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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Sandra Elaine Capps entitled "Morgan le Fay as Other in English Medieval and Modern Texts." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Laura Howes, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Mary E. Papke, Karen D. Levy, Joseph Trahern

Accepted for the Council:

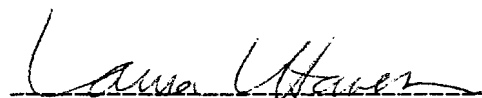
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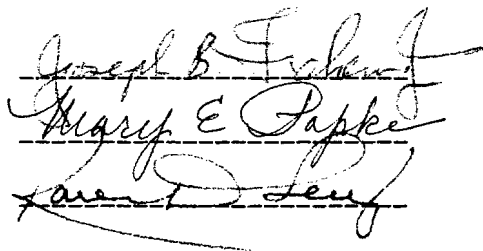
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We have read this dissertation  
and recommend its acceptance:



Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor and  
Dean of the Graduate School

**MORGAN LE FAY AS OTHER IN ENGLISH MEDIEVAL AND MODERN  
TEXTS**

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Sandra Elaine Capps

August 1996



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Many people have helped me directly and indirectly in beginning, continuing, and finishing this work. I want to thank my committee members for guidance, advice, empathy, humor, and just the right amount of fear: Dr. Mary E. Papke, Dr. Karen Levy, and Dr. Joseph Trahern. I especially wish to acknowledge the great debt I owe to my director, Dr. Laura Howes, who offered me sagacity, sympathy, and sensibility when I needed it most. I would also like to thank my friends for their invaluable help: Elizabeth Lamont, who blazed the trail before me and served as a long-distance guide; Samantha Morgan, whose unwavering conviction and support urged me to finish; and Patricia Bernard Ezzell, who remains the pragmatic realist, my touchstone of reality. Finally, I want to thank my dog Buddy, who good-naturedly endured hours of inactivity, curled up around my computer chair.

## Abstract

In this study the presence and power of Morgan le Fay will be re-examined as an ever-shifting figure of alterity in both medieval and modern texts. Using cultural materialist studies, the character of Morgan will be examined against contemporary medieval culture in four medieval texts—Vita Merlini, Layamon's Brut, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and Le Morte Darthur—that span the mid-twelfth to the late fifteenth-centuries. Her presence in the modern texts Gate of Ivrel and Mists of Avalon will be read against a feminist agenda, analyzing her increased visibility and voice in twentieth-century Arthuriana. Postmodern texts, such as Arthur Rex and Merlin, explore and exploit the transgressive nature of Morgan's otherness and focus on the darker humor that has been long neglected in the Matter of Britain. The film Excalibur, as well as other forms of popular culture, turn to the simplicity of allegorical characters and return to the Middle Ages for images of Morgan as an irrational, evil presence. The positive recuperation of Morgan le Fay, then, remains in the hands of fantasy writers, particularly feminist fantasy writers, who in their re-visioning of the Arthurian legend, provide Morgan le Fay and other female characters with a "literature of their own," a significant voice and presence in the Matter of Britain.

## PREFACE

Arthurian literature has been of immense interest to both the literary world and the world of popular culture for centuries; yet, ironically, the shifting nature of the figure of Morgan, one of Arthuriana's prime movers, has been largely ignored. While some work has been done on Morgan, it has focused largely on her link with individual works, particularly Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Malory's Le Morte Darthur. The three major works that have dealt intertextually with the *fée* fail, however, to provide a comprehensive look at Morgan in Arthurian literature. Myra Olstead's 1959 dissertation, "The Role and Evolution of the Arthurian Enchantress," is concerned only with medieval romances, while Kathryn M. Hopson's 1993 dissertation, "Re-visioning Morgan le Fay: A Unifying Metaphor for the Image of Women in Twentieth Century Literature" deals only with the modern period. On the other hand, Lucy Allen Paton's 1903 book, Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance, although good, is both dated and largely concerned with Celtic mythological studies. The purpose of this dissertation, then, is to build upon these earlier works, to examine the presence, power, and importance of Morgan le Fay as the eternal/generic Other (as the term is defined by Simone de Beauvoir) in the continuum of medieval English Arthurian and selected fantasy and postmodern texts. Such an examination will reveal much about medieval and modern gender ideologies, as well as the submerged/emerging voice of the repressed and the marginalized voice of the female figure of power in the Matter of Britain itself. As a *fée* Morgan is always outside the "civilized" world (as this world has been defined by Catherine LaFarge and others), but she is a figure of great power in her own domain of nature. The fear of nature, the anarchic, ungovernable world of the wilderness, was the nightmare vision of medieval society. Yet, the wilderness is also the home of the *fée*, an "invaginated" place of power where men fear to go unless they are mad or seeking hermetic solitude. The medieval world of the romance was a world in which a psychological need for order, a man-made measurable order, kept all

but the bravest knights, the maddest lunatics, and the most penitent recluse within the small enclosed pockets of civilization in the period.

It was also the place in which the Other was seemingly given freer expression than in its own civilized world of the court, a world of order and male camaraderie. Simone de Beauvoir's insight into alterity as part of mankind's need to polarize helps to illuminate the function the Other played in medieval society. The Other is outside the social order, beyond the known. Morgan as Other represents the transgressive: the tension between the Christian and pagan worlds, between the male and female position of Subject and Object, between the centered and the marginalized. The earliest written account of Morgan pre-dates the earliest English written accounts of Arthur by a millenium. This account is found in Pomponius Mela's De Chorographia Libri Tres, a first-century Latin text that locates her on an island (the Ile de Sein off the coast of Brittany) where she enjoys the company of eight sister goddesses and fellow shape-shifters. The next written Latin text is from a Welshman, Geoffrey of Monmouth. In his twelfth-century work, Vita Merlini, Morgan retains her benevolent goddess status. Morgan's character shifts throughout later medieval literature, however, as she is molded into an increasingly evil and irrational presence whose original healing powers are supplanted by a threatening sexuality in Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century work Le Morte Darthur.

Modern women fantasy writers, in turn, have brought Morgan from the periphery to the center where she finds both her voice and her reason. In these recent texts, the marginalized Other becomes the Subject. The romance's stereotypes are replaced by characters with both "personality and contemporaneity" in these romances (Barron 5). Morgan can become a pious pagan priestess or a futuristic warrior; her position inverts (or at least questions) the medieval paradigm of man as Subject and woman as Object within the text. Similarly, postmodern authors find the many facets and layers of Morgan's textuality ideal for its transgressive possibilities and shifting nature. In sharp contrast, Arthurian film has used the allegorical bias in the medieval Other as compelling chiaroscuro characterization of the major Arthurian

figures, and Morgan's reputation as evil sorceress precedes her. Thus, while Arthurian film tends to restore a portion of Morgan's earliest supernatural power, the powers are recuperated quite negatively. A close study of the film Excalibur is a telling counterpoint to its source in Malory's Le Morte Darthur.

**Chapter 1--One is not born, but rather becomes, an evil sorceress.** The study of Morgan as Other is a study of the ever-shifting figure(s) appropriated and altered by the various authors of Arthuriana. Morgan's literary roots lie in the Celtic oral tradition wherein her various roles include fairy enchantress, goddess of battle, and sorceress extraordinaire (cf. Myra Olstead). Yet, by the end of the Middle Ages, her character has been almost completely rationalized and demonized. Indeed, Malory's re-creation of Morgan from his Vulgate sources strips her of her powers of prophecy and limits her healing to a perverted abuse of such power with a wounded Alexander and the requisite barge-to-Avalon healing of Arthur. Morgan's changes, her shifting and re-invention, are a constant in the Arthurian romance wherein her presence is ever the reminder that there is considerable feminine power—outside the closed world of the masculine world—that will not be controlled by conventional romance machinery. She is both the malevolent queen who represents chaos in Camelot when she steals Excalibur and the maternal Lady of the Lake who re-presents Excalibur to an impetuous Arthur in John Boorman's Excalibur. (The film follows Malory's splintering of Morgan and uses two separate actresses for the roles.) As I explore the literary career of this shape-shifter, I will depend in part upon Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "Other-ness" as a fundamental category of human thought (xix). For Beauvoir, woman is perennially defined as relational to man, for "he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (xviii-xix). This definition, for all its modern existential roots, is complementary to the medieval misogynistic treatment of woman for being what eleventh-century Geoffrey of Vendôme saw as that "morally hideous creature whose superficial beauty was in fact the deadliest of traps" (Dalarun 20).

This literary tradition of misogyny flourished as the medieval Church strengthened its efforts to protect the clergy from the fleshly temptation of the temptress, the daughters of Eve who threatened the weaker brethren. Even as antifeminist dogma grew, so, too, did the praise and celebration of the Virgin until its peak in the twelfth century. Neo-Aristotelian images and principles of the "imperfect" male (woman) contended with the idea of the perfect (and unique) Virgin. Yet, the medieval Church's representation of woman was not completely polarized, as June Hall McCash reveals in her study "Mutual Love as a Medieval Ideal." Twelfth-century's Hugh of Saint Victor's anti-Pauline Se sacramentis christianae fidei and Bernard of Clairvaux and his Cistercian followers held more positive attitudes toward women. These men, however, were exceptions to the discourse that cast women into the Eve-Mary dichotomy, a dichotomy that has been expounded and explored by a number of scholars, among them Simone de Beauvoir, Robert P. Miller, Gerda Lerner, Melvin W. Askew, Vern Bullough, Jo Ann McNamara, Joan Ferrante, and Shulamith Shahar, to cite just a few. The binary categories that evolved from this dichotomy continued through the medieval romance into modern fantasy and have by now become firmly entrenched stereotypes of good and evil, male and female. I will also borrow from Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical studies of the Other as a means to explore more fully the freer expression of desire generally associated with Morgan le Fay. Such desire is "freer," for as the "fée stands for love outside society," so, too, her desire is less restrained by courtly romance conventions (Westoby 377). Morgan assumes the active role in her love matches, unwilling to wait for cupid's arrow to smite her victims.

This literary study of Morgan will begin, then, with an examination of medieval materialist studies, an ever-growing field that is instrumental in "re-presenting the past" (Beer 68). The past studies here, such as the works of Friedrich Heer and Gerda Lerner, will center on the twelfth century, the period during which Arthurian narrative blossomed, to the fifteenth century, when Malory wrote Le Morte Darthur. After examining the historical

presence and significance of upper-class British women in medieval history, I will turn to medieval literary images of woman, beginning with the work of the feminist-medievalist Joan M. Ferrante. To complete my introduction to a literary study and trans-historical survey of Morgan, I will then turn to a brief overview of Morgan's presence and power in the Celtic oral tradition. The work of Myra Olstead is instrumental here as I follow the shifting figure of Morgan from the divine to the demoniac.

**Chapter 2--"She knows, too, the art of changing her shape, of flying through the air . . ."** In this chapter I will look at the earliest British texts that concern Morgan le Fay. The first is Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlini (ca. 1150), a pseudo-biographical poem about a magical being long associated with the Fay. In the text, Taliesin recites a brief history of the known world, a kind of encyclopedic list popular in Geoffrey's time that reveals the site of Arthur's final resting place, Avalon, and his would-be healer, Morgan. In Geoffrey's Vita Merlini, Morgan's position as healer is somewhat recuperated, for her name and presence are erased from Arthur's passage to Avalon in Geoffrey's earlier text, Historia Regum Britanniae, only to be replaced by a passive construction that deletes her linguistically from the text. She figures, however briefly, in the Vita Merlini as a figure much closer to her Celtic roots as a deity, for she is still a shapeshifter and a goddess, a scholar, and a healer. Fifty years later she appears in Layamon's Brut, a history of the British people, as Argante, the elf-queen ultimately responsible for healing Arthur in Avalon. Although she has "shrunk" in stature, Morgan is still a beneficent healer and a supernatural being in Layamon's early thirteenth-century text.

**Chapter 3--"[T]hen all had marvel of the falsehood of Morgan le Fay."** This chapter will examine the Fay as she is realized in two later canonical texts, the fourteenth-century poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century romance opus Le Morte Darthur. It is here that Morgan begins to assume the persona of the malevolent Other we

see Helen Mirren play to its fullest in Boorman's Excalibur. The dual nature of the romance, the "mimetic and symbolic," is the same duality that creates characters "presented in black and white terms according" to how they help or hinder the fulfillment of the quest (Barron 5). Further, this duality that marks the romance mode is also related to the polarities associated with the medieval representation of woman. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, it is women--Morgan as an old crone and Lady Bercilak as a beautiful temptress--who oppose the hero, Gawain, and, ultimately, Arthur's court itself. We can see this duality clearly in Gawain when the lady of the castle is compared to the ancient crone:

For if *fe 3onge watz 3ep, 3ol3e watz fat ofer*;  
*Riche red on fat on rayled ayquere*,  
*Rugh ronkled chekez fat ofer on rolled.* (951-3)

(For if one was fresh, the other was faded: Bedecked in bright red was the body of one;  
 Flesh hung in folds on the face of the other.)

Yet, for all her seemingly faded power, it is "Morgne *fe goddes*" (2452) who controls the machinations of this courtly romance. However, in Malory's Morte, Morgan is no longer a goddess; she is an evil, frustrated queen who has no place in the public world of Malory's King Arthur. Having repressed the *fée's* powers of shapeshifting, healing, and prophecy, Malory continues the deconstruction begun in the French prose romances by splitting her into two (possibly three) polarized characters--Morgan and the Lady of the Lake. Morgan represents the chaos of unbridled sexuality and the disruption of the homosocial bonds of Arthur's fellowship that ultimately destroy Arthur's world and possibly threaten Malory's own, while the Lady symbolizes the abortive attempts to help a doomed realm. While Lancelot and Guinevere's adultery lies at the heart of Arthur's downfall, their adultery is fated--prophetic history, if you will. Merlin warns Arthur of the affair early in Morte, that "launcelot scholde love her, and sche hym agayne" (III, 97). Nevertheless, Arthur accepts the mutual desire of Lancelot and Guinevere. After all, queens are readily at hand, and the lovers' desire is trapped



in the stasis of their mutual love. Morgan's treachery (here read desire), on the other hand, is unexpected and willful. She enchants Lancelot for her own pleasure, tries to test Guinevere's faithfulness with a chalice at court, and attacks Arthur's person with her lover-pawn, Accolon, in order to capture her brother's throne for herself. It is Morgan's unconventional and uncontrollable desire that tears away at the fabric of chivalry (civilization) so painstakingly constructed by Malory, thus threatening Arthur's world.

**Chapter 4--"In my time I have been called many things: sister, lover, priestess, wisewoman, queen."** Morgan is largely erased from the interim texts that deal with the Matter of Britain, as Maureen Fries notes in her overview of Tennyson's Idylls of the King and William Morris's The Defense of Guenevere ("Female Heroes"). It is only in the latter half of the twentieth century that Morgan reappears and is finally given center stage and a voice of her own. The Women's Movement, with its emphasis on the re-investigation of female characters in literature and history, inspired many of the recent women fantasy writers who have adopted "intriguing new perspectives on the legend" ("Arthurian" 233). For them, Morgan now becomes the Subject while retaining the qualities of Otherness--enchantment, knowledge, power, and sexuality--that had previously marginalized her. Probably the best known effort is Marion Zimmer Bradley's monumental Mists of Avalon (1982), in which Bradley has reclaimed the Goddess and made Morgan an important priestess of the older, Celtic religion. Relatively unfettered by earlier misogynistic accounts, she creates a densely interconnected community of women. While Bradley fails to protect completely her most powerful character, Morgan, from the effects of "traditional, male-centered events," she does give Morgan ample opportunity to tell her own tale (Fries "Trends," 220-1). C. J. Cherryh's Morgan, in Gate of Ivrel (1976), the first volume of her trilogy, has her own magical sword, *Changeling*, and a decidedly positive epitaph, the White Queen. Morgan's Otherness is further fostered by the uncertainty of time and setting in this fantasy, as well as Cherryh's catalogue of oral and written accounts of her

existence. This small representative group of popular fantasy demonstrates contemporary validation and celebration of the Other.

**Chapter 5--"Morgan le Fay is writing this story now!"** This final chapter will present two representative postmodern literary works and a 1981 Arthurian film, each work valuable for its exploration and exposure of Morgan as an integral part of Arthuriana. In Thomas Berger's witty and ironic Arthur Rex (1978), Morgan turns from evil incarnate to goodness personified. She becomes a Little Sister of Poverty and Pain, "for after a long career in the service of evil she had come to believe that corruption were sooner brought amongst humankind by the forces of virtue" (453) and recovers some of her original goodness, although, in a typically postmodern moment, she reveals that she becomes superficially good in order to further her own evil agenda. Berger turns Malory's unintentional humor into wicked wit. In turn, Robert Nye's wickedly funny Merlin (1978) reunites Morgan with her long-time partner in necromancy, Merlin. Ribald and imaginative, this postmodern account questions authorship and defies closure. In it Morgan is revealed to be a sorceress with powers beyond Merlin's, and her sexuality is rooted in the supernatural beauty of the *fée*. These self-consciously transgressive texts thus re-explore the character of Morgan and reveal, at least one aspect of her role in Arthuriana untouched by both medieval and modern writers: the wicked humor inherent in the *fée*. In Boorman's film Excalibur (1981) Morgan's presence frames the story (de Weever 151), and Helen Mirren's portrayal of Morgan is the embodiment of all that Malory held sacrilegious. She is openly jealous of Arthur's power, and, worse, she is a powerfully sexual creature who assumes his sister's Morgawse's role to seduce Arthur and bear his son Mordred, who then delivers Arthur the cruelest blow he ever receives. Boorman's homage to Malory envisions Malory's worst nightmares of rampant sexuality and power, thus bringing this study almost full circle to Morgan's origins.

In breaking down the "hermeneutic circle" in which the medieval romances are written, one can begin to see the process of the Other as more than a glitch, a reversed mirror image of the dominant ideology. Such deconstruction identifies "the contrary meanings which are the inevitable condition of [their] existence as a signifying practice, locating the trace of otherness which undermines the overt project" (Belsey 601). The "trace of otherness" that is Morgan le Fay has shifted, defying definition throughout the problematic romances to the uncertainty of modern fantasy and the splintering of subjectivity central to the postmodern. The disruptiveness of the formerly muted, marginalized sorceress seems, in turn, to have formed its own hermeneutic ripples as Morgan gains validity and voice, however evil that might be, in contemporary fiction and film. Many texts and genres remain to be re-examined for the presence and absence of the *fée*. Vera Chapman's trilogy--The Green Knight (1975), The King's Damosel (1976), and King Arthur's Daughter (1976)--presents a fully realized and fully visible sorceress, as does Gillian Bradshaw's own Arthurian Hawk of May trilogy, while recent comics, such as Camelot 3000, have adopted Morgan as the reigning *femme fatale*. Films remain an important resource and tool in popular culture studies as the Once and Future King is invented again and again, and the work of Kevin J. Harty is an excellent beginning for any such study. The quest for Morgan, then, is an ever-evolving one that attests to the popularity of the Matter of Britain and to the power and importance of the *fée*.

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**Chapter 1**  
**One is not born, but rather becomes, an evil sorceress:**  
**Medieval Constructs of the English Noblewoman**

The study of Morgan as Other is a study of the ever-shifting figure(s) appropriated and altered by the various authors of Arthuriana. She has been long associated with Arthur, first as compassionate healer, later as villainous destroyer, but Morgan's presence in the Arthurian mythos has been a persistent rather than a consistent one. By the time Arthur began his literary career in the Welsh oral tradition, existing in fragmentary sketches and triads, Morgan had already appeared in the first-century Latin text entitled De Chorographia Libri Tres as a shape-shifting goddess. Much of the supernatural nature that clings to the figure of Morgan stems from an early Celtic oral tradition, as her fame and power were disseminated by Breton conteurs, professional entertainers, of the early medieval period.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Arthur, who began as an action hero/warrior-king, the figure of Morgan came to be a composite figure, a figure whose various roles include fairy enchantress, goddess of battle, and sorceress extraordinaire.<sup>2</sup>

The figure of Morgan is unlike Arthur's in another profound way. Her figure shifts throughout medieval literature so that by the end of the Middle Ages, her character is almost completely rationalized and demonized. Indeed, Malory's recreation of Morgan from his Vulgate sources strips her of her powers of prophecy and limits her healing to a perverted abuse of such power with a wounded Alexander and the requisite barge-to-Avalon healing of Arthur. Morgan's changes, her shifting and re-invention, are a constant in the Arthurian romance wherein the figure of Morgan embodies the divine power of Celtic mythology, in particular the supernatural power of the *fée*, as well as the potentially subversive power of

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Sherman Loomis, "Morgan La Fée in Oral Tradition," Studies in Medieval Literature: A Memorial Collection of Essays by Roger Sherman Loomis (New York: Burt Franklin, 1970) 3-33.

<sup>2</sup> Myra Mahlow Olstead, "The Role and Evolution of the Arthurian Enchantress," diss., U of Florida, 1959, 1-6; Lucy Allen Paton, Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance, 2nd ed. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1960) 1-12.

contemporary learned English noblewomen. Hence, in the romances, her presence is ever the reminder that there is considerable feminine power—outside the closed world of the masculine court—that will not be controlled by conventional romance machinery.

Indeed, Morgan often operates the machinery of a given romance by remote control, as it were, through a seemingly endless battalion of damsels, dwarfs, and magical devices. Yet, even from outside the court, Morgan remains a powerful (although marginalized) figure with whom to be reckoned. She remains a powerful figure in modern and postmodern texts as well; she is both the malevolent queen who represents chaos in Camelot when she steals Excalibur and the maternal Lady of the Lake who re-presents Excalibur to an impetuous Arthur in John Boorman's Excalibur. (The film follows Malory's splintering of Morgan and uses two separate actresses for the roles.) As I explore the literary career of this shape-shifter, I will depend in part upon Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "Other-ness" as a fundamental category of human thought (xix).<sup>3</sup> For Beauvoir, woman is perennially defined as relational to man, for "he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (xviii-xix). This definition, for all its modern existential roots, is complementary to the medieval misogynistic treatment of women as Aristotle's "imperfect" male. Women were subordinate creatures, forever doomed by their imperfect anatomy and their faulty intellects. It was only in the spiritual realm that a woman achieved a measure of equality, for the souls of men and women were viewed as equal by the medieval Church.

Although the Church Fathers allowed that women had souls equal to men, they were quick to add that women were handicapped by the flesh, making women the "hostile, fleshly Other" (Beauvoir 188-9). As Shulamith Shahar points out, while the "medieval Christian viewpoint was not identical with the dualistic stand of the Cathars," which regarded the "human body, sexual relations and procreation as the work of the Devil," there remained in Catholicism "a dual note: emphasis on the gap between body and soul, flesh and spirit" (104-5).

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<sup>3</sup> See also Raymond Corbey and Joep Leerssen, "Studying Alterity: Backgrounds and Perspectives," Alterity, Identity, Image: Selves and Others in Society and Scholarship, eds. Raymond Corbey and Joep Leerssen (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1991) vi-xviii.

This emphasis on the gap led to increased clerical misgivings about women's sexual powers, "perhaps . . . even to a deep-seated male apprehension about, or inferiority complex about, the female capacity for extended sexual activity" (Blamire, Pratt, and Marx 5). So, not only were women physically weaker, they were plagued also by a moral laxness, undone by their own desires.<sup>4</sup>

These desires harmed not only women themselves. Church brethren had to be on constant vigil to guard themselves against the daughters of Eve who represented an everpresent threat to their own uneasy chastity.<sup>5</sup> The fight against the flesh, against the other-ness that was equated with the weaker-minded, weaker-willed medieval construct of Woman, is long and well-documented in many texts and chronicled in the Wife of Bath's "book of wicked wyves."<sup>6</sup> Further, later misogynist writers built upon and expanded the Church Fathers' fundamental image of Woman as Other, propelling an antifeminist tradition that ultimately supplanted its original purpose of reinforcing clerical celibacy with a more virulent and broader strain of misogyny. The purpose of this work is not to prove that misogyny existed or that it had a tremendous impact on medieval culture. Western culture still resonates from the cacophony of antifeminist voices from the writings of the Church Fathers to pulpit exempla to the bawdy fabliau that reveled in the flesh but castigated women nevertheless.<sup>7</sup> The legacy of

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<sup>4</sup> Blamires, Pratt, and Marx continue thus: "Not only did women excite men to sinful thoughts: women were actually held to be more lustful creatures by nature. From here it was a short step to the equation, woman equals lust" (5).

<sup>5</sup> The fight against the flesh was a losing battle—or at best a draw—in the Middle Ages. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury point out that the writings of Jacques Le Goff, Peter Brown, and Caroline Bynum have demonstrated that the Middle Ages was anything but a purely metaphysical time period. It was a "moment of history governed by what we might call an incarnational aesthetic: the Word having been made flesh, the spiritual and the somatic were necessarily intermingled, and the body itself in the Middle Ages became a significant grounding of religious experience" ("Intro" viii).

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Hallissy, *Venomous Woman: Fear of the Female in Literature* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987); Alcuin Blamires, Karen Pratt, and C. W. Marx, eds. *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Vern L. Bullough, Brenda Shelton, and Sarah Slavin, eds. *The Subordinated Sex: A History of Attitudes Toward Women* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988). For a more inclusive list, see Works Cited.

<sup>7</sup> G. R. Owst demonstrates this continuation from the pulpit to the secular satirical literature for "the vast mass of the middle and lower orders" in his chapter on "The Preaching

the Eve-Mary dichotomy still exists, and women often find themselves presented as the Other, forever confined and consigned to the old medieval teleological definition of Woman as procreative creature.

The purpose of this chapter, however, is to examine the product of this misogyny from an historical standpoint, looking at English noblewomen through the perspectives of the various materialist feminist studies that situate women in medieval history. Against this background I will examine the figure of Morgan le Fay in subsequent chapters in her elevated positions as goddess, fairy, and sorceress-queen to show that, even among contemporary constructs of the marginalized figure of the medieval woman, Morgan's alterity is even more pronounced, yet she is markedly more powerful than contemporary constructs of noblewomen created by the clergy and the aristocracy. That is, Morgan's Celtic literary tradition describes a far vaster power and position than the more narrow scope patriarchal tradition had prescribed for her contemporaries. For instance, the noblewoman's power and position did not free her from the dichotomy of medieval concepts of male and female, as Eileen Power points out:

[T]he ideas about women were formed on the one hand by the clerical order, usually celibate, and on the other hand by a narrow caste, who could afford to regard its women as an ornamental asset, while strictly subordinating them to the interests of its primary asset, the land. Indeed it might with truth be said that the accepted theory about the nature and sphere of women was the work of the classes least familiar with the great mass of womankind. (9)

The first part of this study will, then, focus on the English noblewomen situated within this "great mass of womankind" of the twelfth century, the period during which Arthurian narrative blossomed, to the fifteenth century, when Malory wrote *Le Morte Darthur*. While

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of Satire and Complaint" (377). See also Angela Lucas's discussion of this continuation of the tradition of misogyny from the Church Fathers to the later Middle Ages secular writers (*Women in the Middle Ages*) 115-29, and R. Howard Bloch's, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).



this time span frames the particular medieval texts I will be examining, it also frames a time of intense change and activity in medieval Europe, a time which, as Joan Ferrante notes, Friedrich Heer, Norman Cantor, and R. W. Southern all see as a time of growing rigidity in the intellectual expansion of the schools and the Church (Woman as Image 11).

Friedrich Heer sees this rigidity as a key component of the growing marginalization of women in literature, learning, and Church doctrine of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, a marginalization created by a

failure to harness to the social and religious needs of the age that feminine spiritual energy which had burst forth so dramatically in the twelfth century. . . . Cast spiritually and intellectually adrift, women were confronted with the closed ranks of a masculine society, governed by a thoroughly masculine theology and by a morality made by men for men. The other half of humanity came into the picture only when specifically feminine services were needed. (321-2)

This bifurcation of men and women, further fueled by antifeminist homiletic literature, left the High Middle Ages with an "inner schizophrenia . . . clearly shown in the gulf between prevailing [theological] theories and social reality" (322). At the same time, feudalism further restricted the power of English noblewomen, stripping them of the rights they had shared with men in the Anglo-Saxon period. Doris M. Stenton encapsulates noble women's enormous loss of power under feudalism thus: "[F]eudal law enforced by a conqueror meant the end of many things in England, not least among them the independent status of the noble English lady" (28). Diane Bornstein's 1983 study of medieval courtesy literature also reveals the waning power of the noblewoman in the "lack of political literature written for her. Her position was first defined theoretically when her role was no longer powerful politically. A mirror for the princess does not appear until the late thirteenth century, and even after that, there are very few"(78).

This loss of power--political, legal, and economic--indicates just how snugly feudalism fit into the overall "closing" of medieval Europe, especially as it pertained to women. The

formerly influential power invested in a noblewomen's intellectual ability and political savvy was replaced by a powerlessness for most noblewomen. Clearly, there were exceptions to the powerless queen: Eleanor of Aquitaine (twelfth-century queen of Aquitaine, England), Queen Margaret (eleventh-century queen of Scotland), and Eleanor of Provence (thirteenth-century queen of England), to name just a few notable women. Yet even these powerful women rulers were merely exceptions to the rule, and even their modicum of power was threatened by the increasing rigidity of the feudal government.<sup>8</sup>

As feudalism took firmer root in England, the actual power of noblewomen became only a symbol of power (Bornstein 76). They were left as figureheads—symbols of decorum and good breeding—and brood mares. Feudalism encouraged even larger families than were the rule for pre-conquest England to ensure the success of primogeniture. Further, feudalism required further physical fealty in the form of military service. Noblewomen could attempt to supply their husbands with many sons; however, they could not comply with the requirements of English and Angevin feudalism and provide personal military service to the crown. While a noblewoman could take charge of huge feudal manors, and even defend the manor in her lord's absence, her early education did not prepare her to take up arms for the king. In England, where the rights of married women were most severely abrogated, women did not do homage "but merely swore the oath of fealty" (Shahar 146). Noblewomen needed husbands, or some other dependable males, to meet their fief's military obligations.

Marriage then became an even greater political arena as feudalism imposed fealty upon the service system it had set up on its lands. Women were necessary for connecting bloodlines and property lines and for producing children, preferably males, to ensure a line of primogeniture.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, some marriages between the highest nobility resulted in changes in

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<sup>8</sup> As Shulamith Shahar notes, these exceptional women gained power and notoriety by their strong personalities, often directly contradicting both the "description of the general class of women in the 'estates literature' . . . and the rulings of jurists" (171).

<sup>9</sup> It was only in the Central Middle Ages that English women could inherit fiefs, although sons still had precedence over girls in inheritance (Shahar 128).

political property lines as well. The idea of choice in marriage, especially for the woman faced with such political and maternal imperatives, was moot. Although choice had always been a rarity in medieval marriages for all classes, the nobility was more tied to its primary obligations to procure land and protect and keep qualified mates. Despite the Church's twelfth-century ruling that mutual consent was necessary for a valid marriage, feudalism effectively overruled consensual considerations, especially as they applied to willful women. The woman's father or lord decided whom and when she would marry (Lucas 94).

Feudalism thus led to younger brides, reducing the family's liability of a helpless female on a fief, and to a drastic restriction of a married woman's property rights, especially in England, as the rule of primogeniture became more firmly established (Shahar 146). These young brides began early to produce the children expected of them, and continued to have more of them and to have them at closer intervals than did lower-class women since they generally turned nursing over to wet nurses. Their duty was to provide not one but several male heirs as backup system, should one or more die in childhood. Brought up to complement their noble surroundings with grace and style and to provide good breeding for their children, noblewomen's options outside marriage were more limited than those of lower-class women, who could find employment in an expanding job market in the later Middle Ages. Generally speaking, ladies who did not choose, or were not chosen, to be wives and mothers were left with nunneries, a vocation for which many had little or no calling. Shulamith Shahar cites several reasons for women taking the veil, none of which relates to a religious vocation:

[S]ome women took the veil not because they felt a vocation for the religious life, but because the convent afforded them relative freedom from male domination, a better schooling than they could obtain in the world, and, if they became abbesses or held other convent functions, they might wield broad authority and exercise their talents as leaders and organizers. We know of women who, being unhappy in their marriage, chose to enter a convent. (8)

A woman who could not afford or did not choose to enter a nunnery could also serve as companion to a greater lady or as governess to her daughters, a vocation for which she might have little or no patience or talent but one which would be amenable to her own background and education. Vocational options were limited since even the most well-educated noblewoman's education consisted largely of riding, falconry, playing boardgames, dancing, singing, and recitations of poetry and stories (Shahar 152).

The law offered noblewomen even less power than did the marriage market. Legally, the Anglo-Norman wife could make no transactions concerning her property without her husband's consent, nor could she make a will without similar consent, unless it were to dispose of her own "moveables," jewelry and clothing. Effectively, all property was his. Secular law's restrictions of women's legal and civil rights stemmed from "her limited intelligence, her light-mindedness (*imbecilitas sexus*), her wiliness and avarice" (Shahar 12). Yet, even in England where a woman's legal subjugation was so complete, there is evidence that women, both wives and widows, made their own wills.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, widows had more money and chattel than wives of which to dispose (Labarge 34-5). The husband was under no similar compunction to suffer his wife's consent to sell his property (Shahar 91). In courts of law, an unmarried woman of legal age could operate as a free agent, appearing for herself and arguing her own case. A married woman, however, assumed much of the status of a minor, for she was under the guardianship of her husband, with greatly restricted rights. Becoming a wife stripped a woman of the right to "draw up a contract, take a loan, or take any person to court on civil matters" without her husband's consent (92). The language of contemporary legal records leaves no doubt as to who, at least in the statute books, ruled in medieval marriages. As Doris Stenton points out, the wife was "under the rod" or "under the power" of her husband. She

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<sup>10</sup> Margaret Wade Labarge notes that although an English wife was "considered legally incapable of making a will without her husband's authorisation or consent, since in legal terms she owned nothing, . . . more and more married women made wills on their own initiative and husbands usually acquiesced" (34-5).

"could not gainsay" her husband, even if he tried to sell her own inherited land without her consent (30).

We also know that law and custom allowed men to beat their wives (and often still do so allow). Contemporary records list several accounts of an enraged husband turning on his wife and beating her soundly, a custom to which the Wife of Bath can attest. This cruelty may have been paid back from time to time. Barbara A. Hanawalt's study of gaol delivery rolls (1300-1348) may show what happened to the wife who was beaten one too many times. She investigates the "victims of women's wrath" and finds that "in 68.4 percent of the coroners' rolls and in 81.6 percent of the gaol delivery cases, the slain person was male." Almost 25 percent of "women's prey" were family members, husbands being the most common victims (130). While women were indoctrinated into their subordinate position in marriage, by the Church and by the law, criminal records indicate that some women rebelled against this submission occasionally.

Not surprisingly, then, a widow enjoyed the greatest freedom of all women. She was often left to her own volition, to marry or to stay single, especially if she were an older woman. Thus, she escaped a husband's authority and her own was restored to her. Her property was also returned to her, the dower she had brought into the marriage, safeguarded by both the Church and the crown from heirs who balked at turning the land over to her. The widow regained as well her legal status in the courts, a status marriage had stripped away.<sup>11</sup> Like all women of income, the widow could take the veil, and many did, preferring a quiet, cloistered life to what had probably been a demanding and often unhappy life. Others became anchoresses, retiring from all manner of worldly concern to serve God better.

Concurrent with the rise of feudalism and the fall of woman's power, the rise of universities and the "narrowing" of the Church from what Heer calls a "truly 'catholic'"

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<sup>11</sup> Widows enjoyed more protection because they were classified as personae miserabiles (oppressed persons) by the Church as well as greater freedom (for the wealthier widows at least) than any other women in medieval society, for they were no longer under their husband's or father's authority and had their full authority restored (Shahar 95).

religion" mark the closing of the relatively open society that was medieval Europe (20). Gerda Lerner's study entitled The Creation of Feminist Consciousness notes a decline in women's education in nunneries that is concurrent with the rise of the universities:

Until the 12th century, Latin was taught in most convents, which meant that the nuns could read not only the Bible and the Church fathers but Latin verses and secular literature. Coincident with the the rise of the universities and the acceptance of Latin as the language of the university-educated male clergy, the use and teaching of Latin dramatically declined in the convents. (27)

Dorothy Whitelock points out that Anglo-Saxon women, at least the upper class, enjoyed considerably more opportunities for a substantial education than did their Anglo-Norman successors: "In spite of scanty evidence, one gets the impression that in almost all parts of England during the eighth century there were centres where a liberal education could be obtained, and it was not confined to the male sex" (197-8). Fortunately for later upper-class women, many managed an education without the universities, much as they had before them, albeit an education designed to allow them to function in their roles as consort for an upper-class husband. Many young girls received an education in royal courts that taught them no more than to read the Psalter and sign their names, but this compared favorably to a male's education when the average layman could do even less (Ferrante "Conflict," 10). Others profited from more liberal fathers who provided them their own tutors, or who allowed them to share their brothers' tutors.

Most churchmen who wrote of women and education were in favor of women, especially noblewomen, getting a modicum of education, hoping to "foster their modesty and religious piety" (Shahar 154). This education would stand them in good stead should they choose to take the veil. Whatever education women received, they were to use it to honor God. Yet the elementary education of women did not single them out from their male peers of the early Middle Ages. Indeed, Shulamith Shahar's conclusions corroborate Heer's as she explains how male and female nobility shared similar education up until the thirteenth century. It was only

with the rise of the universities that a rudimentary educational system coalesced for boys.

Describing a medieval Venetian fresco from the period of the first universities, Shahar notes that it displays four stages in the life of a man and a woman:

(a) the period of childhood and games, symbolized by boys and girls playing with a windmill, a doll, birds, a toy horse and a rope; (b) the period of study--the boys are learning to read or are holding books or writing implements, while the girls are learning to weave; (c) the period of love, courtship and knightly sport--this section depicts a feast, boys and girls strolling together in a garden, nuptial ceremonies and hunting scenes; (d) adulthood--the jurist and scientist are shown, bearded and dressed in the garments of their professions. . . . [T]hese stages are concomitant not only with the biological stages in man's development but also with social functions. In the 'second stage' the girl has no part in academic study, and consequently woman has no place in the fourth stage, in which men are awarded certain titles (doctor, magister) after completing their studies and begin to fulfil certain functions in society. (159)

The fresco reveals that the discrepancy between male and female education occurs early, gradually widening until the "fourth stage" in which the female is left completely out of the picture. This discrepancy between male and female education complements the similar discrepancy between the childhood of upper-class girls and upper-class boys. Shahar points out that though childhood was brief for both girls and boys, it was the boys who "enjoyed a period of youth and youthful society which their sisters never experienced. . . . Among girls there was an almost direct transition from childhood to marriage, with all it entailed" (140-41).

The lack of a systematic education and experience did not, however, stop female nobility from an appreciation of literature. Noblewomen were often great patrons of writers, poets, and artists. Indeed, Eleanor of Aquitaine, patron of troubadours in southern France, and her daughter, Marie de Champagne, patron of Chrétien de Troyes and Andreas Capellanus, were models for other courts throughout western Europe (Shahar 160). Yet noblewomen did not

just give financial support to early courtly love writers and explicators.<sup>12</sup> They revealed their appreciation for literature in the books they commissioned (often for their daughters) and in the libraries they accumulated. Several current studies reveal that not only did many women actively accrue books, they also promoted cultural change by their position as mother-teacher, as well as by their part in the development of the vernacular.<sup>13</sup> Carol Meale sees the "eclecticism of women's book owning and reading interests" as "defy[ing] the prescriptive dictates of those who sought to control women's access to the written word" ("Laywoman" 143). These dictates arose from the prevailing idea that contemporary fiction directly influenced the impressionable (weaker) mind of women. While a daughter of the nobility was judged physically mature enough to marry and begin bearing the many children expected of the noblewoman, her mind remained weak. Someone—father, husband, or priest— must assume custody of this weaker vessel to protect her from her own ignorance and curiosity.

Several male authors took it upon themselves to provide the necessary instructions for raising a daughter and for controlling a wife. The thirteenth century, noted for its religious fervor and diversity, was also a time for treatises that dealt with secular women. Margaret Wade Labarge cites two general texts on proper female behavior by Robert of Blois and Philip of Novara (38). Not surprisingly, courteous behavior, chastity, and modesty are three of the top demands on upper-class women. Philip also warned against the perils of a woman writer, for she might be tempted to exchange love letters. Vincent of Beauvais, writing for the French court of Queen Marguerite of Provence, also laid heavy emphasis on chastity and an austere

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12 Using de Beauvoir's view of woman as Other, Shulamith Shahar connects these medieval patronesses with the ladies who conducted literary salons in the nineteenth century: "[B]ecause of the marginal place of woman in the world (and her place was always marginal, with variations only of degree from age to age or between countries), the men who sought through creativity to cross boundaries and attain a different world appealed to their support" (161).

13 Susan Groag Bell, "Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture," *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988) 149-187. See also Carol M. Meale, "' . . . alle the bokes that I haue of latyn, englich, and frensch': Laywomen and Their Books in Late Medieval England," *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 128-58.



lifestyle for girls. He reluctantly allowed girls to read, thinking it less dangerous than other educational pastimes (38-9).

Other treatises were more enthusiastic in their approaches, such as the popular twelfth-century Latin treatise Facetus, which, as Judith Weiss summarizes, sees woman as "highly inflammable, with her sensuality barely under control" ("Wooing Woman" 150). Further, while she should conceal her heart and her will, she should be raped at a man's pleasure because this is her secret desire. Yet, even during a rape, woman's conduct is still being guided and damned. If she is passive or makes advances, she is a whore ("Wooing Woman" 150). Labarge sums up these shortsighted and lethally misogynistic treatises thus:

It is characteristic of the impractical attitude of these male advice-givers that they took for granted that such a sheltered, strongly repressed, and inadequately educated young girl would, once married, suddenly find herself competent to run a household, live peacefully with a husband, discipline her children and servants and deal prudently with the domestic economy. (39)

In light of these treatises, the noblewomen who survived and thrived seem all the more intelligent and courageous. Elizabeth deBurgh, later the Lady of Clare, is one such Englishwoman. Thrice widowed by the age of twenty-seven, she was a political prisoner twice and stripped of her lands at the age of twenty-eight. Edward III restored her lands which consisted of considerable holdings in Wales, Ireland, East Anglia, and Dorset. It was as a widow, generally the most powerful position for a medieval woman, that the Lady of Clare became a notable figure. She managed a large household of 250, noted for its organization as well as its riches and for the Lady's great charity. Her accounts attest to her riches, hospitality, and generosity. She had four goldsmiths to take care of her jewelery and plate; she entertained friends and family often; and her philanthropy reached the poor with alms and the clergy through endowments to universities and clerical orders (Labarge 89-90).

The Lady of Clare managed to thrive only after she was deprived of her three custodians/husbands. As Carol Meale's studies point out, other women challenged similar

repressive custom and custodians through their imagination, for the second largest generic group of books contained in women's libraries in this period was the romance, many of them Arthurian.<sup>14</sup> Meale notes that English women "either defied or ignored clerical dictate and formed an important part of the constituency for secular writing, in particular for romance" ("Intro" 3). Arlyn Diamond's study in English romances finds that medieval women were not "just representations in masculine texts, shadows in the masculine psyche." Women took an active part in reading and, to a smaller degree, in writing romances (70). For noblewomen, as reader and writer, the romance provided an idealized noble heroine and, often, a markedly feminine presence in both sens and matière. The romances of Tristan and of Lancelot, both tales of fated, hence uncontrollable, passion and adultery were particular favorites ("Laywomen" 139). This is especially curious given the bulk of homiletic and didactic literature that concentrated on the evils of adultery and fornication, a concentration aimed primarily at women in an attempt to guard their sexual virtue. This is not to suggest that these same female readers of romances were themselves adulterers but, rather, that they read stories about adultery and were able to "extract meaning relevant to their own lives and experiences from male-authors' texts" (Meale "Intro," 2).

So, despite the weight of male authority and guidance, many women managed to find both the means and the motivation to imagine an alternate reality for themselves in the literary sphere. Carol Meale cites the interconnectedness between women's lives and their contribution to literature: "Their everyday activities, their social and economic status, and their family and social networks and relationships, all seem to have had a bearing on their role as the readers, owners, and patrons of books" ("Laywomen" 145). Some women found a place in literature through patronage, some by amassing personal libraries for their own edification. Occasionally, upper-class women distinguished themselves in their own writing,

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<sup>14</sup> Meale suggests a re-examination of how we define "reader": "In an age when 'reading' could be a communal activity. . . the term 'reader' may need a radical redefinition if we are to understand women's use of books" ("Laywomen" 133).

although records are quite scarce in this area. For the works of Marie de France, a twelfth-century poet, to have survived at all speaks volumes about their contemporary popularity. As is the case with most medieval writers, we know nothing of her background. Most critics believe her of noble birth; little else, short of an exceptional nunnery, would have provided her with the educational background she displays in her work. In addition to her native French, she knew Latin as well as English. Her work with Breton *lais* was popular in her own time, despite, or perhaps because of, her occasional use of the feminine viewpoint in matters of love.<sup>15</sup>

As noted above, the nunnery was also an important venue for women's education, especially in the Anglo-Saxon period and the early Middle Ages. Much has been written of the powerful abbesses of the early Middle Ages, such as Hilda of Whitby (d. 680) and Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), but, by the later Middle Ages, the abbesses had been largely stripped of their power, and the education offered in the nunneries was in serious decline.<sup>16</sup> Angela Lucas chronicles this decline in Women in the Middle Ages:

The English nun in the later Middle Ages is a poor descendant of her pious, disciplined and scholarly ancestors of Anglo-Saxon times. Two things in the main were probably responsible for this deterioration. The doubtful piety of those forced vocations [on unmarried women who took the veil instead of a husband] . . . would have had a deleterious effect on the spiritual life of nunneries in the later Middle Ages, and the redoubled efforts to enforce enclosure upon nuns in order to safeguard a correct pattern of

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<sup>15</sup> See Angela Lucas, Women in the Middle Ages, for a fuller discussion of Marie's literary background, her literary innovations and output as well as a hint of her possible true identity as the daughter of Godefroy d'Anjou (father of Henry II) who went on to be the abbess of Shaftesbury (158-61).

<sup>16</sup> There is an incredible amount of work done on learned women in the early medieval Church. See Gerda Lerner, The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy; Margaret Wade Labarge, A Small Sound of the Trumpet: Women in Medieval Life; Susan Mosher Stuard, ed., Women in Medieval Society. Any of these texts, good in and of themselves, also furnish a good bibliography.

moral behaviour had the added effect of cutting them off from the best male teachers of the day. (150)

Friedrich Heer refers to this deterioration as indicative of the Church's failure to give "full scope to the religious energies of Women" (320). Heer goes on to link this "feminine spiritual energy" of the twelfth century--the century of Hildegard of Bingen and Heloise, abbess of Paraclete--to the "increasing gloom and anxiety which spread over Europe in the later Middle Ages, when nations, churches and minorities drew further and further apart" (321). Women found themselves even further marginalized, outside the closed ranks (and minds) of a male-dominated society. Seeking a wider scope of spiritual expression and a means to circumvent a "thoroughly masculine theology and . . . a morality made by men for men," many women joined the many female religious groups arising all over Europe (321-2).

The early thirteenth century is noted for this religious fervor, fueled by these new groups which would soon be renounced by the Church as heretical or would lose their autonomy and be absorbed into pre-existing clerical orders. Set back by the decision of the Lateran Council of 1215, which forbade further new religious orders, even the support of influential male supporters, such as Jacques de Vitry for the Beguines, could not protect these various movements for long against the increasingly-institutionalized Church. Jacques de Vitry's own interest in female religious communities began around 1210 with his concern with the "new" saint, Mary of Oignies, the center of female piety in Liège (Bolton 144). His interest in her led to his protection of her followers, the Beguines, a religious movement that sprang up in twelfth-century Liège and spread to northern France, Flanders, and southern Germany. The Beguines, whose goal was a simplified, industrious, chaste existence, were, in time, confused and even conflated with the more radical Albigensians and Cathars.<sup>17</sup> Gerda Lerner points out that

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<sup>17</sup> One somewhat transparent reason often cited for the confusion of Beguines with Albigensians lies in an etymological misreading of the name "Beguine" as being derived from "Albigensian" (Bolton 145). See also R. W. Southern, *The Middle Ages*, 321-2. A better explanation can be found in the work of historians, such as Gerda Lerner, who notes that the halt of the spread of the Beguines in the early fourteenth century stems from an association

Women who lived without parental or male protection were always vulnerable to accusations of heresy. The mystics who lived as Beguines were often under suspicion of heresy and under attack. . . . Most of the uncloistered women mystics, down to the 19th century, report harassment, ridicule and public condemnation. (79-80).

Finally, even with the support of sympathetic clergy such as Pope Innocent III, who wished to keep within the church all that would benefit it, the groups were effectively halted by Innocent's death and the Lateran Council of 1215 (Bolton 154). Angela Lucas cites the Church's growing concern and reaction toward this wave of unorthodox religious piety as one of the main reasons the Beguines were short lived:<sup>18</sup>

The hardening of church structures during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries encouraged distrust of those outside the accepted categories and the Lateran Council of 1215 forbade the institution of any new religious orders . . . . Since beguines had neither formalised rules and establishments like nuns, nor were always subject to the parish clergy, they were easily suspect . . . . The growing hierarchical suspicion of the extreme poverty preached by St. Francis and the early Franciscans, the desire to control rigorously all forms of lay piety especially among women, and the fear of possible heresy all worked against the beguines. (117)

The charges of heresy were doubtlessly fueled by many sources. Michael W. Kaufman sees the increase in the Church's misogyny and later charges of heresy as a response to the growing influence of women. Nunneries expanded greatly throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as they were filled by women for many reasons. Nunneries were the only alternative for the noblewoman who could or would not find a husband. Other aristocratic women sought intellectual growth there. By the end of the thirteenth century, there were 138

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with the heresy of the Free Spirit, making them subject to investigation during the Inquisition (297, note 29).

<sup>18</sup> The growing rigidity, particularly in canonical law and theology, of the medieval Church as it grew more institutionalized has been noted by others, among them Friedrich Heer, *The Medieval World*, and R. W. Southern, *The Middle Ages*.

nunneries in England alone, and prioresses and abbesses were becoming a visible power in the Church's hierarchy (143). The female assumption of religious power, a power largely held and maintained by men in Christianity, was a clear and present danger. Abbesses in particular seemed most to distress canonists and popes, for they were working against the natural order of things. They were directing double monasteries; in other words, they were directing men. The Church read St. Paul quite clearly in his dictum against a woman teaching: "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man; but to be in silence" (1 Timothy 2: 12).

For the Church, these active and vocal female groups and presences represented what Simone de Beauvoir would define as the Other: "[She is] diversity that destroys unity, matter as opposed to form, disorder against order. Woman is thus dedicated to Evil" (90). The various movements, what later historians would interpret as a sign of a living and thriving church, were read as symbols of chaos, a threat to the Church's stability. The diversity of the many new religious movements was perceived to be a disruptive threat by a Church concerned with unification. From these great numbers of women came "the rising tide of influential women attracted to the various heretical pieties and mystical movements which were exerting a mass influence" (Kaufman 143). These groups were also assuming an even greater power in the Church's hierarchy in their vigorous and diverse spiritualities; they were usurping the language of men, the language of authority. Joan Ferrante, Danielle Régnier-Bohler, and other feminist critics have noted the link between female language and the fear of the fleshly female. Régnier-Bohler examines male fear of the female tongue:

Every damnable excess is crystallized in language. Female language duplicates male language; it reinforces itself with a rhetoric of abusive gestures; it transcends all boundaries, escapes all control. Worse even than the narcissistic deceptions of outward appearance, language is all the more pernicious in men's eyes because it emerges

unpredictably out of silence . . . . Women use language to work evil magic, to deny male virility, to reveal the secrets of sex.<sup>19</sup> (431)

In addition to the association of woman's language with "evil magic," the Church's position on witchcraft began to move from a somewhat tolerant position that recognized good as well as bad magic to one that recognized only the negative aspects of witchcraft. By the mid-twelfth century, the Church had begun to view witchcraft "as a *craft* which could be and was practised and which emanated from the devil. Magic thus, paradoxically, loses its mystique. The *fées* become enchantresses rather than supernatural beings" (Westoby 384). The figure of Morgan illustrates this tendency to rationalize and demonize the powerful female in medieval texts. She is a benevolent goddess in Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century Vita Merlini; a nurturing elf queen in Layamon's thirteenth-century Brut; a mischievous goddess in the Pearl-poet's Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; and, finally, a malevolent sorceress in Malory's fifteenth-century Morte Darthur. Thus Morgan le Fay retains her power but not her divinity (nor her initial benevolence). Fast fading were the days when purification through penance, such as twelve months of fasting, was sufficient to cleanse the novice witch (Rosenthal 270).

Even as the *fées* of literature lost their supernatural qualities and became enchantresses, the figure of the witch began to be noticed (and reviled) in the late Middle Ages with the increased energy the Church poured into witchtrials. Noblewomen, however, were seldom condemned as witches; the witch was usually separated by economic, social, and educational barriers from her accusers. She was generally an old, poor, solitary woman. Her relative powerlessness together with her ties to the flesh, what Jacques Le Goff calls "the

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<sup>19</sup> See Laurie A. Finke, Feminist Theory, Women's Writing (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) and N. Katherine Hayles, Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) for their work on writing perceived as "noise"—that is, discourse thought by the dominant ideology to be nothing more than "static." See also R. Howard Bloch's discussion on the classical and Christian "link of the feminine to the seductions and the ruses of speech" (Medieval Misogyny 14).

devil's stomping ground," made her a prime target for the growing vehemence of the witchhunts (83).<sup>20</sup>

Of course, there were exceptions to the rule. Margaret Wade Labarge details three fifteenth-century English noblewomen—Alice Perrers, the mistress of Edward III; Queen Joan, stepmother of Henry V; and Eleanor of Cobham, wife of Humphrey of Gloucester—who were accused of witchcraft. Although none of them was burned, all faced imprisonment. One of them lost most of her family, her social status, and her freedom. Eleanor of Cobham, second wife of Henry V's youngest brother, unwisely displayed an obvious attraction for witchcraft and necromancy. At the same time, she retained several suspect priests within her household. Brought up on charges by her husband's enemies before an ecclesiastical court in 1441, she was condemned to do three separate days of public penance—walking bareheaded, clad in black through London's busiest streets to three churches where she was to offer a lighted candle. Although several members of her household were later executed, she herself was imprisoned for the rest of her life, dying, long forgotten, on the Isle of Man in 1457 (217).

Magic was also traditionally identified with the educated woman in the medieval period, both in life and in literature. Joan Ferrante sees this association stemming from male rationalization of masculine vulnerability to women ("Education" 30). An educated woman was a woman who could add intellect to the allure of the female body, a double threat to an already threatened man. There has long been an association of women's knowledge with extraordinary powers, often with evil. The medieval stereotype that pairs a beautiful woman with either benign passivity or malevolent power adds to this vilification of the educated woman. If she is articulate, she usurps the male's power of language. If she is beautiful, she saps his virility with her seductive powers.

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<sup>20</sup> Shulamith Shahar, The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages, has an excellent survey of the increasing connection between women, heresy, and witchcraft in the late Middle Ages.



Behind the fear of the venefica (poisoner or sorcerer) is the fear of learned women, a constant fear in later medieval culture. Margaret Hallissy cites three determinants of a threatening woman: intelligence, education, and selfishness (86). Her subsequent analysis of how these determinants align themselves with various ages sheds much light on medieval fear of the learned woman:

Selfishness is possible in a person of any age; intelligence and seductiveness are more specifically associated with maturity and youth, respectively. Intelligence, especially as manifested in learned knowledge, develops over time and so is a function of experience and maturity--of age. Seductiveness in the female is associated with youth. If such an unnatural creature arises as a young and beautiful woman who is also experienced and intelligent, who, moreover, has the capacity to use these powers in her own self-interest, she is formidable. Whether she uses poison or not, she is venefica or malefica. (86-7)

These images of women persist today in the figure of the femme fatale, a figure of delicious evil and power, who is a regular villainess in popular pulp fiction. In medieval literature, she is often the *fée* figure, a figure long associated with amorous activities with no immediate ties to a mortal conscience. In Arthurian literature, she is Morgan le Fay.

Noblewomen generally fared better than their poorer counterparts, but there was still considerable male fear and suspicion regarding an educated woman. One of the main areas of learning--a craft, if you will--in which most women were able to excel lay in the art of healing, not the professionalized healing of university-trained surgeons but the tradition of folk medicine with which women have long been associated. Ladies were expected to be skilled in healing, especially in the concoction of potions and plasters, for they had to repair the broken bodies of men wounded in wars and tourneys (Hallissy 62). Margaret Wade Labarge points out that the romances "suggest the suitability of women being skilled in bandaging, ointments, and the cleaning of wounds, having acquired these skills as part of their education" (170).

As universities grew, so, too, did the exclusion of women from all aspects of higher education, among them the art of medicine. Helen Lemay views the "history of doctors . . . as the record of a dominant male professional group with a monopoly over theoretical notions that were used to buttress the persecution of women" (189). Women were excluded from mainstream medicine by university-trained male physicians and by various royal edicts and new clerical obligations (Benedek 149, 152).<sup>21</sup> Even as the growing field of male-dominated university medicine was working so diligently to foster new methods of learning (one that did not include women students), scientific medicine still equated women's body with the unknown and potentially harmful.

The science of humors, which remained a viable medical tool in the late Middle Ages, helped to maintain the teleological view medical science had of the female body. Written in the fourth century B. C., Aristotle's De Generatione Animalium laid the foundation for the prevailing medieval perception of the female body:

[A]s the secretion in females which answers to semen in males is the menstrual fluid, it obviously follows that the female does not contribute any semen to generation . . . [A] female, in fact, is female on account of inability of a sort, viz., it lacks the power to concoct semen out of the final state of nourishment . . . [T]he female is as it were a deformed male; and the menstrual discharge is semen, though in an impure condition; i.e. it lacks one constituent, and one only, the principle of Soul. . . [T]he physical part, the body, comes from the female, and the Soul from the male, since the Soul is the essence of a particular body. (qtd. in Blamires, Pratt, and Marx 39-40)

Menstruation remained a misunderstood and somewhat mysterious biological function throughout the Middle Ages; it was thought "to cause grass to die, iron to rust, dogs to become

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<sup>21</sup> King Charles VIII (1470-1498) forbade the licensing of women surgeons, and minor clerical vows were added to formal medical education in early 14th-century Paris. See Thomas G. Benedek, "The Roles of Medieval Women in the Healing Arts," The Roles and Images of Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, ed. Douglas Radcliff-Umstead (Pittsburgh: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1975) 145-59.

rabid, and people to become ill" (Lemay 196). Thomas Aquinas writes that the "gaze of a menstruating woman can dim and crack a mirror" (cited in Shahar 73). Shulamith Shahar discusses the different viewpoints of theologians and medical scholars (most of them churchmen), claiming that they held common attitudes about women's sexuality. Physicians held that a woman possessed even greater sexual appetites than a man since "she both ejaculated semen and absorbed it" (71). Further, physicians also believed that conception was possible only if the woman had reached a sexual climax. Shahar concludes:

Thus, the logical conclusion would appear to be that the sexual relations which were theologically justified as leading to procreation were those which yielded maximum pleasure for the woman, but the theologians who denied the right to sexual satisfaction did not take note of medical views of woman's sexuality, and the authors of medical works did not delve into the religious and moral aspects of the problem, at least not in the same context. (71)

Even though this account of female reproductive processes was far from correct, there was an indication that female sexuality was necessary to the procreative function of marriage, rather than a threat to men.

Aristotle and Galen's belief that woman and man were mirror images of one another further substantiated Aristotle's claim that woman was an "imperfect" man, and further deconstructed the integrity of the female body. Caroline Walker Bynum points out that the paradigmatic male body led to "the form of pattern or definition of what we are as humans; what was particularly womanly was the unformedness or physicality of our humanness" (Fragmentation 220). Hence, medieval physicians saw the female anatomy as both imperfect and unformed. This very notion of a deformed body, that which marginalized medieval women, also provided the means and authority for medieval women mystics to write. Their fleshly nature, which created the chasm between male and female bodies and sustained centuries of misogyny, erupts into a mystic jouissance, an inarticulable desire, with its "breaches in

boundaries, . . . with [its] openings and exudings and spillings forth" (Bynum Fragmentation, 220).

Ironically, then, the same physicality that consigned women to imperfect bodies, weaknesses of the flesh, and the brunt of a vigorous antifeminist tradition, provided women mystics what Karma Lochrie calls "a possible position of disruption" (22). Caroline Walker Bynum places this "disruption" into a more cosmic context:

By and large, however, women did not draw from the traditional notion of a symbolic dichotomy between male and female any sense of incapacity for virtue, for spiritual growth, or for salvation. . . . If anything, women drew from the traditional notion of the female as physical an emphasis on their own redemption by a Christ who was supremely physical because supremely human. . . . To women, the notion of the female flesh became an argument for women's *imitatio Christi* through physicality.

Subsuming the male/female dichotomy into the more cosmic dichotomy divine/human, women saw themselves as the symbol for all humanity. (Holy 263)

Thus, for female mystics the flesh removed barriers between their own bodies and the humanity of Christ, and their writings are filled with images of the physicality, the "bodliness of God . . . [and] the bodliness of women as a means of approaching God" (Bynum Fragmentation, 201-02).

Secular women, however, were tied to a more intractable flesh, at least intractable in the sense that medieval physicians refused to see it as other than the irreparably flawed mirror of the male body. Claude Thomasset points out problems that ensued from this faulty diagnostic tool:

[Medieval physicians ] were committed to teleological interpretation, moreover, and preferred to defer to authority rather than attempt unbiased observation. The clitoris, for example, was simply omitted from medieval anatomy. To be sure, Moschion [sixth-century translator of Greek medical texts] had noticed the structure and given it a name, but no one followed his lead. In Constantine's translations the Arabic word for clitoris

was simply transliterated, not translated. The word therefore had no meaning, and apparently no one asked what anatomical structure it named. (46-7)

When a feature of woman's body did not correspond to a similar male feature, it was considered unimportant, even aberrant, and unworthy of mention. To have delved into the mysteries of female anatomy would have revealed something of the true sexual nature of the woman, a nature apart from man's (Thomasset 47). Woman's sexuality remained an unexplored, although not untalked about, mystery and curse, for woman was "lassata sed non satiata (worn out but not satiated)," as Juvenal often referred to her (qtd. in Thomasset 62). This insatiability came not from any failure on the part of the male to pleasure a woman fully but from a wandering womb which "needed regular sexual intercourse . . . to prevent [it] from wandering in search of sperm or becoming poisoned by inactivity" (Lemay 189).

Because both male physicians and the clergy relegated women's bodies to the dark and secret unknown, certain suspicions arose about the women who plumbed the gynecological mysteries routinely--the midwives. Without a university education or a formal apprenticeship, the midwife's knowledge was never sought in medical consultation. Thomas G. Benedek cites only two works even remotely related to obstetrics or gynecology in the Middle Ages (153).<sup>22</sup> In a development that paralleled the Church's marginalization of female movements as it moved toward a more crystallized structure, so, too, did the medical practice alienate female practitioners as it grew more professionalized. Yet, for all the concentrated efforts of men to stop women from practicing, there is evidence that they continued to practice, partly because they had honed their skills and partly because they "charged less, took poorer patients, and, in some, cases, practised purely for charity" (Labarge 177). It was only good business and civic sense that compelled municipal governments to allow some women physicians to continue to practice.

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<sup>22</sup> He cites Diseases of Women by Trotula, thought by most scholars to be a woman, and a thirteenth-century compilation called De secretis mulierum (The Secrets of Women), which has more to do with astrology than with medicine.

It is not difficult to see where this marginalization of women healers leads. Even as fervent women's religious groups were branded as heretical by the medieval Church, skilled women medical practitioners came to be more closely associated with the witch. As mentioned earlier, noble women were generally spared from such charges, for they were better buttressed against these attacks by their social position. Yet, they were occasionally linked with a more specific aspect of witchcraft, the venefica. The role of keeper of the home, a role delegated to all classes of medieval women, involved collecting herbs and concocting potions to care for the household. Men often experienced certain misgivings, even fear, concerning the power to heal or harm that such potions gave women. Much of this fear centers on male impotency:

The witch controls what Kramer and Sprenger [authors of Malleus Maleficarum (1486)] call the 'virile member'; she can cause impotence or satyriasis or deprive a man of potency entirely. Since Sprenger and Kramer draw a fine line between witches and other women in general, it is clear that their obsessively recurrent image—the lost virile member—expresses strong fear of dominant women. (Hallissy 66)

This power of the mysterious female knowledge "to shape events through a substance deviously administered permeates works on witchcraft," especially the infamous Malleus Maleficarum (Hallissy 65).<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the curious grabbag that comprised medieval medicine—ancient folklore of herbs and plants, ideas from classical sources, personal experience, and a large portion of magic and incantations—left its practitioners, often the village "wise woman," holding the bag when an inexplicable death occurred. Often, this death was blamed on the woman's secret knowledge of female activities that existed outside what men regarded as "the proper rational and ordered structure" (Labarge 169, 215). Women's knowledge, as much as their bodies, was under suspicion and indictment for much of the medieval period.

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<sup>23</sup> Hallissy continues this exploration of masculine fear etymologically: "Poisons, potions, drugs, medicines: these are synonymous, as the French term used by Chrétien, la poison (potion) suggests, and all are regarded as the province of the powerful female" (65).

The figure of Morgan le Fay in the material history of medieval noblewomen, themselves marginalized through legal, societal, and religious constraints, occupies a unique position in Arthurian literature. She is never a mere figurehead queen, even when used as a peaceweaver and married to the Northern rebel King Uriens in Malory's Morte. Rather, she is an aggressor and a manipulator throughout the text. Edith Whitehurst Williams notes her alterity in her movement in and out of other characters' stories throughout the later romances, "almost always carrying with her that darker side of self" (42). Furthermore, her character is more often a nightmare rather than a broodmare, for her maternal aspects are never as strongly presented as is the threatening nature she assumes in the later romances.<sup>24</sup> The earliest works discussed below, Vita Merlini and Layamon's Brut, reveal a Morgan removed geographically from Arthur's court. The prevailing Anglo-Norman feudalism that stripped so many noblewomen of their legal and regal powers is curiously absent. The fealty to land and lord is supplanted by Morgan's alliance with the goddess Natura on her paradisaical island of Avalon, and, while later medieval texts often connect her with Gawain and his brothers, either as a mother or an aunt, there is seldom any familial contact between them. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, for example, there is no mention of any children, and Gawain, the nephew she shares with Arthur, is mortally threatened, tempted, and tested by agents within her control.

Morgan's textual position is not only geographically outside Arthur's court, but it falls outside the prevailing laws and mores of contemporary medieval culture as well. While still married to King Loth, she enjoys the power of the widow, owning and managing her own castle and household in Morte without having to wait or arrange for her husband's death. We never read of her relationship to her husband, but we do see her often enough sans husband, avec lover. Given Morgan's history of adultery, marital restrictions seem simply not to apply to the

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<sup>24</sup> Lucy Allen Paton, Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance, notes several children borne by Morgan throughout the various European romances, but the children are largely a minor detail in Morgan's life, with the possible exception of Mordred, Arthur's son and slayer. Paton names the following offspring: Auberon, Pulzella Gaia, Yvain, Gawain, Gaheris, Agravain, and Gareth.

amorous *fée*, even when the *fée* has been rationalized into a mortal sorceress. As a supernatural being, her love interests lie outside the conventions of medieval culture. Even as a mortal woman, these same conventions do not lie too heavily upon her. Although she may have little choice in whom she marries, she has ample choice in whom she loves.

It is as a learned woman that Morgan tends to share the calumny of her learned contemporaries. Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlini gives goddess status to Morgan, as well as a wealth of knowledge and divine powers passed down from her Celtic foremothers. Yet, Morgan is a benevolent goddess, caring for her people and for the wounded King Arthur. Layamon's Brut likewise offers a benevolent and wise Argante (Morgan) who protects Arthur throughout his life and tends his mortal wounds. It is only when we reach the fourteenth-century poem, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight that we begin to see Morgan's knowledge and power tainted with Morgan the goddess's deliciously evil scheming. Even here, however, her evil is blunted by the poem's overwhelming sense of joy, a joy that makes Morgan's machinations less malevolent than mischievous. By Malory's fifteenth-century Morte D'Arthur, Morgan's divine/supernatural knowledge has been rationalized into sorcery, curious learning she acquired from a conventional locale—a nunnery. Yet even in her most opprobrious roles, Morgan retains the knowledge most associated with women, the knowledge of healing. It is only in Morte that this healing becomes problematic, for while Morgan plots Arthur's death and her own assumption of the throne early in the book, by the end of the text she has assumed her traditional role as his healer. Elsewhere her healing takes on a curious dimension, for the male fears of the venefica are recognizable in Morgan's misuse of her knowledge, particularly when she demands sexual satisfaction from a wounded man in exchange for her medicinal skills—a fifteenth-century "sexual healing."

Edith Whitehurst Williams reads the figure of Morgan, developed from Celtic mythology, as a Jungian archetype that exhibits strongly the dichotomies evident in most medieval literary images of women. However, in Morgan the dichotomies are not separated; they are mingled within the character to create what Williams calls the "shadow-trickster"



(40). Morgan combines the beauty of youth/innocence with the ugliness of age/wisdom, the dutifully-married English queen with the scheming enchantress, the healing goddess with the harming anarchist. When Morgan's changing figure, constructed over centuries of oral tradition, is examined in what Michael W. Kaufman sees as a "hermetically closed circle" of the "medieval literary scene" (141), she remains trapped in a hermeneutical stasis of Otherness. It is only when we examine her as a product of differing ideologies, with different voices and different points of view, that we begin to see how the shifting figure of Morgan le Fay is a palimpsest of medieval constructs of alterity.

Joan Ferrante's work on the images of women in medieval literature is an excellent source for identifying historical constructs of the Middle Ages, as well as the various sacred and secular literary genres. Her Woman as Image in Medieval Literature begins with a division of twelfth-century literature into medieval exegesis, in which bipolar figures are common, with a preponderance of the bad; allegorical tradition, in which the philosophical strain (Neo-Platonic) contends male and female union is necessary for harmony; and the rhetorical strain, in which personification is achieved in female figures of vices and virtues. Courtly love reflects this double view, with the lady representing highest love or worldly desires (2). The twelfth-century, with its symbolic figure of woman--Virgin--was followed by the thirteenth-century's movement toward realistic presentation of woman--child-bearer, temptress.

Occasionally, medieval authors offered de-gendered images of females the better to point out their evil ways. As mentioned before, the image of the intelligent woman was a visible threat in medieval literature, but much could be done to render her less harmful. Age was a powerful desexualizing agent that rendered many woman healers harmless; much literature treated the old woman figure as less threatening, e. g., the Loathly Lady.<sup>25</sup> It was in witchlore that they were consistently stigmatized as evil. The younger (hence seductive),

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<sup>25</sup> Ironically, this "less threatening" woman can invert the paradigm of the desexualized old crone. Note Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale of one such Loathly Lady whose knowledge and sexuality make her a powerful and threatening presence.

intelligent woman presented the more palpable threat (Hallissy 86). This younger woman is all too often the demonized figure of the late Middle Ages' version of the feminine witch. Like other preternatural figures, she is known for her sexuality, a sexuality the Church came to link with Satan (Morris, K. 285). It has long been a practice to link the outsider, what the Old English "Precepts" paternally warns against as the fremdre meowlan (foreign/strange woman), with excessive or aberrant sexuality.

Much of this fear has a deeper-rooted cause than simply male fear of the wise woman's secret knowledge, of the repulsion and attraction men feel toward the female body. The witch figure stands even more clearly outside the culture than do the women on its fringe, the prostitutes. The Church, prompted by the work of handy henchmen like Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Krämer, came to view the witch, who had begun as a dualistic figure who could do good or evil, as only a source of evil. The wise women, like the heretics with whom they were associated, were ascribed many sexual transgressions by theologians. Most of these transgressions fall far outside the sexual boundaries allowed by a more tolerant twelfth century. A witch came to be someone, usually a woman,<sup>26</sup> who is "in league with the Devil and denies Christ, baptism and the sacraments" (Shahar 271). She came to be identified as an enemy of the Church at a time when the Church and the culture were more closely conjoined than modern minds can conceive. The witch figure grew out of ignorance and fear, a fear of the Other so strong that it eclipses any lesser constructs of remaining medieval paganism.<sup>27</sup>

At the opposite extreme of this dichotomy that E. William Monter calls the "pedestal and the stake," we find the idealized figure of the courtly lady. Much work has been done to deconstruct this pedestal, for, as Adelaide Evans Harris points out, "even when they most

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<sup>26</sup> The book of Sprenger and Krämer, Malleus Maleficarum (The Witch Hammer) (1486), is a clue to the one-sidedness of the witchhunts. "Witch" is a feminine form here. H. Trevor-Roper calls the text the "summa of demonology, upon which all witch-hunters . . . relied for 200 years" (qtd. in Shahar 268).

<sup>27</sup> See Jeffrey Burton Russell, Witchcraft in the Middle Ages (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972) for a more comprehensive look at the development of witchcraft and its association with women.

exalted her they never lost sight of her essential inferiority" (10). Few scholars now read the representation of the courtly lady as a positive, empowering figure for a medieval woman. While courtly literature began as a result of noblewomen's patronage in twelfth-century France, the constructed figure of the lady was a mirror to reflect the male's feelings, his desires and fantasies (Bornstein 10).<sup>28</sup> Bornstein does note some positive aspects of courtly love for the aristocracy, women and men. It acted as a safety valve during a time of loveless marriages for unhappy younger sons and daughters who were left out of primogeniture and feudal marriages (44-45). Flirting was perhaps a small step for women, but it was nonetheless a significant move away from the endless moralizing didacticism of courtesy books.

Flirting, however, was where the power ended for the woman. As Georges Duby points out, the courtly lady did not own her own body; it belonged first to her father, then to her husband. Her body was the "repository of [her husband's] honor and, conjointly, of the honor of all the adult males in his household" (251). The secular realm's obsession with the integrity of the lady's body rivals the sacred's adoration of the Virgin's. While the body of the lady embodied all the courtly male lover desired, this desire had to be constantly delayed, shifting the "locus of the male's pleasure . . . from the satisfaction of desire to anticipation of that satisfaction. Pleasure climaxed in desire itself" (252). Duby goes on to note that courtly love, far from empowering noblewomen, was a

device for disciplining women, for restraining those traits that provoked anxiety in men, for confining the female sex within a web of carefully orchestrated rituals, for drawing woman's sting by diverting her combativeness to the harmless realm of sport. The game of love did not disturb and in fact strengthened the social hierarchy, in which women were subordinate to men. Once the game was over and everyone returned to serious business, the *amie* returned to the place God intended for her kind. . . . But in the course

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28 Noblewomen did profit from "courts of love," a formalized literary club in which people read romances, "debated *demandes d'amor*, and played word games of flirtation." Women did have a strong presence there as patrons and audience members (Bornstein 42).

of play she had improved herself. *Fine Amour* contributed decisively to the education of ladies and damsels, and it is this sense only that one can speak of an 'advance' for women. (262-3).

The "advance" is small indeed. Courtly love constructed another form of the idealized woman. She is not the chaste, modest, humble, and obedient daughter-wife of the courtesy books; rather, she is the exalted, most gracious married lady who represents all the male lover wants and needs to find supreme fulfilment. She is fantastic, because she is a fantasy, a male fantasy. Occasionally, as Joan Ferrante notes, there is a woman as realist in the midst of the male fantasy. She "cuts through the rhetoric of courtly love, the fictions and postures of the noble lover, and shows up the hypocrisy, the emptiness of the pretense" ("Notes" to "Public Postures," 228). It seems that the poet uses this woman to reveal his own doubts and to deride his own fantasies (Ferrante "Male," 67). Consider Lady Bercilak's relentless tempting of Gawain and ceaseless deconstruction of the empty rhetoric of courtly love in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and recall the crone, Morgan the goddess, behind the courtesan.

Fleshly fantasies were not the only desires medieval men expressed. Related to the courtly ideal of perfection was the clerical ideal of purity. While the Church Fathers had urged virginity upon both men and women, and many priests had felt the hardships of celibacy by the twelfth century, women bore the weight of the demand for virginity. Much has been said about the three divisions of the "fourth estate": wife, widow, and virgin, virgin being the highest. Purity of the body was not enough; virgins must think only pure thoughts and remove themselves from any worldly temptations. Yet for all the effort clergy and male advice-givers made toward indoctrinating females into virginity and its surrounding aura of submission, obedience, and humility, secular literature and sacred drama reveals gaps and repressed voices, long silenced in canonical and homiletic works. The disorderly, dominant woman that fills the fabliaux and reverberates shrewishly throughout the mystery plays is the antithesis of the

quiet virgin or the adored lady.<sup>29</sup> Morgan le Fay is one such chaotic figure, whose presence suggests the repressed voices of other marginalized figures in medieval ideology.

The "repressed voices of other marginalized figures" often came from the most marginalized realm of the romance--the wild. Outside the known world of the court was the unknown world of the wild, the world of dread diseases, outlaws, and beasts fostered by the imagination of medieval bestiaries.<sup>30</sup> There was also the "unconstrained, free-thinking, wise women" who were there to offer advice to a handsome young knight or to the young maiden (Haskell 194-5). Woman has long been associated with nature, with the unknown realm outside the artificial world of culture. Peggy Ann Knapp goes so far as to say, "Though the subject was often overlaid with Christian doctrine and ethics, or courtly manners, women represent nature in medieval narrative," citing the underlying pagan folk materials in many medieval tales; woman's association with the Garden of Eden and the virgin birth; and a preoccupation with asceticism that led to the denigration of women: nature is sex and, therefore, a woman (60-61).

Sherry B. Ortner's oft-cited anthropological study entitled "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" gives a transhistorical examination of how women in western culture have been subordinated and marginalized largely through their biology. The same teleological view of woman as a reproductive entity that so stunted medieval medicine permeates most cultures, ancient and modern. Woman's body and its functions, a source of fear, fascination, and canonical discussion, are perceived as closer to nature with its association with bearing and rearing children. Her powers of reproduction consign her to the world of nature:

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29 See E. Jane Burns, Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993) for an incisive and invigorating look at such women in Old French fabliaux. It must be noted that the shrew/Noah's wife and the fabliau wife are recuperated quite negatively in most instances. Whereas the fabliau wife is more intelligent and quicker-witted than her romance counterpart, she falls into the sins of Eve by the end. Noah's wife, too, suffers, for she is associated with the wickedness of the antediluvian world.

30 G. G. Coulton notes the medieval Church's suspicion of nature, citing that the love of nature associated with St. Francis was an anomaly (112).

Woman's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, in contrast, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, "artificially," through the medium of technology and symbols [i.e. higher aspects of human thought such as art, religion, law]. In so doing, he creates lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables--human beings.<sup>31</sup> (Ortner 75)

Nature, particularly the wild, is also associated with the feminine beyond the procreative function. The wild is the realm of the feminine, what Catherine LaFarge defines as "both the inner and the utterly outside, that which lies beyond the known and the social" (264). The world of nature contains the elemental forces associated with faeries, dryads, and nymphs. It is the world of the huntress, the Diana-figure of Malory's Morte who so easily unmans Lancelot. Arthurian romances are filled with female figures who are "of the lake," and many more mysterious female figures are found near fountains, an earlier site of Celtic pagan worship.<sup>32</sup> The wilderness is also associated with the trappings of the Other--disguise and disappearance (LaFarge 274).

Is Morgan more of a threat because she usurps the male rôle by creating symbols in her enchantment and teaching, rather than merely reproducing children? Does her association with both the world of nature and the world of man represent an inherent danger to the unity of Arthur's court? Only by re-examining Morgan's powers and presence within the literary and social context of the respective texts can we begin to trace and evaluate the literary history of the shifting figure of the fée.

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<sup>31</sup> See a further explanation of this analogy of woman to nature in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, "Woman, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview," Woman, Culture, and Society (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974) 67-87.

<sup>32</sup> John Darrah, Paganism in Arthurian Romance (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1994) is an exhaustive study on pagan influence and remnants in Arthurian literature

Morgan le Fay's earliest literary associations arise from an intimate connection with nature.<sup>33</sup> Rather than attempt to list all the scholars who assert her connection to nature through various goddesses, I will cite the one whose work uses the broadest spectrum of mythology, literature, and anthropology—that by Myra M. Olstead. Although I find some of her analogies a bit thin, especially concerning a reconstructed Celtic society, her comprehensive look at Celtic mythology has much to offer my own study. Olstead's findings reinforce the association of Morgan with nature, with the realm of the Other in medieval society. The *fée's* various aspects (at times two or three characters within a given text are facets of the *fée*) also reflect the various triads of the Celtic goddess. The most often cited goddess association is with Modron, a Welsh river goddess. Hence we have the Lady of the Lake's affiliation with water, the many liaisons at wells and fountains sprinkled throughout Arthurian literature, and Morgan's domain in the Otherworld that is Avalon. From the Irish war goddesses, the Morrígain, she derives her martial ability and shape-shifting. The various goddesses of battle were able to assume animal shapes, generally the shapes of beasts of battle. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *Vita Merlini*, she also has dominion over the air and can fly at will wherever she wishes.

The divine aspect of Morgan does not continue throughout Arthurian literature, for she devolves from goddess to *fée* to enchantress. While a *fée*, she retains the association with nature, especially with the woods and water, but is probably best associated with her amorous nature in *lais* and early romances. I disagree with Olstead in her summation of the figure of the enchantress, for she relates her, finally, to the fertility goddess, finding in this goddess ample explanation for the conflicting traits of a complex literary creation.<sup>34</sup> Morgan le Fay, at least

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<sup>33</sup> I am beginning with the premise that the literary figure of Morgan le Fay is what R. S. Loomis calls a "miniature pantheon," referring to the wealth of Celtic mythology that constitutes the various aspects of her character. Most scholars concede that Morgan had many connections to Irish and/or Welsh mythology.

<sup>34</sup> Maureen Fries sees Morgan, or at least the powerful, sexually active "counter-hero" she represents as "akin to the Magna Dea, the Great Mother whose widespread worship and influence early Christianity found so dangerous" ("Decline" 15, note 2).

the figure of late English medieval texts when she is demoted from faerie to enchantress, is hardly "protective," "generous," or "romantic" (110); rather, she is aggressive, greedy, and lustful.

She retains this aggression, greed, and lust, or at least this strain of assertiveness, in modern culture, but Morgan continues to be a problematic character. While modern women fantasy writers have rescued her from dwindling to humankind by giving her power, purpose, and position, the fear of the Other, what Elizabeth S. Sklar calls a "pervasive gynophobia" is embodied in popular culture's adoption of an oversexed, mean, and nasty Morgan le Fay à la Malory (33). Yet even within this "gynophobia" we can detect corresponding gaps in both modern and medieval western culture. These cultural gaps, as Joan Kelly and Catherine Belsey have noted,<sup>35</sup> are omissions in the respective ideologies, omissions that prevent complete closure of the hermeneutic circle of patriarchy, i. e. the dominant ideology. Morgan le Fay remains on the circle's perimeter, marginalized within the dominant ideology but centralized within the repressed voices and presences of alterity.

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<sup>35</sup> See Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in Becoming Visible: Women in European History, eds. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977) 137-64 and Catherine Belsey, "Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text," Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism, Eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991) 593-609.



## Chapter 2

**"She knows, too, the art of changing her shape, of flying through the air . . ."**

Morgan in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlini and Layamon's Brut

The figure of Morgan le Fay is most powerful yet, paradoxically, the least threatening in the first Arthurian text written by an Englishman to mention her, the twelfth-century Vita Merlini, Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin pseudo-biographical poem of the Welsh bard Merlin. In it we see, perhaps more strikingly than in any later Arthurian texts, an almost palpable difference between medieval culture and modern. Here we see the confluence of Germanic and Christian culture, a blending of nature, the supernatural, and the rational, what Karen Jolly calls a "natural mysticism." Jan Ziolkowski reads this twelfth-century poem as

stand[ing] at the intersection of oral and written, Church, classical Latin, and Celtic. But in large part the jumble exists only in the eyes of the beholder. The long ruminations on the universe, fishes, and islands are not as irrelevant as they seem at first blush; they impress upon Merlin that God controls every aspect of nature, that a divine providence determines the course of events. (162)

The distinctions between perception and knowledge, between the world of nature and that of the supernatural, were all blended within a worldview in which "everything was alive with the presence of God and other spiritual beings" (Jolly 224). It was a different way of knowing, of seeing, that conflated mysticism and science, and, to a large degree, a mode of perception that blended strains of paganism with Christianity. Paganism is a palpable, even powerful, presence in the two texts I will be examining from this early period: Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century text Vita Merlini and Layamon's early thirteenth-century work Brut: A History of the Britons. Early medieval society was more open to the influence of both folklore and the Scriptures, of experience and of authority, than it would be in the waning Middle Ages, as the early open Church, a "living union of mighty opposites" (Heer 21) in which natural and supernatural were contiguous, increasingly closed itself to outside influences.

The early Church, criticized for its attraction to superstition, accommodated this early holistic worldview in the daily lives of medieval men and women as they strove to deal with the unknown, and potentially threatening, world of nature. Anglo-Saxon charms represent this blend of the natural and supernatural. The metrical charm for unfruitful land in Ms. Cotton Caligula A. vii invokes an earlier concept of an earlier pagan goddess along with a contemporary prayer to God the Father:

Erce, Erce, Erce,            eorðanmodor,  
 geunne fe se alwada,    ece drihten,  
 æcera wexendra        and wridendra,  
 eacniendra        and elniendra. (51-54)  
 (Erce, Erce, Erce, mother of Earth,  
 may the all-powerful eternal Lord grant you,  
 fields growing and thriving,  
 flourishing and bountiful.)

This charm, which also instructs specific ritual actions to accompany the prayers, illustrates this marriage of the natural world and Christian cosmogony in the early medieval period. The charm comes from "a world in which earth can be anthropomorphized and addressed as a principle created by God" (Jolly 235). The varied nature of these charms shows them to be an integral part of early medieval culture, illustrated by the collection in Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie's edition of The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems which includes a charm to insure a safe journey as well as the following concerns: a nine herbs charm; protection against a dwarf, a sudden stitch, loss of cattle, the water-elf disease, a swarm of bees, delayed birth, and a wen.

This small collection is a window into a medieval world in which the Church was more open, more receptive, to the otherness of pre-Christian folk ritual. There was also a place for the marvelous in this culture. Jacques Le Goff sees the early Middle Ages as a time when a "belief in miracles, and the enduring struggle between high and popular culture," led to a rise in

the marvelous in high culture in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>36</sup> The marvelous occupied a place between the miraculous, a Christian realm, and the magical, an increasingly problematic realm in the later Middle Ages. The marvelous has the added benefit of having no automatic associations with either good or evil, despite its roots in a pre-Christian folklore. Yet, most astounding of all, as Le Goff points out, is the Church's tolerance for the marvelous with its still visible traces of the pagan (36).

Such traces are located throughout the world of nature in mountains and rocks, springs and fountains, trees, and islands (Le Goff 36). Perhaps Geoffrey of Monmouth's most valuable contribution to the continuing presence of Morgan le Fay is his connection of her to the marvelous Island of Avalon, the Celtic Otherworld that is Arthur's final resting place. Her insularity, in turn, leads to her autonomy and power, and reinforces her earlier association with Celtic goddesses, among them the Welsh river goddess Modron. Also, there are two explicit references to the healing power of water in the text. The first occurs in Taliesin's report on the bounty of Britain, especially the medicinal quality of its hot springs: "Utilis ad plures laticis medicamine morbos / set mage femineos ut sepius unda probavit" (873-4) ("Because of the medical properties of the waters, they are useful in most kinds of diseases, but especially for women's disorders, as the water has frequently demonstrated," [99].)<sup>37</sup> The second occurrence is a wondrous spring that settles the humours of Merlin's body, restoring his sanity (1145-53).

Morgan also has strong watery connections in Breton folklore. Mari Morgans, Margots, and Morgans are Breton sea fairies noted for their seductive charms, which they use on unsuspecting sailors (Olstead 122). The Morgan of Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini* has, however, no traces of the siren, the temptress. Rather, she rules benevolently with her eight sisters over a bountiful land described as an earthly paradise:

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<sup>36</sup> He credits the rise of the marvelous with several factors, among them a Church which felt it could "tame" or utilize the marvelous to its own advantage. The Church also yielded to increased pressure from certain secular groups that wanted to include the marvelous in the literature of high culture, e. g. the romance.

<sup>37</sup> All translations from *Vita Merlini* are by Basil Clarke.

Insula pomorum que Fortunata vocatur  
ex re nomen habet quia per se singula profert.

Non opus est illi sulcantibus arva colonis,  
omnis abest cultus nisi quem natura ministrat.

.....

Omnia gignit humus vice graminis ultro redundans,  
annis centenis aut ultra vivitur illic. (908-911, 914-15)

(The *Island of Apples* gets its name "The Fortunate Island" from the fact it produces all manner of plants spontaneously. It needs no farmers to plough the fields. . . . All plants, not merely grass alone, grows [sic] spontaneously; and men live a hundred years or more [101].)

Thus, not only is Morgan free of the darker associations of sorcery, adultery, and treason she accrues in the later texts, she is also presented as ruler of a second Eden. The island itself, described above as marvelously bountiful, is a result of natura. The goddess Natura, whom Friedrich Heer calls the "demonic-divine mother of all things," was first recognized as a cosmic power in the twelfth century (118). Vita Merlini recalls the divine aspect of Natura, whereas later medieval culture feared and presented the Otherness of the "eternally fruitful mother of all" (119); that is, Natura was represented more and more as "the dark chaos from whence life wells up, as this life itself, and as the over-yonder toward which life tends" (Beauvoir 162-3). Thus the goddess Natura becomes the Other as the holistic view of early medieval Europe was gradually replaced by a growing secularization of western society (Jolly 248). Joined with this change was a growing hostility among clerical intelligentsia toward nature and "the contemporary distaste for 'filthy womanhood' and 'filthy matter' " that furthered the demonic representation of Natura and woman (Heer 119).

Yet, the Morgan in this twelfth-century work has yet to face this association with chaos and death. People live to the ripe old age of one hundred on Morgan's island, and nature's abundance exacts no price from the inhabitants. Nature's bounty is a gift to the children of God

the Father. Here, Natura is an earth goddess who cares for all in her realm, a decidedly feminine realm. The allusion to the redundancy of ploughmen, with its familiar sexual metaphor, alludes to a feminine sexuality/fertility not dependent upon, yet neither hostile toward, men. This refers to the power of Natura to act independently of mankind, but it may refer also to the curious lack of sexuality associated with Morgan at this point. One reason for this lack of sexuality may be simply the small number of lines devoted to the description of Morgan, Avalon, and Arthur's passage to the island (908-40).<sup>38</sup> Or perhaps Morgan does not yet have the amorous nature associated with the supernatural, especially the *fée*, because she retains the goddess status of the Celtic oral tradition.<sup>39</sup> Another reason may be the medieval belief that virginity was the highest state of being for a woman, goddess or mortal.<sup>40</sup> Virginity would have been all the more elevated given that worship of the Virgin Mary was at its height in the twelfth century.<sup>41</sup>

Regardless of Morgan's marginalized presence in Merlin's world, her alterity is not here a negative representation of the powerful woman. Rather, her Otherness is a positive symbol of power in *Vita Merlini*. She retains all the powers she has in her first-century goddess figure, except for the power of prophecy, a power assumed by another woman, Merlin's sister Ganeida, and sanctioned by Merlin:

Tene, soror, voluit res precantare futuras

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<sup>38</sup> Yet Taliesin finds it necessary to tell Merlin of the *murenas*, a species of fish that is all female and copulates through other species (83-35).

<sup>39</sup> While the amorous nature of the *fée* is often cited as one of the reasons she acts as a benefactor to a particular hero, the relationship between Morgan and Arthur remains a doctor-patient one. Whether or not Geoffrey maintains Morgan's goddess status from her earlier incarnation in Pomponius Mela's first-century *De Chorographia Libri Tres* remains problematic. Would even a more open twelfth-century text sanction a goddess to co-exist openly in a Christianized Europe?

<sup>40</sup> The idea that the feminine principle is more powerful, hence more menacing, comes from Simone de Beauvoir's examination of alterity. Here the idea of feminine integrity might be said to link Morgan and her sisters, benevolent and virginal in their Celtic Otherworld, with the Valkyries, malevolent and virginal in their Teutonic Otherworld.

<sup>41</sup> Shulamith Shahar notes the growing presence of the Virgin Mary in the Ave Maria, the centrality of her figure in art and drama, as well as the numerous songs and hymns that were written to praise her (25).

spiritus osque meum compescuit atque libellum?

Ergo tibi labor iste datur. Leteris in illo

auspiciisque meis devote singula dicas.' (1521-24)

('Sister, is it you the spirit has willed to foretell the future? He has curbed my tongue and closed my book. Then this task is given to you. Be glad of it, and under my authority declare everything faithfully' [135].)

The fear of woman's appropriation of language<sup>42</sup> is never realized in Ganieda's assumption of Merlin's vatic powers. Instead, she is even relegated the one prophecy that deals with contemporary politics, and the final address to the Normans "could be taken as airing the need for a permanent settlement of the dynastic feuds, or as an attempt to cultivate [King] Stephen's favour" (Clarke 152). Her words take on even more significance given the troubled political and social climate of twelfth-century England with its problems of annexation and civil war.

Morgan's words are not recorded in the text, yet we know her ability as a healer and as a teacher is valued. She has taught astronomy to her sisters ("*Hancque mathematicam dicunt didicisse sorores*," 926). She is a skilled healer, a characteristic she retains from her goddess status and one she maintains even in her most villainous incarnations. Taliesin, who accompanies Arthur to Avalon, gladly leaves the king in her care when she tells him that Arthur can be healed only if he stays with her for a long time and accepts her medical treatment ("*redire salutem / posse sibi dixit, si secum tempore longo / esset et ipsius vellet medicamine fungi*," 936-8). As Morgan is a teacher of astrology, an educational background in the quadrivium is suggested, a background to which even noblewomen would have had little access.<sup>43</sup> Merlin's forest house, too, has its links with astronomy, a Welsh non-Christian star-

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<sup>42</sup> See Régnier-Bohler, p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> The figure of Morgan suffered as later centuries and subsequent texts reflect the growing association of knowledge, particularly woman's knowledge, with evil. See Kathryn S. Westoby's look at the *fée* in French romances to see Morgan's goddess powers reduced to the seven arts and, all too often, linked to magic and the devil. See "A New Look at the Role of the *Fée* in Medieval French Arthurian Romance."

prophecy (Clarke 141).<sup>44</sup> He asks Ganeida to build him a house with seventy doors and windows so that he may watch the stars, spinning in the heavens, to help him prophesy about his country's future:

Ante domos alias unam compone remotam  
 cui sex dena decem dabis hostia totque fenestras,  
 per qua ignivomum videam cum Venere Phebum  
 inspiciamque polo labentia sydera noctu,  
 que me de populo regni ventura docebunt. (555-9)

(Before the other buildings build me a remote one to which you will give seventy doors and as many windows, through which I may see fire-breathing Phoebus with Venus, and watch by night the stars wheeling in the firmament; and they will teach me about the future of the nation [81].)

Morgan's knowledge of astronomy also may arise from more than a superior education; it is in all likelihood non-Christian, like Merlin's star-prophecy, a rationalized form of the power she has as a goddess, "to know what is to be" (Olstead 161). Furthermore, her knowledge is comparable to, but independent of, Merlin's own. Later Arthurian texts situate her as Merlin's apprentice, giving Merlin the "secret knowledge" that Morgan can possess only in part.<sup>45</sup> In this twelfth-century text her power and knowledge derive from no patriarchal institution or figure.

In *Vita Merlini* Morgan's power and knowledge bears the traces of an older Celtic mythology from which Morgan derives much of her power. As a goddess in Pomponius Mela's

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<sup>44</sup> See Jan Ziolkowski, "Prophecy in Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*," for a discussion of the various types of Merlin's prophecies, ranging from orthodox medieval Christian to pre-Christian shaman.

<sup>45</sup> To see this apprenticeship's fullest implications, with a long-suffering tutor-sorcerer (Merlin) and a lascivious, envious, manipulative Morgan, see John Boorman's *Excalibur*. In the film, it is the "spell of making" that Morgan covets, a spell that smacks of an older, feminine power of procreation that has been appropriated by Merlin. Lucy Allen Paton cites an earlier text, the thirteenth-century *English Merlin* as explaining Morgan's apprenticeship to Merlin, as well as her kinship to Arthur: she learned so much necromancy from Merlin that "the peple cleped hir afterward Morgain le fee, the suster of kynge Arthur" (note 1, 165).

Chorographia, she could "rouse the sea and winds" (Olstead "Role," 161). I would suggest an allusion to these powers in Merlin's initial request to Taliesin: "Venerat interea Merlinum visere vatem / tunc Telgesinus qui discere missus ab illo / quid ventus nimbusve foret" (732-4) ("In the meantime Taliesin had come to visit the prophet Merlin, who had sent for him to learn what winds and rain-storms were" [91]). Taliesin recites a creation myth particular to the early medieval period, conflating sites and figures from antiquity with the Genesis story of creation.<sup>46</sup> Beginning with a single Creator who creates the heavens and the earth, he moves on to the bands of spirits who occupy the heights of the heavens and act as intermediaries between God and mankind (737-78).<sup>47</sup> The encyclopedic list continues, its ties to antiquity evident in the names of islands and the figures associated with them. For example, the Gorgades, "habitant mulieres corporis hirci, / que celeri cursu lepores superare feruntur" (898-9) ("inhabited by goat-bodied women, and these women are said to run faster than hares," [101]), boast of a population of Gorgons, hairy, rough-bodied women of mythology who can outrun the hare, long a pagan symbol of female fertility.

Morgan herself retains pagan characteristics that Geoffrey reports rather than rationalizes or reduces:

Morgen ei nomen didicitque quid utilitatis  
gramina cuncta ferant ut languida corpora curet.  
Ars quoque nota sibi qua scit mutare figuram  
et resecare novis quasi Dedalus aera pennis. (920-4)

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<sup>46</sup> This blending of the pre-Christian and Christianity came from schools, monastic teaching, as well as the encyclopedias (which were being produced for the "general-reader market" by the twelfth century) that fed into all of this (Clarke 7).

<sup>47</sup> Curiously, although Taliesin follows this with a mention of the evils of incubii, evil demons who impregnate mortal women through various deceptions, no mention is made of Merlin's incubus-father, a fact that nearly costs him his life in Geoffrey's earlier text Historia Regum Britanniae.



(Her name is Morgen, and she has learned the uses of all plants in curing the ills of the body. She knows, too, the art of changing her shape, of flying through the air, like Daedalus, on strange wings [101].)

Like the Irish goddesses of battle, the Morrígain, to whom she owes much of her power, she can change her shape.<sup>48</sup> The Morrígain took the shape of the beasts of battle, particularly the wolf and the raven, and it is the raven that Morgan's flight conjures up with her "strange wings." Her power of flight is not explained away by twelfth-century science, nor demonized as an evil craft.<sup>49</sup> Rather, she uses it to fly cum vult (at will), a privilege that is denied Merlin as he is captured and twice brought back to the court in chains.

Merlin is also bound by fleshly ties to the civilized world. The lascivious lecher that he comes to be in later tales, as he sets his sights on Nimue's maidenhead, is foreshadowed in his carnal ties to his wife. Unable to live with her in the civilized world, he cannot escape his mortal jealousies even while he lives as a hermit in the woods. His wife, Guendoloena, is the idealized figure of the steadfast, long-suffering, obedient Anglo-Norman wife whose life is largely dictated by her husband's desires. We know nothing else of her other than her beauty. Ganeida's messenger tells him that Guendoloena has mourned his absence as a devoted wife should, but, before we find that she is worn from weeping, the messenger gives us a mini blazon detailing her beauty:

Non erat in Waliis mulier mulier formosior illa.

Vincebat candore deas foliumque liguistri

vernantesque rosas et olentia lilia prati.

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<sup>48</sup> Charles Squire notes in Celtic Myth and Legend that although known collectively as the Morrígain, the Celtic war goddess is actually five separate war goddesses: "Fea, the 'Hateful,' Nemon the 'Venomous,' Badb, the 'Fury,' Macha, a personification of 'battle,' and over all of them, the Morrígú, or 'Great Queen.'" Morrígú is always present when there is war, "either in her own shape or in her favourite disguise, that of a 'hoodie,' or carrion crow" (52). See also Myra Olstead, "Role and Evolution of the Arthurian Enchantress," 13-17.

<sup>49</sup> Although Geoffrey merely cites Bladud as someone who established some medicinal baths in England, it is clearly the same character that Layamon later excoriates as an evil sorcerer who consorts with the Devil and tries to fly with homemade wings. He fails, and Layamon's mini-exemplum on pride is complete.

Gloria vernalis sola radiebat in illa  
 sidereumque decus geminis gestabat ocellis  
 insignesque comas auri fulgores nitentes. (173-8)

(No woman in Wales more beautiful—beyond goddesses in fairness, beyond the rivet  
 petal, the rose in bloom, beyond the lilies of the field! The splendour of spring shone in  
 her alone, the beauty of the stars was held in her two eyes, gold glittered in her  
 glorious hair [61].)

Such blazons are common conventions in ascribing a woman's beauty to her worth and  
 goodness, for both go hand-in-hand with beauty in medieval representations of women. Morgan,  
 too, has great beauty, but a blazon devoted to that beauty would only reveal the emptiness of  
 the tribute, since she possesses more; she has power and an autonomy that makes her beauty  
 secondary to her skills and abilities, talents which qualify her to rule alongside Natura and to  
 heal Arthur, the great hope of the Britons. Guendoloena has nothing more to attract Merlin's  
 attention than her beauty; yet, it is this attraction that points out Merlin's inherent carnal  
 weakness. Even though he convinces his wife to take another husband to replace him, Merlin  
 reacts violently to her groom when he sees him, undoubtedly feeling himself cuckolded, despite  
 having granted Guendoloena permission to remarry.<sup>50</sup>

[E]xtempolo divulsit cornua cervo  
 quo gestabatur vibrataque jecit in illum,  
 et caput illius penitus contrivit eumque  
 reddidit exanimen vitamque fugavit in auras. (467-70)

([H]e promptly wrenched off the horns of the stag he rode. He whirled the horns round  
 and threw them at the bridegroom. He crushed the bridgroom's head right in,  
 knocking him lifeless, and drove his spirit to the winds [77].)

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<sup>50</sup> Guendoloena's bridegroom also responds to Merlin's strange entrance, sitting astride a  
 stag, accompanied by a row of does and she-goats, with a laugh. As Merlin is noted for his  
 cryptic laugh that precedes his revelation of some secret knowledge, perhaps there is an even  
 deeper jealousy at work here.

Morgan's independence is a telling counterpoint to Merlin's dependence. She is removed from the desires of the flesh and rules harmoniously with *Natura*. While she lives a virginal life in her bountiful kingdom, Merlin complains of the hardships that the forest he loves so much imposes on him: "*Celi Christe deus, quid agam? Qua parte morari / terrarum potero cum nil quo vescar adesse / inspicio, nee gramen humi nec in arbores glandes* (87-9) ("O Christ, God of heaven, what shall I do? What place is there on earth where I can live? I see there is nothing here to eat--no grass on the ground, no acorns on the tree," [57].) His sister, Ganeida, rescues him when she hears of his distress from a passing traveler. She sends a messenger to persuade Merlin to return, which he does by coaxing Merlin from his madness with music. The second time Merlin complains of the harshness of winter, he again finds help from his sister:

*Ne tamen escae michi brumali tempore desit,  
in silvis compone domos adhibeque clientes  
obsequiumque michi facient escasque parabunt  
cum tellus gramen fructumque negaverit arbor.* (551-4)

(Still, food might fail me in winter. So raise me a house, send me retainers to serve me and prepare meals in the time when the earth refuses its grain and the tree its fruit [81].)

Not only does Ganeida have a house built for him, but she comes personally to serve him food and drink. Inge Vielhauer-Pfeiffer reads the relationship between Merlin and Ganeida as a union characterized by mutual understanding, with no struggle for power, but their relationship still follows the traditional construct of the nurturing female serving a worthy man, as Ganeida assumes the position of her brother's keeper.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ganeida's position remains problematic throughout the text, for it is Merlin who reveals her adultery to her husband. She responds by trying to discredit his prophetic powers with trickery and calumny, calling Merlin a *falsus vates*, a false prophet (323). Later, she mourns her husband's death with elaborate mourning and gives up all she owns to join her brother in the woods.

Morgan, too, is a nurturing female, but her nurturing suggests more of the healer than the keeper. She possesses the knowledge of herbs, the wisdom of nature. Her skill is a feature of the goddess, as well as a characteristic of the "secret knowledge" of the wise woman, the herbalist whose power of healing is distorted and darkened in the later Middle Ages, until she appears throughout later literature as the venefica.<sup>52</sup> Here, however, Morgan's power and skills are lauded, never encountering patriarchal suspicion or censure. Even her depiction as the singular healer of Arthur flies in the face of later medieval conventions wherein "the very depiction of a tender and merciful woman is an exception" (Shahar 169).<sup>53</sup> The dual threat of the university and male fear of feminine power had not yet begun to diminish Morgan's role as healer. Geoffrey, of course, presents her healing as a positive power, lest he be forced to explain Taliesin's decision to leave King Arthur in a venefica's hands. There is also Merlin's own ambiguous use of plants: "Utitur herbarum radicibus, utitur herbis, / Utitur arboreo fructu morisque rubeti" (78-9). ("He made use of the roots of plants and of grasses, of fruit from trees and of the blackberries in the thicket" [57]). Geoffrey doesn't make it clear whether Merlin's knowledge extends to healing or whether he turns to a vegetarian diet to subsist in the woods. Morgan's connection with nature is visibly more substantive, a positive and powerful interaction with Natura.

Morgan's power and presence undoubtedly remain intact, then, her alterity a positive and vital component in the text. Her domain is marginalized, as is her character, but neither is diminished nor defamed. Instead, Morgan's various powers and her realm of the Otherworld fit well within the pattern of the medieval encyclopedia, blending with its compendium of contemporary science and classical stories. In Vita Merlini she and her gynaceum are described, not prescribed, for they are as much a part of Merlin's world as is the nature that surrounds him

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52 There are two examples of the venefica in the text, but Geoffrey devotes little space to either. The first is Rowenna, the female poisoner Layamon later damns so thoroughly, and an unnamed lover Merlin had "discarded" and refused to cohabit with any longer.

53 It must be remembered, however, that Morgan's healing is interconnected with Avalon, an Otherworld that does not readily comply with contemporary medieval culture. It is a world in which the Other is no longer marginalized but, instead, plays a central role.

and the God who created it all. Morgan's marginalization, moreover, is colored by the text's protagonist, Merlin, himself a prophet-sorcerer, born of a demon father. Alterity approaches the commonplace when the major character is Merlin, an Arthurian figure long disassociated from society and associated with the divine and the supernatural, rather than just Arthur himself. It is only later, when she has been drawn into the extensive family of Arthur, with its growing association with Christian mythology, British nationalism, and the masculine world of the court, that her alterity becomes more pronounced and problematic.

We find evidence of the burgeoning Christian mythos and the miles Christi figure of a Crusader-like Arthur a half century later in Layamon's Brut: A History of the Britons. Here Arthur is a crusader for both the spiritual and his own earthly realm:

Arfur a fet lond ferde. and fa leoden a-merden.

muchel uolc he aslo3. orf he nom vniuoh.

7 æuere he hæhte ælcne mon. chireche-griðhalden. (11136-38)

(Arthur marched through that realm [Ireland] destroying the people, slaying many and taking possessions enough but always ordering his men to respect the protection of the church [210]. Trans. Donald G. Bzdył.<sup>54</sup>)

Eventually, Arthur has in hand Britain, Scotland, Gotland, Ireland, Orkney, and Iceland (11287-8). Thereafter, Arthur dwells for twelve years in the relative peace and prosperity of a strong king.

However, the source of this great king's powers, Merlin and Argante's elves, calls into question the Christian nature of Arthur's mission in Ireland, for Layamon retains much of the supernatural in his history of Britain, especially as it figures in Arthur's own life. Marvels occur throughout the text, an example of the growing presence of the marvelous in thirteenth-century texts, as Jacques Le Goff notes in The Medieval Imagination (27-37). Arthur's

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<sup>54</sup> All subsequent translations of the Brut will be taken from Bzdył's translation. The Middle English text comes from Layamon: Brut, Eds. G. L. Brook and R. F. Leslie, Published for the Early English Text Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

engendering depends greatly on the magical powers of the sorceror Merlin, while his natal gifts come from elves, emissaries of the elfin queen, Argante.<sup>55</sup> Ygerne is with child, begotten by a lascivious Uther who uses "Merlines wigel" (trickery) to bed and wed the beautiful queen (9605-06):

Sone swa he com an eorðe. aluen hine iuengen.  
 heo bigolen fat child. mid galdere swiðe stronge.  
 heo zeuen him mihte. to beon bezst alre cnihten.  
 heo zeuen him an-oðer fīng. fat he scolde beon riche king.  
 heo ziuen him fat fridde. fat he scolde longe libben.  
 heo zifen him fat kine-bern. custen swiðe gode.  
 fat he wes mete-custi. of alle quike monnen.  
 fis fe alue him gef. and al swa fat child ifæh. (9608-15)

(As soon as he came upon the earth, elves took him and enchanted the child with very strong magic. They gave him the power to be the best of all knights; they gave him a second blessing: that he should be a powerful king; and they gave him a third: that he should have a long life. They bestowed on the child excellent virtues so that he was the most generous of all living men. This the elves gave him, and thus he prospered [187].)

Arthur's entire life, in fact, is a curious blend of the supernatural and the early Christian beliefs that permeate Layamon's Britain. Curiously, Taliesin, the same bard who accompanies a wounded adult Arthur to Avalon in *Vita Merlini* and tells Merlin the miraculous account of Avalon and its ruler, Morgan, is here a venerated prophet who tells of the coming of Christ

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<sup>55</sup> It is generally agreed that Argante is Morgan. While most critics simply accept that Layamon has merely substituted another name for the *fée*, others pursue theories concerning etymology, scribal errors, and Layamon's familiarity with the form Argante. See Lucy Allen Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, 26-7. Herein I will use Argante when referring to the actual character in the *Brut* and Morgan when referring to the shifting figure of the Arthurian legend.

(4520-31). Merlin and Argante are independent of one another in the Brut. Taliesin speaks only of the coming of Christ and Arthur, while Arthur himself tells his people of Argante's role in his final resting place.

Elsewhere, the body of Arthur, savior of the Britons, is conflated with that of Christ, Savior of all humanity, as Merlin uses eucharistic imagery to tell of Arthur's future fame:

of him scullen gleomen. godliche singen.

of his breosten scullen æten. aðele scopes.

scullen of his blode. beornes beon drunke. (9410-12).

(Gleemen will artfully sing of him, noble poets will eat of his breast, and knights will be intoxicated by his blood [184].)

Not only does Arthur embody the transubstantiated nature of Christ, he also takes on the physical attributes of the miles Christi figure known throughout earlier patristic literature:

of his eþene scullen fleon. furene gleden.

ælc finger an his hond. scarp stelene brond.

beornes scullen rusien. reosen heore mærlen. (9413-16)

(Fiery sparks shall fly from his eyes; each finger of his hand will be a sharp steel sword. Before him stone walls will topple, warriors quake, and battle-standards fall [184].)

Yet even as the steel springs from the fingers of this awful, warrior Christ figure, we are reminded that this very steel comes to him from the elfin smith, Widia, and that his sword Caliburn was created by magic in Avalon, the Otherworld kingdom of his future healer, Argante:

fa dude he on his burne. ibroide of stele.

fe makede on aluisc smið. mid aðelen his crafte.

he wes ihaten Wygar. fe Witege wurhte.

.....

Calibeorne his sweor[d]. he sweinde bi his side.

hit wes iworht in Aualun, mi[d] wiȝele-fulle craften. (10543-45, 10547-48)

(Arthur put on Wygar, his armor of woven steel made with noble skill by the elfin smith Widia . . . [He] hung by his side the sword Caliburn wrought by magic in Avalon [202]).

Even the traditional associations of watery sites of supernatural power is encountered by Arthur as he marches on his Scottish enemy. As Arthur and his men pursue their prey, they come upon a lake of marvels, a dark place with strong ties to an earlier hellish spot, Grendel's Mere. Here those responsible for the wondrous water monsters are elves: "[N]ikeres *fer ba[ð]ieð* inne. / *fer is æluene ploȝe. in atteliche pole*" (10851-52) ("Water monsters bathe in that hideous loch of elfin sport" [206]). The lake is also immeasurably broad, indicative of the mysterious and threatening unmaete (unmeasured) side of nature that haunts earlier medieval literature.

The presence of the supernatural is further manifested in an additional large lake, filled with un-fæle water ("evil water") (10987). There Morgan's folk associations with Breton water fairy lore, as well as her parallel ties with Diana, goddess of the moon, can be seen in a lake wherein neither storms nor natural movements of the tides affect its level (10988-95). Even the benevolent attribute of the ladies of the lake is present here to protect the unwary (innocent) mortal trespasser from drowning (10996-11002). King Howel's response to the catalogue of marvels in these waters complements the earlier medieval confluence of the supernatural and the divine: "Nu ic ihere tellen. seolcu *fe* spellen. / 7 seollic is *fe* lauerd. fat al hit isette" (11004-05) ("Now I have heard wondrous words: great is the Lord Who created all this" [208]).

There is ample room for the *fée* in this blend of Christianity and an earlier paganism, and while she still occupies the same marginalized position as ruler of Avalon that she does in Geoffrey's Vita Merlini, her presence is disseminated throughout the natural world and the world of the court. R. S. Loomis cites Layamon as the first to record the elfin natal gifts and



links this same motif in Chrétien's Perceval, as well as other romances--Florigant, Ogier, and Garin de Monglane--written soon after the Brut ("Morgain" 30-31). In the latter three romances, Morgan is included among the supernatural visitors, causing Loomis to infer that "she was prominent in it from the very first." He goes on to draw Morgan further into this elfin association, ending with a 1888 folklorist report that linked fairies called Margots to both Arthur's natal gifts and Morgan's functions in the Middle Ages (31). Moreover, Layamon calls Argante the "fairest alre aluen" (14291) (fairest of all the elves), the same elves who construct wondrous lakes, forge matchless steel, and bestow prophetic gifts upon the children of nobility. Argante's presence, even though embodied in the insular position of queen of Avalon, resonates throughout the realm of the marvelous within which Layamon situates his history.

Argante's power is also echoed in the catalogue of strong, wise women whom Layamon details. While his narration is didactic and given to prescriptive, heavily formulaic roles for men and women, his women often avoid the narrower stereotypes of his male characters. Rosamund Allen notes his powerful, yet positive characterization of women in the text:

He certainly classifies them in the archetypal roles of mother, sister, daughter, wife and queen-consort, and, in emergency, folk-leader, but where women appear in this heavily masculine and martial world, they give a refreshingly different perspective not only on those tiresome wars and quarrels on every page, but also on the very experience of being a woman in that world. (134)

As such, he tells us of Queen Gwendolen, a strong and celebrated queen who marches against her husband the king, his consort, and their child, kills all three, and goes on to rule wisely and well all of Britain. Layamon sees her assumption of power and her bloody revenge as justified and praises her as a wise ruler, citing her fifteen-year reign as one of peace and harmony for all the Britons (1259-61). Peace and the wisdom to bring it about are noteworthy accomplishments in Layamon's world, regardless of gender.

Learned women are also important in his history. He even pointedly deflates Alfred the Great's reputation in his homage to one learned queen, Marcie:

*fa madeðe heo ane læ3e. and læide 3eon ƿat leode.  
 ƿeos la3e wes al iworhte.  
 Bruttes nemmeden ƿa la3en. æfter ƿare laƿuedi.  
 to soðen wihten wene. ƿe la3e hehte Marciane.  
 Seo[ð]den ƿer-æfter. monie hundred wintre,  
 com Alfred ƿe king. Englelondes deorling.  
 and wrat ƿa la3en on Englis. ase heo wes ær on Bruttisc.  
 and whærƿde hire nome on his dæ3e. and cleopede heo Mærcene la3e.  
 Ah ƿet I ƿe sugge. ƿurh alle ƿing. ne madeðe heo noh[t] ærst Ælured  
 king.  
 ah heo madeðe ƿa quene. ƿe me Mærcie cleopede.  
 and Ælured heo seide on Engliſc. ƿis seoðful iwiſ. (3143-53)*

(She made a law governing all things and set it over the people. The Britons named the law after their lady calling it the Marciane, but after many hundred winters King Alfred, England's darling, came and wrote the law in English whereas before it had been in British; he changed its name to the Marcene Law. Nevertheless, no matter what, I tell you truly that it was not made first by King Alfred; Queen Marcie wrote it and Alfred merely translated it into English. That is certain [84].)

This is strong praise indeed, and it complements nicely Rosamund Allen's reading of Layamon as a writer whose history is based on the idea that "the hero is neither man nor woman but this lond: those who give birth to and educate its line of kings and contribute to its peace and stability are the hidden power of the realm" (Allen 140). Marcie's keen sense of justice supercedes Alfred's later claim, making her contribution to England's stability invaluable. Since Argante's presence is so invaluable in the Brut, we can surmise, then, that Argante's Otherworld Isle of Avalon also is still a part of this lond, a vital part of British history. Later distinctions between the supernatural and the natural had yet to crystallize into separate

realms in Layamon's world. Hence a powerful female, supernatural or mortal, still could contribute positively to England's history.

Motherhood, however, constitutes Layamon's chief interest in his female figures, and he is quick to add that both Gwendolen and Marcie held the throne only until their well-reared sons could succeed them. His tenderness toward Merlin's mother, a nun who had been raped by an incubus, is noted by Rosamund Allen: "The narrative of Merlin's engendering is subtle and manages to present a dual point of view: the nun-mother, embarrassed about her ambiguous status, recalls the mingled self-admiration and inexperience of her fifteen-year-old self" (142) who is caught between dream and waking when her lover, "*fa fæireste fing fat wes iboren*" (7839) (the fairest thing that was born), comes to call (142). He further diminishes any guilty associations about her relationship by describing an incubus who comes to her as she lies half between sleep and waking, a vision so beautiful, he could be the Handsome Prince of fairy tales rather than the beast father of Merlin in Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae*: "[f]en com biuoren. *fa fæirest fing fat wes iboren. / swulc hit weore fa muchel cniht. al of golde idiht*" (7839-40) ("[T]here appeared before me the fairest creature ever born; it looked like a great knight all dressed in gold" [158]). Layamon even remembers his own mother in his Prologue, but his sincerity suffers from the prevailing ideas regarding woman's role in procreation as the passive incubator/vessel, while the father remains the driving force behind the child's creation: "[F]or his fader saule. *fa hine for[ð] brouhte. / 7 for his moder saule. fa hine to monne iber* (33-4) ("[F]or the soul of the father who engendered him, and for the soul of the mother who bore him" [33]).

His praise of and tenderness toward the good mother makes his reproach of the bad mother all that more effective. Rowenne, the stepmother of Vortimer, is thoroughly damned in Layamon's tale because of her maneuvers to marry King Vortiger and her subsequent poisoning of his son, Vortimer. In appearance and action, Rowenne is a beautiful and tractable heathen princess whose first appearance in the story is as an auspicious cup bearer to King Vortiger.

Layamon, however, shows his reader the suspicious shadow behind her beauty and the lust it kindles in Vortiger, even while he foreshadows the evil that she will soon do:

Rouwenne *fe* hende. sat bi *fan* kinge.  
*fe* king heo *georne* biheold. heo was him an heorte leof.  
 ofte he heo custe. ofte he heo clupte.  
 al his mod *z* his main. hælde to *fan* miden to wiue.  
*fe* Wurse wes *fer* ful neh. *fe* in ælche gomene is ful ræh.  
*fe* Wurse ne dude næuere god. he mæingde *fas* kinges mod. (7165-70)

(The beautiful Rowenne sat by Vortiger who looked at her lovingly; she was dear to his heart, and he kissed and embraced her often, his will and his strength yielding completely to the girl. The Worse [the Devil], full cruel in every game, was nearby doing evil. He disturbed the king's mind [148].)

Rowenne is revealed as fully compliant with the Wurse in her role as the venefica. Her duplicity is worthy of the greatest of Arthurian villains, for she gains Vortimer's confidence by agreeing to embrace Christianity, a base hypocrisy she compounds when, with a little sleight of hand, she tricks the king into drinking poison:

*fa* while *fe* *fa* king loh. *fa* ampulle heo ut droh.  
*fene* bolle heo sette to hire chin. *fat* atter heo halde in *fat* win.  
*z* seoðen heo *fa* cuppe. bitahte *fan* kinge,  
*fe* king dronc al *fat* win. *z* at atter *fer*-in. (7480-83).

(While the king was laughing, she drew out the vial and, with the cup at her chin, poured into it the poison. She gave the cup to the king and Vortimer drank all the poisoned wine [153].)

Here it is not mother's milk that the stepmother dispenses but "atter," poison she carries "in hire bosme . . . bi-neoðen hire titten" (7476). Rosamund Allen expands Layamon's excoriation of Rowenne still further: "Her crime is greater than regicide; it is the destruction of the family bond and violation of the principle of motherhood" (143).

Argante escapes explicit maternal obligations and associations through her marginalized position as fairy queen and island recluse, but we have seen how her influence extends far beyond her physical presence. Further, the amorous nature of the *fée*, particularly as it applies to the story's hero, is missing in the *Brut*. Lucy Allen Paton notes Layamon's introduction of "an element somewhat foreign to the usual situation" in the fairy's summons of a hero to the Otherworld: Argante, curiously, does not manifest the usual sexual attraction of the *fée* for the young hero (28). Layamon avoids all manner of sexual attraction, except for the aberrant sexual attraction between the duplicitious, heathen Rowenne and the innocent, Christian Vortiger.<sup>56</sup> Even in the crucial meeting between Rowenne and Vortiger, the lovemaking is tame, suggestive of that between a dottering old man and a novice coquette. There is little of the romance's adroit exploration of love. One must wonder if Layamon was completely unaware of the tales of Morgan from the Breton *fabulatores* and *cantores*, who were largely responsible for disseminating the legends of Morgan on the continent (Loomis "Morgain," 8). Lucy Allen Paton's list of Morgan's roles in late twelfth-century romance adds to the mystery of Layamon's asexual Argante:

If we glance over the earliest extant passages relating to Morgain, which extend approximately from 1148 to the end of the century, we shall see her described as a supernatural maiden who heals Arthur's wounds after his final battle at Camlan, as the maker of a magic balsam, as the acme of beauty and skill; she is said to be the sister and also the niece of Arthur; she is the beautiful lady of Avalon, and the love of its lord; she is represented as the slighted mistress who seeks revenge upon a mortal favorite for spurned love. We learn that she is endowed with the gift of prophecy, the

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<sup>56</sup> He does mention a homosexual king, Membriz, whom he castigates thoroughly because "he for-hewede al his quene" and "wifmen he al bilafde" (1289, 1290) ("He scorned his queen," and "he renounced women entirely"). King Membriz represents the antithesis of Layamon's good king/queen: he gave nothing back to his people but a perverted love for male retainers. His punishment is harsh; he dies a lonely death, ravaged by wolves.

power of shape-shifting and of transforming the shape of mortals, an amorous and also a quickly revengeful nature. (8)

One reason for Argante's asexual nature may be Layamon's own aversion to the private world of intimate relationships; another may be the lack of French-derived words in his vocabulary, a lack that might hinder the expression of "the subtleties of courtly and psychological idiom" (Allen 146). Rosamund Allen points out that there are only 59 such words in the 16,000 lines of text (146).<sup>57</sup> Layamon's concerns lie more with the public world, the world of warfare and public duty, than the private one of tenderness and private responsibilities. Women who take decisive action in the Brut do so when the world of men fails, either through action, e.g. civil war between brothers (Belin and Brennes), or inaction, e.g. failure to rule wisely (King Locrin).

Indeed, Layamon strips Argante of any power that might be redundant or intrusive in her association with Arthur and his story. Her shapeshifting, the traditional traits of the Morrígain, is superfluous, for Arthur's battles are swift and decisive without supernatural help. Her divine knowledge is erased from the text; Layamon leaves her no words or thoughts to question Arthur's use of her natal gifts. Her amorous nature would be only a potential threat to Layamon's world, given the *fée's* tendency to remove her beloved hero from the mortal world to the Otherworld. Only her beauty remains, but it is an innocent beauty, removed from mortal eyes, an almost beatific beauty in Arthur's guardian *fée*. Layamon's Brut retains only that which profits the central figure of Arthur. Argante retains only her gift of prophecy to explain that the infant Arthur, a product of sorcery and rape, will receive the necessary virtues to rule wisely; her gift of healing ensures that the wounded adult Arthur will receive the necessary balm to rule again. Argante is needed because the world of man--the mortal world--fails to provide what the world of the supernatural offers: power, prosperity, and life.

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<sup>57</sup> She goes on to say, however, that this did not stop later English writers Melior, Felice, and Iosian from clever externalization of feelings just a few decades later (146).

I would argue, then, that the *fée's* amorous nature is replaced by a maternal one, one responsible for the elfin presence at Arthur's birth as well as the elfin presence at his final resting place.<sup>58</sup> While this construct of a nurturing *fée* fits Myra M. Olstead's theory that a Celtic earth goddess is Morgan's chief source of both her supernatural powers and her nurturing nature, I contend that it is Layamon's tendency to celebrate the maternal and ignore the carnal that best explains Argante's actions and motivations. Argante is responsible for bestowing the noble gifts that make Arthur a good king, as well as for restoring that same good king back to his people. Indeed, her presence frames Arthur's life. Argante may even be seen here as a surrogate mother for Arthur's own mother, Ygerne, who suffers the fate of many mothers who deliver the world's heroes: she vanishes. After she delivers Arthur and, later, his sister Anne, Ygerne never appears again in the *Brut*, nor, we may surmise, in Arthur's life.

The feminine, however, is represented in the realm of magic in the *Brut*. Magic suffuses Arthur's life and realm; yet, the *venefica* figure is rare in the *Brut*, for there still remain differentiated forms of good and bad magic, as Argante's honored position in both the supernatural realm and the mortal world indicate. Indeed, Argante is the focal point of good magic in Layamon's history. A wounded Arthur is taken to the Otherworld of Avalon, where the beautiful and benevolent Argante will "mid haleweie. helen his wunden" (11513). Marie-Claude Blanchet cites Madden's 1847 edition of the *Brut* in which he translates *haleweige* as balsam or balm, "although it could have referred to any sweet medical drink" (133). There is no hint of the later malevolent associations of the woman healer with poison. Instead, Argante is portrayed as a figure of goodness and power, much as she is in *Vita Merlini*. Blanchet sees her character as "donc très belle et vierge (*uairrest alre maidene*), reine (*quene*), elfe (*aluen*), c'est-à-dire *fée*, et mire (elle sait guérir à l'aide de liqueurs médicinales, soit remèdes, lotions, baumes ou emplâtres)" (134). Argante's association with *haleweige*, a word with allusions to the consecrated, is coupled with the Celtic affinity for "philtres magiques, si courants dans la

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<sup>58</sup> Layamon is quick to point out, however, that the Britons of his own time believed in Arthur's eventual return.

littérature celtique" (143), and her connections with healing run throughout Celtic mythology, as well as Arthurian literature.

As this history is one of relative tolerance for magic, there is much said, but little done, about the supernatural magic of the elves and fairies. Such magic, like Argante herself, is part of the perceived order of the world. Myra M. Olstead points out that

Morgan differs from her mythological forbears in that they [Celtic goddesses] possess divine powers directing impersonal forces of nature in an ordered systematic context that allegorically explains and interprets the universe, while Morgan possesses only magical powers that make her a source of wonder and curiosity. The essential difference, and it is an important one, is that her magic is supernatural, rather than divine in character. (120)

The divine aspect of Argante is glossed over, but we see her close associate the Roman goddess Diana scorned and dismissed early in the text. Yet, the "wonder" of the supernatural realm of magic and elfin-fairy power remains unscathed by later medieval suspicions of witchcraft, and even Argante's fellows, the fairies and elves, that make up this history, escape the later associations of similar supernatural inhabitants with witches' familiars. Argante is completely free from any censure or suspicion, as Blanchet points out in Argante's epithet "hende" (courteous, beautiful, good), which Layamon uses "au point de tourner au *kenning*, à la formule" (144).<sup>59</sup> Given the aversion Layamon shows toward the new chivalric manners that were coming into vogue in French literature, his use of hende as a veritable cliché reveals a strong intention to revere, rather than revile, Argante. He also labels Rowenne hende but changes it to swicfulle (wicked) as her evil plot to murder her stepson begins to unfold. Argante's epithet remains unchanged, as she is shown to be a valuable "woman," constant in her

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<sup>59</sup> C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon define the word "kenning" as a "stereotyped figurative phrase used in Old English and other Germanic languages as a synonym for a simple noun" in A Handbook to Literature, 5th ed. (Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986) 270.



goodness and benevolent in her power. Her unchanging virtues mark her as an idealized medieval construct.

Magic does not always escape Layamon's censure, for he delivers an exemplum on pride when he describes the evil craft of King Bladud. His story is a curious one of evil associations and good intentions, for while "al *fat* euer he wolde. *fe* Wurse him talde" (1420) ("he learned all he wanted to know from the Devil" [57]), he also built baths ingeniously that "make *fat* water hot. *fan* folc halwende" (1424) ("made the water hot and healed the folk" [57]). While Layamon berates him for his alliance with the devil, he seems to take particular delight in describing how his pride leads to a mighty fall: "He *zealp fat* he wolde fleon. on *fuðeles læche*. / *fat* al his folc mihte iseon. *Z* his fluhtes bi-halden" (1434-35) ("He boasted that he would fly in the likeness of a bird so that all the people might see and behold his flight" [57]). He goes to London to find a larger audience, dons his feather covering, and elevates himself through sorcery. But like all proud people, he wanted too much, and he is brought down:

*fe* wind him com on wi ere. weo eleden his fluhtes.

brecon *fa* strenges. *fe* he mid strahte.

*Z* he feol to folde. *fe* king wes feie. (1441-43)

(The wind came up against him; his flight wavered, the cords of his wings broke, and he plummeted to earth. The king died [57].)

As if to illuminate further Bladud's punishment for pagan evil, his fall from the heavens is broken by the temple of Apollo, the "tir-fulle Feond" (1445) ("awful fiend"). While his source Geoffrey of Monmouth omits Bladud's connections with the devil, Layamon's insistence on highlighting them, as well as his unnatural flight, suggests the end of Karen Jolly's holistic worldview of the twelfth century and the beginning of the division of the world into separate spheres of perception. Has Layamon clipped Argante's wings here, too, or can she still fly at will as she can in Vita Merlini? We will never know because Layamon leaves her physically insulated and isolated on Avalon. Her emissaries act as her proxies, creating marvels to mystify the locals; acting as elvin "wise men" for an infant king; and piloting England's Once

and Future King to Avalon, where "he bon on liue. / and wunnien in Aualun. mid fairest alre aluen" (14290-91) ("he is still alive and dwells in Avalon with the fairest of elves" [254]).

While Layamon has not yet given up an earlier medieval acceptance of the supernatural, his seeming delight in revealing the ignorance and wickedness of the pre-Christian in his early tales of Britain's settlement foreshadows the later Middle Ages. One particularly telling instance is his story of the founding father, Brutus, who dabbled in pagan worship, asking for divine intervention to help his people:

Leafdi Diana. leoue Diana. he3e Diana. help me to neode.

Wise m[e] 7 wite [m]e. furh fine wihtful craft.

whuder ich mæi liðan. 7 ledan mine leoden.

to ane wnsume londe. fer ich mihte wunien. (601-04)

('Lady Diana, beloved Diana, noble Diana, help me in need. Enlighten me, teach me through your powerful skill where I may go and lead my people to a winsome land where I might dwell' [44].)

Diana appears to him in a vision that night and tells him about the bountiful land of Albion. Despite the fact that Diana helps Britain's founder find Britain, however, Layamon has just indicted Diana for her alliance with the Shuck (the Devil): "Diana wes ihaten. fe deouel heo luuede. / Heo dude wnder craftes. fe Scucke hire fulste" (575-6) ("She was called Diana--the devil loved her! She could perform magic with the Shuck assisting her" [43]).

It would seem, then, that the natural mysticism of the twelfth century, which presented the realms of the natural, supernatural, and the divine<sup>60</sup> as a unified whole in the medieval world of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, has eroded some fifty years later in Layamon's work, leaving the supernatural as a part of the marvelous that even the later

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<sup>60</sup> While Karen Jolly breaks the spheres down into the natural, the supernatural, and the rational, I believe a further division--the divine, a counterpart of Friedrich Heer's closing of the medieval Church--is a valid extension of Jolly's hypothesis.

Church allowed.<sup>61</sup> The grim exultation in exposing the evils and ignorance of the pagans points to a later Church more closed to openly pagan influences. The closing of the Church, once open to what Friedrich Heer calls "a satisfying blend of ingredients taken from pre-Christian 'pagan' folk religions," (20) has closed even Layamon's antiquarian world.<sup>62</sup> Images of pagan worship take on the darker overtones of devil worship as the later Church began to assume its more adamant form.<sup>63</sup>

Argante retains her prominence and power as benevolent healer in the *Brut*, but she reflects the abundance of the supernatural within the text, rather than the continuing presence of the goddess in Arthurian literature. As cited before, she is a "source of wonder and curiosity, rather than the divine" in Layamon's history (Olstead "Role," 120). While wonder and curiosity are still viable concerns, not yet threatening or tinged with later evil connotations, they are still qualities of Otherness that separate Argante from textual centrality as surely as her island separates her from Arthur's Britain. Yet, she remains powerful even in her seclusion, sequestered in her fairy realm. Simone de Beauvoir's definition of woman as Other would posit her as "healing process and sorceress" (162), but this is a nascent dichotomy in Layamon's archaic world.

His is a world where sorcery still can be either good or evil, and universities have not yet made healing a male profession, rather than a skill practiced by both men and women. Argante retains her benevolence, her usefulness, while her divine powers have dwindled to

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61 Yet this is a problematic reading, for this obvious censure clashes with the reverence of Brutus's invocation. Surely, Layamon, as an historian and patriot, would value the words and thoughts of his country's founder, but Layamon, the priest, must contest Brutus's pagan ignorance as a matter of course.

62 Most critics agree with Rosamund Allen who finds the society Layamon depicts as superceded at least 150-200 years earlier than the text's writing ca. 1205.

63 Pagan influences remain in one curiously blended instance of pagan and Christian when Merlin walks around the stones of Stonehenge three times, "sturede his tunge. al-se he bede sunge" (8702) ("and moved his tongue as if he were singing his beads"). Stonehenge, with its long association with druidism and later Christian kings, is a telling place for this mixing of pagan ritual with Catholic.

elfin magic. Links to her divine nature have been transmuted to the less threatening realm of the *fée*, or they have been erased as the figure of Morgan is drawn inexorably into Arthur's world, the world of Christianity, the nation state, and the court: patriarchal realms that figure largely in the marginalization of women. In fact, while Argante is named only twice in the text, both namings come from Arthur. Arthur validates her nominally and cites her as his own savior, thereby clenching Morgan's position as his healer in future Arthurian texts, regardless of her later evil reincarnations:

... [H]e uaren wolde. into Aualune.

in-to *fan æit-londe*. to Argante *fere hende*.

for heo sculde mid haleweie. helen his wunden.

and *fenne* he weore al hal. he wolde sone. come heom. (11511-15)

(He would go to the Island of Avalon where the beautiful Argante would heal all his wounds with balm, after which he would soon return to them [215].)

Argante's presence, then, diffused throughout the text or centralized in the Otherworld of Avalon, remains valuable to the text's central Subject, Arthur, hence the text itself. Layamon's world precludes and precedes the split between the two concepts of "healing" and "sorceress," as both come to take on darker, more malevolent aspects in the later Middle Ages. No more ringing endorsement than Arthur's own words are needed to establish the continuing, albeit re-configured, presence and power of Morgan le Fay in Layamon's "Argante *fere hende*" (11512).

## Chapter 3

"[T]hen all had marvel at the falsehood of Morgan le Fay"

Morgan in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Malory's Morte Darthur

By the fourteenth century, Morgan is neither hende nor helpful; rather, she is hurtful, whether it is in her mischievous testing of her nephew Gawain in the Pearl-poet's Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Sir Gawain) or in her bid for Arthur's throne in Malory's fifteenth-century work Morte Darthur (Morte). The traces of her benevolence dwindle throughout the later Middle Ages, while her divine powers are diluted by rationalization or conferred upon other characters. Maureen Fries links Morgan's literary decline to a growing antifeminist anxiety about powerful women:

Her gradual change (one can hardly call it growth) from a connector of life with healing, as mistress of Avalon, into a connector of death with illicit sex and wrongful imprisonment as she appears in most subsequent romance [after Layamon's Brut], indicates the increasing inability of male Arthurian authors to cope with the image of a woman of power in positive terms. ("Decline" 2)

This "inability" helps clarify somewhat the shift from the benevolent goddess of Vita Merlini and the nurturing elf queen of Brut of the more open earlier Middle Ages to the depraved sorceress of Morte Darthur of the waning Middle Ages. Joan Ferrante links the decline in positive images of women to two shifts in twelfth- and thirteenth-century art forms:

[T]he first is the breaking down into separate parts, which is particularly visible in architecture, as in the difference between Romanesque cathedrals (with their harmony of structure and ornament . . .), and Gothic (in which the figures are isolated from their backgrounds, more like living things, but less a part of the whole). (Woman 12)

The second change is a similar movement in literature, painting, and sculpture, a movement "away from symbolism towards a more realistic presentation of human figures and of nature" (12). This movement reflects the dissolution of an earlier allegorical tradition in which women

were associated with a much more positive symbolism, as well as the Neo-Platonic concept of a union of male and female elements in a perfect whole (2). In the wake of this movement from both the symbolic woman and the union of "male and female forces," women begin to be seen as real beings: "When they [male authors and artisans] think of women as real beings, they tend to see them only as child-bearers, or as temptresses, and the literary possibilities are slight or negative"(13).

There are, nevertheless, considerable "literary possibilities," however negative, for a goddess. While Morgan's physical presence in a text becomes rare (Sir Gawain) and generally sporadic (Morte), her power is often essential to the plot and the various intrigues that plague Arthur's court. Traces remain of Morgan's divine presence even in her most demonic incarnations. Occasionally, the trace is more apparent, as when the Green Knight simply informs Gawain that Morgan "fe goddess" is behind all of Gawain's trials and temptations (2452).<sup>64</sup> At other times the traces are remnants of ancient pagan places, such as the Green Chapel which Angela Carson reads as a sid, an entrance to a Celtic Otherworld (8). This chapter will examine the presence and power of the pagan goddess--that is, Morgan le Fay--in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Morte Darthur. Despite the protests of R. S. Loomis that the Pearl-poet "would have been horrified" had he known his portrait of the Green Knight later could be seen as a sympathetic portrayal of a pagan custom, i. e. the celebration of Mayday, and Morton W. Bloomfield's sure stance that only the folk recognized pagan rituals by the fourteenth century, many critics argue the romance is a site where pagan and Christian elements exist side by side (Loomis Development, 9; Bloomfield 43).<sup>65</sup> I would suggest that the theories of Loomis and Bloomfield be read against Lacan's theory of the Subject as it is

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64 Albert B. Friedman sees the Green Knight's disclosure as Morgan's instant demonization: "A pagan goddess becomes automatically a Christian demon" (267). Yet, Morgan receives no personal censure from either the Green Knight or Gawain. Indeed, the Green Knight goes on to recite a brief history of her lineage, long an indication of nobility in the romance.

65 Peggy Ann Knapp argues that "literary authorship in the Middle Ages turns very often to pagan folk materials (themselves close to myth) for inspiration and story line" (60).

constructed in language, which as Catherine Belsey explains, "confirms the decentring of the individual consciousness so that it can no longer be seen as the origin of meaning, knowledge, and action" (595). In other words, the Pearl-poet's use of pagan elements may not have been a completely conscious choice, especially when it is compared to the painstakingly-wrought Christian elements in the poem. Also, the boundary between paganism and Christianity becomes permeable in the romance. W. R. J. Barron has pointed out that "the borderline between the mythic and the romantic is blurred as ageing myths lose their original religious significance"(3). Moreover, much of the *matière* of the Arthurian romance comes from Celtic mythology, the source of Morgan's wide range of powers and characteristics.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, while Morgan remains a physically marginalized figure in the later medieval romances, her power in the fourteenth-century text Sir Gawain is considerable, owing much to her Celtic mythological heritage. Her power is largely manifested in the marvels that suffuse the "outrage awenture of Arthurez wonderez" (29) (marvelous tales concerning Arthur).<sup>67</sup>

Alan M. Markman notes the importance of the marvelous in Sir Gawain:

The marvelous is indispensable. It informs and shapes the entire narrative . . . . It is the cohesive force which joins together the two primary motifs in the poem, the 'Beheading Test' and the 'Love Test.' It is the force which compels Gawain to begin his journey and it is the force which pulls him into Bercilak's castle. It is the force, finally, which constitutes the marvelous atmosphere, which supplies the necessary feeling that everything which occurs is occurring 'nowhere,' which makes us accept the fundamental precept of the romance that we are, at the same time, both in this world and in another world. (168)

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<sup>66</sup> See Laura Hibbard Loomis's "Gawain and the Green Knight," Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, eds. Donald R. Howard and Christine Zacker (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1968) 3-23 for a good overview of the Celtic analogues for Sir Gawain.

<sup>67</sup> All translations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are the author's, unless otherwise noted.

Certainly, Morgan is largely responsible for the marvelous in Sir Gawain as her agent, the Green Knight, explains his appearance to Gawain, "[H]o wayned me vpon *fis* wyse to your wynne halle / For to assay *fe* surquidré" (2456-7) (She sent me in this manner to your joyous hall to prove your pride). Shape-shifting is a trait of the Morrígain, a trait we see manifested in both her transformation of Lord Bercilak,<sup>68</sup> generous feudal lord, into the "aghlich mayster" (136) (terrible lord) and her own self from the young and beautiful *fée* of earlier Arthuriana into the aged noblewoman with "rugh ronkled chekez *fat* ofer on rolled" (953) (red, wrinkled cheeks that hung in loose folds).

The poem's abundance of marvels complements Jacques Le Goff's study of the rise of marvels which make a sudden appearance in the romance in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (29). He points out three reasons for the emergence of the marvelous: the marvelous is "intimately associated with the idealized knight's quest for individual and collective identity"; the marvelous "had become less threatening, and the Church felt that it could tame it or turn it to advantage"; and the marvelous had become "aestheticized," a literary development (29-30). Certainly Gawain's journey to Bercilak's castle and his series of tests well illustrate Le Goff's three reasons for the marvelous. His exemplary martial prowess is tested repeatedly (albeit briefly) by the strange creatures who inhabit the woods he must pass through:

At vche warfe ofer water *fer fe* wy3e passed

He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,

And *fat* so foule and so felle *fat* fe3t hym byhode,

So mony meruayl bi mount *fer fe* mon fyndez,

Hit were to tore for to telle of *fe* tenfe dole.

Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez, and with wolues als,

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68 Because of the similarity between a "c" and a "t" in the scribal hand, the Green Knight's alter ego has the variant names, Bercilak and Bertilak. I will be using the name Bercilak in my own discussion and the variant Bertilak spelling when quoting a critic who uses the alternate spelling.



Sumwhyte wyth wodwos, *fat* woned in *fe* knarrez,  
 Bofe wyth bullez and berez, and borez oferquyles,  
 And etaynez, *fat* hym aneled of *fe* heze felle. (715-23)  
 (At each ford over water where the knight passed  
 He found a foe before him, but monstrous it was,  
 And it was so foul and so fierce that he was obliged to fight it.  
 So many marvels among the hills one finds there,  
 It would be hard to tell the tenth part of them.  
 Sometimes with dragons he fights, and with wolves, also,  
 Sometimes with trolls, that lived in the crags,  
 Both with bulls and bears, and boars at other times,  
 And giants that pursued him from the heights.)

Edith Whitehurst Williams links Morgan's Celtic ancestral ties to water deities because of the fords where Gawain always finds and fights these monstrous foes:

Not only does the connection with the ford persist, but the monstrous foes are clearly characterized as 'ferly' (marvellous, supernatural) and reflect the fact that the Morrígan not only took the form of a crow but also of an eel, a grey wolf, and a white, red-eared cow in her onslaughts against Cuchulainn . . . . (48)

Perhaps these marvels reveal Morgan's presence in their very nature as creatures largely of fantasy, for the poet's modest disclaimer that he would be hard pressed to give a full account of Gawain's encounters transforms these monstrous battles into minor skirmishes summarily dealt with by Arthur's finest knight. His larger battle lies ahead. This rationalized version of the Morrígan's battle with Cuchulainn and shapeshifting ability conforms to Le Goff's suggestion that the marvelous was "one form of resistance to the official ideology of Christianity" (32). This version also suggests Le Goff's "aestheticized" marvels, a literary device meant to add to the prevalent atmosphere of the marvelous. Whether or not these creatures are part of the arsenal with which Morgan tests Gawain is never explored; the poet condenses the mythic and

marvelous and disclaimer into nine lines. Perhaps the poet feels these few lines are ample allusion to another Celtic hero, Cuchulainn, and leaves the reader to finish the analogy. While Morgan no longer shapeshifts her own form into battle beasts as the Morrígain did, her agents fight her battles for her. Her own shapeshifting is far more deceptive and dangerous.

Morgan's agents also inhabit a world of the marvelous, "a world [that] is largely dehumanized. Marvels feature a world of animals, minerals, and plants" (LeGoff 32). Gawain travels alone through such unpeopled "contrayez straunge" (713) (strange countries), "*fur3 mony misy and myre, mon al hym one, / Carande for his costes*" (749-50) (through many swamps and mire, all by himself, grieving for his plight), until he reaches the "otherworld Logres" (Guerin 199) that is surrounded by, not surprisingly, "water wonderly depe" (787).<sup>69</sup> Yet rather than dwell on the marvels animating the world of *Sir Gawain*, the poet then dismisses them summarily. The knight who reaches Bercilak's castle is a devout Christian knight earlier bedeviled by *ferly* beasts and "*peryl and payne and plytes ful harde*" (733) (peril and pain and evil conditions). The world of the marvelous is not, however, left behind in the primeval forest. It influences even what appears to be the innermost circle of civilization, Bercilak's court, for now Gawain must face a *selly* (marvelous) and mischievous goddess.

The penultimate leg of his journey finds Gawain in a primeval forest "of hore okez ful hoge a hundreth togeder; / *fe hasel and fe ha3forne were harled al samen, / With ro3e raged mosse rayled aywhere*" (743-5) (of gray full-grown oaks one hundred together; the hazel and hawthorn were tangled all together, with shaggy, ragged moss hanging everywhere). When Gawain prays to the Virgin Mary for help and signs himself three times,<sup>70</sup> Bercilak's castle suddenly appears to him: "[H]e watz war" (763) (He was aware) of the fairest castle ever

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69 Such water immediately recalls not only Morgan's ancestral Modron, goddess of the river, but Breton connections with water sprites and the *Brut*'s lake of marvels (ll. 10851 ff).

70 Jacques Le Goff sees the marvelous gaining ground on the miraculous and magical after the thirteenth century: "Miracles become rarer, and magic is more hotly contested. Does it make sense to speak of a 'secularization' of the supernatural?" (12). This idea underscores the irony of his Christian prayer to the Virgin Mary and its subsequent answer in an otherworldly castle.

owned by knight that "schemered and schon *fur3 fe schyr okez*" (772) (shimmered and shone through the fair oaks). Even though the poet subsequently paints a portrait of a contemporary Gothic castle, a well-fortified one, with minute details, such as "couruon coprounes craftly sleze" (797) (carved ornamental tops skillfully made), its sudden initial appearance, its mirage-like shimmering and shining, and the poet's final comment on the castle, "*fat pared out of papure purely hit semed*" (802) (that it seemed cut entirely out of paper) point to its otherworldly origins.<sup>71</sup> Le Goff notes that the word "marvel" is from the Latin mirare (to look at) and "suggests a visual *apparition*" (31). What an appropriate dwelling, then, is an "apparition" for a shape-shifting goddess who has devised this entire complicated plot through deception and dissimulation!<sup>72</sup>

Certainly the castle is a welcome sight, and the hero never questions its origins; it is simply the generous response to his simple prayer for "sum herber" (755) (some lodging). The reader first espies Morgan, the dea ex machina who has instigated the plot, in Bercilak's castle. Ironically, Christianity is evident in this otherworldly castle. Gawain arrives at the castle just in time to join in the Christmas celebrations, celebrations which immediately remind the reader of the joy and warmth of another court. Gawain is treated with the warmest of medieval hospitality and treated to "Goddez awen fest" (1036) (God's own feast) at the table of a goddess. Modern readers would not recognize the goddess in disguise and would find it difficult to account for the respect paid such an ugly and decrepit woman, as Paule Mertens-Fonck points out:

Le lecteur ne peut manquer d'être frappé par les égards dont la douairière, malgré sa laideur et sa décrépitude, est l'objet de la part de la châtelaine, du seigneur et des

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<sup>71</sup> Lucy Allen Paton notes that "beautiful dwellings, feastings, [and] music . . . are accepted commonplaces of fairyland" (85). M. Victoria Guerin calls the castle an "otherworld Logres" (199).

<sup>72</sup> It should be noted also that the Italian term "*fata morgana*" means a mirage, such terminology stemming from the belief that the mirage came from Morgan's witchcraft.

courtisans, ce qui semble indiquer qu'elle occupé un rang très important; mais nous ne savons encore rien de son rôle. (1069)

We can assume, however, that a medieval audience would have seen through Morgan's dissemblance, if not through to her ultimate plan, then at least to her true identity. Mertens-Fonck argues that Celtic mythology, particularly that of the warrior goddess Morrígain, was very much alive to the poet (and presumably the poet's audience): "[L]es légendes celtiques et leurs personnages étaient très vivants, et le souvenir de la déesse Morrígu ne peut manquer d'avoir laissé son empreinte sur le personnage de la fée Morgan" (1071-72). Mertens-Fonck finds another indication of the Morrígain in, "la couleur du corbeau," for the old lady has both a "blake chyn" (black chin) and "blake broges" (black eyebrows) (958, 961). Ironically, though Mertens-Fonck goes on to add that "que Macha, alias la Morrígu—qui offre de multiples ressemblances avec Morgan—prenait parfois la forme et la couleur" of a crow, her argument reaches the standard and predictable "decline" theory to explain Morgan's withered appearance. Mertens-Fonck claims, as do many other critics, that Morgan's appearance has come about because of her sorcery; she has "abaissée au rang d'une magicienne, voire d'une sorcière" (1073).<sup>73</sup> Indeed, she finds that Morgan "n'est plus que l'ombre d'elle-même" (1074).

If Morgan is only a "shadow" of herself, it is what Edith Whitehurst Williams calls "that aura of 'shadow,' that darker side of self" (42). Williams reads Morgan's character as a "shadow-trickster," a character that manifests the same kinds of polarities Simone de Beauvoir notes as part of the Other:<sup>74</sup>

Her characteristics embrace the same tension of opposites found in the other  
[archetypal] prototypes: violence opposed to healing; beauty against ugliness; sexual

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<sup>73</sup> Maureen Fries sees Morgan's appearance as the summation of many antifeminist images of women, the "negative themes of hypersexuality, misused power and ugliness masquerading as beauty [the crone and the lady]" ("Female Heroes" 13).

<sup>74</sup> See Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, especially Chapter IX: "Dreams, Fears, Idols" (157-223).

wantonness against fidelity; a goddess with human passions. She emerges in the dawn of Celtic myth, and, once she finds her way into Arthurian romance, pervades the art and literature of Britain and the Continent from that time to the present, but always in an elusive way. (40)

It is because she is a goddess that Morgan has assumed the shape of an old crone in Sir Gawain, not because the poet is punishing her for her evil misdeeds.<sup>75</sup> It is hardly consistent or logical that Morgan can change the physical appearance of the human Lord Bercilak into the preternatural Green Knight<sup>76</sup> and conceal Bercilak's castle until Gawain's prayers reveal it to him while she herself remains an ugly, old crone trapped in a decrepit body with which male authors have punished her.<sup>77</sup>

While it is true that physical appearance is often a metaphor for inner beauty (or ugliness) in medieval literature, M. Victoria Guerin suggests that physical appearances may have other readings. She links Morgan's appearance with the "otherworld Logres" that Gawain enters to finish his quest. While Sir Gawain begins in the distant past with the poet's recreation of England's pseudo-historical ties to Troy, the poet quickly follows with a look at the present day court of Arthur. It is a joyous court; moreover, it is a young court: "For al watz fis fayre folk in her first age / on sille" (54-5) (For this was the fairest folk in the flower of their youth in the hall). Arthur is still a young man, as yet untroubled by an incestuous son, an adulterous wife, or a treasonous sister: "He watz so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered"

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<sup>75</sup> Edith Whitehurst Williams argues that "it is a mistake to assume with Loomis that when myth is transformed [in the romances] the characters lose their psychic force and become the fictional creations of [their] writers" (47).

<sup>76</sup> Peggy Ann Knapp sees the Green Knight as a composite of the Green Man, a "vegetative god," and the Wild Man, "degenerative forest recluse" (62-3), while others take umbrage at any suggestion of a pagan vegetative myth in the Christian atmosphere of Sir Gawain, e. g. R. S. Loomis in The Development of Arthurian Romance (9). It should be noted, however, that there are potent traces of the Green Man in the holly bob the Green Knight carries, in his survival after decapitation, and in his "greenery," despite the wintry climate outside, to name just a few of his externalized "vegetative" traits.

<sup>77</sup> It is also likely that she chooses an appearance quite opposite her own in order to fool her nephew Gawain.

(86) (He was so jolly in his youth, and somewhat boyish).<sup>78</sup> Guerin notes the "freshness" of Arthur's court, but she continues to differentiate it from the innocence of the earlier romances: "That innocence has been lost, and is replaced by a sense of poignancy and tragedy that deepens with the development of the poem" (198). The lost innocence owes much to "Arthurian destiny," an ironic background to an ignorant court and king that know nothing of what is to transpire, although the audience would know well the cycle of stories associated with Arthur's court (199).

Even this lost innocence cannot account, however, for Morgan's advanced age and ugliness.<sup>79</sup> She is certainly Arthur's older sister, but she could not "logically be in such a state of advanced decrepitude while he is still in his 'first age' " (Guerin 200). Her son, Yvain, sits at an honored position at Arthur's Christmas feast: "And Ywan, Vryn son, ette with hymself" (113) (And Yvain, Urien's son, ate with him).<sup>80</sup> Her son's presence merely indicates that Morgan is a grown woman, not an old crone, but the poet makes no verbal connections concerning Yvain's mother; only his seating at the "hy3e table" (108) (high table) suggests his nobility. Guerin contends that Morgan's advanced age reflects that this "otherworld Logres" represents a future perspective of Arthur's court or at least the court as it involves Gawain (200).<sup>81</sup> She also offers further parallels between present and future characters:

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<sup>78</sup> The word "childgered" has proved to be problematic in its translation. Some critics see it as merely a positive indication of Arthur's youth, while others read it as a negative comment on Arthur's conduct and court. See the "Notes" from Norman Davis's edition of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (75) for further details.

<sup>79</sup> Guerin notes the tradition of premature age and hideousness associated with Morgan's black magic in the Huth Merlin and in the prose Lancelot, but she believes her age serves another purpose in Sir Gawain (200).

<sup>80</sup> Yvain is traditionally Morgan's son and Urien(s) her husband in the romances. Yet, curiously, the poet here speaks of both of Arthur's "sistersunes," (111) (nephews) who are presumably the above mentioned Gawain and Agravayne (Agravaine), traditionally sons of Morgawse. Is the poet intentionally avoiding explicit allusions to Morgan in Arthur's court?

<sup>81</sup> Maureen Fries notes that Gawain "represents the entire Arthurian ethos" ("Female Heroes" 13).

Bertilak . . . is an older double of Arthur. The lady is a lovelier Guenevere, and the court is a more magnificent Camelot. Even Gawain is asked to be a more sophisticated and amorous version of his present self. All the elements of the fatal triangle are present. (208)

This "doubling" of characters leads to the doubling of Morgan herself in the text.

While some critics contend that the medieval audience would have "recognized Morgain la Fée both in the old woman at the castle and in Bertilak's beautiful wife" (Carson 5), many such as Dennis Moore find the argument falls apart upon a close reading of the poem (216-7).<sup>82</sup> Perhaps the split between critics arises in part from the lack of women's names in the poem. Neither the Lady nor Morgan is given a name while physically present, and "scarcely thirty-five lines are devoted to the instigator [Morgan] of that action, and two-thirds of those lines occur after the denouement when her identity and purpose are revealed" (Williams, E. 38).

Guerin points out the extent to which this doubling can serve in the questioning of ultimate authority in the text and in its application to the theme of tragedy she uses to unify her own study of Arthurian romance:

This doubling of the Lady and Morgan also serves to underscore the incestuous connotations of Gawain's dalliance with Bertilak's lady. If she is in some way also Morgan, it would be incest for him to make love to her, and this is perhaps the true intent of the temptation plot. The audience would not have forgotten Arthur's own, equally ignorant, incest with another sister, Morgause, and the resulting birth of Mordred, traitor to his uncle/father and destroyer of the Arthurian world. (211)

While this idea of possible incest does add another layer of complexity to the plot and parallels the even greater tragedy of Mordred's incestuous birth, it distorts what I feel is the mischievous rather than malignant spirit of Morgan in the text. After all, Sir Gawain is, for all

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<sup>82</sup> Maureen Fries notes that while Morgan is a "powerful shapeshifter," there is "nowhere in her history [where she] can be two people at the same place at the same time" ("Decline" 6).

its hardships and sobering moments of truth, a joyous poem, and for all her power as a goddess, Gawain is still Morgan's nephew, just as Arthur is still her brother. While Morgan's hatred of Arthur is integral to many of the later Arthurian romances, there is no clear indication of such intense hatred in Sir Gawain.

Indeed, the hatred she shows toward Arthur in Morte is never fully evinced in Sir Gawain. Her intent to test the "*fe surquidré . . . of fe Rounde Table*" (2457-8) harms no one. Arthur's court is shown to be filled with camaraderie if not heroes, but then the poet's elaborate and chilling picture of the green giant who bursts in on the celebration is ample reason to freeze any knight in his place: "Half etayn in erde I hope *fat* he were, / . . . and oueral enker-grene" (140,150) (Actually half a giant I hope that he was, . . . and all over bright green). Indeed, he is a marvelous figure that "for fele sellyez had *fay* sen, bot neuer are" (239) (though they had seen before many marvels, but never one such as this). Gawain, who faces the marvel as befits Arthur's finest knight, is taught a lesson in true humility that overshadows his initial humility topos when he seeks permission to accept the Green Knight's challenge:

I am *fe* wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest,  
 And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes *fe* soðe--  
 Bot for as much as 3e ar myn em I am only to prayse,  
 No bounté bot your blod I in my bodé knowe. (354-7)  
 (I am the weakest, I know, and the feeblest of wit,  
 And my life would be the smallest loss, if you wish to know the truth--  
 I am praiseworthy only for your blood,  
 No worth but your blood I recognize in my body.)

Even his participation in the potentially fatal "Beheading Test" is overseen by someone else who shares his blood, Morgan, whose control over the Green Knight's form and resurrection would surely extend to control of his axe hand and the humiliating "nirt" (slight wound) the Green Knight gives him.



The other explicit reason for Morgan's machinations falls short of tragedy, too. She sought to "haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe / With glopnyng of *fat ilke gome fat* gostlych speked / With his hede in his honde bfore *fe hyȝe table*" (2460-62) (to have grieved Guenevere and caused her to die from dismay of that same man who, so like a spirit with his head in his hand, spoke before the high table). Yet, as Sheila Fisher states succinctly, "[I]f Morgan wanted to scare Guenevere literally to death, her effort would have been redundant. As the poem depicts Arthur's queen, Guenevere could hardly be more dead than she already is" (74). Guenevere is a completely static figure, an emblem of what money and position can buy. The traditional hatred of Morgan for Guenevere<sup>83</sup> turns instead to gentle, albeit macabre, mocking as her "talking head," the Green Knight, addresses the court first as a whole man, then as a beheaded horror:

For *fe hede* in his honde he haldez vp euen,  
 Toward *fe derredt* on *fe dece* he dressed *fe face*,  
 And hit lyfte vp *fe yȝe-lyddez* and loked ful brode,  
 And melted *fus* much with his muthe, . . . . (444-7)  
 (For the head in his hand he holds up even,  
 Toward the noblest one on the dais he turned the face,  
 And lifted up the eyelids and looked with wide-open eyes,  
 And said this much with his mouth . . . .)

Morgan's mockery of Arthur's court is multiplied twofold by this ventriloquist scene in which Morgan's puppet becomes a literal mouthpiece for Morgan's explicit challenge to Arthur and her implicit one to the court.

It is Morgan's other mouthpiece who offers Gawain the more serious threat, for Lady Bercilak threatens to unman him through both an inversion of the private and public world in "the feminized space of the bedroom" (Fisher 85) and through the appropriation of the

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<sup>83</sup> See Lucy Allen Paton's *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* (60-73) for a more complete explanation of the various accounts for Morgan's hatred of Guinevere.

language of courtly love. Lady Bercilak's first visit sets the stage for Gawain's undoing.

Trapped as he is within the perimeters of liege loyalty and chivalric rules of conduct, Gawain is no match for the Lady who stalks him "dernly and styлле" (1188) (stealthily and silently) in the bedchamber, the private and feminine sphere where few male romance writers have dared tread. Karma Lochrie points out that the medieval misogynist identification of "woman as flesh offered a possible position of disruption for women" (22). Certainly, the Lady's disruptive presence in Gawain's bedroom and her inversion of the Subject and Object positions in courtly love severely test Gawain. The public sphere of feudalism and chivalry, long a patriarchal hierarchy, is further threatened by the "dangerousness of privacy," a privacy Sheila Fisher associates with feminization:

Women in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are repeatedly associated with privacy, but the poem does not feminize privacy simply because this is medieval women's historical place. It does so primarily to conflate the dangerousness of women themselves. The two are one and the same. (78)

Certainly some of this danger arises from the relative powerlessness of the poem's male figures, especially Gawain, Arthur's worthiest knight. The Pearl-poet furthers the "feminization" of the bedroom scenes by Gawain's newfound coyness, a feminine trait he displays in the first moments after the Lady enters his bedroom: "[f]e burne schamed, / And layde hym doun lystly and let as he slepte" (1189-90) (The knight was embarrassed, and lay craftily and pretended to be asleep).<sup>84</sup> When he finds that the Lady is content to "set hir ful softly on fe bed-syde" (1193) until he "awakens," he convinces himself that only words can help him in this potentially dangerous situation: 'More semly hit were / To aspye wyth my spelle in space quate ho wolde' (1198-99) (It would be more seemly to discover with my words quickly what she wants). He soon finds out that she will do the talking in this relationship when she says, "And syfen I haue in fis hous hym fat al lykes, / I schal ware my whyle wel, quyl hit

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<sup>84</sup> The word "schamed" can be read also as "shammed" or "feigned," implying that Gawain's pretense at sleep is more coquetry than embarrassment.

lastez, / with tale" (1234-36) (And since I have in this house he whom all like, I shall spend my time well, while it lasts, with talk).

But the Lady is not content with just Gawain's company and the exchange of pleasantries; rather, she persists in deconstructing the rhetoric of courtly love, placing Gawain in imminent peril of violating his oath of loyalty to his host and of shattering (or at least besmirching) the pedestal upon which the noble lady is placed in courtly love.<sup>85</sup> Not only does the Lady deconstruct courtly love rhetoric, she leaves Gawain and the reader no doubt who is in control of the situation:

'In god fayth, Sir Gawayn,' quof *fe* gay lady,  
*'fe* prys and *fe* prowes *fat* plesez al ofer,  
 If I hit lakked ofer set at lyzt, hit were littel daynté;  
 Bot hit ar ladyes innoze *fat* leuer wer now *fe*  
*Haf fe, hende in hor holde, as I habbe here,*  
 To daly with derely your daynté wordez,  
 Keuer hem comfort and colen her carez,  
*fen* much of *fe* garysoun ofer golde *fat* *fay* hauen.  
 Bot I louue *fat* ilk lorde *fat* *fe* lyfte haldez,  
*I haf hit holly in my honde fat al desyres,*  
*fur3e grace.'* (1248-58)

('In good faith, Sir Gawain,' said the gay lady,  
 The excellence and the prowess that please all other,  
 If I found fault with it or thought lightly of it, it would show little good breeding;

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<sup>85</sup> Arlyn Diamond, drawing upon Andreas Cappelanus's *The Art of Courtly Love*, notes that "love is a rhetorical art, and the interest lies in the contest between the suitor's persuasive capacity and the verbal agility of his reluctant mistress. Skilled speakers can be false lovers, so that speechlessness might be a mark of sincerity" (73). Yet, in *Sir Gawain*, the "reluctant mistress" is Gawain who is beset by the Lady whose clever courtly rhetoric leaves Gawain powerless, and it is Gawain who convinces himself it would be "more seemly" to speak when the Lady ambushes him in his bedroom rather than lying silently in his bed; the Lady turns out to be a false lover.

But there are ladies enough whom it would delight even more  
*To have thee, courteous one, in their possession, as I have thee here,*  
 To make courtly love with pleasantly courteous words,  
 To give them more comfort and relieve their cares,  
 Than do the treasure and the gold that they have.  
 But I praise the same lord that holds up the heavens,  
*That I have wholly in my hands that which all desire,*  
 by means of grace.' [Emphasis mine.]

The Lady's speech entails both the articulation of desire and the language of exchange, an exchange which Sheila Fisher argues arises when Gawain "confronts the private desires of his private self" (85). Privacy subverts the public world of feudalism and chivalry, the world of the court Gawain has temporarily left behind, and privacy is the domain of the feminine, the Other. Arlyn Diamond cites the conservative nature of the romance in its containment of such systems: "[Romances] were conservative in that their conflicts were contained within a system of feudal privileges and their paeon to chivalry legitimated the hierarchial and rapacious system chivalry served"(71). The subversive element of the romance comes from the possibility of personal choice and individual action (71). In Sir Gawain the subversive elements encompass Gawain's struggle to remain true to the public world of both his lord and his host, Arthur and Bercilak,<sup>86</sup> while living up to the idealized image of the courtly Gawain the Lady describes as one "*fat alle fe worlde worchipez quere-so 3e ride*" (1227) (that all the world worships wherever you ride).<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Sheila Fisher reads Gawain's failure to uphold fully his contract with Bercilak as a betrayal of the economic principles of feudal society: "Rather than trafficking in women, he has traffic with them" (85).

<sup>87</sup> Yet even her "worship" of Gawain falters as she repeatedly voices her doubts that he is truly Gawain when he fails, again and again, to prove himself a worthy contestant in the game of courtly love. See lines 1226, 1248-55, 1291-94, 1481-86. Cathalin B. Folks sees the Lady's questioning as a sly reference to Gawain's reputation as a lover in the tail-rhyme tradition; the Lady "manages to disarm her opponent and dramatically reveal his human and comic side" (69). This questioning of identity is also a remarkable disabler, for it keeps the disconcerted Gawain even further off balance.

Furthermore, the Lady's articulation of desire gives voice to the "inarticulable," a problematic utterance as Elizabeth Grosz explains in Jacques Lacan--A Feminist Introduction:

[D]esire is beyond conscious articulation, for it is barred or repressed from articulation. It is structured like a language, but is never spoken as such by the subject. Its production through repression is one of the constitutive marks of the unconscious, upon which it bestows its signifying effects. Desire undermines conscious activity; it speaks through demand, operating as its underside or margin. (64-5)

Rather than question the Lady's "conscious articulation" and subsequent acquisition of her desire "holly in [her] honde," however, we must remember she is but a mouthpiece for Morgan le Fay, an agent of a goddess. Is the Lady consciously acting to entrap Gawain, to test his loyalties and his goodness? Probably not. More likely she is merely a conduit for the movement of desire, "an energy that is always transpersonal, directed to others" that stems from Morgan's desire to deflower the flower of Arthur's court (Grosz 65).<sup>88</sup> Morgan is the speaking Subject, and Gawain is the Object of her desires.

The Lady's speech suggests additional inversions. Since courtly love borrowed heavily from religious imagery, particularly from the worship of the Virgin Mary, the idea of "grace" becomes problematic. As Melvin Askew explains, "The acquiescence of the lady became the giving of 'grace,' and the consummation of love was 'salvation'" (21). Yet here the Lady's posture is hardly one of acquiescence; even her early invitation to her body--"3e ar welcum to my cors" (1237)<sup>89</sup>--foreshadows the lively "luf-talkyng" (927) that the Lady wields as

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<sup>88</sup> M. Victoria Guerin reads the green girdle, which Gawain reluctantly accepts from the Lady, as "metonymically associated with defloration" (225), while Nikki Stiller notes in Eve's Orphans the familiar Freudian association of beheading with castration and that the episode at the Green Chapel takes place on the Feast of the Circumcision (71).

<sup>89</sup> The line "You are welcome to my body" has been interpreted variously as the Lady's blundering inexperience, mere idiomatic French, or just a friendly innocent welcome. Since she embraces him shortly thereafter, I believe the line can be read literally, reflecting the experience of Morgan le Fay as well as the orders of her husband who acts as a panderer to facilitate Morgan's plan. See Norman Davis's edition of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, "Notes," 108-09 for further discussion of the line.

readily as the Green Knight does his battle axe. Even the courtly feminine ideal of a higher goodness, a higher beauty, is brought into question by the Lady's revealing attire on their last morning together. She wears a typical temptress ensemble complete with a plunging neck and back: "hir frote frowen al naked, / Hir brest bare bfore, and bihinde eke" (1740-41) (her throat lay all naked, her breast before and behind also).<sup>90</sup>

Throughout the courtly love matches with Gawain, the Lady assumes an offensive stance, one against which Gawain is forced to defend himself constantly as she continues the game of courtly love later that first morning: "And ay fe lady let lyk as hym loued mych; / fe freke ferde with defence, and feted ful fayre--" (1281-82) (And always the Lady pretended that she loved him very much; the knight proceeded defensively, and behaved full well). The Lady's assumption of the Subject position in courtly love, however, is not through words alone. She is a woman of action as well: "Ho comes nerre with fat, and cachez hym in armez, / Loutez luflych adoun and fe leude kyssez" (1305-06) (She comes nearer with that [Gawain's promise to kiss at her commandment], and catches him in her arms, bows graciously down and kisses the knight). Arlyn Diamond argues that the romance is a "site of struggle for masculine psychic identity, a struggle which is continuously defined and threatened by the possibility of female otherness" (69). In *Sir Gawain*, however, this struggle takes on an added physical dimension as Gawain's psychic identity is buffeted by a strong and aggressive woman who chides Gawain for inaction, suggesting that the Lady desires more than "luf-talkyng" and "tales" from the comely knight, as M. Victoria Guerin notes:

[S]ince Gawain is the hero of so many courtly texts, the lady wishes, as it were, that he would recreate them for her pleasure. But the performative nature of medieval literature is clear in her hope that Gawain will reenact the tales of his own amorous

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<sup>90</sup> The poet does not leave the reader/listener with a *femme fatale* image, for she immediately recuperates her image somewhat with merry words and good cheer toward Gawain. Furthermore, as Cathalin B. Folks contends, "The poet gives his seductress a perfect scapegoat, Morgan le Fay, allowing the ancient miscreant to embody all the unattractive features normally associated with the unmasked temptress, including guilt for the temptation itself" (77).

adventures with her as the female lead; that her request is not innocent is shown by lines 1533-34: 'Dos, techez me of your wytte, / Whil my lorde is fro hame' ('Instruct me a little, do, / While my husband is not nearby'). (207)

Yet, Gawain fends off her physical advances again and maintains his integrity, at least physically:

[f]us hym frayned fat fre, and fondet hym ofte,  
 For to haf wonnen hym to wo3e, what-so scho fo3t ellez;  
 Bot he defended hym so fayr fat no faut semed,  
 Ne non euel on naw fer halue, naw fer fay wysten  
 bot blysse. (1549-53)

(Thus the noble lady tested him, and tried him many times,  
 For to have persuaded him to woo, whatever else she thought;  
 But he defended himself so well that he showed no fault,  
 No evil on either side, neither knew anything  
 but bliss.)

Throughout her maneuvers and intrigues, the Lady remains largely an enigma; however, the poet reminds the reader in the above passage--"what-so scho fo3t ellez" (1550) (whatever else she thought)--and in a later passage--"ne fe purpose to payre fat py3t in hir hert" (1734) (The purpose not to fail was fixed in her heart)--that she is capable of independent thought, if not of independent action.<sup>91</sup> Perhaps her flickers of independent thought illuminate the medieval noble wife's moments of rebellion, especially as the Green Knight reveals himself as a panderer to Gawain at the Green Chapel: "Now know I wel fy cosses, and fy costes als, / And fe wowyng of my wyf: I wro3t hit myseluen. / I sende hir to asay

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<sup>91</sup> The first line also reveals the foreshadowing of Morgan's manipulations of the poem's major characters.

*fe . . .*" (2360-62) (Now I know thy kisses well, and thy nature also, And the unnatural lovemaking of my wife: I wrought it myself. I sent her to test you.).<sup>92</sup>

Certainly we are never privy to Morgan's thoughts; they are as hidden from the reader as her true appearance is hidden from her nephew Gawain. Indeed, the question of appearance and reality arises again and again. It appears that Gawain, despite the poet's insistence on the perfection of his "fyve wyttez," is ironically outwitted again and again.<sup>93</sup> The Lady's clever rhetoric all but tongue-ties him. Indeed, as Cathalin Buhrmann Folks points out, the Lady "convincingly plays a bewildering variety of roles during the course of the three days' temptations: impetuous love-lorn maiden . . . , witty comedy of manners hostess . . . , haughty courtly mistress . . . , and devious vixen" (79). Such versatility is hardly surprising given the shifting figure of Morgan behind her actions. Gawain also fails to recognize or even question the identity of his aunt in her disguise. The implausible castle in the marvelous woods stirs no qualms in the doughty knight. By the time Gawain finally stops to analyze and question his situation, he has arrived at the Green Chapel. It is here that he himself reminds the readers of the perfection of his five wits, but as this perfection has proved faulty whenever Morgan's machinations are at work, his evaluation is dubious at best: "Now I fele hit is *fe fende*, in my fyue wyttez, / *fat hatz stoken me fis steuen to strye me here*" (2193-94) (Now I feel it is the devil, in my five wits, that has imposed on me this appointment to destroy me here). Is the

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92 For all that the Green Knight insists on complicity with Gawain's near cuckolding of him, Bercilak, Gawain, and the Lady, at least on the surface, take on the qualities of fabliau characters as the ignorant husband, the pursued heart's desire, and the active pursuer. Maureen Fries notes that the "fabliau woman is given a wit and resourcefulness usually denied by exegetes to women," certainly the case for the resourceful and clever Lady ("Feminae Populi" 53-4). Further, reading the poem as borrowing from the conventions of the fabliau adds to Morgan's mischievous, rather than malevolent, nature.

93 Gawain's faults and failings take on added dimension if they are weighed against Morgan's traditional prophetic abilities. Does she know in advance that Gawain will fail or does she simply know what frailties to which the human flesh is subject? Does she compel Gawain to accept the Green Knight's challenge through her might or are his actions predictable as a pre-programmed Arthurian knight?



Green Knight a fiend, an emissary of the devil, or is he an agent of a mischievous goddess whose whims include upsetting the Round Table?<sup>94</sup>

The poet is not content, however, to leave the poem's purpose to a goddess's whims, for he has the Green Knight implicate another in his recounting of Morgan's plot:

fur3 my3t of Morgne la Faye, fat in my hous lenges,  
 And koyntyse of clergye,<sup>95</sup> bi craftes wel lerned,  
 fe maystrés of Merlyn mony hatz taken--  
 For ho hatz dalt drwry ful dere sumtyme  
 With fat conable klerk fat knowes alle your kny3tez  
 fat hame.

Morgne fegoddes

ferfore hit is hir name:

- Weldez non so hy3e hawtesse

fat ho ne con make ful tame--. (2446-55) \_

(Through the might of Morgan le Fay, who is staying in my house,  
 And the skill of magical lore, by crafts well learned,  
 The mistress of Merlin has taken many men--  
 For she formerly has had love dealings full sweetly  
 With that excellent wizard who knows all your knights  
 at home.

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<sup>94</sup> It should be pointed out also that at this same Round Table sits her son Yvain. Is she testing his bravery as well, or does his own semi-divine nature protect him from a goddess's stratagems? Charles Squire points out in *Celtic Myth and Legend* that, like his cousin Gawain, Yvain was probably a sun god (Mabon) in Celtic mythology while his father was Urien, a deity of the underworld (328).

<sup>95</sup> The *Pearl*-poet, probably a cleric himself, has offered the reader a problematic word in "clergy," for its common usage refers to religious men and/or religious learning. A less common definition, but one largely associated with Merlin's increasingly rationalized presence in Arthurian romance, is "clerkly skill: learning, scholarship, science," recorded as early as 1225. See *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* vol. 1, 26th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 433.

Morgan the goddess

Therefore that it is her name:

None wields such high pride

That she cannot fully tame them.)<sup>96</sup>

This passage shows both the growing association of Morgan with Merlin in the romances<sup>97</sup> as well as the three main personae that Morgan assumes throughout the Middle Ages--the goddess, the amorous *fée*, and the sorceress apprentice of Merlin--as if the poet is attempting a conscious unity of alterities. Reading the above passage, along with the one below, shows a multiplicity of histories and perspectives, one that looks forward to her character's splitting into Niniane (Merlin's apprentice and thwarted love interest in Malory's *Morte*), backward to the shapeshifting tests of the Morrígain, and to the present for her position as Arthur's powerful yet still relatively benevolent sister. The following passage reveals a more rationalized, if not logical, explanation for Morgan's actions and identity:

*'Ho wayned me vpon fis wyse to your wynne halle*

*For to assay fe surquidré, 3if hit soth were*

*fat rennes of fe grete renoun of fe Rounde Table;*

*Ho wayned me fis wonder your wyttez to reue,*

.....

*fat is ho fat is at home, fe auncian lady;*

*Ho is euen fyn aunt, Arfurez half-suster,*

*fe duches do3ter of Tyntagelle, fat dere Vter after*

*Hade Arfur vpon, fat afel is nowfe. (2456-59, 2463-66)*

*(She sent me in this fashion to your joyous hall*

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<sup>96</sup> M. Victoria Guerin attributes this "universal leveling action" to Fortune, equating Morgan the goddess with the goddess Fortuna (212).

<sup>97</sup> See footnote 45 for a fuller explanation of Morgan's growing dependence upon Merlin for "clergy," learning that becomes more and more rationalized as well as more and more dependent upon a patriarchal figure such as Merlin in the later romances.

To put to the proof the pride, if it were the truth  
 That is current from the great renown of the Round Table;  
 She made me into this marvel *to take away your wits*,  
 .....  
 That is who she is at my home, that ancient lady;  
 She is even your aunt, Arthur's half-sister,  
 The duke's daughter of Tintagel, that the noble Uther afterwards  
 Got Arthur on after, who is now noble.) [Emphasis mine.]

Here the Green Knight hurriedly condenses and rationalizes Morgan's divine machinations to the conscience of the court, acts as a moderator for the hubris of Arthur's court.<sup>98</sup> Morgan is also seemingly intent on stripping Gawain of his senses, leaving him even more at her mercy and deconstructing the perfection of "fiveness," pentangle and all, that the poet uses to illustrate Gawain's worth (lines 623-65). Indeed, even Uther's rape of Morgan's mother, Igraine, at Tintagel has been transmuted into a noble begatting.<sup>99</sup>

Morgan the goddess has been summarily dismissed by not only the Green Knight but by many critics as well, as Sheila Fisher points out:

Her [Morgan's] agency appears to be the trick, one might say the cheap trick, that provides a seemingly *dea ex machina* ending for this intricately structured romance. In our subsequent rereadings of the poem, however, we do not remain as ignorant as Gawain

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<sup>98</sup> The idea of Morgan as a moderator who checks the pride of Arthur's court is curiously ironic given that Bercilak's court indulges so heavily in the other deadly sins of gluttony (or at least conspicuous consumption), lust, and sloth (in Gawain's three mornings of sleeping in), sins that are complemented by Gawain's wrathful misogynist outburst at the green Chapel.

<sup>99</sup> Strangely enough this rape, turned into "great love" by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his twelfth-century text *Historia Regum Britanniae*, is never mentioned as a source of Morgan's growing discontent with her half brother Arthur. But there is another twelfth-century text, the Anglo-Norman Heldris of Cornwall's *Roman de Silence*, that allows an intertextual reading to show that this act of violence is responsible for at least some of Morgan's malicious actions toward the court. See Sarah Roche-Mahdi's Introduction to *Silence--A Thirteenth-Century French Romance* (East Lansing, MI: East Lansing Colleagues Press, 1992) xi-xxiv.

always will, for we know that Morgan is responsible for the events of the narrative.

Yet most critics of the poem persist in treating Morgan (when they treat her at all) as a surprise that they need not make much of since the poem does not make much of her, either.<sup>100</sup> (71)

Geraldine Heng argues that critical readings of romance texts are often formed from a suspicion of that which Morgan embodies, alterity:

[T]o acknowledge the presence of excess, contradiction or strangeness in a romance--the very suspicion of alterity--would be to recognize the text as fissured and traversed by other registers, and alternative discourses, whose competing voices and claims, if allowed to emerge, would serve to challenge the privileged locus. ("Map" 252)

Certainly Morgan's presence challenges both the "privileged locus" of earlier critics as well as the primary focus on Arthur and his court, for Morgan brings with her an unwieldy history of mythos, alterity, and immense power that does not blend readily into the privileged homosocial world of Arthur's court. Yet Morgan "is at the narrative and thematic center of the poem" (Fisher 72), not Arthur himself or his representative Gawain. It is in Morgan's "otherworldly Logres" that Gawain meets his mental (and sexual) match in the Lady and his physical match in the Green Knight.

Gawain meets his physical match at the Green Chapel, a site Paule Mertens-Fonck parallels with the Val sanz Retor, Morgan's private vale that entraps unfaithful male lovers (1076). It is at the Green Chapel that Gawain hears the hellish cacophony that sounds his probable fate, clashing with the euphonious luf talking and good fellowship he has experienced within Bercilak's castle for the preceding three days:

fene herde he of fat hyge hil, in a harde roche

B i3onde fe broke, in a bonk, a wonder breme noyse,

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100 Fisher adds comprehensive endnotes that cite the few articles which do not neglect Morgan in the poem as well as a host of other sources which deal with earlier limiting and limited readings of Morgan's presence in the text (100-05).

Quat ! hit clatered in *fe clyff*, as hit cleue schulde,  
 As one vpon a gryndelston hade grounden a syfe.  
 What ! hit wharred and whette, as water at a mulne,  
 What ! hit rusched and ronge, rawfe to here. (2199-2204)  
 (Then he heard from that high hill, on a hard rock  
 Beyond the stream, on the shore, a wondrously loud noise,  
 Quat ! it clattered against the cliff, as if it would split it,  
 As if one ground a scythe upon a grindstone.  
 What ! it whirred and made a grinding noise, as water at a mill,  
 What ! it rushed and rang, grievous to hear.)

Even the comfort of the girdle cannot allay his fears or offer Gawain protection against Morgan, for his passage to the Green Chapel takes him even deeper into the otherworld of Celtic mythology. Here the curtain of air has been replaced by barriers of water<sup>101</sup> :

Mist mugged on *fe mor*, malt on *fe mountez*,  
 Vch hille hade a hatte, a myst-hakel huge.  
 Brokes byled and breke bi bonkkez aboute  
 Schyre schaterande on schorez, *fer fay* doun schowued. (2080-83)  
 (Mist drizzled on the moor, melted on the mountains,  
 Each hill had a covering, a huge cloak of mist.  
 Streams boiled and broke about the banks,  
 Shattering brightly on shores, that led down to them.)

The girdle diminishes in value in this hidden vale, for the Lady has promised its protection against "*sly3t vpon erfe*" (1854) (any means on earth). But Gawain is no longer on the *erfe*. He is "nowhere," what Alan M. Markman sees as the simultaneity of being in both the real and the

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101 As Maureen Fries explains: "In later French romance, she [Morgan] uses these newly-learned skills [learned from Merlin] to found her *Val sans retor*, to keep Guiomar and other lovers in her power . . . through the Celtic device of a magic curtain of air, [to prevent] the escape of any knight who enters it" ("Decline" 4).

marvelous world that the Pearl-poet has presented to the reader and to Gawain. This otherworld is the abode of the Green Knight whose presence is unknown outside the valley, for while Gawain inquires of everyone "[i]f *ƿay* hade herde any karp of a knyȝt grene" (703) (if they had heard any talk of a green knight) on his journey to Bercilak's castle, "*al nykked hym wyth nay*" (704) (everyone answered no to him). Yet when he has entered the valley of the Green Chapel, his guide warns him about the dreadful Green Knight who has killed many men and has lived at the Green Chapel for a long time, a surprising detail since Bercilak's admission of changing into the Green Knight through the might of Morgan (ll 2456-62) describes what seems only a single singular occurrence:

For he is a mon methles, and mercy non vses,  
 For be hit chorle oȝer chaplayn *ƿat bi ƿe* chapel rydes,

.....

He hatz wonyd here ful ȝore. (2106-07, 2114)

(For he is a ruthless man, and he shows mercy to none,  
 Be it churl or chaplain who rides by the chapel,

.....

He has lived here a long while.)

Is the Green Knight a valuable resource for Morgan, one she uses whenever she seeks to frighten someone to death or to compel him to leave the camaraderie of a comfortable court? Is Gawain's guide merely trying to test Gawain further, building upon Gawain's fear that has already cost him a night's sleep on the eve of the last leg of his journey: "*ƿaȝ he lowkes his liddez, ful lyttel he slepes*" (2007) "Though he lowers his lids, full little he sleeps)? Or is the Green Chapel, the desolate oritry "*with erbez ouergrowen*" (2190) (overgrown with plants) the longtime home of the Green Man, the vegetative god of pagan myth and oral tradition? Even Gawain notes the similarity of the Green Knight and the chapel where Gawain finds him: "*Wel bisemeȝ ƿe wyȝe wruxled in grene / Dele here his deuocion on ƿe deuelez wyse*" (2191-91) (It is fitting that the man wrapped in green would perform his devotions in the

Devil's manner). It is never clear, however, whether Gawain associates the Green Knight's greenness with the pagan Green Man and the overgrown mound with his arboreal realm, or whether he believes him to be fe fende (2193) (the fiend) because he has transferred his own feelings of fear, anger, and confusion into his curses at the Green Knight's abode: "'fis a chapel of meschaunce, *fat chekke hit bytyde ! / Hit is fe corsesdest kyrk fat euer I com inne !*" (2195-96) (This is a chapel of disaster, one where ill luck happens! It is the most accursed church that I have ever come to!').<sup>102</sup>

Whatever Gawain's feelings or the Green Knight's origins or the Lady's actions add up to in the poem, Morgan remains in control. The world of the poem is a world of the marvelous, a world in which appearance, at the hands of a shapeshifting goddess, is confusing, frightening, and deceptive. It is a world outside the familiar, an uncanny world that disconcerts even the truest knight and offers no explanation for its interaction with the known world of the court. It is an otherworldly realm of power and illusion wherein contemporary concerns of chivalry and feudalism are decisively deconstructed. As in the earlier Arthurian texts, Vita Merlini and Brut, Morgan is marginalized from the court and uses the marvelous to draw others to her world, away from the public world of the court. While the Green Knight reveals the prime mover behind his actions, his explanation falls short of explaining Morgan's real reason for such an elaborate scheme.<sup>103</sup> Is her purpose merely to shame the court or to give herself a good laugh? Does her rationale lie outside articulation; that is, are Morgan's actions a physical expression of jouissance? To focus on just one reason is to follow the path of the boasting Green

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<sup>102</sup> Gawain's transference of strong emotions into his outbursts are at their peak, of course, in his antifeminist tirade that he launches into after he admits that the two women have "wyth hor kest han koyntly bigyled" (2413) (with their tricks have him adroitly beguiled). See lines 2414-24 to see Gawain fault all of womankind for his human frailty. But this poem is, after all, a series of tests for Gawain, tests that show him to be a good, albeit flawed, man. Arlyn Diamond reads the antifeminist tirade as an "attack on women [that] affirms masculine solidarity which turns out to be the ultimate foundation of virtue" (80).

<sup>103</sup> Indeed, Maureen Fries calls Bercilak's "unattested word" into question; nevertheless, she also notes that "he was obviously and keenly aware of Morgan's history" ("Decline" 7).

Knight or the abashed Gawain; it reduces the ever-shifting Morgan to a one-dimensional creation of the Pearl-poet. Morgan is neither a flaw in an otherwise perfect poem, as some critics have concluded,<sup>104</sup> nor is she a debased goddess-cum-temptress.<sup>105</sup> Her presence and power test the conservative nature of the romance with its "paean to chivalry [that] legitimated the hierarchial and rapacious system chivalry served" (Diamond 71). Morgan is a character in flux, one who retains sufficient remnants of her Celtic divinity and supernatural traits to manipulate both people and reality in order to test Arthur's court and find it wanting.

The Pearl-poet also finds the court wanting, at least in spiritual matters. Throughout the poem he exposes the worldly pleasures and the all too often secular values of the court. He deconstructs the rhetoric of courtly love to reveal its empty words and emptier promises. Yet while he turns the language of courtly love on its head, he never turns the language over to Gawain, thus invalidating the final outcome of fin amor--adultery and short-lived sexual satisfaction. That is, the threat of adultery and the promise of sexual satisfaction never come to fruition. Furthermore, the poet questions the very foundation of Arthur's world as Gawain's loyalty is tested again and again. Gawain's flaws are revealed, literally and figuratively, as he exchanges his perfect, glittering armor for bedclothes. The golden armor, designed to protect Gawain from other knights and beasts of the forest, is as hollow and artificial as the tenets of chivalry. Gawain's loyalty is sorely tested by the temptations of the flesh, both in the form of the Lady's beautiful body and in Gawain's desperate bid to save his own life. All that glitters

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104 For a good recap of the history of the critical reception of Morgan, read Dennis Moore's "Making Sense of an Ending: Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." He says, "From Kittredge to Friedman and beyond, most critics have held that the poem's ingenious interweaving of material from varied sources, a notable aspect of its *tour de force* achievement, simply breaks down at the end" (214-5).

105 In a culture in which people, especially women, are defined by dichotomies, Morgan's position within the Eve-Mary dichotomy is problematic. As the pagan goddesses become ever more supplanted by the Virgin Mary, Morgan's amorous attributes and independent status clash with the Virgin/good woman's chastity, humility, and obedience. On the other hand, her association with Eve's fleshly desires, disobedience, and weakness hardly fits a goddess.



here is gold, for, as Morgan proves, Gawain's flesh is weak and his spirit is too easily tarnished from exposure to worldly temptation.

Morgan's manipulations of Arthur's court become decidedly deadlier in Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur<sup>106</sup> wherein Morgan's play includes "stewing" a lady for five years until Lancelot, "the beste knyght of the worlde," has rescued her (XI, 792); trying to trade healing for sexual pleasure (X, 642); and sending the occasional enchanted devices via her many false damsels to test the court, including a mantle meant for Arthur that "brente to colys" (IV, 158) (burnt to coals) Morgan's emissary when she is forced to put the mantle on herself. Curiously, though Morgan's actions are harmful, there is generally an ulterior motive to each wicked action that bespeaks an almost noble purpose behind her movements. Much as Bercilak explains in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Morgan's tests prove the worth of Arthur's cohorts in Morte, as Arthur's knights and friends of the court thwart her schemes again and again; however, these tests arise sporadically and from outside the patriarchal world of Camelot.<sup>107</sup> Myra Olstead observes that supernatural women in the romances "provide the temptations that prove a knight's loyalty to the tenets of courtly love and guide him to the adventures that test his prowess" ("Morgan" 129). Morgan's temptations utilize fear as much as courtly honor to test the knights she captures, and the individual knight's prowess proves wanting under her trial. Her tests also forestall any foreknowledge of them, implicate the innocent as well as the guilty in Arthur's fellowship, and challenge the social order of Arthur's world. Even when her figure is marginalized in the text to outlying castles and marvelous valleys, her presence pervades the text and reaches out to disrupt the ordered world of the court when it is least expected.

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106 While I am using Eugène Vinaver's edition of Malory, The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, I will be using the preferred title Morte Darthur as well as the Caxton divisions into twenty-one books which Vinaver indicates in his volume as well.

107 Geraldine Heng notes that Morgan's trials "serve to increase their [Arthur's knights'] abilities and reputations with successful endurance; and the potentially subversive instruments she sends to Arthur are deflected from their purpose when Nyneve publicly discloses their concealed meaning" ("Enchanted" 294).

Her presence does not pervade the text in the same manner as it does in Sir Gawain where the world of the marvelous co-exists with, and often supercedes, the rationalized, patriarchal world. In the fourteenth-century Sir Gawain, a time and a text in which the individual's greatness motivates the adventure, Morgan is able to concentrate her myriad powers upon one hero, a hero whose human foibles threaten to betray his greater loyalties to his king and country. In Malory's fifteenth-century Morte, the individual still faces solitary adventures, but Malory's motivations and actions focus more on the collective good, the fellowship that has come to represent the greatness of the hero Arthur who is by now the symbol of all of Britain. Here the collective, within the text and within Malory's fifteenth-century world as well, is structured upon a feudal system of chivalry already crumbling, eroded externally by a rising middle class and a dwindling aristocracy and undermined internally by its antiquated dogma and complex system of rules. Malory situates his stories within this matrix of present loss and past glory, setting Arthur's Camelot in a Dark Ages context in which pre-Christian beliefs are largely still undifferentiated from Christian ones, while writing from a contemporary world of rapid change and changing loyalties wherein the Church has absorbed or erased most pagan beliefs.

Ironically, however, the *matière* of Malory's text comes from the twelfth century, the period during which the Matter of Britain was gathered for written texts. As the twelfth-century Vita Merlini strongly suggests, this was also a period during which pre-Christian beliefs and remnants were evident in the oral tradition and in the pulpit as well. John Darrah notes the sixth-century denunciation by Gildas of the "old beliefs in mountains, fountains, [and] hills" that pagans had worshipped (90). Yet these old beliefs lingered long afterwards, as Darrah continues:

By AD 1100 or so, bishops were using their authority to sanctify wells. The change of heart seems to have been because the people retained their ancient attachment to the wells on account of their supposed magical powers, often in spite of rededication to a Christian saint. The history of the Church thus shows twelfth century examples of the

recollection of pagan beliefs, demonstrating that such beliefs had survived into the very period in which Arthurian source material was collected, and it shows that they had survived with such forcefulness that they were able to deflect the church from outright opposition to a guarded tolerance quite unlike the earlier attitude. It is thus well within the bounds of possibility that the twelfth century oral traditions used by Chrétien and his successors were also carrying recollections of deities, heroes and heroines. (90-1)

Morgan's presence in Malory resonates with the "recollections of deities," but her figure illustrates the misogynist distortion that has changed her "original wish . . . to keep Arthur with her to heal his wounds . . . into the desire for sexual entrapment, and for the hero's death rather than life" (Fries "Decline," 14). Her "wish" is distorted even further by Malory's appropriation of her as the symbol of lost loyalty in Arthur's world. Her evil is also heightened by her familial ties to Arthur and the court, ties which should entail a degree of consanguinal as well as feudal fealty; however, these ties do not bind Morgan's loyalty.<sup>108</sup> In fact, Morgan shows a remarkable lack of loyalty to anyone in *Morte*. Her enigmatic presence and preternatural powers, a constant reminder of her mythological and supernatural heritage, make her a tailor-made villain for Malory's "storehouse of forgotten and misunderstood mythology" (Squire 272).<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> See Madeleine Blaess, "Arthur's Sisters," *Société Internationale Arthurienne Bulletin Bibliographique*, 8 (1956): 69-77, for a discussion of ad hoc growth of Arthur's sisters in medieval romance, beginning in the twelfth century with her inclusion in Arthur's family through the works of Chrétien de Troyes.

<sup>109</sup> Whether or not Malory is aware of the pagan background of the characters, settings, and events that make up his tales is problematic. For example, he does retain the quest for the Holy Grail, but most critics have noted his inclusion of it as much like a secular quest rather than the almost metaphysical rendering of his Cistercian sources in the *Vulgate*. Charles Squire comments succinctly on the likelihood of Malory's awareness of a pre-Christian background to the stories: "We may be fairly certain that the good Sir Thomas had no idea that the personages of whom he wrote had ever been anything different from the Christian knights which they had become in the late French romances from which he had compiled his own fifteenth-century work" (355).

Maureen Fries describes the role Morgan and her counterparts play in Arthurian romances as "counter-heroes," figures that violate the norms of the patriarchy: "For the male Arthurian counter-hero, such violations usually entail wrongful force; for the female, usually powers of magic" ("Female Heroes" 6). In the public world of *Morte*, magic becomes even more marginalized, for, as Geraldine Heng argues, magic "is an independent force," opposed to love which is a "collaborative discourse" ("Enchanted" 289). There is very little need or opportunity for "collaborative discourse" in Malory given the relative absence of courtly love or private emotions. The two main instances of *fin amor* are also the two main treasons against the state: Iseult, wife of King Mark, and Tristram; Guinevere, wife of King Arthur, and Lancelot. Yet even here Malory erases all courtly rhetoric to focus (albeit reluctantly because of his great love for Lancelot) on the physical. Heterosexual love is anathema to the public world of the court, perhaps explaining why women in Malory often are portrayed so negatively and why Morgan reaches her nadir of depravity in *Morte*. Independence of action and thought, hallmarks of the magical, the feminine, and the Other, would undermine the fellowship of the Round Table. While Arthur's knights do engage in individual quests, they are all parts of the whole, all working toward the common goal and the common good of a utopian comradeship.<sup>110</sup> On the other hand, the female magical figures in the text move freely about the text, acting as independent agents that help or hinder the public world and its inhabitants. Morgan and three other enchantress-queens capture Lancelot as he lies sleeping and leave him to decide between one of them as paramour or "ellys to dye in this preson" (VI, 257), but a helpful damsel facilitates Lancelot's escape from the same prison. Morgan's false damsels, what Uriens calls "fendis and no women" (IV, 140), welcome Arthur aboard a magical ship from which Morgan

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110 Larry D. Benson argues that the feudalism that Malory would have known was a "bastard feudalism," a contractual rather than land-based relation between the lord and lesser nobleman. In a time of shifting loyalties, "lesser gentries tended to seek a 'good lord' rather than serve a 'natural' feudal overlord. Powerful men [i. e. Arthur] and their families thus gathered great retinues in order to grow more powerful" (143).

transports him into a dark prison to await death, but Niniane intervenes to restore Excalibur to Arthur in the ensuing battle, thereby saving his life.<sup>111</sup>

While there seems to be a constant balance between the active misdeeds of the false damsels and the reparations of the true damsels, occasionally the false damsel's deeds are beyond repair. The falsest of damsels, Morgawse, Arthur's own half-sister, is sent to spy upon her brother and consents to lie with him because "the kynge caste grete love unto hir and desired to ly by her" (I, 41). This incestuous union creates Mordred, Arthur's son and slayer, as well as earning Arthur the enmity of King Lot, Morgawse's husband.<sup>112</sup> This private world of magic and fleshly desire threatens the entire structure of Malory's *Arthuriad*. Terence McCarthy claims the "intrusion of the private into the public forms the basis of tragedy" in the text (172), for the world of *Morte* is a public world of chivalry. Nowhere is this intrusion greater than in the love affair between Guinevere and Lancelot that irreparably sunders Arthur's fellowship. The world of chivalry is an ordered world as well, a world that orbits around Arthur. Morgan's intrusions are chaos incarnate, random forays that violate the integrity of the public world. These intrusions also illustrate the underlying subtext of the feminine, a subtext that manifests itself in what Geraldine Heng calls its "disruptive gestures and energies, intrusions and interruptions" ("Enchanted" 283). Through these disruptions and interruptions, the private world intersects with and dissects the values of the public world of

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111 Strangely enough, Malory, who darkens Morgan's character so much in *Morte*, has changed the ship scene significantly concerning Uriens, Morgan's husband. Eugène Vinaver explains, "Malory was well aware that in the original story Morgan le Fay did not discover Urience in his bed by chance 'on a day', but caused him to be brought there from the ship in order to murder him" ("Intro" lxx). In Malory's text Uriens goes to sleep on the magical ship and awakens the next morning "in Camelot abedde in wyves armys" (IV, 138).

112 Malory is careful to remind the reader immediately of Arthur's innocence in the affair: ("But all thys tyme kynge Arthure knew nat [that] kynge Lottis wyff was his sister") (I, 41). Yet this explanation merely indicates one more of the many instances in which Arthur seems inexplicably in the dark about what is happening all around him, even in his own family.

Morte, exposing its flaws and highlighting the chinks in the armor of the knights of the Round Table.

Occasionally the intersection between the private world and the public world is more "pointedly" disruptive as in Lancelot's introduction to the Huntress, a figure whose androgyny threatens the masculine world of chivalry. Catherine LaFarge's article "The Hand of the Huntress: Repetition and Malory's Morte Darthur," notes the threat of androgyny in her exploration of the presence of the feminine as well as the masculine in medieval romance. Citing the "Age of Romance" as the beginning of what modern western culture would define as masculine and feminine, she notes that medieval culture retained a type of androgyny that simultaneously "permitted the two discrete positions to remain, in imaginative use, remarkably free from the strictures of biological gender" (264). Malory's Morte Darthur, however,

seems determined to prevent such liberties. There the feminine is located as both the inner and the utterly outside, that which lies beyond the known and the social—in short, the wild (a geographical region notably unromanticized in medieval culture).  
(263)

The Huntress is one of the most striking inhabitants of this wild zone, a figure closely akin to Morgan, a figure with clear ties to both the Greek goddess Diana and the legendary Amazons. The Huntress's connections to Diana are evinced in her hunting garb and in her prowess.<sup>113</sup> The Lady of the Lake, too, often is associated with chastity, "laughs at the idea of lovers," and uses Diana's lake as a hideaway in the Merlin and the prose Lancelot (LaFarge 267). Yet, Diana's traditional associations with chastity vie with the carnal desire of the fée

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<sup>113</sup> Lucy Allen Paton finds ample evidence of Diana cults that flourished through the Middle Ages in Studies on the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance, 274-9. Catherine LaFarge notes the presence of Diana in numerous medieval texts, among them Boccaccio's Caccia di Diana, Chaucer's The Parlement of Foules, and the prose Lancelot (266). In Chaucer Diana is primarily a goddess for women and their concerns, e. g. a good childbirth and chastity. Childbirth, however, is a feminine, hence private, concern and never enters the public world of Morte, unlike chastity which Malory stresses in his Grail knights.

in Diana's close kinship with Venus, or as Catherine Lafarge explains, "The ambiguous goddess whom the huntress resembles displays the turncoat quality of Freud's 'vehicle of repression.' Diana, represser of desire, by her formal likeness cannot avoid in certain circumstances at once suggesting her twin and equal in archery, Venus" (269). Lancelot, forever caught between conflicting impulses of liege loyalty and sexual desire, is the perfect target of the Huntress's misplaced arrow.

The Huntress also resembles another independent feminine archetype, the Amazon. Her parallels to the Amazon are drawn vividly in Malory's portrait of her:

[S]he was a grete hunteresse, and dayly she used to hunte. And ever she bare her bowghe with her, and no men wente never with her, but allwayes women, and they were all shooters and cowde well kylle a dere at the stalke and at the treste [lying in wait]. And they dayly beare bowys, arowis, hornys and wood-knyves, and many good doggis they had, bothe for the strenghe [leash] and for a bate [kill]. (XVIII, 1104)

LaFarge notes the striking manner in which the figure of the Huntress blends the feminine and the masculine:

Eschewing the company of men, she has the arms and proficiency of a man supported by men's exclusive corporate fellowship transposed to members of her own sex. She is surrounded by a superabundance of the feminine: she frequents the forest, that secret region which is structurally equated with disguise and disappearance and peopled by hermits and women. Men in Malory yearn for contact with their peers and betters; she shows no interest in even the best of men when she happens upon him, and only does so because her hand slips. Her transgression of the female estate is foregrounded by repetitious gender markings tailing off into verbal fumbblings: she is the 'lady hunteras,' 'lady, or damesell, whatsoever ye be'; Lancelot, having 'whorled up

woodly [madly],<sup>114</sup> blurts out that idiom most expressive of conservative estates theory:

'The devyll made you a shoter!' (1104/30-4).<sup>114</sup> (265)

Thus the Huntress's arrow "in the thycke of the buttoke" (1104) represents more than just a physical threat to Lancelot and the public world of the court, for its source, the Huntress, violates not only the social order in her Amazonian existence but the integrity of Arthur's finest knight. The arrow to the buttocks "unmans" Lancelot because the wound, aside from being physically inopportune, stops him from riding a horse, and a knight without a horse is left to trudge back to court in heavy armor, debased and defeated.<sup>115</sup> Further, the arrow's final resting place can be read as an ignominious parallel to the wound of the Fisher King's thigh, both wounds suggesting impotence or castration.<sup>116</sup> The momentous chance to hear the voice of alterity when the Huntress explains her misplaced shot is denied the reader as Malory again falls into a typical narrative pattern "in which not seeing, not hearing, not knowing are the last refuge from an inexorable plot" (LaFarge 269):

'Now, mercy, fayre sir! seyde the lady, "I am a jantillwoman that usyth here in thys foreyste huntynge, and God knowyth I saw you nat but as here was a barayne [barren] hynde at the soyle [earth] in thys welle. And I wente [believed] I had done welle, but my hande swarved.'" (XVIII, 1105)

Lancelot's answer is equally direct: "Alas, ye have myscheved [shamed] me."<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Lancelot's behavior is often rash and excessive. He turns on Elaine after his enchanted night of love and threatens the "traytores" with a sword (XI, 795). He wounds an unexpected male bedfellow "sore nyghe unto the deth" (VI, 260). When Guinevere rebukes him for sleeping with Elaine, he swoons and flees into the forest "as wylde [woode] as ever was man" (XI, 806).

<sup>115</sup> The word "chivalry" is derived from chevalier, French for "horseman."

<sup>116</sup> Richard Cavendish notes the thigh wound/castration motif in several Grail romances, among them the twelfth-century Perlesvaus, Chrétien de Troyes's Conte du Graal, and the German Wolfram von Eschenbach's thirteenth-century text Parzival. See King Arthur and the Grail 125-83.

<sup>117</sup> The Huntress's explanation suggests more than just shame to Lancelot's chivalric code. Either her keen huntress's eyes have betrayed her, or she has knowingly and wickedly compared the ever-besotted and frustrated Lancelot to a barren female deer. Both the hind and the knight have failed sexually.



Shame is a constant threat to the knights of the Round Table, as Richard Cavendish explains:

The key word in the vocabulary of chivalry was honour, which summed up all that was due to a knight and expected of a knight, and which consequently had a vast range of connotations and implications. It meant being held in respect, it meant behaving in a way which earned respect, and it meant paying respect to others. It consequently implied a dread of being shamed, and shame rather than guilt was the code's principal sanction. Public approval was valued more highly than a clear conscience. (40-1)

Lancelot's wound shames and frustrates him beyond its location and the physical handicap which it leaves him. Honor dictates that Lancelot return the blow; chivalry forbids a knight to turn his strength against a woman. Indeed, chivalry's artificial rules break down again and again in the private world where damsels spit on a knight's shield, seduce knights through enchantment, and roam the forest armed and dangerous. The integritas of the artificial world of chivalry cannot remain stable in the face of the intrusions from the world of the Other.

While Malory leaves out a great deal of explanation in his compression of the French material, LaFarge argues that this omission betokens more than mere dramatic compression. She argues that Malory circumvents these transgressions by "not seeing, not hearing, not knowing" the full import of what they represent (269). Instead, his knights escape mental anguish by hiding behind empty rhetoric and by moving on to the next adventure, one they can only hope will be more orthodox.

Malory compensates for chivalry's breakdown in large part by assigning guilt to outside sources, and no source is more outside the social order than Morgan herself. Malory assigns to her the fault of the abasement of chivalry's tenets, chiefly loyalty, as she abuses her brother Arthur's trust repeatedly. She switches Excalibur and its scabbard for a false one after Arthur has entrusted them to her; she uses a castle Arthur has given her to house enemy knights to kill Arthur's own knights (X, 597). Malory constantly tells us that Arthur repents his trust in his sister, but even though "he hath repented hym sytthyn a thousand tymes" (X, 597), Arthur's

understanding is slow in coming. Perhaps the lack of understanding lies in the system of chivalry itself, for the English system of chivalry rests on a foundation of "courage, loyalty and honour, " rather than the original French one that consists of "graceful manners, elegance, wit and refined taste" (Cavendish 42). Malory's knights too often are brave but boorish, constant but crude, and matchless but witless. Gawain accidentally lops off a woman's "hede by myssefortune" (III, 106), Arthur wants to follow the "questynge beste" for "twelve-monthe" when he suffers from a deep melancholy (I, 43), and Ulphuns verbally abuses Igraine for not speaking up and acknowledging Arthur as her son, a son she lost to Merlin immediately upon his birth (I, 45).

Malory's system of chivalry runs smoothest when extraneous private details, such as emotions or private conversations, are minimized or erased. Arthur is never allowed to understand Morgan because he is never allowed to "think " about her. He is forever occupied with martial strategies to secure peace in Britain, peacetime plans for the Round Table, or hopes for achieving the Grail through his knights. Indeed, no male figure is allowed to reflect upon either his own or another's actions for very long in *Morte*. Remorse is equally short-lived in Malory's knights, just as heterosexual love is truncated, and *luf talkyng* is reserved for the French romances. Far from being witty and smoothly gracious as their French counterparts, Malory's knights predictably react violently to difficult situations, be they life-threatening or not. Occasionally, as when Lancelot abandons the love-sick Fair Maid of Astolat (who subsequently dies from grief), the knight's actions have repercussions. Lancelot's own thoughtlessness is graphically illustrated when the Fair Maid's corpse floats down the Thames in a funeral barge before Lancelot and the court. Her smiling corpse is not the only accusing finger, for she holds a letter in her right hand which relates that "now hath dethe made us two at debate for youre love" (XVIII, 1096). Although Lancelot tries to exonerate himself from any guilt in her death, his lover Guinevere points out his failings: "[Y]e myght have shewed hir som bownté and jantilnes whych have preserved hir lyff" (1097). But Lancelot insists that "bownté and jantilnes" is not what she wanted, for the Fair Lady "wolde be [hys]

wyff othir ellis [hys] paramour." Moreover, she loved him "*oute of mesure*" (1097) (Emphasis mine). Desire, then, is an ever-present threat to the security of Arthur's fellowship, a threat to the ability of the individual knight to contribute to the whole. Arthur is forced to concede the correctness of Lancelot's actions in the very face of the consequences of these actions: "[W]ith many knyghtes love ys fre in hymselffe, and never wolle be bonde; for where he ys bonden he lowsith hymselffe" (1097). Rather than lose himself in love, though, Lancelot manages to save himself at a fair price, the price of the Fair Lady's life. Yet he does grant the Fair Lady the one thing she asks that does not endanger his knighthood, her mass-penny.

Other knightly actions also require outside impetus. Generally someone from outside the court provides the means, whether it be instruction, enchanted object, or loving support, for the knight to continue on his particular quest. Maureen Fries cites the heroine as the figure who "lures, guides, and bids [the hero] burst his fetters" ("Female" 6). These damsels support the hero and thus "the norms of the patriarchy" (6). Yet *Morte* has a number of injurious damsels from outside the court who threaten the unity of the artificial world Malory takes such pains to create and defend. Catherine LaFarge sees the need for wholeness as a reaction to earlier texts' exploration of the private:

When one looks back at the century before Malory, it becomes clear that the second arena, the arena of the other, inner, feminine is more confidently explored in earlier secular as well as religious literature, and that Malory's text may represent something of a rearguard action in defence of the first: wholeness, the public, the masculine, a desire for wholeness which Felicity Riddy links to Malory's generation.<sup>118</sup> (274-5)

Certainly the realm of the private threatens the *integritas* of Arthur's fellowship through its revelation of the baser emotions that motivate knights and enchantresses alike. Percival, unable to resist the fleshly charms of a naked gentlewoman, symbolically emasculates himself:

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118 See Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1987) 97-8.

'Sitthyn my fleyssh woll be my mayster I shall punyssh hit.'

And therewith he rooff [stabbed] hymselff thorow the thygh, that the blood sterte  
[flowed] aboute hym, and seyde,

'A, good Lord, Lord, take thys in recompensacion of that I have myssedone ayenste  
[against] The, Lorde!'

So than he clothed hym and armed hym and called hymself wrecche of all wrecchis:

'How nyghe I was loste, and to have lost that I sholde never have gotyn agayne, that  
was my virginité, for that may never be recoverde aftir hit ys onys loste.' (IV, 919)

Not all knights are as successful at quelling the flesh and maintaining their wholeness. Simone de Beauvoir's rationale for the male fascination for female virginity bespeaks a fascination in Morte for an abstract ideal—integrity, wholeness: "It is not because it symbolizes feminine virginity that integrity fascinates man; but it is his admiration for integrity that renders virginity precious" (51). Virginity is precious in the knights of the Round Table, too.<sup>119</sup> Bors succumbs but once, "and sauff for her sir Bors was a clene mayden" (XI, 799). Yet even Galahad, the purest of all knights, bears the stain of bastardy and Lancelot's adulterous passion for Guinevere. He is conceived through witchcraft that causes his father Lancelot to be "so asoted [infatuated] and madde that he myght make no delay but wythoute ony let he went to bedde. And so he wente [thought] that mayden Elayne had bene quene Gwenyver" (XI, 795).<sup>120</sup>

While lust and the pleasures of the flesh prove to be the undoing of knights, bringing them shame and revealing a disloyalty to other knights, such fleshly pleasures inspire the world of the *fée*, and Morgan's traits as fairy mistress of Avalon are evident in this private

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<sup>119</sup> Ironically, it is a rape that will lead, according to Uther Pendragon, to his own integritas and, incidentally, to the birth of Arthur as he explains to Merlin how much he desires Igraine: "I am seke for angre and for love of fayre Igrayne, that I may not be hool" (I, 8).

<sup>120</sup> Elaine's participation in the witchcraft and seduction is not a censorious act, for her father King Pellès facilitates her actions so that she and Lancelot may create Galahad, the knight who achieves the Holy Grail (X, 794).

world that so threatens the public one.<sup>121</sup> Myra Olstead explains how the Arthur-Accolon tale borrows heavily from the fairy world:

Malory's swift-paced narrative, unified and coherent, transports us magically into the fairy world of the old Breton *lais*. The early portion of the episode is imbued with the atmosphere of the *lai*, a fusion of wonder at the suspension of realistic cause and effect with an acute awareness of life and the physical beauty of the wonder. Ancient fairy motifs follow each other in quick succession: the fairy induction, the beautiful stag, the fairy ship with its glowing candles, the fountain, the luxury and radiance of the Otherworld. The plot is also ancient: a fay takes a paramour, makes provision for his success, involves him in combat, and aids him in battle, this time by procuring a magic sword. ("Morgan" 132-3)

Morgan le Fay loses the benevolent aspects of the *fée* in Morte, for while she is a "true fay in the swift and efficient working of her will, independent, single-purposed, clever in stratagem, resourceful," Malory has tainted the story and Morgan with a sinister purpose and method not present in the *lais*. (133). Morgan's lover, Accolon, "is the villain, not the hero; his combatant is Arthur, the glory of Britain, the fountainhead of order and justice" (133). Even her admission of love for Accolon is questionable, for he seems a helpless pawn to her "crauftis and enchauntemente" (IV, 141) and her thirst for power. In his battle with Arthur, a battle Morgan has orchestrated completely down to the stolen Excalibur and scabbard she gives Accolon, Accolon is scarcely more than one step ahead of Arthur at any point. In fact, he does not even know his opponent's true identity until Arthur names himself.

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121 The *fée* offers yet another test for the virginal knight, as Percival can attest. Kathryn S. Westoby describes a typical *fée* visitation:

They are portrayed, with scarcely veiled eroticism, lying on their beds in seductive poses, temptresses who dress for the part in transparent garments which leave little to the imagination and in rich furs, the colour and texture of which provide an erotic contrast with the bare flesh. (376)

When her agent Accolon fails to overthrow Arthur, Morgan makes an uncharacteristic personal appearance to destroy her brother. Geraldine Heng notes Morgan's disruptive behavior: "Morgan is also openly defiant of Arthurian values . . . . Furthermore, her energies are unruly, her instincts unabashedly competitive. She desires not one, but several lovers . . . , and not only magical power, but the temporal authority of the king" ("Enchanted" 293-4). Since Morgan's literary legacy leaves her a figure of great and various powers, these powers are dispersed in many forms and figures throughout Arthuriana. Unfortunately, Malory has followed his contemporaries and depicted a villainous Morgan where once there was a benefactor. The nurturing and healing energies of Vita Merlini and Brut have been transmuted into the devouring chaos of Arthur's most palpable and persistent threat.

Nowhere is Morgan's behavior as threatening as it is in the Arthur-Accolon tale. After Arthur defeats Accolon in battle, Morgan tracks Arthur to an abbey where he lies recovering from his battle wounds. Yet she is not here to heal him as she will do later in Avalon. Instead, unable to seize Excalibur from Arthur's hands, she flees with Excalibur's scabbard and tosses it into a deep lake, back to the water from whence it came. The scabbard, which protects its wearer from excessive loss of blood, is far more valuable than the sword itself, and to compound her villainy, she strips from Arthur the one device that might save him from Mordred's fatal blow. Soon afterwards in her vengeful flight, she saves an adulterous knight, Manessen, cousin to Accolon and of the court of Arthur, from drowning at the hands of a cuckolded husband. The husband, like the scabbard, ends up thrown into water, drowning in a fountain, one of the many fountains, streams, and lakes that run throughout the text.<sup>122</sup> Yet, unlike Arthur's knights who send those they rescue or spare back to Arthur to pay him homage, Morgan defiantly substitutes adulterous love for feudal fealty (and familial loyalty) and instructs Manessen to tell Arthur, "I rescewed the nat for the love of hym, but for the love of Accolon, and tell hym I feare hym

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<sup>122</sup> John Darrah notes in Paganism in Arthurian Romance the importance of "watery sites and their associated divinities" in Celtic religion (90-1). These bodies of water are a substrata to Morgan's history as a water divinity.

nat whyle I can make me and myne in lyknesse of stonys and lette hym wyte [know] I can do much more when I se my tyme" (IV, 152). Silenced in earlier texts, Morgan finally is given in Morte a voice she immediately uses to taunt and threaten Arthur, the same Arthur she succors in Vita Merlini and Brut.

Morgan's contempt for Arthur parallels her indifference to marriage, for her husband is duped by her magic and cuckolded by her lover. Maureen Fries, too, notes Morgan's "indifference to patriarchal values and a sexual freedom unknown and unknowable to the female hero or the monogamous heroine" ("Female" 12). Morgan's negative attitude toward marriage has a logical, or at least understandable beginning in her peremptory schooling and marriage to Uriens: "And the thyrd syster, Morgan le Fey, was put to scole in a nonnery . . . . And after that she was wedded to kynge Uryens of the lond of Gore" (I, 10).<sup>123</sup> Meanwhile, her brother begets two bastard sons, Borre with Lyonors, a "passyng fyre damsell" (I, 38) and Mordred with Morgawse, his half-sister (41).<sup>124</sup> Arthur's affair with Morgawse suggests yet another disturbing aspect of Morgan. Helaine Newstead notes a fusion between Morgan and her sister Morgawse through, among other literary traditions, their association with Avalon and their various identifications with the Lady of Lothian (wife of Loth). (Loth is Morgawse's husband in Morte.) Newstead also points out the connections between Dame Lyones (Lyonors in Morte) and Malory's Lady Lyle of Avilion, who "was originally 'la dame de l'isle Avalon,' according to the *Huth Merlin*" (805). This labyrinth of interconnectedness suggests Morgawse, Lyonors, and Lady Lyle were originally one person, namely Morgan, the oldest figure of the three. It also suggests that Morgan is the mother to both of Arthur's illegitimate sons, as well as to all of

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123 John Darrah points out the "consistency with which the husbands of Ygerne's daughters [Morgan, Morgawse, Elaine] are the rebel kings in the uprising against Arthur when he has acceded to the throne" (109-10). "Peace weaving" was rarely a successful arrangement for a marriage or the cessation of war, nor was it likely a particularly happy arrangement for the wife or husband.

124 See also R. S. Loomis's identification of Morgan with the Lady of Lyon in "A Survey of Scholarship since 1903" in Lucy Allen Paton's Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance, 284-91.

Arthur's named "sister-sons." Perhaps Morgan's presence in the court has been acutely underestimated if her offspring are as numerous as this possible genealogy suggests. Yet, for all her possible maternal links with several of Arthur's key knights, Morgan is never a dutiful wife in her arranged marriage to Uriens. On the other hand, her brother Arthur is free to choose his own wife and marry her despite Merlin's covert warning that "Gwenyver was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff" (III, 97). Heterosexual love in Morte, though, is always destined to fail whether it be marital or extramarital. Malory hesitates to enter the bedchambers of Arthur's fellowship, and Morte has little to do with any other courtly love activities or conventions other than the occasional admonitions to knights to protect and honor ladies.<sup>125</sup>

English adherence to chivalry, especially in Malory's work, converts the concept of romantic love and feminine beauty into inopportune moments of desire and trite generic epithets about the damsel's fairness. Hence, the Morgan that Malory adapts from his French sources has no comparable conventions of courtly love, perhaps even calling courtly love conventions as a whole into question in the fifteenth-century text. Morgan's options in love would seem to be only trysts with extramarital paramours which fall outside the parameters of courtly love with Morgan's marked pursuit of the men and the occasional errant knight she captures and on whom she half-heartedly works her magic. Peggy McCracken notes the disruptive effect the adulterous queen can have on a society such as the one Malory constructs in Morte:

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<sup>125</sup> Generally these admonitions follow an unfortunate incident in which a woman has been decapitated or left to die, usually for love, by a careless knight. See Gawain's first adventure after he is knighted, when he almost immediately (accidentally) decapitates a lady, and is forced to wear her body and head about himself as a cloak for penance (III, 103-09). King Pellinor forthwith instructs the knights to "allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour] strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe" (120). Noticeably absent in Pellinor's speech are the peasant women who are raped when lust overcomes the occasional errant knight. See Andreas Cappellanus, The Art of Courtly Love, trans. John Jay Parry (New York: Norton, 1969) 149-50, who advises knights in his chapter on "The Love of Peasants" to "not hesitate to take what you seek and to embrace them by force" (150).



The adulterous female body introduces instability into the symbolic order that is founded on unitary institutions, putting into question the legitimacy of the entire order along with the social and political systems that it creates and supports . . . [A]s an implicit contrast to the intact, closed virginal body suggests, political and rhetorical stability depend on closure, on an intact, closed system. (56, 57)

While Guinevere's adultery is largely blamed for the destruction of Arthur's fellowship, Morgan's own adultery is left largely on the perimeters of the court. Only in the Arthur-Accolon tale does Morgan's adultery lead, albeit indirectly, to similar instability. Moreover, Morgan escapes McCracken's conclusion that "once opened, the body is possessed by another" (58). No one possesses Morgan's body, although she does seek to share it occasionally.

Even more strongly indicative of her "indifference to patriarchal values," however, or at least more threatening to the social order, is Morgan's lust for Arthur's throne. In a typically condensed narrative, Malory has Accolon confess just how far Morgan's "indifference" takes her:<sup>126</sup>

'[K]yng Arthur ys the man in the worlde that she hatyth moste, because he is moste of worship and of prouesse of ony of hir bloode. Also she lovyth me oute of mesure as paramour, and I hir agayne. And if she myght bryng hit aboute to sle Arthure by hir crauftis, she wolde sle hir hurbonde kyng Uryence lyghtly. And than she devysed to have me kyng in this londe and so to reigne, and she to be my quene.'<sup>127</sup> (IV, 145-6)

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<sup>126</sup> Maureen Fries notes that this confessional mode has no precedent in Malory's French sources ("Decline" 11). It serves here to convey a maximum amount of background and rationale in a minimum space as well as to mitigate Accolon's own guilt somewhat in this deathbed confession.

<sup>127</sup> This confession is redundant, for it repeats an earlier explanation of Morgan's machinations in the Arthur-Accolon tale. The earlier clarification, however, is an authorial intrusion to justify how Morgan came to possess the valuable scabbard. Merlin has just warned Arthur to "kepe well the scawberd" because it will keep him from bleeding to death in battle. In a characteristically regrettable move, "for grete truste Arthure betoke the scawberde unto Morgan le Fay, hys sister" (II, 78). In this doubling of explanations, intentional or not, Malory has compounded Morgan's guilt into an explicit violation of Arthur's great, albeit misguided, trust. Compare it to Morgan's gift of a "counterfete and brutyll and false" Excalibur and

Accolon's confession reveals not only Morgan's lust for power but also the possibility of consanguinal jealousy. Arthur is certainly the most celebrated person of "ony of hir bloode," and sibling rivalry could explain Morgan's continued attacks against the court. Henry Grady Morgan, however, believes that neither her rivalry with Arthur nor her excessive lust for Accolon is the motivation behind the Arthur-Accolon battle:

Morgan's motivation, then, is in complete violation of both the section of the code [of chivalry] which forbids taking part in wrongful quarrels for love—for as Accolon admits, "she lovyth me oute of mesure as paramour"—and she violates the second portion of this requirement of the code—not to participate in wrongful quarrels for personal gain—for her ultimate purpose is to slay Arthur in order to make her lover and herself king and queen of Arthur's realm. (161)

Several questions arise from Morgan's actions and inaction in this tale. Since she displays the Morrígain's ability to shift her shape and those of her army into giant stones to escape Arthur, why does she not avail herself of the battle goddess's warrior skills and take up arms personally against her foe? She is hardly concerned with other conventions that restrict and define her gender in Malory's text. Why does she bother to substitute a false Excalibur when Arthur would have to fight Accolon regardless of weapon availability? Obviously Excalibur is a symbol as well as a tool in Morgan's quest to overthrow Arthur. How viable is Morgan's plan to rule all of England when Arthur's victory over the rebel kings succeeds only because he has the help of both Merlin and the sword he has drawn from the stone (I, 13) and from the "arme clothed in whyght samyte" (I, 52)? While Malory may be writing a tale of a Dark Ages Britain, the idea of an orderly monarchical succession is surely a factor in this fifteenth-century text, given that dynastic struggles in the War of the Roses resulted in the crown changing hands for the fifth time in a generation by 1485, the date of Caxton's edition of *Morte*

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scabbard to Arthur. A damsel delivers them to the king with the explanation, "She sendis here youre swerde for grete love" (IV, 142).

(Riddy 2).<sup>128</sup> Malory witnessed first hand how dynastic wars can disrupt the very fabric of medieval society.

The Arthur-Accolon tale acts as a clarifying moment to exhibit Morgan in her most threatening posture, as a figure capable of a simultaneous regicide, fratricide, and treason, a monstrous figure capable of consciously destroying Arthur and his fellowship. While the other tales and incidents illustrate a figure whose actions range bewilderingly from malevolent to mischievous, this tale presents a consistently evil Morgan and allows us to see her "as an exemplar . . . of the disloyalty that is the basic weakness of the society and that is ultimately to bring about its downfall" (Morgan 153). Myra Olstead, too, argues that Malory has a clear purpose in his reinvention of Morgan, for "he has assigned Morgan a specific function, that of offering a major threat to Arthur's realm" ("Morgan" 131), a threat that persists, albeit somewhat attenuated, in subsequent tales as Morgan targets more and more of Arthur's court.

Morgan's threats of seduction are rarely so deadly or so serious; they more typically concern desires more mundane and, occasionally, amusing. Four sorceress-queens (Morgan, queen of Gore, and the queens of Estlonde, North Galys, and the Oute Iles) almost come to blows over the love of Lancelot: "And anone as they loked on his face they knew well hit was sir Launcelot, and began to stryve for that knyght, and every of hem [them] seyde they wolde have hym to hir [their] love" (VI, 256). Morgan convinces them to rely on enchantment instead of fisticuffs, and Lancelot is taken to her prison where he must decide which queen he favors.<sup>129</sup> Lancelot chooses death over the love of a false enchantress, but a fair damsel rescues him from the cell. Lancelot's escape provides the reader with a look at homosocial bonding never seen in

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<sup>128</sup> As Laurence Harf-Lancner notes, romances are "works which are situated, not simply at the end of a long oral tradition, but in the literary and social context of their age. Each romance was produced, not in a literary vacuum, but against a particular ideological and social background which any study of the work should take into consideration" (qtd. in Westoby 374). In other words, Morgan's overthrow of Arthur can mean only chaos, the end of the social order in Malory's time. See Felicity Riddy's discussion of Malory's own participation in political intrigues and changing loyalties in *Sir Thomas Malory* 1-7.

<sup>129</sup> Maureen Fries calls this scheme a "kind of who's-the-fairest-of-us-all sexual play" ("Decline" 12).

Arthur's court. Unable to find his way from the "grete foreste" into which he has been released, Lancelot finally finds night's lodging in a nearby pavilion. He is soon joined by a strange bedfellow:

Than within an owre there come that knyght that ought [owned] the pavylyon. He wente [believed] that his lemman [lover] had layne in that bed, and so he leyde hym adowne by sir Launcelot and toke hym in his aymes and began to kysse hym. And whan sir Launcelot felte a rough berde kyssyng hym he sterte oute of the bedde lyghtly, and the othir knyght after hym. (VI, 259)

A fight breaks out, and Lancelot "wounded hym sore nyghe unto the deth" (260). When the wounded knight explains he has made an honest mistake, Lancelot explains he "was adrad of treson, for I was late begyled" (260). It is unclear whether he believes the bearded kiss comes from a false enchantress or whether he feared Morgan had tired of using damsels to do her mischief. I read this incident as a bit of mischief orchestrated by Morgan, for Lancelot is lost in the forest, the private realm of enchantresses and magical damsels. The forest is also, as Sally Firmin explains, noted for "its symbolic value. An ancient symbol for the need to find or discover oneself, the forest is also recognized in folklore and by literary tradition as a testing ground" (28-9). This "grete foreste" serves as both a bizarre test designed by Morgan as well as a tweak at Lancelot's facade of a virtuous knight.<sup>130</sup>

Other "affairs of the heart" sound a more sinister note. Myra Olstead reads the close of the Alexander tale as a indication that "Morgan's personality has moved consistently in the direction of pure malice and black magic" ("Morgan" 136).<sup>131</sup> Gone is the benevolent healer-

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<sup>130</sup> I see John Cleese's portrayal of Lancelot as a self-absorbed, over-the-top fighting machine in the film Monty Python and the Holy Grail arising from this and other spurious incidents in Lancelot's slightly tarnished career, e. g. his accidental slaying of Gareth and Gaheris when he confuses them for enemies.

<sup>131</sup> There is room to doubt whether her actions arise from "pure malice." The only openly evil deed she does is to rub Alexander's wounds with the wrong ointment. She drugs him so that he sleeps for three days and nights, but then sleep is a part of healing. Further, the promise she extracts from him mainly deters him from vengeance against his enemy, her co-conspirator Mark. Finally, the statement that Morgan wants Alexander to satisfy her pleasure

guardian of Avalon. Instead, Morgan abuses the young man with her considerable powers of healing by applying to his "sixtene grete woundis" "such an oynement that he sholde have dyed" (X, 642). Although she subsequently applies a soothing ointment to ease his pain, she holds him as a prisoner of love, advising him to refuse the love of a fair damsel "he hath wonne . . . with his hondis" (642). When this same damsel explains to him that he has been tricked into a promise to stay in Morgan's castle for a year and a day<sup>132</sup> so that he can "do hir plesure whan hit lykth hir," his response alludes to the symbolic-sword-in-the-thigh: "For I had levir kut away my hangers [testicles] than I wolde do her ony suche pleasure!" (643). All traces of the benefactor of Vita Merlini and Brut are erased in this tale as Morgan assumes the role of a femme fatale. Yet it is only a half-hearted assumption, for Malory never fleshes out the role. Even her seduction of Alexander is hearsay, not the salacious language of the *fée*.

The motivation for Morgan's actions and desires do not translate readily, if at all, from the private world into the public one of Arthur's court, for her domain in the text is largely the domain of the Other where "the presence of enchantresses and enchantment is a recognition of alterity" (Heng "Enchanted," 293). Heng notes this abundance of magical female figures in Morte:

While only one man, Merlin, is decisively associated with the practice of sorcery, the reference of magic to women is almost casual, reflexive; even nameless figures who make the briefest appearances may possess magical objects and spells, and work enchantment: it is a language depicted by the text as being ubiquitously familiar to women. (285)

Sir Marhaus has dealings with some of these nameless enchantresses who magically undo knights. The "damesels of the turret," the twelve damsels who have befouled his shield by

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comes from the damsel, a cousin who claims the right to the castle and to Alexander in marriage and who may have her own ulterior motives in blackening Morgan's character.

<sup>132</sup> Richard Cavendish notes that a year and a day is the normal interval between a betrothal and a wedding in Celtic tradition (122), a curious twist on Morgan's treatment of Alexander.

hanging it on a tree, have "spette uppon hit and som threwe myre uppon the shelde" (IV, 158).

The women explain their actions as a reaction to Marhaus's hatred for all "ladyes and jantylwomen" (158). They have chosen his shield, the symbol of chivalry, upon which to vent their "dyspyte."<sup>133</sup> Surely the semiotics of their actions against the symbol speaks louder than their trivial words. Marhaus refutes their claim and explains that his hatred stems from a palpable magical threat to his manhood:

Not shal I telle you for what cause I hate them: for they be sorssere[r]s and inchaunters many of them, and be a knyght never so good of his body and as full of prouesse as a man may be, they woll make hym a starke cowerde to have the bettir of hym. And this is the principall cause that I hate them. (IV, 161)

Malory leaves the reader to decide the innocence or guilt of Marhaus, but most readers can assume that the knight's word will win out over the word of one woman or of twelve. Malory does not even bother to find much support for Marhaus's claim. Yvain responds to the damsels' answer by speaking of Marhaus's prowess as a knight who has proved himself in battle. Gawain then adds a witless comment that speaks to the damsels' actions rather than to Marhaus's worth: "[M]ethynke ye [twelve damsels] ar to blame, for hit is to suppose he that hyng that shelde there he woll nat be longe therefro, and than may tho knyghtes macche [match] hym on horsebak" (159). While the actual guilty party or parties remains in a Malory-ian limbo, so, too, does Marhaus's explanation of his hatred for the women. How do the damsels make a good knight a "starke cowerde"? Marhaus seems to draw on the medieval scapegoat of women and witchcraft, the witch figure an easy explanation for male inadequacies

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<sup>133</sup> A shield is used again to show feminine intrusion when Morgan sends a shield with a libelous message to Arthur via Tristram; the shield depicts a knight standing over a king and queen with a foot on each one's head (IX, 554). Tristram, who is "stronge and bygge" (VIII, 375) but not overly bright, cannot fathom the shield's message, but one of Morgan's damsels interprets it for Arthur, telling him it is a warning of the "shame and dishonoure" that he and Guinevere share (557). Guinevere, however, reads the message well and knows the sender (558). Is Morgan's appropriation of the semiotics of heraldry a benevolent act to guide Arthur to prevent the tragedy that results from Lancelot and Guinevere's treasonous affair, or is it just a spiteful communiqué to Guinevere?

and fears, to explain other men's "unmanly" conduct and his own unchivalrous behavior.

Marhaus's rationale suggests the paranoia behind much of the Malleus Maleficarum and the masculine fear of impotency. He has already labeled them "sorssere[r]s and inchaunters," common charges in witchcraft trials. He claims they emasculate even the finest knight "as full of prouesse as a man may be," a frightening fate for any of Arthur's cadre, for no reason other than spite (or envy): "to have the bettir of hym."

Merlin, too, suffers from accusations regarding the darker side of enchantment. A nameless knight acts as the village gossip and warns another knight, "Beware . . . of Merlion, for he knowith all thynges by the devylles craffte" (III, 118). Niniane fears him because he is besotted with her and "for cause he was a devyls son" (IV, 126). As with most magical characters in Morte, for Merlin the language of enchantment often suffers in the translation. In the twelfth-century Vita Merlini, "Merlin's behavior during his spell as a madman resembles that of a seer, diviner, or shaman; during other long stretches he is a political prophet" (Ziolkowski 154). Yet, by the fifteenth-century Morte, his powers have been rationalized greatly, and only traces remain of his great vatic powers.<sup>134</sup> As Henry Grady Morgan and others have noted, Malory has stripped away Morgan's power of prophecy and assigned a rationalized version of it to Merlin. In the Suite du Merlin, the source of Malory's Book I, Morgan "writes in a book the prophecy of the manner of deaths of Arthur and Gawain" (153). Here Merlin tells Arthur of his death as he will later tell a knight of Gawain's death. Even these traces are generally ignored by Arthur when Merlin offers his advice. Merlin's great vatic powers have been reduced generally to "counceil" and "advys" (I, 20).

In a typically low-key fashion, however, Malory describes a palpable instance of Merlin's older prophetic and magical powers in his physical change from a fourteen-year-old boy who tells Arthur his past (his birth) to an eighty-year-old man who tells him his future

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<sup>134</sup> Rather than the amalgam of prophetic styles Ziolkowski sees in Vita Merlini, C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcor contend that when medieval authors speak of "the spell-casting, supernatural Merlin, the Merlin-as-prophet figure tends to be edited out of the legend" (88).

(his death at his son's hands). Arthur responds, "A, ye ar a mervaylous man! But I mervayle much of thy wordis that I mon [may] dye in batayle" (I, 44), but Merlin, the son of an incubus who has been all but completely co-opted by Christianity, discounts the marvelousness of the prophecy, for "hyt ys Goddis wyll" that Arthur pay for his incestuous union with Morgawse (44). There is one instance in which Arthur does listen and obey Merlin, but here his actions are hasty and compound the tragedy Arthur fathered when he begat Mordred. When Merlin advises Arthur to kill his newborn son, Arthur sends all the sons of nobility who share Mordred's birthdate to the sea in ships, leaving Mordred and the other infants to a watery fate. Mordred survives when a passing good man finds him washed up on shore; he must survive because Merlin has already prophesied Mordred will destroy his father. It is unclear why Merlin is presumptuous enough to believe he can circumvent his own prophecy, but Mordred's survival and the needless deaths of so many innocents foreshadow the tragedy Arthur has already spawned.<sup>135</sup>

Arthur does not always seek or accept Merlin's advice. When Merlin warns Arthur of the future love affair between Guinevere and Lancelot, Arthur heeds him not. Merlin facilitates the courtship despite his foreknowledge of her adultery, for he recognizes that where a "mannes herte is sette he woll be loth to returne" (III, 97). Merlin also recognizes the futility of fighting fate, the fate revealed in his prophecies, when he explains why he laughs:

'Thys ys the cause,' seyde Merlion: 'there shall never man handyll thys swerde but the beste knyght of the worlde, and that shall be sir Launcelot othir [or] ellis Galahad, hys sonne. And Launcelot with [t]hy swerde shall sle the man in the worlde that he lovith beste: that shall be sir Gawayne.' (II, 91)

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<sup>135</sup> Merlin does, however, give a false prophecy or at least a prophecy that can change. Note his prophecy concerning Lancelot or Galahad dying by the sword (II, 91). Galahad dies from no mortal causes so that his soul might go straight up to heaven (XVII, 1035), and Lancelot wills himself to die, grieved by the loss of Guinevere, the Round Table, and his own innocence (XXI, 1258).



Perhaps his foreknowledge of the ruin of Arthur's world makes his vision of his own "death" more bearable. Merlin's fate, a magical interment under a stone, is hardly a novel end, for it follows closely Merlin's fate in the French romances. R. S. Loomis notes the parallels:

In the *Vulgate Merlin*, Niniane confines him in the Forest of Broceliande in walls of air . . . . In the *Vulgate Lancelot* she seals him asleep in a cave. In the *Prophecies* the Lady of the Lake imprisons him in a tomb where his body wastes away but his soul lives on for all who come. In Malory we learn that the Damsel of the Lake, Nyneue, made Merlin go under a stone and wrought so that he came never out for all the crafts he could do. . . . Only the *Huth Merlin* makes his imprisonment in the tomb by Niniane end in death. (*Celtic Myth* 127-8)

Merlin's imprisonment in *Malory* is not death so much as a magical restraining order imposed on him by Niniane.<sup>136</sup> Within sixty lines of text, Malory introduces Niniane into Arthur's court; draws a quick sketch of a lecherous Merlin who "allwayes . . . lay aboute to have hir maydynhode"; shows us a clever Niniane who "made Merlion good chere tylle sche had lerned of hym all maner of thyng that sche desyred"; and leaves Merlin "undir a grete stone," a victim of his own lust and Niniane's enchantment (IV, 125-6). Several critics have noted that Malory depicts Niniane far more positively than do his sources. S. E. Holbrook explains how the lechery of Merlin underscores Niniane's underlying goodness:

. . . Malory's Merlin is distinctly lecherous. The line between passionate love and concupiscence may depend on one's moral perspective, but when Malory, who takes pains elsewhere to display the difference between 'virtuous love' and 'licours lust,' refers not once to love but only to 'dottage' and gives Merlin no more than an incessant desire to have the damosel's 'maydenhede,' we must admit that the traditional fatal

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<sup>136</sup> Niniane has many variant spellings in the various romances, among them Nimue, Ninieve, and Vivian. I will use Niniane in my own discussion and the variant spellings when quoting a source.

love has diminished into patent lechery. Our sympathy is thus thrown towards Nymue in this affair. (77)

Niniane's connections to Morgan are nowhere stronger than in this short-term apprenticeship. Maureen Fries details the parallels between the two in Morte:

The Lady [of the Lake] has been retailored to represent the (mostly) nurturing side of a split-mother image, as Morgan becomes the (mostly) devouring side. The combination of these split images appears in the figure of Nimue (also Ninian and Vivian), who first serves as devourer and then as restorer of Arthurian males. Like her sister-avatar, she is called the Lady of the Lake. In a borrowing from Morgan's career, she has the besotted Merlin teach her his magic, but without yielding to him sexually. Shutting Merlin away in a cave, she deprives male Arthurians of their counselor and reveals her own cunning ambition. But Nimue then becomes a devoted and influential friend of Arthurian society. ("Female Heroes" 14)

Malory maintains a balancing act throughout the text in the "split images" of Morgan with no decisive victory between Morgan's endless scheming (in the first ten books at least) and the two Ladies of the Lake who intercede on Arthur's behalf to offer just enough assistance to save Arthur or a member of the court.<sup>137</sup> There is never a "show down," a great moment of truth when either Lady of the Lake confronts Morgan in mortal combat; rather, the Ladies offer the minimum assistance necessary to foil Morgan and save her intended target. There is never spectacle or superfluous display of power in their counter-enchantments. When Arthur faces death at Accolon's hands, Niniane appears on the field of battle to help Arthur, for "she had grete peté that so good a knyght and such a man of worship sholde be so destroyed" (IV, 144). Yet this same damsel who has trapped Merlin under a great stone relies on the slightest of "prestidigitations" to rescue this good knight:

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<sup>137</sup> Myra Olstead argues that the balance between the Lady of the Lake (she sees Niniane and the unnamed Lady of the Lake as one characters rather than two) and Morgan helps provide a "rhythm of plot, [and] at the same time sustains interest in their individual persons and create suspense" ("Morgan"136).

And at the next st[ro]ke sir Accolon stroke at hym suche a stroke that by the damesels inchauntemente the swerde Excaliber fell oute of Accolons honde to the erthe, and therewithall sir Arthure lyghtly lepe to hit and gate hit in his honde, and forthwithall he knew hit that hit was his swerde Excalyber. (144)

Her magic counters only as much of Morgan's own false enchantment as is necessary to save Arthur, thus thwarting Morgan, but, more importantly, allowing Arthur to save himself and save face as well. Thus, while Malory has rendered a more beneficent Lady of the Lake than his sources,<sup>138</sup> Niniane loses far more than she gains in Malory's recuperation, as Roberta Davidson points out:

Nyneve's sorcery and enchantments are limited to the ability to uncover the truth. She finds no treasure and never changes her shape. When physical force is required, she must, like nearly every other woman in romance, obtain a man to help her. Finally, however, she loses even the power of speech, when she too becomes a figure of helplessness, unable to promise the king that he will find healing on the Isle of Avalon. (123-4)

Furthermore, like Morgan, she, too, has learned even these minimal powers she has from another. As Kathryn S. Westoby notes in her discussion of the rationalization of the *fée* in later romances, the supernatural women of the Celtic tradition "simply *were fées*, their later sisters in romance *become fées*, gaining the necessary learning from books or from teachers" (384). Even Morgan's great powers come from a surprisingly "liberal" nunnery, for "ther she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye" (I, 10).

Clearly the threat of the educated woman works hand and hand with the threat of the powerful woman in *Morte*. The teaching ability Morgan possesses in *Vita Merlini* has been replaced in Malory's text by an incredible ability to learn. Morgan learns the art of enchantment, possibly even through communication with the dead if Malory uses the specific

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<sup>138</sup> See S. E. Holbrooks's "Nymue, The Chief Lady of the Lake" for a detailed explanation of Malory's changes in the figure of Niniane.

etymological meaning of the word "necromancy." That she learns this in a nunnery is problematic, calling into question Malory's sources, Malory's adaptation and condensation of the sources, and, less likely, the state of fifteenth-century nunneries. She does not, however, learn from Merlin as an apt apprentice; rather, another aspect of her character, Niniane, does so. Morgan remains more of a threat because of her avoidance of Merlin's teaching since traditionally her apprenticeship is repaid with ugliness.<sup>139</sup> Norma Goodrich calls this loss "a common fairy-tale injunction aimed at girls" (197). She goes on to note that the Merlin of the prose Lancelot

reportedly protected his pupil Morgue, who often astonished him . . . by her great beauty, as by her 'marvelous intelligence,' and the 'subtlety' of her mind. After she had progressed far enough, she also learned 'astronomie' from him, 'ingremance,' [necromancy], and 'other great Marvels.' (198)

Malory tells us little of Morgan's beauty, but then he tells us little of anyone's beauty. Although Morte retains vestiges of fin amor in the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinevere and Tristram and Iseult, idealized feminine beauty is routinely reduced to the generic adjective "fair." Size and strength matter more in the masculine world of chivalry. Feminine beauty can only distract the errant knight from his activa vita. For Malory such beauty is static, and Malory writes best of action. With these gaps about feminine appearance in the text, we can only hypothesize that Morgan retains her fée beauty along with her fée desires.

Maureen Fries's discussion of the female roles of the romances sheds light on the totality of Morgan, a totality that is split into the multiple Ladies of the Lake. She describes these females as "more fluid and far more ambivalent" ("Female Heroes" 7), surely an apt description for the multiplicity of roles and actions Morgan's character assumes in Arthuriana.

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<sup>139</sup> Lucy Allen Paton traces Morgan's growing dependence on others for her knowledge, including the ugly price she pays for her apprenticeship in Studies of the Fairy in Arthurian Romance. She also notes that "one of the most ordinary results of rationalization is the explanation of the fay's power as art from an enchanter, or as due to an acquaintance with astrology" (note 2, 164-6).

The shapeshifter brings with her a fluidity of form and function in all her incarnations, a fluidity that displays itself in "always at least double and usually multiple" manifestations (12). Morte demonstrates these multiple manifestations in the Lady of the Lady and in Niniane,<sup>140</sup> figures who oppose Morgan although they still exhibit many of her traits and powers. As Fries explains:

More beneficent splittings-off from her original role emerge in the several Ladies of the Lake who later develop from her archetype: literally watered-down from Morgan, they exhibit that tenet of medieval misogyny which held that no woman should be as strong as a man, or *could* be without some supernatural power.<sup>141</sup> ("Female Heroes" 12)

It should be noted that even these "watered-down" Ladies of the Lake retain remnants of powerful feminine presence, though largely elided in their obeisance to Arthur and Lancelot. Niniane, noted for minimal effort and outside assistance when she comes to Arthur's aid, takes on the air of her Celtic foremothers when she takes the head of the decapitated Aunowre, the besotted sorceress who tries to behead Arthur, and "hyng[e] hit at hir sadill-bowe by the heyre" (IX, 491). This grisly trophy recalls the violence of Celtic women, who, as John Darrah notes, "were no strangers to violence" (86).<sup>142</sup> The Lady of the Lake (Lancelot's mother in the French romances) retains the powers of Modron, the Celtic goddess of the river. When Arthur inquires about "a damesell goynge uppon the laake," Merlin explains that it is the Lady of the

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<sup>140</sup> Most critics agree that the Ladies of the Lake are all aspects of an earlier Morgan. See John Rhys, Studies in the Arthurian Legend (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891) 348 and R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance, 2nd ed. (London: Constable, 1993) 193. For an opposing view, see Lucy Allen Paton's Studies of the Fairy in Arthurian Romance 248-9.

<sup>141</sup> Myra Olstead uses a different perspective to explain the abundance of supernatural women in the text: "It is important that these women, for whom courtly heroes dare so greatly, be themselves larger than life, that they be worthy of such high aspirations. This necessity explains in part the tendency in romance to portray heroines as supernatural women" ("Morgan" 129).

<sup>142</sup> John Darrah's chapter "Severed Heads and Sacred Waters" traces the rituals and recurrences of beheadings and the various beheaders in the Matter of Britain. See Paganism in Arthurian Romance 83-98.

Lake who lives on an Avalon-like rock<sup>143</sup> and who may bestow upon Arthur the greatest of all swords.<sup>144</sup> "There ys a grete roche, and therein ys as fayre a paleyce as ony on erthe, and rychely besayne. And thys damesel woll come to you anone, and than speke ye fayre to hir, that she may gyff you that swerde" (I, 52).

Morgan, however, remains the more palpable presence in the text, as she continuously unmans the knights of the text, stealing from them the courage, loyalty, and honor most prized by Round Table knights. When Lancelot nearly slays the unfortunate male bedcompanion who mistakes Lancelot for his lover, his fear of Morgan and her fellow sorceress-queens is comically brought to the foreground: "I was adrad of treson, for I was late begyled" (VI, 260). Morgan has raised a treasonous army of her own whose purpose it is to "dystroy all thos knyghtes that kynge Arthur lovyth" (X, 597).<sup>145</sup> She attempts to test and shame Arthur's court with a "fayre horne harneyste with golde" that no woman can drink from "but yf she were tre to her husbande"; the false wife "sholde spylle all the drynke" (VIII, 429), literally and figuratively staining the reputation of Arthur's court.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Myra Olstead points out that Merlin's explanation of the undersea kingdom is another example of rationalization, for the "land beneath the waves (*Tír-fó-thuinn*) is common in Celtic tradition" ("Role" 255).

<sup>144</sup> Strangely enough this Lady of the Lake tries to acquire a trophy head as well. Asking Arthur to return the favor for the sword she gave him, she asks for the head of Balin or yet another Lady of the Lake, this one called Lady Lyle of Avilion, who has brought into the court another sword of contention. Balin accuses her of destroying many good knights and the "causer that [his] modir was brente" (II, 66-7). Adding even more twists to the many aspects of Morgan, this same beheaded Lady, whom Balin describes as more like Morgan than the Dame du Lac, is later in the text alive and well. Further, as Helaine Newstead has noted, "Malory's Lady Lyle of Avilion was originally 'la dame de l'isle Avalon,' according to the *Huth Merlin*" (805).

<sup>145</sup> The honor-bound Lancelot, of course, cannot attack his female captors and, apparently, transfers his repressed fear and anger onto the unfortunate knight, but Arthur feels no such compunctions concerning Morgan and her "daungerous knyghtes": "[T]his castle coude he never gete nother wyne of hir by no maner of engyne" (X, 597).

<sup>146</sup> On a curious French/courtly love note, the horn's evil gains Morgan a permanent reputation when the barons of King Mark's court (where the horn has been brought to instead) wish to burn Morgan as a witch. The narrator then explains that the horn caused always "stryff and bate [death]," and "allway in her dayes she was an enemy to all trew lovers," a problematic epithet and an empty curse in a text that is curiously disinterested in courtly love.

Morgan also retains strong links with Celtic mythology, a connection perhaps most apparent in her shapeshifting escape from Arthur in the Arthur-Accolon tale. Here her actions show she retains more than mere traces of the shapeshifting powers of the Morrígain, the Celtic goddess of battle:

Than she rode into a valey where many grete stonys were, and whan she sawe she muste be overtake, she shope hirself, horse and man, by enchauntemente unto grete marbyll stonys. And anone withall come kynge Arthure and sir Outlake whereas the kynge myght know his sistir and her men and one knyght frome another. (IV, 151)

Like the Morrígain, Morgan is a "fomenter of strife" (Paton 150), and Arthur is generally the particular target of her strife. Arthur's response is typically understated: "A, here may ye se the vengeance of God! And now am I sory this mysaventure is befall" (151). Is Arthur implying the vengeance of God works through Morgan or simply all that has come to pass is to punish Arthur for his own misdeeds? If Arthur believes God's punishment is upon him and his half-sister has scarcely failed in her plot to murder him and take his throne, should he not feel something more than sorrow? We have only to read a bit further in the tale, however, to see that Arthur does react, or at least Morgan has reason to expect some great reprisal from her brother. After she has sent Manessen to Arthur to flaunt her disloyalty to his court, "she departed into the contrey of Gore [her kingdom], . . . and made hir castels and townys stronge, for allwey she drad muche kyng Arthure" (152). Morgan clearly expects a reaction from Arthur similar to one he would give were she a rival king, but Arthur, who manages to subdue the whole of England, cannot stop Morgan.

The shape Morgan chooses for herself and her army, giant marble stones, intensifies the effect of the transmogrification. Traditionally, the Morrígain favors the form of birds, but she has taken many different forms. As Lucy Allen Paton notes:

Her favorite form is that of a bird, especially a crow or a raven. She becomes in turn an eel, a gray wolf (or hound), and a white red-eared cow in a contest with Cuchulinn. We

have seen her come to him also as a beautiful maiden, as a woman with red eyebrows . .

[and as] an old crone driving a cow. (149-50)

Not only is the rock an inanimate, hence unfamiliar, form, it also suggests the stones of Stonehenge that Merlin's enchantment brings to England from Ireland as well as the stone under which Niniane imprisons her "suitor" Merlin. The origin of the stones is explained in Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century text Historia Regum Britanniae in a story of how Merlin complies with Uther's wishes to transport the stones. Merlin, however, transports these huge stones and arranges them with an "artistry [that] was worth more than any brute strength" (198). The Merlin of the Historia, a man skilled in "the foretelling of the future [and] . . . in mechanical contrivances" (195), has dwindled in Morte to an aging lecher who cannot move a single great stone.

Curiously, this same prophet-engineer's fate is sealed by his apprentice Niniane when she traps him under a stone "so hevy that an hondred men myght nat lyfft hit up" (IV, 132). Merlin realizes that "he myght never be holpyn [helped] but by her that put hym there" (132). The Ladies of the Lake, Niniane and the original archetype, Morgan, have extended their powers from water to stone, an extension of the great elemental powers Morgan possesses. While both Morgan and Niniane use stone to protect themselves, Morgan's use of the form is far more menacing. Niniane's imprisonment of Merlin, a parallel of the elemental French *fée* prisons described by R. S. Loomis, is merely following an earlier precedent and simultaneously protecting her virginity. Morgan turns herself and her entourage into stone and boasts that she need not fear Arthur "whyle I can make me and myne in lyknesse of stonys" (IV, 152). Neither Excalibur, "Kutte Stele" (II, 65), nor the fires reserved for "wycches" and "tresonous enchauntresses" can harm a stone. But Morgan cannot remain a stone, not if she is to continue her assaults upon the court.

Morgan remains a threat throughout the first ten books, a force that inverts the laws that order Arthurian society and converts the world outside the court into her own dangerous domain. The outside world, the world outside the court, is relatively populous, peopled by



lesser-known figures whose existence is predicated upon their interaction with major characters; that is, they are the "virtual particles"<sup>147</sup> of Arthur's world, "popping" into existence whenever needed to further the plot, whether it be to help or hinder a knight. Geraldine Heng cites the "proliferation of secondary characters" as an indication of feminine presence ("Map" 255), and *Morte* has an impressive ensemble of damsels, hermits, and the occasional dwarf. Malory invests many of these characters with magic as well, and his text is permeated with the uncanny elements he has collected from his sources and left largely as he found them. Sally Firmin notes the disruptive presence of these elements in her discussion of the perils afforded by Malory's forests:

Yet another peril the knight must confront within the secular forest is the mysterious, disruptive effect of enchantment. Malory suggests the presence of magic through enchanted objects such as horns, swords, spears, scabbards, cups, disembodied hands and voices. Folklore motifs such as the hart, brachet, mysterious messenger, well, and fountain--all part of the forest--are strongly identified with the enchanted.<sup>148</sup> (30)

Moving freely throughout these mysterious and disruptive elements is the enigmatic and dangerous Morgan and her many agents. Firmin describes the two roles of the forest as the "hostile testing ground" and the "source of redemption," that is, forest "imagery suggesting refuge, regeneration, and recovery" (31). While the former suggests the various lairs and prisons Morgan lurks within, the latter suggests a womb-like role of the forest, a frightening

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<sup>147</sup> In *Coming of Age in the Milky Way*, Timothy Ferris explains the impossibility of a real vacuum: "The quantum vacuum is never really empty, but instead roils with 'virtual' particles . . . [E]very 'real' particle is surrounded by a corona of virtual particles and antiparticles that bubble up out of the vacuum, interact with one another, and then vanish" (352). John Gribbin notes in *The Omega Point* that the "particle-antiparticle pairs can pop up, out of nothing at all" (57). Much like the quantum vacuum of quantum physics, the forests of the romances are never truly empty; they can always supply a "virtual" character to move the plot along.

<sup>148</sup> It seems something of an understatement to describe the ubiquitous supernatural and folk elements as a "suggested presence of magic." No doubt Malory's sources, generally far more metaphysical than the more pragmatic Malory, were well aware they described a realm of magic and danger. Malory uses these same elements, much as he uses the Holy Grail: to motivate Arthur's knights.

metaphor of the "devouring mother" where Morgan is concerned. Richard Cavendish expands this connection between the womb-like imagery and the medieval enchantress:

There is an obvious symbolic link between the female genitals and the persistent notion of the enchantress whose lair is in an enclosed place--a castle, a garden, a secluded valley<sup>149</sup> --or by a spring in the recesses of a forest: though there is nothing to show that medieval writers were conscious of it. (123)

We may be fairly sure that Malory is unconscious of this sexual symbolism because even his sexual reality is stripped down to little more than a genealogical articulation, and desire, as Jacques Lacan notes, is here "beyond conscious articulation" (Grosz 64). Uther "lay with Igrayne . . . and begat on her that nygh[t] Arthur" (I, 9). The night of enchantment when Lancelot and Elaine conceive Galahad, "they lay togydir untyll underne [about 9:00] of the morne" (XI, 795). Arthur and Lyonors fall in love, and "the kyng had ado with hir and gate on hir a chylde" (I, 38). It is not surprising Malory is strangely oblivious to the import of the sword (phallus) that does its wearer, the Lady Lyle of Avilion, "grete sorow and comberaunce" (II, 61).

Sexuality is repressed because it conflicts with duty, it opens up the private world of emotions, and, more importantly, it follows no set rules. Sexual desire drives Uther to rape another man's wife, Arthur to bed his sister, Lancelot to commit high treason with his king's wife, and it turns the venerable Merlin into a satyr while the desire for power drives Morgan to plot to kill Arthur and fuels her efforts to destroy him and all that Arthur holds dear. Yet Malory's purpose in *Morte* is to instruct his gentil audience, not to shock or yield to prurient interests. His reportage style controls and reduces outbreaks of desire, changing them into unfortunate incidents best dealt with quickly. Yet Morgan seems to resist Malory's blandest admonishments and splittings of her character. While Malory's intentions vis-à-vis Morgan are difficult to discern, Morgan emerges in Malory with a voice, a voice which is virtually

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<sup>149</sup> Morgan's Val Sanz Retor and Val des Faux Amants, so named because no knight who had ever been false to his lady could leave the valley once he entered, come to mind. Myra Olstead notes that Malory omits the episode that features the "Valley of No Return," an episode that characterizes Morgan as immensely sexual and powerful" ("Role" 191).

unheard in earlier literature where her kind and wise words are spoken by another (Vita Merlin and Brut) or her mischievous orders and reasons are transliterated by her agent (Bercilak in Sir Gawain). In Morte she sends Arthur a prophetic warning at the end of the Arthur-Accolon tale: "I can do much more when I se my tyme" (IV, 152). She appropriates the language of heraldry to send him the shield with the debased king and queen on it. She even lies to her own son, Yvain,<sup>150</sup> when he catches her trying to slay his father:

'A, fende, what wilt thou do? And thou were nat my modir, with this swerde I sholde smyte of thyne hede! . . . [M]en seyde that Merlyon was begotyn of a fende, but I may sey an erthely fende bare me.'

'A, fayre son Uwayne, have mercy uppon me! I was tempted with a fende, wherefore I cry the mercy. I woll nevermore do so.' (IV, 149)

There is no fiend, of course, just Morgan's quick tongue and amazing ability to extricate herself from immediate danger. Morgan's admission of Eve-like temptation alludes to one of misogyny's greatest charges against the weaker vessel, but it also buys her deliverance. Her peremptory appropriation of traditional antifeminist rhetoric suggests at once the cunning woman of the fabliau as well as the penitent and proper woman who admits her inherent frailty. Her son grants her mercy, and anon she is off to kill another king instead.

Although her actions may be said to lead to Arthur's death, she surprisingly reprises her role as healer at the end of his life, accompanying Arthur with three other ladies to Avalon. Henry Grady Morgan offers perhaps the simplest and most logical explanation why Malory includes Morgan's about-face:

This tradition is one of the most integral of the entire Arthurian legend, appearing in the great majority of works comprising the Arthurian materials. Since it was Malory's purpose to tell the entire Arthurian story, he would be defeating his own purpose by leaving out such an integral part of the tradition as Arthur's departure to Avalon.

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<sup>150</sup> Lucy Allen Paton notes that Morgan's son Sir Ewaine le Blanchemains may be a different person from Urien's son Yvain (143). Malory generally identifies Ivain as Urien's son.

Thus, the incident is left as it is in the work, however inexplicable it may be to the thematic whole of the work. (153)

S. E. Holbrook sees Niniane as a "counterbalance" to Morgan by which "Malory retains Morgan's legendary association as the healing goddess of Avalon without letting her presence seem incongruent with her preceding role; that is, she continues to be a negative presence, her solicitous healing power notwithstanding, because she is off-set by Nymue" (776). Holbrook also notes R. M. Lumiansky's argument concerning the balancing act between the other two characters as well: the Queen of Norgales, a "malicious confederate" of Morgan and the Queen of the Wastelands, the "benign aunt" of the virginal Percival (776-7). Perhaps the most convincing explanation for her presence at Arthur's death is that Arthur finally is coming to her space, to Avalon, a place where Morgan's benevolent status is restored.

The whole of Morte is a balancing act from its opening nativity scene in Tintagel to its closing dolorous day in Salisbury. There is a balance within even the most tumultuous of intrusions. Morgan's plot to incinerate Arthur with the mantle is foiled by the Lady of the Lake. When Gawain accidentally decapitates a lady, four fair ladies instruct him to wear her body and head about his own (III, 106-8). Mordred does eventually slay his own father, but Morgawse's incest is repaid by her murder at the hands of her own son, Gaheris, when he finds her in bed with her lover Lamorak.<sup>151</sup> This rough justice is formulaic as is Morgan's final journey with Arthur to the Blessed Isle of Avalon. Morgan herself is less predictable. She has been drawn ever more evil as "the virulent growth of woman-hatred in both religious and lay society and in all kinds of literature documented by historians as a feature of the later Middle Ages" (Fries "Decline," 4). At the same time, she has been drawn ever more into the Arthurian family with its intricate network of split-images and their respective lives. Malory makes Arthur's Round Table the center of an artificial world, a world in uneasy equilibrium between a fabulous past and a flawed present. The shifting figure of Morgan has exchanged divinity and

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<sup>151</sup> Margaret A. Gist notes that it was legal for a son who found his mother in an illicit relationship to slay both her and her lover (86).

divination for diabolism and dissemblance; yet, her powers remain considerable while her loyal protection of Arthur has been supplanted by an insidious and pervasive system of stratagems to destroy him and the fellowship of the Round Table. Into a social order in which the collective good is the collective good of noblemen, themselves allied by a social contract built upon a narrow and shaky foundation, Morgan brings the chaos of change and difference that is the feminine presence of the Other. Malory presumably wants Morgan to embody the predictable forces that ultimately undermine the system of chivalry, but, as Edith Whitehurst Williams argues, mythic characters retain their "psychic force" despite authorial intent (47). Instead, Malory is left with a predictably misogynistic portrait of a chaotic, ambiguous changeling whose powers reveal the entropy of the closed system of Arthur's fellowship.

Yet for all the misogyny that underlies Malory's interpretation of Morgan, she is remarkably free from contemporary constraints on English noblewomen.<sup>152</sup> While Malory follows conventions and marries Morgan off to Uriens, a rebel king, she acts neither as a peace weaver between the two opposing factions nor as an obedient helpmate for her husband. Malory's concerns do not lie with domestic bliss or with courtesy book models of the idealized woman. Morgan's position as a wife is nominal only, for her character does not suffer noticeably from either diminished legal status or an obligation to stay home and procreate. Most female figures in *Morte* represent "objects of masculine competitiveness" (Riddy 102). Yet, there are females who never enter into the arena of masculine endeavor directly, the "feminine presence" that dwells outside the court and interacts with knights only long enough to offer guidance or hindrance to an errant knight. Morgan, however, is certainly not a prize to be won, although she offers herself to Lancelot on more than one occasion, and rather than guiding knights, she sets up an ambush "to wayte uppon sir Launcelot or uppon sir Trystramys" (IX, 511). Females still represent fleshly desire in Malory, but the desire is dealt with summarily in a hands-on

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<sup>152</sup> Margaret A. Gist contends that the medieval romance presents the medieval woman as a "domestic creature, at best a means to man's comfort, and sexual satisfaction" (193-4), but Morgan clearly falls outside the conventional romance construct.

manner. Percival stabs himself through the thigh to avoid succumbing to a woman's charms (XIV, 919). Uther has "his entente and desyre" upon Igraine and fathers Arthur (I, 9). Lancelot, to get to Guinevere's bed, scales a castle wall and "sette hys hondis uppon the barrys of iron and pulled at them with suche a myght that he braste hem clene oute of the stone wallys" (XIX, 1131). Morgan's forthright desires invert the courtly love situation, but her love comes to naught. Her lover Accolon cannot stand against Arthur in battle, and her half-hearted attempts to win Lancelot are never fully realized threats.

Yet, Morgan does represent a threat to the order of Malory's world. The danger does not so much lie in her considerable powers, as it does in the chaotic nature and source of these powers. For while by the fifteenth century she has been reduced from goddess to sorceress and has been largely removed from her original place of power, Avalon, she has become a member of Arthur's family, an extended, Christian fellowship. The Otherness of the goddess and the *fée*, however, have not been lost; it has been transmuted into an even more frightening alterity in Malory. Morgan is the sorceress sister who attacks her brother and tries to take his throne. She is the adulterous wife who tries to kill her husband and the unnatural mother who lies to her son when he catches her. In Morte she finally has been given a voice, and she uses it to threaten Arthur openly and by proxy. Her powers of sorcery, except for the one shape-shifting incident in the Arthur-Accolon tale, are largely reduced to the venefica. No longer the fremdre meowlan, the foreign woman, in Arthur's court, Morgan has become the heimlich figure, the person at once familiar and uncanny to the court. Perhaps this dual nature is why Arthur is tricked by Morgan again and again, for her words tell him plainly enough that she means to destroy him.<sup>153</sup> It may also serve to illuminate the problematic last image of Morgan and

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<sup>153</sup> Denied a voice in Vita Merlini, Brut, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Morgan makes up for her previous silence with vitriolic declamations against Arthur throughout the Arthur-Accolon tale, but Arthur does no more than swear such revenge "that all Crystendom shall speke of hit." Arthur also reveals that he has had a loving, one-sided relationship with Morgan that is nowhere else mentioned in the text: "God knowyth I have honoured hir and worshipped hir more than all my kyn, and more have I trusted hir than my wyff and all my kyn aftir" (IV, 146). Morgan is left unscathed.

Arthur traveling to Avalon and her last words to Arthur: "A, my dere brothir! Why [ha]ve ye taryed so longe frome me?" (XXI, 1240). In rendering a figure so antithetical to Arthur's world, Malory has ironically retained in her the only hope, the Once and Future Hope, for the rebirth of that which she is instrumental in destroying. The equilibrium Malory seeks for Arthur's world is untenable; the center will not hold. Only the periphery, the area that circumscribes the ever-shifting world of Morgan le Fay, provides the stability and impetus for Arthur's fellowship.

## Chapter 4

"In my time I have been called many things: sister, lover, priestess, wisewoman, queen"

Morgan in Gate of Ivrel and Mists of Avalon

Morgan le Fay largely disappears from Arthuriana until she is reintroduced in the second half of the twentieth century when, as Elizabeth S. Sklar notes, she is "rediscovered" in two versions of the same persona.<sup>154</sup> She is

the Morgan of fantasy fiction, where feminist ideology accords her varying degrees of sympathy; and the Morgan of texts designated for mass audiences—films [e. g. Excalibur], comic books, and role-playing games—a Morgan who, . . . expresses the fears that inevitably accompany the sort of radical cultural change represented by the social realities and ideological imperatives of escalating female empowerment during this century. (25)

Both the two texts of this chapter, C. J. Cherryh's Gate of Ivrel (1976) and Marion Zimmer Bradley's The Mists of Avalon (1982), are concerned with the sympathetic figure of Morgan, a product of feminist ideology and Morgan's constantly-shifting persona. Even though Morgan<sup>155</sup> is the would-be savior of the world in C. J. Cherryh's novel Gate of Ivrel (hereafter Gate), she remains the Other, feared and hated by most of this feudal society. Her quest to destroy the qujalín gates drives the plot and brings Morgan to the center of the text; however, she rarely

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<sup>154</sup> Elizabeth S. Sklar explains Morgan's absence from the nineteenth-century renewal of interest in Arthuriana thus:

Curiously, despite Malory's crucial influence on the nineteenth-century Arthurian revival, Victorian and post-Victorian revivalists had little or no truck with Morgan le Fey, opting instead to embody their gynophobic anxieties in the seductress figure of Nimue/Vivien. While Morgan is occasionally represented in the Victorian and post-Victorian visual arts, especially by the great illustrators of Malory's *Morte* (Beardsley, Rackham, Pyle), and is presumably present as one of the mourning queens in various pictorial representations of the death of Arthur (e. g. James Archer's 'Le Mort D'Arthur'), only rarely does she serve as protagonist, as in Frederick Sandys' 'Morgan le Fey' (1864). (24-5)

<sup>155</sup> For continuity I will continue to use the spelling "Morgan," although both Cherryh and Bradley use variant spellings.



becomes the speaking Subject. Cherryh explains that she chose Vanye's point of view to maintain the integrity of the heroic fantasy genre:

The first set of the 'gate books' . . . involve much more the character of Vanye, who is a *medieval* man (emphasis mine). I had to pick his viewpoint or they cease to be heroic fantasy and become science fiction novels, pure and simple, because Morgaine is far more technologically sophisticated than he is, and if it were told from her viewpoint, it would tend to be a thing of numbers and calculus. (qtd. in Lane, Vernon, and Carson 26)

Cherryh's decision to tell the narrative from Vanye's point of view to silence Morgan while privileging the male voice follows the medieval patriarchal tradition; it also ties in with what Lynn F. Williams calls Cherryh's "very conservative notions about social hierarchies" (86). Ironically, this very decision to write formulaic heroic fantasy opens *Gate* to a subversive retelling of the genre, for Morgan's presence disrupts the formulaic pattern of the heroic fantasy through the subversion of the traditional association between woman and nature, man and culture as well as through gender role reversal.

Sherry B. Ortner's anthropological study entitled "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" discusses the transhistorical teleological relationship between the female body and the procreative powers of nature, while the male, unable to reproduce life, is connected to an artificial creativity, i. e. higher aspects of human culture, such as law, art, religion, and technology.<sup>156</sup> Yet, in *Gate*, nature is no longer associated with anything regenerative. Morgan and her *ilin* Vanye ride through inhospitable, wintry mountains and woodlands that teem with unnatural beasts. Morgan explains that these beasts "are brought through . . . [S]ome will be harmless; but some will thrive and breed. Ivrel must be sweeping a wide field" (75). Unlike the *ferly* (magical, supernatural) beasts Sir Gawain battles on his way to Lord Bercilak's castle, these creatures are products of *qujalín* technology gone awry. Although Morgan is not immediately responsible for the beasts' presence (as one might possibly argue she is in *Sir*

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<sup>156</sup> For a more in-depth look at Ortner's study, see pages 33-4 of text.

Gawain), the very sword she carries, *Changeling*, was forged in the "witchfires" of the gates, the same gates that bring both the creatures and the post-apocalyptic wasteland to the surrounding countryside. Moreover, not only is Morgan indirectly associated with the wasteland of trees "warped . . . like souls twisted and stunted by living in the continual presence" (21), she carries with her an otherworldly technology, a masculine "artificial creativity" responsible for the weapons and medicines of her own world and time.

Yet, Morgan's character is not irreparably damaged by her association with the horrors the Gates bring, for telling Morgan's story from Vanye's point of view also allows Cherryh to mitigate the apparent capriciousness of a Morgana-like sorceress by drawing on the resources of a science fiction frame for what is basically a fantasy story, and providing a sympathetic viewpoint--Vanye's--within the fantasy; Morgaine's Malorean context serves to measure the distance between the medieval vision of women--inscribed in Gate of Ivrel through quotations of mediievally inspired literature--and the modern context which makes science fiction possible. (Beal 66)

I would add that the medieval vision of women is present in their absence as well, for women are largely a nameless procreative necessity in most of the text. Vanye's brother Erij asks if Vanye sleeps with Morgan (109), and a crude sexism seems to be the norm for this society: "Even with women of quality men of low-clan made coarse jokes, well-meant; with women of the countryside even high-clan men were far more direct" (103). The one woman who is visible and (just) vocal in this society is Flis, an over-sexed attendant, who vies for the attention of a feverish Vanye. Further, the only other women of the text, those in the Chya hall, are clearly separate from the males, leaving Vanye's interrogation to the men.

Only Morgan enjoys any kind of autonomy in this clannish, i. e. patriarchal, society. Much of this autonomy comes from continued belief in the legends that have grown up around her and her now dead companions. It is generally advantageous for her mission that she allows, even encourages, the population, especially its more powerful members, to believe her the powerful sorceress of legend:

"Are you truly that Morgan of Irien?," [asked Kasedre.]

"I never claimed to be," said Morgaine.

. . . "But you are, truly," he said. "There was never the like of you in this world."

Morgaine's lips suddenly acquired a smile as feral as Kasedre's could be. "I am Morgaine," she said. "You are right." (52)

Patrick McGuire cites her complicity in preserving her legend as her way to control society:

Morgan is obviously, even transparently, a "Fairy Queen," a figure in the tradition of Morgan le Fay. But Morgan knows this too. As seen from her own perspective, part of this role has been forced upon her accidentally . . . , but it is in large measure a conscious choice—adopting it has seemed the best way to manipulate the local population. Morgaine resists certain parts of the role (such as playing the seductress), while other aspects (such as the heartless manipulation of mere mortals) strengthen their hold over her despite her own will. (48)

Allowing the legend to continue among the people generates sufficient awe and fear to allow Morgan to continue her mission relatively unhindered, but such notoriety can exact a great price. Fear of the Other also leads to a more evil association: "And then Paren [one of Erif's Nhi soldiers] had his first clear sight of Morgaine in the darkness, and exclaimed the beginning of an invocation to Heaven. The men about him made signs against evil" (100-01). Later, seeking brief asylum at the monastery of the Gray Fathers, Morgan finds that despite the hospitality her party has been shown, the brethren still fear her: "[S]ome blessed themselves in dread of her, and this seemed greatly to sadden her" (144). Such fear and misunderstanding, of course, follows Morgan's literary career, especially in the wake of Malory's *Morte*, but here the fear is legitimized somewhat. Morgan admits she was at the massacre at Irien, and she carries *Changeling*, a sword whose power derives from the Witchfires of the Gates themselves.

However, despite the fact that all the general population distrusts Morgan, Cherryh also gives her something no medieval writer has ever given her; she gives Morgan a loyal subject, a shoulder companion if you will, who defends Morgan physically and verbally. Vanye

moderates Morgan's notoriety, partly because he owes her loyalty as she is his *liyo* and partly because he grows to see her as separate from the legends that have grown up around her earlier adventures a century before. Indeed, Morgan makes it a point to inform Vanye that she is not the Morgan of legend: "You perhaps have an exaggerated idea of my capacities" (54). His role as her *ilin* precipitates, but does not necessitate, the further changes Morgan's presence in a heroic fantasy creates. Mary T. Brizzi argues that Cherryh is making a "statement about the complementary nature of feminine and masculine characteristics, showing that the whole human personality must exhibit both types of qualities" (32).

Certainly, Vanye defers to Morgan's judgment and yields to her commands again and again, typically traits of female roles, but he is also her bound servant.<sup>157</sup> A good deal of his deference and yielding stems from his fear of the unknown, a common enough reaction in the face of the power and presence of Morgan. Certainly, Morgan's sword alone is enough to chill the heart of any man, particularly a medieval man. Her sword dwarfs Excalibur in its origin and power. While Arthur's sword is given him by the Lady of the Lake, Morgan's sword is forged in Witchfires. Excalibur's blade is true, but its great power rests in its scabbard which magically protects its wearer from death by bleeding. *Changeling's* blade wields the incredible gravitational power of a black hole, an unimaginable force Vanye has seen in action:<sup>158</sup> "It was the look of the four men of Myya that he could not get from his mind, that awful lostness as they whirled away into that vast and tiny darkness, men who could not understand how they

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<sup>157</sup> When questioned about the role reversal in *Gate of Ivrel* wherein the woman is the hero and the male a helper, Cherryh noted that certain literary traditions, e. g. courtly love, explain this reversal (qtd. in Lane, Vernon, and Castle 27). While she is correct in that courtly literature occasionally features an active women and a somewhat passive male, generic conventions prohibit women from exhibiting power and autonomy even remotely like Morgan's in *Gate of Ivrel*.

<sup>158</sup> Cherryh never explains what *Changeling* does to its victims, thus adding to its horror and maintaining the heroic fantasy mode, as opposed to the "numbers and calculus" of science fiction. My own conclusion is that the weapon's power is derived from the gravitational pull of a black hole, thus explaining the nothingness that consumes its victims when they meet the "event horizon." Cherryh's admission that her "first love is really technology" suggests that, had *Gate of Ivrel* a later publication date, she might have used an even more current science, say, superstrings technology to power the sword (qtd. in Lane, Vernon, and Carson 25).

were dying" (130-1). Moreover, Vanye is a curiously fearful hero when threatened with his own society's dangers; he knew "[h]e was not brave. He had long ago discovered in himself that he had no courage for enduring pain or threat" (83). Brizzi notes further connections with Vanye and the typically powerless female role:

Illegitimate child of a woman dead in childbirth, he has been raised where he is considered second best. He strives to earn adult privileges, but when, in late adolescence, he slays his brother in self-defense, he is cast out by his father when he refuses to save his honor by killing himself. Branded a coward, he is set out with no means of livelihood and finally taken up by Morgaine. Like an unwanted child in a male-oriented world, he turns to a protector—not a husband, but a female. (44-5)

Brizzi then carries her argument to a higher plane: "What appears, in Cherryh's books with epic heroines, to be superficially a feminist statement about the heroic possibilities of females and the helping possibilities of males is actually a more profound, but still feminist, statement about the creative androgyny of the human spirit" (47). While this argument is a fitting homage to Virginia Woolf's theory of androgyny and paints an almost rhapsodic picture of Morgan and Vanye's relationship, it underestimates the "medieval vision of women" to which Rebecca S. Beal refers. This vision is still firmly in place in the feudal world of Vanye, though, admittedly, there is a great deal of role reversal between Morgan and Vanye. In a scene that recalls the loneliness and misery of the Old English poem *The Wanderer*, she rescues Vanye, a banished son far from his home and family, from exposure and starvation. In return, she claims him as her *ilin*,<sup>159</sup> a claim she alone of women can make:

Thee has sheltered with me, taken food,' she said. 'And the Chya of Koris gave me clan-welcome, and gave me lord-right, *ilin*.'

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<sup>159</sup> *ilin* corresponds roughly to a banished thane with perhaps expanded perimeters of what service is due the *liyo* (lord, here lady). Vanye is now an *ilin* because he accidentally killed one brother and maimed the other. Implicit within his banishment is the inability or unwillingness of his father to extract *wergild* (man-money) or revenge upon his own son and the son's unwillingness to take his own life through ritual suicide; therefore, the son is turned out of the family and off the lands, stripped of title, property, and clan rights.

He bowed his head to his hands upon the floor. She spoke the truth: alone of women, this was true of Morgaine, killer of armies. . . . [H]e had not even reckoned of it, for her being a woman; he had sheltered at her fire as he would have taken shelter at that of some Aenish farmwife. Such folk had no claim to make against an *ilin*.

Morgaine did. (28-9)

The world of Gate is, nevertheless, largely a masculine world wherein women are without lord right, or any rights, for that matter, and, clearly, one female character's rights and privileges do not counterbalance the silence of all the other women in the text. But Morgan is an atypical female whose adaptability allows her, once more, to create her own personal space in an alien environment. Morgan clearly assumes a traditionally masculine role for the bulk of the text. She is no longer the goddess who flies or the sorceress aristocrat whose sporadic attacks are financed by her royal assets. This Morgan has no time for the random and rash acts of violence and mischief committed by Malory's sorceress. She no longer seeks to test the court or even to seduce the occasional errant traveler. The sexual desire of the *fée* and the desire for power of the jealous sibling do not figure in Cherryh's portrait of Morgan. The sexuality is present, for she is a strikingly beautiful woman whose allure presents Vanye with a few uncomfortable moments. Yet, this Morgan is no longer the libidinous *fée* or the scheming adulteress; she is aloof and quite removed from her effect on her unfortunate male companion. Leaving her carnality behind, Cherryh's Morgan moves towards the original munificence of the goddess in Vita Merlini and the *fée* in Brut. Here she assumes an active and aggressive goodness, pursuing the *vita activa* of an errant knight. She travels on horseback through rugged terrain and dresses in men's gear, as Vanye discovers when they find lodgings in Kasedre's hall:

He finally realized that the person was Morgaine, Morgaine without her cloak, black-clad and slim in men's clothing . . . she had a barbaric bent yet unsuspected; and the blade *Changeling* was hung over her chair, and her other gear propping her feet--most unwomanly. (46)

She is also the grimmer figure of the pair, the icy Morgaine Frosthair, despite Vanye's ilin status, divesting herself of any emotion that might impede her quest. She tells Vanye, "[T]hee knows how little trust I have to extend; and I have less of charity" (156). Her determination to seal the Gates is as single-minded as that of any of Arthur's Grail knights; however, she is not hindered by any feudal notions of loyalty or chivalrous obligations to her traveling companion. Vanye observes that "[i]t was as if death and the Witchfires were an appointment she were zealous to keep, and she resented every petty human interference in her mission" (55). Yet, despite her assumption of the masculine role, societal presumptions about women save her life at least once. Morgan and the remaining four of her original Union, the would-be destroyers of qujalin Gates throughout space and time, lead an army of ten thousand men into battle at the Gate site at Ivrien. Everyone is destroyed but Morgan, who explains to Vanye:

'But I lived of course. I was the only one far back enough. . . . I could not hold my men; they thought they could aid those below, with their king, and they rode down; they would not listen to me, you see, because I am a woman. They thought that I was afraid, and because they were men and must not be, they went. I could not make them understand, and I could not follow them.' (92)

At other times, the male fear and distrust of women reveals itself in a familiar medieval hysteria. Denied his request to see Morgan's sword, Kasedre, lord of the manor, decries Morgan's thankless refusal:

And Kasedre shrieked, railing upon his guests until the froth gathered at the corners of his mouth and he turned a most alarming purple. Ingratitude seemed the main burden of his accusations. He wept. He cursed.

'*Qujalin* witch,' he began to cry then. 'Witch! Witch! Witch!' (63)

The label of "witch" was a constant threat to the powerful and intelligent medieval woman. Morgan is not only powerful and intelligent; she is also from outside the dominant culture, no longer tied by consanguinity or a divine beneficence to help anyone. Further, Arthur, the one

constant variable in Morgan's link with the mortal world, is absent. The text even briefly notes such an absence: "But there were no more High Kings, only the lords of clans" (24). The qujals, who have destroyed the High Kings and disrupted and exploited a succession of other worlds, have replaced Morgan le Fay's destructive drive for power with their own brand of cosmic imperialism until, in the end, they "had little need left, and little ambition but for luxury and novelty and the consuming lust for other, ever-farther Gates" (10). Morgan selflessly seeks only the destruction of all the Gates, knowing that one day she will "step out the last one and find nothing there" (156).

Unable to grasp the immense knowledge and power of the qujalin race, the medieval society of Gate brand their artifacts and descendants as elements of witchcraft. Morgan is caught up in these sweeping claims of witchcraft. "The Book of Embry, Hait-an-Koris," an account that details the appearance and soullessness of the magical qujal, describes qujalish blood thusly:

if childe be born of gray eyen, in stature considerable, and if he flee gude and seek after  
sich Places [the places of power, i. e. the Gates], for qujal lacken soules, and yet by  
sorceries liven faire and younge more yeares than Men. (11)

In "The Annals of Baien-an," a record of the devastating war that destroyed ten thousand men and Morgan's four companions at Ivrien, Morgan is described as a woman of "pale coloring and stature as great as most ordinary Men" (12). The description that follows alludes both to the many names and aspects of Morgan and intimates that Morgan has assumed a darker version of Arthur's title of Once and Future King:

[S]he perished upon a hill of Stones, by them hight [called] Morgaine's Tomb, for by  
this name she was known in Aenor-Pyvvn, though it is reported that she had many  
Names, and bore lord-right and titles. Here it is said she sleeps, waiting until the grat  
Curse be broken and free her. Therefore each yeare the folk of the village of Reomel  
bring Giftes and bind great Curses there also, lest perchance she wake and do them ill.  
(12-3)



Despite the abundance of versions of the legend of Morgan, Vanye continues to protest that Morgan is no witch; she has no qujalin blood, despite his initial decision that she is "at least half-*qujal*, [gray] eyes and [white] hair bore witness to that" (23). Perhaps Vanye's support stems from a growing realization that her main attributes are "quixotic charm, determination, and quick-witted skill" (Brizzi 44), not qujalin magic. Certainly, he witnesses her skill and charm as she fences with the mad Kasedre, "well able to play the games he played and tread the maze of his insanities" (52).

Vanye's support complements Karen Schaafsma's work on fantasy entitled "Wondrous Vision," which details the evolving relationship between the supernatural Other and the hero. She finds the "fundamental act of the hero is not defeat of evil but the affirmation of the value inherent in the Other," an Other which is "typically characterized by a paradoxical combination of qualities" (63). Morgan's gear embodies this "paradoxical combination," for she carries both a sword of infinite destructive power and medicines that stimulate the weary and regenerate the wounded. When the text introduces Vanye, he is no hero; rather, he is an outcast whose main purpose is simply to stay alive in the hostile world he has been turned out into. When the text introduces Morgan, she emerges wraithlike from behind the shimmering barrier that surrounds Morgaine's Tomb (20).<sup>160</sup> He quickly discovers that she has been "entombed" for one hundred years, released possibly when the deer he is hunting flees him, only to "struck between the pillars and vanish" (21).<sup>161</sup> Even though her obvious ability to "liven faire and younge more yeares than Men" (11) initially shocks and frightens Vanye, he "gains an understanding of his proper role" as the subordinate to a supernatural Other (Schaafsma 64).

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<sup>160</sup> Following last chapter's close reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, I see a striking parallel between the "shimmering web," i. e. force field, that surrounds Morgaine's Tomb and the mirage-like shimmering and shining castle of Bercilak, another "force field" that protects Morgan from random visitors.

<sup>161</sup> The deer enters the "shimmering web" only because its "fear-hazed wits" drove it forward into a place "which even insects and growing things avoided" (21). The unfortunate deer is reminiscent of the hunted deer in Beowulf that refuses to enter Grendel's Mere, preferring death from his enemy over its unnatural fate in that dread place.

His growing acceptance of Morgan's mission validates her presence as what A Reader's Guide to Science Fiction labels a "sorceress [who] is a cop in the service of an interstellar empire," surely a bizarre figure in Vanye's primitive, feudal world (Searles, et al. 38). Vanye continues to defend Morgan, even when her detractors are closer to home. When his brother Erij implies that Morgan has bewitched him into joining her on a suicide mission, Vanye answers, "It was fair Claiming, and she was within her right" (122). Vanye's support is especially vital given Morgan's self- and authorially-imposed silence in the text. Schaafsma notes that the hero often serves as mediator more than anything else, negotiating "between the supernatural Other and the larger community" (70). Vanye facilitates Morgan's acceptance and passage through hostile environments and peoples because he gives himself over completely to his liyo. As the hero in such fantasies should, Vanye "relinquishes, to a great extent, his personal identity; he leaves behind everything and takes on overwhelming responsibility" (66-7). Vanye's surrender is so great, in fact, that he leaves his own world to follow Morgan through the Gate.

Morgan does not order Vanye to follow her; in fact, she releases him after they have destroyed the qujalin stronghold at Ivrien. When Morgan does speak, however, it is a far remove from her threats to Arthur in Malory's Arthur-Accolon Tale. When she finds that Vanye means to follow her through the Gate, she tells him bluntly he is no longer necessary:

'Do not delay me further. This following me is nonsense. I do not know how the Gate is behaving, whether it will fling me out elsewhere. And you do not belong. You were useful for a time. You with your *ilin*-codes and your holds and your kinships . . . this is your world, and I have needed a man who could maneuver things as I needed them. You have served your purpose. Now there is an end of the matter. You are free, and be glad of it.' (190)

Obviously, she can speak plainly enough when necessary, and, doubtless, Vanye, the struggling mediator between Morgan and the community, realizes her selfless nature. Even the cynical and vindictive Erij detects there is more between Morgan and Vanye than ilin and liyo: "If she will

have you--go" (189). Love or at least loyalty draws Vanye to Morgan, allowing this fearful medieval man to "comprehend a reality which transcends rational understanding," or, at least, "rational understanding" of the world Vanye had known before he met Morgan (Schaafsma 64).

Much of Cherryh's work, science fiction and fantasy, seeks to increase the understanding between the Other and the human. Cherryh says that she writes about the "human adjustment to the unfamiliar . . . and sees science fiction as an apt vehicle to continue traditions of our own culture while widening its viewpoints" (qtd. in McGuire 134), and although her texts reveal her conservative adherence to earthly patriarchal hierarchies, there is still an opportunity for the "unfamiliar" to exert a powerful influence on her work and on her characters themselves. The Germanic-clan society of Gate presents at once the most conservative and the most exclusionary of cultures, a culture predisposed to alienate that which is Other. Yet, Cherryh's decision to tell Morgan's story from Vanye's point of view to preserve the generic conventions of the heroic fantasy in her "gates trilogy" ironically preserves the otherness of Morgan with narratives, as Jenny Wolmark notes,

that challenge the limits and constraints of dominant representations. Tension between the familiar narrative framework and the unfamiliar representation of gender result in open-ended narratives in which the relationship between gender and genre become unstable. Her narratives exploit this instability and despite their conventional appearance, they disrupt conventional definitions of difference and otherness. (72)

This tension is the cohesive strength of the text, bringing together the supernatural female Other and the subservient male hero into a symbiosis that leads to Vanye's complete rejection of his home world and Morgan's final and uncharacteristically joyous response to his unexpected presence: "But she laughed and flung her arms about him, and he about her, pressing her tightly until she flung back her head and looked at him. It was the second time he had ever seen her cry" (191).

Morgan's presence and power are always disruptive, even here where Morgan seeks to restore the status quo and rid Vanye's world of qujalín evil forever. The medieval fear of the

strong and powerful woman follows Morgan through space and time to this world and will continue to follow her so long as fantasy writers are unable or unwilling to envision a culture whose dominant ideology is other than patriarchal. Reflecting the feminist criticism of the 1970s, Morgan here challenges the canonical genre of heroic fantasy and presents a female figure whose presence questions both the masculine world of the patriarchy and the traditional role of women therein. Cherryh's androgynous characters further challenge these restrictions and suggest in the open-ended narrative that there is the promise of acceptance of the Other elsewhere.

There is no trace of androgyny in Marion Zimmer Bradley's The Mists of Avalon, hereafter Mists, (1982). The sexes are clearly separated, markedly differentiated by differing concepts of time. While the male figures are part of linear, "masculine," time, the female pagan figures exhibit a feminism, which Julia Kristeva notes, "rejoins, on the one hand, the archaic (mythical) memory and, on the other, the cyclical or monumental temporality of marginal movements" (198). Here the complementarity that Mary T. Brizzi sees as integral to an understanding of Cherryh's work is replaced by an endless cycle of polarities that highlight the major tensions and conflicts between the early Church with its one Truth, one God and the older pagans with their many truths and many aspects of the Goddess; between the world of the masculine court with its linear time as well as secret shames and the world of feminine nature with its cyclical time and mystical sexual unions; and between men and the power of their patriarchal hierarchies and women and the power of their sexuality. Sallye J. Sheppard notes that Mists "puts us squarely in the cultural crucible that is Arthurian tradition itself: a collision of incompatible cultural traditions" (92)—that is, a collision between Christianity and the Old Religion. Such a collision reveals what Raymond Thompson calls the novel's major theme, tolerance and intolerance (Return 132), that theme presented in a text which, ironically, stresses, above all, unity. Morgan le Fay<sup>162</sup> is the presence and voice of

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<sup>162</sup> As with prior texts, the names Morgan, Guinevere, Vivian, Morgawse, and Igraine have variant spelling. I will use these for the sake of consistency.

alterity whose "progress toward wisdom and enlightenment as servant of the Goddess unifies the novel" (*Return* 132). Her voice and presence are also transhistorical; she is at once the voice of the Old Religion, the pagan worship of the Goddess, and that of the Neo-Pagan, herein a movement eerily reflecting the feminist movement of the sixties that unites feminism with a contemporary celebration of the Mother Goddess.

On the surface, Bradley's decision to employ polarities in her re-visioning of Arthuriana would seem to continue the medieval fragmentation of woman as Other by removing her farther and farther from the Subject position held by men in the patriarchy. Indeed, Bradley does revel in women's difference; women in this text, at least those who embrace the Goddess, experience a cyclical time that Bradley highlights through their own menstrual cycles, their worship of the moon, and what Charlotte Spivack notes as the "fecundity in the maternal world of the Goddess" (157). Bradley's description of Morgan awaiting the Horned One (Arthur) at Beltaine aptly illustrates her connection with this fecundity:

She lay there, feeling the life of the earth around her; she seemed to expand, to fill all the cave, the little scribbled drawings were painted on her breasts and her belly, and above her the great chalk figure, man or deer, strode with erect phallus . . . the invisible moon outside the cave flooding her body with light as the Goddess surged inside her, body and soul. She stretched out her arms, and at her command she knew that outside the cave, in the light of the fecundating fires, man and woman, drawn one to the other by the pulsating surges of life, came together. (178)

While this vision of *jouissance* associated with fertility is certainly a valid anthropological re-claiming of the Great Mother Goddess, a deity found in both Western and eastern cultures, I find the return to the teleological function of woman as womb a problematic feminist message, especially so in Morgan's first sexual encounter during which she must sacrifice her virginity as the Virgin Huntress to the Horned One, the King Stag (171). Vivian, Morgan's aunt and the High Priestess of Avalon, arranges the sacrifice and the players—Morgan and her brother Arthur—interpreting their union as necessary to produce an heir to represent both Avalon and

England.<sup>163</sup> Yet, the arrangement, for all its basis in pagan antiquity, borders on rape, as Morgan considers her incestuous union with horror and anger: "*Why did you do this to us? Great Mother, Lady, why?*" (181).

Karen E. C. Fuog notes a telling pattern to the many sexual forays in *Mists*. Bradley's emphasis on the exploration and subsequent demystification of female sexuality is a means to deconstruct the concept of female Otherness (72). Unfortunately, Bradley's polarities fall short in this deconstruction, as Fuog argues:

The power of women is inextricably linked to their sexuality. Linkage reinforces the patriarchal attitude that woman is a voracious and manipulative sexual creature. Women's failure reinforces a patriarchal attitude concerning women's political stupidity and ineffectuality. Bradley attempts to create a text where women are not defined as Other, and where they have power. At a fundamental level, she fails in both projects. She successfully demythologizes female sexuality, and thus takes a stride toward eliminating Otherness. But women are still different in that they wield magical power . . . . Instead of eliminating the Other, Bradley has merely shifted the category so that men fulfill it, and the sexes still separate. (85)

However, even in this separation of sexes, Bradley finds a unity. Sabine Volk-Birke contends that Bradley's concept of the priestesses of Avalon "at least hints at the possibilities of an integrated sensibility which relies on its rational and intuitive powers alike" (412).

Unfortunately, the only character who exhibits these rational and intuitive powers with any consistency is Vivian, whose phallogentric drives lead to Morgan's gross deception at Beltaine, to her estrangement from her son Lancelot, and to, eventually, her own death. Though her legacy may be carried on by an older but wiser Morgan at story's end, Morgan's role clearly will be one that reflects her own adaptability to the encroachment of Christianity. The women of Avalon who have embraced the Goddess under Vivian's rule and who will continue to do so

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<sup>163</sup> Perhaps I am simply one of those "few readers" that Beverly Deweese assumes "may be annoyed by [Bradley's] many references to mothering" (32).

under Morgan's, share other ties, as Morgan notes in a somewhat dated statement of feminist Sisterhood: "*All women, indeed, are sisters under the Goddess*" (285).

Many of the tensions arise from those who disagree with this sorority of women. As Morgan's constant antagonist, Guinevere is perhaps the text's greatest source of dissension and, perhaps, evil.<sup>164</sup> Where English medieval texts have left us generally with a silent and accommodating queen,<sup>165</sup> Bradley presents us with a vituperative and vocal figure actively opposed to all that Morgan represents. Sabine Volk-Birke notes that the first meeting between Morgan and Guinevere sets the stage for both their personal and religious differences; their "relations are determined by fear, contempt, distrust, and hatred" (421). Guinevere is an uneducated, mean-spirited, dogmatic Christian who accuses a remarkably devoted Arthur of, among other things, forcing her into Lancelot's arms and, even worse in her mind, of loving Lancelot for more than his fellowship alone:

'At times, . . . it has seemed to me that you loved Lancelet more than me. Can you say in truth that it was to give me pleasure, or was it for the pleasure of him you loved best of all--?'

. . . It is a sin, then, to love my kinsman and think, too, of his pleasure? It is true, I love you both--'

'In Holy Writ it speaks of that city that was destroyed for such sins,' said Gwenhwyfar. (547)

This sin to which she refers is, in fact, a homoerotic incident in which Lancelot joins Arthur and Guinevere in a *menage-à-trois*, an appointment that seems a logical conclusion to centuries of this ill-fated triangle. Morgan, in turn, finds nothing immoral about this union, a union Carrol

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<sup>164</sup> This reading of Guinevere is a potentially rich one, for it undermines the standard reasoning behind the long-standing enmity between Morgan and Guinevere, suggesting that ill will does not necessarily originate with Morgan.

<sup>165</sup> But Marie de France's "Lanval" features a queen who accuses the knight of homosexuality because he is not attracted to her. See Marie de France, "Lanval," *The Lais of Marie de France*, Trans. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1982) 105-25.

L. Fry contends stems from Lancelot's lust, for Guinevere represents his "passion for Arthur"

(339). Fry continues to explore this centuries-old affair thus:

And at one point, the three central figures of Arthurian lore end up in the same bed, with the actual pairings uncertain. Morgaine, the Neo-Pagan conscience of the novel, finds nothing morally wrong with this triangle except the Christian-inspired guilt all parties wallow in, and perhaps, the fact that she lusts for Lancelot herself; but at a critical moment he had failed to function for her. (339)

Guinevere's subsequent revulsion reflects the patriarchal abhorrence of the homoerotic, the fear of "sameness." Marilyn Farwell observes that sameness is not a threat in Avalon; in fact, in another way it destroys Avalon's reliance on heterosexuality and on gender difference for meaning. This sameness does not depend on whether or not these characters are lesbian but on the space they create which outlaws difference from its midst. This lesbian space also seems to be the strength and core of Avalon. (101)

It is understandable, then, that to Guinevere's horror, Morgan joins in the jocose, albeit painful, ribbing Gawain gives Lancelot about "the Greek fashion in love":

'Why Gawaine, what then will you say to all those priests who profess devotion to Mary the Virgin beyond all things on earth? Would you have it they all have a scandalous carnal devotion to their Christ? And indeed, we hear of the Lord Jesus that he never married, and that even among his chosen twelve there was one who leaned on his bosom at supper--'

Gwenhwyfar gave a shocked cry. 'Morgaine, hush! Such a blasphemous jest!'

(480)

Morgan's liberal sexual mores also draw heavily upon the more tolerant sexual ethic of Neo-Paganism which holds that all love comes from the Goddess.<sup>166</sup> Just as all men and women

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<sup>166</sup> Despite the antagonism between Morgan and Guinevere, the *fée* desire is never dormant. After a quick embrace with Guinevere in a rare friendly moment, Morgan is drawn to touch Guinevere again and share Guinevere's "glow and loveliness." She then remembers the



are united by love in the Old Religion, so, too, all women are united in their roles in life. Carol L. Fry writes that contemporary pagans "refer to the Triple Goddess, whose aspects include Maiden, Mother, and Crone, the three stages of a woman's life" (339), an observation that ties in with Bradley's redundant reminders that Morgan is the union of these three stages, as Gwydion (Morgan's son Mordred) tells Niniane in one scene: "In her the Maiden and the Mother and the Crone meet and blend" (599). We see these three concurrent stages in the various aspects of Morgan in Malory's *Lady of the Lake*, Vivian, Ninian, and Morgan herself who is now grown more complicated in *Mists* by further splintering into Raven, Nimue, and Igraine, who is the Lady of the Lake.<sup>167</sup>

The second wave of feminism, which coincides with Bradley's text, focused on the specification of women's differences from men and from each other, turning to psychoanalysis, among other things, to examine gender differences. Here, Bradley turns to Jung's theory of gender archetypes. The Triple Goddess is also related to the Jungian fourfold archetypal feminine--maiden, mother, wise woman, and warrior. The warrior, however, is represented only nominally in *Mists*. Vivian tries to explain the many aspects of the Goddess to the novice priestess Morgan: "She is not only the Great Mother of Love and Birth, she is also the Lady of Darkness and Death. . . . She is also the Morrigan, the messenger of strife, the Great Raven" (136). The Raven of Avalon is mute, however, under a vow of silence. The Morrigan of Celtic legend, a shapeshifter often represented by the battle beast, the raven, is silenced. The warrior goddess wields no sword and issues no threats here, not even in the Arthur-Accolon story

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menage-à-trois and thinks, "*I am no better than he. I too nurse all manner of strange and perverse desires, and who am I to mock at any?*" (486)

<sup>167</sup> Unfortunately, there is no available genealogical guide to Morgan and her family. There is a wealth of possibilities in their interrelationship: Taliesin, or Merlin, the father of Vivian, Igraine, and Morgawse, is also the father of Niniane, the young woman a lecherous Merlin pursues in *Morte*. Morgan's step-son Avalloch, whom she kills via the agency of a great sow (a representation of the Mother), shares the same name as the father of the Celtic river goddess Modron, one facet of Morgan from oral tradition. Accolon, Morgan's lover who tries to kill Arthur here and in *Morte*, is both Morgan's lover and step-son in *Mists*. Morgan's sister Morgawse is sexually attracted to Morgan's young son Mordred, whom she has reared since he was a baby. Vivian, Morgan's aunt, is the mother of Lancelot, Morgan's love interest.

wherein Morgan's lover Accolon dies. Her one gift is that of limited prophecy, a gift she seldom employs. Given Bradley's admission that she has read "an enormous volume on the Druids and Celtic religions" (vii) and her agenda to empower women in the text, I find this underdeveloped side of the Triple Goddess and unexplored literary ancestor of her chief protagonist a curious lack.

There is no want of Christianity in Mists, though, with its virulent antifeminist message promulgated by both hostile priests and co-opted women, such as Igraine and Guinevere. Yet Bradley's Dark Age Christianity is also misleading, for its fanatical adherents seem out of step with the more open Church that Friedrich Heer posits existed up until the thirteenth century. Indeed, as Heer observes, the "open religion of the earlier Middle Ages was a satisfying blend of ingredients taken from pre-Christian 'pagan' folk religions" and a blend of exoticized Christian ingredients (20). The antifeminist dogma and intolerance attributed to Bradley's Christians are much better suited to a discussion of the "closed" Church of the High Middle Ages when, as Heer argues, the Church . . . "hardened into a set of crystalline forms of thought" (29). The "crystalline" structure, however, does fit within Bradley's agenda to sharpen the distinction between the tolerant Goddess and the intolerant God.<sup>168</sup>

In Mists, the Christian priests are messengers of hate and intolerance, bullying the recalcitrant Igraine when she explains to Morgan that the Mother Goddess "did not see fit to send me a son, child" (78). Father Columba instructs Igraine that she "should not talk to the child of Goddesses and superstition. Gorlois [Igraine's husband] wished her to be reared as a good Christian maiden. Morgaine, your mother did not have a son because your father was angry with her, and God withheld a son to punish her for her sinful will" (79). The priest supplants the notion of a loving, maternal goddess with that of a wrathful mortal man as a

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<sup>168</sup> I realize artistic license is a viable means to an end in fiction, but I find Bradley's historical methodology at times patently misleading, especially given that she involves herself with a historically intersection of myths, i. e. Christian and Druid/Goddess.

plausible explanation for Igraine's sterility.<sup>169</sup> Igraine, who has been long-suffering in obedience to her husband's insistence on bringing Father Columba to Tintagel, suddenly finds the priest's addendum to a willful Morgan—"That child should be beaten"—to be insufferable. In an act of heroism with feminist overtones, Igraine turns on the priest and orders him out of her sight. She will not allow "her daughter [to be] brought up to feel shame at her own womanhood" (79). Igraine's strength and commitment to the Goddess are admirable, but like so many of Bradley's characters, she succumbs to Christianity eventually. Her death bed confession reveals what Bradley presents as the root of Christianity's evil; unfortunately, she confesses her displeasure to the uncomprehending ears of Guinevere: "I sent her [Morgan] from me because I felt it better, if it came to be a choice of evils, that she should be in Avalon and in the hands of the Goddess, than in the hands of the black priests who would teach her to think that she was evil because she was a woman" (359). Guinevere tries to quiet her ramblings, telling her, "You cannot call upon the Goddess of the fiends here--." Yet, after years of hypocrisy, Igraine does call upon the Goddess, placing her "beyond all your other Gods," returning to the Goddess's embrace as she lies dying (360).

Guinevere, however, is Bradley's symbol of Christianity's most distorted message, the virulent antifeminism prevalent in the later Middle Ages. Guinevere rattles off a litany of clerical misogyny to assuage her rage at becoming a "brood mare . . . for the High King's stud service":

. . . [S]he must obey her father's will as if it were the will of God. Women had to be especially careful to do the will of God because it was through a woman that mankind had fallen into Original Sin, and every women must be aware that it was her work to atone for that Original Sin in Eden. No woman could ever be really good except for

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<sup>169</sup> There is a constant comparison in this text between the fecund world of the Goddess and the sterile world of Christianity, especially in Guinevere's rabid Christianity and inability to bear children.

Mary the Mother of Christ;<sup>170</sup> all other women were evil, they had never had any chance to be anything but evil. This was her punishment for being like Eve, sinful, filled with rage and rebellion against the will of God. (268)

This inculcation of Christian sexual inequality fuels much of Guinevere's fear and hatred in the text. When Arthur, a product of Avalon's tolerant attitudes and powerful female figures, tells Guinevere that he is willing to let her rule alongside him as an equal, she answers, "I could never presume so far, my lord and king" (273). When Guinevere is not wallowing in self-pity for her childless state or blaming Arthur's concupiscence for their plight, she is castigating Morgan and the Goddess as servants of evil:

'[T]he priests say that their Goddess is that same old serpent of evil whom our Lord drove from the Garden of Eden! Even now Morgaine clings to those filthy and heathenish rituals of hers--God tells us, yes, that those heathen who have not heard the word of the Lord may be saved, but what of Morgaine, who was brought up in a Christian household, and afterward turned to the filthy sorcerous ways of Avalon?' (554)

Further emphasizing her polarities, Guinevere is portrayed physically as angelic: tall and fair; the traditional medieval concept of the beautiful woman, she all but glows with her beauty. Morgan, on the other hand, is "small, dark, delicately made"(8) and acutely aware of the contrast between herself and Guinevere: "Morgaine felt, in spite of her fine decent gown and beautifully woven veil, as if she were some gross, dwarfish, earthly creature before the ethereal whiteness and precious gold of Gwenhwyfar" (284). Bradley thus plays upon the medieval metaphor that exterior appearance reveals the interior. Because she gives "voice to those females who have so long remained mute in Arthurian legend" (Fries "Trends," 221), she

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<sup>170</sup> Ironically, as Gerda Lerner notes in *The Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy*, Mary came to be associated with more than just a virgin birth in medieval folk culture. Various attributes associated with her include healing properties, fertility, and protection during childbirth. She was also often identified with the moon, the stars, and the sun, fertility, as well as "her patronage of war and violence" (125-6). One can only wonder what Guinevere's reaction to the Virgin's parallels to the pagan would be.

is able to deconstruct the semiotic association of beauty with goodness, difference with evil.

Bradley does not just give female characters a voice of their own; she gives them thoughts (rumination, nagging self-doubt, fantasies, stream-of-consciousness), religious dogma (rhetoric without thought), and even small talk (conversations in bedchambers and sitting rooms). This great babble/Babel does not foreground one focused female voice as medieval texts tend to do with their privileged male voice. It does give a multiplicity of female voices in which we most clearly recognize that of Morgan, the one presence and voice that unifies the text. The great length of the book stems largely from the flood of communication between women and from Morgan's endless self-recriminations and vacillations, as if to make up for centuries of silence. Morgan, as the extremely self-aware Subject and conscience of the text, embodies the voice—and thought—of the text in what Raymond Thompson sees as Bradley's main concern—to "explore the psychology of her characters" (*Return* 132).<sup>171</sup>

Through Morgan we see the immense tolerance and love of the Goddess again and again as she tries to defuse Guinevere's many attacks on her religion, sexuality, her love for Arthur, and her gender; all are one concern in Morgan's worship of the Goddess as well as, ironically, in Guinevere's conflation of pagan depravity. On one occasion, after listening to Guinevere's venomous and blasphemous denunciation of her, her Goddess, and her aunt, the priestess of Avalon, Morgan's is still the voice of reason:

'Keep away from him, you—! Would you tempt him into sin further than this? Have you not done enough, you and that foul demon you call your Goddess, you and that evil old witch whom Balin rightly killed for her heathen sorceries--?'

Morgaine shut her eyes, and her face looked as if she were about to weep. Then she sighed and said, 'I cannot listen to you curse at my religion, Gwenhywfar. I cursed not yours, remember that. God is God, however called, and always good. I think it sin to

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<sup>171</sup> This psychological exploration helps explain the endless (and vexing) vacillation of the maturing Morgan, for the reader spends much of the text inside Morgan's head.

believe God can be cruel or vindictive, and you would make him meaner than the worst of his priests.' (552)

Baird Searles's review of Mists also sheds light on Morgan's function in the text. He argues that the villains of the text—i. e. Mordred, Morgan, and Morgawse—"are not necessarily villains but nationalists acting against a nouveau religion and an alienated aristocracy" (167). While I believe Mordred and Morgawse are too deliberately malicious and cruel here to support a view of them as "nationalists," I believe Morgan's actions and speech place her squarely in the political, religious, and textual center of Bradley's work. Both Mordred and Morgawse seek to fulfill a personal desire for both power and sexual satisfaction throughout the text, while Morgan is always consumed with the desire to unify both the two religions and, hence, all the Britons. She serves as both an emissary of the Goddess and a member of Arthur's court; moreover, she is the voice that re-tells the Arthurian legend and the presence that unifies the text. Further, Mists, as Sallye J. Sheppard points out, summarizes "centuries of Morgaine-le-Fey lore in one selfsame space" in Morgan's own opening words: "In my time I have been called many things: sister, lover, priestess, wise-woman, queen" (93; ix). The ever-shifting figure of Morgan is given a humanity, albeit a weak and imperfect one, in this text that at once acknowledges and attempts to explain psychologically why Morgan le Fay has assumed varying definitions of the Other throughout Arthurian literature.

R. S. Loomis notes of Morgan's ever-changing figure that:

No personage in the Arthurian cycle was the subject of such multifarious traditions as Morgain la Fee, and none developed into such a variety of characters . . . [I]f anything is consistent about the legends of Morgain la Fee, it is their inconsistency. No figure of the Arthurian cycle was more changeful than she. (Arthurian Tradition 53; 102)

Morgan's many positions in Mists—"sister, lover, priestess, wise-woman, queen"—add a psychological depth to her character that contrasts with Guinevere's endless anger and fear, for not only does Morgan assume these many roles, we see how difficult and painful each one is for her. Gone is the evil, rash sorceress whose hatred and envy can only be witnessed, never

clearly understood. Here, in words, thought, intense emotion, and actions, many of which border on the melodramatic, is the Neo-Pagan Morgan, a misunderstood but nonetheless endlessly adaptable figure who seeks not the destruction of Arthur's court but unity between his Christian world and her own.

Often, however, the adaptability takes on an irritating (and disappointing) malleability that reveals itself physically and verbally. In the face of Guinevere's insistent dogma, Morgan generally holds her tongue. She realizes the inevitability of Christianity's dominance and the culture that accompanies it; as she tells Lancelot, "[S]ince their view of God is what shapes their reality, so it shall be . . . . Now they will make for themselves the kind of God they think they want—the kind of God they deserve, perhaps" (809). Morgan's surrender to the inescapable reflects Bradley's anthropological awareness of which underlying myth is the dominant one in Arthurian literature; Christianity dominates Arthuriana, although the underlying Celtic myth ruptures surface tranquility occasionally. Further, while one may read Morgan's acceptance of the inevitable as integral to Bradley's Neo-Pagan tolerance, one may also see it as an almost Germanic fatalism. I see, on the other hand, her acceptance of Christianity's continuing presence and her efforts at unity as a modern reading and explanation for Morgan's adaptability in literature and continued presence as the Other. Even here, where Christianity is the dominant ideology of the culture, the dominant figure of the text celebrates diversity and difference.

At other times, Morgan's malleability leads us to see her as a co-opted figure who wrenches our attention from Morgan's privileged status as a priestess of Avalon. Perhaps the most striking instance is Bradley's painstaking portrait of Morgan as housewife, a position Morgan does not recount in her earlier list of roles she has played. Even Malory ignores her servitude as a wife, but then Malory does not often venture into the "feminine sphere" in *Morte*. Bradley hints in her curious epigram that, perhaps, Malory does not give a full account of Morgan's unfortunate marriage to Uriens: "' . . . Morgan le Fay was not married, but put to school in a nunnery, where she became a great mistress of magic.'—Malory, *Morte d'Arthur* ." In *Morte*

the following sentence explains that Arthur next arranges for her marriage, but in Mists the possible machinations behind the marriage are revealed. Guinevere, jealous of the affection shown Morgan by both Lancelot and Accolon, suggests the match between the aged Uriens and the ageless Morgan. Arthur "will compel no women to marry unwillingly," but Morgan is quite willing, thinking her intended is Accolon, Uriens's son (565).

Morgan accepts her fate when Uriens is revealed as her perspective husband and serves him well as a good housewife and helpmate.<sup>172</sup> Uncomplainingly, Morgan attends to Uriens's house, even rubbing "his thin, callused old feet until the blood rose to the surface and they looked alive again; then she fetched a flask and began to rub one of her herbal oils into the king's gnarled toes" (571). Certainly, even with (or perhaps because of) the Christian overtones of humility here, this episode is a demeaning one in any work with such a pronounced feminist agenda. Morgan's quiescence continues when Uriens tells her that she is a "notable housekeeper," for she knows "*he thinks he is being kind to say so*" (572). Morgan thus becomes the image of a model medieval wife in her marriage to Uriens, but Bradley makes sure we realize this is image only. Beneath the surface we have Morgan's interior monologue rationalizing her current status because Morgan is spiritually dead or at least weakened, perhaps the most fitting state for a medieval wife. Yet, while the tides no longer run in her blood, she still feels "full the flow of the summer" (570). Her marriage is a period of dormancy, a dormancy which is jarred by anger and a sudden proprietary interest in Cornwall, her birthplace, when Uriens foolishly brags, "And under the Roman law, I suppose, as your husband, my dear, I am Duke of Cornwall" (577). While Morgan's home is clearly usurped by King Mark in Morte, Morgan has never been fully realized enough as a character to exhibit any sentimental desire for her home.

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<sup>172</sup> Yet even more importantly, one must note that she is a housewife who also has a mystical sexual union with her stepson Accolon and kills another stepson Avalloch to prevent his assumption of his father's throne.



Uriens's remark triggers an awakening in Morgan. Her dormancy falls away, and she begins to feel both the surges of anger as well as the tides. Her anger mirrors the suppressed anger of many 1980's housewives who were left out of the Women's Movement and alludes to a re-constructed feminist view of medieval marriage:

*Uriens cares nothing for Cornwall, only that Tintagel, like myself, is his property, bearing the mark of his ownership! Would that I could go there, live alone as Morgause at Lothian, my own mistress with none to command me . . . If Uriens dares to lay claim to an acre of Cornwall, I will give him six feet of it, and dirt between his teeth! (577)*

Morgan's anger restores her autonomy and highlights her complicity in her sorry state. Aptly enough, her awakening comes at midsummer dawn:

She had been a fool. Why should she have accepted compliantly Arthur's word, fearing to embarrass him before his fellow kings? If he could not keep his throne without a woman's help it might be he did not deserve to hold it. He was a traitor to Avalon, an apostate; he had given her into the hands of another apostate. Yet she had meekly agreed to what they had planned for her. (579)

Fueled by her anger and hindsight, Morgan is brought back to the Goddess by an "awareness of power [that] flooded her," a flood precipitated when she witnesses the Goddess at work:

[T]he girl's rather stupid face was transfigured for a moment. *The Goddess works in her, too*, Morgaine thought, and then she saw Accolon's face; he was looking at her in wonder and awe. She had seen that look before, when she brought down the mists from Avalon. . . *I am alive again. After all these years, I am a priestess again, and it was Accolon who brought it back to me* " (585)

Accolon, Morgan's sexual pawn in Morte's Arthur and Accolon Tale, is here a free agent and a worshipper of the Old Religion. Morgan and Accolon unite magically in a sexual union that heals her and restores her to her former position as priestess. Karen E. C. Fuog argues that

Bradley "demystifies female sexuality," but I read Morgan's interior monologue as anything but "demystified" (72):<sup>173</sup>

*Even as we lay together under the stars that Midsummer, I knew what we had done was not so much lovemaking as a magical act of passionate power; that his hands, the touch of his body, were reconsecrating me priestess, and that it was her will. Blind as I was to all that moment, I heard around us in the summer night the sound of whispers and I knew that we were not alone. (588)*

Sex is a mystic union in the Old Religion, uniting woman and man with the Goddess. Fuog continues to explain that Bradley, "in breaking myths of the seductress and her power, . . . constructs female sexuality as a source of female pride and power"(72), certainly a great power for Morgan who becomes one with the Goddess after she becomes one with her lover Accolon.

It is in her relationship with Accolon that Bradley's recuperation of Morgan's reputation is most marked. While Morte's Arthur-Accolon Tale paints Malory's blackest portrait of Morgan with her open threats to Arthur and his kingdom, Mists gives us a much more sympathetic and innocent Morgan. In both accounts Morgan uses magic to subdue Arthur: an enchanted boat in Morte and a duplicitous trip to the Land of Fairies to take back Arthur's sword. Yet here Accolon takes Excalibur and the scabbard of his own accord and, in a tender moment never intimated in Malory, "raised Morgaine to her feet and kissed her" (732), and while the fairies fashion a new sword and scabbard for Arthur, Morgan's conscience takes its toll on her. Yet she steels herself as he cries out, "This is some wicked enchantment, wrought by my sister and her witchcraft!" (734). However, the unrepentant shapeshifter who threatens Arthur's court and drowns an innocent man is replaced here by a purposeful priestess who seeks to restore Avalon to its former power, despite pain and anguish to her beloved yet disloyal brother. As she awaits the outcome of Arthur and Accolon's mortal combat, though, it is the

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<sup>173</sup> Reading Bradley's Goddess worship with Karen Jolly's "Father God and Mother Earth: Nature-Mysticism in the Anglo-Saxon World" illuminates both the early medieval mindset concerning the lack of distinction between nature and the supernatural; however, the fanatical Christian dogma that erupts from Guinevere fits much more the later Middle Ages.

sorrowful sister and lover who realizes that "*never again, never again shall I know a moment's happiness, since one of those I love must die . . .*" (734). Bradley retains the outcome of the fight, but she adds a predictably maternal twist to the innocent victim of the battle. Instead of an innocent passerby who drowns at Morgan's hands, an innocent child is lost as Morgan miscarries the child conceived with Accolon when she has a vision of his death.

Bradley does much to diffuse or transfer Morgan's evil onto other characters,<sup>174</sup> giving Morgan a voice to explain that which has been left unexamined for centuries. Realizing that "the only way to know the Other is to let it speak, to let it be the Subject 'I,'" (van Alphen 12), Bradley gives Morgan a voice that will not be silenced, even when fear or good sense have confined that voice to an interior monologue. In projecting Morgan as the Subject of the text, and largely silencing the patriarchal voice of the male (except in Guinevere's diatribes), Bradley replaces the familiar alterity of Morgan and her various aspects--"magic and evil"--with a less familiar alterity that is central to the theme of cultural collisions, "mythology, religion, and values associated with the Goddess and her matrifocal perspectives of the cosmos" (Sheppheard 93). Thus, while the Old Religion is revealed to be alien to Christianity, it still is as familiar to the textual Subject as Neo-Paganism is to the author.<sup>175</sup> Moreover, Christianity, the dominant religion of the patriarchy, is revealed to be wanting.

It is the Old Religion, the worship of the Mother Goddess, that offers the unity that Arthur's kingdom can never achieve. Bradley's Neo-Paganism offers a solution to this disunity because, as Karen Jolly notes, with our "goddess-worshipping ancestors, there were no sharp polarities between masculine and feminine and spirituality and nature" (97). While *Mists* is defined by polarities, there are rare dissolutions of these polarities in Morgan's spiritual/sexual union with Arthur and with Accolon. The only other possibility for union in

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<sup>174</sup> For instance, Morgan's incestuous union with Arthur is explained by Vivian's deception at Beltaine, and Mordred's evil comes largely from his surrogate mother, Morgawse.

<sup>175</sup> Faye Ringel notes in "New England Neo-Pagans: Medievalism, Fantasy, Religion" that Bradley is the "leader of the West Coast pagan nexus" (67). Carrol L. Fry sees *Mists of Avalon* as a "useful training manual for novice pagans" (34).

the text lies outside the mortal world in the Land of Fairy. This other place is an "enchanted country which was neither the world of Britain nor the secret world where the magic of the Druids had taken Avalon, but that older, darker country where there was neither star nor sun" (401-2). There Morgan finds herself caught in a dream-like, even womb-like, world where sexual desires are instantly gratified. Her own *fée* desires are explored and satisfied as they never are in the world of Britain, but Morgan loses her Subject position completely in the Land of Fairy, becoming acted upon rather than acting of her conscious volition. So, even though her desires are satiated here, her life is at a standstill, anesthetized to the real sentient world.

In Britain, however, Morgan remains unrequited. When she contemplates her desire for Lancelot, she is left with "an intolerable ache that would never be wholly slaked" (325). Later, as she prepares a love charm for Elaine to ensorcel Lancelot, she tries "to form a prayer to the Goddess who joined man and women in love, or in simple lust like the rutting of beasts . . . her whole body aching with a desire that she knew would never be slaked" (536). Unfortunately, Bradley's many references to Morgan's unrequited and requited desires leaves the reader with not so much a spiritual synergy between man and woman as an image taken straight from the pages of a modern romance, a "bodice ripper," if you will. Once such encounter with Lancelot is explained thus by Morgan:

She let him push her down. Through the back of her mind, in bitterness, was the thought, *a princess, Duchess of Cornwall, a priestess of Avalon, tumbled in the stables like some dairymaid, without even the excuse of the Beltane fires*. But she closed it away from her mind and let his hands move on her as they would, unresisting. *Better this than break Arthur's heart*. She did not know whether it was her own thought or that of the man whose body was somehow all over hers, whose fierce furious hands were bruising her; his kisses were almost savage, driving into her mouth in a rage. She felt him pull at her dress and moved to loosen it for him. (296)

It is difficult to reconcile the priestess with the needy woman described above or the *fée*'s silken boudoir for her hero of choice with a roll in the hay. Karen E. C. Fuog notes this type of

incongruity as part of the general failure of Bradley to escape the very culture in which Mists is produced: "Certainly Bradley intended a feminist agenda, and to a large extent she succeeds in it. Strong, vibrant women serve as potential models for the audience, and female sexuality is demythologized. Yet at its deepest level, Mists is subsumed by the patriarchal society in which Bradley lives" (86). The ideologies of an era are thus reproduced in all the Arthurian texts, and the respective negative attitudes toward women are transferred onto Morgan. Bradley is bound, too, by the limits of contemporary feminist thought. Perhaps she herself suggests this limitation for all storytellers when Morgan explains how perception shapes reality: "Well, so it must be, for as man saw reality, so it became" (809).

As C. J. Cherryh attempts to contain Gate of Ivrel within the generic confines of the heroic fantasy, so, too, is Marion Zimmer Bradley faced with writing for a culture whose values have interpellated her as well. Fuog holds that the only models Bradley has for modern western culture are based on "phallogentric, patriarchal structures [which] are the only ones [the] audience will recognize, the only models available" (86). She believes that Bradley's deconstruction of woman as Other by her demystifying female sexuality only leads to a shifting of Otherness; magic replaces the feminine sexual mystique, and the "same problems of Otherness and power imbalance remain" (86). I agree with Fuog that Bradley is bogged down in her agenda by her Western idea that "power is limited and everyone wants it" (86). I also believe, however, that Bradley is aware of her inability to deconstruct Otherness while working from within a Christian culture that is based on long-standing dichotomies between man and woman, Christian and pagan. This awareness would explain, in part, Bradley's cycles of polarity that keep the reader and writer constantly aware of both perceived and inherent gender differences. This is why Morgan is such an appropriate mouthpiece for the Other, whether it be Avalon priestess, Neo-Paganism icon, or the unhappy housewife who illustrates the disenfranchised medieval woman.

By the final pages of The Mists of Avalon, Morgan, the product of centuries of misogyny and rationalization, has discovered her raison d'être and revealed it to an audience as a quiet

reconciliation of the Old and New religions, a reconciliation that may go unnoticed by the Church but will satisfy Morgan's and Bradley's desire for unity. As she does in Morte, indeed as she has done since the twelfth-century Vita Merlini, Morgan retires to Avalon to live forever: "Her work was done" (876). One can read Morgan's departure as a retreat because she has accepted that the Goddess is no match for God: the Old Religion has outlived its adherents. There is, however, a more positive reading of Morgan's final exit. Morgan comes to understand "that the essence of the Goddess will never be completely lost in any civilization or religion because what she represents and protects is so universal . . . that it will always find a way of expressing itself" (Volk-Birke 423). In Bradley's underlying theme of tolerance and intolerance, Morgan's long struggle to determine the will of the Goddess has been a lifelong test of her own tolerance. Like the tests Morgan submits Gawain to in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the trials the Goddess submits Morgan to reveal her to be flawed as well. The evils of her past are revealed as mistakes and exaggerations as we re-live her struggle to reconcile the two worlds between which she is caught. Gawain's trials last a few days, Morgan's a lifetime. Gawain, however, belongs in the dominant culture, and, unlike those of Gawain, Morgan's trials lead her not to the center of the Arthurian world but to its fringes: "She need only step through the mists here and be in Avalon" (876).

## Chapter 5

*"Morgan le Fay is writing this story now!"*

Morgan in Arthur Rex--A Legendary Novel, Merlin--Darkling Child of Virgin and Devil, and Excalibur

Avalon recedes even further into the mists in Thomas Berger's Arthur Rex--A Legendary Novel, hereafter Arthur Rex (1978). The Fortunate Isle is only intimated in Robert Nye's Merlin--Darkling Child of Virgin and Devil, hereafter Merlin (1978), while in John Boorman's 1981 film Excalibur, it has dwindled into a brief, final glimpse of Arthur in his funeral barge with three cut-out figures of queens dressed in white standing by the dying king's side. Morgan, however, remains a strong presence in all three texts, a wicked and largely unrepentant malevolent figure who still seeks to overthrow or, as in Nye's Merlin, to unman her slower-witted brother. Yet, Morgan's malevolence has never been so much wicked fun, for all three works present a Morgan who revels in her own evil schemes. Drawing upon the various literary strains that constitute the shifting figure of Morgan le Fay, Berger, Nye, and Boorman give us a character who celebrates her otherness openly; however, the end result of the author's individual characterizations reveals much of their respective visions of Malory's Morte and thus relevance to a contemporary, even postmodern world.

Of the three authors, Berger's faithfulness to Malory is the more obvious, even though, like Malory, he draws from many sources. Indeed, Berger's agenda is clearest when Arthur Rex is read intertextually with Morte. Brooks Landon says that Berger's narrator "shows an essential allegiance to events as set down by Malory" (56), but this allegiance does not preclude an ironic deconstruction of much that Malory holds sacred and essential. Berger de-thrones nobility, or at least the nobility of Uther Pendragon. No character in his text is cruder in deed and word than Uther, as his barbarous words of inspiration to his warriors reveal early in the text: "Cut down the shit-eaters and carve their rotten bellies out and wind their stinking guts around their necks and drive staves up their dirty arseholes. Rip off their ballocks and shove

them down their muzzles" (24). The narrator's wry irony does not leave off with just this drill-sergeant routine to the troops, for he adds that Uther continues in "language of the greatest eloquence for its effect on the British warrior" (24).

Furthermore, Uther's savagery on the battlefield and in the bedroom is similarly saturated with testosterone. The narrator lists the typical catalogue of martial conquests and notes Uther's "worthiness" as a king, for "[h]e killed many men and took many maidenheads wherever he went and was considered the greatest king of his time" (21). We, as the narrator does himself, question here the medieval concept of a great king, and the narrator continues to question the concept throughout Uther's brief reign. His desire for Igraine, modified and softened from Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *Historia Regum Britanniae* through Malory's fifteenth-century *Morte*, is no longer just a noble conception from an ignoble consummation. Uther is here a rutting, lecherous animal: "[H]e closed with her [Igraine's] alabaster body as a ram doth address an ewe" (10). Uther himself, in a statement that anticipates John Boorman's absorption with the sword Excalibur as well as the homophobia that permeates the court, tells Merlin of his worries regarding his successor, Arthur:

Tis the prime function of a man to use his prick, and a king is the quintessence of manliness and a model to the masculine orders beneath him. Swyving one's own sisters, as do the monarchs of bawdy Egypt, though a most unnatural practice, is not so heinous a crime as having at a boy. O cruel destiny, that a sod should succeed me!' (25).

It is hardly surprising that Arthur breathes a sigh of relief when he finds that the mother of his beloved Guinevere was not one of Uther's many conquests, for, as Leodegrance tells him, she had "a great aversion to him, by reason of his stench. For Uther did rarely bathe within a twelve-month, and disdained all scents as being appropriate only to vile sodomites" (80). For all his prowess at fighting and swyving, Uther was just a man, and a smelly one at that.

The threat of "vile sodomites" is ever-present in *Arthur Rex*, whether it be in the form of Uther's illogical conclusion that his rival Gorlois's association with Saxons, notable sodomites in the text, is reason enough that his head be mounted "atop Lud's Gate, with the



legend TRAITOR AND SOD beneath the ragged neck" (14); in Tristram's unfortunate encounter with his warder, "who was a detestable sodomite . . . [and] did purpose to perform with him a vicious crime against Nature" (113); or in Guinevere's perpetual ruminations about the type of friendship Arthur and Lancelot share: "[S]he could not understand the admiration which two men might feel for each other without being either of them sexually unnatural" (217). Indeed, the threat of homosexual otherness is a recurring leit motif in the text, a disruptive presence that belies the existence of a "a medieval period as an escape to a golden age" (Thomas 54); rather, Berger replaces the golden age with what Jimmie Elaine Thomas sees as a "realistic, almost sordid view of morality of the time" (54). Thomas continues: "Indeed, he seems to wish to destroy the romantic illusion that the medieval period was a time of chivalrous knights who always acted properly" (54). What could be more destructive to the fiercely heterosexual world of the masculine court than the suggestion of homosexuality in its midst?

Perhaps, though, even more threatening to the medieval world is the fear and threat of the powerful woman, a danger Berger's Dark Ages' Uther points out centuries before Sprenger and Krämer's fifteenth-century Malleus Maleficarum. The lovesick king admits impotency to Merlin, but he suffers only because he has been bewitched: "I have me the peculiarity . . . with a woman I have long desired, to tup her so often with the tool of the mind that when it comes to close buttocks my actual meat will not stand. It is as if a malignant spell hath been put upon it"(6). Fortunately for Uther, Merlin has the correct counterspell. Unfortunately for Gorlois, the counterspell involves Uther assuming Gorlois's shape and swyving his wife Igraine. Arthur's own sister Morgawse is perhaps the most dangerous of these sexually powerful females, for her incestuous seduction of the naive Arthur leads to the birth of Mordred, Arthur's greatest threat and his greatest shame. Yet, even though Mordred is one of Malory's and Berger's greatest villains, Berger sets up Morgawse's seduction and Mordred's conception as a comedy of errors, from her flagrant display of flesh to a disconcerted and virginal Arthur to Arthur's own shortcomings: "[H]e was not the best lover with whom the lady had performed the act of darkness" (64).

While Berger acknowledges Malory's fear of the flesh and follows Malory to a degree in his observance of potential harm from the powerful woman, he goes far beyond Malory's offhand castigation of female sexuality to explore a broader realm of prurient interests. Sexuality, long associated with the fleshly female, is expanded in Arthur Rex from the aforementioned threats of homosexuality to a whole new dimension of exotic desires in the aptly-named Liberty Castle, where Gawain finds himself faced with far more exotic temptations than he ever did in Bercilak's Castle (Sir Gawain). Gawain is offered, in turn, the attentions of juvenile boys, a sadistic Roman masseur, a "corps of unfledged maidens," a Chinese girl who will pleasure Gawain under the table, a dancing boy, and the nearly naked Lady of the castle (201-04). Gawain "naturally" withstands all temptation but the last, for, like her analogue in the fourteenth-century Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the Lady offers her body to the overwhelmed knight. To complicate the plot further, Berger's Gawain is drawn into a similar bargain as is contracted in Sir Gawain and finds himself at a loss to fulfill his daily exchange with his host when, unlike his fourteenth-century counterpart, he seeks her out in her own bedroom and, losing his "strength of will," finds that "he must need submit to this lady altogether" (213).

While Berger deflates the seriousness of Gawain's breach of contract, he inflates the symbolism of Gawain's surrender in his description of the Lady's boudoir:

[T]aking the virile initiative he [Gawain] did go in search of her, . . . and thus all corridors at Liberty Castle soon led to the most private of her chambers, the walls of which were lined with quilted velvet of pink, the which color deepened and darkened as he penetrated the room, and the couch on which she lay was of magenta. But her body was fully covered, in a robe of the richest dark red and of many folds and trimmed with the sleek fur of the otter. (211)

It is little wonder that Gawain "must need submit" to the Lady in this invaginated enclave he has penetrated. Yet, even this shameful lapse of loyalty to his host and Gawain's questionable chivalric obligations to the Lady are mitigated in this modern adaptation of Sir Gawain.

Where Morgan's testing reveals Gawain to be flawed, a shame he carries with him always in Sir Gawain, here he is tested by the Lady of the Lake, the benevolent aspect of Morgan who serves as Arthur's guardian in Morte. Rather than feel himself "untrustworthy, mendacious, and adulterous" (214), as his fourteenth-century counterpart must have, Berger's Gawain is left feeling perplexed, as he watches the Green Knight transform himself into the Lady of the Lake, whose earlier form had been the Lady of Liberty Castle.

This aspect of Morgan, however, does not leave Gawain with a didactic message about pride and human frailty; instead, she leaves him all the more puzzled about his difficulties with women. As Gawain notes, the Lady of the Lake was involved when he was twice "gulled," in his accidental beheading of a Lady and his adultery with the Lady of Liberty Castle (216). Having been the dupe in two of the Lady of the Lake's hoaxes, Berger's Gawain is rightfully angry and frustrated. Yet, Gawain's familiar antifeminist tirade at the end of Sir Gawain that absolves men of carnal guilt is here replaced by a softened admission of Gawain's own complicity in his problems: "But I must ask why my natural addiction to women must invariably be the cause of my difficulties. Methinks I was happier as the lecher of old. I have since been only miserable" (216).<sup>176</sup> There are no easy answers in Arthur Rex, no absolutes that offer Gawain a cure for his addiction. Instead, the Lady of the Lake's answer compounds his confusion:

'Gawaine, thou were never commanded to be a prude.'

And so having made her favorite knight the more puzzled, the Lady of the Lake did void that place in the form of a golden gossamer, the which floated from the door of the chapel and rose high into the soft air without. (216)

Gawain's confusion and anger are rare and never so fully developed in Malory's Morte. Terence McCarthy notes that the "romance takes us close to its heroes; we share their thoughts and see into their hearts. Malory takes us farther away, replacing intimacy with respect"

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<sup>176</sup> Berger's Gawain suggests in his self-awareness a similar, if somewhat less-developed, sense of self in his prototype in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

(148). Berger, on the other hand, brings us back to their thoughts and their hearts, even when their hearts are hardened by evil. Berger claims that in Arthur Rex, "[P]erhaps for the first time since Marie de France, the queens and princesses are permitted their due in the tales, of which they are the traditional survivor" (qtd. in Landon 62), and Merlin alludes to the self-awareness Berger has given his characters, particularly his female characters, when he says, "I know little of woman, but even so methinks there be none who exist without a sense of self" (78-9). Yet, sprinkling his narrative with epithets of "unnatural woman" and "unnatural sister," the narrator's use of medieval commonplaces still does not prepare us for the transgressive postmodern look at the very self-aware Morgan who challenges even the most villainous charges Malory makes against her. Morgan responds to her young nephew Mordred's instant nihilistic affection for her in a suitably transgressive manner:

And Mordred was enraptured by the brilliant intellect of his aunt. 'I regret only,' said he, 'that because there is no such thing as love, I can not love thee.'

'And be assured that thou dost please me quite as much,' said Morgan la Fey, 'and that at such a time I regret that I am not capable of sexual feeling, for on principle 'twould be a jolly thing to take thee into my bed and commit at once two crimes of which I greatly approve: incest and unnatural congress with an infant person. And 'twould only be improved upon were you rather my niece, thus affording the possibility of a third viciousness: female sodomy.'

But then Morgan la Fey did smile merrily. 'I jest with thee, dear Mordred. For the sexual appetites (though they might be used as means) are never ends in the celebration of evil.' (223)

Certainly, Malory's Morgan uses lust, among other devices, to win over Accolon, her champion against Arthur, but Malory never allows her to acknowledge her sexual desires, let alone glory in her lusty evil. Sexuality, the bane of chivalry and, hence, Malory's Morte, is disruptive and to be avoided by any knight who wants to remain worthy. Morgan plans the systemic

destruction of Arthur by ruining lesser men through lust, who will, in turn, help her destroy the king, "who since his lone encounter with thy mother [Morgawse] is immune to desire" (224).

In keeping with the rest of Arthur Rex, however, Morgan's machinations come to naught, for the text's tone is never completely pessimistic. In a characteristically ill-tempered discussion between Morgan and her pupil Mordred, Mordred asks her if she is aware "that [her] failures to that end [Arthur's death] have been disgraceful failures?" Quite aware of her many bungled attempts, Morgan answers, "How typically malicious of thee to remind me . . . . Canst thou do better, little shit?" (366). Morgan's failures are obvious throughout Morte, usually highlighted by the welcome presence of the Lady of the Lake; yet Malory makes no comments on her rash acts and many blunders. It is a given that she is an irrational, malevolent, and, ultimately, flawed force committed to destroying Arthur. Berger gives Morgan both voice and opportunity to explain rationally her malevolence which she does at great length with an occasionally melodramatic flourish that deflates her own exaggerated sense of evil, as when she tells Mordred, "The great purpose in doing evil is to defy the good, dear boy!" (221). Yet this vocalized philosophy of evil is not all that distinguishes Morgan from her counterparts in medieval literature, for she takes pains to squelch any trace of femininity and maternal emotions in herself to further the "service of evil"; it is difficult to watch the "excruciating torture of a helpless victim" when femininity raises its ugly head (222).

Her philosophy of evil cannot stand, however, any more than can Arthur's philosophy of virtue. Brooks Landon cites the tragedy of the text as centered "on the erosion of the innocently idealistic belief that life can be governed by the simple principle of opposing good to evil" (49). Berger reveals throughout the text that polarities are too simple a tool to explain the complexity of humanity and the mythic power underneath Arthurian legend. Morgan's failed philosophy is pointed out by Mordred, the one character who is privy to Morgan's teachings. Mordred's mockery of her errors, however, forces the reader to see Morgan's demonstrated inability to kill a king, a king whose naiveté and blind adherence to his absolute beliefs would seem to render him a perfect target for any competent, industrious evildoer. Here,

his malefactor is a shapeshifting enchantress who changes forms as effortlessly as her benevolent counterpart, the Lady of the Lake, floats away as gossamer from Gawain. Garrett Epps sees Berger's team of Morgan and Mordred as a "semi-comic Boris and Natasha, energetically wicked without real menace" (47), but the menace is real, for Morgan's and Mordred's intentions to destroy Arthur are ever foremost in their thoughts and actions. The same Mordred who feels unexpected awe of Guinevere and bumbles in handling his Saxon soldiers is also the same Mordred who runs "his father through the bosom till caught by the hilt the blade could go no further" (481).

Morgan's cruelty—she does cuckold her husband and plot to kill both her paramour Accolon and Arthur here<sup>177</sup>—is mitigated, however, by her entry into a nunnery. Maureen Fries reads this move as a partial restoration of Morgan's "original archetypal significance" ("Trends" 208), but I would argue that her decision must be examined in light of both her rationale for entering the nunnery and in the nunnery's name itself: Little Sisters of Poverty and Pain. As the narrator tells us,

[S]he entered herself into the Convent of the Little Sisters of Poverty and Pain, for after a long time in the service of evil she had come to believe that corruption were sooner brought among humankind by the forces of virtue, and from this moment on she was notable for her piety. (453)

Returning to the nunnery, the place where she learns necromancy in *Morte*, may be no more than just another disguise, just another tactic in her endless war on Arthur, or she may simply have tired of too obvious evil. The name of the convent, though, suggests both a mendicant order, such as the Poor Claires, as well as a sadomasochistic perversity for poverty and pain sometimes associated with medieval Christianity.

Perhaps Berger is intimating that both piety and cruelty suffuse all of Christianity. Certainly, Merlin takes great delight in "puncturing Arthur's sanctimonious Christian beliefs"

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<sup>177</sup> As in Malory's *Morte*, Morgan's evil energies are most evident in the Arthur-Accolon section of the text.

(Thomas 85). With a touch of pagan disdain and an irony that would be at home in Bradley's Mists of Avalon, Merlin explains the purpose of Christianity in controlling the populace, perhaps even as an opiate for the masses:

'[A]s an institution Christianity doth provide a containment for the mob as the banks of a stream a channel for the water, and as a faith it doth meet the universal requirement of men for that which is beyond the evident, the which is often vile. And the Nazarene, by taking upon himself the guilt for all human pollution, hath provided the most cunning god of the many to which mortals have resorted.' (34)

The one Truth of Christianity that is anathema to the many truths of the Old Religion in Bradley's text is the same here, but the cruelty of the priests has been lessened, and the absolute Truth has been ironized into an occasional mock miracle or grandiose statement by Arthur. In a postmodern refutation of the existence of any absolute claim to truth, Berger uses Merlin, the postmodern prophet, to deconstruct casually the divine mystery of transubstantiation. Merlin effortlessly transmutes the Archbishop of Canterbury's wine to water and then back again when the Archbishop threatens to "chide" the errant steward by having "him racked and pulled apart at the nuts" (28). The Archbishop, then, is revealed piecemeal in this meeting with Merlin as an illiterate huckster with much experience at conjuring miracles which are "a penny an hundred" (29).

Merlin is not content to reproach merely the occasional errant clergy. Rather, as Jimmie Elaine Thomas notes, he continues to castigate the problems associated with the later Church:

In order to make Arthur aware of the misuses of the church, he unmasks pardoners selling fraudulent papers, brothels calling themselves "Nunneries," and archbishops dealing in spurious miracles. But even worse, in Merlin's assessment, is the narrow-minded, self-righteous attitude so often characteristic of Christianity. (126).

Perhaps most damaging of all in Arthur Rex, as it is in Mists of Avalon, is the shame that is Christianity's legacy to medieval culture, as well as the tool with which Morgan seeks to topple the king. The Lord of Liberty Castle, the place where the only sin is to refrain from

consummating one's desire, explains to Gawain why he, a pagan, dares to test the virtue of a Christian knight: "Because I have no shame!" merrily replied the lord. "Which is a Christian invention" (210). Morgan knows she can kill Arthur only in a death "brought about by some great shame such as by the machinations of a blood-relative" (224-5). She uses her pawn, the evil Sir Gromer Somir Joure, to strike a bargain with Arthur. In exchange for the stolen sword Excalibur, Arthur is to answer the question "*What do women most desire in this world?*" (313). Morgan does not want to kill Arthur outright here. She intends a far worse fare for a Christian king; as Sir Gromer Somir Joure explains, "For my purpose be not to slay you, but rather to humiliate you, the which, you will agree, is far more deleterious to a king of the greatest worship" (313). Arthur sees no possible answer to the question, as, in typical medieval misogynist style, he answers Gawain's own doubts about his success by saying, "[T]hat a woman doth not know her mind is an established truth" (314).

Fortunately for Arthur, success does not rely on traditional patriarchal wisdom, for, as Brooks Landon argues, "central to the problem of hierarchical thinking, as well as central to events in Berger's telling, is blindness of Arthurian men to the wisdom of Arthurian women" (62). Following in the tradition of Malory's Arthur, Berger's Arthur is deaf to Guinevere's advice and blind to her affair with Lancelot (which the lower orders have known about for years) because Arthur is so firmly entrenched in the "linear hierarchies of medieval Christian thought" that he does not recognize any voice or authority other than that of a patriarchal hierarchical one (Landon 61). He does, however, entertain a fantasy near the end of his life that Guinevere might have been a better ruler than he, but he stops himself before he blasphemes further: "But to proceed further with this fantasy would no doubt be blasphemous, God having decided which must rule and which must serve" (458). The narrator is more pragmatic than Arthur and his medieval counterparts, for he "exposes the chauvinism of the



era, the realities of power and portrays women as the only characters deep enough and realistic enough to understand the chauvinistic subscription to that concept" (Landon 55).<sup>178</sup>

Certainly Guinevere, who is all but silenced by Malory, condemns the very chauvinism and chivalry that undoes Arthur's world in both Morte and Arthur Rex:

And Guinevere . . . thought to herself, Nay it [war] hath happened because of men and their laws and their principles! And she wondered whether those who were not knights did not have it better, living according to their appetites, for the common folk and the beasts fought only for food and sometimes their lusts, and being a woman she could not understand honor and justice, for they were invented by men. (442)

These artificial virtues and systems reflect both Berger's critique of the hierarchical world of the romance and what Suzanne H. Macrae calls Guinevere's "own brand of frustration and longing" (89). Macrae explains Guinevere's frustration further:

-More intelligent and politically adept than her husband, she must sit as mere consort rather than exert any genuine power. She romanticizes what she lacks, but the real Lancelot shatters her fantasized dream of him. Boredom, vanity, and self-defeat lead her to love him. Yet she despises his piety and duty and strives to corrupt his will, not being satisfied with just royal command of his services. (89)

Thus, Guinevere's critique of the patriarchy serves both as what Brooks Landon calls Berger's "double focus, at once true to the heroic essence of the myth and searching for deeper truths beneath that heroism and its tragic end" (49), as well as a feminist critique of the medieval construct of woman in both culture and the courtly love tradition.<sup>179</sup> Her fated lover, Lancelot,

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<sup>178</sup> I would argue that Gawain is "deep enough and realistic enough" to understand the fallacies inherent within the system as well, especially in the Dame Ragnell section when we see him struggle with Arthur's narrow-mindedness and later give to his bride the choice to be what she will, a sufficiently strong power to break Morgan's transformation spell upon Ragnell.

<sup>179</sup> Joan Kelly-Gadol posits a need for a "doubled vision of feminist theory" to overcome "certain conflicts in theory and practice that stem from earlier notions of sex oppression and social changes" (52), much as Berger implies a need for a "double focus" to re-vision the Arthurian legend. See Joan Kelly-Gadol, "The Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory," Women, History & Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) 51-64.

is likewise interpellated by the patriarchy and its polarized point of view, for he is shocked when Guinevere speaks on "male things" (178) and is completely unable to "derive any meaning from Guinevere's anger" a few minutes later (179). Even their love affair is stymied by Lancelot's liege loyalty and Christian shame: "For though he had loved her greatly, at no time was the joy comparable to the sorrow and shame of it" (275).

Other women are also self-aware and, occasionally, self-serving when it comes to manipulating the tenets against those who are bound by them. While she holds Gawain "tightly and her warm breath was against the hollow of his neck," the Lady of Liberty Castle beseeches Gawain for the protection he owes her under chivalry: "You are the defender of women," said she, "and I am in distress" (206). Yet, when Gawain offers to don his armor to fight for her honor, he finds her foe is no person but, rather, a "sense that [her] kisses are obnoxious" (205). The maiden whom Percival seeks to aid also uses the sacred creed of chivalry to seek sexual satisfaction:

'Dost refuse a command from thy lady?' asked the maiden greatly indignant.

And Percival therefore took off his armor and he lay down on the branches.

'Now,' said the maiden, 'put thine arms about me and hold me tight, so that I might be warmed. And take no liberties, on pain of being vile and grossly indecent.'

(385)

Percival takes no "conscious" liberties, but he finds himself at a similar disadvantage as Gawain. While both have been the best knights they are capable of being, they both face women who have climbed down from the pedestal where chivalry placed them and into the bedroom where even the bravest knights fear to go.

Women are not the only characters, of course, who question chivalry and its ideals. Berger gives Arthur himself an early opportunity to define the rigid laws and principles of chivalry when he explains to the Irish King Ryons, a veritable double of his own father, that chivalry is "[a] code for, a mode of, knightly behavior, in which justice is conditioned by generosity, valor shaped by courtesy. . . . The vulgar advantage is declined. Dignity is

preserved, even in a foe" (42). Echoing the reader's own suspicions that this simple code seems inadequate to base a kingdom upon, Ryons asks, "And is that all?" When Arthur adds that "[g]raciousness is sought," too, Ryons shows the difference between chivalry and reality: "But as it is, I am a king and not a bloody prating little preacher. Thy Lady of the Lake is a whore and her sword [Excalibur] will make my toothpick" (42). Subsequently, Arthur is forced to behead this slanderous king with the would-be toothpick of which Ryons speaks. Reason, i. e. the chivalric code, is not what enables Arthur to destroy his enemy and subdue his army; rather, it is the magic, a force which Merlin explains "is that to which reason cannot be applied" that furnishes Arthur with the weapon he needs (44).

Magic, however, lies outside Arthur's rational, ordered world of the court. We first see magic at work at a spring in a traditional forest setting. Here Uther's knights unthinkingly drink from the spring and are "transformed into green frogs and the horses into spotted hounds." Merlin, in the guise of a raven, chides them for drinking without his permission and then begs forgiveness for his "magician's japery" and reverses the transformation (3).<sup>180</sup> Here Berger has followed Malory in transferring the magical spring and the raven, a common shape assumed by the Morrígain, to Merlin, but the lion's share of the power of magic belongs to another aspect of Morgan, the Lady of the Lake. Despite Arthur's efforts to build a kingdom upon the artificial world of chivalry with its focus on Christian virtue and its constant companion, shame, the Lady of the Lake owes no allegiance to anything Arthur holds as sacred. Merlin tells the king that magic and reality share a common universe, yet they do not share a common language of reason: "[Magic] 'tis another realm of being. A fish cannot converse with a bird, because each inhabits another medium, yet they both exist and in so doing share the universe. So it is with magic and reality" (44-5).

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<sup>180</sup> Berger, in a postmodern parody of T. H. White's *Merlin*, describes his own parallel version of Merlin:

... [H]e was transformed into a man with a long white beard and wearing the raiment of a wizard, which is to say a long gown and a tall hat in the shape of a cone, both dark as the sky at midnight with here and there twinkling stars and a horned moon. (3)

Arthur dismisses this "alchemy" as beyond his province; he does not have time to "treat fully with every idiosyncrasy of each of his subjects" (45). Joan F. Dean sees this dismissal of magic as a dismissal of the focal point—"the immaterial, the irrational, and the magical" (62). She continues:

Arthur's inability to partake of these faculties, to participate in the realm of the imagination, proves to be his most serious limitation. Because of it, Arthur is unable to transcend the temporal or the terrestrial or to appreciate his own accomplishments.

From the outset Arthur fails to move beyond the material and the literal. (62)

On the other hand, the Lady of the Lake is tired of the human world of reason and the sleight-of-hand miracles of Merlin:

'I am bored,' said the lady, 'by that physical application of reason. I am interested only in that which is mythical. Thou, Merlin, art incapable of making a true miracle. Thou hast never lifted a great weight except by levers [i. e. Stonehenge], the which thou hast concealed from men's eyes by putting them under hypnotic spell. (107)

The Lady even debunks Merlin's supernatural origins as the child of a virgin and an incubus, a literary tradition begun in Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century text Historia Regum Britannie:

Thy father . . . was a mendicant friar, and he did get thy mother, a milkmaid, with child which became thee. As a boy thou wert assailed by cries of 'Bastard!' And couldst not fight the whole world, poor fellow. Therefore, thy wits being keen, thou didst decide to live by them, and not by the sword—or the begging bowl.' (108)

In a not-so-surprising twist to Malory's Merlin-Niniane story, Merlin tries to get the Lady of the Lake to join him in his "cave of alchemy" (109), but this aspect of Morgan is far more powerful and far less threatened than that of her Morte counterpart Ninian. The Lady refuses to join Merlin who voluntarily takes himself from the world of man; as she tells him, "[T]hou canst not so confine the feminine principle, though 'tis quite masculine so to try" (109).

'Tis been a masculine preoccupation for some time to confine the feminine element, the "immaterial, the irrational, and the magical" (Dean 62), to find what Arthur seeks as an absolute. The narrator tells us that because Arthur is a man, he "did seek to find a universal principle for all things (315)," i. e. the masculine principle: the material, rational, and scientific. The narrator defines this "universal principle" as a "fixity, an arresting of time; whereas . . . Guinevere did speak from a female sense of fluidity (for women, like the sea, do know the tides, and their phases are no more capricious than those of the moon)" (315). Arthur's universal principle and subsequent discussion of "fixity" and "fluidity" touch upon a simultaneity of theories, echoing Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the Other which posits, "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth" (61). This representation of the world elicits the polarities of Subject and Other, substituting the possibility of other perspectives for the certainty of one "universal"—that is, masculine—point of view. Arthur's theory on fixity and fluidity also evokes the idea of the postmodern text which "rejects the traditional notion of representation, mimesis, or realism to redefine what realism is" (McCaffery xiii), for Arthur accepts unquestioningly traditional/hierarchical concepts of reality as absolutes, impervious to doubts or re-examination. In addition to Beauvoir's theory of representation and the postmodern rejection of absolutes, Arthur's theory also notes the concept of women's time, a cyclical time theorized by Julia Kristeva<sup>181</sup> and popularized by Marion Zimmer Bradley in *Mists of Avalon*, most noticeably in the female association with monthly courses, phases of the moon, and seasonal changes.

Thomas Berger's *Arthur Rex*, for all its postmodern moments, does not seek to pillory Arthur as the embodiment of the arrested and artificial system of chivalry and the spokesperson for the hegemony of the patriarchy. In fact, as Suzanne H. Macrae points out,

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<sup>181</sup> See Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, Eds. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 197-217 for a discussion of cyclical time.

"[P]lacing blame becomes a slippery or ambiguous operation. He seems to like his characters; his lighthearted irony expresses neither serious morality nor the expectation or desire to reform" (88). Even the Lady of the Lake, whose feminine/personal principle would seem most threatened by Arthur's narrow-minded vision of what most concerns a king, harbors no ill-will for the king. In fact, Berger gives her the first opportunity she has in any Arthurian text to claim openly responsibility for the many good deeds she has done for Arthur. She tells Arthur that she is his

'friend of old . . . who furnished thee with Excalibur and who hath so many times provided instruction for thy knights, and who can protect thee from the grosser harms such as this [the poisonous mantle], but who can give you no immunity to the subtler poisons undreamt of by Morgan la Fey.' (278)<sup>182</sup>

Even the venefica figure of Morgan le Fay surmounts the traditional medieval figure of Other because she is given both a self-awareness and even more opportunity than exists for the Lady of the Lake to voice her personal philosophy, her manifesto on evil. She also does not remain absolutely evil, however, just as the Lady of the Lake is not always absolutely good. Morgan's problematic entry into the Little Sisters of Poverty and Pain convent adds a few more ambiguous claims to Morgan's newfound religiosity. The narrator tells us that when Percival and Galahad see her in the convent,

[N]either . . . recognized her as Morgan la Fey, whom they had seen walking obscenely naked through the throne room at Camelot whilst Mordred had posed as king, *for she had reformed absolutely* (emphasis mine). And with her tender care she restored Galahad at least temporarily, and then both knights prayed with her, and then they resumed their travel, and they carried with them a crucifix she had given them to take to King Arthur. (470)

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<sup>182</sup> This is a curiously ambiguous statement about her own power and that of her malevolent aspect Morgan le Fay, for it seems to limit her own powers to those which counteract Morgan's alone, a self-evident limitation in Morte but a limitation not quite so obvious in this text.

Lest the reader believe Morgan is completely interpellated into Christianity, however, the narrator tells us of Arthur's consternation over the crucifix, for it has, inscribed above the head of Christ, the letters ACRB—"Arthur of Camelot King of Britain." Arthur believes it blasphemous, and, self-reflexively, he also does not "consider himself a martyr" (473). It is quite possible that Arthur's limited self-awareness precludes him from seeing himself as a martyr, but it is very likely that Morgan, who has previously seen him as a perfect victim, now sees him as the ultimate martyr.

Brooks Landon argues that complexity finally undoes both the good and the wicked in Arthur Rex, "uniting both good and evil in the crucible of irony" (50). Nowhere is this crucible more evident than in Arthur's funeral barge. There, the three women in Arthur's life, Guinevere, Morgan le Fay, and the Lady of the Lake, the "not-so wicked, the not-so-virtuous, and the supernatural,"<sup>183</sup> accompany him to Avalon, his final resting place (499). The narrator's epithets ironically point out that Guinevere is not the absolute destroyer of Camelot as scribes have described her, nor is Morgan le Fay the absolute little Sister of Poverty and Pain, although she does try to bring her brother a fair share of both. As for Arthur, the narrator leaves us with a cryptic reading of Arthurian legend: "King Arthur, who was never historical, but everything he did was true" (499). Berger leaves the reader the task of defining the word "true." Does it mean "accurate," "genuine," "not false," "faithful," "rightful," or "honorable"? Or does it mean all of the above? We are left with our own slippery slope of meaning.

Equally slippery is the task of isolating "a clear moral and social norm" (Macrae 88), making the text unusually appropriate for the continuously shifting figure of Morgan le Fay. Here we see her consciously wreak havoc, or at least plot to do so, against her brother who has decided that his sin of incest has brought about Morgan's malicious machinations against him.<sup>184</sup> We lose her "consciousness" only once she becomes an actual Little Sister, for we are

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<sup>183</sup> It seems that, as Merlin points out, the supernatural falls outside the real world and, as such, is not subject to mortal claims of "good" and "evil."

<sup>184</sup> Actually, his own overblown sense of shame, a problem no woman in the text shares, is the magnet for Morgan's schemes, for she knows that shame will undo him.

then no longer privy to her thoughts and must interpret her actions for ourselves, balancing her long history of deceit with her recent declaration of a change of heart. Berger does not leave us with the thwarted irrational genius of Malory's sorceress who reappears at Arthur's death to fulfill her centuries-old role of Arthur's healer; rather, he gives us an evolving, self-aware Morgan whose endless capacity to adapt suggests complexities that never begin to surface in Morte. And, above all, Berger gives us the black humor that bubbles beneath the surface of any unrepentant evildoer, a humor unheard in Malory but one that fits well within modern angst. Suzanne H. Macrae sees this black humor as "twentieth-century absurdity—pessimism, about intellectual and moral certitude and resignation to the intractability of existence and the fallibility of religion, science, politics, and social programs" (93). Morgan le Fay, a figure always at right angles to the ordered world of the "linear hierarchies of medieval Christian thought" (Landon 61) is the ideal representative of uncertainty and doubt in Berger's re-vision of the Matter of Britain.

While Berger's Arthur Rex leaves us with a slippery slope, Robert Nye's Merlin wrenches the ground from under our feet altogether. Nye's reading of the Matter of Britain owes much to the Postmodern Awakening (1960-75) as characterized by Larry McCaffery. Merlin is replete with "dark humor, literary parody, surrealism, byzantine plots full of improbable coincidences and outrageous action, all presented in a dazzling variety of excessive styles that constantly [call] attention to themselves" (xix). Echoing this definition is Helen McNeil's review of the novel, which notes that "everything calls attention to itself, taking a revisionist view, to put it mildly, of the Matter of Britain" (305). McNeil's description of the text "put[s] it mildly," for there is nothing "mild" in the whole book. Even Merlin's mother, the virginal Vivian, who is generally portrayed as an innocent victim, as in Layamon's thirteenth-century Brut, is here a much more cognizant virgin than is customary in Arthuriana, as we see when she struggles to explain her present state of virginal pregnancy to Friar Blaise:

'I have never been fucked, father.'

Friar Blaise averts his one eye and crosses himself.



'I'm sorry,' says my mother, 'I know I shouldn't use words like that. I'm just trying to make it all clear to you. I know what fucking is, and it has never happened to me. Except in this dream. In this dream that I thought was a dream, but which must have been the devil, because now I am with child.' (38-9)

Although Merlin's mother is finally given a voice to explain an experience that has previously been treated summarily, here her account is not so much to inform the reader about a demonic rape as it is to show how women were viewed as fleshly objects by the medieval Church; Vivian's confession to Father Blaise regarding her "dream" degenerates into a voyeuristic opportunity for the priest. As discussed in Chapter 1 of this study, Simone de Beauvoir notes this conflation of flesh with female that is largely responsible for the medieval construct of the Other: "[T]he Christian is divided within himself; the separation of body and soul, life and spirit, is complete. Original sin makes the body the enemy of the soul; all ties of the flesh seem evil" (188-9).

It is these same fleshly ties that Nye examines, however, that connect the narrative, or narratives, creating an unrestrainedly lurid re-vision of Arthuriana, one whose "[o]bscene passages, with their mythic tits and bums, make the most powerful scenes in a book that has few completed actions" (McNeil 305). While the whole court of Camelot throbs with passions only hinted at in courtly romance, e. g. *Fuckalot Lancelot* (203), Nye's most devilish fun seems to be at the expense of the Church. The three devils, who orchestrate and participate in the torrent of voyeurism, sadomasochism, masturbation, lesbianism, and incest that inundate the text, seem particularly at home inhabiting the bodies and libidos of the clergy.<sup>185</sup> Merlin recalls one such incident in which Dame Pudicity "inspects" Vivian in a debauched

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<sup>185</sup> A conversation between two of the devils that reveals that sexual perversion of the clergy (at least these members of the clergy) is not solely due to demonic possession:

The bit I liked, he [Astarot] says, 'the bit I really liked was that conversation in the confessional. Making the friar say all that about kissing it and sucking it and did you swallow it and was it hot.'

He was *thinking* it,' says my uncle Beelzebub modestly.

They always do,' my father confirms. (73)

examination to ascertain her virginity and whether or not Vivian is a witch: "My father, in drag, made some kind of love to my mother, while my uncle was watching disguised in the skin of a monk" (75).

Nye further implicates the clergy in the widespread hypocrisy and hysteria of the medieval witchcraft trials. In an inversion of the medieval premise that witchcraft derived its power from devil worship, here the demonic forces are given credit for the authorship of the book that fueled the witchhunts of the late Middle Ages--the Malleus Maleficarum:

'That sermon about the bird's nest full of pricks,' says uncle A. 'Great stuff.

First rate theology. What crap.'

'Straight out of the *Malleus Maleficarum*,' my uncle B confesses.

'What's that?'

'Another book. Not written yet.'

'Do we write it? That one too?'

'Of course.'

'I write *all* the books,' says my father the devil gloomily, grandly . . .

'Not without help from us,' says uncle B. The *Malleus*, for instance, is mostly our work. Astarot and me.'

'Under our own names?' the count says incredulously, stirring his drink with his tail.

'Of course not. Pen names as always. Krämer and Sprenger.'

'Sounds like a firm,' says uncle A.

'Dominicans,' says uncle B. (74-5)

Merlin, the failed Antichrist, though, manages to foil at least part of the witch hysteria.

Vivian, faced with the two choices left an unwed mother, to "become a regular whore" or to die (102), is saved by her infant son when he reveals to the presiding judge that he, too, is a bastard. Faced with burning his own mother at the stake, the judge renounces the horror of burning women and witches forever:

bastard. Faced with burning his own mother at the stake, the judge renounces the horror of burning women and witches forever:

'I am sick of burning women,' he announces. 'I have been sick of it for some time. You have to draw the line somewhere, and I have drawn it here and now. I am not going to burn my mother. And not having burned my mother, it follows in justice that I cannot condemn another for my mother's sin—namely, that of conceiving a child outside of holy wedlock.'

The judge rises. He produces a fishing rod from under his pink robe.

'I'm going fishing,' he says. 'Court adjourned.'

The judge heads for the door.

'You can burn the stake,' he tells the nuncio as he passes him. (106)

Whether or not the judge's decision to "burn the stake" instead of the unwed mother has any bearing on Morgan le Fay's conceiving an incestuous child with Arthur is problematic. There is no indication that anything in the text can stop her from the purpose at hand. Morgan le Fay, whose presence always signals the presence of alterity, is here recognized as one of many transgressive figures in this postmodern re-telling of Malory's Morte. Nye's Morgan transcends the necromanical and power-hungry Morgan in Morte. Here, she uses her craft to kill her own mother in order to take her place:

While Morgan le Fay fashions a stone effigy of her mother the lady Igrayne, and then thrusts a sword through the heart of it, by some magic almost the equal of mine, and then usurps her mother's place in King Lot's bed<sup>186</sup>—for Igrayne falls down dead, and

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<sup>186</sup> In this text Igraine is not a passive victim in Uther's royal conquest; rather, she later leaves her husband Uther for Lot, traditionally the husband of her daughter Morgawse. Here Morgan usurps both Morgawse's traditional role as Lot's wife as well as Morgawse's incestuous conception of Mordred.

While Morgan has been accused of being an "unnatural" sister, wife, and woman, her relationship with her mother has largely been erased from other texts. Here, however, Morgan's evil extends to her own mother, paralleling in miniature the dolorous day when Mordred slays his father Arthur. Morgan's evil encapsulates the transgressive nature of Merlin and challenges even the transgressions of Merlin himself. As Geraldine Heng observes in her discussion of Arthurian romance, the "competing voices and claims" of alterity challenge the "privileged locus" ("Map" 252) of reader, author, and even the textual Subject.

Nye's text is filled with such "competing voices and claims" that question authorship, hence authority, in telling the story. Alluding to the medieval tendency to conflate the signifier with the sign, Merlin gives Arthur a quick lesson into medieval philology:

'The sign expresses the thing.'

'The thing is the virtue of the sign.'

'There is an analogical correspondence between the sign and the thing signified.'

'The more perfect is the sign, the more entire is the correspondence.'

'To say a word is to evoke a thought and make it present. To name God is to manifest God.'

... 'To utter a name is to create or evoke a being.'

'In the name is contained the verbal or spiritual doctrine of the being itself.' (161)

The irony of Arthur's lesson, however, is that this text endlessly questions both the sign and the signifier, deconstructing the medieval certainty of absolute meaning. The power of Logos is lost in the text. Furthermore, there is no "privileged locus" in Merlin. The constantly changing authorship, we are told, goes from Merlin to Morgan and back to Merlin again, much to Merlin's dismay:

Let me make it quite clear to the doubtful:

This book has one maker and one maker only.

authorship, we are told, goes from Merlin to Morgan and back to Merlin again, much to Merlin's dismay:

Let me make it quite clear to the doubtful:

This book has one maker and one maker only.

Who ever heard of a book being written by the characters in it?<sup>188</sup>

As the authorship of the text is in question, so, too, is the figure of Merlin himself. Aside from the epithet "darkling child of virgin and devil," Merlin's identity is never certain. His identity occasionally conflates with that of Ninian, another aspect of Morgan, a conflation that alludes to Merlin's obsession with Ninian in the Vulgate cycle and in Morte. This merging of characters is most evident in two instances. First, Ninian uses the river's waters to wash her face, "scrubbing away" all traces of herself to reveal Merlin dressed in "the girl's green gown" (146). Next, Ninian represents a narcissistic mirror image of Merlin, the ultimate self-reflexivity: "*But she has no face?*" protests my uncle Beelzebub, "her face is like a looking glass. He is looking at himself!" (208).<sup>189</sup>

To complicate further these splintered images of Morgan, a complication that reminds the reader of the many strands of oral tradition that make up the Matter of Britain, Ninian is sometimes known as Vivian, e. g. in Tennyson's Idylls of the King. Here Vivian is Merlin's mother. Albert W. Halsall discusses the tangled genealogical theads of Arthuriana and the subsequent carnal tapestry Nye weaves with the same threads:

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<sup>188</sup> Although, as Merlin immediately reflects, there is the possibility of many voices within a postmodern tale:

Of course, there is a sense in which Morgan le Fay could be said to be writing *her* story, and my father the devil is writing *his* story, and Arthur so, and Igrayne so, and all the rest of them who have an original and autonomous existence apart from me. (168)

<sup>189</sup> C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcor note an earlier conflation of Merlin in Malory's Morte with another aspect of Morgan, the Lady of the Lake:

The parallels between Merlin and the Dame du Lac, in their roles as the mentor to the young hero and as the provider of his sword, in their use of female messengers to Arthur's court . . . , and in their association with water and tombs have led us to consider the possibility that Merlin may be a reflection of the same prototype as the Dame du Lac. (89)

Ce n'est pas que les différents narrateurs de *Merlin*, que incluent le magicien lui-même . . . et Morgane la fée, cachent les détails généalogiques que Tennyson trouvait si désagréables. Au contraire, le récit de la conception d'Arthur, chez Nye, devient une description paradigmatique des rapports sado-masochistes existant entre hommes et femmes dans l'univers de Merlin. Comme tel, il se situe entre des descriptions semblables à celles de Merlin et de Mordred, les trois couples de parents étant respectivement, Uther et Igraine, Lucifère et Viviane, et Arthur et Morgane la fée. (169)

Even in this sadomasochistic paradigm, Morgan proves herself to be superior to Arthur, if one can label the sexual object of incestuous, masculine desire as superior, both in diabolical eroticism and in the disgrace of Camelot itself. In Arthur's perverted lust to see his half-sister naked, fantasies compound fantasies, and his lust grows into an obsession. The narrator reveals the dark side of the brief, shining Camelot:

Camelot the golden.  
Built upon a secret cesspool.  
A very perfect gentle knight.  
Who likes to whip girls' bottoms.  
A noble king. The noblest.  
Revelling in incest with his sister. (184).

Morgan is not armed with martial power to overthrow Arthur, but she does possess a twisted version of the amorous power of the fée. She manipulates the desire of Arthur, the "once and future cretin" (204), to father his ultimate foe, Mordred, as Merlin discovers:

But Morgan and my father the devil outwitted us, so it seems. The brand of the king on her thigh is a real brand. That is unarguable. And the child that will kick soon in her womb is a real child.

Mordred.

Bastard son of King Arthur and his half-sister.

Fruit of incest.

Destroyer of the Round Table. (185-6).

Merlin claims, "Mordred is the truth about King Arthur" (186), a ruinous truth authored by Morgan.<sup>190</sup>

Morgan's complicity in Arthur's fate, however, is but one account in a narrative made up of many such accounts. Unlike the Morgan in Berger's Arthur Rex, Nye's Morgan does not speak for herself; rather, she is a willing and willful subject for the Lucifer who celebrates her evil: "A will, a home, a wish, a longing . . . I never saw a more perfect specimen. Such evil! Such beauty!" (166). Her self-awareness has been replaced by an enormous capacity for evil and an equally large appetite for carnality. Yet, her evil is mitigated by the weakness and corruption around her. Her mother gives up her own child so Uther will continue to pleasure her in bed (154). Guinevere has become a sexual exhibitionist, offering Lancelot a "pair of her golden panties" in a tournament (199) and offering to let Arthur, the "once and future cuckold," (213) "whah-whah-watch" (212) while she copulates with the traditionally virginal Percival at the Grail Castle. Even Arthur, whose shame of incest plagues him throughout Arthuriana, here rationalizes incest with Morgan: "The daughters of Adam and Eve, our first parents, were the wives of Cain and Abel, their brothers" (176).

Final judgment of Morgan's character is deferred further when Morgan returns to the convent, here one suggestively named Flaming Heart, where she becomes the abbess. As in Arthur Rex, though, there is still the question of motivation for her decision to enter the convent, for despite Lucifer's jubilant declaration that "*Morgan le Fay is writing this story now!*," she never emerges with the self-awareness and complexity of Merlin himself. As a result, we must weigh her decision to enter the nunnery with our first meeting of her in a nunnery where she invokes Lucifer in a ceremony that blends the demonic and the divine:

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<sup>190</sup> Merlin admits he is muse to, if not a co-author of, this truth because it is his chance question to Arthur--"To see the naked body of your half-sister?"--that inflames the imagination of the king. From that moment all is lost. Camelot might as well be a heap of rubble" (177).

'Emperor Lucifer,' prays Morgan le Fay, down on her knees in the chapel of the convent of the Flaming Heart, 'master and prince of rebellious spirits, I adjure thee to leave thine abode, in whatsoever quarter of the world it may be situated, and come hither to communicate with me. I command and I conjure thee in the name of the mighty living God (Father \* Son \* and Holy Ghost \*) to appear without noise and without any evil smell, to respond in a clear and intelligible voice, point by point, to all that I ask thee . . . (167)

Whether or not Lucifer ever speaks directly to Morgan's desires, her desires are answered in her usurpation of her mother's throne and husband and in her conception of Arthur's traditional nemesis. The Convent of the Flaming Heart may be just a place for her to bank the coals of her heart's desire for the present, however, for the convent is "black-walled"(219) with, perhaps, the stain of evil or the lick of hell fire. Still, when we last see Morgan, she has resumed her position in the traditional barge-to-Avalon scene, or at least we see a queen with "the face of the king's half-sister, Morgan le Fay" (220). In this text of ever-changing realities and identities, the shifting figure of Morgan accommodates the mutable rhythm of postmodern reality. Morgan's own destiny, which resists closure in all of the texts where she withdraws to Avalon, is here more open. Albert W. Halsall explains that "[l]e récit de Nye reste donc 'ouvert,' narcissique et inconséquent, selon la tradition post-moderniste" (171), an open-ended tradition that complements well the mutability of and attraction for the figure of Morgan in medieval, modern, and postmodern texts. To paraphrase Astarot's explanation of the foiled Sleeve Job story at the end of the story of Merlin, "*This is just the end of the story*" (224); by no means is it the end of Morgan le Fay.

Popular film necessarily provides much more closure to Arthurian narratives, and John Boorman's 1981 film Excalibur is no exception. Ambiguity, self-reflexivity, and a rejection of traditional realism offers new perspectives on Arthuriana in postmodern texts. Popular films, however, draw upon nineteenth-century realism, and nothing is so "real" to the audience of such films as the overdrawn stereotypes of good and evil. Evil must be decisively destroyed to



appease an audience accustomed to allegorical characterizations and punitive, even divine, retribution. Events in Boorman's Excalibur do, as Kevin J. Harty contends, "revolve around a trinity of women--Igrayne, Guinevere, and Morgana," but this is an unholy, or at least an unworthy, trinity in Boorman's portrayal of the three characters (284). Igraine is a moment's pleasure for Uther, while Guinevere always comes second in Arthur's affections. Morgan, the once and future archnemesis of Arthur, is here unapologetically wicked and destructive. Furthermore, Morgan le Fay, apparently insecure despite all her power, falls prey to Merlin's flattery, and speaking the powerful charm of making once more, she withers into an aged and ugly crone at the end of the film. Mordred, her "dear, sweet boy," recoils in horror at her appearance and falls upon her in a murderous rage, striking, then throttling her. Jacqueline De Weever argues that Boorman justifies Morgan's death at the hands of what she has created because "women's power is to be feared because it produces only evil" (153). Because the film presents such an intense gynophobia, De Weever places Excalibur in the antifeminist tradition of the Middle Ages. Elizabeth S. Sklar, in turn, cites Morgan's relationship with Merlin as a telling Freudian analogue to Boorman's re-telling of Malory:

Her adversarial relationship with Merlin is equally suggestive. In a sense, while he is able, Merlin plays superego to Morgan's id, containing as best he can her anarchic impulses. . . . The fact that this containment is only temporary, however, that Merlin is ultimately defeated by Morgan's primal energy, by her essential femaleness, suggests a truly apocalyptic gynophobic vision, predicating as the inevitable outcome of female empowerment and uncontained female sexuality the successful sabotage of all the structures controlled by the masculine establishment, familial, social, ethical and political. The end-product of female empowerment, according to this gloomy gospel, is the irredeemable collapse of human civilization, a return to the primal world of bestiality, anarchy, and chaos. (33)

Boorman ensures our reading of Arthur's ultimate betrayal by Mordred by framing a dying Arthur against a dying, blood red sun. Excalibur, whose purpose as Merlin tells Uther, is "to heal, not to hack," has been only a temporary balm to heal a wounded nation.

Perhaps the reason the above metaphor for a healing sword does not work is that Boorman has removed most of its traditional magic. Certainly, it still has the power to "cut steel," and it glows an eerie green glow to symbolize its presence and power. But it has been removed from its powerful scabbard, a scabbard Merlin tells Arthur "is worth ten such swords" (Nye 190). Furthermore, the Lady of the Lake is erased from the first scene in which Merlin retrieves the sword from Uther. The next time we see her, she functions as an aquatic blacksmith, mending "what could not be broken." She lies passively in the water, a beatific smile plastered across her face, holding the sword upright until the dumbstruck Arthur takes it from her hands. Her third and final appearance (unless she's one of the three clone queens on the barge to Avalon) is represented by only her mail-clad arm which catches the sword and then sinks immediately. Boorman has even removed her famed three brandishes of the sword when she receives the sword from Bedivere, here Percival.

Boorman's Excalibur, with all its weird glow and steely perfection, is so thoroughly separated from the feminine that neither Arthur nor Boorman can see that "the secret powers of the new weapon [are] contained not in [the] blade, but in [the] scabbard or sheath (Lat. *vagina*)" (Heng "Feminine," 284). The Merlin of Malory, a source Boorman credits for most of his material, tutors Arthur on the superior strength of the scabbard: it prevents the bearer from bleeding to death. Boorman's Merlin, however, never mentions the scabbard, nor does he identify the Lady of the Lake. Instead, we are left with a sword that "shines with the glow of twenty lamps (300 watts)" and a "Linda Evans look-alike Lady of the Lake [who] floats to the surface of the water and returns the sword intact" (Purdon and Blanch 158).<sup>191</sup> Here Excalibur

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<sup>191</sup> I am not sure which is to be the more powerful connotation for the one-dimensional figure of the Lady of the Lake scene. Are we supposed to associate an intact-ness, a virginal integritas, to her character, or is she a watery Valkyrie?

cannot rise above its association with male power and identity. Despite Merlin's repeated reminders that the sword is to unite Arthur's people, Excalibur is most visibly associated with illicit, hence failed, love: the rape of Igraine, the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere, and the incest of Morgan and Arthur.

Indeed, phallic imagery impregnates this film. One can attempt to do a reading of the film that ignores this imagery, but it is difficult to avoid tripping over the overt masculine sexual references throughout. For instance, the opening Igraine-Uther section exposes the primal need Uther has for Igraine, a need generally transformed into a more gentle longing in the medieval texts. While Igraine performs her spinning, circular, i. e. feminine, dance for Uther and his troop of loutish men, Uther's lust builds to the boiling point. Boorman takes no chances on the viewer missing Uther's burning desire for Igraine's flesh. The men pound on the table on the downbeat, growling unintelligibly, as the music grows louder and her dancing more frantic.<sup>192</sup> At the music's crescendo, Uther and Gorlois confront one another, teeth bared. Igraine cowers like a trapped hare beneath them. The film then abruptly cuts to a battering ram, hammering directly at the portal of Gorlois's castle. His ram failing him, Uther resorts to Merlin's magic, a transformational spell—the charm of making—to penetrate the castle's defenses. Uther, armed finally with the long-awaited Excalibur, rides upon the dragon's breath, assured by Merlin that his "lust will hold [him] up." Apparently, the lust holds him up until he reaches Igraine's bedchambers, for he wastes no time in seizing what he has won. Having breached her defenses, Uther announces his desires to Igraine with a suggestive command: "Come, Igraine." The subsequent assault is heightened by roaring fires blazing behind the two, as they consummate Uther's passion before the fireplace. The fires suggest at once Uther's raging passion, recent battles,<sup>193</sup> and the ongoing battle which the gored Gorlois,

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<sup>192</sup> The cinematic male gaze is never more obvious than in Igraine's dance number.

<sup>193</sup> Strangely enough, Uther's opening battles occur at night, hardly an advantageous time for any medieval battle, one would imagine. Perhaps this is why Uther's men wear darker armor of a baser metal that does not reflect light as readily as does Arthur's stainless steel, remarkably shiny armor. Or, possibly, Uther's night battles and dark armor represent the more

thrust through by the spears of Uther's men, is simultaneously waging. Excalibur cuts back and forth between the two deaths, the big death of Gorlois on the battlefield, the "little death" of Uther in Igraine's bedroom.<sup>194</sup>

Borrowing from the Tristram and Isolde Tale of Morte, Excalibur is subsequently used symbolically to divide the two adulterous lovers, Guinevere and Lancelot. Conflating the two sets of lovers, Boorman's film depicts Lancelot and Guinevere finally consummating their great love for one another in the "healing" forest.<sup>195</sup> It is somewhat unsettling that an homage to Malory would expose their love to passersby in the forest,<sup>196</sup> for Malory, in his great love and admiration for Lancelot, always seeks to protect the lover's privacy behind Guinevere's bedroom doors. Here, however, the two join in a naked embrace and lie in one another's arms on the forest floor.<sup>197</sup> Arthur reluctantly finds the two lovers with the help of Merlin's sight and, as King Mark does when he finds his wife Isolde locked in a similarly naked embrace in the forest, he thrusts his sword between the two. In this symbolic self-emasculation, Excalibur cleaves the "dragon's spine," piercing Merlin himself in his crystal cave. The earth trembles, and stalagmites and stalagmites crash to the floor of Merlin's cave. Yet, Lancelot and Guinevere sleep the sleep of the truly innocent, or the truly satiated, until Lancelot awakens to Guinevere's screams the next morning. "The king without a sword! The land without a king!,"

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primitive Dark Ages, what Boorman calls "the lost centuries," while Arthur's last night battle and shiny armor represent an end to darkness, a mythic ray of hope.

<sup>194</sup> Aside from the savagery of Uther's attack, what I find most disturbing about Uther's evident passion for Igraine is the fact that the actress who plays Uther's passive lust interest, Katrine Boorman, is the daughter of John Boorman. Moreover, Boorman's son, Charley Boorman, plays the evil child Mordred, a child whose active evil equals or exceeds his mother's. Perhaps Sara Boyle's assessment of Igraine as a perpetual pawn works equally well in assessing Boorman's choice of his daughter for the role (42).

<sup>195</sup> A sword draws the two lovers together, literally, as Lancelot extends his sword to Guinevere to invite her into his forest bed. Luckily for Guinevere, Lancelot's sword is not equal in power to Arthur's.

<sup>196</sup> The forest in Excalibur is remarkably clear with an open, well-paved road, hardly the threatening abode of witches, hermits, and madmen that it is in Morte. Passersby, especially the peasants and tradesmen with whom the film abounds, would not be unusual travelers.

<sup>197</sup> True love is worth any discomfort in the film, especially evident when the blood-stained armor of Lancelot fills half the screen when he rides into Camelot in an earlier scene to champion Guinevere.

shouts Lancelot as he runs off naked into the woods to become the forest madman that only Guinevere's scorn can transform him into in Morte. Guinevere, what Richard Coombs calls a "chivalric blank" (332), coils abjectly around the sword, evoking the fallen figure of Eve with her fatal attraction to forbidden fruit.

In the wake of this symbolic emasculation and Morgan's subsequent empowerment with the spell of making, Morgan assumes the monstrous proportions of Boorman's gynophobia. She hugs herself as she waits outside Arthur's bedroom, as she does in almost all of her later scenes, perhaps because, as Merlin has told her, "It's a lonely way, the way of the necromancer." She has passed through the fires of knowledge in the crystal cave, with its contradictory rewards of desire and regret, knowledge and oblivion, ironically, the same knowledge that Igraine and Uther, Guinevere and Lancelot have hard earned. Merlin has been dealt with, locked away in a crystal tomb, trapped by the same magic he used on her mother. To Merlin alone, finally, she divulges her plan to destroy Arthur: "You're not a man. You're not a god. I shall find a man and give birth to a god!" Whether or not the child shall partake of her divinity is unclear. Yet, it is hardly likely Boorman would allow Morgan any residual divine power, given that Morgan's magical powers before she charms the spell of making from Merlin are represented by bubbling cauldrons, bat wings, and exotic herbs, the makings of a witch or venifica figure. The source of divinity apparently lies in her brother, the king, whose divinity is echoed later in Percival's vision of the Grail.

Sara Boyle describes Morgan's incestuous rape of Arthur as a fitting reversal of Merlin's role in her mother's rape by Uther:

Morgan is a woman shaped by treachery, twisted at the root and determined to wield power. As a child, she had seen her mother deceived and powerless before Merlin's plans. Now, she is relentless in pursuit of the knowledge, and the concomitant power, that will allow her to take revenge on all the wizard has wrought. She uses not only his magic, but his plan—the same plan she witnessed as a child—but she uses no third party as Merlin used Uther. (43)

In a problematic maneuver, Morgan enters Arthur's bedchambers, lies atop him in the guise of Guinevere, and whispers emphatically, "Love me. Love me." Although Jacqueline De Weever contends that Boorman here implies that Morgan's doubling of the queen suggests that Morgan "would like to change places with Guinevere in Arthur's bed" (154), Morgan is not the needy lonely necromancer desperate for Arthur's love. More likely, Boorman and his co-writer Rospo Pallenberg have conflated Morte's Dame Brusen's magic spell on Lancelot—a spell which causes him to believe Elaine, the future mother of his son Galahad, is Guinevere—with Merlin's transformational spell on Uther. Moreover, Morgan appears more duplicitous and more "complicitous" in her incestuous union by assuming the pleasing form of Guinevere, because she immediately transforms herself back to her own form after their strangely short intercourse to tell him, face to face: "I have conceived a son, my king. My brother."<sup>198</sup>

Here Excalibur, ensnared since its opening credits in "a thick web of myth and history," becomes even more entangled in the various threads of Arthuriana (Sterritt 328).<sup>199</sup> Mordred's quickly ensuing birth is accompanied by a lightning storm during which a bolt of lightning strikes Arthur in the chest.<sup>200</sup> Arthur is spiritually, emotionally, and physically destroyed by the lightning bolt, for it signifies the evil of Mordred and Morgan as well as the great wasteland that results from a land without a king. Curiously, the Fisher King, the traditional symbol of One King/One Land, is initially stripped of his own regenerative powers, generally, by a wound to the thighs.<sup>201</sup> Perhaps Arthur's loss of Excalibur is sufficient emasculation, for the film's next scene depicts a wasteland replete with peasants in the muck and mire, begging

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<sup>198</sup> One can only speculate as to the shortness of the sexual act on Arthur's relative state of anticipation or inability or, instead, on Morgan's amazing ability to facilitate whatever is at hand. Witness the next scene of Mordred's birth with Morgan herself delivering her son.

<sup>199</sup> Yet for all the various strands of mythology, Boorman, as was Malory, seems unaware of Morgan's Celtic mythological roots.

<sup>200</sup> Mordred's conception is usually not revealed to Arthur for years, and Arthur, himself, generally hides his secret shame from his court. Here someone has spread the word almost immediately, as the priest implores God to save them from Morgan's evils: "God save us from Morgana. And save us from her unholy child."

<sup>201</sup> Medieval wounds to the "thighs" are generally sanitized versions of castration.

Uriens for help.<sup>202</sup> Arthur decides the Grail is the only thing that will "restore what was lost." What has been lost, though, is as enigmatic as the Grail usually is in medieval literature, for Arthur has lost all desire to live, and with this lost desire, he has caused the destruction of his fellowship. Camelot is somber where before it shone from its sheet-plated rooftops to its shiny armored knights to its gleaming golden dragon statues that adorn the castle everywhere. Meanwhile, as Percival discovers on his ten-year quest, most of Arthur's knights have died, many at the hands of Morgan and her spawn. In a near-death experience, Percival sees the Holy Grail, which is replaced by Arthur himself into an ethereal vision that speaks to Percival with the voice of God-Arthur. Yet, despite his conflation with the Grail and the fact that Percival answers the Grail's questions correctly,<sup>203</sup> Percival must take the Grail, generally a metaphor rather than a tangible chalice,<sup>204</sup> to Arthur to restore him.

It is soon thereafter that we find that Guinevere has restored the sword to some of its magical properties by acting as a surrogate Lady of the Lake, keeping Excalibur safely within her convent cell, itself lit by one tall window that resembles nothing so much as a huge cut-out of Excalibur, until Arthur claims it. The sword's healing powers are called upon to heal the land, and flowers and cherry trees burst into bloom, in a "dash of Ken Russell kitsch," as Arthur and his remaining knights ride out to destroy Mordred (Benson 329). Excalibur's healing, however, is short-lived in a film more noted for its gruesome battles than its curative miracles. In the dolorous finale, Mordred grimly tells Arthur, "Come father, let us embrace at last!" and runs Arthur through with his spear, echoing Uther's "Come, Igraine" and his own fatal penetration that sired Mordred's father. Pulling himself along Mordred's spear, Arthur, in turn, stabs his son with Excalibur. However, hope does not end with the death of Arthur, for

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<sup>202</sup> This film would be revealing (and great fun) to read against an earlier Arthurian film, Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975), what with its ever-present peasants who, by turns, frolic in an idyllic woodland and grub in the "lovely filth."

<sup>203</sup> Traditionally Percival must ask the question(s) himself to free the Fisher King from his life in death.

<sup>204</sup> In this tangible holy relic, Boorman follows Malory's de-mystification of the Grail from his Vulgate sources.

Arthur tells Percival that he has not lost the sword in throwing it into the lake: someone else will wield it. I must apologize in advance for my perhaps intentional misreading of Arthur's prophetic last words, but they seem so in character with the phallic imagery that floods this film: "One day a king will come, and the sword will rise again."

As long as there are phallocentric filmmakers as John Boorman, the sword will, indeed, rise and fall again and again. Yet, for all its malignancy toward Morgan, its indifference to the Lady of the Lake, its manipulation of Igraine, and its reduction of Guinevere to a "pre-Raphaelite painting" (Combs 333), the film's gynophobia is all but dissipated in what David Denby calls the "visual fustian--flames and fury in the night, mist rising ominously from the ground, klutzy bits of magic" (334). Even Morgan as the "very embodiment of motiveless malignancy, the archetypal animus run rampant" (Sklar 29), is reduced in the film to a medieval femme fatale whose malevolence is all but overwhelmed by her self-absorption in her own evil. Richard Corliss describes her thus:

Of Morgan, mistress of mandrake and sulfur, Mirren [the actress who plays Morgana] makes an armored, camp enchantress, swathed in purple veils and seaweed capes, intoning Merlin's dread spells as if they contained the dirtiest and most sacred words in any world, incarcerating the wizard in a cocoon of cotton candy as she proclaims victory over her mentor, Mirren convinces that she could charm a kingdom--or a film--with her perfidy. (337)

While this is the "anarchic, modern Morgan" of whom Sklar speaks (29), she is also a one-dimensional figure, a caricature of the evolving Morgan of feminist fantasy and the witch figure that unsettles twentieth-century male fantasy as readily as it did the fifteenth-century audience of the Malleus Maleficarum. The medieval belief in the connection between powerful women and impotency is nowhere so evident as in Excalibur. The only visibly powerful woman in the film, Morgan, is ultimately responsible for the chain of events that lead Arthur to lose both his sword and his land. Her responsibility is highlighted visually in concurrent events,



Mordred's birth and the accompanying thunderstorm, that transform Arthur into the emasculated Fisher King of the film.

Yet, because film adds a visual element to Morgan missing from her long literary tradition, we end up with "purple veils and seaweed capes," melodramatic gestures of evil, and Boorman's too obvious marginal framing of Morgan as the outsider in Arthur's world. Ironically, as Jacqueline De Weever notes, although Morgan "resides not in the margins but in the center" (153) of the film, no one notices that she wears slinky, black halter dresses, or that she wears a black veil to the wedding of Arthur and Guinevere and sits in the rear of the copse of trees in which they marry. Her capacity for evil is enormous in the film, but the other characters are so pathetically dull and predictable, or, in the case of Merlin, world-weary, that her destruction of the fellowship of the Round Table seems a welcome relief. The fellowship is never more than a tenuous artificial relationship at any given time, for when there is no battle to occupy them, the men grow listless and only a veneer of civility separates them from Uther's earlier comitatus.<sup>205</sup> Life animates Camelot only in the carnivalesque atmosphere of its entrance; in bucolic peasants and the ambient sound of their folk songs and occasional advice to the king and court; and in the forest which is filled with babbling brooks, all traces of Morgan's Celtic roots but here serving only as divides between warring factions, a comical site for Merlin to take an impromptu spill, and as a branch for the Lady of the Lake's weapons' repair shop.

The embodiment of evil, Morgan, seeks to re-invent herself with the charm of making, to animate herself in a world where noblewomen are married either to a knight or to Christ. For all Morgan's femme fatale characterization, there is a self-awareness that comes through when Merlin asks her if she is worthy of the charm. She answers him emphatically, "I am! I am!," both an answer to Merlin's question and an assertion of her own identity and autonomy.

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<sup>205</sup> Perhaps the most surprising of the barely civilized Round Table knights is Gawain, whom Liam Neeson plays as a boorish brute, exchanging amorous looks with Morgan (who is either his aunt or mother unless Boorman has found another "sister son" named Gawain). Even Gawain's death is ignominious as he is killed by the child Mordred. Although Mordred kills Gawain in the Alliterative Morte Arthure, both are adults.

Autonymy is, however, the most dangerous threat to the Round Table, and Boorman kills Morgan at the film's end after revealing her ugliness in a medieval conflation of sign and signified: the true face of evil is ugly. Morgan is truly an outsider in a society in which "the land and the king are one" and she is determined to kill that king. She will ever be an outsider in the "intensely conservative ideology, subtextually consonant with the pervasive gynophobia that has marked most Anglophone Arthurian literature from Malory to the present" (Sklar 33). Even her last scene with the dying Arthur is blurred in the dreamscape cinematography that obscures much of the film. Percival sees only a barge heading into the sunset with three white-clad queens standing, hand in hand, around a prone figure. The queens are all but faceless in their anonymity, and one can only infer that Morgan has assumed her former benevolent status, unless she is truly dead.<sup>206</sup>

Despite *Excalibur's* attempted extermination of the powerful female, Morgan has survived and thrived as the eternal enemy of Arthur and all that he represents in other contemporary texts, moving from being what Elizabeth S. Sklar cites as a "bit-player to major actor in the modern Arthurian saga" (30). Morgan le Fay and her various aspects--Ninian, Vivian, and the Lady of the Lake--continue to be prime movers in the Matter of Britain, yet their continued success is hardly surprising given the extreme adaptability of the shape shifter Morgan. While the conservative nature of the romance allows the *fée* only a limited voice and a marginalized presence, modern and postmodern literature have expanded her role, giving her both something to say and a place to say it. Yet, despite her varying ideological and historical representations throughout the medieval to the present period, the figure of Morgan is bound to gender dichotomies even in feminist fantasies, such as C. J. Cherryh's Morgan trilogy<sup>207</sup> and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon*.

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<sup>206</sup> I have found no other source that destroys Morgan, other than Boorman's film; even Malory merely erases her presence when her worst evil is over and resurrects her when it is time to take Arthur to Avalon.

<sup>207</sup> The three books are *Gate of Ivrel* (1976), *Well of Shiuan* (1978), and *Fires of Azeroth* (1982).

To borrow from Michèle Barrett's article, "Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender," Morgan is caught within the "compensation" of Western culture which, "in the context of systematic denial of opportunities for women, attempt[s] to 'compensate' for this by a corresponding ideology of moral worth" (81). While she is outside Arthur's immediate family--hence Christianity and Western culture *per se*--as in Vita Merlini and Brut, Morgan's character enjoys the benevolent association of healing and divine autonomy. Indeed, the figure of Morgan thrives in the "open" twelfth and thirteenth centuries when there still existed an undifferentiated hegemony between nature, the supernatural, and the divine, the era of "nature-mysticism" Karen Jolly sees as a synthesis between earlier Anglo-Saxon culture and a "later European or 'Western' thought" (224). In this more "fluid" ideology, Morgan's "moral worth" is not easily or sharply delineated as it is in the later "closed" Middle Ages when "society closed its ranks" and "[w]itch-mania was a catching malady in a world made schizophrenic by masculine anxieties and masculine fears" (Heer 309). The earlier figure of Morgan feels no such alienation. She is already separated physically from the political and material concerns of Arthur's court as a goddess in Vita Merlini, and Layamon's *fée* figure of Morgan maintains both her distance from the court as well as her maternal, rather than carnal, interest in the savior of the Britons.

When she has become an integral member of Arthur's clan, however, her alterity becomes the more malevolent because its complexity will not be so easily condensed into polarized images of women, e. g. Madonna/Whore. The ready stereotypes of the medieval romance, wherein the roles of characters are "representational rather than individual" (Barron 5) cannot embody readily the many strands of oral and written tradition that are synthesized in the figure of Morgan. Always shifting, always evading the absolute chiaroscuro of allegory, the Morgan of the medieval romances continues to reveal there is always another layer to the palimpsest that is Morgan le Fay. In Sir Gawain we find her malevolence mitigated in her chastisement, rather than divine retribution, of Arthur's court, while the Morgan of Malory's Morte is restored finally to the benevolent healer of Vita Merlini and Brut.

Furthermore, she is even allowed to be the loving sibling Arthur has mistaken her for so many times. The figure of Morgan resists the closure of allegory and even interrogates the nature of the didactic function of the romance. We are left with the fissures and instability of an Otherness that is not easily coded and compacted into the readily recognizable allegories of good and evil in medieval dichotomies.

The modern feminist fantasy writer that seeks to "recuperate" the figure of Morgan is faced with the daunting task of deconstructing an ideologically/historically "dominant meaning of gender in particular periods," a task that involves a far more complex interrogation of the patriarchy that has yet been accomplished (Barrett 82). While Bradley's interrogation is far more probing than Cherryh's, both fail to find or construct for Morgan an "ideology of her own." This failure is particularly surprising given that Cherryh situates her narrative in the otherness of both another world and another time, and Bradley's *Mists* is set in the early years of Christianity, before it had assumed the crystalline structure of what Friedrich Heer calls the "closed" Church. Yet both writers reveal the necessity to represent Morgan by "re-presenting the past," a past that Gillian Beer believes needs

double readings . . . or perhaps multiple reading is a better expression—since binarism is another of the hidden metaphors within which we function. The numerology of the [medieval] culture has replaced the magic of seven, and of three, with the magic of two, with its fixing polarities: what Cixous calls its 'hierarchised oppositions.' (69)

Cherryh's narrative, tied to fixed Western hegemony, is more conservative in its "re-presentation" of the *fée*, particularly so because Cherryh's Morgan is simply too preoccupied with saving the world to spend much time on self-awareness and gender constructions. Bradley's Morgan, however, combines Thomas Berger's "double focus" (Landon 49) and Joan Kelly-Gadol's "doubled vision of feminist theory" (52) to give the reader a view of Morgan that explores the mythological crossroads in Arthuriana, Morgan's involvement in the synthesis of the two religions, as well as a feminist re-reading of women's roles in the Matter of Britain.

The postmodern Morgan, in turn, celebrates the transgressive nature of the *fée* that leads to her defamation in the romance and her endurance in pop culture. Berger's Morgan revels in her evil, not bound by Christian ties that tenuously hold even her most depraved incarnations in medieval texts, while Nye's Morgan is an exploration and glorification of desire and power. Neither represents the more positive images of her earlier twelfth- and thirteenth-century figures in Vita Merlini and Brut, but both expose the dark humor of the amorous *fée* and the scheming enchantress that suffuses much of the subtext in Sir Gawain and Morte, especially in the parallel scenes in Sir Gawain and Arthur Rex that are most self-reflexively aware of the boundaries of courtly love and chivalry, i. e. the bedroom scenes. The humorous, even campy, mise-en-scene of Morgan's toad-and-bat-filled laboratory, the femme fatale boudoir, and the melodramatic poses and throaty whispers of Helen Mirren as Morgana, however, are insufficient to disguise the "pervasive gynophobia" behind Boorman's Excalibur (Sklar 33). Elizabeth S. Sklar's article "Thoroughly Modern Morgan: Morgan le Fey in Twentieth-Century Popular Arthuriana" recounts the steadily "devolving" subversive figure of Morgan in film, a figure that is singularly dealt with in Excalibur: she is killed at the hands of her son. After stripping away Morgan's power by appealing to a vanity that characterizes medieval constructs of woman,<sup>208</sup> Boorman continues the annihilation of her character by removing even the possibility of her former shapeshifting abilities, as, in the final scenes, her desire for power over the masculine world of chivalry undoes her completely. She is left an ugly crone, the medieval figure that conflates the evil, powerful woman with the witch figure, and her own creation, her son, reflects, perhaps, Boorman's own inability to see a powerful woman as anything but manipulative and evil. In Excalibur the "rough ronkled chekez" of Morgan are real, a punishment for the presumptuous female.

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<sup>208</sup> An even more subversive reading of this scene is an intertextual one in which Merlin's flattery is read against the medieval and Victorian tradition, i. e. Tennyson's Idylls, in which Niniane flatters Merlin to learn his magic and then captures and imprisons him forever, generally as a means of escaping Merlin's lewd advancements. The *fée* never destroys Merlin.

As Boorman's film suggests, the contemporary popular culture of "film, comics and gaming" shows a Morgan who is "id incarnate, anarchic and obsessive, deploying a devastating combination of sexuality and sorcery in a single-minded campaign of structural subversion" (Sklar 28). The Morgan of popular culture is an occasionally self-aware but always unrepentant figure whose single-mindedness is both her raison d'être as well as her downfall. Popular culture, with its tendency to collapse complexities into chiaroscuro simplicities, liberates medieval constraints on the *fée's* carnality and the enchantress's power but at the price of Morgan's complexity. She becomes static, finally, as unchanging as the traditionally static figures of Arthur and his court. Morgan reigns in popular culture as the wicked queen, the evil stepsister, the femme fatale: one-dimensional stereotypes of the beautiful, evil, and powerful female.<sup>209</sup>

Despite the bleak picture popular culture leaves us with in the Malory of comics, games, and films, I believe there are still avenues that avoid this backlash against powerful female figures in literature and mythology. Morgan has managed to endure more than a millenium of this backlash because not only does her characters shift its shape, it re-defines itself with a resiliency that resists even the gynophobic impulses of late medieval and contemporary popular culture. Her literary legacy illuminates changing literary constructs of women, constructs that, in turn, re-present a medieval past and challenge the narrowed perspective of women in contemporary writings. The alterity that Morgan embodies, however, is not always a threat. Fantasy writers, such as Parke Godwin in Firelord, Beloved Exile, and The Last Rainbow, follow in the path of J. R. R. Tolkien to create an alternate view of the legend of Arthur that combines anthropological data on an historical Arthur with a

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<sup>209</sup> Elizabeth S. Sklar calls the Morgan of contemporary popular texts a "thoroughly bad egg, a composite of all the patriarchal nightmare-women of literary tradition: Eve, Circe, Medea and Lady Macbeth compressed into a single, infinitely menacing package" (28). She notes Morgan's evil portraits in the fantasy game Pendragon, in several comics, such as Iron Man, Camelot 3000, Prince Valiant, and Swamp Thing, and in a variety of films. She leaves out one interesting nightmare-woman that remains a future feminist project—the Amazon, a long-time inhabitant of the "patriarchal nightmare" of which Sklar speaks.

reconstructed mythos of the fairy world. Science fiction, with its necessary recognition of the Other, re-views and re-news the panorama of Arthurian characters that lead to wry re-tellings of Arthuriana, such as Simon Hawke's Wizard series that integrates medieval characters into future and contemporary settings. New Age music has also found material in the Arthurian legend. Canadian Loreena McKennitt has set "The Lady of Shalott" to music, and Alan Stivell, a Breton harpist, has released a CD entitled The Mist of Avalon "en hommage aux livres de Marion Zimmer Bradley 'Les Dames du Lac.'"

I would like to expand this study to examine these lesser-explored modern visions of the Arthurian legend, bringing in lesser-known works from literature, film, and music to see how Morgan is presented for mass-market consumption, a market that is perhaps more sensitive to the reigning zeitgeist than the more esoteric and introspective texts. The greatest potential of the *fée* as a literary character, however, remains in the hands of feminist authors who explore and extol Morgan's otherness, returning to her the autonomy and power she has in the twelfth-century Vita Merlini and, occasionally, the altruism of the fairy queen in the thirteenth-century Brut. Feminist writers, such as Persia Woolley in her novel Child of the Northern Spring (1987) and Vera Chapman in King Arthur's Daughter (1976), have found a fertile field of the Arthurian mythos to excavate: the other largely unheard and unseen female figures in the Matter of Britain. Here the voices are those of Guinevere in Woolley's text and Ursulet, a character of Chapman's own imagination. In the vision of feminist authors, Morgan and other voices of alterity can hope to escape the "hermeneutic circle" of Otherness in which both medieval and modern culture construct images of women and become fully-realized presences and powers in Arthuriana. Perhaps, once more, Morgan le Fay will fly through the air cum vult (at will) and know the art of mutare figuram (changing her shape) (Vita Merlini 924, 922).

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### VITA

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