WHICH WITCH?:

MORGAN LE FAY AS SHAPE-SHIFTER AND ENGLISH PERCEPTIONS OF MAGIC REFLECTED IN ARTHURIAN LEGEND

by

Cheyenne Oliver

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Ben Lowe, Department of History, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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Descended from Celtic goddesses and the fairies of folklore, the literary character of Morgan le Fay has been most commonly perceived as a witch and a one-dimensional villainess who plagues King Arthur and his court, rather than recognized as the legendary King's enchanted healer and otherworldly guardian. Too often the complexity of Morgan le Fay and her supernatural abilities are lost, her character neglected as peripheral. As a literary figure of imaginative design this thesis explores Morgan le Fay as a unique "window" into the medieval mindset, whereby one can recover both medieval understandings of magic and female magicians. By analyzing her role in key sources from the twelfth to fifteenth century, this thesis uses Morgan le Fay to recover nuanced perceptions of the supernatural in medieval England that embraced the ambiguity of a pagan past and remained insulated from continental constructions of demonic witchcraft.

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I. INTRODUCTION

> I am Morgan le Fay, and I will never die. I hover on the wind, and fate falls out of each slow beat of my wings. That is what my name means: Morgan the fate, Morgan the magical, fey Morgan of the otherworld, Morgan who must be feared.
> --Nancy Springer, *I Am Morgan le Fay: A Tale from Camelot*

The name Morgan le Fay holds many meanings and has appeared in various forms throughout the course of medieval and modern history. Whether she embodies great Celtic pagan goddesses, or an immortal fey using her magic to aid or trick mortals that enter her domain, to many she remains a menacing witch that lurked in that darkest corner of the medieval mind. Most recognize Morgan le Fay from her frequent appearances in modern media and popular culture. Generally, she is portrayed as King Arthur's treacherous half-sister and an evil enchantress. In many modern retellings Morgan even seduces her brother in order to sire Mordred, who ultimately brings about the prophetic end to Camelot and the Knights of the Round Table. Few know or speak of her beginnings, but Morgan le Fay makes her first appearance in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* as the shape-shifting Queen of the enchanted island of Avalon, renowned for her beauty, magical skills, and knowledge of herb lore. Once a semi-divine figure trusted to heal England's greatest king of legend, over time and several cycles of continental romances, Morgan degenerates into a mortal, whose beauty and character deteriorates as she gains knowledge of the dark arts. Despite her seemingly sordid reputation, Morgan le Fay is always named as one of the Queens shrouded in black who

accompanies Arthur to his final resting place in Glastonbury. According to English tradition, however, Morgan escorts her brother into the healing vale of Avalon where she will mend his grievous wounds and restore him as the Once and Future King.

By nature Morgan le Fay is a shape-shifter, her erratic magic and mysterious behavior throughout centuries of Arthurian legend makes her impossible to predict as she consistently evades gender expectations, resists categorization, and defies dichotomous definitions of good and evil. Her seemingly schizophrenic role as Arthur's rival and restorer leaves readers with a difficult image to reconcile, and all too often the complexity of her character has dissuaded scholars from delving deeper than reading her as a one-dimensional villainess or the stereotypical witch. In fact, the *Arthurian Encyclopedia* chiefly identifies Morgan as a goddess dethroned, rendered by continental romances "into a mortal who must conceal her age through magic arts; her once-prized favors are condemned as promiscuity . . . the famed healer now schemes to destroy others, almost invariably with humiliating results."[1] Largely dismissing Morgan le Fay's unique appearances in English tales, the entry instead observes that "she was paid little attention in English literature . . . until rediscovered by modern fantasy writers."[2] Unfortunately, this somewhat narrow understanding of Morgan le Fay is all too common, leaving room for the present study to explore Morgan's mysterious magical behavior in Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *Vita Merlini*, the fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century classic *Le Morte Darthur*.

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[1] Norris J. Lacy, ed., *Arthurian Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1986), s.v. "Morgan le Fay."

[2] Ibid.

These texts act as "windows" into the medieval mindset where characters are malleable and molded as the author sees fit. This thesis focuses on Morgan le Fay in various medieval sources, as she is imprinted with the author's understandings of both magic and female magicians. Although she is often interpreted as a witch, Morgan's appearances in English sources echo ancient traditions of feminine magic as a dualistic force with destructive and restorative properties. The original Morgan of Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *Vita Merlini* reflects the fertile imagination and local folklore of the Anglo-Welsh bishop. He envisions Morgan not as a witch, but as the magical Queen of an enchanted realm of plenty where she serves as King Arthur's otherworldly guardian and healer, with knowledge of the herbs that cure and poison. Whereas Geoffrey pronounces Morgan's role as a healer and emphasizes the potential benefit of her medicinal craft, thirteenth-century French sources began to characterize Morgan as a dark enchantress shadowing the continental witch. English sources, however, remained largely reminiscent of pagan tradition and Celtic motifs. The Pearl Poet's fourteenth-century romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, preserves Morgan's otherworldly status. This tale depicts Morgan le Fay as a mischievous trickster using her magic to orchestrate several trials that test Gawain's knightly prowess, contributing towards his growth as a knight and a man. Even on the verge of the great European witch-craze, when feminine magic was regarded with increasing hostility, English sources maintained the integrity of Morgan le Fay's original role. Within Sir Thomas Malory's classic fifteenth-century work, *Le Morte Darthur*, Morgan le Fay echoes a pagan past. Here Morgan serves as both a critic to the reign of a flawed king and as Arthur's otherworldly physician. Her supernatural abilities take on wild and elemental

qualities in order to purge corruption from Camelot and ultimately to heal a broken realm torn by civil war. Taken together the following chapters critically analyze these sources and demonstrate a popular English tradition of magic reflected in the literary character of Morgan le Fay. Rather than associating feminine magic with demonic constructions of witchcraft, generations of English authors firmly rooted Morgan le Fay to a folkloric past and envisioned her as a relic of the fairy faith and the Celtic otherworld.

Chapter one of this thesis strives to determine the intellectual origins of Morgan le Fay by examining her earliest appearance in Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *Vita Merlini*, a unique text that draws inspirations from a pre-Christian Celtic past and immortalizes pagan perceptions of magic that accepted and celebrated the supernatural female, rather than demonizing her. The chapter first provides an analysis of the mythic models for Morgan le Fay in the earliest English tradition, as well as her subsequent appearances in medieval romances, and then considers how her limited appearance within the text reflects evolving witch stereotypes that began to take shape by the end of the twelfth century. Given his status as an Anglo-Welsh bishop and historian it is likely that Geoffrey utilized a unique blend of clerical writings on magic, Celtic and Welsh mythology, as well as classical sources to inspire his poetry. He identifies Morgan as the magical mistress of the Island of Apples, a learned mathematician, and a skilled healer capable of restoring health to King Arthur after he was mortally wounded—an image that conflicts with even the earliest clerical constructions of the witch. The *Mabinogion* and other folk tales, like the Irish epic of Cuchulainn provide rare written accounts of pre-Christian myths and legends. These sources aid in understanding the traditions of Celtic magic and morally ambivalent folkloric spirits incorporated into the *Vita Merlini*.

Classical models of the alluring, crafty, and powerful Greco-Roman goddess and sorceress will also be discussed as they may have been translated to Geoffrey through Latin authors during his clerical training. The writings of early Christian authors such as Augustine and Isidore of Seville build context for clerical conceptions of demonic magic, as they cast particular suspicion on female magicians and contemplated notions of demonic pacts. These ancient prototypes and early Christian writings are critical to understanding Geoffrey's Morgan as a female practitioner of magic, especially considering that gender stereotypes from antiquity and fear of the feminine provided the earliest intellectual foundations for witchcraft and seem to be largely absent in Geoffrey's early conception of Morgan le Fay. As Arthur's semi-divine healer, with the potential to harm or heal the legendary king, Geoffrey's Morgan echoes a benign view of magic that England inherited from a pagan past.

To demonstrate a critical point of comparison to English conceptions of magic, chapter two first examines the degradation of Morgan le Fay's magic and character in thirteenth-century French romances, and contrasts her witch-like appearances in continental literature to her consistently whimsical English portrayals. Though the classic romances of Chrétien de Troyes preserve Morgan's role as a wise and benevolent healer, French literature of the thirteenth century depicts Morgan le Fay as a spiteful sorceress who practices demonic magic in order to topple Camelot. The blackening of her magic corresponds to notions of heretical witchcraft that developed on the continent, shifting the blame of war, plague, and social unrest onto diabolical cults of witches in service to the Devil. Anxieties about *incubi* sexually preying on women and sorcery rendering males impotent are communicated in the theological treatises of Thomas Aquinas, while

inquisitorial literature and papal writings increasingly refined the concept of heresy and called for the persecution of demonic witchcraft. Thirteenth-century French sources that characterize Morgan le Fay as an evil witch forever cast suspicion onto her magical abilities, but her appearance in the English-authored *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reflects a view of magic that clung to folkloric tradition.

The second half of chapter two examines evolving notions of magic in the British Isles as continental witchcraft theory was introduced to the region by means of the curious fourteenth-century Irish sorcery trial of Alice Kyteler. In 1324, the bishop of Ossory, Richard Ledrede, accused Dame Kyteler of leading a local Satanic cult, renouncing Christ to obtain magical powers, sacrificing animals to demons, and engaging in routine intercourse with a familiar-*incubus*. Overall, the charges brought against Dame Alice Kyteler were met with considerable resistance from the local populace and display a foreign understanding of demonic witchcraft introduced here for the first time in the British Isles. Such demonic conceptions of magic were typically rejected by an English audience, however, as illustrated by Morgan le Fay's characterization in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Composed in 1375 by the anonymous Pearl Poet, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presents Morgan le Fay as a morally ambiguous trickster, who lures Gawain away from the courtly realm of King Arthur and into the wild wood, where she tests the young knight's virtues by means of magical trials. Although her magic is traditionally perceived as malicious, it is ultimately used to reinforce chivalric values in Gawain, like honor, cunning, and bravery. Near the end, the Green Knight speaks of Morgan with great reverence, even naming her as a goddess, illustrating a fourteenth-century English understanding of magic that was divorced from the demonic.

The final chapter explores the image of the English sorceress on the verge of the European witch-craze by comparing Sir Thomas Malory's Morgan le Fay as she appears in the fifteenth-century *Le Morte Darthur* to the image of the diabolical witch laid out in contemporary writings on witchcraft and demonologies. Although it is uncertain if continental demonologies circulated as freely in England as they did on the mainland, by the fifteenth century understandings of continental witchcraft had breached the shores of England, and perhaps Malory's characterization of Morgan le Fay. Malory's Morgan practices necromancy, lustful behavior, and operates outside of patriarchal control like the dreaded witch of European demonologies; however, this study seeks to fully contextualize the time and circumstance of Sir Thomas Malory, who wrote not as a cleric but as a knight-prisoner during the tumultuous period of the Wars of the Roses. Witnessing a calamitous era in England and the death of the chivalric age as a consequence of an unstable monarchy, Malory paints a complex portrait of Morgan le Fay as both a ruinous witch scheming to overthrow Camelot and a nurturing healer, with the power to restore health to King Arthur after he is mortally wounded in his final battle. With her magic taking on both a destructive force to purge Camelot of corruption, and a restorative force to heal the King and a mend broken realm, Malory echoes a folkloric past in his conception of Morgan le Fay while responding to the chaotic circumstances of a troubled era.

The irregular nature of Morgan le Fay manifests itself through several centuries of medieval romance as she develops multiple and sometimes conflicting personas, leaving generations of scholars confounded as to how she may be categorized. Rather than attempting to dissect such a complex magical figure, many historians and critics have

simply relegated Morgan to the periphery as a character unworthy of serious investigation. Although some scholars have sought to track the origins of Morgan le Fay and the role she plays in the courtly realm of Arthurian legend, few have historicized her character or thought to consider the enchantress as a reflection of medieval understandings of magic. The following literature review, however, exposes cracks in the existing scholarship on Morgan le Fay and highlights the most recent works that support the argument set forth in the following chapters.

The moral and magical ambiguity that surrounds Morgan throughout Arthurian legend has prompted debate among scholars since the beginning of the twentieth century. Among the first to track the origins of Morgan le Fay was Lucy Allen Paton in 1903 with her book, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, where she claims that Morgan le Fay "has never been made the subject of special investigation."[3] In her study she connects Morgan to a Celtic tradition and firmly identifies her as "the Fairy Queen of Arthurian legend."[4] Paton largely notes the similarities between Morgan's magic and behavior throughout centuries of medieval romance and fairy motifs present in Irish sources, inspiring later scholars such as Roger Sherman Loomis to contemplate similar connections. Although many scholars of this era neglected to investigate the mysterious Morgan le Fay, Loomis made her the sole topic of query in his 1945 article "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses" where he aptly considers Celtic magical prototypes to extract an "explanation of Morgain's multiple personality, [and] her infinite variety."[5] He

[3] Lucy Allen Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* (Boston: Ginn, 1903; repr., New York: B. Franklin, 1960), 8.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Roger Sherman Loomis, "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses," *Speculum* 20 (1945): 200.

recognizes the intricacies of her character and contemplates the possible connections between Morgan le Fay and a myriad of Celtic goddesses, including Morrigan, Macha, and Modron. He cites the unpredictable magic and actions of these goddesses, as well as their transfiguration abilities and dominion over the otherworld as mythic models for Morgan's multiplicity throughout Arthurian legend.[6] Although many have deemed the scholarship of Paton and Loomis to be too narrowly focused on Celtic sources, their insights will be considered carefully within this study as they remain among the most widely cited authorities on the origins of Morgan le Fay.

The scholarship of both Paton and Loomis was reprinted throughout the twentieth century and spoke to a new generation of scholars inspired by the European and North American feminist movement. Especially since the late 1960s Morgan le Fay has been considered in feminist readings as a misunderstood character, demonized as a female practitioner of magic, and a potential critic of patriarchal authority. In 1969, Fanni Bogdanow made note of this in her widely-cited article, "Morgain's Role in the Thirteenth-Century French Prose Romances of the Arthurian Cycle." Without openly rejecting the established argument that Morgan is the literary descendent of a fairy mistress, or a goddess with Celtic origins, Bogdanow asserts that Morgan's role in the thirteenth-century French romances "cannot be traced to a single common pattern."[7] She sidesteps the complicated issue of origins in favor of analyzing Morgan's role in French Arthurian literature and her struggles with various lovers. Highlighting the nature of her magical abilities and their role in how her character is perceived, Bogdanow concludes,

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Fanni Bogdanow, "Morgain's Role in the Thirteenth-Century French Prose Romances of the Arthurian Cycle," *Society for the Study of Mediaeval Languages and Literature* 38 (1969): 124.

"it is not her character, but the changing context which determines the part assigned to her."[8] Though her work is primarily a literary analysis, Bogdanow's observations are astute and relevant to this study in that she recognizes the blackening of Morgan's character as a gradual process established by successive authors in correspondence with society's evolving attitudes towards women and magic.

Within the past two decades as the importance of women has come to the forefront of scholarly attention, there has been a rapidly expanding body of literature exploring women in the legends of King Arthur. In her 2006 book, *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, Carolyne Larrington presents readers with a sharply focused study, analyzing how enchantresses operate in the courtly world of Arthurian legend. Many chapters deal directly with Morgan le Fay, defining her according to the fairly sweeping assertion that, "enchantresses are not witches; they are sexually attractive women who employ their magic for their own ends, not in the service of Satan."[9] Larrington's study offers useful observations concerning the origins of Morgan le Fay and her various roles throughout Arthurian legend; however, she too broadly defines Morgan and her magical sisters as simple "enchantresses," rather than fully considering how they may embody medieval notions of magic. This thesis seeks to deviate from analyzing Morgan solely as a literary character and instead situates her magic further within European demonologies, clerical writings on witchcraft, and traditional Celtic folklore.

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[8] Ibid., 130.

[9] Carolyne Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition (*London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 2.

Contrary to many studies that neglect to provide historical context for Morgan le Fay and her supernatural powers, in her 2010 article, “Malory's Morgan le Fay: The Danger of Unrestrained Feminine Power,” MaryLynn Saul analyzes Morgan's magical abilities in conjunction with continental constructions of witchcraft found in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Though an admirable study, Saul somewhat narrowly concludes that Morgan's practice of demonic magic and deviant female behavior “define her as a witch, as Malory's fifteenth-century audience would have understood the term.”[10] The present study is most aligned with Saul's methodology of contextualizing Morgan's magic with contemporary demonologies, but seeks to expand her area of inquiry by considering Morgan’s appearances in a wider variety of Arthurian writings, and by providing broader historical context for how her magical abilities may have been received by an English audience.

Offering the latest contribution to an expanding genre of literature dedicated to the infamous Morgan is Jill M. Herbert's *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter*, published in 2013. Herbert aptly argues that as a shape-shifter Morgan le Fay is a manifestation of societal anxieties towards deviant female behavior as she continuously parts with feminine gender roles and social expectations throughout centuries of Arthurian literature. The work is unique as a book dedicated solely to examining Morgan le Fay, however, Herbert tends not to elaborate on the historical context of her magical abilities, leaving room for further investigation.[11]

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[10] MaryLynn Saul, "Malory's Morgan le Fay: The Danger of Unrestrained Feminine Power," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 46 (2010): 96.

[11] Jill M. Herbert, *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2013).

Long neglected by historians as a peripheral character unworthy of serious investigation, recently the inconsistency of the role that Morgan le Fay plays throughout Arthurian literature has confounded scholars who struggle to trace her origins and discover how she operates within the courtly world of legend. While Merlin as the reputed son of an *incubus* makes a rare appearance in modern histories on magic and witchcraft, few studies have sought to analyze Morgan le Fay as a manifestation of medieval perceptions of magic. Many noteworthy works that trace the intellectual foundations of witchcraft, and others that attempt to recover how ancient traditions of magic persisted in medieval society inform this study, but all largely neglect Morgan le Fay as an avenue of exploration. In doing so, however, they create space for this thesis to explore Morgan le Fay as a unique embodiment of folkloric and pagan understandings of magic that survived in popular English literary traditions. Modern scholars cannot define her. She is called a goddess and a witch, but as we will explore in the following chapters, as a shape-shifter Morgan's magical identity more likely lies somewhere in between.

II. TO HARM OR HEAL?: ORIGINS OF MORGAN LE FAY IN THE *VITA MERLINI*

Making her debut in English Arthurian literature as the shape-shifting Queen of the Island of Apples, Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote Morgan le Fay into legend in the somewhat obscure *Vita Merlini* around 1150. Geoffrey tells us she lives far from mortal men in an enchanted realm of plenty where nine sisters rule by just law, but the beautiful Morgan is "first among them [and] has greater skill in healing." [12] In addition to her extensive knowledge of folk medicine, Morgan "knows, too, the art of changing her shape, of flying through the air, like Daedalus, on strange wings."[13] This beautiful enchantress is entrusted to restore health to King Arthur, "if only he stayed with her for a long while and accepted her treatment."[14] Though she may heal the king, as a female practitioner of magic, Morgan may just as easily poison him. As a woman, her supernatural knowledge is suspicious, perhaps even dangerous to a medieval audience. With this inherent ambiguity built into her character Geoffrey begins a tradition of Morgan le Fay as a complex magical figure, as beautiful as she is powerful, eternally shrouded in mystery.

Although she is most commonly depicted as Arthur's treacherous half-sister and a dark sorceress determined to bring down Camelot with diabolical enchantments, Morgan

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[12] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, trans. Basil Clarke (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973), 101.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 103.

le Fay was first conceived by Geoffrey as a fanciful character, seemingly plucked from legend. Given his background as a bishop and a historian with access to Christian writings that began to cast suspicion onto female magicians, it perhaps would have been more likely for Geoffrey to envision Morgan according to early clerical constructions of the witch; but Geoffrey's Morgan seems to transcend even the earliest medieval witch-stereotypes. The range of Morgan's magical abilities, especially her mastery of transfiguration, flight, and her pronounced role as a healer, belies Geoffrey's familiarity with English and Welsh sources that preserved ancient traditions of pagan magic. With few surviving texts that record English traditions of magic from a pre-Christian era, Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini* is an invaluable text that acts as a window into the medieval past. As a work of literature intended for a private audience, with magical components inspired by myths, folklore, and fairy tales, the *Vita Merlini* affords this study the opportunity to penetrate the imagination of Geoffrey of Monmouth and to uncover how his whimsical conception of Morgan reflects an ambivalent view towards magic present in twelfth-century England. With her mysterious beginnings and the power to alternatively heal or poison King Arthur, this chapter will first consider what magical prototypes inform the earliest appearance of Morgan le Fay in English Arthurian legend and then determine how she corresponds to the hazy image of the "witch"that arises by the end of the twelfth century.

Anglo-Welsh bishop and historian, Geoffrey of Monmouth is most famous for being the first to record a biographical account of King Arthur in *History of the Kings of Britain*. In his later work, the *Vita Merlini*, he elaborates on the life of Merlin and introduces Morgan le Fay. The Latin poem focuses primarily on Merlin, but near the end

of his text Geoffrey introduces the potent idea that Arthur does not die in his final battle, but rather is transported by barge to an enchanted island where the beautiful and talented Morgan will heal his mortal wounds and perhaps one day return him to the land of men. Based on oral traditions of Merlin-figures from Scotland, Ireland, Wales and North Britain, the *Vita Merlini* depicts the illustrious wizard as an eccentric prophet, cursed with fits of madness that periodically drive him to abandon the corruption of man and civilization to seek solace in the wilderness and the companionship of animals.[15] Morgan herself appears only briefly at the end of the poem, emerging as a fully imagined yet mystifying figure.

In Geoffrey's account she lives far from mortal men on the paradisal Island of Apples, also called "'The Fortunate Isle' from the fact that . . . it produces crops in abundance and grapes without help; and apple trees spring up from the short grass of its woods" and perhaps even more miraculous, "men live [there] a hundred years or more."[16] Geoffrey's island paradise would later become known as Avalon, with soil that reaps and sows itself and where mortals enjoy everlasting youth, a realm that echoes ancient Celtic motifs of the otherworld and the feminine domain of the fey. In this enchanted land nine sisters "exercise a kindly rule over those who come to them from our land," but the beautiful Morgan is "first among them [and] has greater skill in healing . . . . She has learned the uses of all plants in curing the ills of the body."[17] While her talent as a healer is particularly foregrounded Morgan "knows, too, the art of changing her shape, [and] of

[15] John Jay Parry, introduction to *Vita Merlini* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1925), 15-16.

[16] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, 101.

[17] Ibid.

flying through the air, like Daedalus, on strange wings."[18] By her will she travels great distances and glides down from the sky to visit Chartres and Pavia, established areas of ecclesiastical learning, which may explain how she learned mathematics and astrology well enough to teach her nine sisters.[19] This beautiful and learned enchantress is attributed with the knowledge to restore health to King Arthur after he was mortally wounded in the Battle of Camlann. In Geoffrey's text the legendary king is transported by barge to Morgan's island paradise of plenty, with the Celtic sea god Barinthus as the "steersman because of his knowledge of the seas and the stars of heaven."[20] Morgan received Arthur "with due honor" and "put the king in her chamber on a golden bed, uncovered his wound with her noble hand and looked long at it."[21] His prognosis is uncertain, however, as "at length she said he could be cured if only he stayed with her a long while and accepted her treatment."[22] Within the *Vita Merlini*, Morgan holds Arthur in her far off realm to heal him, echoing motifs found in both Celtic and Greco-Roman mythology of beautiful sorceresses capturing traveling heroes on their journeys, sometimes indefinitely delaying their travels. In perhaps the most renowned classical example, Circe turns Odysseus's men into swine and holds the epic hero for a year and a day, promising her aid in his journey home, in exchange for his love.[23] Fairies too, of Celtic folklore typically capture mortal men they lure into the fairy mounds, where they

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses*, 8.

[20] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, 103.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Herbert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, 28.

are trapped in a land of eternal feast and song.[24] Though there is no scholarly consensus on the intellectual origins of Morgan le Fay's magical prototype, it clear that Geoffrey of Monmouth was indebted to an array of classical and Celtic sources to imagine Arthur's enchanted otherworldly healer, as she is most often named as the literary descendant of a Celtic goddess mixed with attributes borrowed from the Greco-Roman sorceress.

Considering Geoffrey's Anglo-Welsh heritage and his status as bishop of St. Asaph's in North Wales as he composed the *Vita Merlini*, historians must first consider the potential Celtic influences on the text and Geoffrey's early conception of Morgan. While many scholars have doubted the direct connection between Morgan and Celtic prototypes, Geoffrey's Merlin is firmly rooted in a mythic past. Whereas Merlin's role remains limited in the pseudo-historical *History of the Kings of Britain*, Geoffrey paints a fuller portrait of the famous wizard in the *Vita Merlini* and draws on Celtic traditions to inform Merlin's magic, personal life, and trickster identity. Stephen Knight describes the *Vita Merlini* as a work of fiction, its style resembling that of a composition of creative design rather than an academic study, incorporating popular traditions of English magic and mythic prototypes. He emphasizes the connection between Geoffrey's Merlin and the Welsh figure Myrddin, a legendary prophet and madman who survived in popular local folklore.[25] Myrddin informs Geoffrey's depiction of Merlin as a great king that is driven mad with grief after seeing his companions killed in battle, forever cursed with fits of prophetic madness that often drive him into the wilderness. Undoubtedly, Merlin is a descendant of the Welsh Myrddin and the folkloric wildman in the woods that was a

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[24] Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, 39-40.

[25] Stephen Knight, *Merlin: Knowledge and Power Through the Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 32.

widespread myth throughout Europe and the British Isles.[26] As a peripheral character in the *Vita Merlini*, it is more difficult to trace the roots of Morgan to a Celtic past, but the clear connection between Merlin and Myrddin makes it reasonable to turn to Celtic motifs and Welsh sources to explore the origins of Morgan le Fay's magical prototype.

While some critics have expressed doubt that Geoffrey's Morgan is derived from Celtic sources, many still look to the dual nature of Celtic deities and folkloric women to explain the complexity of her character throughout Arthurian legend. Within the *Vita Merlini*, Geoffrey only invokes Morgan near the end of his tale as Arthur's otherworldly physician, and though she is fully imagined as the beautiful mistress of an enchanted island, and a knowledgeable healer that is capable of flight, transfiguration, and divination, the source of her powers is never explained. Jill Herbert has most recently asserted that while Greco-Roman influences can be seen in the *Vita Merlini*, "Geoffrey is probably most indebted to Celtic sources in granting Morgan the ability to change shape and fly." [27] She further notes the connection between Morgan and the Celtic Morrigan, one figure in a triad of goddesses including Badhb and Macha who are traditionally associated with battle, warrior patronage, shape-shifting, fertility, and death.[28] Although the etymological connection between the two is tenuous, a clear personification of the Irish Morrigan, her erratic patterns of behavior, and magical powers are recorded in the Irish epic of Cuchulainn of Muirthemne.

Dating back to the Ulster cycle of Irish storytelling, or the first century C.E., the epic of Cuchulainn alludes to the unpredictable nature of Celtic magic and deities, with

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[26] Lacy, *Arthurian Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Merlin (Myrddin)."

[27] Herbert, *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter*, 27.

[28] Ibid., 19.

the goddess Morrigan first appearing to the warrior Cuchulainn as a "young woman . . . with a dress of every color on, and her form very excellent."[29] She introduces herself to Cuchulainn as the "Daughter of King Buan," and offers her love and aid to the warrior who openly rejects her protection. [30] Scorned, Morrigan threatens Cuchulainn, "I will be a help to you . . . . [or] I shall be more troublesome to you . . . when I come against you when you are in combat against the men."[31] Using her powers of transfiguration, Morrigan attacks Cuchulainn in battle, taking the form of an eel, a grey she-wolf, and a hornless red heifer; however, the warrior counters her assaults, wounding the goddess each time. After the battle, Morrigan appears to test the warrior again, this time in the form of an old hag, both blind and lame, milking a cow with three teats.[32] Fooled by her disguise, Cuchulainn asks the hag for three drinks of milk to refresh him, thanking her each time with a blessing. At the end of the transaction Morrigan's wounds are healed and she reveals her identity. Before parting, the two squabble again, Morrigan taunts the warrior and he replies with venom, "If I had known it was you . . . I would not have healed you ever."[33] Though Cuchulainn rejects the patronage of the battle goddess, Morrigan continues to look after him and warn him of his impending death, breaking the yoke of his war chariot the night before his final battle. The relationship between the two is ambiguous. Though Morrigan appears to be Cuchulainn's tutelary goddess, she uses her magic in alternative attempts to seduce, protect, and harm the epic hero, displaying

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[29] L. Winifred Faraday, trans., *The Cattle-Raid of Cualnge* (Cambridge, ON: Publications Medieval Irish Series, 2002), 50.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid., 54.

[33] Ibid.

the sort of unpredictable behavior that Morgan le Fay develops in centuries of Arthurian romance.

Like Morgan as Arthur's otherworldly guardian in the twelfth-century *Vita Merlini*, the Irish Morrigan has often been identified as the guardian of Cuchulainn's deathbed. As Rosalind Clark aptly observes, however, "this could mean that she is guarding him from it, but it could have a more ominous meaning" in that the goddess may be ensuring the hero fulfills his fate and dies in battle.[34] Whether she means to help or harm him, Morrigan's connection to the death of the epic hero is clear and though she may not appear as one of "the three times fifty queens that loved Cuchulainn [and] saw him appear in his Druid chariot, going through Emain Macha . . . singing the music of the Sidhe," her literary descendant in the form of Morgan le Fay would one day be named as one of the black-veiled queens who accompanies a wounded Arthur on a barge into the healing vale of Avalon.[35] Overall, the ambiguous relationship between Morrigan and Cuchulainn provides a mythic model present within Celtic folklore that echoes the uncertain relationship Morgan le Fay shares with King Arthur in Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini* and later English Arthurian tradition.

Another source providing Geoffrey with a strong tradition of wild magic, fairy motifs, and crafty enchanted women to inform his image of Morgan in the *Vita Merlini* is the Welsh *Mabinogion*. The eleven stories that make up the *Mabinogion* as a whole are difficult to date. Most tales appear in the fourteenth-century Red Book of Hergest and the White Book of Rhydderch manuscripts, but recent editor and translator, Sioned Davies,

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[34] Rosalind Clark, "Aspects of the Morrígan in Early Irish Literature," *Irish University Review* 17 (1987): 233.

[35] Augusta Gregory, trans., *Cuchulain of Muirthemne: The Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster* (London: J. Murray, 1902; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 263.

notes that their roots lie in ancient oral tradition.[36] No one contributor can be named as the author of the *Mabinogion,* as Celtic tales were delivered orally for centuries before they were finally committed to writing. Given that scholars are unsure of the exact dating of these stories, perhaps Geoffrey of Monmouth did not engage directly with them in their written form. Undoubtedly, though the *Mabinogion* immortalizes Celtic motifs and pre-Christian perceptions of magic that freely circulated in the popular English mentality and resonate in Geoffrey's Morgan.

In addition to stories of giants, fairy queens, and great pagan kings, some of the earliest Arthurian romances are recorded in the *Mabinogion*. Perhaps one of the most recognized Arthurian tales, present in its Welsh form within the *Mabinogion,* is the *Lady of the Well*.[37] Like Geoffrey's Morgan, the Lady of the Well dwells in a land far beyond the "uninhabited regions of the world" in a "great shining castle" that always appears at the edge of the horizon.[38] Strangely "there was no sign of life in the castle, apart from in the hall" where "twenty four maidens . . . fairer than the fairest maiden that you ever saw in the Island of Britain" wait on visiting knights, offering them the finest of clothing, meat, drink, and service that "was better than anywhere else."[39] Similar to Morgan's Island of Apples, the Lady of the Well dwells in a distant and enchanted realm of plenty, populated by beautiful women that offer who finest hospitality to knights in their care.

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[36] Sioned Davies, introduction to *The Mabinogion*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), *ix*.

[37] According to popular scholarly consensus there is an apparent influence of Continental Arthurian traditions present within some Welsh stories in the *Mabinogion* including *The Lady of the Well*, *Peredur*, and *Geraint*.

[38] *The Lady of the Well,* in *The Mabinogion*, 117.

[39] Ibid., 118.

Elements of magic are casually integrated into the quest of Arthur's knight, Owein, as he seeks out the mysterious castle and becomes infatuated with its widowed mistress. A maiden gives Owein a magical ring for protection and invisibility, offering her aid in the knight's quest to win the love of the Lady of the Well. Without a lord to defend her well, the sovereignty of the Lady is threatened, prompting her to choose Owein as her protector. The two are hastily married and "Owein defended the well with spear and sword . . . . and he stayed thus for three years," until King Arthur, in sorrow of losing his knight actively seeks to find Owein.[40] Coming upon the shining castle of the Lady of the Well, Arthur and Owein are reunited and "the feast that had taken three years to prepare was consumed within just three months."[41] As in the realm of the fay, and Morgan's Island of Apples, where mortals live a hundred years or more, time seems to slip away in the Lady of the Well's domain. Owein himself begins to notice how the passage of time differs between realms when he requests to return with Arthur for a short time, where he "stayed for three years instead of three months."[42]

In his time away occupied with knightly exploits, Owein forgets his mistress, leaving her lands vulnerable, until a damsel comes to reclaim his ring of protection. Echoing the motif of the Celtic wildman of the woods, Owein is driven mad with grief for neglecting his lady. In a fit of self-disgust and sorrow he roams the "remote regions of the world and desolate mountains . . . . until his clothes disintegrated and his body all but gave out and long hair grew all over him," his only company the wild beasts of the

[40] Ibid., 128.

[41] Ibid., 130.

[42] Ibid., 131.

wood.[43] His sanity is only restored when a benevolent countess bids her handmaiden to anoint Owein with a precious ointment that contains magical healing properties. Whereas the origin of the salve remains a mystery in the *Mabinogion*, medieval French author Chrétien de Troyes would attribute 'Morgan the Wise' with crafting the miraculous healing salve that cured the madness of Owien (later called Yvain).[44] In the end, the Lady of the Well and Owein are reunited in her otherworldly paradise, where time stands still and mortals do not age, recalling the enchanted space Geoffrey's Morgan occupies herself. Moreover, feminine magic in this tale is used to educate Owein on the importance of maintaining moderation between love and military prowess, and ultimately as a healing force that restores the knight's sanity after his lesson is learned.[45]

In the tales that make up the *Mabinogion*, magic is an everyday phenomenon that plagues some in the form of a curse and benefits others as a miraculous charm. Enchanted women and acts of magic are integral to many stories and are presented almost casually. The enchanted space of these stories renders wonders and miracles completely commonplace.[46] Overall, the inherent ambivalence of Celtic folklore, and the presence of sovereign magical mistresses who capture knights and hold them in their sway, provides useful prototypes for Morgan in Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini* and her subsequent appearances in the English tradition of Arthurian legend.

While Carolyne Larrington has recently almost entirely refuted Celtic origins for Geoffrey's Morgan, she reasonably turns to the image of the Greco-Roman enchantress

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[43] Ibid., 131.

[44] Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William B. Kibler (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 332.

[45] Davies, introduction to *The Mabinogion*, *xvii*.

[46] Lacy, *Arthurian Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Mabinogi (Mabinogion)."

from classical literature. Her strongest correlation between the two is in recalling the epic seductress Circe from Homer's *Odyssey*.[47] On their journey home from war at Troy, Odysseus and his men are sidetracked to the far off island of Aeaea. Here the divine beauty Circe lives in a stone palace guarded by all manner of beasts she has bewitched with magical drugs. Homer uses many terms to describe Circe, including witch and goddess, but she is ultimately depicted as "the nymph with the lovely braids," who tempts Odysseus' men to enter her palace with "her singing, lifting . . . spellbinding voice as she glided back and forth at her great immortal loom."[48] Though Circe appears to show the sailors hospitality, "she mixed them a potion--cheese, barley and pale honey mulled in Pramnian wine--but into the brew she stirred her wicked drugs to wipe away from their memories any thought of home."[49] Then, in the first magical episode recorded in Greek literature, Circe strikes the men with her magical wand and turns them into swine.[50] With the aid of a magic herb plucked by Hermes, Odysseus is able to outmaneuver the sorceress and convince her to restore his men to their human form. Years slip by slowly in Circe's realm of "ease, day in, day out . . . feasting on sides of meat and drafts of heady wine" until Odysseus pleads with the sorceress to release him and aid him in his journey home.[51] With her counsel, the hero is able to travel to the land of the dead, where he performs the earliest recorded necromantic ceremony to summon the blind prophet

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[47] Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses*, 9.

[48] Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996), 239.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Georg Luck, "Witches and Sorcerers in Classical Literature," in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 110.

[51] Homer, *Odyssey*, 245.

Tiresias with libations of wine, honey, and the sacrifice of a black ram.[52] In addition to providing a magical female prototype for Geoffrey's Morgan, of a beautiful enchantress who lives on a secluded island and knows a shape-shifting craft, Homer's *Odyssey* records the origins of many elements typical for magical operations throughout the ancient and medieval world, including the use of a wand, magical herbs, and necromantic rituals used to summon the spirits of the dead.[53]

The association between Geoffrey's Morgan and Medea, the legendary priestess of Hecate, is not immediately apparent in the *Vita Merlin*i, but with her status as a learned sorceress who practices diabolical magic, Medea provides a useful model for Morgan's subsequent witch-like appearances in continental romances.[54] Seneca paints a crazed portrait of Medea in his drama as a professional witch and a woman scorned. To enact revenge against her disloyal husband, she appeals to "triple formed Hecate," the Greco-Roman goddess of death and dark magic. She further invokes "Chaos of endless night . . . [and] unholy spirits of the dead," to aid her in her quest.[55] From act one scene one Medea plots to kill Jason's new royal wife by crafting her a gift of beautiful wedding garb laced with poison, and to destroy the city of Corinth by murdering the king. As Medea descends into madness throughout the play, her magic takes on a truly wild and destructive force as she plots to kill her own children in order to cause Jason pain. While this image differs from Geoffrey's portrayal of Morgan in the *Vita Merlini*, as a healer she always reserves the power to poison. Later characterizations of Morgan le Fay even

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[52] Luck, "Witches and Sorcerers in Classical Literature," 111.

[53] Ibid., 110-11.

[54] Ibid., 113.

[55] Seneca, *Medea*, trans. H.M. Hine (Warminster, UK: Aris and Phillips, 2000), 47.

depict her as a scheming murderess who concocts noxious potions and creates magical objects to hold sway over Arthur's knights, venting anxieties about female practitioners of magic as diabolical sorceresses partially modeled off of classical prototypes.

Considering the wild and elemental nature of Morgan's magic, one cannot discount the potential influence of the Greco-Roman goddess Diana on her inception. Like Morgan, the virgin huntress was known for her dual identity, most often depicted as a fickle goddess who would turn would-be lovers into animals to slay. Despite her maidenly status, she was the goddess of the moon, whose crescent phase symbolized fertility, and the patron of animals who ensured their fertility. In her darkest conception as a dual goddess Diana was associated with the three-faced Hecate, the goddess of hell, fertility, death, and dark magic.[56] Demonologies often reported nightly rides of witches being led by the wild goddess of the hunt and scholars such as Jeffery Burton Russell have named the cult of Diana to be the most prominent Mediterranean element in medieval witchcraft.[57] While there is no direct connection between Geoffrey's Morgan and Diana, the schizophrenic nature of the classical goddess of the hunt and her wild magic is heavily reflected in continental traditions of Morgan le Fay.

The presence of nocturnal goddesses and the tradition of the beautiful, crafty, and powerful Greco-Roman enchantress would have been translated to a medieval audience through Latin authors such as Ovid, Vergil, Seneca, and Hyginus. By the twelfth century a significant amount of their literature was analyzed and annotated by theologians, making classical texts more accessible and compatible with Christian teaching. During

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[56] Jeffery Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 47-48.

[57] Ibid., 47.

his education as a cleric Geoffrey of Monmouth was likely exposed to Latin sources, making it probable that Morgan le Fay's magical archetype has some classical origins.[58] Literary figures like Circe and Medea, as well as the mythic tradition of Diana paint a relatively dark depiction of the prototypical classical sorceress, and personify ancient anxieties about deviant female behavior and the dangers of unrestrained feminine power that would be later echoed in the Christian image of the witch, and in the malevolent portrayals of Morgan le Fay.[59]

As a whole, the literary and folkloric traditions of talented female magicians that are echoed in Geoffrey's Morgan vent a certain level of anxiety concerning the nature of feminine power. Like Morgan, many live far from civilization and patriarchal rule, in enchanted realms of plenty, dominated by beautiful women who hold wandering knights and heroes in their sway for years at a time. While ancient tales depict magical women as morally ambiguous and alternatively helpful or malicious figures, they were generally translated to a clerical audience as dark sorceresses, and were eventually demonized into the stereotypical witch that developed in continental Europe throughout the medieval period. Traditionally, women were more likely to be associated with sorcery than men, due to their domestic roles as healers and cooks. Further presiding over the mysteries of life, death, and childbirth, women were attributed with secret knowledge of herbs that could heal, poison, or invoke feelings of love or hate. Some were even thought to know hexes that caused impotence.[60] The women of Arthurian legend also occupy a unique

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[58] Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses*, 9.

[59] Jeffery Burton Russell and Brooks Alexander, ed., *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2007), 33.

[60] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 280.

space in that the connection between women and magic is casual and almost expected. Geraldine Heng notes, "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."[61] Despite the reoccurring trend throughout the medieval period of associating women with nefarious magic, depictions of Morgan le Fay within the earliest English tradition of Arthurian legend capture a relatively ambivalent view of magic that may have been more prevalent in the popular mindset. Within the *Vita Merlini*, Geoffrey imagines Morgan as a skilled and learned otherworldly healer, whose magic is imbued with mythic possibilities rather than steeped in clerical constructions of the witch that began to take shape in Europe by the end of the twelfth-century.

In order to more fully understand the intellectual origins of Geoffrey's Morgan we must turn from mythology and folklore to clerical understandings of magic and sorcery as they potentially influenced the work of the Anglo-Welsh bishop. While there is not a great deal known of Geoffrey of Monmouth's personal life or education, and reconstructing an early medieval worldview and English perceptions of magic is particularly difficult considering the limited nature of Anglo-Saxon records, it is possible to measure the reaction to pagan beliefs and perceptions of female magicians by consulting early English law codes, clerical writings on magic, and popular literature outlining the image of the English sorceress in the twelfth century. By the time Geoffrey authored the *Vita Merlini* in the twelfth century, pagan Europe was a distant memory, and the Church had long since demonized many aspects of Mediterranean magic. In the

[61]Geraldine Heng, "Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory," in *Arthurian Women*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster (London: Routledge, 2000), 99.

ancient world magic was a morally neutral act that could be employed as a hostile or benevolent force, but as the Roman Empire was Christianized during the first centuries C.E. classical *daimones*, or supernatural entities called upon by magicians to enact their magic, evolved into Christian demons. In the classical understanding, *daimones* were ambivalent spirits, but early Christian authorities condemned them as undisputedly evil creatures in service of Satan to battle the Church.[62] As organized and institutionalized Christianity took on an increasingly prominent role in society, sorcerers and magicians who consulted with the spirit world were no longer openly tolerated. [63]

Of all the ancient Latin Christian theologians, St. Augustine of Hippo wrote the most extensively on the connection between demons and sorcery, and his writings would later become a widely cited authority on condemning all magic as demonic.[64] In his *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine explicitly comments on the folly of superstition and idolatry, and expresses deep concerns for the reckless vanity of "certain kinds of consultations or contracts about meaning arranged and ratified with demons, such as the enterprises involved in the art of magic."[65] He further condemns the practice of astrology, and medical magic that utilizes amulets, incantations, or any number of "utterly futile practices."[66] Augustine asserts that magicians entering demonic pacts practice a "kind of spiritual fornication," and further advises the Christian to actively avoid the "disastrous

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[62] Michael D. Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages," *Speculum* 76 (2001): 963.

[63] Valerie Flint, "The Demonisation of Magic and Sorcery in Late Antiquity: Christian Redefinitions of Pagan Religions," in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed., Ankarloo and Clark, 279-80.

[64] Ibid., 319.

[65] Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Teaching*, bk II, trans. R. P. H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 47.

[66] Ibid.

alliance of men and devils."[67] Overall, the Latin theologian dismisses any means of acceptable magic and instead condemns the pride, sinful curiosity and extreme self-centeredness of magicians who abandon Christian morality for forbidden knowledge extracted by consultations or contracts with demons. While these negative traits would later be incorporated into the French characterization of Morgan le Fay and inform the continental image of the witch, they do not seem to inform directly Geoffrey's conception of Morgan within the *Vita Merlini*, as her role as King Arthur's otherworldly healer is particularly pronounced.

In addition to the writings of Augustine, Geoffrey likely encountered the work of Isidore of Seville during his education or career in the clergy. As an extremely learned churchman of seventh-century Iberia who acted as theological advisor to the Visigoth kings of Spain, Isidore was widely respected as a clerical authority, and copies of his work circulated in Ireland within a century of his death.[68] His most influential writing was a twenty-eight volume encyclopedia entitled *Etymologies,* a work cataloguing the etymological origins of all that was known about the Roman Empire up through his lifetime. Within *Etymologies* Isidore categorizes all manner of *magi,* or magical figures that commit acts of harmful magic. These writings prove particularly invaluable in reconstructing an early clerical understanding of magic and the sorceress as they may have been translated to Geoffrey. [69]

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[67] Ibid., 51.

[68] Clarke, "The Twelfth Century and Geoffrey's Non-Celtic Sources," in *Vita Merlini*, 8-9.

[69] Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 51-53.

According to Isidore, the "foolery of the magic arts held sway over the entire world for centuries," not because of the direct influence of the Devil but, "through the instruction of the evil angels."[70] To these evil angels he attributes the knowledge and skill of all diviners, necromancers, and oracles, from the magicians of Pharaoh's court in the biblical account of Moses, to the actions of the witch of Endor,[71] and "the very famous Circe, who turned the companions of Ulysses to beasts."[72] Generally Isidore condemns all *magi*, male or female, but the early beginnings of gendered constructions of witchcraft can be seen as he places special emphasis on the cunning of the sorceress. He cites the "noble poet" Vergil in describing "a certain woman who excelled in the magic arts," she "promises with her spells to sooth whichever minds she wishes, but to bring hard cares to others; to make the waters of rivers stand still, to turn the stars back, and to raise night ghosts."[73] Drawing from classical stereotypes of the diabolical enchantress, Isidore claims that the sorceress not only has control of the elements and the ability to raise the dead, but she can also manipulate the minds and emotions of men. Just as Greco-Roman authors feared feminine magic as a hostile force, medieval authors like Isidore of Seville recycled ancient stereotypes, imagining female magicians as particularly threatening to the patriarchal Christian order.

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[70] Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, bk VIII, chapter 9, trans. Stephen A. Barney, W.J. Lewis, J.A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 181.

[71] The Bible reputes the witch of Endor as the figure consulted by King Saul before he battled the Philistines. This woman summoned the spirit of the prophet Samuel, who proclaimed that Saul would be defeated in battle and killed for consulting a practitioner of the forbidden occult. See Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 33.

[72] Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, bk VIII, chapter 9, 181.

[73] Ibid., 182.

Despite an established Christian tradition that denounced pagan healing magic as "amulets consisting of curse-charms," the practice of ritualized medical magic stubbornly endured in England and was ultimately reflected in Geoffrey's twelfth-century depiction of Morgan.[74] In converting the island of Britain from the fifth to the tenth century, the Church was forced to compromise and incorporate pagan rites and traditions into local practice. Missionaries were especially encouraged to adopt pagan holidays and give new Christian meanings to local symbols and superstitions.[75] As a result, a Christianized folk-culture emerged that encompassed a tradition of magic utilizing herbs, rituals, protective amulets, and incantations. Such magic was morally neutral and could be used with good intent as a charm, or with negative intent as a curse; but generally magic remained an element of daily life.[76] In particular, Anglo-Saxon folk healers who used herbal remedies were believed to be gifted with magical knowledge and used incantations as an integral component of their cures.[77] As England underwent the process of Christianization over successive generations these charms, remedies, and incantations began to incorporate religious elements. One Anglo-Saxon healing charm advises a man with heart tumors to "let a girl go to a spring that runs due east, and let her draw a cupful of water moving with the current, and let her sing on it the Creed and an Our Father."[78] Another, gives the recipe for a "pleasant drink against insanity," directing healers to "sing twelve Masses"

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[74] Ibid., 183.

[75] Jane Crawford, "Evidences for Witchcraft in Anglo-Saxon England," *Medium Aevum*, 32 (1963): 100.

[76] Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 57-60.

[77] Crawford, "Evidences for Witchcraft in Anglo-Saxon England," 105.

[78] Anglo-Saxon Healing spell, quoted in Russell and Brooks Alexander, *A History of Witchcraft*, 45.

over a combination of common ingredients and herbs to imbue the drink with healing properties.[79] Despite clerical writings on the dangers of medical magic the tradition was never fully eradicated during the Middle Ages. In fact, many seventh- to eighth-century English law codes that record penalties for the worship of pagan gods do not denounce the practice of magic as evil, or forbid the use of semi-magical healing salves.[80] As England was Christianized the demonization of magic was never fully completed and an accepted custom of medical magic inevitably endured in the popular mindset and ultimately within literary manifestations of Morgan le Fay.

While Geoffrey would have been exposed to ancient Christian writings that expressed a fairly negative view towards magic and female magicians, they would not entirely color his earliest depiction of Morgan le Fay. In fact it was not until the tenth or eleventh century that English clerics would even begin to specifically single out women as hostile practitioners of magic. In a sermon on auguries, English abbot Ælfric of Eynsham's use of the word *wicca* is decidedly feminine.[81] Historian Jane Crawford explains "we can for the first time be sure that here the material relates to women," as these witches "are revealed as disciples of an elemental heathenism, teaching the worship of stones, trees and wells; they are possessed of occult knowledge which, though it may be true, is dangerous because it comes from the devil."[82] While the English abbot warns Christians against seeking the demonic knowledge of such women, Crawford contends that this concept does not correspond with the Devil's pact or fears of diabolical cults of

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[79] Ibid.

[80] Crawford, "Evidences for Witchcraft in Anglo-Saxon England," 105.

[81] *Wicca* is an Old English word meaning witch, derived from the verb *wiccian*, meaning to cast a spell. Russell and Brooks Alexander, *A History of Witchcraft*, 12.

[82] Ibid., 111.

witches in service of Satan that would eventually circulate in continental Europe.[83] The tradition of the continental witch was not given a great deal of attention in early English clerical literature, making it reasonable for Geoffrey to imagine a beautiful and skilled female magician free of demonic stereotypes.

As a final point of comparison to demonstrate the unique status of Geoffrey's Morgan is the clear depiction of the English sorceress given by William of Malmesbury in his twelfth-century *Chronicle of the Kings of England*. Though the majority of his text deals with the larger history of England from the fifth to the twelfth century, one particular anecdote related by William discusses the unfortunate fate of a woman who lived in Berkeley and was "addicted to witchcraft."[84] Contrary to the image of the beautiful and learned Morgan, who is entrusted to heal the mortal wounds of Arthur after his final battle, the sorceress of Berkeley is described as "excessively gluttonous, perfectly lascivious, setting no bounds to her debaucheries, as she was not old, though fast declining in life."[85] After foreseeing the death of her son and his family by a sudden accident and a quickening end to her own life, the sorceress tries to repent. She calls upon her two remaining children, a nun and a monk, and confesses, "Formerly my children, I constantly administered to my wretched circumstances by demoniacal arts . . . yet while practising these crimes I was accustomed to soothe my hapless soul with the hope of your piety."[86] For her crimes she knows her soul is condemned and yet she gives her children specific instruction on how they may rescue her body: "Sew up my corpse in the skin of a

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[83] Ibid., 112.

[84] William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England: From the Earliest Period to the Reign of King Stephen*, ed. J. A. Giles (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 230.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Ibid.

stag; lay it on its back in a stone coffin; fasten down the lid with lead and iron; on this lay a stone bound with three iron chains of enormous weight."[87] In addition to all these measures, she further instructs "there to be psalms sung for fifty nights, and masses said for an equal number of days."[88] Despite all the efforts to consecrate her grave, the sin of the sorceress was so great that she is ripped from her tomb by a powerful demon mounted on a black horse. Her desperate cries for assistance were allegedly heard over four miles. Although the sorceress of Berkeley appears as a morally and sexually debauched woman who practices the forbidden craft of sorcery, she is somewhat victimized as an isolated addict of the demonic arts who desperately tries to repent in the final stage of her life, rather than a member of the fully developed stereotypical witch-cult in service of Satan. This anecdote is fairly unique, however, in that it is the only known English episode that emphasizes the connection between a sorceress and the demonic before the thirteenth century. [89] William of Malmesbury's sorceress of Berkeley demonstrates an unusual link between English literature and early constructions of witchcraft, but Geoffrey's Morgan presents a stark contrast to the dark witch-like figure. As the powerful and revered magical mistress of the Island of Apples, skilled in the art of healing, Morgan seems to occupy a much different vision of female practitioners of magic, grounded in a mythic past, and divorced from clerical prejudices.

Morgan's appearance in Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*, however brief, forever wrote her into legend as Arthur's otherworldly healer, skilled in many magical arts. Rather than being feared for her power, Morgan is spoken of in the highest esteem, named for her

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[87] Ibid., 231.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Crawford, "Evidences for Witchcraft in Anglo-Saxon England," 114.

beauty and renowned for her magical skills. She is trusted to heal England's greatest king of legend and although some have read the physician's prognosis as somewhat grim, based on the condition that Arthur "could be cured if only he stayed with her a long while and accepted her treatment," his men nevertheless "happily committed the king to her care" and set sail with favorable wind on their journey home.[90] While the Anglo-Welsh bishop would have undoubtedly been familiar with a developing clerical understanding of demonic magic that began to particularly suspect female magicians and distrust healing magic, Geoffrey's Morgan defies dichotomous definitions of "good" and "evil" and remains more inspired by a rich pagan past and a pantheon of morally ambiguous folkloric women, rather than the early Christian image of the witch. Myths and legends may tell us that feminine magic can heal a hero as quickly as it might poison him, but in her earliest form Morgan le Fay embodies an ambivalent view of female practitioners of magic and represents a Christianized tradition of medical magic that endured in twelfth-century England. Even as the *Vita Merlini* immortalizes a Morgan free of demonic stereotypes, descended from the deities of myth and legend, future authors would dethrone the goddess and envision Morgan le Fay as a demonic witch, scheming to bring down Camelot.

[90] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, 103.

III. EVIL VS. ENCHANTED MAGIC: THE DEMONIZATION OF MORGAN LE FAY AND PRESERVATION OF FOLKLORIC ROOTS IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Once imagined as the semi-divine Queen of the Island of Apples who tended to the legendary King Arthur's wounds in an enchanted paradise, the status of Morgan le Fay degrades in medieval romances that mortalize Geoffrey of Monmouth's goddess-like figure. Rather than being inspired by myth and legend, thirteenth-century French sources would begin to reveal a darker Morgan, who "knew more about witchcraft and spells than any other woman; and because of her keen interest in such things, she gave up and forsook all dealings with people and lived day and night in far-off forests."[91] The French account concedes that for her great knowledge many "never spoke of her as a woman but rather called her Morgan the Goddess," then snidely reminds readers, that "there was no dearth of fools at that time in the countryside."[92] In the following century, however. a contrary portrayal of Morgan le Fay was recorded in a romance of English origin, the renowned *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Instead of a dark witch-like figure, the anonymous Pearl Poet imagines a whimsical Morgan who uses her powers to orchestrate several magical trials that draw Gawain into a Celtic otherworld, where she assumes many guises to test his knightly prowess. In the end, when her role in his journey is

[91] Norris Lacy, ed., *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post Vulgate in Translation* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 2:305.

[92] Ibid.

revealed the Green Knight boasts of the "might of Morgan le Fay," well learned in "the science of lore," and reverently names her "Morgan, the goddess and my guide."[93]

While both English and French sources of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries firmly identify Morgan as Arthur's sister, knowledgeable in a great many magical crafts, the portraits vary considerably. As the thirteenth century progressed, French personifications of Morgan increasingly conformed to an evolving understanding of the demonic witch and her diabolical practice of *maleficium*. By contrast English sources preserve a light-hearted and fanciful characterization of Morgan, reminiscent more of fairy tales, folklore, and Celtic mythology than clerical constructions of the witch. The reader is left to reconcile the differences between French and English accounts: to a medieval audience is Morgan le Fay a witch, a goddess, or somewhere in between? It is the purpose of this chapter, therefore, to identify how the degradation of Morgan le Fay's character in thirteenth-century French romances corresponds to evolving notions of heretical witchcraft, and to determine how her appearance in the fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reflects how popular English perceptions of magic retained a strong folkloric tradition and rejected continental understandings of the witch.

To fully appreciate the uniquely ambivalent status that Morgan le Fay maintains throughout the English tradition of Arthurian legend, the continental romances must be considered as a critical point of comparison, for Morgan's name and magic are forever tainted within thirteenth-century European sources. The wildly popular genre of the courtly romance began with the writings of Chrétien de Troyes in the latter half of the twelfth century. His romances are informed by the writings of Geoffrey of Monmouth,

[93]William Vantuono, trans. and ed., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Dual-Language Version*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991), 135.

but Chrétien humanized Geoffrey's semi-divine Morgan by naming her as Arthur's sister. She remains a helpful figure, providing magical healing ointments for two of Arthur's knights, Erec and Yvain. Her ointments are "so wonderfully effective that the wound to which it was applied, whether on nerve or joint, could not fail to be completely cured and healed within a week."[94] Although Chrétien's "Morgan the Wise"[95] remains an enchanted healer, he speaks of Thessala, a wanton sorceress who practices necromancy and "diabolical enchantments," foreshadowing the menacing role that Morgan le Fay plays throughout thirteenth-century French prose treatments, and reflecting darkening perceptions of magic and heightened suspicion of female magicians in the minds of European authors. [96]

From the thirteenth to fourteenth century European society grew increasingly hostile towards magic as the enchanted creatures of folklore became demons, corresponding to the corruption in the character of Morgan le Fay. Satan became more vivid in the minds of Europeans as the evil force contributing to an unstable world with rapid population growth, dislocation, economic fluctuation, shifting political forms, and movements for reform and counterreform within the Church. [97] Such insecurities were commonplace in the medieval world and prompted increased anxiety towards the supernatural, reflected in popular culture, literature, and superstition. Even thirteenth-century graphic art depicted the growing notion of human beings engaging in the Devil's pact with parents sacrificing their unbapitized children in payment for demons enacting

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[94] Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, 89.

[95] Ibid., 332. The ointment that cures the madness of Yvain was concocted by "Morgan the Wise."

[96] Ibid., 159.

[97] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 101-2.

dark magic. At the same time, Satan himself was more frequently represented with a monstrous and deformed but recognizably human shape. [98] As Satan and demonic forces were increasingly humanized, the evils previously attributed to mysterious incorporeal demons became attributed to mortal magicians. The concept of heresy as a religious crime warranting severe persecution grew to match the calamity of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Europeans searched for a scapegoat to blame for the erosion of society marked by the devastation of the Black Death, famine, war, and the inevitable social change that followed. The insecurities of the era prompted many to engage in popular movements of horrific violence that set the precedent for the witch hunts, including the Crusades, the Hundred Years' War, and the institutionalized persecution of heretics in the form of the Inquisition.[99]

Tumultuous times prompted many to turn from the organized Church in favor of a number of reformist groups that emphasized apostolic poverty and pious communal living. With growing numbers settling into new monastic orders that rejected the spiritual authority of the Catholic Church, such groups like the Cathars, the Waldensians, and even independent spiritual communities that took no formal vows, threatened the solidarity of the Church. In an era when the Church sought to promote orthodoxy, such fringe groups were considered dangerous and deemed heretical by clerical authorities when they refused to stop preaching.[100] The Cathars and Waldensians in particular were demonized, as stories rumored them to gather for nocturnal liaisons with the Devil, sexual orgies, and ritual murder. In a letter pleading for the increased persecution of heretics, Pope Gregory

[98] Ibid., 134.

[99] Ibid., 136.

[100] Ibid., 139-40.

IX (r. 1227-1241) relates the anxieties of the time in a vivid depiction of the heretic entering into the Devil's pact. Satan emerges as "a man of marvelous pallor, who has very black eyes and is so emaciated and thin, that, since his flesh has been wasted, seems to have remaining only skin drawn over the bone."[101] To seal the pact, the heretic "kisses him [the Devil] and feels cold, like ice, and after the kiss the memory of the catholic faith totally disappears from his heart."[102] For the first time classic elements of what would become popularly known as the witch's sabbath began to take shape and established a link between heresy and witchcraft.[103]

In an effort to counter heresies, Pope Gregory IX created an institutionalized papal Inquisition in 1231, which would become fully organized by the end of the thirteenth century. Suspected heretics were brought in for a formal inquiry, but could be imprisoned for an indefinite amount of time. The accused rarely received legal representation. If a lawyer was present, he likely urged his defendant to confess, which could also be legally obtained by means of torture. While it was possible to be reconciled with the Church and assigned punishment or penance, if accused heretics withdrew their confessions, or "relapsed," they were turned over to secular authorities to be burnt alive at the stake. [104] By 1233, Pope Gregory IX dispatched inquisitors almost exclusively drawn from the Dominican order to several dioceses in the south of France, tasked with eradicating heresy. As the century waned, *beguinages*, or local informal religious communities populated by women, were regarded with particular suspicion as they took

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[101] Pope Gregory IX, *Vox in Rama*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, ed. Kors and Peters, 115.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 131-32.

[104] Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 42-43.

no formal vows, which brought their orthodoxy into question. In a campaign that lasted from 1314 to the late 1320s, over one hundred beguines in Languedoc alone were forced into exile, apostasy, or burnt at the stake.[105] Among those executed were several female mystics such as the visionary, Na Prous Boneta, and Marguerite Porete, author of *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. The persecution of the Inquisition rendered these formerly celebrated women into heretics, foreshadowing the association between feminine magic and witchcraft that would gradually take hold in the coming centuries.[106]

As the Inquisition took shape judges, lawyers, clerics, and academics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries contributed towards a corpus of writings that contemplated the connections between women and heretical witchcraft. Women's sexuality also became a topic of theological query, particularly among Dominicans who considered women naturally more lustful than men.[107] Drawing from a long tradition of misogyny within Judeo-Christian thought and customs, women were seen as self-polluting by means of their reproductive and menstrual cycles, processes that were believed to be evidence of humanity's fall from grace and the inherent impurity of women.[108] As Dominican authors perpetuated this belief in inquisitorial literature and served in great numbers as papal inquisitors, they ultimately transmitted this view into their rationalizations of women's spiritual weakness and natural inclination towards

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[105] Louisa A. Burnham, *So Great a Light, So Great a Smoke: The Beguin Heretics of Languedoc* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 2.

[106] Ibid., 140-50.

[107] Elliott Dyan, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 36-37.

[108] Ibid., 2.

witchcraft and demonic coupling.[109] Christian writers as early as Augustine acknowledged the existence of demon lovers preying on vulnerable female victims, and this literary trend persisted well into the thirteenth century. French authors conceived Merlin as the son of an *incubus*, rendering his magic of demonic origin. Contemporary schoolmen like William of Auvergne (1180-1249) emphasized the spiritual vulnerability of women and argued that they were more susceptible to supernatural encounters, as both women's sexual voracity and their breadth of imagination made them natural victims of the demonic *incubus*.[110] The great Dominican theologian, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), lent further credence to the belief in *incubi* and other demons that he described as airy spirits of intellectual substance that were permitted, only by God, to take corporal form in order to enact dark magic or perform sexual acts. [111] Within her discussion of women's sexuality in thirteenth-century literary trends, Elliot Dyan aptly commented that "the sexual relationship between the woman and the incubus was represented as consensual, giving rise to a binding agreement not unlike the pact imputed to the sorcerer and the devil."[112] The demonic pact between woman and *incubus* "anticipates the witch: the epitome of cold, calculating female carnality and malice."[113] Shadows of these anxieties concerning the danger of women's spiritual weakness and their inclinations towards the dark arts were projected onto French and Italian manifestations of Morgan le Fay that

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[109] Ibid., 37.

[110] Ibid., 52.

[111] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 147.

[112] Dyan, *Fallen Bodies*, 54.

[113] Ibid., 58.

render a formerly benevolent otherworldly healer into a wicked, libidinous, and spiteful woman, practicing diabolical enchantments to terrorize King Arthur and his court.

With the popularization of the Arthurian romance in French vernacular came the inevitable Christianization of a legendary past, as successive authors infused evolving medieval perceptions of sorcery into their tales and cast suspicion on the magical nature of Morgan le Fay. The tales of King Arthur were significantly elaborated upon by anonymous French authors of the thirteenth century. The Vulgate cycle of Arthurian romance was written between 1215 and 1235 and acts as a conflation of both literary sources and oral tales. The unknown author or authors expand on the quest for the Holy Grail, the role of the illustrious Sir Lancelot, and elaborates upon Morgan le Fay as a dark enchantress and an enemy of Queen Guenevere.[114] Within these tales Morgan remains in good standing with her brother, but in the Post-Vulgate cycle, authored anonymously between 1230 and 1240, her character is further vilified and her magic is firmly associated with the demonic.[115] While the authorship of the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycle of Arthurian romance is unknown, some scholars believe the works were the products of many authors over time, making the texts ideal windows into the medieval mind as they reveal blackening continental perceptions of magic and the increased suspicion of its female practitioners.

In the *Story of Merlin*, for example, Morgan is introduced as the bastard daughter of the Lady Igraine, and half-sister to Arthur. As an undesirable daughter, Morgan is sent to a nunnery, as was the custom of many noble families who preferred to pay meager

[114] Lacy, *Arthurian Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Vulgate Cycle."

[115] Ibid., s.v. “Post-Vulgate Cycle.”

entrance fees to a convent, rather than the expected dowry for a respectable marriage.[116] An apt student, Morgan "mastered the arts" and "became wonderfully skilled in an art called astrology, and she worked hard all [of] the time and knew a great deal about the healing arts. For her master[y] of knowledge, people called her Morgan the Fay."[117] She remains sequestered in a convent until Arthur becomes king, and she is welcomed to his court. There Morgan quickly befriends Merlin who "endowed [her] with great learning" and he "taught her many wonders in astrology and necromancy, and she kept them all in her mind."[118] It is worth noting that here French authors both depart from and elaborate upon the origins of Morgan's magic as set out by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the *Vita Merlini*. While Geoffrey's Morgan exists more as an otherworldly figure inspired by myth and legend, with but a mere suggestion that some of her some of her magic was learned, the Morgan la Fay of French tradition comes into her supernatural powers by way of mastering literacy and the demonic arts.

Being that basic literacy was an uncommon skill to acquire in the medieval world, for many perhaps the ability to read and write did translate into magical knowledge. Literacy, however, was an exceptionally rare pursuit for women, making Morgan's aptitude for learning and magical knowledge suspicious to a contemporaneous audience. Her extraordinary intelligence gave her renown as 'Morgan the Fay,' "fairy" being a word "used for all women who practiced magic . . . . They all knew the powers of words and stones and herbs, which allowed them to retain youth and beauty and enjoy whatever

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[116] Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 210.

[117] *Lancelot-Grail*, 1:208.

[118] Ibid., 307.

wealth they wished."[119] While this distinction alone is fairly benign, Merlin "who possessed all the wisdom that came from demons" endows Morgan with dangerous necromantic knowledge. [120]As opposed to simply practicing a form of common sorcery, Morgan is given instruction in a highly structured magical system that was greatly feared by ecclesiastical authorities. Derived from Arabic and Hebrew magical traditions, the secret art of necromancy relied on the invocation of specific demons that were manipulated through intricate rituals and spells uttered in Latin. Naturally, a woman like Morgan le Fay, dabbling in the necromantic arts, would be viewed with hostility in a time when the pope himself feared political plots enacted by demonic sorcery.[121]

Throughout the thirteenth-century French romances the more magical knowledge that Morgan accrues the more loathsome she appears in beauty and character. At first Morgan's virtues overshadow her curious nature. An early depiction portrays her as young and beautiful with an infatuation for Queen Guenevere's kinsmen, Guiomar. Morgan is described as "quite clever and comely in body and in features . . . . She had the fairest head of any suited for a woman, the most beautiful hands, and wondrously well-made shoulders, and she was the cleverest of all."[122] Through the interference of the Queen, however, Morgan is rejected by her lover; and she retreats into the woods to fester in rage, swearing vengeance. Thus Morgan develops her legendary hatred for Queen Guenevere, and when the enchantress learns of the love the chivalrous knight Lancelot bears for Guenevere, she instigates several magical plots and entrapments to

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[119] Ibid., 2:11

[120] Ibid.

[121] Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages," 965-66.

[122] *Lancelot-Grail,* 2:354.

expose their treasonous affair. Fully seduced by the dark arts, Morgan is described as ugly, wickedly spiteful, and "so lustful and wanton that a looser woman could not have been found."[123] The Post-Vulgate additions to Morgan only blemish her character more, as she conspires to steal Excalibur's enchanted scabbard, depose her brother as king, and kill her husband. Even Morgan's dealings with Lancelot take on more sinister overtones in the Post-Vulgate continuation, when the knight envisions Hell. Morgan appears to him "ugly and fearsome . . . , she wore no clothing except a wolf's pelt, which covered her poorly."[124] In Lancelot's vision countless devils torment Morgan, but her power is so formidable that she can still command the demons to seize the knight. They take him to see Guenevere in anguish wearing a crown of thorns on her head, "with her tongue hanging out of her mouth" and "burning as brightly as if she were a fat candle."[125] As the thirteenth-century progressed, the diabolical nature of Morgan's magic is highlighted as French sources imbued her with the power to manipulate demons even after death, creating a decidedly dark tradition of Morgan le Fay from which later authors would draw.

In the last quarter of the thirteenth century an unknown Venetian author composed the *Prophesies de Merlin*, where a notable passage somewhat demonizes all of the Arthurian enchantresses, as they resemble a coven of self indulgent and egotistical witches, dueling for the status of the most powerful enchantress. According to the text the Dame d'Avalon summons Morgan le Fay, the Queen of Sebille, and other sorceresses of the realm to test their power of enchantment against magical rings that she has procured

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[123] Ibid., 2:311.

[124] Ibid., 5:171.

[125] Ibid.

from India. The contest of skill is quickly won by the Dame d'Avalon's powerful rings, and she defeats all that come to meet her challenge, even Morgan and her distinctive brand of dark sorcery.[126] When Morgan arrives, she summons a legion of demons from Hell in the form of deformed crows and dragons to carry the Dame d'Avalon to a high tower. Compelled by the magic of the lady's rings, however, Morgan is humiliated as she removes her clothing to reveal not a beautiful body that has seduced handsome knights, but rather sagging breasts and a descended belly, her physical decrepitude the cost of her dark magic. She admits, in fact, to using glamour as a magical cosmetic to mask her degraded beauty. In triumph the Dame d'Avalon aims fire from between her legs at Morgan's clothes and burns them to ashes, and comments that it was a trick Merlin taught her in exchange for her virginity. On this point, Carloyne Larrington notes that the "Dame has exchanged her physical integrity for a magical skill with distinctly hellish overtones; her vagina has literally become the burning pit invoked in clerical misogynist attacks on female sexuality."[127] While other texts neglect to mention how the magic of the enchantress is enacted, by the end of the thirteenth century continental Arthurian legend firmly associates feminine magic with demonic agency.

Although the French romances established a rather dark tradition of Morgan le Fay that reflected increased anxieties concerning the diabolical nature of the heretical witch, evolving notions of magic in the British Isles largely rejected a demonized construction of witchcraft. In fact, the fourteenth-century sorcery trial of Alice Kyteler aptly demonstrates the secular nature of witch trials in the British Isles, as civil powers in

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[126] Bogdanow, "Morgain's Role in the Thirteenth-Century French Prose Romances of the Arthurian Cycle," 128.

[127] Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses*, 24.

Ireland resisted ecclesiastical authority and attempted to deny the Church to the right to persecute heretics by Inquisitorial procedure. The curious case took place in 1324 when Richard Ledrede, the bishop of Ossory in Ireland accused the wealthy widow, Alice Kyteler, of witchcraft. She was implicated as the head of a local cult of witches who made ritual sacrifices to the Devil during nocturnal meetings where they preformed revolting magical rites designed to murder men or render them impotent. In addition to these sordid crimes, Lady Kyteler allegedly kept a shape-shifting demon familiar that she lay with carnally, and in return he granted her wealth and anything she willed.[128] While sorcery trials were certainly conducted in medieval Christendom, a case of this magnitude, concerning a sect of organized heretics and accusations of demonic coupling, was unprecedented and met fierce resistance in Ireland, as the bishop turned a family inheritance dispute into a sorcery trial.[129]

Beginning his career as a Franciscan of English origin, Ledrede received his clerical training on the continent and likely absorbed his understandings of heresy and demon worship from the papal court at Avignon that was particularly preoccupied with fears of magical plots and *maleficium*. He was appointed bishop by Pope John XXII (1249-1334) and consecrated at Avignon, visiting a volatile papal court that had recently conducted several heresy trails, most notably that of the Templars, Bishop Guichard, and proceedings for the post-mortem trial of Pope Boniface VIII. Though the heresy trials were all political in nature, the charges brought against the accused persisted in the belief that *maleficium* was no longer the act of a single sorcerer, but rather the collective threat

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[128] Richard De Ledrede, *A Contemporary Narrative of the Proceedings Against Dame Alice Kyteler*, in *The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler*, ed. L.S. Davidson and J.O. Ward (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1993), 27-30.

[129] L.S. Davidson, introduction to *The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler*, 1-3.

of a diabolical cult of devil worshipping witches who were enemies to all of Christendom.[130] This understanding of demonic witchcraft visibly marked Ledrede's career as heretic hunter and ultimately colored his rulings in the property dispute of Lady Alice's many disgruntled sons and stepsons. They complained to the bishop that the wealthy widow had come into her posterity through vile sorceries, rendering her claim to inheritance invalid. Property disputes of this nature were not all that uncommon in the medieval world, as women often outlived their husbands, accumulating wealth and heirs of their own after several marriages, leaving themselves open to accusations of sorcery from resentful stepchildren.[131] While charges of witchcraft deriving from family quarrels were perhaps common, the diabolical cult-like elements of Ledrede's shocking allegations and the added sexual element of Alice's personal *incubus* were unprecedented, and met with hostility by the wealthy widow's local allies, who promptly had the bishop arrested and held for seventeen days.[132]

Despite the protests of local authorities, Ledrede pressed for the arrest of Alice Kyteler and eleven of her alleged accomplices after his release from prison. The bishop officially summoned Lady Kyteler to appear and answer for her crimes of heresy; she in turn fled from Kilkenny to England with the help of her wealthy kinsmen. For her impudence and failure to comply, Ledrede excommunicated Lady Alice and in response she sued the bishop for defamation of character. As a distant relative to Lady Alice, the local seneschal, Sir Arnold Poer, and other powerful noblemen cited the bishop to appear

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[130] Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 139.

[131] Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 237.

[132] Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 138.

before parliament in Dublin.[133] Medieval Irish law was a blend of locally arbitrated *brehon* law and English common law, but when the matter of heretical witchcraft came to parliament in Dublin, noblemen of Kilkenny had little to say when the assembly was won over by the religious ardor of Ledrede.[134] The bishop was then able to proceed with the arrest of Alice Kyteler's alleged associates. In June of 1324, the bishop seized Lady Alice's maidservant, Petronilla and had her publically flogged to extract a lurid confession that served as evidence for his accusations. This act was particularly heinous considering that common law prohibited torture, even during sorcery trials. The practice was admissible by Roman law, however, and was frequently used to obtain confessions on the continent during Inquisitorial trials. The same day Petronilla confessed to participating in Lady Alice's foul sorceries, she became the first heretic to be burnt at the stake in Ireland, rather than being hanged for the civil crime of sorcery, as was customary in England. [135] Alice Kyteler was the only accused witch to escape persecution, but some years after the mayhem of the sorcery trial Ledrede himself was summoned before the court of the archbishop of Dublin, as well as many secular courts, to respond to various crimes, including the instigation of murder. In effect the bishop was exiled as he fled to Avignon, swearing to the pope that Ireland was full of heretics.[136]

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[133] Ibid., 139.

[134] *Brehon* law is the term used to describe Irish native law. Although the English settled in Ireland between 1169 and 1172, bringing with them English common law, *brehon* law persisted at the local level until the English came to dominate the island in the seventeenth century. See Janet Sinder, "Irish Legal History: An Overview and Guide to the Sources," *Law Library Journal* 93 (2001): 243.

[135] Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (San Francisco: Pandora, 1994), 76.

[136] Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 139-40.

The case of Alice Kyteler set several important precedents for the European witch trials, including the theme of demonic coupling, the idea that cults of demonic witches sought to destroy Christendom and the patriarchal order, and the notion that sorcery equated to heresy and was punishable by torture and death by fire. These traits, however, rarely characterized English sorcery trials which remained relatively restrained and localized.[137] In fact, upon accusing Lady Alice of such vile crimes, the bishop met fierce resistance from local authorities, who described Ledrede as a meddling foreigner who introduced oppressive and unfamiliar notions of heretical witchcraft in an attempt to destroy the religious heritage of Ireland.[138] Many have even discussed the possibility of the trial being an attempt by the papacy to exert spiritual control over England and its provinces. L.S. Davidson describes the case as "a precocious attempt to introduce a relatively remote province [Ireland] to the new model of witchcraft being developed on the Continent by the French theological schools and the Avignon papacy."[139] Overall, Ledrede's sexually charged conception of Alice Kyteler as the witch in command of a Devil-worshiping cult of heretics is representative of the stereotypical continental witch. This image was largely foreign to a fourteenth-century English audience, however, and rather the opposite is preserved in the whimsical portrayal of Morgan le Fay recorded in the contemporaneous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The French romances would forever tarnish the name of Morgan le Fay; but her appearance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* illustrates how English perceptions of magic in fourteenth-century Arthurian legend remained enchanted rather than demonized.

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[137] Barstow, *Witchcraze*, 76-77.

[138] Ledrede, *A Contemporary Narrative of the Proceedings Against Dame Alice Kyteler*, 48.

[139] Davidson, introduction to *The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler*, 1-2.

Most magic in medieval Irish and English literature was removed from Christian doctrine and inspired by pagan tradition and Celtic mythology. The link between human beings and morally ambiguous fairies was a popular theme, with charming women leading unsuspecting mortals into the Fairy Hill to keep as prisoners in a realm of everlasting life and feasts.[140] Though they were classified as demons, fairies were often aligned with the powers of good; their elemental magic was sometimes even assimilated into the biographies of saints' lives, illustrating an understanding of magic that was compatible with Christianity.[141] Within the fourteenth-century work, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Morgan le Fay appears as a magical trickster, using her craft to draw Gawain out of Camelot in order to test his chivalric values.

Composed by the anonymous Pearl Poet in 1375, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is widely regarded as the finest Middle English Arthurian romance, regaling the reader with a tale of the mysterious Green Knight sent to King Arthur's hall as if by "illusion and enchantment," to challenge the wits and bravery of the knights of the Round Table by means of a Christmas game.[142] The Green Knight announces that any man brave enough to strike him with his great axe may keep it as his own, provided that the knight again meet with him in a year and a day for a return blow.[143] The beheading theme of the Green Knight's Christmas game immediately recalls a folkloric tradition and belies the Pearl Poet's familiarity with the epic Irish hero, Cuchulainn. According to legend, Cuchulainn was said to have taken the head of a giant challenger and was in turn required

[140] Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 53.

[141] Ibid., 54.

[142] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 19.

[143] Ibid.

to receive a return blow, which he miraculously survives. In another variation, three heroes behead the giant, but only Cuchulainn displays the courage to return and meet his opponent's axe.[144] Like his legendary predecessor, Gawain is the knight brave enough to agree to the twisted game of beheading, and is thus honor bound to journey to the Green Chapel the next year, where the Green Knight awaits. In a display of knightly piety and to protect him on his quest, Gawain invokes the image of "the gracious Queen of Heaven . . . on the inner side of his shield her image emblazoned, so that when he glanced thereto, his courage never failed."[145] By Morgan's magical craft, Gawain is drawn away from Arthur's civilized court into the wild woods. Deep in the forest, Gawain's knightly prowess is tested by unpredictable magic, where traditional chivalric values and Christian piety do him little good in the inverted feminine domain of the otherworld. Here Morgan's magic and illusions are potentially malicious, but rather than French traditions that tie her to continental constructions of witchcraft, the Morgan le Fey of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* echoes the mischievous fairy mistress of Celtic myth as she uses her magic simply to test and humble Gawain.

On his journey to the Green Chapel, Gawain travels far from civilization, "into a forest full, deep, fantastic and wild," where Morgan's magic embodies the unpredictable nature of the wood.[146] Folk tales and popular notions of sorcery reflected anxiety about the mystery of life and nature, and as a result witches were often endowed with powers over weather and the elements. Removed from the rule of men, forests were frequently regarded as magical places or portals to another world where the 'woodwives' and

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[144] Lacy, *Arthurian Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight."

[145] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 39.

[146] Ibid., 43.

'wildwomen' of lore ran with the Greek goddess Diana, waiting to tempt or trick wandering mortals.[147] As Gawain retreats into the wood, away from the courtly realm of King Arthur, Morgan le Fay is able to work her wild and elemental magic that echoes a Celtic past.

Wandering through an enchanted landscape populated by "wicked dragons," "trolls from treacherous crags," and "ogres who harrass . . . from the high hills," Gawain emerges half-starved and miraculously comes upon the forest castle of Lord Bercilak. In this otherworldly realm Gawain unknowingly encounters the shape-shifter Morgan le Fay, drawing behavioral patterns from Celtic motifs, rather than that of the continental witch.[148] In the home of Lord Bercilak, Gawain is welcomed to a grand feast, where Morgan simultaneously takes the form of both the beautiful lady of the house and an ancient crone, "held highly in honor by humans round about."[149] Gawain observes that the "ladies revealed little likeness, for if the young wife was winsome, withered was the other," and yet they trod together.[150] Although many critics have found Morgan le Fay's role in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to be entirely peripheral, most recently scholars have asserted that Morgan's role is diverse as she assumes a variety of feminine roles to contribute towards the testing of Gawain.[151] As a shape-shifter, Morgan's identity holds a certain plurality and multiplicity that is shared by a myriad of supernatural Celtic female figures. Her appearance in this tale, however, corresponds most strongly with that of the

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[147] Russell and Alexander, *A History of Witchcraft*, 46.

[148] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 35.

[149] Ibid., 55.

[150] Ibid.

[151] Geraldine Heng, "Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *PMLA* 106 (1991): 500-502.

loathly lady, who is characterized throughout folklore by her changing outward appearance from haggardly to beautiful, her uninhibited sexuality, and her role as a mentor to knights.[152] Though he finds a sense of security within the walls of the lord's castle, Gawain has entered a court imbued with feminine magic, a wild forest realm far from the patriarchal rule of King Arthur.

In the guise of the lovely Lady Bercilak, Morgan tests Gawain's honor and chivalry by attempting to seduce him over a period of three days while the lord is away hunting. Gawain finds himself in an alternative courtly reality where women set the rules and act as the sexual aggressors. With full knowledge that her husband bid Gawain give him anything he received during the day while he is out, the wily lady of the house tempts the knight with a game of seduction.[153] Unwilling to offend the lady or act dishonorably towards his host, Gawain struggles to act with courtesy. Attempting to stand on his honor, Gawain refuses her sexual advances and only kisses the lady, dutifully returning to the lord what he received during the day. After several days of chivalrous conduct while the lady uses "her enthralling face," "thrillingly naked"throat and, "her breasts bare in front" to entice Gawain, the Lady Bercilak insists on presenting the noble knight with a keepsake.[154] He refuses her gold ring, so she offers instead her enchanted green girdle, embroidered with spells and embellished with pendants that she promises will protect him from all bodily harm.[155] Reluctantly, Gawain accepts her gift, fearing he may die from the Green Knight's blow the next day. He neglects to share his secret with

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[152] Herbert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, 56.

[153] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 87.

[154] Ibid., 93.

[155] Ibid.

the lord of the house, however, failing to be truthful in hopes of saving his own life. In a way Morgan's trials aid in reinforcing traditional chivalric values, but part of her purpose may also be to humble Gawain, forcing him to compromise his notions of honor and morality in unpredictable and difficult situations.

Protected by the girdle, Gawain makes his way to the Green Chapel, where the Green Knight returns his blow; however the hero's neck is only nicked and he is spared a full beheading, as the Green Knight unveils the purpose of his journey and Morgan le Fay's trickster identity. Here Morgan le Fay has a problematic appearance in the text, as she is central to the plot as the magical mastermind behind Gawain's trials, but also peripheral in that her tricks are concealed until the end of the work. After Gawain escapes the Green Knight's blow, the latter reveals himself as Lord Bercilak. He admits he holds, "sway in this land through the might of Morgan le Fay who in my house dwells, and the science of lore[156] through [Morgan's] skills well learned."[157] Gawain himself is absolved of any guilt as Lord Bercilak forgives him for his minor moral transgressions. He admits that he does not blame Gawain for taking the girdle to save his life and confesses, "the wooing of my wife I wrought myself. I told her to tempt you, and you truly seem to be the most faultless knight who ever on foot went."[158] Lord Bercilak then speaks of the power of Morgan le Fay, informing Gawain, "the mastery of Merlin she has managed to acquire, for she once dallied in delight and developed an affair with that marvelous

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[156] Whereas the integrity of her learned magical skills is maintained in the dual language translation used, other translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, including a recent Oxford translation, refer to Morgan's magical knowledge as "wiles in witchcraft," perhaps contributing to her reputation as a decidedly dark and witch-like figure. See *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. Keith Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 87.

[157] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 135.

[158] Ibid., 131.

magician."[159] He further recalls a mythic past and reverently identifies her as "Morgan the goddess," who sent him in a ghastly green guise to challenge Gawain's wits, tempt his pride, and "to see if there were truth in the rumors of renown of the great Round Table."[160]

Though many dismiss Morgan in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as an evil witch and an enemy of Christian knights, her magical trials contribute towards the testing of Gawain and his knightly prowess. Her magic is not portrayed as a demonic force, but instead acts as an agent of change whereby Gawain is able to humbly recognize his faults as a knight, in turn making him a better man.[161] As in many English folk tales, here Morgan's magic is the force by which the moral of the story is reinforced. With her illusions, assertive attempts at seduction, and twisted game of beheading, Morgan draws Gawain away from the "civilized" court of King Arthur into the feminine domain of the Celtic otherworld, where he is unable to maintain strict adherence to a chivalric code though he is renowned as the most virtuous and pious of knights. Gawain's experience with the Green Knight and Morgan's magical trials humble him, rendering Morgan into a morally ambiguous, but helpful character who incites change and transformation.

Although the early French romances of Chrétien de Troyes maintain the tradition of "Morgan the Wise" as an enchanted healer, the tales imagined in the thirteenth century demonize Morgan le Fay, reflecting the tensions of a medieval world, darkening perceptions of magic, and heightened suspicion of female magicians in the minds of European authors. Undoubtedly centuries of population fluctuation, war, disease, famine,

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[159] Ibid., 135.

[160] Ibid., 135-37.

[161] Herbert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, 54-55.

and religious upheaval left their mark on European society, as Satan and demonic forces became more vivid in the popular mentality. Shadows of these anxieties were projected onto early witch stereotypes, as well as French and Italian manifestations of Morgan le Fay. Continental literature transformed a formerly benevolent otherworldly healer into an evil, sexually debauched, and spiteful woman, who practices a highly structured form of demonic magic to enact her diabolical enchantments. While the Pearl Poet leans heavily on Celtic tradition to inform his depiction of Morgan, he is firmly aware of the dark French tradition of her character, for he names her as Arthur's sister, and reports her affair with Merlin. Rather than appearing as a witch-like figure, however, the Morgan le Fay of the Gawain tale dwells far from the realm of mortal men and emerges as a whimsical character with wildly unpredictable magic, reminiscent of Geoffrey's semi-divine Morgan from the twelfth-century *Vita Merlini*.

In England, a persistent tradition of folklore preserved the moral ambiguity of a pantheon of Celtic creatures that were never fully assimilated into Christian demonologies, allowing the English image of Morgan le Fay to remain almost wholly insulated from continental constructions of witchcraft until the fifteenth century. [162] Though the fourteenth-century writings of the Pearl Poet speak of Morgan the Goddess with great reverence, the author's writings do warn against the dangers of other female sorcerers. The Pearl Poet admits that many men were, "through the wiles of women bewitched into woe . . . . by women both mild and wild they were confused and used,"

[162] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages,* 111.

foreshadowing fifteenth-century anxieties about witches that would surface in Sir Thomas Malory's portrayal of Morgan le Fay in *Le Morte Darthur*.[163]

[163] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 135.

IV. A FALSE SORCERESS AND WITCH?: CELTIC AMBIGUITIES AND MORGAN LE FAY IN *LE MORTE DARTHUR*

With her name and magic forever blackened by continental romances that rendered Geoffrey of Monmouth's benevolent and enchanted healer into a dark and witch-like figure, there remained a persistent tradition of Morgan le Fay in English literature that maintained the integrity of her once whimsical and semi-divine status. Drawing inspiration from a variety of English and French sources, the knight-prisoner Sir Thomas Malory was left to reconcile these differences as he imagined a deeply nuanced Morgan le Fay in his classic fifteenth-century work *Le Morte Darthur*. On the surface she appears as a "false sorseres and wycche" who "dud never good, but caused stryff and bate, and allway[s] in her dayes she was an enemy to all trew lovers."[164] In Malory's tales Morgan takes on shades of the witch as she creates dangerous magical objects, seduces knights, and uses her craft to plague King Arthur and his court. In a punishment that would fit her crimes as a witch "many knyghtes wysshed hir brente [burned]," however her apparent acts of malice serve as warnings to Arthur of the dangers that lurk beneath the superficial luster of his court.[165] Commonly Morgan is dismissed as a one-dimensional villainess in Malory's work, categorized as a witch and false sorceress; but strangely she is redeemed in the end as she accompanies a mortally wounded Arthur by

[164] Sir Thomas Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver rev. P. J. C. Field (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 1:430.

[165] Ibid., 1:157.

barge to the otherworld of Avalon, where she fills her traditional role as healer to the legendary king.

While Malory wrote in a time of increased suspicion of heretical witchcraft and his depiction of Morgan le Fay takes on characteristics of the continental witch, it is critical to note the time during and circumstances under which he wrote. Perhaps reflected in Morgan's dual image as a diabolical witch and enchanted healer were Malory's troubled times and circumstances as he witnessed the political chaos of the English Wars of the Roses and the breakdown of the chivalric age. Much like his dark enchantress, Malory himself was a somewhat conflicted figure, at times a respected landowner and knight who was intermittently incarcerated for attempted rape, theft, and alleged political scheming.[166] By means of her magic taking on both a destructive and restorative force in *Le Morte Darthur* it is possible that through Morgan, Malory manifests his criticisms against a fragile English monarchy as he endows her with the power to purge Camelot of corruption and heal a broken realm. With Malory's complex portrait of Morgan le Fay in mind, it is the purpose of this chapter to determine to what degree her witch-like appearance in *Le Morte Darthur* reflects gendered notions of continental witchcraft and to fully consider how her erratic magic and behavioral patterns echo a folkloric past, responding to the tumultuous circumstances of Malory's era.

To determine what elements of Malory's Morgan le Fay are informed by the continental witch, general patterns of fifteenth century witchcraft must be observed, especially as they relate to fully sexualized and demonized constructions of the witch, defined by clerical writings, popular notions of witchcraft, and the introduction of the

[166] P. J. C. Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 97-103.

definitive witch hunting manual, the *Malleus Maleficarum*. The first stirrings of the European witch-craze began in the fifteenth century as constant famine, war, and reoccurring waves of plagues contributed to the continual breakdown of medieval society and inspired fears of diabolical cults of witches and devil worshipers conspiring to dismantle Christendom. Witchcraft beliefs in particular, flourished in Malory's time, evidenced by a marked increase in the publication of theoretical discourses dedicated solely to witchcraft and the increased size and scope of witch trials throughout Europe.[167] At the cusp of the fifteenth century the University of Paris affirmed its belief in the existence of magic and zealously warned against the ever more present practice of sorcery, described as "a foul flood of errors newly emerging" from "olden darkness."[168] The condemnation of 1398 largely emphasized the idea of magicians engaging in a demonic pact. Through the idea of pact the theological faculty of the university further articulated the connection between sorcery and heresy, linking understandings of complex ritual magic with unlearned practices of common sorcery. As the Church increased in organizational efficiency and refined its position on magic and heresy, the size, scope, and severity of witchcraft prosecutions grew. Desperate to combat the armies of Satan and preserve the realm of Christendom, medieval authorities made scapegoats of the deviant, namely witches, Jews, and heretics.[169]

Perceived as a sort of contagion by the Church, the literature of the early fifteenth century reflects clerical concerns about sects of devil worshipers growing at

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[167] "Malory's Morgan le Fay: The Danger of Unrestrained Feminine Power," 85.

[168] University of Paris, Magic Arts Condemned, 1398 in *University Records and Life in the Middle Ages*, ed. Lynn Thorndike (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944; repr., New York: Norton, 1975), 263.

[169] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 202-3.

unprecedented rates. In 1409 Pope Alexander V wrote to the inquisitor of heretical depravity in Avignon, bidding him to cooperate with local religious authorities and secular powers to aid in persecuting and eradicating heretics. The pope was distrustful of the leniency found in episcopal courts alone and ordered the Inquisitor of Avignon to personally take charge of cases involving sorcery and the invocation of demons.[170] His letter describes disturbing reports of blasphemous Christians and "perfidious Jews . . . [that] have founded new sects and perform rites that are repugnant to Christian religion."[171] This letter marks a beginning to the popular acceptance of "diabolical" or collaborative witchcraft by the church. Within this understanding of witchcraft, a single witch cannot act alone, but rather operates as a member in a larger sect dedicated to the destruction of Christendom and the human race. These anxieties often manifested on the continent in stories of cannibalistic sects of heretics engaging in the witches' sabbath. For example, in 1435 Johannes Nider, a Dominican theologian authored the *Formicarius*, an extensive moral and theological treatise that recounts many anecdotes from inquisitors and captured witches describing their profane gatherings. Nider wrote that, "the witches gathered in a certain place, and when their deeds were done they saw the demon visibly appear in the form of a man. The disciples then had to deny Christianity, promise never to adore the Eucharist, and to trample the crucifix underfoot."[172] More disturbing, however, are the graphic confessions of a captured witch on how they devoured infants and prepared their bodies for sacrilegious rites:

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[170] Ibid., 205.

[171] Pope Alexander V to Pontus Fougeyron, 1409, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, ed. Kors and Peters, 153.

[172] Johannes Nider, *Formicarius*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, ed. Kors and Peters, 15.

> Unbaptized infants . . . we kill by our ceremonies in their cradles, or when they are lying in bed beside their parents . . . . We then remove them secretly from their graves and cook them in a cauldron until their flesh, cooked and separated from the bones, is made into a powerful liquid. From the solids of this material we make a certain unguent that is useful for our desires, arts, and transformations. From the liquids we fill a container, and from this, with a few additional ceremonies, anyone who drinks immediately becomes a member and master of our sect.[173]

On the continent, the belief in collaborative witchcraft fed into the idea of the witches' sabbath, where members trampled the cross, abjured the Catholic faith, engaged in cannibalistic infanticide and debauched orgies, and surrendered to a cult of Satan. This embellished understanding of witches and their horrifying rites justified harsher persecutions on the mainland, and the use of physical and psychological torture to extract confessions and the names of heretical collaborators.[174]

Throughout the fifteenth century the Church also bolstered the power of the Inquisition in an effort to eradicate the contagion of heresy. Canon law was unclear on procedures for conducting witch trials and as the crime became associated with heresy, the Inquisition superseded the authority of local, episcopal, and secular courts. To promote this rapid expansion of power Pope Eugenius IV (r.1431-1447) issued a number of bulls ordering inquisitors to specifically persecute magicians and diviners whose crimes largely fit the classical understanding of witchcraft in that they idolized demons, offered them sacrifice, desecrated the cross, and made pacts with the Devil. The policies of Eugenius IV greatly advanced the powers of the Inquisition, as did the acts passed by his predecessor Nicholas V (r. 1447-1455), who gave inquisitors the authority to

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[173] Ibid.

[174] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 229.

prosecute sorcerers, even when their connection to crimes of heresy was tenuous. [175] By the end of the fifteenth century the Inquisition received full papal support when Pope Innocent VIII (r.1484-1492) published the *Summis desiderantes affectibus* in 1484, sanctioning the activities of witch-hunters Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger. The bull officially "remove[d] all impediments by which in any way the said inquisitors are hindered in the exercise of their office, and to prevent the taint of heretical pravity and of other like evils from spreading their infection to the ruin of others who are innocent."[176] The significance of the infamous papal bull acted as a preemptive justification for Kramer and Sprenger's infamous demonology, the *Malleus Maleficarum*.[177] The *Summis desiderantes affectibus* of 1484 further established that the Inquisition against witches had full papal approval, allowing for mass persecutions to take place in the coming centuries[178] The *Malleus Maleficarum*, or Hammer of Witches, not only acted as a handbook for rooting out and persecuting witches, but also fully articulates gendered constructions of witchcraft that came to dominate on the continent, as for the first time the book primarily identified women as witches.[179]

Before the year 1500, 71 percent of accused witches and those executed for the crime were women. In centuries to come these figures would rise as high as 80 or 90

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[175] Ibid., 228-29.

[176] Pope Innocent VIII, *Summis desiderantes affectubus*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, ed. Kors and Peters, 178-79.

[177] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 230.

[178] Ibid.

[179] Moria Smith, "The Flying Phallus and the Laughing Inquisitor: Penis Theft in the *Malleus Maleficarum*," *Journal of Folklore Research* 39 (2002): 394.

percent as the crime came to be almost exclusively associated with women.[180] While the church, Roman law, and Inquisitorial procedure put the apparatus for persecution in place and provided a great deal of the intellectual foundations for witchcraft, in no way can they be held solely responsible for the violence of the witch hunts against women. Rather, the substantial gynophobia and apparent misogyny present in medieval European ideas concerning witchcraft and women may have a been a response to the medieval patriarchy in crisis, as continuous continental wars resulted in a high male mortality rate and threw the sex ratios of most communities off balance. In some areas the "continental wars had reduced the number of males so drastically that, at the time of the witch prosecutions, there were more than 200 women for every 100 men aged between 14 and 45."[181] Shortages of land and other economic restrictions forced young couples to postpone marriage until their late-twenties or early thirties, and while young men were incorporated into the military or the clergy, girls stayed home with poor prospects to marry. Unmarried women and widows formed large groups of 'spinsters,' and without being under a direct patriarchal influence they were socially ostracized, and subjected to ridicule and sexual suspicion. As the gender division grew more severe women's behavior became a matter of public concern. Penal law criminalized deviant female behavior such as adultery, infanticide, and prostitution. Cursing and bewitching were considered to be the most dangerous of feminine crimes, though, as the power of the witch could affect the weather, destroy crops and livestock, inflict physical harm, and

[180] Barstow, *Witchcraze*, Appendix B, 179-81.

[181] Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, ed., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Period of the Witch Trials* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 71.

even render a man impotent. [182] On the continent, the anxieties of a threatened patriarchy inspired stories of diabolical sects of witches that would gather in the woods at night to eat babies they had stolen from their mother's breast, fornicate with the Devil, and plot great acts of evil.

While fears of female witches surged in Malory's time and may have influenced his dark depiction of Morgan le Fay as a female practitioner of magic, it is important to note that the continental image of the witch never fully penetrated the popular English mindset. In contrast to the continent where the old pagan traditions of magic became a cult of Satan, in England witch hunts remained a peripheral phenomenon, with few documented sightings of the witches' sabbath, cannibalistic infanticide, or the Devil's pact.[183] Rather than mass persecutions, English witch trials were relatively tame and restrained, due to a belated and incomplete reception of the concept of heretical and demonic witchcraft in England.[184] Papal inquisitors and ideas concerning the great medieval heresies never crossed the Channel, and English authorities never officially initiated witch hunts, making the populace less paranoid about the new concept of heretical witchcraft when it was finally introduced in the fifteenth century. The English justice system usually insured that witches were tried by juries, and though they could condemn a witch based simply on reputation, in practice there were many acquittals due to incomplete or circumstantial evidence. The further lack of inquisitorial procedure and absence of legally sanctioned torture produced fewer confessions amongst English

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[182] Ibid., 70-71.

[183] Ibid., 79.

[184] Brian Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1995), 200.

witches, as opposed to their continental counterparts who might admit to any number of heretical depravities under torture.[185] Overall, the idea of collaborative witchcraft and demonic pacts were largely foreign to the English, and though the Devil made a minor appearance in most English witch accusations, his role was usually ambiguous and peripheral. Some of the witch's characteristics are integrated into Malory's Morgan as a seemingly treacherous, spiteful, and lustful woman, who uses malevolent sorcery to wreak havoc on Camelot, but she remains a conflicted character and a deeply complex magical figure inspired by a strong tradition of English folklore.

Witnessing the political calamity of the Wars of the Roses and the instability of the English monarchy, Sir Thomas Malory mourned the death of the chivalric age in *Le Morte Darthur* where he paints a complex portrait of Morgan le Fay as both a destructive witch scheming to overthrow Camelot and a nurturing healer, with the power to restore health to King Arthur after he is mortally wounded in the Battle of Camlann. As a period of unrest and intermittent dynastic conflict from 1455 to 1485, the Wars of the Roses destabilized the nobility of England as the royal houses of York and Lancaster battled to gain control of the throne. Beginning as a dispute of rulership among the heirs of Edward III, the nobles of the house of York deposed the weak and mentally-infirmed Lancastrian King Henry VI, and replaced him with Edward IV. After a period of relative peace, King Edward IV died suddenly in 1483, causing more political upheaval as his sons and heirs disappeared mysteriously after being sent to the Tower of London. Richard III then took the throne, but his short two-year reign was marked by dissent; and he was slain at the Battle of Bosworth Field, defeated by the forces of Henry Tudor, a distant Lancastrian claimant. Crowned in 1485, Henry VII began to bring an end to the destructive civil wars,

[185] Ibid., 200-202.

and a formal union between the warring households, when he married Elizabeth of York in 1486. The political chaos wrought by the Wars of the Roses left many of this era with a disturbed world view that is evident in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, with its emphasis on how the division of noble houses can ruin a kingdom.[186]

The political violence of the Wars of the Roses had profound social consequences as political and personal allegiances became impossible for knights and nobles to maintain. Not a great deal is decisively known about Malory himself, but he tells us he was a knight and a prisoner, and that he finished his classic work during the ninth year of King Edward IV's reign, which would be sometime between March 4, 1469 and March 3, 1470.[187] Impressed in his writing is a genuine sense of how troubled and broken the concept and practice of knighthood became during the Wars of the Roses, as vassals could not uphold their oaths of fealty to a single worthy lord.[188] A victim of such circumstance, Malory was most likely a Lancastrian sympathizer, implicated as a political enemy of York and periodically imprisoned. Within his text he expresses particular sympathy for a captive knight who suffered from suicidal depression, perhaps reflecting on his own sorrows while incarcerated for possessing the wrong political leanings. His frustrations, however, inspired a rich legacy found in *Le Morte Darthur*, an authoritative and anglicized collection of tales that comprehensively recounts the rise, reign, and fall of King Arthur and his knights.[189] Drawing from extensive familiarity of both English and French romances, Malory projects the anxieties of the times into his

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[186] Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*, 173.

[187] Gweneth Whitteridge, "The Identity of Sir Thomas Malory, Knight-Prisoner," *The Review of English Studies* 24 (1973): 257.

[188] Herbert, *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter*, 67.

[189] Lacy, *Arthurian Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Malory, Sir Thomas."

tales, noting the dangers of a weak monarch trying to keep hold of the crown and maintain the stability of a realm divided by shifting personal and political loyalties. Morgan le Fay operates in a similar world as Malory, knowledgeable of the courtly system, but hanging on the fringe.[190] Rather than simply representing a one-dimensional demonic witch, Morgan becomes the magical agent by which Malory manifests his criticisms against a fragile English monarchy as he endows her with both the destructive power to expose corruption in Camelot, and the ability to heal King Arthur and restore order to a broken realm.

To determine what elements of Morgan le Fay's character are informed by continental constructions of witchcraft in *Le Morte Darthur*, scholars such as MaryLynn Saul have turned to the definitive witch-hunting guide, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, composed only two years after the initial printing of Malory's classic. The witch-hunting manual is at pains to emphasize that "a greater number of witches is found in the fragile feminine sex than among men."[191] The book further deems women to be "impressionable," "intellectually like children," and, "more carnal than a man," concluding that, "a wicked woman [is] by her nature quicker to waver in her faith and consequently quicker to abjure the faith, which is the root of witchcraft."[192] As a woman it is therefore expected that when Morgan le Fay "was put to scole in a nunnery . . . she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye," a craft usually identified as demonic magic.[193] Whereas the *Malleus Maleficarum* and other contemporary sources

[190] Herbert, *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter*, 66.

[191] Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Reverend Montague Summers (New York: Dover Publications, 1978), 41.

[192] Ibid., 44.

conjure up images of grotesque and sacrilegious rites practiced by witches, the Middle English "nygromancye" is a much less pejorative term. Within the medieval English understanding, this type of magic was on the fringe of acceptability, derived from learning found in the seven liberal arts rather than interaction with demons or the dead.[194] In tracing the etymology of the Middle English "nygromancye," Helen Cooper argues that "although its derivation is equivalent to 'black magic', the word is often used for supernatural power derived from sources other than God rather than necessarily from the devil."[195] Contrary to French depictions, where it is clearly understood that the magic of the enchantress is enacted by demons, Malory does not blatantly associate Morgan with the Devil or identify her magic as a strictly malevolent force. Rather, Malory reports that Morgan's supernatural abilities originate from her mastery of knowledge and learning found in the seven liberal arts.

After Malory names Morgan a necromancer, he goes on to identify her according to traditional patriarchal relationships, as wife to King Uriens and mother to the great knight Uwayne; but she also displays the sort of behavior found among women "infected with witchcraft . . . namely infidelity, ambition, and lust."[196] While Morgan takes on shades of the stereotypical witch, unlike many thirteenth-century French accounts where Morgan exchanges her physical beauty for magical knowledge, Malory describes her as

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[193] Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 1:10.

[194] Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 161.

[195] Ibid.

[196] Kramer and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 47.

"a fayre lady as ony [one] myght be."[197] Nevertheless, Morgan's devious nature is first revealed when Arthur entrusts Excalibur's magical scabbard to her for safekeeping, but "she wolde have had Arthure hir brother slayne, and therefore she lete make anothir scawberd for Excaliber lyke it, by enchauntement, and gaf the scawberd Excaliber to her love," Accolon, a knight of the Round Table.[198]As the lustful and treacherous sister of King Arthur, who practices demonic magic, seduces knights, and schemes to bring down Camelot it seems reasonable for Saul to conclude that Morgan's "actions define her as a witch" but a close analysis of her character and magical episodes throughout the text demonstrates that Malory's Morgan is patterned off more than just the diabolical witch found in the *Malleus Maleficarum* and continental witch lore.[199]

Although Malory wrote at a time of increased suspicion of female witches, as a knight-prisoner it seems unlikely he would have regarded Morgan le Fay as nothing more than a demonic witch. Morgan's plot within *Le Morte Darthur* to slay her husband and brother in order to seize control of Camelot is seemingly malicious and self-serving, but Morgan's magic takes on a destructive force in order to purge King Arthur's realm of corruption. Just before Morgan arrives at court Arthur unwittingly lies with his "syster on the modirs syde," Morgause "and [he] begate uppon hir Sir Mordred."[200] Shortly after, Arthur has a prophetic dream whereby griffins and serpents invade to burn and slay all the people of his land. Merlin later tells the King, "ye have done a thynge late that God ys displesed with you," and predicts that the offspring of the incestuous affair "shall destroy

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[197] Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 1:45.

[198] Ibid., 1:78.

[199] Saul, "Malory's Morgan le Fay: The Danger of Unrestrained Feminine Power," 96.

[200] Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 1:41.

you and all the knyghtes of youre realme." [201] In that moment Arthur simply marvels at Merlin's prophecy, but then commits a heinous act of infanticide by the wizard's advice to eliminate the future threat of Mordred. He sends for all the children "borne in May Day, begotyn of lordis and borne of ladyes . . . . And all were putte in a shyppe to the se; and som were foure wekis olde and some lesse. And so by fortune the shyppe drove unto a castelle, and was all to-ryven [shattered to pieces] and destroyed the moste party, save that Mordred was cast up."[202] The pitiless decision to expose these infants in order to avoid divine punishment for his sins belies the questionable judgment of the young king, as does Arthur's choice in marrying Guenevere despite Merlin's warning that she would ultimately be unfaithful. In yet another exchange with the wizard, Arthur displays his naivety when he favors the masculine symbol of his sword, Excalibur, over the feminine symbol of Excalibur's enchanted scabbard, which Merlin tells him is worth "ten of the swerde; for whyles ye have the scawberde uppon you ye shall lose no blood, be ye never so wounded."[203] Arthur's inability to recognize the value of the sheath prefigures his distrust of Morgan and her many attempts to warn him of the impending doom of Camelot.[204] The questionable judgment and morality of a young King Arthur foreshadows the troubles that eventually corrupt Camelot from within. The timing of Arthur's poor rulings also align with Morgan le Fay's introduction at court and shortly after, the death of Merlin, allowing Morgan to assume the dominant magical role within the text, where she employs her craft to expose the weakness of her brother's court.

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[201] Ibid.,1:44.

[202] Ibid., 1:55.

[203] Ibid., 1:54.

[204] Herbert, *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter*, 77.

After the Lady of the Lake traps Merlin "by enchauntentement . . . undir a grete stone," Morgan's plot to depose her brother and slay her husband unfolds as King Arthur, King Uriens and Sir Accolon ride ahead of a hunting party one morning to pursue a great hart into the woods, the traditional stage of fairy magic in Celtic folklore.[205] Lucy Allen Paton identified this episode as the stereotypical fairy entrapment, where mortals are led into the magical realm of the fay by pursuing an otherworldly beast.[206] Upon following Morgan's enchanted hart, the men exhaust their horses and continue the hunt on foot, being drawn farther into the forest and Morgan's snare. Once Arthur captures and slays the beast, the trap is set and miraculously "a grete water" appears, where Arthur spies "a lytyll shippe, all apparayled with sylke downe to the watir."[207] Little does he know that the magnificent vessel is enchanted with no "erthely creature therein."[208] Once aboard the ship, Arthur, Uriens and Accolon find themselves in the otherworldly realm of the fey, as twelve fair maidens warmly welcome them and "served of all wynes and metys that they coude thynke of . . . . [T]he kynge had grete mervayle, for he never fared bettir in his lyff."[209] Blissfully unaware that they are the victims of Morgan's magic and aboard her fairy vessel, the men "leyde in their beddis easyly, and anone [soon] they felle on slepe and slepte merveylously sore all the nyght."[210] Rather than being inspired by witch lore,

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[205] Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 1:127.

[206] Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, 83.

[207] Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 1:137.

[208] Ibid.

[209] Ibid., 1:138.

[210] Ibid.

Morgan le Fay's power in Malory's work is largely removed from the Devil and instead takes on wild and elemental qualities, characteristic of fairy magic from Celtic folklore.

From the enchanted ship King Arthur, Accolon, and King Uriens, awake in different locations where Morgan's two-pronged plot to have Accolon slay her brother with Excalibur is thwarted by the Lady of the Lake, and Morgan's own hand in killing her husband is stayed by her son Uwayne. While some scholars have read Morgan's schemes of attempted murder and regicide as the rebellious actions of a witch threatening patriarchal authority and society at large, her magic only takes on a destructive and harmful guise to critique Arthur's kingship and show how easily the loyalties of his knights are compromised.[211] After being defeated by Arthur, Accolon confesses to his role in Morgan's plot to slay her brother, "the man in the worlde that she hatyth moste, because he is moste of worship and of prouesse of ony of hir bloode."[212] Unrepentant of his past sins and errant judgments that perhaps motivated Morgan's plans to depose him, Arthur absolves Accolon of his share of the blame in the treasonous plot. The King instead curses his "sistir Morgan la Fay," and foolishly looks past his knight's treachery, who was compelled "by hir false crauftis . . . to agré to hir fals lustes."[213] Arthur further swears to "be sore avenged uppon hir, that all Crystendom shall speke of hit," setting the tone for the adversarial relationship the siblings share for the remainder of the text.[214]

Upon learning that her plans have been thwarted, Morgan flees from Camelot into the forest, where her magic mimics that of the chaotic Irish battle goddess, Morrigan,

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[211] Saul, "Malory's Morgan le Fay: The Danger of Unrestrained Feminine Power," 88-91.

[212] Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 1:145.

[213] Ibid., 1:146.

[214] Ibid.

rather than the transfiguration abilities of the continental witch. Refusing to allow Arthur to remain invulnerable, Morgan le Fay seizes Excalibur's healing scabbard as her brother rests from his ordeals in a nunnery just outside the forest. After she plucks the sheath from his possession, Arthur awakens and pursues his sister, who spies him following her. Morgan rides to a lake nearby and, "lete throwe the scawberde in the deppyst of the watir."[215] Her destruction of the sheath does not necessarily signal betrayal or rebellion, but that Arthur is unworthy of holding Excalibur's enchanted scabbard, imbued with restorative feminine magic.[216] As a manifestation of the Irish Morrrigan, who acts as the guardian of warriors' deathbeds, it is possible that Morgan destroys Excalibur's healing sheath to seal Arthur's fate of dying in battle, ultimately allowing her to bring his ruinous reign to an end and for Arthur to restore his honor by dying a "worshipfull dethe" that will be forever preserved in legend.[217]

In making her escape Morgan rides "into a valey where many grete stonys were, and whan she sawe she muste be overtake[n], she shope [shaped] hirself, horse, and man, by enchauntemente unto grete marbyll stonys."[218] Shortly after, Morgan bids a messenger to tell Arthur, "I feare hym nat whyle I can make me and myne in lyknesse of stonys, and lette hym wete [wait] I can do much more whan I se my tyme."[219] Here it is most likely that Morgan's powers of transfiguration derive from Celtic sources, rather than continental witch lore. Medieval witches were rarely invested with shape-shifting

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[215] Ibid., 1:151.

[216] Herbert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, 85.

[217] Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 1:44.

[218] Ibid., 1:151.

[219] Ibid., 1:152.

abilities, but the rare account describes them as assuming the nocturnal guise of a cat, dog, hare, or wolf in order to cast spells undetected. [220] By contrast Morgan takes on the likeness of stone in her escape from Arthur, similar to an anecdote from Celtic mythology, whereby the Irish goddess, Morrigan has stolen a cow from the warrior, Cuchulainn. While Lucy Allen Paton admitted that the exact details of the accounts vary, she recognized the potentially mythic roots of Morgan's relationship with Arthur and explained the parallels between the two tales:

> Cuchulinn is about to attack the Morrigan when she and the cow vanish from sight, and she reappears in changed form; Arthur is on the point of overtaking Morgain, when she flings the scabbard out of sight and into the lake and shifts her shape. The Morrigan reminds Cuchulinn that she can transform herself at her pleasure, and threatens him with destruction; Morgain reminds Arthur that while she can transform herself into stone, she does not dread him.[221]

While the details may vary, structurally these incidents emphasize how female shape-shifters of Celtic origin are impervious to mere mortal men. At first she may appear as a destructive traitor-witch, but Malory's Morgan le Fay is a deeply complex magical figure, exhibiting the moral ambiguity of Celtic folk-spirits as she uses her craft in an attempt to depose the King that "God ys displesed with," and later to expose the weakness of Camelot from within.[222]

Although some of her actions seem personally motivated out of malice, many of Morgan's plots are designed to expose corruption in King Arthur's court, mainly the treasonous affair between Lancelot and Guenevere that compromises the loyalty of the

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[220] Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors*, 108-11.

[221] Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, 24.

[222] Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 1:44.

Knights of the Round Table. In addition to her attempts to seduce Lancelot into betraying Guenevere's love, Morgan le Fay crafts a magical horn that "had suche a vertu that there myght no lady nothir jantyllwoman drynke of that horne but yf she were trew to her husbande."[223] Intended to expose the forbidden love of Lancelot and Guenevere, the horn was intercepted and delivered by mistake to plague the court of King Mark, preserving the secrecy of the lovers' affair. In creating the horn by means of "sorsery" Morgan is named a "false sorseres and wycche . . . an enemy to all trew lovers."[224] On the surface Morgan's magic appears to be a malevolent force, intended to cause "stryff and bate" but in creating the enchanted horn she intends to expose the infidelity of the Queen and Arthur's most prized knight.[225] Rather than acting as a demonic force, like the magic practiced by continental witches, Morgan's magic is potentially beneficial, but often misunderstood.

When Arthur's knight, Sir Tristan, comes upon the castle of Morgan le Fay and requests lodging, she takes him as her prisoner. She bids him to bear her shield at the tournament of King Arthur that "signyfieth kynge Arthure and que[ne] Gwenyver, and a knyght that holdith them bothe in bondage and in servage."[226] Bearing Morgan's shield, Tristan "smote downe many knyghtes . . . . And whan kynge Arthure saw that shylde he mervayled gretly in what entent hit was made."[227] Even after a mysterious damsel blatantly informs Arthur that "thys shylde was ordayned for you, to warn you of youre

[223] Ibid., 1:429.

[224] Ibid., 1:431.

[225] Ibid.

[226] Ibid., 2:554.

[227] Ibid., 2:557.

shame and dishonoure that longith to you and youre quene," the King dismisses the notion after Tristan tells him that the shield was wrought by Morgan le Fay.[228] Shortly after this episode, Arthur is delivered a letter from King Mark, cautioning him of the ruin adultery will sow in his court. Malory writes "whan kygne Arthure undirstode the lettir, he mused of many thynges," for a while the king thinks on "his systyrs wordys . . . that she had seyde betwyxte queen Gwenyver and sir Launcelot."[229] Here, Malory hints that there may be more to Morgan's actions throughout the text than spite and malice. After a while, however, Arthur thinks of "how his owne sister was his enemy, and that she hated the queen and sir Launcelot to the deth, and so he put that all oute of his thought."[230] In repeatedly perceiving Morgan as his enemy and interpreting her magical warnings as diabolical and false enchantments, rather than a potential agent of growth and change, King Arthur fails to see the dangers of the Queen's affair and the complicity of his knights, effectively dooming his own kingdom to destruction.

In a final attempt to remind Arthur of the physical weakness of his kingdom, Morgan captures the great knight Alexander the Orphan, renowned for his strength and knightly prowess. At this point in the text, Arthur's healing scabbard is lost, rendering him vulnerable to his enemies in combat; but he may yet be saved if he and his knights are receptive to Morgan's counsel and aid. In a tournament, Morgan witnesses Alexander's skill in combat, but he is laid open with "sixteen grete woundis, an in especiall one of them was lyke to be his deth."[231] Before she helps him, though, Morgan

[228] Ibid.

[229] Ibid., 2:617.

[230] Ibid.

[231] Ibid., 2:642.

first exacerbates Alexander's condition, "Than quene Morgan le Fay serched his woundis and gaff hym suche an oynement that he sholde have dyed . . . . And than she put another oynemente upon hym, and he as oute of payne."[232] Here she exhibits her miraculous ability to both poison and heal, and promises that he may be restored to complete health if he stayed with her for a year and a day. This prefigures the same trust Arthur will need to place in his sister if she will accompany him to Avalon to mend his mortal wounds and restore him as the Once and Future King. Morgan demonstrates to Alexander, and by extension Arthur, that she can harm and heal at her whim, exposing the physical vulnerability of both knight and king.[233] By upholding his oath to stay by Morgan, Alexander may be restored to his former knightly grandeur, but his distrust of her power proves to destroy him when he strays from her castle to make war on every knight that comes his way. In the end, Alexander is slain, as Arthur is foretold to be in his final battle, and while both men are inherently distrustful of Morgan's magic that can harm as easily as it may heal, they are not destined to share quite the same fate.

Despite her many warnings directed to Arthur and his knights, the king dismisses Morgan's concerns and fails to recognize the treachery that lurks beneath the superficial luster of his court. Her aggravated efforts throughout the text to expose the disloyalty of the Queen and the complicity of the Knights of the Round Table are attempts to force Arthur to confront the divided loyalties of his kingdom. She is unable to incite Arthur to act, however, perhaps mirroring Malory's own frustrations as a knight-prisoner unable to serve a worthy lord.[234] It is only after Arthur's past sins penetrate the court in the form of

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[232] Ibid.

[233] Herbert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, 87-88.

Mordred that the treasonous affair between Lancelot and the Queen is revealed, prompting Arthur to cruelly order that Guenevere be burnt at the stake. As their love is exposed the loyalties of the Knights of the Round Table splinter as Lancelot rescues Guenevere from her execution and accidently slays Gawain's younger brothers. To avenge their deaths, Gawain goads Arthur into declaring war on Lancelot, providing Mordred with the distraction he needs to seize the throne. Though the efforts of Morgan le Fay to expose the forbidden love of Lancelot and Guenevere have often been read as motivated by jealously, in the end the danger of their affair is apparent, as the loyalties that held Camelot together crumble and civil war breaks out. The corruption that Morgan tried to preemptively purge from Arthur's court and expose with her many magical warnings ultimately destroys the kingdom from within. As Arthur rides into battle and finally eliminates the threat of Mordred, his own son born of an incestuous union, leaves the King grievously wounded.

Malory himself never witnessed an end to the Wars of the Roses, but he envisions reconciliation between the feuding siblings when he names Morgan le Fay as one of the queens shrouded in black to accompany Arthur by ship to Avalon after he is mortally wounded in his last battle. Aboard the barge the king lays his weary head on Morgan's lap, and she gently scolds her younger brother for ignoring her persistent warnings and incurring a wound so grievous that she must heal him, "A, my dere brother! Why [ha]ve ye taryed so longe frome me? Alas, thys wounde on youre head hath caught overmuch coulde."[235] Up until this point in Malory's text, Morgan and her brother share a contentious relationship, but in the end Arthur finds peace with his sister and tells his

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[234] Ibid., 89.

[235] Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3:1240.

knights to, “Comforte thyselff . . . . For I wyll into the vale of Avylyon to hele me of my grevous wounde.”[236] Here Malory recalls Morgan's traditional role as Arthur's healer in the otherworld, making his return to England a possibility when he writes “yet som men say in many p[art]ys of Inglonde that kynge Arthure ys nat dede, but h[ad] by the wyll of Oure Lords Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall com agayne, and shall wynne the Holy Crosse.”[237] The idea of Arthur’s sojourn into the Celtic island paradise of Avalon is firmly identified as a Breton belief that Malory intentionally invoked. In the English tradition, Arthur is not viewed as a departed spirit, but rather it is believed that he is kept alive in the otherworld through Morgan’s enchantment and will one day return to England.[238] Once again Morgan le Fay is imagined as the Queen of Avalon and assumes her immortal guise in her guardianship of Arthur. Malory echoes Morgan’s divine ancestry and relation to the triple-faced Irish Morrigan as a destroyer and a restorer. With her medicinal magic used to purge corruption from Camelot, she takes on shades of the goddess of fertility and death, and in her guardianship of Arthur, she acts as patron to the warrior-king. In life Arthur was too stubborn to accept Morgan’s aid, fearful of her mysterious magic that both harms and heals; but hovering on the brink of death the king finally accepts her aid and the potential benefit of her healing craft in the otherworld, where he may be mended and restored like the realm of Britain.

As a critic of the crown throughout his tale, Morgan le Fay gives voice to Malory’s frustrations with the problems of his own era, namely the devastation wrought by ambitious lords seizing power from a weak king. On the surface she appears to

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[236] Ibid.

[237] Ibid., 3:1242.

[238] Lacy, *Arthurian Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Avalon."

continuously harass Arthur and his knights, causing many to perceive her as a false sorceress and witch, but her actions are intended to remove the threats from her brother's reign so the kingdom may remain united under Arthur. Like Malory, Morgan seeks to serve a worthy lord but cannot prevent the impending destruction of civil war.[239] Her own circumstance mirrors Malory's, but he optimistically envisions reunion between the siblings as Morgan escorts Arthur into the healing vale of Avalon, perhaps symbolically representing Malory's desire too for healing and reconciliation between the noble houses of England.

Recently Morgan's appearance in Malory's classic work has been measured against the image of the continental witch laid out in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. The witch-hunting manual chiefly identifies witches as wicked, lustful, ambitious women who practice demonic magic and worship the Devil; however, this proves to be a poor model for Morgan le Fay, as Malory depicts her as a multifaceted magical character. She is initially introduced in the text with a certain duality as she fills typical feminine roles as a wife and mother, well learned in the art of 'nygromacye.' While the *Malleus Maleficarum* defines this as dangerous demonic magic, Morgan's supernatural abilities derive from learning found in the seven liberal arts. Her magic further takes on wild and elemental qualities typically associated with the supernatural feminine forces of Celtic myths and legend.

Firmly aware of both continental and English traditions of Arthurian legend, Malory adapted his tales to respond to troubled times in England, and perhaps inadvertently projects English perceptions of magic into his text. Malory's Morgan le Fay is not to blame for the crumbling of Camelot as an evil traitor witch, rather she is vested

[239] Herbert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, 78-79.

with the potential power to restore health to the king and by extension restore order to the realm. Often Morgan's magic seems malicious, but her plots only rarely have destructive ends, more often ending in thinly veiled warnings to Arthur and his knights of the role their actions play in the impending doom of Camelot. As she does throughout the English tradition of Arthurian literature, Malory's Morgan le Fay defies simple dichotomous definitions of good or evil, reflecting a continuous tradition of magic in England inspired by folklore that was never fully demonized by continental constructs of witchcraft. In English tales from the twelfth to fifteenth century Morgan le Fay consistently emerges as a character plucked from legend, and remains immortalized in literature as the eternal Queen of Avalon.

V. CONCLUSION

> I knew Mrs. le Fay by reputation, and was not expecting anything pleasant. She was held in awe by the whole realm, for she had made everyone believe she was a great sorceress. All her ways were wicked, all her instincts devilish. She was loaded to the eye-lids with cold malice. All her history was black with crime; and among her crimes murder was common. I was most curious to see her; as curious as I could have been to see Satan. To my surprise she was beautiful.
>
> --Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

Even the famous American novelist, Mark Twain was familiar with Morgan le Fay and her notorious reputation as a false sorceress and scheming murderess. In his political allegory *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Morgan represents the corruption of the medieval nobility. Beneath her beautiful veneer and sing-song voice she is a harsh mistress who employs torture daily in her dungeons, and lashes out with sudden violence to all who displease her. Twain's petty, indulgent, and malicious Morgan is a jealous contender to Arthur's throne and serves to demonstrate how Morgan le Fay has been traditionally perceived as a shallow villainess or a devious witch. Despite her unwavering variety in centuries of medieval literature and the inherent ambiguity built into her English characterizations, Morgan le Fay's status as a powerful and learned enchantress with the ability to harm or heal has left even modern audiences skeptical of her magical intent.

The connection in the popular mind between female healers, poison, and dark magic predates both modern and medieval stereotypes. Historically perceived in Western culture as the physically, mentally, and spiritually weaker sex, women were seen as

inherently inclined towards demonic seduction into the dark arts. Wise women well learned in herb lore and folk medicine were naturally suspected of using their knowledge for nefarious ends. Shadows of these anxieties were projected onto early Greco-Roman literary figures like Circe and Medea, depicted as venomous women more apt to poison than to cure. The image of the medieval witch, however, represents the most heinous rendering of cold calculating female malice, with her satanic rituals and noxious brews that instill illness and render men impotent. From antiquity through the medieval and modern eras, feminine magic has most often been seen as a destructive or demonizing force, and while some continental depictions of Morgan le Fay take on shades of the witch, the English tradition of her character defies demonic stereotypes.

The image of the witch and her malevolent practice of *maleficium* failed to fully permeate the imaginations of English authors. Instead, Morgan le Fay emerges as a relic of a Celtic pagan past, where as a shape-shifter her feminine magic takes on a certain duality. While Arthur is alive and king, Morgan acts as a critic of her brother and his knights, her magic sometimes taking on a destructive force in order to incite growth and transformation in Camelot. In the event of Arthur's death, Morgan assumes her immortal guise as the Queen of Avalon, and her magic takes on a restorative force in order to heal the king and perhaps one day return him to the realm of Britain. According to medieval English tradition, established by Geoffrey of Monmouth and echoed by the Pearl Poet and Sir Thomas Malory, Morgan is an immortal fey with wondrous magical knowledge who serves as Arthur's otherworldly guardian and healer to the legendary king, ultimately acting as a patron of the realm rather than its greatest enemy.

Although she is commonly regarded as a peripheral character, Morgan le Fay has withstood the test of time, and her shape-shifting nature frequently manifests throughout her many appearances in modern media. With the stereotype of the witch firmly entrenched in the modern psyche, Morgan's magic almost always translates to a contemporary audience as witchcraft or malevolent sorcery. From her slightly obscure appearance as the marvelous Mad Madam Mim in Disney's 1963 production of *The Sword in the Stone*, to her highly sexualized images in comic books, video games, and modern television and films, popular culture has cast Morgan le Fay in the role of the arch-villainous, with an inexplicable hatred of Arthur and his knights and a single-minded determination to wreak havoc on Camelot by means of her black magic.[240] Ignorant or intentionally forgetful of her origins, modern renderings of Arthurian tales typically fail to capture Morgan le Fay and all of her subtle nuances, more often dichotomizing the relationship between Morgan and her brother, with Arthur embodying the "good" king and his sister the "evil" traitor-witch. Perhaps future studies will come to consider Morgan le Fay and her infinite variety throughout Arthurian legend. They may choose to contemplate her mysterious role as a female magician in centuries of medieval literature, or consider how her continued representation as an evil enchantress reflects how the witch stereotype is perpetuated in modern Western society.

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[240] Morgan le Fay makes many appearances in modern media. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, both Marvel and DC comics featured Morgan as an immortal supervillainess who uses her dark magic to enact evil plots. She made her first appearance in the comic multiverse in Marvel's *Black Knight* #1, issued in 1955. Many modern films have also showcased Morgan le Fay as an arch villainess. For example, the 1981 film *Excalibur*, rendered Morgan into an evil temptress who uses her dark magic to seduce Arthur into an incestuous affair, and to entrap Merlin. More recently, the television series *Merlin*, aired on BBC from 2008 to 2012, portrayed Morgan as a somewhat multifaceted character whose magic eventually corrupts her as she jealously covets Arthur's throne and uses the dark arts to sow chaos in Camelot. Just like medieval artwork depicting witches as debauched sexual fiends, the imagery surrounding Morgan le Fay in modern media is hyper sexualized. Her costumes are most often very revealing, featuring plunging necklines, sheer or clinging fabrics, and split skirts, all acting to showcase her exaggerated feminine attributes.

As a shape-shifter, Morgan le Fay reserves the right to take on many magical forms and identities. Most recently feminist re-readings of Arthurian literature have prompted authors to tap into Morgan's Celtic roots and the matriarchal religions of lost pagan tribes. In her popular fantasy novel *The Mists of Avalon*, Marion Zimmer Bradley envisions Morgan le Fay as Morgaine, a priestess of the pagan Mother-Goddess who in her totality represents the life cycle and simultaneously embodies dimensions of all women as maiden, mother, wise woman, and warrior. By the end of the tale Morgaine assumes her role as the chief priestess of Avalon and comes to embody the Goddess, having moved through all stages of the feminine as "Morgaine the Maiden, who had summoned Arthur to the running of the deer and the challenge of the King Stag, and Morgaine the Mother who had been torn asunder when Gwydion [Mordred] was born, and the Queen of North Wales, summoning the eclipse to send Accolon raging against Arthur, and the Dark Queen of Fairy."[241] Bradley's novel was made into a mini-series of epic proportions produced by TNT in 2001 and inspired many other works of fiction that call upon Celtic deities and fairy motifs in their depictions of Morgan le Fay. Despite her infamous reputation as a traitorous witch and venomous woman, medieval English texts and even some modern literature preserve in their depictions of Morgan le Fay a perception of the supernatural rooted in a folkloric past, echoing the wild magic of the fair folk that live just beyond the mists of Avalon.

[241] Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1982), 867.

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