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# Masks of the Dark Goddess in Arthurian Literature: Origin and Evolution of Morgan le Fay

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Masks of the Dark Goddess in Arthurian Literature:  
Origin and Evolution of Morgan le Fay

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Thesis Approved:



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Masks of the Dark Goddess in Arthurian Literature:  
Origin and Evolution of Morgan le Fay

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Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Eastern Kentucky University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, John and Marsha Shearer, for their unwavering support, and to my entire family for their ever present love and encouragement.

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## ABSTRACT

The world of Arthurian legend is one steeped in mythology and magic, reflecting ancient Celtic traditions and tales that long preceded it. Such tales often feature perplexing and seemingly contradictory characters who drive complex plotlines and frequently challenge primary figures, greatly impacting how the overall story unfolds. A primary example of such a character is Morgan le Fay, who, by the time Sir Thomas Malory writes *Le Morte d'Arthur*, in the fifteenth century, has assumed a range of roles from sister to King Arthur, Queen in her own right, wicked sorceress, and healer. Using both Post-Colonial and Feminist lenses, this study focuses on the origin and evolution of the Arthurian character Morgan le Fay, analyzing how the shift from a Pre-Christian Celtic oral culture to a Christian literate one impacted the development of her character. Further, this work specifically aims to analyze the complexities that have gradually surfaced in regard to the nature of her character, while illustrating a level of consistency that she has maintained across texts and traditions, namely the roles of healer, embodiment of sovereignty, and agent of justice.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The host of perplexing and seemingly contradictory characters who inhabit the corpus of Arthurian tales point to the variety of sources that have influenced those tales; from British folklore and Celtic myth, to medieval Christianity. One of the most enigmatic characters within the various different Arthurian tales is Morgan le Fay, who would ultimately become known as the king's sister, a queen in her own right, a sorceress, and a constant challenge to Arthur's world. By the time Sir Thomas Malory writes of Morgan in the fifteenth century, in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, he presents a character whose various layers appear contradictory at certain points in his work, illustrating for his readers a paradoxical figure who exists in the margins of society, yet the power she wields from the shadows is so great it ultimately appears to contribute to the downfall of Arthur's kingdom. Despite her role as challenger and nemesis to King Arthur and his court, in the end she is the primary figure who receives the fatally wounded Arthur in a great barge in order to take him away to Avalon for healing. Here Morgan returns to the role of otherworldly healer which the earliest work to mention her by name, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, places her in, thus leaving Malory's readers perplexed regarding her nature and identity. This has led to a range of theories about the nature of Morgan le Fay, for while some have been quick to attribute her decline from earlier works, in which she was solely a healer, to the rise of patriarchal Christianity, others have understood the different roles she assumes to be indicative that her origin is in the deities

of the ancient oral Celtic cultures, in whose tales goddesses and gods don a variety of masks. This literature review will address some of the works which analyze Morgan le Fay, applying the different theories mentioned herein to her identity, while endeavoring to gain a clearer perspective on her various roles, which seemingly encompasses everything from deity and healer, to enchantress and wicked witch. As the overall conversation clearly reveals, Morgan is indeed a shapeshifter, generally appearing from the margins in a range of guises and masks, each of which speaks to her roles as healer, representation of sovereignty, and agent of justice. Regardless of the role she assumes, she always has a valuable lesson to impart, and in some cases this accompanies great loss and devastating repercussions.

In her book *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter* Jill Herbert analyzes Morgan Le Fay's role as a shapeshifter across the range of medieval texts she is presented in as well as within the cultures at large which have endeavored to categorize her. Further, she elaborates on Morgan's refusal to be categorized, yet writers and scholars persist with such attempts today. Beginning with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, the first work to mention Morgan by name, and working through her presentations in a few of the primary texts where she plays a significant role, Herbert illustrates Morgan's inconsistencies, arguing that the attempt to find consistencies in her character is futile. She proceeds to address a considerable amount of scholarship that has focused on Morgan, pointing out that, while much of it has offered a great deal of insight, it generally misses the mark in accurately assessing her character, specifically because there is always an attempt to place her in a box. This is even the case, she claims, with such notable scholars in the field of Arthurian Studies as Maureen Fries, who has brought

much light to Morgan's character, particularly in her discussion on the role of counter-hero. Herbert essentially refutes all aims to categorize and dichotomize Morgan, pointing out that humans, much like the deities of ancient traditions, are far too complex to define in terms of binaries, particularly shapeshifters like the healer of Avalon.

In "Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Life Of Merlin As Feminist Text*," Fiona Tolhurst discusses the possible influence political activities and the royal family may have had on Geoffrey's depiction of Morgan as solely an otherworldly healer and ruler of a sisterhood of nine. She believes that Empress Matilda may have greatly impacted his vision of this briefly mentioned yet powerful figure in the overall work. Tolhurst elaborates on the strength of character and strong will the claimant to the English throne exemplified, despite the ultimate defeat she experienced, pointing out the strong possibility that this may have intrigued Geoffrey, leading him to create two strong female characters in this work, one of whom is Morgen. Further, while previous writers have offered speculation pertaining to the actual name of Geoffrey's otherworldly ruler, a masculine name during this period, Tolhurst goes beyond this and discusses her role and functions as leader of his Insula Pomorum, some of which, she points out, were considered masculine while others were feminine. Due to the varying nature of her functions, Tolhurst ultimately claims that Morgen, who she refers to as a female king, and her domain are both androgynous, mysterious, and positive overall, existing outside of the court of King Arthur and accountable in no way to the patriarchal system that rules it.

In "Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain And The Green Knight*," Sheila Fisher, like Jill Herbert, aptly illustrates the paradox that is

Morgan le Fay, as she is a shadowy figure who seemingly lurks in the margins within this tale about Sir Gawain, but who nonetheless is the central orchestrator of the events within the entire work. The anonymous author of this work clearly positions the story within a Christian, patriarchal framework, as the ideas of chivalry and morals convey, but the influence of Celtic oral tradition, and the role of the divine feminine cannot be denied, as Fisher points out, for while the Green Knight/Sir Bertilak, who appears to be the primary challenger/nemesis within this work, attempts to take credit for the sequence of events earlier in the tale, even he ultimately admits that it is Morgan alone, who is finally named toward the end of the work, to whom the credit for the challenge can be given. Furthermore, Fisher also points out that, while she may appear to be in the margins of this work, Morgan is actually placed right at its center through her influence on Lady Bertilak, who could be considered another form or mask of Morgan's, lending to the notion that her power is beyond description, as she is even referred to by Sir Bertilak as a goddess. Fisher links this inhabiting of the margins, or private domain, to the realm of aristocratic women during this period and to medieval misogyny in general, but from this sphere Morgan, whether Celtic goddess or powerful enchantress, wielded great power and influence over the patriarchal, Christian court of Arthur.

Unlike Fisher, Lorraine Kochanske Stock explicitly claims, in "The Hag at Castle Hautdesert: The Celtic Sheela-na-gig and the *Auncian* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," that she believes the character Morgan le Fay was born from a type character in the earlier oral Celtic cultures, namely the Sheela-Na-Gig. The Sheela-Na-Gig, a Crone figure who represented fertility/sexuality, the divine feminine, and death for the ancient Celts, could be found throughout Britain and Ireland looming over the entrances of

castles and, with the rise of Christianity, she was even commonly found greeting the religious as they entered churches. It's due to both her form as a Crone, or Hag, and her association with churches that leads Stock to believe she was the archetype from whom Morgan was derived, as the latter was said to preside over the Green Chapel in *Sir Gawain*, and it's very likely that an image of the Sheela would have been looking down from atop the said chapel. Also, Stock refers to the similarity, both in name and characteristics, between Morgan and a specific ancient Celtic deity considered to be a Sheela-Na-Gig, the Morrigan.

While *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* could arguably be a prime example of Morgan's origin being rooted in a type character within Celtic culture, as discussed by Fisher and Stock, Maureen Fries considers a variety of Arthurian tales, dating from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, that speak to this notion also, as her work, "Female Heroes, Heroines and Counter-Heroes: Images of Women In Arthurian Tradition," discusses. She perceives Morgan as descending from the religious archetype of the Great Mother, and, as such, she would have posed a powerful threat to the Christian church and to patriarchal society, both of which possessed control of the production of the literate world. Fries discusses how her character was rounded and defined in a series of different works of literature, from initially assuming the role of a virgin healer, to a variety of roles in a single work under different names, of whom one, a wicked sorceress, actually identifies as Morgan.

Departing somewhat from the three authors discussed thus far, Carolyne Larrington, in *King Arhtur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters In Arthurian*

*Tradition*, believes that Morgan le Fay has her origins, not in the oral cultures of the Celts, but rather in those of the ancient Greeks. Larrington believes that the character's first portrayal in literature, Morgen in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, was derived from the sorceresses Medea and Circe of Greek myth, and most heavily on Medea. She takes into consideration the fact that one of Geoffrey's contemporaries was Benoit de Ste. Maure, the writer of *Le Roman de Troie*, in which the character of Medea was featured, and who bears striking similarities to Morgen, which leads to her theory that this initial version of the Arthurian character owes entirely everything to the sorceresses of Greek myth, rather than the Celtic oral cultures and folklore.

Caitlin Matthews, in *King Arthur and The Goddess of The Land*, begins her search for the original identity of Morgan le Fay by looking for a Proto-Morgan, who would have been more of a type character in the oral traditions of the Celts, specifically a consort/healer to a fallen hero. Like Stock, Matthews believes that evidence for this Celtic Proto-Morgan can be found in Irish tradition in the form of the death/battle goddess Morrigan, as well as in the Welsh Modron, who was a Great Mother and washer at the ford, and the Breton Morgue, queen of faerie and haunter of wells. She specifically elaborates on the connection between Morgen and the Welsh Modron, as there is an oral Welsh tradition that speaks of an encounter between King Urien and Modron, daughter of the King of the Otherworld, who was fated to wait at the ford where the meeting occurs until she encounters a Christian man with whom she can have a child. This comes to pass, and the child is Owain. In Arthurian legend Urien is said to be the husband of Morgan le Fay, who is the mother of Owain. While there is no specific evidence of the name Morgan, which in Welsh was a masculine name, appearing in the Celtic traditions

and Arthurian legend prior to Geoffrey of Monmouth, it would seem, as Matthews elaborates on, that there is a clear connection to the type character the Great Mother and washer at the ford of Welsh oral tradition.

In her work, "Fairy Godmothers and Fairy Lovers," Laurence Harf-Lancner expresses the belief, similar to Matthews, that Morgan le Fay's original type character is the Breton Fairy Queen of Celtic oral tradition, and thus came into the literature of King Arthur by way of the folklore of Brittany. She discusses how this character would assume various roles, from Fairy Godmothers to otherworldly paramours, and furthermore would sometimes be referred to as a woman endowed with great powers through skill and education, while at other times she would be looked upon as a goddess. Interestingly, Harf-Lancner also mentions the work *Le Roman de Troie*, the story believed by Larrington to have within it the precursor for Geoffrey's Morgen, the sorceress Medea, but he points out that there is also a fairy from the Otherworld within it, namely Orva la fee, in whom some scholars have clearly seen a precursor for Morgan le Fay.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BIBLIOGRAPHY OVERVIEW AND THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

The world of Arthurian legend is one steeped in mythology and magic, reflecting ancient Celtic traditions and tales that long preceded it. Similar to the British Celtic myths of old, the tales of King Arthur's world are populated with many characters who are often perplexing and seemingly contradictory from one scene to the next. A primary example of such a character is Morgan le Fay, who, by the time Sir Thomas Malory writes *Le Morte d'Arthur*, in the fifteenth century, has assumed a range of roles from sister to King Arthur, Queen in her own right, wicked sorceress, and healer. Malory seems to have presented to his readers an enigma, for in one moment she appears as a treacherous villain, while in the next she is a loving healer restoring the sick to health, leaving audiences inclined to ask for centuries to come why there are so many inconsistencies with the nature of this character and her overall development. Furthermore, in her last appearance in Malory's work, as the healer, she is returning to the role she originally assumes in the first work ever to mention her by name, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, which raises the question regarding what led to her fall to begin with. This has led to a range of theories pertaining to the nature of Morgan le Fay, for while some have been quick to associate her fall from earlier works, in which she was a healer, solely to the rise of patriarchal Christianity, others have understood the different roles she assumes to be indicative that her origin can be found in the deities of the ancient oral Celtic cultures. In such tales goddesses and gods don a variety of masks which differ

greatly from one story to the next, appearing as friend in one instant and as foe in the next. Using both Post-Colonial and Feminist lenses, this study will focus on the origin and evolution of the Arthurian character Morgan le Fay, analyzing how the shift from a Pre-Christian Celtic oral culture to a Christian literate one impacted the development of her character. Further, this work will specifically aim to analyze the complexities that have gradually surfaced in regard to the nature of her character, while illustrating a level of consistency that she has maintained across texts and traditions, namely the roles of healer, embodiment of sovereignty, and agent of justice.

In the field of Arthurian Studies a great deal of interest and research has centered on King Arthur himself, Merlin, Guenevere, and Lancelot, but little scholarship has been devoted to Morgan le Fay. As of yet, there isn't a study that specifically looks at the various works in which Morgan plays an important role, analyzing her character and the various masks she wears. The current study will aim to fill this gap in Arthurian scholarship, while also focusing on the overarching narrative pertaining to Morgan's character. While some theorists, such as Jill Herbert, believe that an attempt to find consistency in Morgan's narrative may only further contribute to binary thinking, this work sets out to prove otherwise, as such an approach can be limiting in and of itself. Morgan is a shapeshifter, and her character does indeed defy binaries and being categorized, but such factors do not prevent her from having a narrative and maintaining consistencies across the corpus of Arthurian texts. Through identifying such consistencies across the wide range of Arthurian texts, audiences can better understand her character overall, enabling theorists and general readers alike to more clearly perceive Morgan as a figure who is both human and descended from the deities of old.

Considering the theories of Yi-Fu Tuan, regarding space and place, can bring a great deal of insight to the development of the character of Morgan le Fay, particularly as she shifts from benevolent healer to wicked sorceress in medieval literature. In his work *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* Tuan elaborates on the notion that there are two distinct types of mythical space, the first of which is, “a fuzzy area of defective knowledge surrounding the empirically known; it frames pragmatic space. In the other it is the spatial component of a world view, a conception of localized values” (Tuan 86). In the first type of mythical space are to be found otherworlds such as the Elysian Fields, the Garden of the Hesperides, and the Arthurian Avalon, all of which are outside of practical, known space, but considered paradisiacal locations none the less. In Arthurian legend Morgan is the ruler of the otherworld Avalon, and in early medieval works both she and her domain assumed a more benevolent role, specifically associated with healing. As medieval cultures began shifting in Britain and Ireland, with the gradual rise of Christianity and patriarchal society, that which was unknown was relegated to the margins of society, given no voice, and labeled sinister. In this regard audiences of Arthurian literature can begin to see Tuan’s second notion of mythical space surfacing, particularly where the center of society is concerned, namely the court of Camelot, with unfamiliar locations outside of it being dismissed as other and potentially dangerous.

In addition to Tuan’s discussion, giving attention to the shift which occurred from oral to literate societies regarding characters, space, and place can prove beneficial for gaining a clearer understanding of such characters as Morgan. Walter Ong, in *Orality and Literacy*, discusses the process by which the type character found in oral cultures gradually becomes more round in a literate culture, pointing out that in this process

characters essentially attain more human like and relatable qualities. In this sense characters become less predictable and act according to situations that arise within a storyline, which in turn reflects various different layers to their overall identity, thus presenting a more complex and realistic character (Ong 148). In early literate societies there are often found traces of the former oral culture in literature, or what Ong refers to as residual orality, and the earliest depictions of Morgan are clear examples of this. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* and Etienne de Rouen's *Draco Normanicus* she is barely more than a type character who rules an otherworldly paradisiacal realm, specifically reflecting a deep connection between Morgan and the place she rules, as is often the case with the deities who serve as her precursors, namely the mother goddess Modron and the Morrigan, goddess of battle and death. Modron is the daughter of Avallach, the embodiment of the Isle of Avalon, and the Morrigan is generally associated with the battlefield, surfacing in the midst of chaos and strife. Like these two characters, Morgan and her otherworld realm are essentially synonymous, as they are both in the first type of mythical space Tuan discusses, outside of the world of everyday life, and this combined with Morgan's vague depiction presents for audiences a type, or flat, character who exists in the margins of the narrative.

### **Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini***

In his lesser known work *Vita Merlini*, written around 1150, Geoffrey of Monmouth first introduces readers to the mysterious otherworldly healer, whom he names Morgen. She is the virgin healer of the Insula Pomorum, or Isle of Apples, leading a sisterhood of nine, and it is to her that the wounded Arthur is brought by Merlin

following his last battle. In this work Morgen is beneficent and nurturing, bearing a strong resemblance to her possible precursor, Modron, the Welsh Great Mother, who is the daughter of the king of the Isle of Apples in Celtic oral tradition. In her work, *King Arthur's Enchantresses*, Carolyne Larrington argues that Geoffrey's otherworldly healer actually also owes a great deal to sources outside of the Celtic oral traditions, specifically to the Greek sorceresses Medea and Circe, a distinction being that Morgen appears to only use her powers for good (Larrington 8-10). While this may be the case, it does nevertheless set the stage for a possible fall for the otherworldly healer, as she practices a magic and lives a life that is outside of the province of the church, and in medieval society such waters could be dangerous to tread. Another distinction to make about this first appearance of Morgen into the world of Arthurian literature is the point that she is actually sought out rather than actively journeying in a barge to collect the dying king, as is the case with all of the tales that follow. This being the situation, she appears to be inclined to remain outside of the world of King Arthur and his court, which would therefore lessen the potential threat such a figure could impose in the minds of the patriarchal medieval society, for although she is 'other' and therefore potentially dangerous, as long as she stays in the Otherworld away from the world of Camelot, there was no need to darken her character.

In his work *Orality and Literacy* Walter Ong discusses the process by which a type character from an oral culture becomes round in a literate one, claiming that, "the flat, 'heavy' or type character yields to characters that grow more and more 'round', that is, that perform in ways at first blush unpredictable, but ultimately consistent in terms of the complex character structure and complex motivations with which the round character

is endowed” (Ong 148). In Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlini* Morgan is essentially an example of the type character discussed by Ong, as she is specifically a healer and priestess of an otherworldly paradise who leads a sisterhood of nine other priestesses, and outside of this readers know very little else about her. Kristina Perez, in *The Myth of Morgan La Fey*, further elaborates on the connection between Modron, the Celtic Great Mother, and the healer type character, as she believes that Geoffrey’s Morgan has her roots in Irish Celtic oral tradition, specifically in the character of Froech’s divine mother in *The Cattle Raid of Froech* who, along with an entourage of otherworldly women, takes her son to a fairy mound to restore his health (Perez 95). Considering Ong’s theory regarding the type character, this appears to be a more solid connection regarding Morgan’s origin. While Larrington’s argument is strong, it’s important to remember that Geoffrey didn’t develop Morgan to the extent the Greek sorceresses, Medea and Circe, had been, and therefore she was more akin to a type character such as the Celtic Great Mother of oral folk tradition.

In addition to the insight both Perez and Larrington offer on Geoffrey’s Morgan, Tolhurst discusses the importance of considering the roles Galfridian Morgan plays as educator, magician, healer, and ruler, all of which are more frequently ascribed to male characters, pointing out that there is no shadow cast on her character in this work for holding such positions (Tolhurst 128). This isn’t necessarily the case with successive writers who build on Geoffrey’s character, for, as she moves ever closer to Arthur’s court, her role gradually begins to both develop further and darken as well. While this first appearance of Morgan presents a character who is seemingly only beneficent and kind, it’s also possible that medieval audiences associated her with classical figures such

as Medea and Circe nonetheless, therefore considering her independence, magical abilities, and the androgynous nature of the role she assumes to be suspect. As there is much left unspoken and ambiguous regarding Geoffrey's Morgen, his audience is ultimately left with a range of possibilities where her true nature is concerned. The notion that Morgen's powerful abilities may move in any direction, for good or ill, is vaguely suggested in Geoffrey's work and is more explicitly built upon in successive Arthurian tales. At the close of *Vita Merlini* audiences are left with a mysterious healer figure who rules a faerie otherworld and is descended from the great, and sometimes dark, Mother Goddess type character, Modron, a deity who is also related to sovereignty and justice. Regardless of suggestions pertaining to the potential dark side of her nature, Morgen in Geoffrey's work still remains in what Tuan refers to as the first mythical space, that of the otherworld, and as such she poses no immediate threat to Arthur and his realm of practical, known space. It's specifically her location and distance here which ultimately determines her status as beneficent figure rather than dangerous foe.

### **Etienne de Rouen, *Draco Normanicus***

In the late twelfth century Morgan's character begins to gradually shift, moving ever so slightly closer into the world of Camelot, and therefore toward a position of conflict. In Etienne de Rouen's *Draco Normanicus*, composed in 1168, Morgan is referred to as an otherworldly nymph who, "receives her brother, cares for him and feeds him, heals him and makes him immortal" (Larrington). Etienne's work focuses on the reign of Henry II and is essentially a response to some of the challenges he is facing, particularly across the channel in Brittany with Louis VII. Arthur is spoken of romantically as the once and future king who will return to bring order and peace to the

land if Henry II does not do so himself. Interestingly, in this work Arthur and Morgan are made in reference to the political climate of the time, but the fact that they are mentioned along with the way in which they're illustrated speaks clearly to the development of Morgan's character. In this particular work she is still referred to as being otherworldly, but she is now brought into the family of King Arthur for the first time, as she is now his sister. While the description applied to her doesn't necessarily cohere with her lineage, the reference to her as being of the world of faerie most likely applies to her knowledge and application of the magical arts, rather than her actually being from a different world or dimension altogether.

In her work *Morgan Le Fay Shapeshifter* Jill Herbert analyzes Morgan's character by looking specifically at what the text of *Draco Normanicus* says about Arthur and the nature of his existence in her domain. She looks at the term *Perpetuum* which refers to the state of wellness or wholeness that she helps her brother achieve, which would indicate that he will now be eternally well, and therefore not of the earthly realm any longer. Herbert refers to Morgan as placing Arthur, "beyond the threat of death. By association, Morgan is, then, no mortal herself but a supernatural being ruling a supernatural island that itself stands outside of time...In order to retain this immortality, Arthur may then be required to remain on Avalon with Morgan forever." Echoing Larrington, Herbert likens Morgan in this work to Circe and Calypso of classical Greek traditions, along with the Morrigan and the Fairy Mistress of Celtic traditions, all characters who are seemingly benevolent in one instant and challenging, or even dangerous, in the next (Herbert 31-32). Considering this perspective, it would appear that in Etienne's work Morgan is possibly both his healer and his captor. While she is

primarily displaying kindness in this text, beneath the surface there is potentially another side to her character, a darker side, or what the church would refer to as evil, however for those who still held to ancient Celtic traditions, here Morgan was simply a manifestation of the mysterious Dark Goddess .

Expanding further on Morgan's role in the *Draco Normanicus*, Herbert continues looking specifically at references to Arthur himself, who is greatly impacted by Morgan's actions. She focuses on Arthur's position as the ruler of the Antipodes, alluding here to an underworld in which his rule is referred to as fatal. Paying close attention to the concept *fatalia iura* in the passage that illustrates Arthur's position in the Antipodes, Herbert makes an additional connection between Morgan and Arthur, one that transcends that of siblings, namely one linked to the classical figures of the Fates. The Old French term *fay* has its origin in the Latin *fata*, which in turn is connected to the classical concept of the Fates, who control the destinies of humans, and such figures in Celtic traditions were connected to the fairy otherworld, just as Morgan is considered the ruler of such a realm (Herbert 32). Moving beyond classical thought, such a position could potentially have a much darker connotation to it, for if Etienne's Christian audience perceives Arthur as lord of the otherworld, or underworld, being linked to Hell, and they understand Morgan to have been the one to place him in such a position, then this could possibly have been the beginning of her fall. Herbert goes on to claim, "Portraying Morgan as evil in the *Draco*, if only by association, lays partial foundations for interpretations of her actions as malicious by later authors such as Malory" (Herbert 33). This perspective of good versus evil which Herbert elaborates on overlooks the continued presence of Celtic traditions among Christians during this time. Again, rather than perceiving this other side

of Morgan as being evil, she may have been understood as a representation of the dark and mysterious divine feminine. It may certainly be said, when engaging with this text at a deeper level, that Morgan's role has already begun to assume complexities, for while the words tell audiences she is solely a healing, beneficent character, potential allusions indicate otherwise. Such complexities in her character can be attributed to the effects of residual orality in a progressively literate society. Where the different manifestations of a figure like the Dark Goddess would have been perceived as a mysterious and necessary component to life in Celtic oral cultures, specifically related to the concept of the balance of light and dark, in a progressively Christian medieval society a binary way of thinking prevailed, and that which was dark was solely related to evil.

**Chretien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide***

In the twelfth century work, *Erec and Enide*, composed in 1168 by Chretien de Troyes, the nature of Arthur's sister is somewhat perplexing, for there appear to possibly be two Morgans, namely Morgain la Fee, the lover of the King of Avalon, and Morgue la Sage, the sister to Arthur. Lucy Allan Paton, in *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, argues that there is, "scarcely room for doubt that Morgain la fee, the lover of Guigomar, was identified in Chretien's mind with Morgue, the sister of Arthur," further pointing out that Morgue was skilled with herbs, and could create medicines as well as balms for healing, which is reminiscent of Geoffrey's Morgen of the Fortunate Isle. It is possible, as Paton points out, that this was just a scribal inconsistency, and that the two characters are one and the same (Paton 64-65). Further, Paton believes that Geoffrey's Anna, which was the original name of Arthur's sister, and the healer Morgen of the Isle of Apples were later conflated into one character, thus

developing her as an individual character even more. This could have ultimately contributed to the division of the Proto-Morgan of oral tradition, and to the creation of additional characters, as implied by Paton (Paton 138-139). Chretien actually brings Morgan's presence into the world of King Arthur's court on occasion, and while she still appears to be beneficent in his work, this could certainly set the stage for the decline of the healer of Avalon.

Larrington believes that the darkening of Morgan's character had indeed begun in Chretien's work, specifically in relation to Guenevere, as illustrated in the Guiot manuscript of *Erec and Enide*. She elaborates on this, pointing out that Enide received, "a splendid embroidered chasuble, given her by Guenevere. The chasuble was originally a garment made by Morgan in the Perilous Valley, and intended for her lover, which Guenevere had obtained through subterfuge" (Larrington 40-41). This would certainly appear to indicate that there is already enmity between the sisters-in-law. Further, Morgan begins to have a presence at court, albeit on rare occasions but a presence nonetheless, and this coupled with potential animosity toward the queen could easily present for Chretien's audience a somewhat darker figure than the healer illustrated by Geoffrey. While Larrington's discussion adds insight and additional layers to Chretien's Morgan, specifically Arthur's sister if there are indeed two in this work, the primary role still attributed to her is that of beneficent healer who has a possible connection to the fairy otherworld of Avalon. Similar to the works of Geoffrey and Etienne, Chretien's *Erec* depicts a Morgan who is not necessarily what she appears to be at first glance, for like both deities of old and humans in general, perhaps she is neither wholly good nor completely bad, thus defying the binaries audiences and scholars have attempted so

vehemently to place her in. Still in Chretien audiences are seeing the conflict brought about by residual orality in relation to a medieval Christian and literate society. Those for whom Celtic traditions of the previous oral culture still resonated could perceive Morgan as embodying the concept of the need for a balance of light and dark as the deities of oral cultures often did. Interestingly, the more developed her character becomes, the greater the desire to place her in a box and dichotomize her role.

**Ulrich von Zatzikhoven, *Lanzelet***

Toward the end of the twelfth century, German audiences are introduced to an otherworldly sea fairy who, while remaining unnamed, would seem to be either Morgan herself or a character who is derived from the same source, a Proto-Morgan. In Ulrich von Zatzikhoven's *Lanzelet* the title character, based on Chretien's Lancelot, is brought up from childhood by a foster mother, who is a sea fairy and ruler of an underwater realm of women. The tale later reveals that this same sea fairy is also the mother of the character Mabuz, based on the figure Mabon from Celtic folk tradition. Mabon's mother from ancient Celtic tales is none other than Modron, who is considered amongst many Celtic and medieval Arthurian scholars to be the precursor of Morgan. As Arthurian traditions proceed to develop throughout medieval Europe, Lancelot's foster mother becomes known as the Lady of the Lake, and as such this tale would therefore indicate that Morgan and the Lady of the Lake are both born of the same source, the Celtic Great Mother Modron.

Similar to Geoffrey's Morgen, the sea fairy of *Lanzelet* appears mostly benevolent, but the fact that she inhabits a world outside that of King Arthur's realm and courtly society places her in a marginal and suspect position. While Geoffrey's character

is seemingly wholly benevolent, Ulrich's otherworldly figure ultimately appears to have an agenda, particularly where her son is concerned. As Carolyne Larrington points out, "Lanzelet's abductor has, in part, saved his life by rescuing him, but she has her own covert agenda: to promote her unworthy son at the expense of an exemplary knight. It is solely to this end that she rears and trains Lanzelet as the best knight in the world" (Larrington 116). While the sea fairy nurtures and protects Lanzelet throughout his life, appearing to be a benevolent figure, the reader learns that her kind acts are done, in part anyway, for the benefit of her biological son, whose enemy, a knight named Iweret, Lanzelet kills, therefore revealing her as the orchestrator of the murdered knight's demise. Here the sea fairy, an analogue of Morgan, is certainly reminiscent of Geoffrey's depiction of the otherworldly healer, yet Ulrich's illustration of her builds on the notion that her powers could move in any direction, for what would appear to be both good and bad intentions. It is, however, important to remember that she is a mother in this work, and her actions which lead to the destruction of the one knight both contribute to the wellbeing of her biological son and her foster son, who in turn becomes the greatest knight of Arthur's court. This too illustrates the sea fairy's connection to the Celtic Great Mother, for she is also one of the faces of the Fates and therefore brings about death and sacrifice at times to ensure balance and new beginnings.

### **Lazamon, *Brut***

If the twelfth century appeared to yield some confusion regarding Morgan's identity and the nature of her character, the thirteenth century only contributed in the expansion of this ambiguity. In Layamon's *Brut*, composed in 1205, the healer of Avalon is mentioned only at the end of the work, at which point Arthur is taken to her to

be healed after his last battle. Her name is Argante, she is referred to as an elfin queen, and there is no mention of any relation to Arthur. It is possible that her name here could be linked to Arianrhod/Argantorota, the Celtic goddess of the moon, but it's also a possibility, as other theories have pointed out, that this name could be an example of a typographic error of the scribe, which was not uncommon during this period, with the actual name being Margante (variant of Morgan). In their work *Ladies of the Lake* Caitlin Matthews and John Matthews refer to Layamon's Argante as both the chief Lady of the Lake and ruler of Avalon. They elaborate further on the possible connection she may have with the Celtic goddess Arianrhod, particularly as she is depicted in the *Mabinogion*, claiming that, "As Queen of Maidenland, Argante seems to share common features with...the goddess Arianrhod in her solitary tower of Caer Sidi. Each woman is a mother or foster-mother who trains a son or foster-son before she reverts to her otherworldly seclusion once more" (Matthews and Matthews 104). In this connection to Arianrhod as Queen of Maidenland and foster-mother, Argante can clearly be related to the Sea Fairy of *Lanzelet*, whose precursor, like Morgan's, is the goddess Modron. Considering the various depictions of Morgan and her analogues across the wide corpus of medieval Arthurian literature, Layamon's Argante bears the strongest resemblance to Geoffrey's Morgen specifically through her connection to Modron, a goddess from oral tradition with whom both Geoffrey and Layamon would have been familiar due to her origin being in Welsh culture. Also like Morgen, Argante only interacts with the characters of Arthur's world when they enter her otherworldly mythical space. Further, in this work the ruler of Avalon has once again become more of a type character, and, while

she is referred to as kind, her independent agency, power, and distance from Arthur's world position her as potentially dangerous.

### **The Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles**

Following Layamon, during the early to mid thirteenth century, the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles return Morgan back to Arthur's family, as she once again assumes the role of his sister, only now writers begin casting her in a seemingly darker image, as she grows to despise Queen Guinevere after the latter proceeds to destroy a potential romance for her in the *Prose Lancelot* (Larrington 41-43). This hatred only continues to grow throughout the cycle and ultimately appears to influence her relationship with Arthur as well, thus placing Morgan in the position of primary villain of Camelot, constantly challenging the Knights of the Round Table and questioning their ethics. While Morgan's role of challenger may seem to be a clear example of the influence of the Church, leading to a representation of her as the embodiment of temptation and evil, perhaps there is more to this different side of her, this 'other' Morgan, for as Kristina Perez points out in *The Myth of Morgan La Fey*, "Morgan, like an omnipotent deity (or, indeed, the Oresteian Mother) has become the superego of Arthur's kingdom, all-seeing and all-knowing, ready to mete out punishment to her errant sons" (Perez 89). Essentially it can be said that Morgan is the Great Mother in the form of Lady Justice, aiming to ensure that Arthur and his knights are themselves upholding the standards and code of chivalry they place such great value on.

Adding further confusion and ambiguity to Morgan's identity, is the return of Lancelot's foster mother into the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles, referred to throughout

as the Lady of the Lake. In these different tales she appears as the perfect counterpart to Morgan, for while the latter has become a darker, challenging character, the Lady of the Lake now seems more the healer and protectress. As is often the case, the story isn't quite so black and white, and it's important to point out the different layers to the character of the Lady of the Lake as well, some of which aren't so beneficent, such as the abduction of the baby Lancelot who was pulled from his mother's clutching arms early in the *Prose Lancelot*. It's also important to note that this particular scene in the Vulgate Cycle can lead directly back to an earlier source in which the Lady of the lake and Morgan are once again unquestionably linked, as it has, "a precedent in the only Arthurian romance in Occitan, commonly called *Jaufre* (1180-1225)...the hero is pushed into a spring by a lady who holds him tightly in her arms and brings him to an underwater paradise. She then reveals herself to be...*la fada de Gibel*, a.k.a. Morgan la Fey" (Perez 74). In this understanding of the two sides to Morgan, her precursor, the divine Proto-Morgan, shines through, for the Celtic goddesses never don only one mask. Throughout the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles audiences can easily trace a thread from both Morgan and the Lady of the Lake back to Ulrich's sea fairy, the Queen of Maidenland, and ultimately to Geoffrey's Morgen, as the otherworldly healer has developed and rounded to the point of assuming two separate identities. While at first glance the two characters may appear to be clearly defined, they are actually indicative of the otherworldly healer's ever-changing nature, for even the individual guises she assumes may shift from one scene to the next, from nurturer, to challenger, to sovereignty, and finally back to nurturing healer again. As Morgan continues to further develop

throughout the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles she is simultaneously given more detail and more ambiguity.

Morgan's character continues to take a variety of interesting shifts and turns throughout the thirteenth century, as the Christian Church and patriarchal society proceed to gain in power and influence. Ong refers to the round character as, "registering changes in consciousness that range far beyond the world of literature," which speaks volumes to this period, for with the rise of the Christian church in the increasingly literate cultures of medieval Britain there were attempts to relegate the former beliefs, which centered on the divine feminine in Celtic oral cultures, to the shadows. This seems abundantly clear in the works of the early thirteenth century Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles, in which the Queen of Avalon appears to progressively decline in one of her guises, namely Morgan le Fay, from the original otherworldly healer she once was to a sorceress who begins to use her powers for darkness more frequently. This body of texts consistently presents Morgan's fluid nature, for, like the deities of old and humans in general, she is indeed multifaceted, continually revealing a range of different masks which are often ambiguous and misleading.

Throughout the Vulgate Cycle Morgan's disdain for Guinevere increases to the point of hatred, resulting in her aim to both humiliate the Queen and to reveal hidden truths about her to Arthur. At various different points Morgan captures and imprisons Lancelot, in what would appear to be an act of revenge due to the nature of his relationship with Guenevere, and also because he lifts the enchantment from her Valley of No Return, but again when taking an in-depth look at her actions and the range of

possible motives associated with them, it becomes evident that there is a deeper meaning behind them. During his time of imprisonment, Morgan continually serves as the challenger to the code of chivalry the knight has sworn to, offering to release him at times but only on the condition that he will keep his distance from Guenevere and return to her, all of which he adheres to. Further, Morgan's wilderness domain serves as a space in which Lancelot and other knights are able to step away from Arthur's court, the chivalrous code, and the responsibilities demanded of them there, in order that they may become better acquainted with themselves through reflection and guidance, specifically Morgan's guidance. In his solitude and reflection Lancelot proceeds to paint the story of his affair with Guenevere on the wall of Morgan's prison, which the latter in turn reveals to her brother, but promises to keep quiet at Arthur's request. As Herbert points out, "Morgan's castle, then, stands as a safe haven for painful revelation... a refuge from that civilization's moral judgment of both Lancelot and Arthur" (Herbert 44-45). Considering all that transpires here, it is easy to see Morgan's role as being closely related to her earliest form as healer in Geoffrey's work, for what initially appears to be a prison turns out to be a refuge wherein the truth is revealed, justice is aspired to, and healing can take place. As with Ulrich, in the Vulgate the potential for the different sides to Morgan which Geoffrey alludes to have surfaced, and while audiences may be inclined to simply see her as the antagonist and therefore the villain, it's important to give attention to the significance of her actions and her overall purpose, namely to ensure justice and balance.

In the *Mort Artu* section of the Vulgate, Morgan is presented as the allegorical goddess Fortuna, revealing to Arthur in a dream his impending doom. As Perez points out, "The duality of Fortune and Death for Arthur is clearly a feminine entity" (Perez 96).

Both Fortune and Morgan represent here the divine feminine as giver of life and also as Death itself. Morgan, like Lady Fortune, presides over the Fortunate Isles, as Avalon was referred to by Geoffrey, and ultimately as psychopomp she takes the wounded and dying there to be healed. In addition to her roles as Lady Fortune and Psychopomp, Morgan is again Lady Justice in this work, for she warns Arthur repeatedly of the tragedy that will befall his kingdom if he does not see to it that justice is upheld. It is due to Arthur's negligence in holding Lancelot and Guenevere accountable for their affair that the fortune of the king and his realm turns down a dark path, for Lady Justice will now hold not only the guilty accountable, but the enabler shall pay as well. Adding to this parallel between Morgan and Fortune is the recent discovery, by Michael Twomey, of a letter which dates to the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, and was supposedly composed by Morgan la Fey. In this letter she introduces herself as, "empress of the wilderness, queen of the damsels, lady of the isles, long time governor of the waves, (of the) great sea," and tells a tale which seemingly indicates that she is Fortune herself (Perez 98-99). Similar to the other works of the Vulgate Cycle, in both the *Mort Artu* and the letter purported to have been written by Morgan, the Virgin of Avalon has developed to such a degree that she has, in a sense, returned to her original role as healer and goddess of fortune, but with the added associations to nature, particularly water, and justice. That many writers have associated Morgan with water is not surprising, for her name in Welsh means sea-born, and the goddess she is most commonly believed to have descended from, Modron, is also a goddess of water and wells. Further, this adds to her nature as a shapeshifter, as she is fluid and can assume a range of roles and wear a variety of masks.

### ***Les Prophecies de Merlin***

Later in the thirteenth century, Morgan's character develops and rounds to such a degree in the anonymous Anglo-Norman work *Les Prophecies de Merlin* that in addition to Morgan le Fay and the Lady of the Lake, there is now the Dame d'Avalon, essentially presenting Morgan in triple form, echoing her roots from oral traditions as a triple goddess. Interestingly, each figure appears to be in conflict with one another, although this is not due to difference in nature, but rather difference in biases and goals. In this particular work Morgan's character echoes the Celtic goddess in triple form, specifically the Morrigan, the Irish deity of war and fertility, for as Perez points out, "The attributes that Morgan displays in Arthurian legend are a combination of the characteristics associated with...Morrigan, Macha, and Badbh...These figures are intimately related in Celtic thought, as is the interconnectedness of water, sexuality, and power" (Perez 2). In this particular work each of the enchantresses, as they're referred to here, engage in a battle to test who is the most powerful, a battle which reveals not only their skills at sorcery but also their overt sexuality, and the connection each has with water. This portrayal of Morgan in triple form, if only symbolic, is presented again and again with the development of her character, as she is sometimes accompanied by sister enchantresses, while other tales give her two biological sisters, most commonly named Morgause and Elaine. The very image of Morgan as triune figure speaks to the complexity of her character, the different aspects of her nature, and the varying sentiments regarding different situations, for here audiences encounter the sea fairy foster mother, the queen of the otherworld who is a healer, and Lady Justice, challenger of

Arthur and his knights. Again, this speaks to the multifaceted nature of the deities of old, in whom Morgan finds her origin, and to the complexities of humans in everyday life.

**Jendeus de Brie, *La Bataille Loquifer***

Toward the end of the thirteenth century audiences see Morgan's character primarily in her role as ruler of the otherworld, and, maintaining her unpredictability, her actions speak to a benevolent nature, yet her disposition and motives can also shift to one of vengefulness and wrath. In the French work *La Bataille Loquifer*, composed by Jendeus de Brie, the hero of the work, Rainouart, is summoned and taken to Morgan's domain to battle a monster, which he successfully defeats. He then becomes her lover, and they have a child. So far, Morgan displays only benevolence, but later in the tale he leaves Avalon to search for his elder son, at which point Morgan begins to feel concern for her own child's position, and she unleashes the dark side of her nature on Rainouart, as she sends the monster he had previously defeated out to sea to bring about the destruction of the hero's ship. In this work her wrath is due to the protective nature of her role as a mother, for as Carolyne Larrington points out, "her benevolence vanishes when she realizes that, under normal social rules for the precedence of elder and legitimate children, Rainouart's legitimate offspring represent a threat to the interests of the child she is carrying" (Larrington 47). Here Arthur's world, the affairs of court, and certainly the King himself have no impact on Morgan's nature and behavior. Further, while the ruler of Avalon can be led to act in vengeful ways, her general nature appears to be one of benevolence and kindness. Her roles as ruler of an otherworld, mother, and protectress harken back to Ulrich's sea fairy, who in turn reflects influence from the Queen of Maidenland, Arianrhod, of Celtic oral tradition. In this work Morgan is also

presented in her form as sovereignty whose aim it is to establish balance in the land, as her summoning of the knight to do battle with the monster clearly illustrates. As is often the case, her character is indeed multifaceted, but in her lack of predictability and the deeper meaning to her seemingly antagonistic actions there is consistency.

When analyzing the development of Morgan's character, it's important to consistently consider the prominent role the church plays in medieval society in relation to the traditions of an oral culture. While the answer may seem to be clear regarding the development and decline of Morgan's character, namely being the church's concern regarding the portrayal of such a powerful, independent female, which could be perceived as threatening, there are other factors to consider, for the descendents of the Celtic peoples of Britain were not quick to push their heritage underground. In her book *God and the Goddesses*, Barbara Newman elaborates on the role of the divine feminine in medieval Christianity, claiming that the monotheistic God of this tradition was surrounded by three different pantheons, specifically the pagan gods of old, the saints of the church, and the allegorical goddesses. Newman claims that the saints, with the Mother of God at their center, were perceived as very real and interactive, as their presence could be felt throughout Christendom, but the pagan gods of old had been removed to the realm of mythology and fairytales, albeit powerfully present in folklore and poetry. The allegorical goddesses were somewhere in between the first two pantheons and mingled with both, for scholarship has tended to relegate them to the world of myth as well, but the fact that they are mentioned in a variety of both theological writings and poetry, such as that of Christine de Pizan, tells a different story (Newman 1). In her works *The Book of the Mutation of Fortune* and *Christine's Vision*, written at the

beginning of the fifteenth century, Christine de Pizan elaborates on the role of Lady Fortune, the goddess, who has shown the protagonist favor, and at her desire has transformed her into a man, in order that she may live the life she wishes without the restraints placed on her by society (Newman 116-119). Lady Fortune here assumes the role of the goddess of fate from ancient oral traditions, a role which Morgan also assumes in the Arthurian tales, clearly depicting the presence of residual orality in the increasingly literate cultures of Britain. Inheriting her connection to the Fates from Modron and the Morrigan, Morgan is ever the shapeshifter, showing favor to Arthur and his knights in some tales, while in other stories serving as the constant challenger and nemesis, thus becoming Lady Justice.

#### **The Mediterranean Arthur: *Tavola Ritonda* and *La Faula* of Guillem Toroella**

Somewhat similar to the work of Jendeus de Brie, the Italian Arthurian tale *Tavola Ritonda*, composed during the early to mid part of the fourteenth century, presents Morgan, here Fata Morgana, in a benevolent role, while casting the Lady of the Lake, or Dama del Lago, in a more villainous one. In this work Morgan, a sister to both Arthur and the Lady of the Lake, possesses the ability to prophecy, a gift she tapped into and strengthened with the aid of Merlin. As the tale progresses certain actions of Morgan's appear to possibly fall on the side of malicious behavior, specifically her determination to reveal the relationship of Guenevere and Lancelot to Arthur. While Morgan does wish to be the lover of Lancelot herself, this doesn't serve as the driving force behind her aim to reveal the affair to Arthur, but rather it's more of an answer to the call of Fate, which insists that she offer insight to Arthur as her prophetic abilities will allow. The Lady of the Lake on the other hand proves to be a much darker figure than in previous tales. Here

apparently she wishes to celebrate the love of Guenevere and Lancelot, as well as that of Tristan and Yseult, but machinations she employs to bring them to her castle are manipulative and potentially deadly. Larrington elaborates further on the actions of Dama del Lago, pointing out that, “First the Lady imprisons Tristan; then she captures Lancelot, Guenevere, and Yseult by creating illusory corpses of the two knights, a stratagem which nearly brings about Yseult’s death from grief” (Larrington 82). Here audiences see the roles reversed somewhat, for while certain of Morgan’s actions may seem less than benevolent, her ultimate aim is generally for the overall good of those involved, but the same cannot be said of the Lady of the Lake, as she appears to simply enjoy playing with the lives of the young lovers, as though they are her puppets. In addition to assuming the roles of both nurturer and challenger, in this work Morgan is also a prophet, a role often held by Merlin alone, which hearkens back to Geoffrey’s depiction of the androgynous otherworldly ruler and healer, adding yet another illustration of Morgan’s refusal to be categorized and dichotomized.

Carolyne Larrington points out that by the fourteenth century in much of western medieval Europe Morgan’s domain has become a commonly perceived mythical space existing in the European landscape, “an island which one might chance upon during an ordinary voyage” (Larrington 48). In the lesser known Catalan work, *La Faula*, dating to around 1360, the poet Guillem Torroella tells a tale in which he is carried, by way of a whale, to Morgan’s isle which is now located in the east. He alludes to the notion that this isle may be one and the same as the Biblical Eden, and its ruler is kind and beautiful, appearing to be a young lady of sixteen years of age. This tale postdates Arthur’s rule as King, for he is present and in a state of sadness due to the current affairs

of Britain. Larrington elaborates on his state and Morgan's role, claiming, "Arthur explains that Morgan bathed him in a fountain whose source was the River Tigris—one of the four rivers of the Earthly Paradise—to heal his wounds, and that he is now sustained in eternal youth by an annual visit from the Holy Grail... Arthur laments more specifically that his sword shows him that on earth brave men go unrewarded and hampered by poverty while miserly kings prosper" (Larrington 48-49). Here, again, readers see Morgan portrayed in nearly the identical role she assumes in Geoffrey's work, with one variation, namely a connection to the Holy Grail and the Grail Maiden. Further, this otherworld she rules may in fact be the same paradise as that mentioned in Biblical texts, possibly linking both ruler and domain to other traditions and to a time that long precedes Arthurian Britain, therefore essentially placing Morgan outside of time and space.

### ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***

In the late fourteenth century work *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Morgan returns to her original form as goddess, but in this work it's specifically in the Dark Crone aspect that she is portrayed. Here she is indeed the empress of the wilderness, which Gawain has to travail to meet the challenge of the Green Knight, as well as internal challenges which surface on his journey, all orchestrated by Morgan herself. Perez refers to her as the Oresteian Mother, who is, "the battleground on which the child's struggle between loving and destructive impulses, life and death instincts take place" (Perez 105). In this guise we see again a duality to Morgan's nature, which gradually appears to be more and more consistent regarding her character. She is indeed the Oresteian Mother who leads Gawain on a journey, both physically and psychologically, in order that his

code of chivalry may be continually challenged to reveal his strength of character. In this tale, as in the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles, Morgan is also ultimately revealed to be Lady Justice, whose impact is pivotal where the central part of the story is concerned, yet she appears to be navigating from the margins throughout.

Returning to Barbara Newman's discussion of medieval goddesses can possibly shine further light on Morgan's character, particularly as she is portrayed in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Newman refers to Natura as a "protean personage" who is always lurking in the shadows of what we perceive to be reality, aiming to ensure that humanity lives in accord with nature, and, "as the most enduring of all medieval goddesses" the first mention of her can be dated back to the 1140's in the work *Cosmographia*, composed by Bernard Silvestris of Tours (Newman 51-52). This description of Natura could accurately describe Morgan in *SGGK*, for she is the veiled, mysterious figure, ever lurking in the background throughout the work, seeming to exist only in the margins, but who in the end is revealed to actually be the orchestrator of the events of the entire story. Returning to the notion of Morgan as omnipotent figure serving as the conscience of Arthur's knights, here she is ever present with Gawain, particularly in the private domain of Bertilak's castle, which in actuality is her castle.

As Sheila Fisher points out in "Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," Morgan's castle is the realm of the private, as was the feminine in general according to medieval standards. Ultimately it is in this private sphere that Gawain is given his most challenging test, "for the temptations posed by private desire are essentially the ones that Gawain must overcome both to save

his life and to ensure the preservation and continuation of the Arthurian world” (Fisher 85). While it may seem that Gawain has yet to face his most dangerous challenge, namely the meeting of the Green Knight prior to the end of the work, in actuality it is continually facing him in the veiled presence of Morgan throughout much of the work. Again, with this work, as with so many involving Morgan, on the surface her character can be seen as antagonistic, but a more thorough analysis will reveal her as the Celtic Dark Goddess, or Cailleach, who is testing both Gawain as an individual and King Arthur’s court as a whole. It’s only through such tests, which reveal hidden truths, that corruption can be combated and healing can begin to take place, thus Morgan is ever the healer.

Lorraine Kochanske Stock also points out in “The Hag at Castle Hautdesert: The Celtic Sheela-na-gig and the *Auncian* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” a clear connection between Morgan and the Dark Crone in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but specifically as the Sheela-na-gig figure of Celtic oral culture and tradition. The Sheela-Na-Gig, referred to as the Cailleach hag in parts of Scotland and Ireland, was a Crone figure who represented fertility/sexuality, the divine feminine, and death for the ancient Celts, linking her to the Irish triple goddesses of war and fertility from oral tradition, namely Morrigan, Macha and Badbh. Her images could be found throughout Britain and Ireland looming over the entrances of castles and, more commonly, of churches with the rise of Christianity, specifically in the form of grotesques aimed at warding off evil. It’s due to both her form as Crone, or Hag, and her association with churches that leads Stock to believe she was the archetype from whom Morgan in the tale of *SGGK* was derived, as the latter was said to preside over the Green Chapel in the story,

and it's very likely that an image of the Sheela would have been looking down from atop the said location (Stock 128-129). Here again, even in the figure of Sheela-na-gig, Morgan assumes an enigmatic role, returning to a type character from whom she possibly has her origin, but unlike other works which precede this one, Morgan doesn't maintain much in regard to her human identity. She is essentially a veiled figure who visually appears in the margins, symbolizing the Dark Crone aspect of the divine feminine, setting the events of the entire story into motion.

### **Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur***

In the late fifteenth century Sir Thomas Malory builds on the material that precedes him, illustrating for readers one of the most perplexing pictures of Morgan le Fay to date. In his *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Malory introduces her as the youngest sister of Arthur, who was sent by her mother and Arthur's father to a convent for her education which is where she initially learns to practice and wield magic. As Malory's work progresses, the theories that claim Morgan and the Lady of the Lake to be rooted in the same figure, namely a Proto-Morgan or Morgen from Geoffrey, become quite clear and seemingly applicable. Introducing additional layers to the identity of the healer of Avalon, Malory has two Ladies of the Lake, one of whom is unnamed while the other is named Nyneve. In her discussion of Morgan and the Lady of the Lake, Geraldine Heng points out in her essay *Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory*, "If Morgan and Nyneve may be said to differ—and some have argued that they are both merely divided aspects of a single magical being—it is a difference of intensity rather than of kind" (Fenster 106). Essentially, neither Morgan nor the Ladies of the Lake are wholly good or completely bad, as they each make choices throughout the work that are

questionable or antagonistic, but similar to their portrayals in previous works, Morgan is generally the challenger of the protagonist, Arthur, while the Ladies of the Lake continually rescue him. Once again Morgan and the Lady of the Lake are two sides of the same coin, each reflecting the roles of healer, challenger, and sovereignty.

In Malory's work Morgan and the Ladies of the Lake reside outside of the world of Camelot, particularly in some variation of an otherworldly paradise, and therefore the rules of court do not necessarily apply to them. Heng further elaborates on this by discussing the nature of each character, pointing out that, contrary to how the characters have been commonly perceived throughout history, Morgan and the Ladies of the Lake have many layers, and as such they defy the binaries of good versus evil. The emphasis is often placed on Morgan as being the villain, gradually contributing to the downfall of Camelot, but it is Nynve who entraps Merlin, Arthur's wise counselor, inside a cave for the rest of his days by luring him there, and this could certainly be considered an act of villainy. Furthermore, early in the work the original Lady of the Lake aids Arthur in establishing himself as king, but her assistance comes with a price, which he later discovers is the beheading of an enemy. While the unnamed Lady of the Lake, the first to be mentioned in the work, is ultimately beheaded by one of Arthur's knights, the Lady of the Lake named Nynve appears to redeem herself in time by assuming the role once held by Merlin, that of Arthur's counselor, and her misdeeds seem to be all but forgotten. Similarly, while Morgan issues continual challenges to the court of Camelot, it is she who appears as the primary figure on the barge which receives Arthur following his final battle. Again, she assumes the roles of psychopomp and healer, come to collect Arthur to take him to her otherworld after he receives his fatal wound. In these examples of

Morgan and the Ladies of the Lake, the figure of the Proto-Morgan, or Morgen from Geoffrey, has developed and rounded to encompass a variety of different masks, which in one light presents the Oresteian Mother, and yet this also reveals distinct human personalities which cannot be contained in binaries.

Herbert elaborates further on Malory's depiction of Morgan, and to some degree on the Lady of the Lake, claiming that they are actually the voices in which he critiques the chivalrous code and the hypocrisy so prevalent among those who claim to uphold it. Malory and Morgan both fully understand what the code of chivalry entails and the conflict which often results from the lack of reconciliation between it and courtly love. Both author and character exist in spaces outside of the chivalrous code and courtly love, as he is in prison and Morgan lives in an otherworld realm. This in turn gives them a clear perspective on how well the knightly code is upheld, the role it plays in relation to courtly romance, and how productive the political climate is as a whole in medieval British society. Herbert illustrates the necessity of Morgan's presence and voice in Arthurian society, claiming, "As a shapeshifter, Morgan signifies change in herself as well as a change required in others; her actions critique the limitations of the knights chivalry and Arthur's rule" (Herbert 69). In this sense Morgan is the primary critic of King Arthur, his court, and the politics of Camelot as a whole. She is both Sovereignty and Lady Justice looking through a critical lens, continually warning Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table that repercussions will ensue if they proceed in their corrupt behavior, and, further, that the entire kingdom will collapse if the King refuses to hold those committing treasonous acts accountable. As Sovereignty she is threatening to dissolve her contract with Arthur, which in turn will destroy his legitimacy as king, and

as Lady Justice she insists that balance be maintained. When balance is disrupted, Morgan, as an agent of justice, will work to restore it which often requires her to bring about disharmony, or even devastation, in the lives of those who have committed wrongful acts to begin with.

Adding further to the complexity of Morgan's role in Malory is the gender fluidity that is part of her very nature, along with her transcendence of binaries like good and evil. Herbert points out that this enables Morgan to move, "both within and beyond the dichotomies of male/female, good/evil. Her resourcefulness and adaptability are limitless; she may act like a man but she is not bound to rigid knightly codes...nor is she bound to feminine rules of conduct" (Herbert 70). This speaks to Morgan's roles as ruler and healer of an otherworld, representation of sovereignty, and agent of justice in general. Early in Malory's work she begins challenging boundaries upon being sent to a convent for learning, for while it may be assumed that her education would be framed in the Christian tradition, she actually becomes skilled in magical arts, particularly in necromancy, while residing there. This foreshadows her roles as psychopomp, often associated with masculine figures, and ruler of an otherworldly isle of the dead, both of which surface at the end of Malory's work as they do in many of the texts which precede his. In addition to this is her function as teacher, particularly of knights, which is specifically linked to her position as wise ruler of Avalon and is generally attributed to men at this time. As with the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles, in what appears to be antagonistic behavior toward King Arthur and his knights throughout much of the work, is actually Morgan teaching them via the numerous challenges she presents. Each of these different masks of Morgan's are also woven together with those of Sovereignty and Lady

Justice, the former of which embodies the land and insists that a ruler be worthy of holding the title of king, while the latter ensures that corruption is kept at bay with balance and harmony serving as guiding principles for a court and society. Morgan's fluid nature allows her to be all of these, as she crosses boundaries, serves as a teacher and healer, demands justice, and aims for balance.

### **Post-Bibliographical Theoretical Discussion**

In addition to Newman's insight, regarding medieval Christianity and the divine feminine as the allegorical goddesses, Perez considers the idea that both Morgan and the Lady of the Lake can be seen as the goddess Fortune, essentially manifesting as two sides of the same coin. Beginning with the Vulgate Cycle and continuing through Malory's work, they both serve as Sovereignty and psychopomps, as they are, "kingmakers and death-wielders, jointly taking away the kingship and shepherding Arthur back to the Otherworld for renewal and rebirth." After receiving his fatal wound in the last battle, Arthur must return to the "Otherworld womb" to be healed and nurtured back to health by the Oresteian Mother (Perez 100-101). In this regard, as in other illustrations of her character, Morgan dually echoes her earlier role as type character, the healer and Great Mother who rules an otherworldly wilderness, while at the same time speaking to the cultural shifts which have occurred since her inception, for she can be perceived as both villain and healer, challenger and nurturer.

Adding further perspective to Morgan le Fay, and the different roles she has assumed as her character has developed, Kristina Perez discusses distinct parallels with Mother Mary of Christianity. She points out that one of Mary's most important roles in

Catholicism, like Morgan's in Arthurian legend and Celtic oral tradition, is that of intercessor, in order to lighten the burden for sinners upon entering death in the realm of Purgatory. Perez elaborates on this, pointing out that Morgan's domain, "Avalon might be read as a kind of Purgatory because Morgan seems to fulfill the function of Intercessor for Arthur" (Perez 101). Regardless of the different masks she dons, Morgan always appears on the barge at the end of the tale, ready to receive Arthur and transport him to her Faerie Otherworld in which time, similar to Purgatory, seems to stand still while the wounded and ill are tended to. Furthermore, Morgan in her earliest form, as the healer of the Island of Apples in Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*, is the virgin priestess of the Otherworld, as Mary is the Virgin Mother of Christianity.

While writers give relatively little attention to Morgan from the Renaissance through the Victorian era, she emerges quite dramatically in the twentieth century, particularly in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* and J. Robert King's *Le Morte d'Avalon*. Interestingly, in both Bradley's and King's works Morgan is given more human identity, and audiences are given access to her thoughts and feelings via firsthand accounts. Further, in each work not only is Morgan herself portrayed as having many different layers to her identity, but she also gains a deeper sense of awareness that life itself is often very fluid and ambiguous. This awareness comes to her early in Bradley's work, in which she becomes a priestess for the Celtic Great Mother, as she hopes that the divine feminine and masculine principles can ultimately live harmoniously in the world. Quickly perceiving that the patriarchy will need to be responded to with aggressiveness, she begins to see herself and her sister priestesses as being in opposition to the patriarchal system that defines Arthur's court. Similarly, in King's work Morgan learns of the lack of

justice and balance in her culture at an early age, and she vows to become the second Eve, or the embodiment of the Great Mother, who will tear down the patriarchal system in order that a matriarchy may replace it. While Bradley's character is less aggressive and vengeful than King's, they both ultimately realize that balance and healing is what the goal must be, which is what they both aim for in the end, albeit challenging and imparting wisdom to Arthur and his court along the way. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries Morgan is still seemingly as illusive and protean as ever, but, as Bradley's and King's works show, she consistently impacts Arthur's court from her wilderness otherworld in her roles as healer, representation of sovereignty, and agent of justice.

Morgan le Fay has assumed a range of different roles and donned a variety of masks since Geoffrey of Monmouth first presented his audience with the type character of otherworldly healer, and she continues to do so no less in the twenty-first century. Morgan is a character who speaks to western culture and society at large, as a strong, empowered female, as the Great Mother, and even as the Dark Crone. She symbolizes healing and wellness, the divine feminine, and love, as well as the mysteries of life and death. Just as her identity shifted from story to story in medieval society, the form she assumes, the genre she can be found in, and the tale she tells can vary greatly. While she has moved leaps and bounds beyond her original archetypal role, she hearkens back to it frequently, often presenting a dual identity, affirming, as Heng points out, "the final instability and impermanence of all constructed identity" (Fenster 108). Morgan may have begun as a type character, but she has developed over the centuries to such a degree that she is now an enigma, leaving audiences to wonder if there is anything about her which one might call remotely predictable. With such a notion in mind, it's important to

point out that this doesn't mean she is completely inconsistent and that there is no way to understand her character, for in her lack of predictability she is actually consistent. She represents the fluidity of all life, of the ancient deities, and of human nature. Further, in her representations and roles as healer, challenger/Lady Justice, and sovereignty she is indeed quite consistent across the range of medieval texts in which she is presented, as well as in post-medieval and modern works which feature her.

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