Troublesome Teleri: Contemporary Feminist Utopianism in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Lady of Avalon*

JAN SHAW

Lady of Avalon by Marion Zimmer Bradley is part of a trilogy[1] that takes the idea of Avalon from medieval Arthurian literature and reworks it to create an alternative social, cultural and religious community. The trilogy tracks the development of the mythical Avalon from its establishment in *The Forests of Avalon*, through its development into a significant social and political force in *Lady of Avalon*, to its final rise and fall during the reign of King Arthur in *The Mists of Avalon*. This trilogy is, *prima facie*, a feminist project, taking the marginalised mysterious feminine otherworld and reclaiming it, developing it as a feminine narratological space that has been elided by mainstream masculine literatures.

While *Lady of Avalon* is the middle book in the fictional chronology of the trilogy, it was the last to be produced. The first volume was *The Mists of Avalon*, a hugely commercially successful retelling of the Arthurian story. As an Arthurian text this work has received some critical attention.[2] Bradley's

---

[1] Marion Zimmer Bradley, *Lady of Avalon* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1997); Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Forests of Avalon* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1993); Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1983). All quotations will be from these editions.

[2] For a general positive reception see Lee Ann Tobin, 'Why Change the Arthur Story? Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*', *Extrapolation*, 34:2 (1993), 147-57, and Diana L. Paxson, 'Marion Zimmer Bradley and *The Mists of Avalon*', *Arthuriana*, 9:1 (1999), 110-126. For discussion of Bradley's conception of the Goddess see Carrol L. Fry, '"What God Doth the Wizard Pray To": Neo-Pagan Witchcraft and Fantasy Fiction', *Extrapolation,* 31:4 (1990) 333-346, and Victoria

two prequels to *The Mists of Avalon*, while less successful in terms of sales, are arguably more successful as feminist projects. Surprisingly, however, *The Forests of Avalon* and *Lady of Avalon* have received no critical attention.

In *The Forests of Avalon*, Avalon is established as an escape from the oppressions of patriarchy; it is a community of self-sufficient women who are not beholden to men for their livelihood or well-being, and thus they explicitly refuse the status of marketable objects in the patriarchal economy of exchange. *Lady of Avalon* is a novel in three parts. Set in the years 96-118 A.D., Part I tells of the moving of Avalon into the mists to protect it against both the Roman legions and the violence of the extremist Christian priests. The self-proclaimed independence and autonomy of *The Forests of Avalon* is not enough to free women from the physical violence legitimated by a patriarchal order, so magic is invoked to separate Avalon from the world. In Part II of *Lady of Avalon* (285-293 A.D.), Avalon has been established in the world as a centre of learning and privileged knowledge for some 160 years. From this position Dierna, the High Priestess, attempts to engage with, and wield influence in, the world of men. To participate in this economy, Dierna makes a strategic decision. In order to position herself as an actor in the political economy, she must necessarily position other women as objects of exchange within this economy. At this moment the utopic ideal of Avalon turns into a dystopic regime, where personal identity is subsumed within the 'universal good', a good determined by those with access to mysterious and privileged knowledge and power. Part III (440-452 A.D.) tells of the coming of age of Viviane, who is to become the most powerful and awe-inspiring High Priestess of Avalon in the chronologically later text, *The Mists of Avalon*.

Sharpe, 'The Goddess Restored', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 9:1 (1998), 36-45. For a positive reception of lesbian politics see Marilyn R Farwell, 'Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Subtexts: Toward a Theory of Lesbian Narrative Space in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*' in *Arthurian Women: A Casebook,* ed. and intro. Thelma S Fenster (New York, NY: Garland, 1996) pp. 319-30. For a negative strain see particularly Karin E. C. Fuog, 'Imprisoned in the Phallic Oak: Marion Zimmer Bradley and Merlin's Seductress', *Quondam et Futurus: A Journal of Arthurian Interpretations*, 1:1 (1991) p. 73-88, and James Noble, 'Feminism, Homosexuality, and Homophobia in *The Mists of Avalon*', in *Culture and the King: The Social Implications of the Arthurian Legend,* ed. & introd. Martin B. Shichtman, James P. Carley (Albany: State U of New York P, 1994) pp. 288-96.

This essay explores the development of the character Teleri in Part II of the text. Teleri becomes a pawn in Dierna's political game, demonstrating that one person's utopia can easily become another's dystopia. On the face of it this tale is dystopic, with Teleri's situation seemingly going from bad to worse as the narrative continues. It does, however, have several 'glimpses' of processes which qualify and invert the dystopian condition. The tale of Teleri could, therefore, be interpreted as a utopian dystopia along the lines described by Dunja M. Mohr, who argues that 'utopian dystopias' are dystopias with a utopian subtext: 'the utopian subtext is interwoven as a continuous narrative strand within the dystopian text'.[3] While the tale of Teleri might indeed be a utopian dystopia, it introduces a narrative thread sufficiently subversive to undermine the paradigms of established order that permeate the larger text, destabilising many of the apparent certainties found in the main narrative. The tale of Teleri can therefore be approached as an example of what Lucy Sargisson has identified as feminist utopianism. Finally, this paper concludes that utopianism in *Lady of Avalon* is not to be found in Avalon itself, but rather in the continual resistance and critical reflection that was the impetus for the foundation of that alternative society.

Contemporary feminist Utopianism

In her significant and influential work *Contemporary feminist Utopianism,*[4] Sargisson theorises utopianism as an approach to texts. Rather than considering the notion of utopianism as associated with a model or 'blueprint' of an ideal society, as an artifact or fixed object, Sargisson is more concerned with utopianism as a process of reading. For Sargisson, utopianism in texts is evidenced by the spaces they create that allow certain kinds of reading to take place.

Sargisson takes the conventional idea of the blueprint model as her point of departure in considering feminist utopianism. Transgressing the categorical

---

[3] Dunja M. Mohr, *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias* (Jefferson, NC, USA: McFarland, 2005).

[4] Lucy Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

boundaries of Krishan Kumar's five types of ideal society[5] and drawing on Thomas More's *Utopia* for support, Sargisson argues that one of the functions of traditional utopias has been social debate and critique. Such critiques are necessarily subversive as they not only operate internally to the text, but also turn a critical eye to the 'political present'.[6] Drawing particularly on More's *Utopia*, Sargisson argues that this subversion extends to a critique of system and order, of the 'perfect society'. Contrary to conventional belief, therefore, Sargisson presents utopianism as fundamentally subversive of the blueprint model. In her analysis of a number of feminist texts from the late twentieth century, Sargisson finds that one of the main functions of feminist utopianism is to undercut the notion of perfection, of the one truth, of the ideal society. The disruption of the blueprint model, overlaid with the notion of social and political critique, is the focus of Sargisson's utopian approach.

The notion of the perfect society presents a number of problems for feminism. It assumes the possibility of perfection, the one ideal. To strive for perfection is also to strive for the one truth, the one answer. Sargisson problematises this on a number of levels. On a most basic level, 'To strive for perfection is to strive for death' (37). Perfection means there is nowhere else to go. Perfection necessarily means the end of process, which is stasis. The most perfect end, the most perfect closure, is death.

Sargisson further critiques this view of utopia as having a 'universalising function' (51). The 'perfect society' depicted will be, necessarily, equally perfect for everyone. This is based upon the ideal generic 'human'. Sargisson notes, however, that traditional, mainstream utopian literature and theory grants this universal 'human' an 'abundance of qualities commonly associated with masculinity. The ideal utopian subject, for instance, conquers passion by the exercise of reason, and his mind conquers his body.' (51). Indeed, feminist

---

[5] In *Utopianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) Kumar posits that utopia is 'distinct and different' (p. 17) from the other numerous possibilities of ideal society, of which he delineates four major alternatives: the 'golden age', arcadia or pastoral (p. 3); the Land of Cockayne (after the medieval poem) which is a land of 'extravagance, exuberance and excess' (p. 6); the millenium or 'once and future Paradise' based largely upon a Christian model (p. 6); and the ideal city or 'perfect commonwealth', founded in the tradition of classical democracy (p. 12). Sargisson critiques this view as content driven.

[6] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism,* p.28.

critique has long argued that the figure of the universal 'human' is in fact masculine. From a feminist perspective, the ideological construct human/non-human is underpinned by that of man/woman and masculine/feminine which further manifests itself as reason/passion and mind/body. The traditional view of utopia is, therefore, fundamentally established upon the notion of the binary dichotomy; it sets up a binarism of truth/non-truth.

The fundamental flaw of the binary dichotomy is that while it appears to delineate two separate entities—one and another—it in fact takes the form one/not one. The binary dichotomy describes a unity divided into two parts that are mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive. Together they make up the whole universe of possibility for that particular notion. Helene Cixous has famously demonstrated that the two parts are in a hierarchical relation, with one having a positive value, and the other a negative value. In other words, one is presence and the other is absence of positive value.[7] For Luce Irigaray, the other can be understood as that which is cast off by the one, that which is rejected by the one: the other is made up of 'scraps, uncollected debris'.[8] The irony is, of course, that the one is in fact reliant upon the other for its definition, as the relation between the one and the other is based purely upon differentiation. The other supports the one by defining what the one is not. By being what he is not, the other operates to reinforce—to reflect back—to the one an image sanitised of all impurities and imperfections that are safely, carefully contained within the other. Such dependency is of course strategically and systemically denied.

Sargisson suggests that contemporary feminist utopianism proposes another kind of otherness. Rather than the binary dichotomy which is A/not A, feminist theory looks to the A/B of difference, where A and B are not defined in terms of one another, and are therefore not in a binary relation. This means that the formulation could be A/B/C or any number of possibilities, quite simply because their relation is not mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive. This is closely linked to the 'double gesture' Derrida associates with the process of deconstruction:

---

[7] Helene Cixous, 'From "Sorties"', *New French Feminisms,* eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton UK: Harvester Press, 1981).

[8] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 30.

> Deconstruction cannot limit itself, or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture ... practice an *overturning* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to *intervene* in the field of oppositions it criticizes. [9]

A reversal of the binary dichotomy is only the first step. To effect any lasting change, the paradigm of mutually exclusive and exhaustive binaries must be undercut and displaced. How is this to be done? Irigaray makes a number of suggestions:

> Turn everything upside down, inside out, back to front. *Rack it with radical convulsions* ... Insist also and deliberately upon those *blanks* in discourse which recall the places of her exclusion ... Reinscribe them hither and thither as *divergencies*, otherwise and elsewhere than they are expected, in *ellipses* and *eclipses* that deconstruct the logical grid ... *Overthrow syntax* by suspending its eternally teleological order, by snipping the wires, cutting the current ... Make it impossible for a while to predict whence, whither, when, how, why[10]

> In other words, the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the subject or the object, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal.[11]

This paper argues that the Tale of Teleri goes some way to effecting this destabilisation. The tale begins with Teleri trying to take control of binary constructions by simply reversing the binary construct and assuming the

---

[9] Jacques Derrida, *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* ed. Peggy Kamuf (Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 108.

[10] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York; Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 142.

[11] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 78.

position of subject, but she cannot throw off the relentless gendering implicit in binary operations. In the end Teleri finds that the only escape is to cast off the binary paradigm and embrace the disruption and risk associated with stepping outside the prescribed order. Teleri's actions become deeply subversive of the dominant order, and wreak havoc upon it. On the level of characterisation, Teleri comes to learn that freedom is release from ideological constraint. On the level of the wider narrative, the tale represents the potential of the feminine when let loose on structures of logocentric order, of the feminine as subversion of such an order.

Entrapment and the setting up of binaries

Teleri recognises early in her life that the world operates according an underlying paradigm of binarisms, and that the pairs thus described are not of equal value. She does not want to be in the position of object, of other, into which these binarisms would cast her. Instead, she constructs her own binary of freedom/entrapment, which is grounded in a double movement of both 'going beyond' and freedom from men. Teleri imagines Avalon as a magical place, beyond the constraining walls of her father's town, a utopia of feminine agency and freedom. In such a place, Teleri seems to assume, she would automatically take a leadership role, thus assuming a subject position. Inevitably, however, Avalon is no utopia. While women are free from men in Avalon, it is another hierarchical society that functions within a paradigm of binary order, an order in which Teleri finds herself on the wrong side of the binary divide.

Teleri is the daughter of Eiddin Mynoc, a powerful and wealthy regional prince of the Britons. She has been educated alongside her brothers, speaking with her father 'in the cultivated Latin which the Prince had required all his children to learn'.[12] Well-educated and perceptive, Teleri recognises all around her the binaries that would operate to contain her life. However safe and protected it might be, Teleri does not identify with such a life, likening it to the luxurious house in which she lives: 'protected and nurtured, but turned inward' (151). Even the rain in the atrium is tamed, it simply falls, adding to

---

[12] Marion Zimmer Bradley, *Lady of Avalon* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1998) p. 150.

the beauty of the 'potted' flowers, cultivated, encircled, entrapped. No matter how beautiful it might be, such a life is a 'cage' (210, 288), a trap from which there is no escape, a wife is 'a slave', marriage is 'bondage' (199). Within this world of women the only movement is an endless cycle of repetition, of sameness: 'The women in my father's hall could talk of nothing but men and babies' (168). Teleri wants nothing to do with either. For her, such a life of enclosure and repetition is no life.

Teleri dreams instead of movement, of journeys, of going beyond:

> But there was a ladder that led to the rooftop. ... *Hitching* up her skirts, Teleri *climbed* it, *opened* the trapdoor, and *turned* to face the wind. Rain *stung* her cheeks; in a few moments her hair was wet and water was *running* down her neck to *soak* her gown. She did not care. Her father's walls gleamed pale through the rain, but above them she could see the grey blur of the hills.
> 'Soon I will *see what lies beyond* you,' she whispered. 'And then I will be free!' (151, my emphasis).

Teleri has found a trapdoor out of her stifling life and gone beyond it into the cold and rain. She is capable of her own movement: 'hitching', 'climbed', 'opened', 'turned'; and unlike in the atrium, the rain on the rooftop is unconstrained and invigorating: 'stung', 'running', 'soak'. For Teleri freedom is having no borders, seeing 'what lies beyond'.

Teleri thus constructs a definition of freedom that is quite literally, geographically, going beyond, and that necessarily precludes marriage. She identifies with Avalon, a place she has only heard about in stories, and imagines that it will deliver her the freedom she desires:

> the priestesses did not marry. If they wished they took lovers in the holy rites and bore children, but they answered to no man. The priestesses of Avalon had powerful magic. (151)

Thus Teleri establishes, within her own understanding of the world, an underlying dichotomy of freedom/entrapment based upon an alignment of freedom with that which lies beyond, and with personal and especially sexual agency, while entrapment is aligned with a range of notions that revolve

around marriage: obedience to husband, bearing children, and the domestic realm as enclosure. For Teleri Avalon represents this freedom, she constructs it in her mind as a utopia of the blueprint type, with a strict social order based upon a reversal of existing social codes, elevating women to subjecthood through the casting out of men.

So, while Teleri lives in a world that would position her as the other in the self/other relation, and so relentlessly manoeuvre her into marriage and domesticity, there is an alternative in Avalon. Teleri is able to contemplate Avalon because her father recognises her particularity and wishes to accommodate her uniqueness. Teleri knows her father's behaviour is 'indulgent' (150), as 'most girls her age had already been married off without anyone's considering their wishes at all' (151). He allows Teleri to choose, so Teleri goes to Avalon.

Teleri is disappointed. Avalon does not deliver the freedom she had come to expect.

> To sit spinning with the other women was not the life of freedom she had imagined when she begged her father to let her come to Avalon. *Will I yearn always for a happiness that is beyond my grasp?* She wondered then. *Or will I learn in time to live contentedly within the mists that wall us round?* (171)

The domesticity of life on Avalon is an unpleasant surprise. While Teleri admits that the conversation 'has some meaning' (168), she still wonders about the beyond where happiness resides. The mists also have a slightly sinister quality. They are actively encircling and entrapping. Unlike the walls of Teleri's father's house that can be climbed, stood upon, and seen beyond, the mists are intangible and thus cannot be grappled with or surmounted. The mists are quite literally impassable without a magic spell. For Teleri Avalon is a strange and unexpected mixture. While it offers freedom from men, still there are domestic needs to be attended to and all this comes with the somewhat troubling enclosure of the mists, which are an impenetrable barrier in both directions.

Teleri's experience undercuts her notion of Avalon as a utopia of feminine freedom and agency, and also challenges her understanding of

freedom and entrapment as clear-cut binarised terms. Avalon nevertheless reinforces the binary as an idealised paradigm of order. Avalon presents its own range of hierarchical binaries, including consecrated/ unconsecrated priestess and privileged/unprivileged knowledge. Somewhat paradoxically, consecrated priestesses, who are sworn to Avalon for life, are the only ones who have the privileged knowledge that enables them to move through the mists at will, thus, only those who are bound are free. As an unconsecrated priestess Teleri finds herself in a domestic space more securely enclosed than that from which she has apparently escaped. The problem for Teleri on Avalon is that she finds herself enmeshed in a new range of binary constructs, but she is on the wrong side of the divide. Her subjecthood has been elided and she has no agency. In Avalon, as a trainee priestess, she is only a subject in waiting with the promise of eventual transformation into a subject operating as the main containment mechanism.

Instead of becoming a priestess, however, at what seems like the eleventh hour Dierna claims that to serve the goddess Teleri must marry Carausius. Teleri objects to the marriage in the strongest terms, but her objections are ignored as personal. Her wishes/fears/desires are treated as though they are nothing. She must bow to the universal good. Thus the particularity or uniqueness of the self, that which was celebrated by her father and brought her to Avalon, is pushed aside and deemed to be of no importance. Dierna only attends to the universal, which is, she argues, the defence of Britannia.

Instead of allowing Teleri her uniqueness, Dierna inscribes an identity upon her. Dierna identifies Teleri to Carausius as 'the daughter of Eiddin Mynoc. Her birth is high enough so that it will be considered a worthy alliance, and she is beautiful' (196). Seeking to arrange a marriage, Dierna identifies Teleri as having desirable marketable qualities within this economy: she has 'high birth' and is 'beautiful'. Dierna continues by granting to Teleri herself this identity, strategically adding the characteristic of 'most gifted': 'you are the fairest and most gifted of our maidens yet unsworn, and you are of high birth' (198). Such characteristics are generalities. They might identify Teleri in this instance, but she is interchangeable with any other person who satisfies these criteria. They do not tell us *who* Teleri is, they tell us *what* she is. As Adriana Cavarero explains:

> While claiming to be valid for every*one* that is human—who is

> rational and thinking, as the experts would say—the subject lets itself be seduced by a universality that makes it into an abstract substance. The fragility of each *one* is thus inevitably sacrificed to the philosophical glories of the One.[13]

There are two points to note here. First, *who* we are is personal and individual. Being thus insignificant in the wider frame, *who* we are is easily dismissed, as Dierna does above with Teleri. However, there is the second point. The universal, as abstract and philosophical, nevertheless addresses the One who is constructed within its schema. So, if one aligns oneself with the One, if one can tap into this vein and make oneself recognisable as a One, then one can accede to the status of a universal subject. This means that, while *who* we are might go unrecognised, *what* we are, if it is an identity that has status and meaning in the universal, might perhaps be used as a mechanism to accrue benefits. The *who* and the *what*, by this calculation, are not mutually exclusive, depending of course upon *who* you happen to be. The universal good is therefore not really universal at all.

Necessarily, the costs and benefits within such a system are unevenly distributed. As an object of exchange, Teleri cannot be an actor in the economy of exchange, she can only be acted upon. She can accrue no benefit to herself. Nevertheless, in this economy Teleri has significant exchange value, as carefully itemised by Dierna. She also has use value. As Carausius' wife Teleri is a service provider on a number of levels. Publicly, she provides political advantage to Carausius, connecting him simultaneously with the royal house of the Durotriges and with Avalon. However, more importantly for Carausius and Dierna, Teleri uses her powers to convey Dierna's sightings to Carausius, and thus expedites his military successes against the Saxon raiders. On the back of this marriage Carausius goes from strength to strength, relishing in the glory: 'when the men of the fleet raised him on their shields to acclaim him Emperor, he lifted his arms, accepting their love, and their land' (240). Dierna too has much to gain from the alliance between Carausius and Avalon. As she rides off in the carriage with Teleri to the wedding, Dierna muses upon the tales that will be told of her achievements in the histories of Avalon, and realises that they 'lay in this journey' (201-2). In other words,

---

[13] Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and selfhood*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 38.

Dierna's historical legacy is dependent upon the alliance she is forging with Carausius, and Teleri is simply the means for her to achieve this end. For Teleri there is nothing of herself, nothing for herself.

So it can be seen that the dichotomies Dierna constructs and enforces upon Teleri—the particular/universal that she maps onto who/what we are, and the subject/object and self/other that underpin them—are mutually exclusive only as Dierna strategically applies them to Teleri. For Dierna herself, however, it is another matter. Through the process of identifying Teleri, of naming her, Dierna both claims Teleri as her own and also asserts herself as a subject of knowledge.

Dierna is operating within an economy that has been aligned by Derrida with the 'Drive of the Proper'; for Derrida, the proper is linked with propriety, property, appropriation, the proper place and the proper name.[14] The proper offers mastery to the subject: 'it is the infinite mastery that the agency of Being (and of the) proper seems to assure it'.[15] For Derrida naming is an act of appropriation, as Sargisson explains:

> Naming, for Derrida, is claiming. Naming, asking and deciding 'What is it?', is central to philosophical discourses and relies upon the possibility of attaining the truth. It assumes the (possible) presence of truth, hence logocentrism.[16]

Naming (and claiming) assumes an actor, a namer and claimer. Derrida links naming with the actions of God, who 'owns' the power of naming. In this context, the giving of a name is an act of positioning or organising, of labelling, of defining. The giving of a name is, in fact, an act of appropriation, a claiming of possession by the namer. Sargisson links this kind of actor with the author of the blueprint in popular conceptions of utopianism, as the namer of the perfect ideal. The gift of the blueprint is an act of appropriation, a claim of possession, an inscription of the ideal. The act of naming, by this account, is not something that just happens, it is

---

[14] *Derrida Reader*, p. 123. Translator Barbara Johnson notes: 'In French, "propre" can mean both "proper" and "own", *Derrida Reader*, p. 150 n. 4.

[15] *Derrida Reader*, p. 158.

[16] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism,* p. 89.

something that must be enacted by someone. The act of naming is therefore not innocent.

Dierna is such an actor. Through the act of naming, Dierna has the capacity to create, or rather remake, Teleri into that which suits Dierna's scheme. Further, this act reduces Teleri to an object of possession of Dierna. Teleri is now able to be traded in the economy of the proper by Dierna for Dierna's own ends. Similarly, Dierna has the capacity to recreate herself as she sees fit. This means that Dierna is a subject of knowledge, and as such she can align herself with the universal; she can rework *who* she is with *what* she is (or rather, with what she should be, or what she would like to be). Moreover, Dierna's motivations are not innocent, but driven by her desire to author herself into the annals of Avalonian history. For Dierna, then, the particular and the universal, the *who* and the *what*, are inextricably interwoven. Thus the lie of the universal/particular and the what/who as mutually exclusive binaries is revealed. What really matters is whether or not one is a subject of knowledge, in other words, whether one has access to definitional discourses, and is able to rework them as required.

Thus it can be seen that Teleri's construct of utopian freedom as 'going beyond' and the absence of men is fundamentally flawed. Teleri recognises binary constructs as the underlying paradigmatic schema with gender as the main organising principle. Teleri resists the position in which this schema would place her as a woman and tries to negotiate out of this position by choosing the separatist feminine world of Avalon. Teleri finds, however, that Avalon is not a utopian world that will free her from subjection. Rather, she finds that Avalon is founded upon the same paradigms of order as the outside world. While Avalon's binarisms are not overtly underpinned by gender, they nevertheless necessarily repeat the relation of subjection between the one and the other. Changing the occupant of one position or the other does not reconfigure the structures of power. Further, through the acceptance of the apparent ubiquity of the binary structure, Teleri unwittingly participates in her own subjection. Moreover, on Avalon the hope of subjecthood is held out (to all) as a reward (to the few) to encourage acceptance of the paradigm of order. In this way an ideology is developed within which the acceptance of subjection is understood as a necessary condition in the process of eventual self-realisation. Existing structures of power are therefore both reinforced by and embedded within ideological operations.

Avalon is no utopia. Indeed there is no particular place in the text that can be elevated to utopian status. Rather, Sargisson's utopianism can be found in another kind of space. It is a space that functions at both the level of character and the level of narrative. It is a space brought into being through the thought processes and finally the actions of Teleri, and it is also a space that destabilises the narrative certainty of the wider text. To find such a space it is necessary to look elsewhere and otherwise.

Estrangement and the breaking down of binaries

One way in which a utopian space can manifest itself is in the form of a voice or a character who moves from one world to another within the text. Sargisson identifies such a visitor 'who is temporarily estranged from her/his own environment' as a traditional utopian convention.[17] Such a visitor can bring a new critical distance to the perception of their own world:

> Estrangement, the mechanism of the utopian text whereby it focuses on the given situation but in a displaced manner to create a fresh view, is identified as central to the subversive quality of the genre.[18]

Further, the experience of moving 'in and out of different cultures' can effect a change in 'identity and behaviour' in the visitor, even to the extent that the visitor shifts from being one person to another in different contexts.[19] Such accommodations require adjustments which necessarily destabilise the original position of the visitor to some degree. This process can create a visitor who can sustain both accommodation and critical distance simultaneously:

> The effect of such travelling on visitors to utopia is usually that of

---

[17] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism,* p. 179.

[18] Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 33 cited in Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 180.

[19] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 179. See also Maria Lugones, 'Playfulness, "World"-Travelling, and Loving Perception' in *Hypatia*, 2:2, (1987), 3-19.

an enhanced awareness of their own present.[20]

The term 'visitor' suggests one who visits from somewhere, and who therefore retains a central core connection with that somewhere, usually their home world. In classical utopian narratives, the utopia is revealed by the visitor who returns home, imbued with a new critical distance, but home nevertheless. The term 'traveller', on the other hand, is moving away from reference to a home base. In contrast with the term 'visitor', 'traveller' suggests one who no longer identifies with the 'home' world or with any other. In this discussion, the traveller refers to one who (no longer) has a core identity, who has changed fundamentally, who is fundamentally estranged. It is from a position of fundamental estrangement that the character of Teleri in Bradley's *Lady of Avalon* and the narrative around her come to question a number of dichotomies that underpin the main narrative of the text. Teleri's musings challenge the self/other construct, which in discursive terms is subject/object, but also privileged/unprivileged knowledge, particular/universal, what/who, mind/body and particularly freedom/entrapment.

The binarism of privileged/unprivileged knowledge is assiduously cultivated on Avalon. Teleri, still unconsecrated, has no access to privileged knowledge, and so she does what is required of her, marrying Carausius because she believes that it has been foretold (199). While Teleri is obedient, however, her childhood taste of subjecthood makes her not easily reconciled. To preserve her sense of self, Teleri detaches herself from the identity inscribed upon her and the environment in which she has been placed. Teleri's detachment during the marriage ceremony and celebrations is evident. She is barely present, only ever seen from a distance: 'Carausius looked across the room, where Teleri was standing with her father' (204), and both Carausius and Dierna 'gaze at Teleri' (207). Later, in the bedroom scene, she is simultaneously present and absent: 'she had only to detach her mind from her body and she felt nothing' (211). Teleri also cuts herself off from Avalon: 'It will be better to make the break a clean one' (202), and she later refuses to visit Avalon when invited. This estrangement is a deliberate and strategic survival mechanism of Teleri's very self. It enables her to do her duty without flinching, but she lives almost as an automaton, detached from everyone and everything around her. Estranged from both the material world of her daily

---

[20] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 179.

existence and from Avalon, Teleri's position is one of ideological divestment.

Ironically, Teleri's chance to 'go beyond' and thus fulfill her dream of freedom comes encumbered with her marriage to Carausius. As the wife of the admiral of the British fleet Teleri is not hampered by the tedium of domestic tasks. Instead she travels the length and breadth of the country, repeatedly seeing 'what lies beyond'. She travels from Dubris on the eastern coast (223) to Venta Silurum in Wales (252), from Portus Adurni on the southern coast (187) to Corstopitum near Hadrian's Wall (242). She has considerable agency in her movements, choosing to travel to Corstopitum when Carausius wanted her to stay in Eburacum (243), changing the route on the way to Venta Silurum to include Aqua Sulis (252). These journeys hold little interest for Teleri. Since she left Avalon, her experience of 'going beyond' is more closely related to exile than to freedom, and rather than encirclement or entrapment, stone walls look 'fragile against the expanse of the moors' (243). Teleri's notions of freedom have been abandoned: 'she no longer ... dreamed of freedom' (244).

This physical travelling, however, enables a more figurative travelling. In her estrangement, Teleri becomes a dispassionate voice critiquing nationhood, identity, politics and power. Teleri's musings problematise the binarised dichotomy of self and other which manifests itself here as nationhood and identity. When Dierna and Allectus confront Carausius about his loyalty to Britannia, and they debate what Britannia is, Teleri stands aloof. And yet, her straightforward observations belie the hotly disputed claims of race and nation making a mockery of the subtle complexity of political arguments. For example, when she sees Hadrian's Wall she notes that the Picts 'were as Celtic as the Brigantes on this side of the Wall', and yet despite this racial similarity, they are more feared than the foreign Saxons (242). Further, Teleri dispassionately ruminates upon core definitions, questioning that which is unquestionable during times of war:

> *Did she love Britannia? What did that mean?* She was fond of the Durotrige lands where she had been born, but *she had seen nothing on these northern moors to make her love them*. Perhaps, if she had been allowed to study the Mysteries as long as Dierna, she would have learned how to *love an abstraction* as well.

> But it was Dierna's *ability to care for abstractions* that had
> sent Teleri into *exile*. Teleri had no more wished to be Empress
> of Britannia than she did to *rule* Rome itself. To her, they were
> equally *unreal*. (My italics, 244)

Teleri ponders definitions of nationhood but can find only contradictions.
Having established the racial sameness of the enemy, Teleri is now confronted
with the geographical difference of the northern territories of Britannia. The
northern moors are alien to her—cold and bleak, without comfort—how can
she love them? Despite being born a Briton princess, and now being Empress
of Britannia, Teleri does not identify with Britannia or with being a Briton.
Rather than a matter of blood and land, Teleri concludes that nationhood is an
abstraction. This undercuts the earlier notion established by Dierna that
Britannia is a binding of blood and soil.

Further, Teleri connects the 'ability to care for abstractions' with
privileged knowledge ('the Mysteries'), but also with power over others (to
'exile', to 'rule'). Thus a direct contrast between Teleri and Dierna is
established. Dierna uses her access to privileged knowledge to wield worldly
power. Teleri, on the other hand—as the beautiful daughter of a powerful
prince, as the wife of the admiral of the Britannic fleet, and finally as Empress
of Britannia—has always had access to this kind of power if she wanted it,
albeit through different means, but these things mean nothing to her. In this
world, Teleri lives within a system of meaning which is alien to her. The
glories it celebrates do not interest her. They are 'unreal'.

Denying Teleri access to privileged knowledge was one way to keep her
in Dierna's thrall; however, Teleri's estrangement from Dierna enables her to
critique the high priestess's wisdom. Dierna, as high priestess of Avalon, is
enormously powerful both symbolically and personally. This is evident in the
moment during the blessing of the fortress of Adurni when Dierna
spontaneously requires Carausius to enter into a blood oath:

> 'Your blood will bind you to this soil. Hold out your arm'.
> In her voice was utter certainty and he, who with one word could
> send the entire Britannic fleet to sea, obeyed.' (192)

Dierna is not easily denied. Nevertheless, Teleri is able to respond to Dierna's

'lofty meditations' by raising her eyebrows, and to refuse Dierna's presumptive request (256). Teleri's refusal is later given narrative approval, as Dierna's interpretation of events is once again shown to be incorrect, thus undercutting further the certainty of privileged knowledge. As Dierna's apparently privileged knowledge is thus shown to be partial, so she loses her grip over Teleri. Teleri's estrangement has enabled her not only to critique Dierna's apparently privileged knowledge, but to accede to subjecthood. No longer an object possessed by Dierna, no longer transacted by others, Teleri asserts herself as an actor in the economy, transacting on her own behalf. Later, when Teleri agrees to abandon the marriage with Carausius, which had been arranged by Dierna for her own ends, and marry Allectus, she is clearly free of Dierna. She does not even consider Dierna or what she might think. She is momentarily concerned about Carausius, but Dierna is absent from her thoughts and from her conversation with Allectus. When Dierna learns what Teleri has done, she considers cursing her, but doesn't have the energy. Dierna no longer has any power over Teleri, and Teleri no longer participates in her own subjection.

Teleri's estrangement thus allows her to critique established norms, and it is this critique that releases her from the constraints of the universals within which she has been trapped. Somewhat ironically, it is Teleri's uniqueness, her individual particularity ignored by Dierna, which changes the whole political scene in Britannia.

Teleri's argument against her marriage to Carausius is personal. It is based upon her distaste for men, particularly after her violent assault and attempted rape by a Saxon raider. This experience is fundamental in shaping her view of the world. It is part of who Teleri is, and Dierna knows it. While Dierna was able to save Teleri at the last moment, she acknowledges the life-changing effects of such an event: '*that demon has raped her soul*' (166). However, in order to effect the marriage, Dierna dismisses this knowledge even when Teleri reminds her of it (199). Teleri submits, but as Carausius displays incrementally more Germanic characteristics, there comes a moment when she can no longer acquiesce, and she leaves him. Teleri's only protest to Carausius is a private one, a unique response based upon her unique circumstances and experiences. Her rejection of him is not based upon an abstraction, but upon the material revolt of her physical body: 'She had tried to discipline her feelings, but since the feast at Cantiacorum she had not been

able to bear his touch' (252). Sargisson notes that one of Cixous' strategies to usurp 'masculine' writing is that she 'invites the body into the text', in a way which 'privileges the corporeal whilst at the same time transgressing the mind/body divide' (S. 115). Bradley does this with Teleri. Teleri has bodily knowledge, a knowledge that Dierna casts aside as personal and therefore irrelevant, but it is a knowledge which is ultimately held up against Dierna's privileged knowledge and overrides it. It is this bodily knowledge, not bound by logic or reason but nevertheless inescapably real for Teleri, that leads to her abandonment of Carausius and her acceptance of Allectus.

When Teleri agrees to marry Allectus, it is not for reasons of politics or nation, but because she is seduced by his recognition of *who* she is, rather than *what* she is. Allectus literally throws himself at her feet, declaring a passion of many years that has been inscribed in the text from the day they met: ''You have haunted my dreams … I would give you my heart on a platter if it would please you'' (270). Moreover, Allectus offers her what no-one else has, he offers her a choice, affirming her subjecthood: 'Allectus would not stop her if she rose and walked away' (271). What tips the balance, however, is the recognition of her irreplaceable uniqueness: 'Carausius had needed her as a link to the British, and to Avalon. This man needed her love' (271).

Teleri's acceptance of Allectus can also be read as an instance of Cixous' alternative economy of the gift. Cixous sets up a 'realm of the gift' as an alternative to the gift as it is traded in the masculine economy of the proper. For Cixous, in the economy of the proper the gift is equated with debt:

> Giving: there you have a basic problem, which is that masculinity is always associated—in the unconscious, which is after all what makes the whole economy function—with debt.[21]

As was discussed above, the giving of a name is an act of appropriation within the masculine economy. Within this economy any form of the gift operates similarly, as 'a gift that takes—autonomy and identity'.[22] Sargisson raises the question 'in logocentric discourse, can there be a "true" gift?'[23] As a

---

[21] Helene Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation', *Signs*, 7:1 (1981), 48.

[22] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 121.

[23] Lucy Sargisson, 'Contemporary feminist Utopianism: Practising Utopia on

possible alternative to this masculine economy, as a different way to approach interpersonal exchange within feminist utopianism, Sargisson presents Cixous' libidinal economy and the realm of the gift. Cixous' realm of the gift is predicated upon a different desire. Rather than on accumulation, on 'investment ... in anticipation of a due return',[24] Cixous' feminine economy is characterised not by exchange, but by 'giving and receiving' which take no measure, by giving 'freely'.[25] This is not to say that one always gives and the other always receives, but that no account is kept. Teleri understands that she has 'power' in her relationship with Allectus (271). He is prepared to give her anything, everything, even Britannia, but she has no interest in these things. Her power is that she can give him a gift, a free gift, a gift which has great value to him, and his only gift to her is that he has given her the opportunity to give without any return.

Teleri's fundamental estrangement, her capacity as a traveller, divests her of ideologies of nation, of politics, of power, and even of identity and belonging. She is no longer in the thrall of the binary order, she is no longer complicit in her own subordination. Being thus released, indeed being the agent of her own release, she is able to take critical positions which were previously impossible and/or unthinkable. Moreover, she is able to enter into relations on her own behalf and on her own terms. Teleri thus succeeds in finding her freedom at last, in 'going beyond' the existing paradigms of meaning and order. In so doing Teleri's movements are profoundly subversive of that order.

Teleri and the subversion of order

Teleri recognises binary constructs as the underlying ideological structure and tries to escape her feminine destiny as an other, attempting to become a subject, a self, a One. She does not succeed because she is trapped on the wrong side of the divide; however, the lie of the binary is evident in the capacity of Ones to reconfigure themselves, to author themselves forever

---

Utopia' in *Literature and the political imagination*, eds. John Horton, Andrea Baumeister (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 245.

[24] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 121.

[25] 'Castration', p. 54.

renewed as Ones. It is not until Teleri 'goes beyond' the binary paradigm, by celebrating her particularity and disallowing the privilege of the one, that she is free.

From the moment Teleri is introduced into the narrative, she is 'femininity as potential subversion of order'.[26] Her construction of her own binaries, and her positioning of herself on the subject side of such a split, is already approaching the first step of Derrida's deconstruction, that of the reversal of order. This is suggestive of a capacity to cross forbidden boundaries. When Teleri's potential is fully released the order is overthrown both ideologically and narratively. In her estrangement Teleri becomes an ideological traveller, stepping beyond the binaries and critiquing them from without. Finally, she eschews the economy of the proper, releases herself from the clutches of the universal and embraces the realm of the gift.

Operating within the realm of the gift is a process fraught with risk: 'This takes the form of wandering, excess, risk of the unreckonable: no reckoning'.[27] Risk is both practically necessary, as it is inherent in any process which is without closure, and it is also political. The gift of protection offered to women by patriarchy has never been free, but in the giving up of protection there is risk. However, without risk there is no possibility for change:

> Who goes not into the abyss can only repeat and restate paths already opened up that erase the traces of gods who have fled.[28]

A significant strategy for feminist utopianism, then, is not only the transgression of boundaries, but a going beyond into the space of risk and uncertainty, of the unpredictable and the unknowable. In this way utopian thinking creates new conceptual spaces—a good place that is no place, an *outopia*—in which different ways of 'thinking, conceptualising and theorising' can be imagined.[29] These new conceptual spaces are both within and without the text: they have their 'roots' in the text, and work from within the text (110),

---

[26] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 120.

[27] 'Castration', p. 53.

[28] Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991), p. 213.

[29] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 59.

but they are not clearly delineated or described there. Instead, the text provides opportunities, openings, and ambiguities which challenge expected patterns and closures. The text thus creates a space which, while necessarily established by it, is somehow elsewhere, estranged from the text. Sargisson notes that this utopian space, and the critical function it makes possible, operates not in some desired/perfected/blueprinted future, but in the present of the text and therefore also critiques the contemporaneous historical, social and political context. From this ou/utopian space, then, alternative 'readings of the present', or even 'radically different 'nows'' are possible (52). The open-endedness of this approach to utopianism is 'constantly affirming play, process and dynamism' (108).

Lady of Avalon creates such a space in two dimensions. First, in the development of the character of Teleri. From naive but perceptive princess to self-sacrificing servant of Avalon, Teleri becomes an independent actor whose agreement to marry Allectus is a radical deviation from her prescribed path. This liberatory act literally racks the dominant paradigm with 'radical convulsions', causing the military order established by Carausius and Dierna to collapse into ruins. Second, the tale of Teleri operates to subvert the ideological certainties of the wider narrative. The tale is dystopianism interwoven with utopianism, with critique and subversion. Further, as a sub-plot, it weaves critique and subversion in an out of the main narrative. Thus twice embedded it would be easy to dismiss this tale as a caution against the foolishness of women and their capacity to unthinkingly bring down an empire; but it is much more than that. It destabilises the apparent certainties which permeate all three narratives of the text: nationhood, identity, wisdom and power. Most particularly, it reconfigures freedom as ideological release.

Rather than closing on the hope of a positive future conventionally offered by traditional utopian narratives, Sargisson aligns the ending of a feminist utopian text with open-endedness and uncertainty. Part II of Lady of Avalon closes with both hope and fear. After the deaths of Carausius and Allectus, and the fall of the Britannic rebellion against Rome, Teleri is finally reconciled with both Dierna and Avalon. In the postscript, Teleri becomes High Priestess of Avalon and even ascends to the high seat of prophecy that has been unoccupied for hundreds of years. Despite this apparent resumption of the status quo, Teleri's prophecies reveal a continuation of the ideological unravelling in the outside world, and these prophecies end 'too chaotic for

comprehension' (294). Within this environment of uncertainty and change—of risk—Teleri sleeps soundly; it is Dierna's peace that is broken.

Jan Shaw is a lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Sydney. Her current research interest is fantasy and the fantastic in women's literature. She has also published in the areas of Middle English literature and narrative theory.