

EVA OPPERMANN

*Independent Scholar*

## **Avalon as a heterotopian place/space in the Arthurian tradition, and in Marion Zimmer Bradley's Avalon series**

### **ABSTRACT**

In this contribution, Foucault's principles of a heterotopian place are demonstrated to be applicable throughout the Arthurian tradition from its beginning onwards. The texts investigated are Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* and his *Vita Merlini*, the *Alliterative* and the *Stanzaic Morte Arthure*, Laȝamon's *Brut*, and Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Furthermore, they are shown to be especially prominent in the first three books of Marion Zimmer Bradley's Avalon series; *Mists*, *Forest House*, and *Lady*. Foucault's first and fifth principles are shown to be especially obvious throughout the tradition; Avalon has always been characterized as an otherworldly place of healing and protection and, as such, as one considerably well poldered, according to Clute, or thresholded, according to Schrackmann. With these principles elaborated in the genre of fantasy fiction, Bradley is shown to create (one of) the first prototypical heterotopian fantasy settings. Foucault's other principles, which are regarded as sufficient rather than necessary, are also demonstrated to be present in both the tradition and Bradley's work with selected examples. The essay also discusses how the influence of Avalon has even crossed the borders between fiction and reality by turning contemporary Glastonbury into a *Kraftort* for Neo Pagans.

**KEYWORDS:** heterotopian places, Arthurian tradition, Avalon tradition, polders, thresholds.

### **1. Introduction**

Nowadays, Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1982, hereafter *Mists*) has been recognized as worthy of scholarly interest whereas its sequels have not; only Hildebrand (2001: 93-94) briefly mentions them in order to exclude them from her survey. However, throughout her Avalon series, Bradley has constructed a prototypical heterotopian place in Fantasy by transferring the Isle of Avalon from this world into the realm of Faërie. She does so on the basis of material

present in the Arthurian myth from its early stages onwards, if not from its very origin in Celtic folklore. It is, therefore, my aim to demonstrate how Bradley uses motifs from her pretexts to construct the first prototypical heterotopian place in Fantasy literature and to draw some scholarly attention to the two sequels of *Mists*; *The Forest House* (1983, hereafter *Forest House*) and *The Lady of Avalon* (1997, hereafter *Lady*)<sup>1</sup> because they contain additional key scenes of Bradley's creation. Especially *Lady* is of interest because it contains the ritual which finally separates Avalon from the real world whereas *Forest House* deals with the original conflict that made the priestesses move there. *Mists*, chronologically the last in the series but the first to be published, reveals several of the heterotopian characteristics of the isle particularly well.

This textual investigation will be supported by several texts from the Arthurian tradition to show how the concept of Avalon as a heterotopian place has been present in the myth since its origin. I will concentrate on Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*; the first text which introduces Avalon to English literature (although written in Latin), and his *Vita Merlini* for its detailed description of the place. "Thanks to [Geoffrey], the ancient Britons, King Arthur, Merlin, and much else achieved such celebrity" (Dumville 2011: 116). Furthermore, Laȝamon's *Brut* is of central importance: "Written in English, at a time when the literary idiom was overwhelmingly French, Laȝamon's *Brut* is one of the first major pieces of literature to have come down to us in Middle English. [...] It is the earliest surviving work in the English language to deal with the figure of Arthur" (Le Saux 2001: 22). Pearsall (2003: 18) describes Laȝamon's *Brut* as Britain's one and only national epic. Wace, in his intermediate *Roman de Brut*, had added the motif of Arthur's doubted death; which Laȝamon expended (Barron – Weinberg 2001: xxxii-xxxiii). Malory's *Morte Darthur*, the last text from the tradition which I investigate, is the most elaborate text of the Arthurian Legend in England and also the most obvious pretext for Bradley's *Mists*. Green (1994: ix) also states that, "scarcely any writer in English has done more than condense the narrative of Sir Thomas Malory, cutting and simplifying according to the age of his audience, but always following him with more or less exactitude". Green's own version "in essentials [...] is almost entirely Malory" (1994: x) except for a few passages which are not relevant here. Even Bradley, whose new interpretation of the Arthurian legend is the far-

---

<sup>1</sup> There are even more books in the series but these were not only published during Bradley's lifetime but also for the greatest part formed by her whereas her later works were subject to her Sister-in-law Diane Paxson's editorship and, very likely, influence.

thet from the original so far, shows strong parallels with Malory's text, especially with Arthur's reception of Excalibur, Sir Gareth's story, and her presentation of Pellinore's dragon, who is not Malory's running gag but reappears several times. Furthermore, I will refer to other texts such as the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* where appropriate. I will, however, exclude texts which were written after Malory because there is no new development to the motif in question until Bradley's work but just variations of what Malory presents.

Oppermann (2019) has demonstrated how a whole fantastic realm has been proved to be a heterotopian place once it fulfils the criteria set by Foucault and, in correspondence with Foucault's fifth principle, those of Mendlesohn's liminal Fantasy and Clute's polders in the *Harry Potter* books of J. K. Rowling and Cassandra Clare's *The Mortal Instruments*. In this contribution, I will continue this line of discussion by using of the same criteria in order to prove Avalon's heterotopian character.

## 2. Avalon as a protective place

According to Foucault's first principle, heterotopian places are "des lieux privilégiés, ou sacrés, ou interdits, réservés aux individus qui se trouvent, par rapport à la société, et au milieu humain à l'intérieur duquel ils vivent, en état de crise" ["privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis"] (Foucault 1984: 756–757; Miskowiec 2015: 4). This is, in my opinion, the one necessary condition for a heterotopian place. Foucault (1984: 757; see Miskowiec 5) gives "psychiatric hospitals" as examples but I can see no reason for excluding other types of hospitals.

In the Arthurian tradition, Avalon is the place where Arthur is brought to be healed of the wounds he received in the fatal fight with Mordred at Camlan. As the last king of a dynasty, sorely wounded in battle and with his realm endangered by destruction Arthur is a person in a state of crisis indeed. "Arthur sets forth on his final journey [...] to an Otherworld Avalon, for healing or burial [...]. This we may call the 'Journey to Avalon', and it has persisted from earliest accounts" (Thompson 1996: 339). Geoffrey of Monmouth describes the scene as follows: "Sed et inclitus ille Rex Arturus letaliter uulneratus est, qui illinc ad sananda uulnera sua in insulam Auallonis euectus est" ["Arthur himself, our renowned king, was mortally wounded and was carried off to the Isle of Avalon so that his wounds might be attended to"] (*Historia* XI, 178, 81-2/252, Thorpe 1966: 261).

Geoffrey also establishes Avalon's reputation as a place of education and medicine in the *Vita Merlini*:

Insula pomorum que Fortunata vocatur  
 ex re nomen habet quia per se singula profert.  
 [...]  
 Illuc iura nouem geniali lege sorores  
 dant his qui ueriunt nostris ex partibus ad se,  
 quarum que prior est fit doctior arte medendi  
 exceditque suas forma presente sorores.  
 Morgan ei nomen didicit que quid utilitatis  
 gramina cuncta ferant ut languida corpora curet.  
 [...]  
 Hanc que mathematicam dicunt didicisse sorores  
 [...]  
 Illuc post bellum Camblani vulnere lesum  
 duximus Arcturum nos conducente Barintho,  
 equora cui fuerant et celi sydera nota.  
 [...]  
 Posse sibi [Morgana] dixit, si secum tempore longo  
 Esset et ipsius uellet et medicamine fungi.

(*Vita Merlini* 908-38)<sup>2</sup>

Loomis states that “[t]here is no attribute of Morgan’s better authenticated than her power of healing” (1991: 159). The scene reappears in both the *Alliterative* and the *Stanzaic Morte Arthure*:

And graithes to Glasthenbury the gate at the gainest;  
 Entres the Ile of Avalon and Arthur he lightes,  
 Merkes to a manor there, for might he no further;  
 A surgen of Salerne enserches his woundes;

(*Alliterative Morte* 4307-11)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The island of apples which men call “the Fortunate Isle” gets its name from the fact that it produces all things of itself; the fields there have no need of the ploughs of the farmers and all cultivation is lacking except what nature provides. [...] There nine sisters rule by a pleasing set of laws those who come to them from our country. She who is first of them is more skilled in the healing art, and excels her sisters in the beauty of her person. Morgan is her name, and she has learned what useful properties all the herbs contain, so that she can cure sick bodies. [...] And men say that she has taught mathematics to her sisters, [...] Thither after the battle of Camlan we took the wounded Arthur, guided by Barinthus to whom the waters and the stars of heaven were well known. At length [Morgan] said that health could be restored to him if he stayed with her for a long time and made use of her healing art. (Read a Classic translation 29-30). The text is copied from Egeler (2015:186). The printed version from Read a Classic is deteriorated with printing errors.

<sup>3</sup> And proceed to Glastonbury by the readiest route  
 Reach the Isle of Avalon, and Arthur alights

He led his lord unto that strand;  
A riche ship, with mast and ore,  
Full of ladies there they fand.

The ladies, that were fair and free,  
Courtaiisly the king gan they fonge;  
And one that brightest was of blee  
Weeped sore and handes wrang.  
“Broder,” she said, “wo is me!  
Fro leching hastou be too long;  
I wot, that gretly greveth me,  
For thy paines are full strong.”

[...]

The king spake with sorry soun:  
“I will wend a little stound  
Into the vale of Aveloun,  
A while to hele me of my wound.”

(*Stanzaic Morte* 3499-517)<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, as King states, “the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* had remained true to the ‘history’ written by Geoffrey of Monmouth and [...] provides [...] the king’s heroic death and transportation to the Isle of Avalon” (2011: 16). LaŽamon also states the idea that Arthur has survived in Avalon to await his messianic return:

Æfne þan worden þer com of se wenden  
Pwaes a sceort bau liðen      sceoen mid vðen,

---

And goes to a manor there – he could move no further.

A surgeon of Salerno searches his wounds. (translation: Krishna)

- <sup>4</sup> He led his lord unto the strand,  
where a rich ship with mast and oar  
full of ladies now did stand.  
The ladies who were fair and free  
To the King gave a welcome strong  
And one, the most lovely was she,  
Sorely wept and her hands she wrung.  
“Brother,” she said “ah woe is me!  
From leeching have thou been too long;  
And full greatly does that grieve me  
For thy injuries are grievous strong.”  
[...]  
The king with sorry sound spoke he  
“Now to Avalon am I bound  
And there for a while shall I be  
until I am healed of my wound.” (translation: Kahn)

And twa wimmen þerinne wunderliche idithe  
 And heo nomen Arður anan and aneouste hine uereden  
 And softe hinne adoun leiden and for ð gunnen liðen.  
 Bruttes ileueð Ʒete þat he bon on liue,  
 And wunnien in Aualun mid fairest alre aluen  
 And luckieð euerie Bruttes Ʒete whan Arður cumen liðe.

(*Brut* 14283-7, 90-3)<sup>5</sup>

Malory's version is perhaps the best known, not just because it was post-text-ed most often but also because it inspired John Carrick's famous pre-Raphaelite painting:

[...] And whan they were there, evyn faste by the banke hoved a lytyll barge wath many ladyes in hit; And amonge hem all was a quene, and all they had blak hoodis, and all they wepte anh shryked whan they swa Kynge Arthur.

[...] And than the quene seyde: "Ah, my dere brothir, why have ye taryed so longe frome me? Alas, thys wounde on youre hede hath caught overmuch coulede." And anone they rowed fromward the londe. [...]

"Comforte thyself", seyde the Kynge, "and do as well as thou mayste for in me ys no truste for to trustre in. For I {wyl} into the vate of *Avyloun* to hele me of my greivous wounde – and if thou here nevermore of me, pray for my soule." But ever the quene and ladyes wepte and shryked, that hit was a pyté to hyre.

(*Morte* 687-8, emphasis original)<sup>6</sup>

Malory later also discusses the chance of Arthur's survival in Avalon despite the discovery of his grave at Glastonbury in 1191. This survival becomes a central motif in the tale of "Olger the Dane". Here, Avalon is Olger's Promised Land at the end of

<sup>5</sup> And of this king's end will no Briton believe it except it be the last death, at the great doom, when our Lord judgeth all folk. Else we cannot deen of Arthur's death; for he himself said to his good Britons, south in Cornwall, where Walwin was slain, and himself was wounded wondrously much, that he would fare into Avalon, into the island, to Argante the fair, for she would with balm heal his wounds, and when he were all whole, he would come to them. (translation: Madden)

<sup>6</sup> And when they were there, even fast by the bank was a little barge with many ladies in it. And among them was a queen, and they all wore black hoods. And they all wept and cried when they saw King Arthur. [...] And then the queen said: "Brother, why have you stayed so long away from me? O dear, I fear the wound on your head has caught too much cold." And they rowed away from the land. [...] "Comfort yourself, said the king, and do as well for yourself as you may; for I will be no more trust for you to trust in. I will travel to the valley of Avalon, where my terrible wound will be healed – and if you do not hear from me again, pray for my soul." But still the ladies wept and cried so that it was a pity to hear. (my translation, E.O.).

his life: “[Morgan le Fay said:] ‘you shall never die, but after you have lived a life of glory on the earth you shall be mine, and I will bring you home to dwell with me for ever in Avalon, the land of Faery’” (“Olger” 348-9). Furthermore, Olger and Arthur, the latter now healed, “talked of knightly deeds and rode [...] in friendly justs against the forms of Sir Lancelot and Sir Tristrem” (“Olger” 362). Thus, Avalon is once more the Otherworld where the supposedly dead heroes are healed and survive.

Malory and Laȝamon hint at another way in which Avalon is a heterotopian place in the Arthurian tradition; it also is the home of persons who are able to work magic. Arthur’s sword Excalibur and, in Malory’s version, its valuable scabbard are said to have been forged there. Geoffrey mentions Arthur’s “Caliburno, gladio optimo et in insula Auallonis fabricato” [“peerless sword, called Caliburn, which was forged in the Isle of Avalon”] (*Historia* IX, 146, 111/199, Thorpe 1966: 217). Laȝamon adds a significant hint:

Calibeorne his sweord      he sweinde bi his side,  
Hit wes iworht in Aualun      *mid wiȝelefulle craften.*

*Brut* 10547-8, emphasis added<sup>7</sup>

Egeler comments:

[Laȝamons] Avalon ist ausdrücklich ein Land der Zauberkunst, wie sie in die Schöpfung des Schwertes Excalibur eingegangen ist.<sup>8</sup> Ferner ist es ein Land des Lebens und der Heilung, in dem tödliche Wunden geheilt werden können. Dabei ist der Verlauf der normalen menschlichen Zeit außer Kraft gesetzt, oder ist diese doch zumindest ohne Macht über die Einwohner Avalons.

(Egeler 2015: 199).<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, Geoffrey, too, associates the place with magic, at least, his Morgaine has extraordinary abilities:

<sup>7</sup> Caliburn, his sword, he hung by his side, it was wrought in Avalon, with magic craft. (Translation: Madden)

<sup>8</sup> Egeler here refers to Barron, xxxix. Barron links Arthur’s weapons to Celtic tradition. In the context of Avalon, it is worth mentioning that, on p. xxxviii, also Morgan, as the healer on Avalon, is connected to the same tradition. Ackroyd also emphasizes that the material was “originally Celtic in origin” (2002:113).

<sup>9</sup> [Laȝamon’s] Avalon explicitly is a land of magic as it is present in Excalibur’s creation. Furthermore, it is a land of life and healing, in which deadly wounds can be cured. The ordinary course of human time either is not working, or it is without influence on the isle’s inhabitants. (my translation, E.O.).

Ars quoque nota sibi qua scit mutare figuram  
 Et resecare nouis quasi Dedalus aera pennis  
 Cum vult est Bristi- Carnoti-siue Papie  
 Cum vult in uestris es aere labitur horis.

(*Vita Merlini* 915-18)

[She also knows an art by which to change her shape, and to cleave the air on new wings like Daedalus; when she wishes she is at Brest, Chartres, or Pavia, and when she will she slips down from the air onto your shores. (Read a Classic Translation 30)]

If we remember the Christian attitude towards magic at all times, this may well turn Avalon into a heterotopian place for those who work it. If this can be connected to the “Land of Faery” which is mentioned in “Olger” may be debatable, however, it is not impossible.

To summarize; traditional Avalon is a heterotopian place because it is a place of healing and survival for King Arthur after his last battle. He is in a state of crisis in correspondence to Foucault’s first principle. Loomis calls Avalon “a Pagan Elysium” (1991: 161). Frenzel concisely, if not entirely correctly, states:

[A]uch Avalon auf der “Insel der Gesegneten”, wohin der todwunde [...] Artus entrückt wird, ist deutlich eine Toteninsel, die unter der Herrschaft einer Fee, Morgan, die ihn heilt, steht, und von der er nach keltischer Tradition einst wiederkehren wird.

(Frenzel 1992: 385)

[Avalon, on the “blessed Island”, to which the dying Arthur is transported, is an Isle of the Dead, ruled by a Fairy, Morgan, who heals him, and the place from which, according to Celtic tradition, he will once return. (my translation, E.O.)]

I do not agree with Frenzel’s opinion that Avalon is an Isle of the Dead. The fertility of the isle and its function as a place of healing contradict this very notion. In addition, the fairies and magicians in Avalon live, so this place cannot be reduced to the place where the dead Arthur was found.

Furthermore (female) learning (the boarding school is another of Foucault’s examples, see Foucault 1984: 757) and the working of magic are characteristics of the isle, so that Foucault’s first proposition is entirely fulfilled in the Arthurian tradition.

In all her three books of Avalon, Bradley adopts all these elements. Her creation of Avalon as a place of protection goes beyond the tradition. In *Forest House*, the Goddess Cult and its priestesses have been in peril ever since the Roman invasion. The growing conflict with the Roman authorities forces the priestesses to move to the more reclusive Avalon before the Forest House falls victim to treason.



However, Avalon cannot remain a secure heterotopia either since the move there was merely a change of location, no matter how well the mists appear to hide the Tor from Roman eyes (see *Forest House* 425). The conflict with the Romans and the growing influence of fundamental Christianity remains virulent. Therefore, in *Lady*, the only way left for the priestesses is to remove Avalon from the ordinary world by the aid of the Fairy Queen:

“[...] I will tell you of a way in which the priestesses and Druids of Avalon might be saved. [...] A way to separate this Avalon in which you dwell from the rest of the human world. The Romans will only see the isle of Inis Witrin, where the Nazarenes have their church. But for you there will be a second Avalon, shifted just sufficiently so that its time will move along a different track neither wholly in Faerie nor in the human world. To mortal sight a mist will enfold it which can only be passed by those who have been trained to shape the power.”

(*Lady* 143-4)

Only after this move, Avalon has become a really safe heterotopian place.

In Bradley's version, Avalon maintains its role as a place of education for the priestesses. Their education covers both Latin and Greek, astronomy and, especially, herbal lore for healing (e.g. *Forest House* 171-8; *Mists* 157-8). In *Lady*, Avalon is turned into “the last precious refuge of their school” (*Mists* 131) when Caillean realizes that “they had skills that would win them a welcome in any British chieftain's hall. [...] Why not take the daughters of ambitious men and teach them for a time before they went out to marry?” (*Lady* 28). Thus, Bradley's Avalon can be compared to the two Foucaultian examples of the hospital and the boarding school: like in Eton or Rugby (or Hogwarts, see Oppermann's examples), the novices live separated from their families in order to concentrate on their education. Furthermore, it is the place where the old Celtic religion still exists, so that the positive influence of the Goddess remains present in Britain, if only hidden. In *Mists* (873-4), Avalon becomes a refuge also for Christians whose version of faith is not conform with that of the Church authorities. Bradley's Avalon, therefore, fulfils the needs of more than one group of individuals in a social crisis.

It is interesting, however, that Bradley deviates from the tradition in the most obvious case: Her Arthur dies on the shore of the lake before the transport could begin (*Mists* 1000). Nevertheless, Morgaine can tell the dying king:

You held this land in peace for many years, so that the Saxons did not destroy it. You held back the darkness for a whole generation, until they were civilized men, with learning and music and faith in God, who will fight to save something of the beauty

of the times that have past. If this land had fallen to the Saxons when Uther died, then would all that was beautiful and good have perished forever from Britain.

(*Mists* 999)

Thus, even though Arthur cannot survive, his mission has been accomplished. This may not be the healing promised by other versions of the Journey to Avalon Motif but it is support to the king in his final crisis as well.

### 3. Well-guarded thresholds

Apart from the one necessary condition, Foucault describes further characteristics of a heterotopian place, but these are, in my opinion, rather sufficient than necessary since they mostly result from the necessity of maintaining its protective function. Among them, as Oppermann (2019) demonstrates, Foucault's fifth principle is the most prominent in the context of fantasy because it has the highest potential for fantastic creativity:

Les hétérotopies supposent toujours un système d'ouverture et de fermeture qui, à la fois, les isole et les rend pénétrables. En général, on n'accède pas à un emplacement hétérotopique comme dans un moulin. Ou bien on y est contraint, c'est le cas de la caserne, le cas de la prison ou bien il faut se soumettre à des rites et à des purifications. On ne peut y entrer qu'avec une certaine permission et une fois qu'on a accompli un certain nombre de gestes.

(Foucault 1984: 760)

[Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place [sic!]<sup>10</sup>. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures.]

(Miskowiec 2015:7)

Obviously, this principle results from the necessity to protect those individuals who are in a crisis as described above. This also is the aspect where Clute's concept of polders comes in:

Literally a polder – the word derives from Old Dutch – is a tract of low-lying land reclaimed from a body of water and generally surrounded by dykes; to ensure its continued existence, these dykes must be maintained. [...] Here we use the word analogously: [...]

<sup>10</sup> Miskowiec here translates wrongly. Foucault speaks of a mill, not of a "public place".

A polder, in other words, is an *active* Microcosm, armed against the potential Wrongness of that which surrounds it, an anachronism *consciously* opposed to wrong time.

(Clute 1991: 772)

According to Clute, “enclaves become polders only when a liminal threshold must be passed to enter them, for only then are they defended” (1991: 772). The knowledge of how to enter them has also been classified as a “threshold” (“Schwelle”; Schrackmann 2012: 273). Clute further calls polders “pacific enclaves” (1991: 772), which is reminiscent of the protective character Foucault necessarily ascribes to heterotopias. It is, according to Oppermann (2019), this way that a fantasy world develops its heterotopian qualities: A magic threshold is stronger than any other device of hiding because neither Muggles (Rowling), Mundanes (Clare) or the Uninitiated (Bradley) will be able to cross it.

It is true that thresholds have been present in fantasy since it was established; Lewis Carroll’s rabbit hole or C. S. Lewis’ wardrobe are only two famous examples. However, there is one important difference between these traditional thresholds and those of the polders I discuss here; the latter’s active construction and maintenance: A place in the fantasy world is separated deliberately from its ordinary surrounding space to create a heterotopia – and ‘thresholded’/‘poldered’ accordingly.

I suppose that, in the tradition, the journey to Avalon motif is responsible for much of the impression that Avalon can only be reached by crossing a threshold; Avalon is an obvious Otherworld where healing beyond all earthly hope is possible. However, it is not obvious that Avalon is closed to anyone who wishes to go there. A threshold is not mentioned even if Avalon’s otherworldly character is apparent. Geoffrey of Monmouth speaks of the skills a seafarer must have in order to reach the isle. “Jlluc post bellum Camblani vulnere lesu[m]/duximus Arcurum nos conducente Barintho, /equora cui fuerant et celi sydera nota” [Thither after the battle of Camlan we took the wounded Arthur, guided by Barinthus to whom the waters and the stars of heaven were well known.](*Vita Merlini* 929-31, Read a Classic translation, 30). Furthermore, the fact that Magic was employed on Laȝamon’s Avalon hints at certain sanctions to the place, since in a Christian culture magic was certainly not performed in the open public. Therefore, a certain threshold can be assumed on the shores of Avalon, otherwise the magic there would be unprotected.

If the Barge of Avalon was magical or not is difficult to decide. Magic is not explicitly mentioned although the barge arrives at the place where Arthur lies

without being called for. In Malory's *Morte* Excalibur is thrown into the lake and received by the hand which swung it before the barge arrives (*Morte* 687-8), so this action may be interpreted as a signal for the barge to collect the fallen king. In this context one may wonder how much marvel was presupposed by the readers either from pretexts or from folk lore.<sup>11</sup>

Bradley is a master in creating not only an impressive ritual by which Avalon was moved from the human world between the mists, she also explicitly describes the act of 'poldering' Avalon (*Lady* 143-52). In the third part of *Lady* and in *Mists*, a priestess is consecrated when she is able to cross the threshold by her own knowledge, power and will (*Lady* 376-8; *Mists* 158). Those who are neither initiated nor in the company of one who is are unable to reach Avalon and will arrive at the shore of Glastonbury only. Thus, her liminal polder works as well as those of Oppermann's examples. Since Bradley's Avalon was created before Rowling's wizarding world and is, in fact, the earliest example of a heterotopian fantasy created according to these rules, I see it as the prototypical<sup>12</sup> heterotopian fantasy world. It is not unlikely that Rowling was aware of at least *Mists*, which was a bestselling novel in the eighties, if not of the whole series. Thus, Bradley highly elaborates the few hints she receives from the tradition about possible and probable thresholds around Avalon and the isle's traditional otherworldly character and so creates one of the first examples of, if not the, prototypical heterotopian fantasy world.

#### 4. Avalon's influence: Then and now

Foucault's sixth principle states that

[les hétérotopies] ont, par rapport à l'espace restant, une fonction. Celle-ci se déploie entre deux pôles extrêmes. Ou bien elles ont pour rôle de créer un espace d'illusion qui dénonce comme plus illusoire encore tout l'espace réel, tous les Emplacements à l'intérieur desquels la vie humaine est cloisonnée. [...] Ou bien, au contraire, créant un autre espace, un autre espace réel, aussi parfait, aussi méticuleux, aussi bien arrangé que le nôtre est désordonné, mal agencé et brouillon.

(Foucault 1984: 761)

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Lewis 1963: 21. Lewis's example of Satan in "popular belief", Origen, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* may also equal popular belief or pretextual influence about magic and its consequences in Avalon presupposed at several stages of the Arthurian tradition.

<sup>12</sup> For my definition of prototype, see Oppermann 2005: 613.

Heterotopias have a function in relation to all the space that remains. This function unfolds between two extreme poles. Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory [...]. Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.

(Miskoviec 2015: 8)

Apparently, traditional Avalon fulfils the second category which Foucault describes here. It is the place from which there comes at least some of the power that makes Arthur High King of Britain; the fact that Excalibur, Arthur's most prominent weapon, was forged in the island in the versions of Geoffrey and Laȝamon shows that whatever powers are at work in Avalon have considerable influence on the maintenance of his kingship and the resulting golden age. Malory does not mention that either Excalibur or its magical scabbard were made in Avalon (although his readers likely were aware of this tradition), neither is there any connection between the Lady of the Lake and the Isle (*Morte* 37-8). However, since the same arm which receives the sword before Arthur dies also hands it over to the king (see *Morte* 687), one might assume that the lake was the same in which Avalon is situated. In any case, magic is present with Excalibur too, otherwise the scabbard could not make Arthur invulnerable:

Then seyde Merlyon, "Whethir lyke ye bettir the swerde othir the scawberde?"

"I lyke bettir the swerde," seyde Arthure. "Ye ar the more unwyse for the scawberde ys worth ten of the swerde; for whyles ye have the scawberde uppon you, ye shall lose no blood, be ye never so sore wounded. Therefore kepe well the scawberde allweys with you."

(*Morte* 38).<sup>13</sup>

It can be assumed that readers familiar with the tradition also connected Excalibur and its scabbard to Avalon.

Furthermore, the Isle has traditionally been the place from which Arthur may one day return to restore his realm and to defend those invaders who destroyed Britain as it was. As an otherworldly paradise, it naturally has a more ordered

<sup>13</sup> Then said Merlin: "Which do you like better, the sword or the scabbard?" "I like the sword better," said Arthur. "then you are the more unwise for the scabbard is worth ten times the sword, since while you have it upon you you will never lose blood or will be badly wounded. Therefore make sure that you have the scabbard with you always. (my translation, E.O.). See also Tobin (1993: 149) for a comparison to the scabbard-scene in *Mists*.

appearance than the real world with its wars and sorrows, or even as the ordinary world in the Arthurian legend, by which I mean the sum of all stories about King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. In addition, the hope of Arthur's return from Avalon was also a power to support rebellion against the conquerors of their territory:

King Arthur occupied a messianic space in British popular mythology, his return being directed at foreign oppression, which chiefly meant the English. Already at the beginning of the twelfth century we see Francophone observers commenting on this aspect of British culture. In the late Middle Ages, the Bretons too found themselves in military conflict with the English and no doubt saw new reason to hope for Arthur's promised role as deliverer from the Saxons.

(Dumville 2011: 110)

The reason why Henry II had monks 'discover' the grave of Arthur and Guinevere in Glastonbury had, as Carlson claims, more than one reason:

The abbey in Glastonbury needed money for building works, the king of the English needed, or was in the effect able to use, an Arthurian dead body as part of a larger repressive response to indigenous British rejection of his imperial overlordship in Wales.

(Carlson 2011: 200).

In 1485, incidentally (or not) the year in which Malory's *Morte* was published, Henry VII also tried to connect to Arthur's succession; not only was his firstborn delivered in Wales, he also was christened Arthur.

In Bradley's series, Avalon is a space of tolerance and order where Christianity and the ancient Celtic religion exist side by side without enmity (*Mists* 873). Therefore, it is a safe haven for opponents of Bishop Patricius and especially Gwenhwyfar, who makes Arthur break his oath to Avalon.

In addition to its protective function, Bradley's Avalon is the original source of Arthur's power. The King is of Avalon's royal bloodline by his mother Igraine, and his kingship is confirmed by the ancient ritual of the great hunt (*Mists* 196-7, 200-6); this ritual is further meant to supply Arthur with an heir from the very same line (*Mists* 189), however, due to Morgaine's giving birth to Mordred in Lothian and fostering him with Morgause, this succession will not come into power.

In a scene carefully modelled on Malory's (with the difference only that in *Mists* Viviane tells Arthur of the scabbard's protective power, not the Merlin, see *Mists* 236), Bradley relates that the sword of Avalon belongs to the Druid regalia (*Mists* 254), so again, Avalon is a power behind the King. Bradley's Arthur swears

allegiance to Avalon and to tolerance, which is beyond any other version. Only Arthur's breaking his oath causes Avalon's loss of its original power of bestowing kingship to Christianity.

In *Lady* and at the beginning of *Mists*, when the schooling of young priestesses and maidens is still in full function, Avalon also trains the wise women who are responsible for much of the healing done in Britain. Caillean herself establishes this as one of the heterotopian functions of the Isle, and Morgaine displays her knowledge of herbal lore more than once in *Mists*. Thus, also the learning of Avalon has some influence on the rest of Britain.

The transportation of the dying Arthur and his survival in order to return one day like a messiah establishes Avalon's status as a heterotopian place in most versions of the story, from Geoffrey of Monmouth onwards. Geoffrey first describes Arthur's transport to the island in a barge, and this also is present in the *Stanzaic* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and in Malory's version. Avalon has been a place of hope for a mortally wounded hero. As shown above, Bradley deviates from this line in the tradition but she also shows influence of Avalon beyond the thresholds of her heterotopian Isle. Avalon may disappear in the mists, but the Goddess manages to remain in the world in the form of the Virgin Mary.

With the importance of Glastonbury as a centre of neo-Celtic movements, I am inclined to add to this result by ascribing to Avalon a heterotopian influence that crosses the limits of the Arthurian tradition and its fictional works into our own real world:

Der für Eingeweihte wohl wichtigste „Kraftort“ [...] liegt in der britischen Grafschaft Somerset im Südwesten Englands. Hier in Glastonbury versammelte sich angeblich das Who-is-Who der Sagenwelt: Josef von Arimathäa [...], um den Heiligen Gral zu vergraben [...]. König Artus fand [...] auf dem Friedhof des Klosters seine letzte Ruhestätte. Sofern es ihn gab. Oder seinen Mentor Merlin, den Urtyp des weisen Zaubers. [... Hier] soll [...] die mystische Insel Avalon liegen, [...]. Die Moore rund um die Stadt sollen sie einst wie ein Gewässer umschlossen haben. Ihr Wasser soll bis heute heilende Kraft haben. Deshalb ist es tausenden Heilssuchenden einen Besuch wert. (Behmer 2018: 60-2)<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The most important location of power for the initiated [...] is located in Somerset, in the southwest of England. Here, at Glastonbury, the whole Who-is-Who of the legends is said to have met: Joseph of Arimathia [...], for burying the Grail. King Arthur found [...] his last rest on the local cemetery. If he existed. Or his teacher Merlin; the prototype of the Wise Wizard. [...Here] the mythic Isle of Avalon is said to be [...]. The swamps around the city are said to have surrounded it like a body of water. They are said to have healing powers even today. Therefore, thousands of seekers for healing consider it worthwhile to go there. (my translation, E.O.).

Paxson ascribes an important part to Bradley by illustrating how her own pagan belief influenced her work: “With *Mists*, [Bradley] created from the Arthurian tradition a mythos for the emerging New Age” (1999: 110). Of course, it is not only Bradley’s success that makes Glastonbury a centre of neo-paganism but her influence may have supported this movement. Thus, the influence of the heterotopian Avalon reaches even beyond fiction into realism.

## 5. Further Heterotopian principles

Foucault’s three remaining principles are not as apparent and as characteristic for Avalon, but they are still perceptible.

Le deuxième principe [...] c’est que, au cours de son histoire, une société peut faire fonctionner d’une façon très différente une hétérotopie qui existe et qui n’a pas cessé d’exister; en effet, chaque hétérotopie a un fonctionnement précis et déterminé à l’intérieur de la société, et la même hétérotopie peut, selon la synchronie de la culture dans laquelle elle se trouve, avoir un fonctionnement ou un autre.

[The second principle [...] is that a society, as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another.]

(Foucault 1984: 757, Miskovic 5)

Avalon never is a central setting. Still, its functions as either the place of healing for Arthur or as the place where magical weapons are forged are apparent. These two heterotopian functions also demonstrate that the role of Avalon changes in one and the same book (e.g., LaŽamoon’s *Brut*) as well as in the whole tradition. Avalon’s different functions do not differ very much in the tradition; but in times of rebellion, it may become a place of hope for his expected return. Geoffrey also describes it as a place of learning but this does not have any great influence on the tradition, except for Bradley. Therefore, I will concentrate on her work for this part of my investigation.

With three novels, Bradley had a considerable amount of room to treat Avalon’s changing positions and functions. First, Avalon becomes a recluse dwelling place for the priestesses, so the pagan cult is moved away from the centre of society while Roman culture and Christianity take over its place. Second, Avalon’s function changes from a place of cult to a place of female schooling in *Lady*, and in *Mists*, it becomes the place where the British High King is brought to power during the rituals of the hunt and by receiving Excalibur (one should not forget



that the Dragon Island is one of the seven moved originally, see *Lady* 144-5). So, both the traditional and Bradley's Avalon fulfil Foucault's second principle.

The third principle is about different spaces all in one: "L'hétérotopie a le pouvoir de juxtaposer en un seul lieu réel plusieurs espaces, plusieurs emplacements qui sont en eux-mêmes incompatibles" [The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.] (Foucault 1984: 758, Miskoviec 6). With Inis Witrin and Avalon coinciding, this principle too is considered in both the tradition and especially in Bradley's Avalon series, in which the two islands are identical. The congruence of Glastonbury and Avalon was established at least with Arthur's cross on what was 'discovered' in 1191 at Glastonbury Abbey. However, even before this congruence has been manifested in single stories. How this congruence was achieved in Bradley's work becomes obvious by looking again at the words of the Fairy Queen in *Lady*:

"The Romans will only see the isle of Inis Witrin, where the Nazarenes have their church. But for you there will be a second Avalon, shifted just sufficiently so that its time will move along a different track neither wholly in Faerie nor in the human world."

(*Lady* 144)

The description of the effect the ritual has reveals that indeed two Avalons exist afterwards:

For a moment she thought that nothing had changed. Then she saw that the ringstones on the Tor were whole and straight, as if they had never been desecrated, and the slope beyond the holy well where the beehive huts of Father Josephus and his monks had stood was empty and green.

(*Lady* 151)

On the other side of the mists, there will now exist an isle with these same beehive huts and the ringstones broken and soon removed. In the near future, Glastonbury Abbey will be built there.

It is obvious that Foucault's third principle is realized easier by (fantasy) fiction than in reality, and it comes as no surprise that he chooses the stage as his example. Hugh Everett's theory of multiple universes may have a certain appeal and even be physically valid (see Vaas 2014: 51) but it cannot be justified by the average human. In fantasy, however, where thresholds and their crossings are common, disbelief is much more easily suspended. One may ask, however, if those neo-pagans who come looking for Avalon really find something at Glastonbury Tor and around the ruins of the Abbey.

According to Foucault's last remaining principle,

[l]es hétérotopies sont liées, le plus souvent, à des découpages du temps, c'est-à-dire qu'elles ouvrent sur ce qu'on pourrait appeler par pure symétrie, des hétérochronies; l'hétérotopie se met à fonctionner à plein lorsque les hommes se trouvent dans une sorte de rupture absolue avec leur temps traditionnel. (Foucault 759)

[Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time—which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time.

(Miskowiec 6.)

This, again, is not as obvious in the tradition as with Bradley. Nevertheless, one can argue that Avalon as the keep of Arthur until his messianic return begins to exist after the ending of the Arthurian golden age, so that there was indeed “an absolute break with traditional time”. Henry VII's claim on Arthur marked the very beginning of the Tudor dynasty after the Wars of the Roses. And even nowadays, Avalon has been claimed by the aforementioned neo-paganists only after the New Age had come, and humankind was ripe for their cults in a world of growing complicatedness.

Bradley's own heterotopian places (I include the Forest House here since its function resembles Avalon) show this change significantly: Seclusion in the Forest House became necessary only with the Roman invasion, which is an obvious break in time. So is the beginning supremacy of Christianity, which makes it necessary to move Avalon into the mists. The emergence of great priestesses into the ordinary world (Dierna, Viviane, Morgaine) often marks changes in the political situation of Bradley's Britain: the reign of Carausius, and the kingship of Ambrosius Aurelianus and Arthur respectively. With the reappearance of the Goddess behind the veil of the Virgin Mary, the heterotopian Sacred Isle has fulfilled its function.

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, Avalon fulfils all criteria of Foucault's heterotopia both in the tradition in general and in Bradley's work specifically. In the tradition, especially the Journey to Avalon Motif is responsible for the Isle's heterotopian character; Arthur the defeated and mortally wounded hero can rest here and recover in order to return and regain his lost kingdom. Foucault's other principles appear at least as hints as well. Bradley also uses many traditional elements. From these, she constructs the first heterotopian fantasy world in literary history and, therefore, a prototype on which many more recent examples can be measured while her story develops from what

Pullman calls “stark realism” (2015) in *Forest House* to a fully-fledged Fantasy in *Lady* and *Mists*. Even though the readers are not always witnesses to the creation of heterotopian polders, their necessity and construction are discussed at some point in the story. In the trilogy, all six principles Foucault has developed can be traced, some of them are elaborated because Bradley moves in fantasy and not, like Geoffrey, Laȝamon, and Malory, in a historical genre, no matter how this may be understood nowadays. It is one of those examples which are “predominantly concerned with a ‘vanished’ idealized rural world” (Meteling 2017: 67).

If Bradley was influenced by Foucault, however, cannot be proved. As likely, if not more so, is that she witnessed the situation of her own coven of the Aquarian Order of the Restoration (see Paxson 1999: 114) and wished to create for her own priestesses a place safe from Christian persecution. In her own report about the origin of *Mists*, Bradley is more interested in characters than in places. Nevertheless, the location at which she concentrates her numinous power has never lost, and will never lose, its meaning and importance for both neo-pagan pilgrims to a location of power nor for tourists who wish to engage with one of the greatest figures of myth; King Arthur.

## REFERENCES

### SOURCES

“Alliterative Morte Arthure.”

1994 *King Arthur's Death*. TEAMS Middle English Text Series.

Bradley, M. Z.

1982 *The Mists of Avalon*. London: Penguin.

1993 *The Forest House*. London: Penguin.

2007 *The Lady of Avalon*. New York: Roc.

Geoffrey of Monmouth

1966 *The History of the Kings of Britain*. London: Penguin.

2007 *The History of the Kings of Britain*. London: Boydell.

2011 *The Life of Merlin/Vita Merlini*. READACCLASSIC, ISBN: 9781611044614.

Barron, W. R. J. – Weinberg, S. C.

2001 *Laȝamon's Arthur*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Madden, Frederick

1999 *Layamon: The “Arthurian” Portion of the Brut*.

[http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/layamon\\_madden.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/layamon_madden.pdf), accessed 28 September 2022.

Malory, Thomas

2004 *Le Morte Darthur*. New York: Norton.

Cox, G. – Jones, E. (eds.)

1871 “Olger the Dane”. In *Arthurian Legends of the Middle Ages*. [Repr. 1995] Washington: Senate, 1995, 348-68.

“Stanzaic Morte Arthure”.

1994 *King Arthur's Death*. TEAMS Middle English Text Series.

## SPECIAL STUDIES

Ackroyd, P.

2002 *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination*. London: Anchor.

Barron, W. R. J. – S. C. Weinberg

2001 "Introduction". In: W. R. J. Barron – S. C. Weinberg (eds.) *LaŹamon's Arthur*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, x-lxxi.

Behmer, K.

2018 "Auf der Suche nach dem Sinn: Der moderne Kult um die Kelten," *G/Geschichte* 2, 60-3.

Bradley, M. Z.

1988 "My Search for Morgaine le Fay". In: M. Pors (ed.) *The Vitality of the Arthurian Legend*. Odense: Odense University Press, 105-9.

Carlson, D.

2011 "Anglo-Latin Literature in the Later Middle Ages". In: A. Galloway (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 195-216.

Clute, J.

1997 "Polder". In: J. Clute – J. Grant (eds.) *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. London: Orbit, 772.

Dumville, D. D.

2011 "'Celtic' versions of England". In Galloway, A. (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 107-28.

Egeler, M.

2015 *Avalon, 66 Nord*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Foucault, M.

1984 "Des espaces autres". *Dits et Ecrits*. Vol. 4. Paris: Gallimard, 752–62.

2015 "Of other Spaces. Utopias and Hererotopias" Translated by Jay Miskowiec, <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>, accessed 28 September 2022.

Frenzel, E.

1992 *Motive der Weltliteratur*. Stuttgart: Kröner.

Green, R. L.

1994 "Author's Note." In *King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table*. London: Puffin, ix-xii.

Hildebrand, K.

2001 *The Female Reader at the Round Table: Religion and Women in Three Contemporary Arthurian Texts*. Uppsala University Press.

Kahn, S.

1986 *The Stanzaic Morte: A Verse Translation of Le Morte Arthur*. Lanham: University of America Press.

King, P.

2011 *Medieval Literature 1300-1500*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Krishna, V.

1983 *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A New Verse Translation*. Lanham: University of America Press.

Le Saux, F.

2001 "LaŹamon's Brut". In: Barron, W. R. J. (ed) *The Arthur of the English*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 22-23.

- Lewis, C. S.  
1963 "The English Prose *Morte*". In Bennett, J. A. W. (ed) *Essays on Malory*. Oxford: Clarendon, 7-28.
- Loomis, R. S.  
1991 *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Meteling, A.  
2017 "Gothic London: On the Capital of Urban Fantasy in Neil Gaiman and Peter Ackroyd". *Brumal* 5 (2), 65-84, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/brumal.416>, accessed June 25, 2018.
- Oppermann, E.  
2005 "The Animal Novel: An Attempt at Sub-Genre Definition". In Mazur, Z. – Bela, T. (eds.). *Language and Identity: English and American Studies in the Age of Globalization*. Vol. 2. Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 611-27.  
2019 "The Heterotopian Qualities of the Secondary Worlds in Joanne K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* Books and Cassandra Clare's *The Mortal Instruments*". *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 29 (3), 402-421.
- Paxson, D. L.  
1999 "Marion Zimmer Bradley and *The Mists of Avalon*", *Arthuriana* 9, (1), 110-26.
- Pearsall, D.  
2003 *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Pullman, P.  
2015 "Interview." [www.achuka.co.uk/archive/interviews/ppint.php](http://www.achuka.co.uk/archive/interviews/ppint.php), accessed 20 May 2015.
- Schrackmann, P.  
2012 "Wissen als Schwelle". In Schmeink, L. – Müller, H. H. (eds.) *Fremde Welten*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 271–85.
- Thompson, R. H.  
1996 "The First and Last Love." In Th. S. Fenster (ed.) *Arthurian Women. A Casebook*. New York – London: Garland, 331-44.
- Tobin, L. A.  
1993 "Why Change the Arthur Story? Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*", *Extrapolation* 34 (2), 147-57.
- Vaas, R.  
2014 "Parallelwelten/Multiversen", *Bild der Wissenschaft* 1, 36-53.

EVA OPPERMANN

Independent Scholar

Dr.Eva.Oppermann@web.de

ORCID code: 0000-0002-0017-4380