Malory and the Trotula treatise are contained by a patriarchal framework – yet her depiction of Avalon does not entirely escape patriarchy, either.

Chapter 3 "Morgaine Speaks": *Écriture Féminine* **and Women's Medicine in** *The Mists of Avalon*

In this chapter, I will argue that *The Mists of Avalon*, in its female-centered fantasy adaptation of Arthurian legend, fills in some of the gaps in fifteenth-century representations of women's embodied experience. Bradley's text is of course more radical in its feminism than a medieval text can be, but it is nevertheless valuable to read Bradley's insistent focus on childbirth and female sexuality next to the *Morte Darthur* and the Trotula treatise, to show how twentieth-century feminist experiences of motherhood differ from those of medieval women. Using the feminist theory of *écriture féminine*, which was current at the time of Bradley's writing, I will show that Bradley uses narrative techniques that express women's experience of their health in ways that conventional patriarchal forms of writing cannot. By using third person narration for much of the novel, Bradley shows how the societies of Avalon and Camelot view issues of women's health, including abortion, contraception and adultery. By switching to first person narration, in italicized sections called "Morgaine speaks," Bradley shows Morgaine's personal experience of the same issues of abortion, contraception and adultery. Although the Middle English Trotula treatise deals compassionately with women's pain and shame in seeking medical care, I have argued that it retains an ambivalence towards the female body that stems from the patriarchal and Christian attitudes demonstrated in the *Morte Darthur*. In bypassing the conventional, patriarchal literary form of a medical treatise to write in a more stream-of-consciousness style similar to the one Kristeva uses in "Stabat Mater," and which does not follow a linear chronology, parts of Bradley's novel aim to overcome this shame surrounding the female body. By placing *The Mists of Avalon* next to the *Morte Darthur* and the Trotula treatise, however, we can see that the overall narrative of *The Mists of Avalon* is heteronormative, since

Bradley's version of Camelot shares the misogynistic views of women's bodies of the other two texts; when Avalon recedes into the mist at the story's end, becoming accessible to few people, the patriarchal Camelot and its Christian views of the female body prevail over the gynocentric Avalon.

Écriture féminine is a style of writing that expresses women's embodied experience without recourse to conventional patriarchal language's misogynistic structures (Jones 247). Kristeva and Cixous both write that *écriture féminine* comes from the embodied experience of motherhood. Kristeva writes for instance, that motherhood is the "real experience" of femininity, arguing that when her contemporaries reject motherhood as a means of subjecting women to patriarchal norms, they reject along with it a powerful experience that unites women and actually enables them to resist patriarchy: "when feminism demands a new representation of femininity, it seems to identify motherhood with that idealized misconception and, because it rejects the image and its misuse, feminism circumvents the real experience that fantasy overshadows" (161). In other words, Kristeva argues *for* an association between femininity and motherhood, even as she rejects the traditional religious connotations of maternity, such as purity and chastity. Cixous writes in *The Laugh of the Medusa* that "a woman is never far from 'mother'... There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink" (881). Cixous extends the idea of motherhood as a metaphor, writing that it is "sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was 'born' to her" (881). In this way, Cixous makes motherhood include any caring towards the female body; this care has a healing function that allows women to feel whole in their bodies.

Critics have pointed out that Kristeva and Cixous' emphasis on motherhood is problematically essentialist, and that it excludes women who are not mothers (Lindsay 52, Jones 253). By emphasizing the binary between patriarchal writing and *écriture féminine*, critics argue, Kristeva and Cixous risk reinforcing rather than subverting women's subordinate position, inscribing women as biologically determined to be mothers and to care for others (Lindsay 53, Jones 255). For the purpose of this paper, however, I will accept Kristeva and Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine* as a style of writing that draws on women's embodied experience, whether that is the experience of motherhood, of sexual desire, or even of seeking out abortion. I will use the theory of *écriture féminine* to show how the *Morte Darthur*, the Trotula treatise and *The Mists of Avalon* can be put in a productive juxtaposition, revealing what aspects of women's experience are represented or omitted from each text.

Just because *The Mists of Avalon* is written by a woman does not guarantee that it is an example of *écriture féminine*. The Trotula treatise, after all, may have been written by a woman – a subject of much debate among critics. French linguist Bernard Cerquiglini argues that, when female characters speak in medieval texts by men, their voice is controlled by the male author and therefore is not an authentic representation of women's experience; most writing by medieval women also participates in masculine discourse, rather than questioning or subverting it (188-9).[5] Similarly, Cixous notes that many women writers have written as if they were men, reproducing classical misogynistic representations of women, or obscuring the female characters in their texts (878). If women can fall into patriarchal, misogynistic discourse unless they make a conscious effort to draw on their embodied experience in order to write *écriture féminine,* then it should not matter whether the author of the Trotula treatise was a man or a woman: what should

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[5] Some writing by medieval women does resemble *écriture féminine*. Karma Lochrie argues, for example, that the mystic writing of Margery Kempe represents her body (68-76).

matter is whether the treatise circumvents patriarchal language to express the embodied experience of women in a way that may have helped medieval women to understand and take control of their reproductive health.

I have not argued that Trotula treatise is an example of *écriture féminine* because, while it is a text for women about women's embodied experience, it does not depart from the conventional form of a medical treatise. This is not to criticize the treatise for adhering to conventions of medical writing, but to point out that it cannot represent female embodiment as fully as a text which does depart from patriarchal literary forms. Kristeva and Cixous' *écriture féminine* uses embodied experience as the starting point from which to experiment with free-flowing, unrestrained literary forms that do not follow conventional genres. *The Mists of Avalon*, however, may be an example of *écriture féminine*, since it uses stream-of-consciousness first person narration to explore women's embodied experience. In "Stabat Mater," Kristeva tries to convey the "real experience" of being a woman through columns of text written in a non-academic style. They encapsulate a mother's relationship to her child, as well as to her own body, emphasizing embodied experience and imagining a society in which women do not have to translate their real experience into words. In these columns of text that use less theoretical language, Kristeva imagines a feminine language of the body that abandons language altogether, making "WORD FLESH," (Kristeva 162), yet still creates a community among women. However, since Kristeva's medium is language, she must try to convey this real experience through language. Similarly, Bradley is adapting a story that exists in written form and therefore must adapt written language to her feminist purpose. Rather than retaining all of Malory's content, which is mainly a linear narrative in the third person that focuses on the heroic actions of knights, and not on thoughts and feelings (Haught 97), Bradley switches between third person

and first person narration, giving access to Morgaine's way of experiencing the world. Since she has the Sight, Morgaine's inner experience is not chronological; she perceives some events before they happen, and some events from the past haunt her vividly. In the same vein, her experience of motherhood is not limited to the time she actually bears and cares for a child, but extends throughout her entire life.

The Prologue and the last chapter of *The Mists of Avalon*, in particular, do not obey linear chronology. In the Prologue, Morgaine explains how she is able to recount events that happened when she was too young to understand them or in her absence. She says:

> *As I tell this tale I will speak at times of things which befell when I was too young to understand them, or of things which befell when I was not by; and my hearer will draw away, perhaps, and say:* This is her magic. *But I have always held the gift of the Sight, and of looking within the minds of men and women; and in all this time I have been close to all of them. And so, at times, all they thought was known to me in one way or another.* (x)

A lack of linear chronology is not unique to Bradley's version of Arthurian Legend. The very title of the *Morte Darthur* reveals its ending: the death of Arthur. Arthur is the "once and future" king; as in *The Mists of Avalon*, the beginning and ending of the story are contiguous. What is different about Bradley's novel is that this flattening of linear time occurs through Morgaine's experience as a priestess of the Goddess religion. Most of the novel *is* chronological, just as the events of the *Morte Darthur* are presented chronologically; however, the "Morgaine speaks" sections query linear time, reacting to events long after they happen or telling of future events. Morgaine says that her ability to tell this story is directly linked to her gift of the Sight. No one else could tell this story, because they have not had Morgaine's embodied experience of seeing

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into others' minds. In this way, Bradley translates the medieval quality of being non-chronological into *écriture féminine*, altering a patriarchal form of writing to feminist purpose.

This alteration of chronological order exists in Morgaine's identification as a mother, as well. She describes herself as a mother in the Prologue, before she narrates her experience of becoming a mother; in the last chapter, she recalls how she cared for Arthur in her childhood. This flattening of past and present is rooted in Morgaine's embodiment. It is her role as a priestess that makes her into a "once and future mother." In the Prologue, she says that when Arthur died and she welcomed him on the barge to Avalon, he "*rested upon the breast of the* Great Mother *from whom he came to birth*" (x, emphasis mine). In the book's final chapter, Morgaine identifies herself as the Goddess, saying,

> *there were others standing there with me, robed and crowned, Morgaine the*
>
> *Maiden, who had summoned Arthur to the running of the deer and the challenge*
>
> *of the King Stag, and Morgaine the Mother who had been torn asunder when*
>
> *Gwydion was born, and the Queen of North Wales, summoning the eclipse to send*
>
> *Accolon raging against Arthur, and the Dark Queen of Fairy…or was it the Death*
>
> *Crone who stood at my side?* (867)

In this passage, Morgaine expands Kristeva and Cixous' definition of women's embodied experience to include virginity, women in positions of authority, and old age. These four aspects of womanhood – virginity, motherhood, power and age – are facets of the Goddess (Spivack 21-2). This links Morgaine's embodied experience through all the stages of her life to her special knowledge and abilities that come from being a priestess of the Goddess; together, her experience and her magic are what produce the narrative of *The Mists of Avalon*. In the "Morgaine speaks" sections, this non-chronological narrative is told in an overflowing, excessive

way. Bradley writes in long clauses linked by a series of commas, mimicking the flow of blood, milk and tears. Given its origin in Morgaine's embodied experience as a priestess, *The Mists of Avalon* is an example of *écriture féminine* that succeeds in expressing some aspects of women's experience that the *Morte Darthur* and the Trotula treatise fail to.

As I noted in the previous chapter, Malory pays little attention to childbirth. This is not because his text is medieval, since the Trotula treatise does pay detailed attention to birth. Whereas most medieval texts – ever since Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain,* according to Leah Haught (97) – idealize a golden age of chivalry and focus on violent masculinity, the Trotula treatise is interested in childbirth and women's health, and *The Mists of Avalon* picks up on this interest. The author of the Trotula treatise does not, however, openly discuss female sexual desire outside of marriage. The cure for "suffocation of the moder," for instance, says:

> it is profitable to haue company with man. But þus vunderstonde: in lawfull
> company, as with her housebandes and with none other; for in certayn it were
> better for a man other for a woman to haue the grettest sekenesse of þe body
> whiles þei leven than to ben helyd thorough a dede of lechery. (90)

Although the Trotula treatise purports to help women seek medical help without fear of shame, this passage shows that the treatise still considers extra-marital sexuality to be shameful. Bradley uses the female characters to vocalize criticism of the patriarchal, misogynistic society of Camelot. Morgause, in particular, criticizes the Christian idea that sexuality outside of marriage is sinful (Tobin 148), defending women's right to have lovers other than their husbands. In conversation with Gwenhwyfar, Morgause acknowledges that the Queen's Christianity prevents her from accepting adultery: "I had forgotten, you are so pious a lady, you look never on the

beauty of any man save your own wedded husband" (607). This is of course not true, since Gwenhwyfar has committed adultery with Lancelot – but she considers her love for him to be marred by sin, and she feels an "agonizing burst of shame" when Arthur asks Lancelot to sleep with her (448). Women raised in the Goddess religion, on the other hand, accept that their sexual desire is natural. Morgause says that Morgaine "is full enough of life that I do not think she would be content in an old man's bed" (608). Morgause also recognizes that sexuality can be a source of personal and political power for women. She does not remarry because then she would relinquish her position as Queen of Lothian, yet she says that to live without a man "would not suit me at all! And Lamorak is over-young to rule as king, though he has other duties, and I find him most satisfactory –" (607). Sheppeard also argues that the meeting of the King Stag and the Goddess, in the form of Arthur and Morgaine, illustrates that Christianity is responsible for the shame that surrounds sexuality (98).

Morgaine's attempt to preserve the Goddess religion in Camelot, so that people can be free of the shame of Christianity, is unsuccessful. It seems that relationships free from shame cannot exist in the heteronormative, patriarchal space of Camelot; they need a female-centered, caring space to be possible. Marilyn R. Farwell discusses lesbianism, using "lesbian" as a metaphor much as Cixous uses motherhood as a metaphor. In other words, lesbianism does not necessarily mean sexual relations between women, for Farwell, but any kind of close relationships between women, whether sexual, romantic, sisterly or motherly (325). It may be a hybrid – just like Morgaine's relationship to Arthur is a hybrid of sister, lover and mother. Farwell focuses on the scene in which Morgaine returns to Avalon after many years and exchanges blood with Raven. They lick blood from each other's cuts, and Morgaine thinks, "*never have I known what it was to be received simply in love*" (639-40). Morgaine finds this

erotically charged exchange to be more emotionally fulfilling than any of her sexual encounters with men – yet, for the rest of the novel, Morgaine is heterosexual, and she never has sex with a woman.

Farwell cautions against minimizing Morgaine's relationship with Raven, however; she argues that this encounter creates lesbian space within an otherwise heteronormative narrative (320-1). Many masculine narratives, including medieval romances, just give female characters access to male roles or male space for a limited time (Farwell 324). In order to create actual space for women, a space of feminine sameness without rigid boundaries – a space like Avalon, which is shrouded in mist and which has no borders and no direct point of access – must be created (Farwell 323-4). Farwell argues, though, that Avalon ultimately reinforces heterosexuality in its division of women from men, and in its ritualization of heterosexuality through the union of the King Stag and the Goddess (327). On the other hand, Avalon is not homophobic the way Camelot is; when Morgaine dreams that she kisses Raven she is "without surprise or shame" (405), whereas the court of Camelot wonders whether "Lancelot likes it overmuch, seeing his gifts on the bodies of handsome young men" (713, Farwell 328). In this way, Avalon allows Morgaine to fulfill her desire for love and caring in a way which is not possible in Camelot. Melinda Hughes writes that Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar, for instance, are doubles of each other – "dark and light ladies" (24) – but they never quite form the "communal sisterhood" of feminist utopias because they cannot accept each other's differences (27). Morgaine says, for example, "*From [the day Morgaine helped Elaine seduce Lancelot], Gwenhwyfar hated me; and that I regretted most, for in a strange way I had loved her*" (543). This passage shows that Morgaine longs for a sense of sisterhood with Gwenhwyfar, even as their difference in religion and beliefs about female sexuality make it impossible.

An illustrative example of the lack of a caring community of women, even within the society of Avalon, is Morgaine's inability to choose whether or not to have an abortion. She considers aborting the child she is bearing by Arthur, even though it may be a daughter of the Goddess, in order to spare his feelings, thinking, *"he must never know, he has enough to weigh his heart at this crowning. If I can bear this burden and keep silence to give his heart ease, I will do so"* (211). Although incest is not condoned by the Goddess religion, Morgaine believes that her accidental sexual relationship with her brother would not make him feel so ashamed if he did not live in a Christian society. Yet it is not only Christianity that controls people's bodies and makes them feel ashamed about their sexuality; the Goddess religion, too, makes it a sin for Morgaine to abort her child. One of the main feminist purposes of *The Mists of Avalon*, then, is an exploration of women's reproductive rights.

Reproductive rights are important to many female-centered fantasy novels. Daniel Lukes writes that Neomedieval Feminist Dystopia is written in the tradition of feminist utopia (47). Neomedieval Femininst Dystopia often builds a stylized, medieval-like world in order to criticize patriarchal reproduction politics (44). Women's reproductive rights were limited by Christian views of the female body. Even the Trotula treatise, the purpose of which is to provide women with inaccessible medical knowledge, is ambivalent towards abortion and contraception, just as it is ambivalent towards the female body in general. Medieval medical practitioners knew about effective herbal abortifacients and contraceptives (Riddle 67). This information had to be disguised in medical treatises; a ninth-century treatise from a Benedictine abbey, for instance, includes known abortifacients in "a cure for all stomach aches" and in a list of herbs for "women who cannot purge themselves" of their menses (Riddle 90-1). Abortifacients and contraceptives were also sometimes named under the guise of *preventing* sterility, so that women would not

take herbs that would cause them to miscarry (Eccles 1982, 67). The need to disguise information about birth control was even more pressing by the fifteenth century because the Church was becoming more strict about interfering with God's will in reproduction, ever since the early fourteenth century when abortion was declared homicide by Edward I (1271-1307) (Riddle 92-4). The Middle English Trotula treatise probably disguises abortifacients and contraceptives in this way as well. The first section after the treatise's introduction, for instance, is "of þe stopping of her blode þat they shuld have in her purgacions and be purged of" (60). After listing several combinations of herbs, including the purgatives pellitory and scammony, the author writes, "For though ther were a ded chylde in her wombe it wolde brynge it ouȝt" (68). In other words, these herbs would probably induce not only menstruation but also miscarriage.

Because information about contraception and abortion had to be disguised, it was often difficult to follow. Treatises did not always include dosage, or how frequently to administer the herbs, or where to find more exotic plants (Riddle 106-7). As a result, women would have needed practical experience to profit from a reference text like the Trotula treatise (Riddle 123-4). This is the kind of knowledge that enchantresses like Morgan and Nineve could be expected to have, yet Malory does not include birth control or abortion in the *Morte Darthur*. The potential for enchantresses to alter crucial genealogies, preventing the conception of or aborting children like Merlin or Arthur, would pose a threat to Camelot's patriarchy. Yet Malory omits all mention of birth control and abortion, even when it might have emphasized his purpose of presenting Morgaine as an evil enchantress. This is one instance where *The Mists of Avalon* reveals what is missing from Bradley's source texts: Morgaine's attempts at inducing miscarriage in *The Mists of Avalon* dramatize the fact that medical knowledge does not always translate smoothly to women's real world experience. When Morgaine becomes pregnant by an

accidental incestuous encounter with her brother Arthur, she plans to induce abortion using her knowledge of herb lore, which she gained in her training to become a priestess on the island of Avalon (224). Her knowledge of healing and magic comes from the Cult of the Goddess, and Morgaine recognizes her debt to the Goddess as she gathers abortifacient herbs. Morgaine "wrested the herb free from the earth and began stripping away the root, murmuring the charm appointed for this use – a prayer to the Goddess to restore life to the bush uprooted, that while she took this one bush, others might grow in its place" (224). This emphasis on ensuring future fertility – both of the plant and, metaphorically, of Morgaine – is echoed by the Lady of the Lake, who tells Morgaine not to induce an abortion. The Lady of the Lake says, "Think twice, Morgaine, before you refuse what the Goddess sent you from the King Stag" (225). Although this advice is given by the leader of a gynocentric society, it upholds the idea that female bodies are made for reproduction, to the benefit of existing power structures. Those power structures are not patriarchal, in Avalon, yet Morgaine and other women's bodies are still subject to rules and beliefs that prevent them from getting the kind of medical care that the Trotula treatise seeks to make more accessible. Perhaps by resisting categorization as either utopia or dystopia, *The Mists of Avalon* creates a more realistic representation of women's reproductive health, one which portrays the struggle women undergo to access reproductive health care, as well as the ambivalence that both men, and women like Viviane, feel towards reproductive rights.

Morgaine follows Viviane's advice and bears her child by Arthur, but her experience of motherhood is not positive and does not contribute to the building of a caring community of women. Morgaine feels bitter towards Viviane and Avalon, thinking, *"The Goddess had had her way with us"* (231). Gwydion's actual birth is painful as well, and leaves Morgaine feeling detached from her body. Although Morgaine knows herb lore and how to induce abortion, she is

"unskilled in midwifery" (251). She does not understand what is happening when her water breaks, "her face crimson with astonishment and shame" (243). Labour nearly kills Morgaine, and she delivers Gwydion screaming "Mother! Mother!" in an appeal to either Igraine or the Goddess (248). In spite of this pain, Morgaine does feel motherly towards Gwydion and begs to hold him; Morgause refuses, since she knows that she will foster Gwydion (251). Morgaine's lack of control over her own body in Avalon is certainly not utopic – her society does not achieve Trotula treatise's ideal of providing medical care to all women who want it – but it dramatizes some women's "real experience" of lacking the choice, even when they have access to medical knowledge. Although Morgaine is a literal mother, she does not raise her son or develop a physical connection with him; her role as a mother throughout the novel is primarily metaphorical. The *écriture féminine* that describes Morgaine's metaphorical motherhood opens the experience of motherhood to a greater variety of women than the *écriture féminine* of Kristeva and Cixous, in its insistence on literal motherhood.

Making the experience of motherhood metaphorical as well as physical imbues it with power, when many women's experience of literal motherhood is disempowering. Morgaine's figurative role as Arthur's mother, for instance, gives her power over him. Morgaine's relationship with Arthur shows that motherhood, for her, can include all forms of caring for others. Morgaine and Arthur's relationship in *The Mists of Avalon*, while sometimes antagonistic, is different from their relationships in the *Morte Darthur*. In Malory, Morgan is the aggressor and Arthur is the victim (Benko 24). In the episode of the *Morte Darthur* which I discuss in my first chapter, when Morgan tries to have Accolon kill Arthur, for instance, Morgan is represented as a malicious threat to Camelot. Morgan's worth is measured by the way she interacts with male characters, and how well she serves the patriarchal interests of Camelot. In

The Mists of Avalon, on the other hand, she and Arthur relate to each other as two human beings; neither is perfect, and Morgaine's worth is not measured by how well she serves her brother (Benko 27). Nevertheless, Morgaine's relationship to Arthur is primarily a nurturing one. As a girl, Morgaine takes care of Arthur and feels burdened by this responsibility. When Arthur lies dying of a wound, memories of caring for her brother come back to Morgaine: "for a moment, knowing she moved at the very edge of madness, she heard Igraine calling impatiently, '*Morgaine, I told you to take care of the baby...*'" (749). This memory shows that Morgaine's role towards Arthur is fundamentally one of caring, even after she has betrayed him and tried to have Accolon kill him. The Accolon episode occurs much later in *The Mists of Avalon* than in the *Morte Darthur.* Moving Morgaine's betrayal of Arthur towards the end of the novel establishes Morgaine's initial role as Arthur's protector (Tolmie 29). This means that when Morgaine eventually rebels against Arthur, it is not because she hates him or to fulfill her own lust, which are her motivations in the *Morte Darthur* (Morgan, Olstead), but to "free" people's minds from Christianity (Tolmie 30, Bradley 734).

Although Bradley portrays Morgaine in a positive light – Charlotte Spivack writes that Bradley redeems Morgaine from her negative representation in Malory through her devotion to the Goddess (21-2) – she fills the position of evil enchantress with Morgause. In fact, Morgaine and Morgause seem almost to switch the roles they play in the *Morte Darthur.* In Malory's text, it is Morgause who begets Mordred with her brother Arthur, and Morgaine whose magic threatens Camelot. In *The Mists of Avalon,* it is Morgaine who bears Mordred, and Morgause who uses black magic to try to rule Camelot. She slits the throats of a dog and of a maid to access the Sight in order to see the whereabouts of her sons and the political situation in Camelot (816-21). After she kills them, she "felt herself shaking with the unexpected power, as if she

were spreading out through the whole of the room, through the whole of Lothian, through the whole of the world... She had never dared so much before, but now it had come to her, unsought" (818). Just as Morgause sees it as her right to take lovers, she sees it as her right to kill others using magic in order to gain power; in this way, *The Mists of Avalon* makes Morgause, a hypersexual woman, into a dangerous threat to Camelot, just as the hypersexual Morgan poses a threat in the *Morte Darthur*.

Furthermore, although *The Mists of Avalon* does critique Christian views of the female body, as well as critiquing nostalgia for the violent masculinity of Camelot, its representation of its heroine may be more similar to that of medieval romance than it initially appears. Helen Cooper writes that female characters in medieval romance are often able to overcome patriarchal oppression to marry the husband of their choosing; their self-awareness and power as characters comes from their sexuality (219-20). However, their power is a "fantasy" of male authors, and their sexual desire for the male characters a kind of narcissism on the part of the author (Cooper 236). Although medieval romances pay attention to the thought processes of female characters, women's actual desires are not necessarily addressed (Cooper 237). Tolmie builds on Cooper's argument, writing that fantasy heroines based on medieval romance heroines often rise above an oppressive system to succeed as individuals, without creating cultural change (Tolmie 147). This is the case for Morgaine, who ends her life happily in Avalon – but who does not succeed in preserving the Goddess religion in Camelot, which becomes a wholly Christian society.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

While it stands to reason that a twentieth-century adaptation of Arthurian legend would be more feminist in its aims than most medieval texts, I have argued that reading *The Mists of Avalon* alongside the *Morte Darthur* and the Trotula treatise reveals a more nuanced feminism. *Écriture féminine* is valuable for what it enables Bradley to show about the embodied experience of Arthurian women, but it is a flawed form of feminism, as critics have pointed out, since it is essentialist and exclusionary in its focus on motherhood. Yet *écriture féminine* is flawed also in that it omits the practical information about women's embodiment that the Trotula treatise provides. *Écriture féminine* purports to stem from the female body, but knowledge about the body within *écriture féminine* is vague. Because *écriture féminine* abandons patriarchal language of the kind used in medical treatises, it cannot explain how to deliver a child without recourse to that patriarchal language; perhaps because women in the 1980s had much more ready access to medical care than medieval women they did not need to have such practical information themselves. Nevertheless, it is empowering to women to include such medical knowledge in a representation of their embodiment, as the Trotula treatise does. This is not to place these two texts in competition with each other – or to suggest that, because Malory does not always address women's embodiment, the *Morte Darthur* is anti-feminist in its intent. As a reader of the *Morte Darthur*, Bradley must have seen untapped worlds of personality and embodiment in Nineve, Morgan and Morgause. A suggestion of feminism exists already in Malory's characters, or there would be no impetus for Bradley to flesh out this feminism in the nine hundred pages of her novel. In comparing these three texts, then, I have tried to show that the Trotula treatise and *The Mists of Avalon* complement each other in their filling in of the gaps of women's experience in the *Morte Darthur*. Drawing on the knowledge of women's medicine found in the Trotula

treatise, and the representation of women's embodiment in *The Mists of Avalon*, it is possible to imagine the women of the *Morte Darthur* using magic and herb lore to heal each other behind the scenes and off the page.

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