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## Dark Sisters and Light Sisters: Sister Doubles and the Search for Sisterhood in *The Mists of Avalon* and *The White Raven*

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### Dark Sisters and Light Sisters: Sister Doubles and the Search for Sisterhood in *The Mists of Avalon* and *The White Raven*

#### Abstract

Examines the literary device of “doubling” in Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon* and Paxson’s *The White Raven*, as expressed in the “surrogate sister” pairs of Morgaine/ Gwenhwyfar and Branwen/Esseilte.

#### Additional Keywords

Bradley, Marion Zimmer—Characters—Gwenhwyfar; Bradley, Marion Zimmer—Characters—Morgaine; Bradley, Marion Zimmer. *The Mists of Avalon*; Doubling; Paxson, Diana—Characters—Branwen; Paxson, Diana—Characters—Esseilte; Paxson, Diana. *The White Raven*; Sisterhood

# Dark Sisters and Light Sisters

## Sister Doubles and the Search for Sisterhood in *The Mists of Avalon* and *The White Raven*

Delinda Hughes

Achilles and Patroclus, David and Jonathan, Huck and Jim: literature overflows with examples of positive male bonding but rarely and less positively portrays female bonding and sisterhood in such stories as those of Helen and Klytemnestra, Ariadne and Phaedra, down to and including James Fenimore Cooper's Alice and Cora and Herman Melville's Lucy and Isabel. However, a recent development in fantasy novels by women, including Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* and Diana Paxson's *The White Raven*, indicates that women writers of fantasy are beginning to recognize the importance of portraying the quest for positive female bonding and "sisterhood" in their fantasy novels. This "sisterhood" encompasses not only the relationship between women related by blood or marriage but the relationship found in any woman-to-woman dyad in which each woman searches for an identity, for a positive sense of "Self" (in the Jungian sense of the word) through interaction with a sister or sister surrogate.

This search for identity through sisterhood in these fantasy novels by women parallels in many ways the search for "communal sisterhood" present in some feminist utopias. Yet, the search for sisterhood through sister surrogates depicted in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* and Diana Paxson's *The White Raven* focuses on the "power of two," which is actually a relatively new form of a major theme popular in art since archaic times — doubling. Although this doubling takes the form of a woman-to-woman dyad in both books in order to show the potential for recognition of identity through positive sisterhood relationships, each author adapts a distinct doubling pattern to reflect the relationship between the sisters. Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar serve as an example of the nineteenth-century American Dark Lady/Pale Maiden antagonism with each sister having the obvious physical differences, as well as antithetical cultural and religious backgrounds. At the beginning of *The White Raven*, Branwen and Esseilte are "similar" doubles with each having similar physical features and cultural and religious beliefs. By the end of the book, however, they have diverged physically, culturally, and religiously. Both Bradley and Paxson follow a classic literary tradition in using doubling; yet, the novelty is that both pairs are of sympathetically treated women, unlike the negatively portrayed doubles present in the works of Cooper and Melville. Indeed, if feminist authors are critical of women characters, the latter are more likely to be innocents such as

Melville's Lucy, while the mysterious Isabel-like figures stand as female heroes, a situation present in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*.

Tales of King Arthur are popular in myth, history, and fantasy, but Bradley renews the Arthurian legend by focusing not on Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, but on the counter-poised roles of Arthur's half-sister, "Morgaine," and his wife, "Gwenhwyfar" (as Bradley spells their names in *The Mists of Avalon*). This relationship as sisters-in-law, friends, and rivals is an intricate one that binds Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar even as it separates them. The two share the love of Arthur, but their competition for the love of "Lancelot" (as Bradley spells his name in *The Mists of Avalon*) separates them. Certainly, this intense competition divides them from their very first encounter, as in this scene, Morgaine and Lancelot are just beginning to fall in love when Gwenhwyfar intrudes. Unfortunately, once Lancelot sees Gwenhwyfar, he instead falls in love with her.

This initial scene also establishes the dichotomy between Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar, as it is obvious from this point that Morgaine is to play the archetypal "Dark Lady" to Gwenhwyfar's "Pale Maiden." Of the physical distinctions between these two archetypes, Robert Rogers says, "The blue-eyed, fair-haired, light-complexioned one is the Fair Maiden.... Her darker counterpart part is... the Dark Lady..." (126) with "her black hair, her black eyes, her wild beauty, her exotic, almost foreign qualities..." (Fryer 33). The Pale Maiden finds her roots in the myths of Artemis, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Brigid. The Dark Lady finds her roots in the myths of Venus, Circe, and Eve. Not until the eighteenth century, however, did these figures take on the dark/evil and light/good connotations in regard to physical appearance (Rogers 128). Leslie Fiedler says of this transition, in regard to Cooper's clearly delineated female heroes, "Cora and Alice... the passionate brunette and the sinless blonde, make once and for all the pattern of female Dark and Light that is to become the standard form in which American writers project their ambivalence toward women" (197). Bradley, in portraying Morgaine as a Dark Lady and Gwenhwyfar as a Pale Maiden, closely adheres to this pattern established by early male American writers. Yet, Bradley manipulates these established stereotypes in such a way that although Morgaine is in many ways a conventional Dark Lady, she is not a representative of evil, nor is Gwenhwyfar, as the conventional Pale Maiden, simply "the sinless blonde."

As is traditionally the case with Dark Ladies, including Melville's Isabel, Morgaine despises her dark looks and even more so once she sees Gwenhwyfar. For, once Morgaine sees Gwenhwyfar, the former cannot resist contrasting her own dark appearance with that of Gwenhwyfar:

Morgaine saw herself as she must look to Lancelot and to the strange golden maiden — small, dark, with the barbarian blue sign on her forehead [the sign of a priestess of Avalon], her shift muddy to the knees, her hair coming down. Little and ugly like one of the fairy folk. Morgaine of the Fairies... So they had taunted her since childhood. (Bradley 158)

Conversely, Gwenhwyfar is "all white and gold, her skin pale as ivory just stained with coral, her eyes palest sky blue, her hair long and pale and shining through the mist like living gold" (157), a typical portrait of the Pale Maiden as epitomized in Melville's famous Lucy Tartan.

Because Gwenhwyfar and Morgaine become sisters-in-law through Arthur's marriage to Gwenhwyfar, the Pale Maiden and the Dark Lady unite in sisterhood, but only briefly. As Charlotte Spivack explains,

As a devout Christian, she [Gwenhwyfar] is a natural antagonist to both Igraine and Morgaine, offending both with her piety. At the same time, there develops a certain feminine sympathy between the queen and Morgaine (156).

Yet, this "feminine sympathy," a form of sisterhood, is both illusory and temporary, for they allow their cultural and religious differences, and, of course, Lancelot, to force them apart, without either sister gaining a positive sense of "Self" or an identity from the relationship.

In creating her characters as representatives of contrary cultures, Bradley again adapts the Dark Lady/Pale Maiden dichotomy. The Dark Lady is typically "a person who acts out her feelings in ways that depart from the plan of the patriarchal community" (Fryer 28). In contrast, the Pale Maiden "represents the traditional espoused values of the community" (Fryer 85). Thus, the Dark Lady represents anti-patriarchal values, while the Pale Maiden represents patriarchal values and restrictions. Scholars acknowledge pre-Christian Britain as a world in which a woman, such as Viviane, the Lady of the Lake, had power as a priestess, healer, and ruler. This culture, however, like the male-dominated patriarchy, also has its disadvantages, since power can be misused in any culture, as Viviane misuses her power to manipulate Morgaine and Arthur in an attempt to bring peace to Britain. Bradley says in her interview with Parke Godwin, "My own Morgaine and Arthur... are actually the victims of political scheming of Viviane" (Godwin 8), since it is Viviane who betrays Morgaine into an incestuous relationship with Arthur, Morgaine's own half-brother. Bradley, however, does not portray this incest as sinful, nor is Viviane's scheming unquestionably evil. Certainly, Viviane acts as she does in the belief that

Morgaine's and Arthur's bloodlines, brought together in a son, would set up a dynasty that claiming secular

allegiance of every soul in England, would free the Druids and other pagans from Christian rules (Arbur 96).

In this sense, Viviane's scheming is an attempt to create a world based not only upon cultural and social equality but upon religious equality as well.

In contradiction to the matriarchal society of Avalon, Gwenhwyfar has been raised within and accepted the confines of patriarchal Britain, which narrowly defined the roles of a woman in society. In Gwenhwyfar's case, she is to be daughter, wife, queen, and eventually, mother. As a daughter, Gwenhwyfar accedes to her father's demand that she marry Arthur, although the thought of being "High Queen of Britain" (Bradley 256) obviously terrifies her. As a wife, Gwenhwyfar expects, as patriarchal society teaches, to be nothing more than Arthur's faithful wife and the mother of his children, neither position which she fulfills. Instead, she has an adulterous affair with Lancelot and remains unable to produce an heir for the throne. It is her inability to fulfill these roles thrust upon her by society that contributes to the downfall of Camelot:

As in the original, then, Gwenhwyfar is the major cause of Arthur's downfall but for a different reason. It is not her adulterous affair with Lancelot [sic] but her dogmatic imposition of Christianity that alienates the king and drives the supporters of the goddess to plot his death. In this sense, Gwenhwyfar, like Morgaine, becomes both the victim and the instrument of the deity she worships (Spivack 157).

This narrow-minded devotion to Christianity once more signals Gwenhwyfar's position as a Pale Maiden, who exemplifies the "perfect female purity of the Virgin Mary" (Rogers 127). Raised by nuns at the convent at Glastonbury, Gwenhwyfar is the typical medieval woman, as Bradley states, "I made my Guinevere [sic] a conventional woman, and of course, influenced by the medieval view, I made her the perfect Christian woman" (Godwin 8). Because Bradley is retelling the Arthurian legend, however, Gwenhwyfar cannot remain the perfect, chaste Christian woman due to the inevitable love affair with Lancelot. In this affair, she defies both the patriarchy and the Church. Later, however, by renouncing Lancelot's love and returning to the convent, Gwenhwyfar accepts patriarchal Christianity for the imperfect religion that it is when it cannot accept the love of a woman for a man other than her husband. Likewise, Morgaine learns to accept that there is more to religion than a narrow belief in one God or goddess.

Morgaine and the priests and priestesses of Avalon worship Ceridwen, a Celtic goddess, with the triple dimensions of Maiden, Matron, and Crone (alternately known as the Wise Woman). Bradley, however, adds a fourth dimension to the goddess, which she calls "a secret face." Spivack discusses these four faces, or dimensions, of Bradley's goddess:

The goddess of ancient Britain, like the goddess in most ancient matriarchal cultures, bears a resemblance

to the feminine quaternity in Jungian psychology. In Jungian terms there are four dimensions in the feminine psyche: mother and maiden at opposite poles and wise woman and warrior at opposite poles. Every woman to a certain extent participates in each of the four cardinal dimensions, but most women tend to favor one aspect over another. (150)

Bradley's incorporation of this quaternity appears first when Viviane notes the similarity of herself, her sisters Igraine and Morgause, and her niece Morgaine to the "four" dimensions of the goddess: "Viviane notes the resemblance of Viviane herself as wise woman, Igraine as mother, Morgaine as maiden, and Morgause as the dark, hidden, ominous fourth side" (Spivack 150). This fourth side, the secret dimension of the Goddess, is then her warrior aspect, represented by Morgause.

As well as correlating to the four women — Viviane, Igraine, Morgause and Morgaine — at one point in their relationship, this quaternity also clarifies each phase of Morgaine's life, as Morgaine so well notes as she goes to bring the dying Arthur to Avalon:

I stood in the barge alone, and yet I knew 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? (Bradley 867)

Although Morgaine at this point willingly acknowledges the four sides of her "Self" as equivalent to the four dimensions of the goddess — maiden, mother, warrior, crone or wise-woman, it is not until she truly understands and accepts the dimension of the wise woman that she can acknowledge that the Virgin Mary is merely another dimension of the goddess.

Bradley explains her theory of the Mother Goddess in her interview with Parke Godwin:

All the Mother-of-Goddesses are interchangeable with Mary. Christians tried to create a patriarchal religion without Goddesses, but the human spirit demands a world-mother. This is why Morgaine, seeing the Goddess vision in the Christian church, realizes that the Goddess can take care of herself. If men reject her in one form, she will appear in another. All the great shrines where the Virgin has appeared ... are all the sites of old pagan shrines where the Goddess has been appearing long before Mary was ever heard of. She just changes her name. (7)

Once Morgaine realizes that the worship of the goddess will survive and that she has not failed in serving the goddess, she seeks sisterhood among the priestesses of Avalon, as Gwenhwyfar has sought sisterhood among the sisters in the convent. For, although the Dark Lady and the Pale Maiden have glimpsed sisterhood with each other,

their essential cultural and religious differences have kept them from reaching an understanding of "Self" or gaining an identity through their relationship with one another.

Morgaine sought an identity through her relationship with her opposite double, the Pale Maiden, Gwenhwyfar, and failed. Branwen searches for sisterhood and an identity with her similar double, Esseilte, in Diana Paxson's *The White Raven*, a retelling of the legendary/historical story of the ill-fated triangle of Tristan/Iseult/Mark (Drustan/Esseilte/Marc'h as Paxson spells their names). Yet, Paxson's concern is not so much the recreation of the tragic love affair of Drustan and Esseilte, but the depiction of Branwen, a minor character in the original legend. Paxson explains in her afterword:

I wondered what it would be like to live with one of the world's greatest love affairs especially for those who had to cope with the consequences. Looking at the story, it seemed to me that without Branwen's help the whole thing would have been impossible, for in every crisis of the story it is Branwen who picks up the pieces without ever receiving any of the rewards. (437)

As the one who merely "picks up the pieces," at least in the beginning of the story, Branwen truly believes that she has no identity outside her relationship with Esseilte.

As the illegitimate daughter of the Morholt, brother of the High Queen of Ireland, and a British captive, Branwen becomes a servant when her father presents her to the Queen as a servant for Esseilte, the Queen's daughter. Because of Branwen's complicated position in society as a bastard and yet the niece of the Queen, the relationships that form between Branwen and Esseilte assume many different forms including servant/master, betrayer/betrayed, sisters, and perhaps even "twins." In his article *"The White Raven: A Personal Response,"* Paul Nolan Hyde refers to Esseilte as Branwen's "essential twin" (38). Indeed, the two are born on the same day, although to different mothers. In addition, Branwen states at one point, "I thought that we were one being, born into separate bodies by some mischance and now united again" (Paxson 122). The fact that Branwen and Esseilte have a similar heritage (both are born in Ireland, although Branwen's mother is British), have a relationship as twins/sisters (although Branwen is socially inferior to Esseilte), and are similar in physical appearance (although Branwen considers her appearance a "shadow" to Esseilte's "sunlight") supports Hyde's claim that the two are at least figuratively, twins.

Physically, Branwen and Esseilte are indeed almost twins. In fact, their appearance is so similar that Branwen takes Esseilte's place on the latter's wedding night. When Branwen fears that the deception will be revealed, Esseilte replies, "We are the same height and shape, and darkness will disguise differences in feature and coloring" (Paxson 196), and Branwen eventually admits that she and Esseilte do share "a family likeness" (196).

Paxson, however, does not intend for the differences in coloring between Branwen and Esseilte to be antagonistic,

as it is with Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar in *The Mists of Avalon*, but rather, complementary. Branwen says in the prologue,

The Queen gave us both to one nurse to be suckled, and together we played and quarreled through all the years of our growing — Esseilte and Branwen, like sunlight and shadow, so that if one of us were looked for, then the other was surely to be found (Paxson 2).

Later, as she sees her reflection in a pond, Branwen says,

For a moment I thought I saw Esseilte's face reflected there. Then I realized it was my own — thinner with eyes more gray than blue and hair the pale brown of a shadowed wheatfield, where hers was like the same field shining in the sun" (Paxson 5).

The relationship between Esseilte and Branwen parallels this physical sunlight/shadow dichotomy, respectively, as Branwen notes after her betrayal of Esseilte's affair with Drustan. When Esseilte confronts Branwen, the latter replies, "I was born to stand in your shadow — can you blame me for seeking just a little sun?" (Paxson 400). This sunlight/shadow dichotomy, however, basically concludes once the two arrive in Britain, when there is "the gradual darkening of Esseilte and the progressive brightening of Branwen" (Hyde 9), as Branwen seeks the sun and forges an identity separate from her sister.

In fact, a vital part of Paxson's development of the cultural similarities and differences between Branwen and Esseilte lies in the exploration of Branwen's heritage. As the child of an Irishman and a British woman, Branwen has cultural ties to both countries, whereas Esseilte has ties only to Ireland. Raised in Ireland, Branwen acknowledges her Irish heritage, but she also feels alienated by her lack of position in the Irish patriarchal society, a society that allows her father to simply "give" her as a servant to her own cousin. Similarly, Esseilte, although the daughter of the High King of Ireland, is also merely a possession of her father, to be "sold" as part of an alliance to King Marc'h of Kernow (Cornwall). Indeed, initially, both Branwen and Esseilte are merely possessions of their fathers, without power, position, or even separate identities. Like Gwenhwyfar in *The Mists of Avalon*, Esseilte obeys her father and marries the man her father chooses; yet, like Gwenhwyfar, she finds identity and power in a relationship outside her marriage. Branwen, on the other hand, like Morgaine, finds identity and power through her relationship with the goddess.

Immediately after Branwen arrives in Britain, she begins to feel a certain "recognition" for the land, which she believes is her "mother's blood" speaking to her. This recognition becomes even more apparent during the Great Marriage (in which Branwen, as mentioned earlier, takes Esseilte's place). In this ritual, not only do King Marc'h and his supposed "Queen," (actually Branwen), unite with each other but also with the land itself, to ensure the land's fertility. During this "sacred nuptial," Branwen draws upon the power of the Goddess of the Land, uniting herself

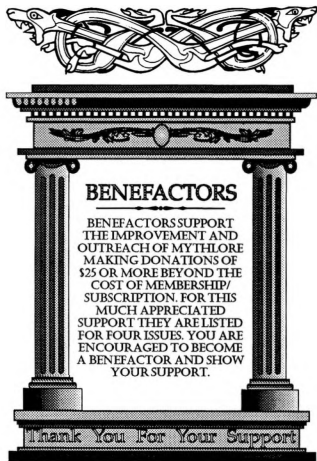
to Cornwall, as well as to King Marc'h. In contrast, Esseilte, who does not participate in the ceremony, never becomes united with the land or with the Goddess of the Land, and therefore feels alienated, much as Branwen once felt in Ireland. Unfortunately, however, Branwen's growing acceptance of her relationship with the "Mother" signals an inevitable spiritual crisis.

As Branwen becomes more and more involved with the land and people of Cornwall, including the fairies of the Hidden Realm, she increasingly feels alienated from God. Hyde explains this problem, "Central to the heart of the story is the apparent conflict between the Sidhe and the Christ: the vicars of Jesus versus the spirits of the Land" (40). Branwen, who serves as a link between the underground world of the Sidhe and the world of men, increasingly feels torn by this conflict. When she confronts the Christian hermit, Ogrin, with her experience among the fairies, she expects condemnation, but Ogrin realizes that "if they [the fairies] are in this world it is because God made them..." (Paxson 226). Later, after Branwen has betrayed Esseilte, and Esseilte has confronted her, Branwen again seeks solace with Ogrin. When she fears she cannot pray to God because she has forsaken him, Ogrin prompts her to pray instead to "the Mother of God" (Paxson 406). Thus, Branwen reaches the "Mother" (whether it is the Mother of the Land or the Mother of God) and obtains absolution for her sins. She also discovers, however, that she must set Esseilte free before she can find an identity outside that as Esseilte's servant/sister/twin (Paxson 408). As Esseilte lies dying, she begs Branwen to let her go, but it is only with the knowledge that Esseilte will be with the "Mother" that Branwen is finally able to set Esseilte free. Furthermore, Branwen can now acknowledge her own identity as "the White Raven of Logres... the Queen of the Hidden Realm... the Brigantia of Kernow" (Paxson 425).

Dark Lady/Pale Maiden and similar doubles — these are only two of the faces of sisterhood, of the woman-to-woman dyad, of the power of two. The sisters in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* and Diana Paxson's *The White Raven* both search for sisterhood, for identity, for an understanding of "Self" through an understanding of a sister double. Unfortunately, Gwenhwyfar and Morgaine catch only a glimpse of the true meaning of sisterhood, as they are never quite able to accept the other's differences and are therefore unable to form identities based upon their relationship as sisters. Branwen and Esseilte initially experience a form of temporary sisterhood, but they lose this sister bond once they reach Cornwall and begin to find identities outside their relationship as sisters. Although neither set of sisters actually reaches ideal sisterhood, each woman does gain the ability to establish an identity through an outside relationship — Branwen and Morgaine with the goddess and Esseilte and Gwenhwyfar with their male lovers — an ability caused at least partially through knowledge gained from a sisterhood relationship. 16

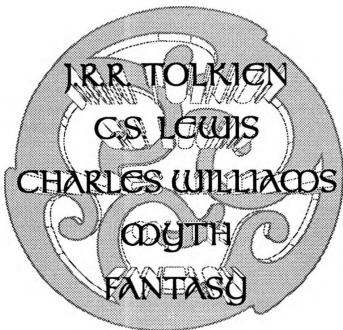
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## MYTHOPOEIC CORE READING LIST

MYTHLORE frequently publishes articles that presuppose the reader is already familiar with the works they discuss. This is natural, given the purpose of this journal. To be a general help, the following might be considered a core reading list, with the most well known and frequently discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given.

### J.R.R. Tolkien

*The Hobbit*, 1937; "Leaf by Niggle," 1945; "On Fairy-Stories," 1945; *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* 1954, *The Two Towers* 1954, *The Return of the King* 1955; *Smith of Wootton Major* 1967; *The Silmarillion* 1977.

### C.S. Lewis

*Out of the Silent Planet* 1938; *Perelandra* 1943; *That Hideous Strength* 1945; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* 1950; *Prince Caspian* 1951; *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* 1952; *The Silver Chair* 1953; *The Horse and His Boy* 1954; *The Magician's Nephew* 1955; *The Last Battle* 1956; *Till We Have Faces* 1956.

### Charles Williams

*War in Heaven* 1930; *Many Dimensions* 1931; *The Place of the Lion* 1931; *The Greater Trumps* 1932; *Shadow of Ecstasy* 1933; *Descent Into Hell* 1937; *All Hallow's Eve* 1945; *Taliessin through Logres* 1938, and *The Region of the Summer Stars* 1944