A WOMAN OF MYSTERY: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF MORGAN LE FAY IN ARTHURIAN LITERATURE

by

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This thesis investigates the depiction of the character, Morgan le Fay, in both medieval and modern Arthurian literature. The medieval works treated include Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlini, the Arthurian romances of Chrétien de Troyes, the French Vulgate cycle's Merlin, Lancelot, and La Mort le Roi Artu, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur. The study concludes with an examination of Morgan's role in two modern novels: John Steinbeck's The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights and Marion Zimmer Bradley's The Mists of Avalon. Enduring aspects of the Morgan le Fay tradition, including her multiple personae, relationships with other Arthurian characters, and ultimate malevolence or benevolence, are examined in each chapter. The conclusion suggests that, while the basic characteristics of Morgan remain the same, the attitudes of authors and society about what she represents change, and this accounts for the radically different portrayals of the character in the examined works.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Due to the immense popularity of Marion Zimmer Bradley's The Mists of Avalon, there is renewed interest in the character of Morgan le Fay in the long tradition of Arthurian literature. However, no previous critical work has considered at any great length both medieval and modern treatments of Morgan. It can be argued, however, that to understand modern interpretations of Morgan le Fay's character, one should understand how she originated and how her personality has changed at the will of different authors.

Morgan le Fay is one of the most ambiguous and enigmatic figures in western literature. She is undeniably appealing, in spite of the fact that she is often depicted as being an evil enchantress. However, the idea that evil itself can be appealing in a twisted way does not explain Morgan, because she is very often portrayed as Arthur's loving nurse in Avalon. Perhaps it is the enigma of Morgan le Fay itself that appeals to readers.

In the course of my discussion, I shall be considering the various ways in which Morgan has been portrayed in an attempt to reveal the inherent contradictions that are an integral part of Morgan's character. Three important questions have informed this study: why is Morgan portrayed as a benevolent character in the early medieval chronicles, as a corrupt and evil enchantress in

Malory and Steinbeck, and again as a relatively sympathetic priestess in The Mists of Avalon?

What is Morgan's role in the courtly love tradition which includes Chrétien de Troyes' romances, the French Vulgate cycle, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and the Morte Darthur? She functions both as a seductress who will not play by the established rules of courtly love and as an upholder and tester of chastity and fidelity. In many of the courtly love stories, as well as in the modern Mists, Morgan plays whatever role directly opposes Guenevere's. Why is it that the two most powerful female figures in Arthurian literature constantly oppose each other on every possible level whenever they appear together?

One of Morgan's most consistent features is that she seems to represent values and attributes which directly oppose not only those of Guenevere, but also those of Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. For example, Morgan believes in magic and is associated with paganistic or satanic religions. The knights, on the other hand, rely on their Christian beliefs and spirituality to make them victorious. Morgan and the knights are also opposed in the area of stereotypical female and male realms of power. Morgan relies on her magical abilities and her intelligence or wit to protect herself. Arthur and his knights rely primarily on their physical powers, courage, and spirituality to allow them to prevail. The best knights are not lauded for their intelligence, but rather because they are perfect Christians or ideal lovers. Intelligence is especially looked down upon in Malory's works and

is often associated with magic and thus with evil.

Although The Mists of Avalon provides an explanation as to why Morgan eventually opposes Arthur's rule, few other medieval or modern sources provide a reason for her strange hatred of her brother which conflicts so greatly with her earliest and most enduring role as Arthur's healer or loving sister who sails away with him after his final battle.

Unlike other major figures in the Arthurian tradition, Morgan is possessed of multiple personae. Her personality not only varies from book to book, but multiple interpretations and different aspects of her character appear simultaneously in a single work. No other character in Arthurian tradition has been splintered and reformed so many times and in so many different ways.

Morgan may be appealing because she represents an archetypal figure. She may be a manifestation of the Jungian Trickster archetype. Morgan may also be an aspect of an archetypal Sorceress figure - a powerful woman who embodies both man's fear of the feminine and the seductive appeal of the female gender.

Another of Morgan's unusual traits is that she is never completely defeated or killed. In her final appearances she either escorts her brother to the earthly paradise of Avalon or mourns his death before sailing off to points unknown. Morgan is never in any danger of being killed in Malory or the Vulgate Cycle. Since many of the other evil or misguided characters in Arthurian literature must pay for their transgressions with their

lives, why is Morgan, who commits several crimes against society, always spared?

These are just a few of the fascinating characteristics of Morgan le Fay which are worthy of investigation. Too long has Morgan been a shadowy figure hovering at the edges of Arthurian literature and criticism. It is time for someone to investigate the origins and development of Arthurian literature's most changeable character and perhaps even discover the reason for her incessant mutability.

CHAPTER II

GODDESS, FAY, WITCH, WOMAN

As is the case with so many legendary figures, the origins of Morgan le Fay are lost in the mists of time. She may have first appeared in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlini (c. 1130), or her origins may be as distant as the folktales of ancient Ireland or even the mythology of the ancient Greeks. She may be purely a creature of the imagination, or she may have her roots in historical events and personages.

The most widespread belief is that Morgan le Fay's prototype is the triple-figured Irish goddess called the Morrigan. There are several similarities between the two characters which support this belief. Both Morgan and the Morrigan have an ambiguous relationship with the hero, whom in the case of Morgan is Arthur and in the case of the Morrigan is Cuchulain. Morgan betrays her brother Arthur and tries to destroy his knights, but still comes for him after his final battle and takes him away to Avalon to be healed. The Morrigan despises the Irish hero Cuchulain because he spurns her advances, and thus she tries to hinder him in battle. However, she also tries to prevent him from going to the battle which will cause his death. In her final appearance in the story of Cuchulain, the Morrigan takes the form of a crow and mourns or pays respects to the dead hero.

Both Morgan and the Morrigan have extensive shape-shifting

abilities. Morgan in the Vita Merlini "knows too the art of changing her shape, of flying through the air, like Daedalus on strange wings" [1]. In the later Morte Darthur, Morgan escapes from Arthur after the Accolon episode by changing herself and her men into stones. The Morrigan most often appears as a red-clad woman with red eyebrows, but when she is hindering Cuchulain during a fight in the Tain Bo Cuailgne she changes shape in quick succession, becoming "an eel, a gray wolf, and a white, red eared cow" [2]. After Cuchulain has wounded her, she tricks him into healing her by assuming the shape of an old woman and offering him milk from her cow. For each drink he blesses her and thus unknowingly heals her wounds.

The Morrigan and Morgan le Fay are both represented as having multiple aspects. Morgan often appears in the French romances and Malory as a member of a group of enchantresses, such as in the episode of Lancelot's temptation by Morgan and three other enchantress queens who have little personal identity beyond their names. The Morrigan is usually portrayed as a triple-aspect war goddess. The names of her aspects are Badb, Macha, and either Morrigan or Ana. Coincidentally, Arthur's only sister in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae is named Anna [3]. In the later romances, this single sister develops into a multitude of half-siblings, many of which have Morgan-related names, such as Morgain, Morgue and Morgause.

The erratic behavior of Morgan and the Morrigan may be explained by the fact that they both can be identified as

archetypal Trickster figures. Some of the characteristics of the Trickster include:

> an intimate relationship with nature, illustrated both by the theriomorphic form (the crow) and the connection with water; the mischief-making and shape-shifting; and an uninhibited sexuality accompanied by a ruthless vengefulness [combined with] that 'hint of the saviour', the impulse to save and protect [4].

This explains the roles of both Morgan and the Morrigan in the death scenes, as well as their earlier sexual promiscuity and hunger for vengeance once they have been spurned by Cuchulain and Lancelot. One possible way in which the connection between Morgan and the Morrigan can be expressed is Cuchulain's comment to the Morrigan in the Tain Bo Regamna; "A dangerous enchanted woman you are" [5].

Although this statement is an excellent description of the Morrigan and Malory's Morgan le Fay, it does not apply to the benevolent Morgan in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlini. This Morgan is a healer and gracious otherworldly queen, not a bellicose battle deity or a destructive promiscuous enchantress.

The Vita Merlini presents the first character who can be unequivocally identified with the Morgan le Fay in Malory and the French Vulgate Cycle. Her name is Morgen, which is much closer to the French Morgain or Malory's Morgan than Morrigan. But Morgan's behavior in the Vita Merlini is very different from both that of the Celtic war goddesses and Malory's wicked enchantress. Her major purpose in the poem is to receive Arthur into Avalon and heal him. This responsibility will remain Morgan's primary

function in the later works, even though her character is made evil and her other deeds do not lead the reader to suspect that she will perform a benevolent act in the end.

Morgan is an extremely powerful woman in the Vita Merlini. In fact, as Stewart and Darrah both point out, her powers resemble those of a pagan goddess. The best description of her powers is given by the character Taliesin in the Vita Merlini.

> The one who is first among them has greater skill in healing, as her beauty surpasses that of her sisters. Her name is Morgen, and she has learned the uses of all plants in curing the ills of the body. She knows, too, the art of changing her shape, of flying through the air, like Daedalus, on strange wings. At will, she is now at Brest, now at Chartres, now at Pavia; and at will she glides down from the sky on to your shores [6].

Darrah compares this list to a collection of attributes of pagan goddesses, such as "metamorphosis into bird or animal form; magical control over natural phenomena; healing; and membership of the royal house of an otherworld island of all delights" [7]. Although Morgan retains her healing powers in a corrupt form in the Vulgate and Malory, her other great powers are stripped from her. All she retains is her strange association with Avalon and the healing of Arthur. Aspects of this part of the Morgan legend continue through the French works into Malory and beyond.

In Vita Merlini, Avalon is never expressly named, but is referred to as "the Island of Apples" or "the Fortunate Isle" [8]. This island can best be described as Geoffrey's vision of a Utopia.

> It needs no farmers to plow the fields. There is no cultivation of the land at all beyond that which is

> Nature's work. It produces crops in abundance and grapes without help; and apple trees spring up from the short grass in its woods. All plants, not merely grass alone, grows spontaneously, and men live a hundred years or more [9].

The later identification of this island as Avalon most likely derives from the word *aval* which means apple or from the Breton word for air, *avel* [10].

Although Geoffrey's ultimate inspiration for Avalon was most likely a desire to create a heaven on earth where Arthur could heal and perhaps return from some day, he may have had a real location in mind when he described the "Fortunate Island." Taliesin states, "That is the place where nine sisters exercise a kindly rule over those who come to them from our land" [11]. The choice of nine sisters may have been completely arbitrary on Geoffrey's part. Nine is a powerful mystic number which has been used since ancient times to determine the number of members in a group of females, such as the Muses. If the Morgan in Vita Merlini is truly derived from Celtic goddesses, her sisters may be *doppelgangers* or expressions of her multifold aspect.

However, if Geoffrey based Avalon on an actual locale, that place would most likely be the Ile de Sein, a small island off the coast of France. According to a widespread Breton belief described by Pomponius Mela in the first century, AD, the island of Sena was inhabited by nine virgin priestesses "who were reputed to control the winds and waves, to transform themselves into animal shape, to heal and to predict the future" [12]. If

Morgan and her sisters are really not at all influenced by the priestesses of Sena, the resemblances between them are truly uncanny coincidences.

The relationship between Arthur and Morgan and Avalon which is introduced by Geoffrey fascinated subsequent chroniclers and romance writers. Significantly, this aspect of Morgan in Vita Merlini is the only feature which survives the Vulgate and Malory and remains an important episode in Arthur's life in modern works. In Geoffrey's version of the story, Arthur's men take him to Morgan and Avalon, although in later works she will be forced to collect him herself. Taliesin's description is full of praise for Morgan and her healing abilities.

> Morgan received us with due honor. She put the king in her chamber on a golden bed, uncovered his wound with her noble hand and looked long at it. At length she said he could be cured if only he stayed with her a long while and accepted her treatment. We therefore happily committed the king to her care and spread our sails to favorable winds in our return journey [13].

There is no mention in the Vita Merlini of any kinship between Arthur and his benefactress Morgan. Paton believes that Morgan was originally intended to be Arthur's fairy mistress and queen in the Otherworld [14]. However, Geoffrey never hints that Morgan is Arthur's lover any more than she is his sister. She seems at worst a *deus ex machina* figure introduced to heal Arthur and create a promise of his eventual return, and at best an early substitution for the Holy Grail in "one of the earliest appearances of the 'wounded king' theme that was to become

widespread in Grail literature during the Medieval period. Morgan is the regenerative power of the Otherworld" [15].

The first suggestion of a possible relationship between Arthur and Morgan occurs in Chrétien de Troyes' romances, which are discussed below in the context of the other French works, but the first hint of kinship in the chronicles takes place in Giraldus Cambrensis's Speculum Ecclesiae (c. 1216), which relates how Arthur's body is transported "to the isle of Avalon (which is equated with Glastonbury) by his kinswoman Morganis, and his burial there" [16]. Cambrensis's view is much more pessimistic than Geoffrey's because Arthur is not healed and will never return. Cambrensis even attacks views based upon Geoffrey's version and calls them:

> absurd tales which are propagated by *fabulosi Britones et eorum cantatores*; for the latter were accustomed to relate, he says, how a certain fantastic goddess, Morganis- *Dea quaedam phantastica*- took Arthur to Avalon to be healed of his wounds and how, when they are cured, he will return to reign over the Britons [17].

In the time between Geoffrey (1130) and Cambrensis (1216), Morgan has already been changed almost beyond recognition. Her divinity is being ridiculed and her healing powers are no longer strong enough to save Arthur. She becomes Arthur's kinswoman in Cambrensis and his sister in Chrétien. There are several explanations for the establishment of a sibling relationship between Arthur and Morgan. In order to authenticate her theory that Morgan was originally Arthur's mistress, Paton suggests that "the broader significance of the old French *suer* (sister)

frequently used by a lover to his lady... lies at the foundation of the tradition" [18], although this seems farfetched. A more likely explanation is that Morgan is caught up in the early French romantics' penchant for awarding numerous half-sisters to Arthur so that their favorite heroes could claim kinship with the king [19]. Thus, the character Morgause becomes a separate entity from Morgan so that the hero Gawain may become Arthur's nephew. Morgan herself is given Yvain as a son, which will cause numerous problems for Malory as he tries to reconcile how such a virtuous knight can have such an evil mother.

If Celtic goddesses were the inspiration for the Morgan in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlini, there may have been a transition phase of some sort to soften the bellicosity of the Morrigan and also provide an explanation for Morgan's association with islands and bodies of water. One possibility, although rather a remote one, is the mermaid Liban in The Book of the Dun Cow, who survives a flood and is later baptized Muirgen, or "sea born," before she dies. Rhys believes that the similarity between the names Morgan and Muirgen is great enough to prove his hypothesis that all the Ladies of the Lake in later romance can be traced back to Liban-Muirgen through Morgan [20]. This theory is highly unlikely, since Morgan has never been associated favorably with the Christian church and has never otherwise appeared as a mermaid. The names are most likely coincidental.

A more suitable choice for the transition figure is the Welsh goddess Modron or Matrona. The primary evidence for a link

between Morgan and Modron is the similarity between their families. Although Geoffrey portrays Morgan as a virgin with nine sisters, many early French works provide her with a husband and a son. Modron is the wife of Uriens and the mother of Owein, while Morgan is also the wife of Uriens and the mother of Ewaine le Blanchmains [21]. Modron inhabits a magical lake, as do the later Ladies of the Lake in both France and England in the Vulgate Cycle. Like the Morrigan and Morgan, Modron is both benevolent and malevolent. According to old folktales:

> we may recognize Modron not only as the lovely fay of the lake who brings her husband wealth and beautiful children but also as a fearful hag, haunting pools and foreboding death and doom [22].

In his addendum to Paton's book, Loomis explains that the name Morgan cannot possibly derive from Modron, which seems to negate a large portion of the argument that the latter contributed to the traditions of the former. The link may occur in a Welsh belief in a water-sprite called Morgan, who, like the sinister aspect of Modron, carries naughty children into her lake [23].

The exact connection between the Celtic goddesses, water-sprites, and early chroniclers' versions of Morgan may be lost because of Morgan stories which were never written down. Such stories may have formed part of the oral repertoire of Breton *conteurs* in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries who spread the Arthurian tradition from "Scotland to Sicily" [24]. Attributes of Morgan which suddenly become evident in the early romances and chronicles for no apparent reason, such as Morgan

becoming Arthur's sister, her antagonism towards Arthur in the romances, or her fame as Fata Morgana in Italy, may be attributed to this long-lost oral tradition.

However, Loomis may not be giving the early writers enough credit. It is not inconceivable that each artist changed Morgan to suit the plots of individual works or spontaneously invented aspects which he felt would make the character more interesting. Once the trend was established to make her corrupt and Arthur's sibling nemesis, the fertile imaginations of the romance writers continued the cycle until Malory excluded nearly all of her redeeming factors in order to make her the perfect villainess and personification of disloyalty in Morte Darthur.

While Morgan in the Vita Merlini may be descended from Celtic goddesses or largely Geoffrey's own creation, her appearance in the poem is strangely similar to a scene which can be traced back at least as far as Homer. This "matrix of the legend- an island queen of magical powers receiving a royal hero" [25] is the basis of the story of Circe and Odysseus in the Odyssey. Both Morgan and Circe fit the archetypal model of what I call the Sorceress; a woman who is powerful and even dangerous, often capricious, but ultimately alluring. The Sorceress symbolizes the male fear of women which is inexorably combined with an extreme, often sexual, attraction.

Another figure who embodies these features is Medea. The similarities between Morgan and Medea are most likely coincidental, but they do illustrate the archetypal aspect of

Sorceress traits. Both Morgan and Medea are famous for their abilities as healers, but both often use their powers to harm those close to them. In the romances and Malory, Morgan hates her husband Uriens and tries to kill him, using a sword instead of her magic. Medea hates her husband, Jason and avenges his betrayal of her by slaying their children with a sword rather than poisoning them. Morgan tries to kill Arthur by sending him a poisoned cloak as a gift. Medea kills her rival by sending a poisoned cloak as a wedding present. Medea and Morgan represent the Sorceress archetype because they "rise vengefully from a man-dominated warrior society, which has little place for women except as menials and breeders" [26]. They frighten men because they will not stay in their proper place and thus, they are portrayed as evil and unnatural creatures.

Another connection between Morgan and ancient Greek characters is a title which soon becomes an inseparable part of her name, le Fay. Exactly where Morgan acquired this appellation is uncertain. Geoffrey refers to her simply as Morgen and Giraldus mockingly calls her a goddess. Chrétien de Troyes may be the first writer to refer to her as Morgan le Fay, in his Erec (1170). One other possibility is Benoit de Ste.-Maure's Roman de Troie (c. 1160), which mentions a character named "Orva la fee" [27]. Whether or not this is, as Loomis believes, the second appearance of Morgan in literature, despite the difference in names, it is an indication that magical women are, by 1160, being referred to as fays. The word fay or *fee* is related to the Latin

word, *fata*, which refers to fate in general or one of the three Greek goddesses known as the Fates. Fay may also be related to the Latin word, *fatua*, which means prophetess [28]. According to Kinter, the Pythias and Sybils of ancient Greece and Rome evolved into the medieval fays. Fays were originally benevolent prophetesses, as Morgan is in Vita Merlini, but eventually became supernatural and often evil creatures. The early fays certainly resemble the Morgan in Vita Merlini. The fay:

> is essentially supernatural; is always of beauty beyond man's imagination; never lacks power to fulfill her pleasure,is superior to all human blemish or necessity; is very amorous or lustful [and] has entire foreknowledge [29].

Once the medieval church and court get their hands on the legend, it alters somewhat and insures the fays' eventual corruption. The new rules stipulate that "there is a natural hostility between the fay and the church; a term is fixed for the life of the fay; the fay becomes partly a charming lady of the court" [30]. This is the way Morgan is portrayed by the French romance writers. Chrétien depicts her as benevolent and distant, but each subsequent writer blackens her character until she becomes the magical villainess in Malory.

Notes

1 Geoffrey of Monmouth, Life of Merlin, trans. Basil Clarke (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1973) 101.

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3 Madeleine Blaess, "Arthur's Sisters," Bulletin Bibliographique de la Societe Internationale Arthurienne 8 (1956): 69.

4 Edith Whitehurst Williams, "Morgan la Fee as Trickster in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Folklore 96 (1985): 41.

5 Paton, Studies 24.

6 Geoffrey 101.

7 John Darrah, The Real Camelot: Paganism and the Arthurian Romances (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981) 79.

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10 E.K. Chambers, Arthur of Britain (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1927) 219.

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16 Roger Sherman Loomis, "Morgain la Fee in Oral Tradition," Romania 80 (1959): 341.

17 James Douglas Bruce, The Evolution of Arthurian Romance vol. 1 (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1928) 78.

18 Paton, Studies 137.

19 Blaess 75.

20 John Rhys, Studies in the Arthurian Legend (Oxford: Clarendon, 1891) 348-9.

21 Roger Sherman Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance (New York: Columbia UP, 1926) 192.

22 Roger Sherman Loomis, "Morgan la Fee and the Celtic Goddesses," Speculum 20 (1945): 197.

23 Paton, Studies 286.

24 Loomis, "Oral" 341.

25 Geoffrey 203.

26 Norma Lorre Goodrich, Merlin (New York: Franklin Watts, 1987) 195.

27 Loomis, Celtic 183.

28 William Lewis Kinter, "Prophetess and Fay: A Study of the Ancient and Medieval Traditions of the Sibyl," diss., Columbia U, 1958, 59.

29 Kinter 62.

30 Kinter 62.

CHAPTER III

MORGAN'S FRENCH CONNECTION

Morgan's first French appearance occurs in Chrétien de Troyes' cycle of Arthurian romances. She is not a major character in these works. In fact, she never actually appears, but is referred to twice in Erec et Enide (c. 1170) and once in Yvain (c. 1177). However, these passing remarks are very important because they present a Morgan le Fay who has not yet become the corrupt and bitter enchantress of the Vulgate. They also introduce new attributes into the Morgan tradition.

The first mention of Morgan in Erec states:

> Graislemier of Fine Posterne... had with him his brother Guigomar, lord of the Isle of Avalon. Of the latter we have heard it said that he was a friend of Morgan the Fay, and such he was in very truth [1].

Guigomar, or Guiomar, will become Morgan's lover in the Vulgate Cycle and the cause of much of her bitterness toward lovers. The association of Morgan with aspects of Avalon is now a firm part of the Morgan tradition.

The other references to Morgan refer to her benevolent healing powers. When the knight Erec is wounded, a plaster is brought

> which Morgan, his sister... had given to Arthur, [and] was of such sovereign virtue that no wound, whether on nerve or joint, provided it were treated with the plaster once a day, could fail to be completely cured and healed within a week [2].

Ironically, this miraculous medicine is the prototype of the poisonous poultice Morgan will use on the young knight Alisander le Orphelin to force him to do her bidding in the Morte Darthur. Morgan's healing powers are actually diminished in Chrétien, according to Jennings, who points out that "Erec is only partially cured by Morgain and fully restored by Enide, the one who loves him" [3].

However, Morgan's medicines seem entirely responsible for bringing Yvain back to sanity in the later work. The ointment of "Morgan the Wise" is so powerful "there was no delirium of the head which it would not cure" [4]. As soon as Yvain's temples are rubbed with it, the madness leaves him and he continues his adventures.

Morgan in the Vulgate Cycle is not as interested in helping Arthur's knights as she is in trapping, seducing, or hindering them for her own purposes. Although much of her behavior is explained or partially justified, she nonetheless becomes a much more selfish, bitter, dangerous and cruel woman in the Vulgate Cycle than she has ever previously been depicted.

The Vulgate Cycle is a series of French prose romances written by an unknown author or authors that relates the life and adventures of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. The creation of the Vulgate tales marked the first time that the story of Arthur was written as a romance rather than a chronicle. Much of the emphasis of the story switched from the British Arthur to the French Lancelot, who is made a much more appealing

and adventurous character. The role of Morgan le Fay is also expanded, and she becomes one of the major enemies of Lancelot and Guenevere. Her relationship with Arthur has not yet become an adversative one, and the worst she does to the King is prove that Lancelot is having an affair with Guenevere. The appearances of Morgan in the Vulgate Cycle are limited to three books: Merlin (c. 1200-25), Lancelot (1225-30), and La Mort le Roi Artu (c. 1230) [5].

Kinter remarks that the medieval church and courtly society attempted to turn the fay into "a charming lady of the court" [6]. This is exactly what happens to Morgan le Fay in the Merlin. She is no longer a supernatural or divine being by birth. In fact, her only noble claim is that she is Arthur's bastard half-sister. She gains her power in an unusual way.

> And the kynge uentres of Garlot hadde a-nother of hir doughters, that was getend on baste, whos name was Morgains. And be the counseile of alle hir frendes the kynge sette hir to skole in an house of religion, and she learned so moche of an arte that is cleped astronomye, wher-in she wrought many tymes; and by that crafte was she cleped morgne-le-fee [7].

It is ironic if not completely illogical that Morgan learns the skills which give her the title "the Fay" in a religious establishment. This may simply indicate the unknown author's disapproval of nunneries as places where women could become educated to a higher degree than was considered healthy or proper for them. Westoby suggests that

> it is perhaps not surprising that a display of knowledge of any sort by a woman should be looked on askance in an age when very few people, men or women, were educated to such a

> high degree. A woman with wide knowledge of the seven arts might well have inspired considerable awe and fear, and skill in magic might easily be attributed gratuitously to such a person [8].

In Merlin, Morgan inspires more awe than fear; she does not become a wicked figure until Lancelot. She has a good relationship with her brother Arthur, as is shown when she and her sister visit him.

> And whan the kynge entred in-to the Citee his suster com a-gein hym, the wif of kynge loot of Orcanye, and with hir com Morgne le fee, hir suster, that was so grete a clergesse. And whan the kynge hem knewe he made of hem grete ioye, for longe tyme hadde he not hem sein;and thei kissed as brother and suster [9].

Morgan also has an extremely friendly relationship with Merlin which is similar to his later associations with the Lady of the Lake and Nimue.

> Morgne le fee a-queynted hir with Merlin, and was with hym so prive, and so moche she was with hym that she knewe what he was, and many merveilles he hir taught of astronomye and of egramauncye, and she helde it right wele [10].

Whether she gains the bulk of her powers from Merlin or her own study, Morgan nonetheless becomes a powerful woman who is able to deal ruthlessly with those who cross her.

The eventual targets of her ill-will are Guenevere and the Queen's lover, Lancelot. While later works such as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Malory provide no solid reason for Morgan's passionate hatred of the Queen, which makes her enmity seem petty and unjustified, the Vulgate Merlin presents an explanation of Morgan's hatred in a form that any courtly lover could understand

and perhaps even sympathize with. Morgan falls in love with a knight named Guiomar, who is Guenevere's cousin. They have an affair and "thei loved hertrly to-geder longe tyme that noon it wiste" [11]. Guenevere eventually finds out about the lovers and forces them to end the relationship by threatening her cousin with death. No explanation is given as to why Guenevere disapproves of the match. The most likely possibility is that since this episode occurs before Guenevere's affair with Lancelot, Guenevere decides that it is not proper for two unmarried people to carry on in such a way. If this is indeed the case, it is perfectly understandable that Morgan, who "whan she were wroth with eny man, she was euell for to acorde" [12], would try to destroy Guenevere's own illicit affair by attempting to steal away her lover, or, when that fails, informing Arthur of their relationship.

Morgan spends the rest of the Vulgate Cycle trying to avenge herself on Guenevere "and dide hir after gret annoye, and of blames that she areised that euer endured while hir life lasted"[13]. This is the last mention of Morgan in the Merlin and the darker side of her character is beginning to be emphasized. Not only is she vengeful, but the narrator also remarks that she is "the moste hotest woman of all Breteigne" [14]. Morgan's promiscuity and lustfulness will be a major aspect of her character in the Lancelot.

Morgan's first appearance in the Lancelot contains references which directly relate to her final appearance in the

Merlin. Morgan, furious with Guenevere and feeling betrayed by Guiomar, uses her powers of "astronomye and of egramauncye" [15] to create the Val sanz Retor or "Vale without Return" [16]. This valley is enchanted so that

> no knight or lady, if once within its encircling mist, can issue forth until an absolutely faithful lover, who can achieve various perilous adventures that await him at the entrance, shall break the spell [17].

Naturally, Lancelot is the person who breaks the spell.

The Val sanz Retor is one of a series of tests, deeply loved by romance writers, which are designed to prove a true or false lover. Just as only a faithful wife may drink out of Morgan's magic drinking horn in Malory, only a completely faithful lover like Lancelot may free the captured lovers. The Val sanz Retor also indicates the degeneration of the *locus amoenus* of the fay. The otherworldly paradise of Avalon in the Vita Merlini where knights are brought to heal has become a trap which seems to promise adventure and true love, but is actually "an illusion, a place from which knights need to be released" [18].

Morgan is fascinated by Lancelot and determines to have him for herself, not only because he is an absolutely faithful lover, but because he loves Morgan's despised rival Guenevere. Since Lancelot is absolutely true to Guenevere, Morgan must resort to sly tricks to win him or convince Guenevere that he is dead. To this end, she drugs Lancelot and steals a ring given to him by Guenevere, substituting an identical ring of her own which Guenevere had given to her before their falling-out.

Morgan seems strangely diminished in this section. The great "clergesse" who creates the Val sanz Retor and the benevolent healer, Morgan the Wise, in Chrétien is suddenly reduced to crudely drugging Lancelot. She is afraid of him to such a degree that she switches the rings as "stealthily as she might, for well she knew that an he were ware thereof, none could withhold him from killing her" [19] Morgan has gone from being referred to as a great "clergesse" or fay to a character who

> forsook the company of folk and spent day and night in the great deep forest so that many of the folk of which there were *numerous fools* throughout the land said that she was not a woman but called her Morgain the goddess [20].

Hardly more than a century earlier in the Vita Merlini, Morgan had been a near-goddess in earnest.

One of Morgan's few remaining traits which link her to the Celtic goddesses is her multiple personality, this time in the form of her damsels. Morgan sends one of her ubiquitous maidens to deliver the stolen ring to the court along with a story that Lancelot, with his dying breath, returned the ring with a confession of his "vile and horrible sin against his lord that is here" [21]. Guenevere manages to turn aside suspicion, but Morgan determines that, rather than allow Lancelot to return to her, she will keep him "a prisoner, not from hatred of him, but in the hope that thus she will drive the queen to madness or despair that will lead to her death" [22]. This is similar to her tactics in Sir Gawain, where she uses the apparition of the Green Knight to "afflict the fair queen, and frighten her to death" [23].

Lancelot eventually escapes from Morgan's influence and both lovers discover the truth about the rings and are reconciled. However, Lancelot soon becomes Morgan's prisoner again in a scene which is the prototype for the temptation of Lancelot. This scene will be dealt with in more detail in the Malory and Steinbeck chapters. Suffice to say, Lancelot is captured by Morgan and two other queens who try to coerce him into becoming the lover of one of them. Once again, he passes the test and proves that he is an absolutely faithful lover.

Lancelot falls into Morgan's clutches one more time during the Vulgate Lancelot. Morgan, who is never short of wit even if her magical powers are diminished, realizes that she cannot win Lancelot by appealing to his heart, which is firmly devoted to Guenevere. In a stroke of pure genius, Morgan devises a temptation which no true knight could ever resist. She sends a damsel to Lancelot, "who by promising to lead him to a certain perilous adventure decoys him to a castle that Morgain has built in the forest with the intention of imprisoning him there" [24]. She weakens his mind and body with drugs and puts him into a prison overlooking a garden, where "she plans to keep him confined for the rest of his life" [25]. She hopes that he will eventually accept her love,

> for she kept him not in prison from hatred, but she thought to conquer him by his misease; and she had many a time prayed him for his love, but he would hear naught thereof [26].

Lancelot spends his time painting pictures on his wall

inspired by his great love of Guenevere. Morgan encourages him because she will be able to use the paintings to give Arthur irrefutable proof of the affair. After almost two years' imprisonment, Lancelot escapes after breaking the bars of his prison in order to reach a rose which reminds him of Guenevere. He considers killing Morgan, but does not "for love of King Arthur, and for that she was a woman" [27]. He satisfies his thirst for vengeance by sending her a message greeting her "as the most disloyal woman in the world" [28]. This is not extremely bright of him since, although she is momentarily frightened of his great strength, his scorn increases her resolve to let her brother know about the paintings.

The motif of the painted walls provides the bridge between Morgan's last appearance in Lancelot and her first in La Mort le Roi Artu. Morgan appears only twice in this volume, but both of her appearances are crucial to the plot. In her first appearance, she finally succeeds in doing what she has been trying to accomplish throughout the whole Lancelot: she proves to Arthur that his wife and his best knight are having an affair.

Morgan's feelings toward Arthur at this point are rather ambiguous. She receives him richly in a castle reminiscent of her earlier earthly paradises; it is

> so beautiful, so delightful, so rich, and so well sheltered that never in their whole lives had they seen such a fine dwelling nor so well situated [29].

Morgan tells Arthur that "There is not a woman on earth who loves you more than I do, and I ought to do so truly, if blood love is

not wholly lacking" [30]. She reveals that she is his sister. Arthur is overjoyed because, as he tells Morgan, "I thought you were dead and gone from this world" [31]. He begs her to return to court and "be a companion to Queen Guenevere," but Morgan naturally refuses, and instead "they found great pleasure in speaking together without others present" [32]. Since Morgan has not shown any previous enmity toward her brother, it may be surmised that she means him no harm in this case either. At worst, she is using him to get her revenge on Guenevere and Lancelot. Whether or not she knows he will be hurt by her revelation, or if she cares, is never expressly stated.

Morgan cannot tell Arthur directly about the affair because "she feared that, if she revealed the truth and Lancelot heard that the king knew it through her, the whole world could not prevent him from killing her" [33]. Once again, she uses her wits and contrives matters so that she and Arthur talk together in the chamber painted by the imprisoned Lancelot. The King cannot help but notice the paintings and begs Morgan to tell him about them. She pretends reluctance until Arthur promises never to reveal her as his source. She tells him that Lancelot "has loved Queen Guenevere since the first day that he received the order of knighthood" [34] and relates how she imprisoned him and how he painted the incriminating scenes. Arthur is so incensed by the material proof of what he has already suspected that he swears, "I will work at the matter until they are caught together in the act" [35]. Morgan does her best to encourage his foul mood and

"urged him to take vengeance for the shame very soon," which Arthur promises to "do with such cruelty that it would be talked of forever" [36].

Although Morgan makes more attempts to reveal the infidelity of Guenevere in Malory, she is never quite as successful as she is in the French La Mort le Roi Artu. While it is ultimately Agravain's scheme, as in Malory, which discovers the lovers, Morgan is enough of a threat to be partially blamed for the episode. Lancelot is warned by Bohort that the King suspects him. When Lancelot asks who dared inform Arthur, Bohort replies, "If it was a knight, it was Agravain, and if it was a woman, it was Morgan, King Arthur's sister" [37].

Since Lancelot and Guenevere have finally been found out, there is no need for Morgan to continue in her role as Guenevere's rival and informant on the lovers. Morgan herself knows that she will no longer have to devise more ways to reveal the affair after she shows Arthur Lancelot's paintings. When Arthur invites her to come back to the court, she tells him, "When I leave here, I will go to the Isle of Avalon where the ladies live who know all the enchantments of this world" [38].

True to her word, Morgan does not appear again until Arthur lies dying after his final battle. A ship full of ladies appears to Arthur and Sir Girflet:

> When the ship came to shore just where the king was, they came to the ship's side, and the lady who ruled the others held Morgan, King Arthur's sister, by the hand and began to call the king to come aboard the ship. The king, as soon as he saw Morgan, his sister, rose to his feet from the ground where he was sitting, and boarded the ship [39].

At least one critic, Noble, has questioned why the unknown author of the Mort chooses to include this scene in a work which, as he accurately points out, is almost devoid of magic and fairy mythology.

In her earlier appearance in the Mort le Roi Artu, Morgan "does not have, or at any rate, does not use, any magical powers but relies on her own intelligence and her knowledge of human nature" [40] when she tricks Arthur into demanding the meaning of Lancelot's paintings. Noble suggests that the scene of the ladies in the barge is included because of the "weight of tradition" which goes back to the Vita Merlini and also because of the author's realization of "the value of such a striking and arresting scene" [41]. These two reasons may explain Malory's retention of the same scene.

Another aspect of this episode also adapted by Malory is that the ladies are unsuccessful in trying to heal him. The next morning Girflet finds Arthur's tomb and is told by a holy man, "I do not know who the ladies were that brought him" [42]. If fairy mythology does indeed recur at the end of the Mort, it is not strong enough to cure Arthur, and thus the ladies "surrender him to God by giving him a Christian burial" [43]. Therefore, this version hearkens back to Cambrensis rather than the Vita Merlini because Arthur is not presented as waiting to come again while he heals in an earthly paradise, but is undeniably dead. This perhaps asserts the omnipotence of God and the mortality of all humans. It is also a much more depressing ending because it

offers absolutely no hope for the future. Arthur is dead. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

Thus, the role of Morgan and fays in general in the Vulgate Cycle can be seen as one which constantly degenerates on multiple levels. Coming into the Vulgate, Morgan is predominantly a benevolent healer or a fay who lures heroes into her otherworldly paradisiacal home and heals or entertains them until they decide to return to their own world. Fays in general function as erotic seductresses because they are outside of the normal social order and can play roles which the courtly code could never assign to courtly ladies. Fays allowed early romance writers "to express sexual desire and fulfillment much more vividly and freely" [44]. Due to the increasing moral power of the church, or perhaps a change from literature which depicts the adventures of an individual to literature which stresses the individual's ultimate responsibility to society as a whole, the fay becomes an evil being who is trying to undermine the social order by trapping knights in her illusory otherworld. A perfect example of this is the Val sanz Retor in Lancelot.

In conjunction with this change of values, the physical appearance and appeal of fays like Morgan also degenerates. Early fays'

> beauty is legendary: a yardstick by which to measure loveliness in others. They are portrayed, with scarcely veiled eroticism, lying on their beds in seductive poses, temptresses who dress for the part in transparent garments which leave little to the imagination [45].

Morgan is not ethereally beautiful in the Merlin, but the author

does describe her in an extremely favorable way:

> This Morgain was a yonge damesell fressh and Iolye. But she was som-what brown of visage and sangwein colour, and nother to fatte ne to lene, but was full a-pert auenaunt and comely, streight and right plesaunt, and well syngynge... and there-to she hadde oon of the ffeirest heed, and the feirest handes vnder hevene, and sholdres well shapen at devise: and she hadde feire eloquense, and tretable, and full debonair she was as longe as she was in hir right witte [46].

Although Morgan's desires remain strong, she is not beautiful enough to win Lancelot's heart in the later romances, and there is some indication that she is growing old and ugly. This suspicion is borne out in another French Arthurian romance called the Huth Merlin, which explains that "when Morgan was a healing nurse she was beautiful, but as her knowledge of the wicked arts of sorcery grew, she became progressively uglier" [47]. This is a typical expression of the belief of the medieval church that any kind of learning, especially magic (which is associated with the Devil) has a detrimental effect on women. It makes them old and ugly before their time, or at the very least, causes them to become sterile or hysterical. Morgan's combined degeneration of morals and body may also be linked to the medieval concept that "evil within is symbolized by outer ugliness" [48]. It is in this guise, as an ugly old woman, that Morgan makes one of her most enigmatic appearances in Arthurian lore, in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Notes

1 Chrétien de Troyes, Arthurian Romances, trans. W.W. Comfort (London: J.M. Dent, 1975) 26.

2 Chrétien 55.

3 Margaret Jennings, "'Heavens Defend Me From That Welsh Fairy': The Metamorphosis of Morgan la Fee in the Romances," Court and Poet, ed. Glyn S. Burgess (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1981) 199.

4 Chrétien 218.

5 Quotes from the Merlin will come from a Middle English translation of the French original, published between 1450 and 1460. The other two works will be quoted from modern English translations.

6 William Lewis Kinter, "Prophetess and Fay: A Study of the Ancient and Medieval Traditions of the Sibyl," diss., Columbia U, 1958, 62.

7 Henry B. Wheatley, ed., Merlin or the Early History of King Arthur: A Prose Romance (London: Kegan Paul, 1899) 86.

8 Kathryn S. Westoby, "A New Look at the Role of the Fee in Medieval French Arthurian Romance," The Spirit of the Court, ed. Glyn S. Burgess (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985) 384-5.

9 Wheatley 374.

10 Wheatley 375.

11 Wheatley 509.

12 Wheatley 508.

13 Wheatley 509.

14 Wheatley 507.

15 Wheatley 375.

16 Lucy Allen Paton, trans., Sir Lancelot of the Lake: A French Prose Romance of the Thirteenth Century (New York: Harcourt, 1929) 241.

17 Paton 241.

18 Westoby 378.

19 Paton 242.

20 Jennings 198.

21 Paton 244.

22 Paton 247.

23 Marie Borroff, trans., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A New Verse Translation (New York: Norton, 1967) 51.

24 Paton 321.

25 Paton 322.

26 Paton 322.

27 Paton 326.

28 Paton 326.

29 J. Neal Carman, trans., From Camelot to Joyous Guard: The Old French La Mort le Roi Artu (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1974) 39.

30 Carman 41.

31 Carman 41.

32 Carman 41-2.

33 Carman 40.

34 Carman 43.

35 Carman 44.

36 Carman 44.

37 Carman 77.

38 Carman 41.

39 Carman 164.

40 Peter Noble, "The Role of Fairy Mythology in La Mort le Roi Artu," Studi Francesi 45 (1971): 481.

41 Noble 482.

42 Carman 165.

43 Noble 482.

44 Westoby 376.

45 Westoby 376.

46 Wheatley 507-8.

47 Jennings 200.

48 Westoby 383.

CHAPTER IV

MORGAN BEHIND THE SCENES

Morgan le Fay's role in the medieval alliterative poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (c. 1360-95) may be only a brief appearance as a sort of *deus ex machina* figure or it may be the most crucial element of the poem. Regardless of her actual significance, critics have written more about the brief appearance of Morgan in Sir Gawain than her role in any other work in the Arthurian tradition, analyzing everything from her psychological significance to the importance of the color of her eyebrows.

Although Morgan le Fay's name is never mentioned until Bertilak's revelation in the last few lines of the poem, she appears and is described in much detail as the mysterious old woman who accompanies the equally mysterious Lady of Castle Hautdesert. These ladies are complete physical opposites. Called "the crone and the coquette" (l. 1317) by the poet, the two women have been seen by critics as physical expressions of Good and Evil [1] or even "the two faces of fortune" [2], i.e. good luck and misfortune.

Naturally, as in the Vulgate, age and ugliness are always associated with negative values. Friedman asserts that "Morgan's ugliness in Sir Gawain is to be taken as an indication of her evil nature and sinful purposes" [3]. It follows then that the

court of Castle Hautdesert, and especially the Lord and Lady, must be good people because they are young and comely. Why, then, does the poet remark that the obviously evil old woman is "held in high honor by all men about" (l. 949)? Burrows offers a different interpretation of this scene:

> the old lady gives offence simply by being old and "zolze" in a household where, as in Arthur's hall, the whole company is otherwise presented as "zonge" or at least "zep" [4].

Morgan is the very picture of the Loathly Lady, a character usually misunderstood and mistreated in literature, such as the hag in Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale. Often, age and ugliness in such a person are illusory, and this may very well be the case with Morgan, who is known to be a shape-shifter. Pace claims that the description of the Loathly Lady in Sir Gawain contains a feature which would have caused medieval audiences to identify the crone as Morgan. According to his explanation, ugliness and great age would be associated with Morgan's interest in evil magic. The irrefutable proof of Morgan's identity is the line, "And nothing bare beneath save the black brows" (l. 961), which are a sure sign of "the lecherousness which is so prominent a characteristic of her" [5]. This seems to be expecting too much from the audience. Even if they were intimately familiar with Morgan's behavior in the Arthurian tradition, the inclusion of such a random and singular detail does not seem to indicate an intent on the poet's part to identify Morgan early in the poem. Perhaps if she was constantly described in the romances with the

epithet "black-browed Morgan" the connection would be more likely, but in this case, it could simply indicate any older woman with a taste for lechery, just as the Wife of Bath's space between her front teeth indicates a taste for young men.

Many critics believe that Morgan le Fay's appearance at the end of Sir Gawain is a way of drawing blame away from Bertilak and his wife because Morgan is known in Arthurian tradition for her motiveless malice. Kittredge calls Bertilak's revelation that Morgan is "the 'only begetter' of Gawain's adventure" [6] "the one weak spot in the superb English romance" [7]. He provides two reasons for this claim: Morgan is mentioned too late in the work to have any all-encompassing significance, and her plots do not even succeed.

Bertilak tells Gawain that one of the reasons Morgan sends him to court in the guise of the Green Knight is:

> To afflict the fair queen, and frighten her to death
> With awe of that elvish man that eerily spoke
> With his head in his hand before the high table
> (11.2460-62).

As Kittredge points out, Guenevere is no more alarmed or astonished than anyone else in the court during the Green Knight's visit and "certainly she was in no danger of death from shock" [8]. Barron suggests that the mention of Morgan's desire for Guenevere's death is a rather crude attempt on the poet's part to justify Morgan's inclusion into the poem as a major foe of the Round Table. By presenting Morgan in her traditional role, the poet "frees Bertilak from personal malignity and demonic

associations, leaving the validity of his judicial and confessional role untouched" [9]. Not just Bertilak, but also his seductive wife is freed from evil responsibility by the choice of Morgan le Fay as the "dumping-ground for all the suspicions and resentments which we have stored up on Gawain's behalf" [10].

However, Bertilak's wife may be the pivotal element which determines Morgan le Fay's importance in Sir Gawain. The critics who argue that Morgan is a significant character in the poem stress her relationship to the unnamed lady who tempts Gawain. Since Morgan is the prime instigator of the plot to seduce Gawain, the Lady must be attempting to seduce him because Morgan or Bertilak want her to. Although some critics dismiss this as just the act of another character like Bertilak, over whom Morgan has some form of control, others have suggested that the connection goes deeper than that.

The Lady exhibits many traits that could be attributed to Morgan herself. These include a seductive personality, an otherworldly castle domicile, and a proclivity for giving rings or other magical gifts to her paramours. Therefore, it is very possible that the Lady of Castle Hautdesert is Morgan's *doppelganger*. The young, beautiful seductress and the "enchantress withered by contact with evil forces " [11] are two of the most common aspects of Morgan's multiple persona.

Puhvel has argued that the women cannot both be Morgan because "even she cannot be two persons at once" [12], but Morgan le Fay has already proved that she can. In nearly every previous

appearance, she has had some kind of physical extension of her character, either in the form of her triple aspect as an Irish goddess, her nine sisters in the Vita Merlini, or her damsels and fellow enchantress-queens in the Vulgate Cycle. Carson attributes this phenomenon in Sir Gawain to the contradictory nature of "the other world" [13], where normal limits do not apply. Williams explains it as a natural characteristic of Morgan as a Trickster archetype; "the awareness of the dark and loathly against the equally disastrous impulse toward blissful ease" [14].

One of the most conclusive pieces of evidence that Morgan and the Lady are one and the same is that the younger woman, "with the exception of Gawain's guide to the Green Chapel... is the only character in the poem who remains nameless" [15]. Considering that even Gawain's horse, Gringolet, is accorded this courtesy, the omission seems strange. Unless, of course, the lady has a name already: Morgan le Fay. Although Bertilak asserts that the Lady is "my wife so dear" (l. 2404), this does not mean that she cannot be Morgan, especially since Morgan "lodges at my house" (l. 2446). If this is not enough proof, Bertilak's next sentence relates how "by subtleties of science and sorcerers' arts/ The mistress of Merlin has caught many a man" (ll. 2447-8). It does not seem completely inconceivable that Bertilak himself is one of these men, and, like Accolon in Malory, carries out her schemes out of love or some other control she has over him.

However, this does not explain why Morgan is presented and referred to by name in her guise as the old crone. Perhaps if the

younger woman is conclusively proved to be the promiscuous seductress Morgan, Gawain's acceptance of her gift would have been even more incriminating. There is also the possibility that the idea of Gawain's own aunt trying to seduce him would not have been well-received by Christian audiences.

By relying on Morgan's traditional multiple personae, the poet is able to capitalize on all of the useful aspects of her character. Morgan, by her very nature, is both "the crone and the coquette" (l. 1317). She can be simultaneously a seductress and an enchantress who can mastermind a plot against the Round Table and has enough power to change Bertilak into the Green Knight. She is a character who knows both the court of Camelot and the court of Hautdesert and is the "link between the two groups of characters" [16].

Morgan's attitude toward the Round Table in general and Gawain in particular is an ambiguous one. Are her motives benevolent or malevolent? Bertilak's explanation of Morgan's actions is not conclusive:

> She guided me in this guise to your glorious hall,
> To assay, if such it were, the surfeit of pride
> That is rumored of the retinue of the Round Table.
> She put this shape upon me to puzzle your wits,
> To afflict the fair queen, and frighten her to death
> (ll.2456-2460).

The tradition of Morgan as a tester, especially of chastity and knightly prowess, is a long one. Her enchanted drinking horn causes trouble for many women in the courtly love tales, while knights such as Tristan and Alisander le Orphelin are pitted

against her by authors in order to demonstrate their courage, prowess, and ability to resist her seductive overtures. Therefore, Morgan is the ideal character to conceive a plot which will test both knightly aspirations and Gawain's chastity. But what motives are behind her attempt to scare Guenevere to death?

Although on the surface, this act seems a totally malevolent attempt to take the life of a heroine of the romance, anyone who knows the full story of the life of Arthur can perceive other motives in Morgan's plot. In this poem, Morgan learns her magic from Merlin "for sweet love in secret she shared sometime with that wizard" (ll. 2449-50). Although some critics, such as Friedman, use this remark to link Morgan to the treacherous Nimue, Morgan's relationship with Merlin in the Vulgate cycle is not an evil union, and Merlin is certainly not ill-disposed toward the court. One magical skill attributed to both Merlin and Morgan, at least in the Vita Merlini and early romances, is the power to see the future. If Morgan can predict the future, or perhaps merely has suspicions similar to those she has in the Vulgate, she knows about Guenevere's sexual wantoness with Lancelot which will eventually lead to the downfall of the Round Table and her brother's death. If she knows this, she is acting benevolently by trying "to save Arthur and defend the court against the attack on their morals by a corrupt adulteress" [17]. If, however, "Guenevere has had no thoughts or intention of adultery as yet in the young court, Morgan has no right to kill her in defense of the court" [18]. Ultimately, Morgan's motives

in this are a moot point since the trick does not succeed in killing the Queen. Morgan may have hoped that Guenevere would see some special significance in the Green Knight that would cause abject terror only for her. Perhaps the beheading game is actually aimed at Arthur and his ability to strike a blow would be some test of his wife's chastity.

Regardless of her original plan, Gawain is the knight whose chastity and faithfulness are tested by Morgan. Friedman, while granting that perhaps Arthur's court is corrupt and in need of reform, questions whether Morgan is a "proper agent for such a task" since "by nature fays are sexually insatiable, and Morgan is perhaps the most promiscuous lady, mortal or immortal, in all Arthurian romance" [19]. Who other than someone who knows about promiscuity could test chastity? Nice medieval girls are not going to risk their own chastity to test someone else's. Once again, the fay is used in a sexual situation where a courtly lady could not properly be presented.

Gawain's temptation is a test both of his chastity and his faithfulness to his host. Morgan is definitely only trying to test his chastity rather than actually seduce him because once he tells the Lady, "Lover have I none,/ Nor will have yet awhile" (ll.1790-1), she stops trying to seduce him. She switches instead to testing his faithfulness to the host by offering gifts. Gawain resists this temptation until he realizes that the green girdle could save his life, and thus he chooses to break faith with Bertilak. Therefore, both of the potential problems of the court,

chastity and faithfulness, which Morgan attempts to rectify remain, since Guenevere is still alive and Gawain fails his final test. As if to underscore Morgan's failure,

> it is obvious from the knights' laughter (11.2513-15) that the court does not take seriously the green girdle, the gift of great value, which is a warning against both [20].

It is also possible that Morgan represents the power of nature, which is one of her attributes as a Trickster. In this case, she represents the power of the natural desire to preserve the mortal body which is set in opposition to the Christian desire to save the immortal soul.

If Morgan's appearance in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is enigmatic, then perhaps the most enigmatic aspect of all is Bertilak's assertion that

> Morgan the Goddess, she,
> So styled by title true;
> None holds so high degree
> That her arts cannot subdue (11.2452-55).

Does Bertilak mean this in earnest or is this another example of Cambrensis's and the Vulgate Lancelot's claims that only fools could think of Morgan as a goddess? The viewpoint that Morgan is an actual goddess is an interesting one because it allows one to contrast the certainly pagan goddess Morgan, who dominates and controls the action during the second half of the poem, with the Christian goddess Mary the Virgin, who protects and helps Gawain during the first sections of the poem.

Early in the poem, much mention is made of the fact that Gawain is Mary's knight. He carries her image with him on his

shield during his wanderings and prays to her to "be his guide/ Till a dwelling comes in sight" (11.738-9). He prays to her again for "Some harborage where haply I might hear mass and Thy matins tomorrow" (11.754-5) and immediately "he was ware, in the wood, of a wondrous dwelling" (1.764). This is, I believe, the point at which Morgan begins to gain ascendancy. The castle is the answer of the goddess Morgan rather than Mary to Gawain's prayers.

The castle is remarkably similar to the forest castle in which Morgan receives Arthur in the French La Mort le Roi Artu. Both are places of extreme beauty and luxuriousness in the middle of otherwise dark and inhospitable forests. Both also have aspects of the otherworld, such as the trait of appearing almost from out of nowhere.

After Gawain enters the castle and is received, Morgan the goddess makes her first appearance, in the double aspect of maiden and crone which is a trait of pagan goddesses. Gawain and the Lady make some mention of Mary in their first conversation and "when he is severely tempted, she protects him" [21] on the third morning, but after Gawain withstands the final attempt on his chastity, Mary is never mentioned again. Gawain puts aside the shield with Mary's image and chooses instead to protect his life with the magic token of Morgan le Fay, the green girdle. He depends on the physical girdle rather than his faith to save his life. Finally, he finds out that the prime mover of his fate has not been Mary or the Christian God, but rather the machinations of Morgan le Fay.

Thus, there is definitely a strong case to be made for Morgan being the controlling force behind the scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Her traditional role as a tester of chivalry and chastity, her close relationship with Gawain's temptress, and her apparent usurpation of Mary's godlike power all indicate that Morgan is more than just a convenient device used by the Gawain-poet to resolve the action of the poem.

Morgan's ultimate motives in Sir Gawain remain unclear. Is she trying to save or destroy the Round Table? Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is the last work until modern times which will present an uncertain view of Morgan's motives. Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur effectively blackens Morgan's character so that for nearly five hundred years there is no question that Morgan wishes to utterly obliterate the Round Table and anything else that is good and pure.

Notes

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CHAPTER V

MALORY AND THE FAY

In Morte Darthur (c.1470), Sir Thomas Malory simultaneously brings Morgan down to her lowest level and unwittingly turns her into one of the most powerful and interesting female characters in Arthurian legend. While much of her magical ability is removed or subverted, she remains a powerful and extremely unconventional female. In Malory's account, she turns against her brother as well as the lovers Lancelot and Guenevere, but she still comes in her traditional role to carry away Arthur at the end of the book.

Much of Morgan's role in the Morte Darthur is similar to her role in the French Vulgate Cycle, which is unsurprising since the Vulgate was Malory's primary source. Morgan's first appearances in both works are almost identical. As Malory relates: "the third sister Morgan le Fay was put to school in a nunnery, and there she learned so much that she was a great clerk of necromancy" [1]. This is an early hint of Morgan's degeneration. She is no longer a goddess, fairy, or student of Merlin, but a clerk who learns necromancy at a nunnery. Malory, borrowing from other romances, awards Morgan a husband, King Uriens of Gore, and a son, Sir Uwain le Blanchemains.

Morgan is brought to court by her mother at the end of Chapter 20 in Book I of Morte Darthur and does not appear again until the beginning of the Accolon episode, which is fortold by

Merlin in Book II, but does not actually occur until Book IV. While the Accolon episode is not an original addition by Malory, he refines the details and establishes it forever after as the first great betrayal of Arthur.

According to Malory, Arthur's magic sword Excalibur has an even more miraculous scabbard which has the power to render its bearer invulnerable, "for ye shall lose no blood while ye have the scabbard upon you, though you have as many wounds upon you as ye may have" [2]. In spite of a prophecy that "the sword and the scabbard should be stolen by a woman from him, that he most trusted" [3], Arthur entrusts the scabbard into the keeping of his sister Morgan. Because "she loved another knight better than her husband King Uriens or King Arthur, and she would have Arthur her brother slain" [4], Morgan gives the scabbard to her lover, Accolon, and has a powerless copy made for Arthur.

Through the use of her damsels, a magic ship, and illusions, Morgan traps her brother and forces him to do battle with Accolon. The plot is foiled by Morgan's nemesis, the Lady of the Lake, and Arthur triumphs, with the defeated Accolon confessing and describing Morgan's motives. Perhaps Morgan wants Arthur dead because "King Arthur is the man in the world that she most hateth, because he is the most of worship and of prowess of any of her blood" [5], although such motiveless malice seems to undermine Malory's stress on the theme of family disloyalty in the Morte Darthur.

From now on, Morgan will be a fugitive living in isolation

far removed from society. Morgan reinforces her divorce from society by trying to kill her husband Uriens before she realizes that Accolon has not succeeded in killing Arthur. Utilizing a method reminiscent of Medea, Morgan prepares to slay Uriens with a sword, but is stopped by her son. Instead of using magic on him, she uses her wits and convinces him that she is "tempted with a devil" [6], and he allows her to escape.

Morgan realizes that she has lost her brother's trust when he sends her Accolon's body as a "present" [7], and she flees from court. Determined to triumph over her brother in some way, Morgan visits the abbey where Arthur is recuperating from his duel with Accolon, and tricks the priests into letting her see him. She steals the scabbard from Arthur while he sleeps and throws it into a lake. In a rare use of magic, she transforms herself and her men into stones to elude Arthur, and escapes to the country of Gore. She sends Arthur a message to the effect of "tell him I fear him not while I can make me and them that be with me in likeness of stones; and let him wit I can do much more when I see my time" [8], but nonetheless she "made her castles and towns passing strong, for always she dread much King Arthur" [9].

This episode is a major example of how Malory turns Morgan into a force of discord and disloyalty in Arthur's England. Morgan's betrayal is much more significant than Accolon's because she is Arthur's sister and he has "honored her and worshipped her more than all my kin, and more have I trusted her than mine own

wife and all my kin after" [10]. The fact that his own sister makes the first attempt on Arthur's life introduces the theme of family disloyalty and foreshadows the later betrayals of Guenevere and Mordred. Morgan's betrayal is directly connected to Mordred's by her theft of the scabbard. The scabbard "is the symbol of Arthur's invulnerability" [11], and Morgan destroys this by throwing it into the lake. Thus, Arthur cannot survive Mordred's death stroke during his final battle, and the hopes of a better society are likewise destroyed.

The fact that Arthur's half-sister is the major force of disloyalty in the book also reminds the reader "that all is not well in the ideal society, and that the seeds of its tragic downfall were inherent from its inception" [12]. Arthur's birth itself is a result of disloyalty and violations of the codes of society. Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon, breaks his bond of loyalty with Morgan's father, the Duke of Tintagel, by coveting his wife, Igraine. This breach of loyalty and social codes leads not only to the birth of Arthur, but also to the unjust death of Morgan's father. One of Morgan's motives for her enmity against Arthur may be revenge for the earlier betrayal and subsequent death of her father.

Because of her disloyalty and special powers, Morgan is also "a spirit of discord in the Arthurian community" [13]. If Arthur is working "to fashion order out of chaos" [14], Morgan is trying to pull the world back down into chaos, "discordantly refusing to abide by her brother's mundane rules" [15]. She subverts

Accolon's oath of loyalty to Arthur and turns the knight against his king. Arthur is forced to fight "against his own power in the form of his sword Excalibur" [16] on the side of a wrongful cause, while the traitor Accolon fights on the side of the just.

This is Morgan as the dark side of the Trickster; taking established laws of society and capriciously turning them inside-out, breaking down order and replacing it with chaos, and using sexuality, wit, and shape-shifting powers to accomplish her ends. She seduces Accolon in order to win his allegiance. She uses extremely quick wits to convince her son that she is under demonic possession when he catches her trying to slay her husband. She shapeshifts herself and her cohorts into rocks "so that Arthur, for all his prowess, cannot capture her" [17].

A perfect example of Morgan's power as a rule unto herself occurs in the scene directly following the stone transformation. On her way to Gore, Morgan encounters two knights. One has been cuckolded by the other and is trying to drown him. Because the captured knight is Accolon's cousin, Morgan releases him and allows him to drown the other knight. Although the cousin is also a knight of Arthur's, Morgan instructs him to tell her brother "that I rescued thee, not for the love of him but for the love of Accolon" [18], thus making it perfectly clear that she overthrows justice for her own purposes, not in aid of the higher justice of Arthur's court. The very fact that a knight of Arthur's has cuckolded another knight indicates that "Arthur's order is still impure in many ways" [19]. Morgan may send the knight back to

court just to point out to Arthur that chaos will remain at Camelot even though she departs.

Morgan will no longer work her chaos and disloyalty directly at court, but will either send representatives to court bearing messages or will imprison members of the court at one of her own castles. The earliest example of Morgan's gifts is the Medea-like poisoned cloak she sends to Arthur immediately after the Accolon episode.

Due to her dread of her brother, Morgan decides to do away with him so that he will no longer be a threat to her life. She sends one of her damsels to court with the mantle and the message, "Your sister sendeth you this mantle, and desireth that ye should take this gift of her; and in what thing she has offended you, she will amend it at your pleasure" [20]. Arthur, who only the night before has sworn "to be avenged on her and I live" [21] is either very forgetful or very good at turning the other cheek, because he is pleased by the present. Perhaps he still hopes for some form of reconciliation and the return of order to his family. Only the timely intervention of the Lady of the Lake prevents Arthur from donning the mantle. She advises him instead to order the damsel messenger to put it on. Since the damsels in Malory serve no greater purpose than to be cannon-fodder in Morgan's battles of court intrigue, the girl predictably "fell down dead, and never more spake word after, and burnt to coals" [22].

Morgan's act of sending a deadly gift breaks down society as

do so many of her other acts, because she violates ancient codes of friendship and hospitality. Furthermore, because "Arthur's ideal society is built on the trust, friendship, and loyalty of disparate knights from numerous lands, Morgan's act is one of defiance against a sacred tenet of the Arthurian world" [23].

After this act, Arthur's temperament, which is in its own way as capricious as Morgan's, will not allow him to ever trust Morgan again, even when she sends him signs telling him the truth about his wife and Lancelot. As Jesmok points out, Arthur's "inability to find some middle ground with her, some *measure*, contributes to his doom and to that of the kingdom" [24]. A good example of this is the reversal of motives during the Guenevere and Lancelot episodes, where Morgan is trying to discover the lovers while Arthur is primarily concerned with ignoring the trysts or even actively removing suspicion from his knight and his Queen. Arthur's capriciousness is illustrated when he vents his impotent anger at his unassailable sister against her innocent son, Sir Uwain, by banishing him from the court because Arthur is suddenly fearful that "my nephew... is of counsel with her to have me destroyed" [25].

Morgan's next two attempts to send objects to the court may be seen both as acts of disloyalty and attempts to reveal Guenevere's adultery to Arthur. Morgan sends a knight to King Arthur with "a fair horn harnessed with gold, and the horn had such a virtue that there might no lady ne gentlewoman drink of that horn but if she were true to her husband, and if she were

false she should spill all the drink" [26]. The horn is diverted by Sir Lamorak to the court of King Mark, where "there were but four ladies of all those who drank clean" [27].

In a perfect world, the horn would be considered a thing of order and "good because it separates truth from falsehood" [28]. However, because the world is not perfect and is ruled by the laws of chivalry and courtly love (which actively encourage extramarital affairs as being the highest expressions of love), a horn which reveals adultery "did never good, but caused strife and debate" [29]. Morgan, again in her Trickster aspect, is offering the court a truth which they do not wish to accept. They call her "an enemy to all true lovers" [30] instead of realizing that true, faithful lovers would be vindicated by the horn. Although Morgan is still acting as a chaotic force opposing the codes of society, she points out that the society itself contains inherent aspects of corruption and chaos.

Morgan's third gift to Arthur's court successfully reaches its destination and is in fact carried by one of Arthur's best knights. Morgan captures Sir Tristan and agrees to let him go free if he will carry a shield of her devising to the next tournament. He agrees and "the shield was brought forth, and the field was *gules* with a king and queen therein painted, and a knight standing above them" [31]. When Tristan wants to know the meaning of the shield, Morgan is very circumspect, telling him only, "It signifieth King Arthur and Queen Guenevere and a knight that holdeth them both in bondage and servage" [32]. The message

is meant only for the three people portrayed on the shield, so that Arthur will know of the lovers' betrayal and the lovers will know he knows.

Morgan's purpose in Morte Darthur gradually changes. In the early portions of the book, she wants power and hates her brother Arthur because he stands in her way. By the time of the latter two gifts, Morgan has switched from being power hungry to desiring love, specifically Lancelot's love. She uses all of her resources to gain his affection. In the episode of the temptation of Lancelot, she even tries to coerce him into loving her, but he remains devoted to Guenevere. Once she realizes that she cannot seduce him away from Guenevere she decides that she will have revenge by revealing the adulterous affair.

Gradually, this "desire for revenge, born in hatred and humiliation,...is tempered with a desire to warn Arthur of the corruption in his household" [33]. Morgan the Trickster is now acting as a mediating figure, but Arthur's mind is firmly set against her because of her earlier treachery. He ignores the warning of the shield even when Morgan's damsel mouthpiece tells him, "Sir King, wit ye well this shield was ordained for you, to warn you of your shame and dishonor" [34]. If Arthur had acted on this warning, he might still have saved his kingdom from its eventual dissolution into chaos. As it stands, Morgan does more to preserve order and society in the later books, while Arthur and his knights fall prey to their own inner corruption and chaos. Arthurian society itself must ultimately bear culpability

for the death of the dream of Camelot, rather than shunting all the blame onto a convenient scapegoat like Morgan.

Malory seems to do his best to turn Morgan into a scapegoat anyway. This is especially evident in Malory's view toward magic and women. Malory's opinion of both is extremely negative, and therefore it is unsurprising that the epitomé of both, Morgan le Fay, is treated in a negative manner.

Malory tries either to supress Morgan's magical abilities or show her using them for evil purposes. Barber suggests two reasons for Malory's supression of magic:

> The demand for the grotesque and incredible was not a trait of Malory's class or times... Secondly, the magic element was incongruous in the French romances, and in his simplification of the latter he naturally rejected it [35].

Thus, the power of prophecy that Morgan exhibits in some French romances is completely removed and given to Merlin instead. Even Merlin, however, is not a completely beneficent character in Malory. He is portrayed as a dirty old man pursuing Nimue and is called the son of the Devil because of his magical powers. Is it any wonder, then, that Morgan, whose reputation has already been blackened in the French romances, becomes the repository for the negative feelings Malory has against magic? According to Greene, "Malory associates magic with the values which destroy lasting love, lasting loyalty, and the love of God; he associates magic with the irrational and anti-realistic" [36], and thus these are not coincidentally the same values with which Morgan is associated.

The best example of Morgan using her magic for corrupt

purposes occurs in the Alisander le Orphelin episode. King Mark asks Morgan to kill Alisander for him. Morgan's knight captures and wounds Alisander, but Morgan becomes enamored of him. In the Vita Merlini and Chrétien de Troyes' romances, Morgan's skill as a healer is her most important trait. Malory takes this tradition and corrupts it because Morgan uses her knowledge of medicine to inflict pain on Alisander before she heals him. She

> searched his wounds and gave such an ointment unto him that he should have died. And on the morn when she came to him he complained him sore; and then she put other ointments upon him, and then he was out of his pain [37].

Morgan then uses her healing powers to coerce Alisander into staying with her for a year by promising to heal him completely. He gives his word and is healed, but breaks the promise as soon as Morgan's cousin offers him the chance to escape.

Normally, a knight would be condemned in courtly society for breaking a pledge to a lady, but Morgan is exempted from this tradition because she is alienated from society and because she is not the type of woman to be featured in conventional female roles. If Morgan is an example of the Trickster archetype, then she is also a representative of the Sorceress archetype: the woman who is both lethally dangerous and supremely seductive.

However negative Malory's view may be towards Morgan, she is a vitally important part of the work because she provides the knights with a truly dangerous female adversary. Knights like Tristan and Lancelot who are able to resist her seductions are especially lauded because their acts show not only their prowess but also their faithfulness as perfect lovers.

Considering the traits of Arthurian enchantresses, one begins to understand how Malory's villain, Morgan le Fay, becomes a modern feminist heroine. Malory's heroines are women who play by society's rules and are willing and cheerful members of their society. The enchantresses, on the other hand, are alienated, ostracized, and self rather than society-centered.

> Most of the sorceresses in Malory's Morte Darthur live in a world apart. They are physically isolated from the run of society, living beyond the civilized fringe in a far-off land or castle. But more important, they are set apart socially and psychologically. Their social intercourse is limited to women like themselves or knights whom they have entrapped. *Self*-centered rather than social or chivalric, they seek love, sexual fulfillment, even power, but never acceptance. They seem to relish being outsiders [38].

While Malory's society chooses their heroes from those who follow social codes, modern society has a strange love for anti-heroes or anti-heroines - rebels who react against a society which refuses to allow them to express their own ideas or indulge their own desires. An overtly sexual woman in Malory's time is an immoral being, while modern society regards such behavior as an indication of independence and strong will. Perhaps it is not so much that Morgan's character changes from medieval to modern works, but rather that opinions about what she represents alter.

One aspect of the Morgan tradition which remains consistent, even in Malory, is her office as Arthur's retriever and comforter after his last battle. Malory adheres to the tradition that is established in the Vita Merlini, even though it contradicts his previous portrait of Morgan. His reasons may be similar to those

of the unknown author of the French La Mort le Roi Artu - that the scene is too dramatic and breathtaking to leave out. Certainly, Malory's description provides an appropriate depiction of a hero leaving the material world.

> Thus was he led away in a ship wherein were three queens; that one was King Arthur's sister, Queen Morgan le Fay; the other was the Queen of Northgales; the third was the Queen of the Waste Lands. Also there was Nimue, the chief lady of the lake [39].

Lumiansky suggests that the four queens symbolize two opposing values. Morgan and the Queen of Northgales (who helps Morgan trap Lancelot and confine Elaine to her boiling kettle) represent the forces of evil which oppose the Round Table. Nimue and the Queen of the Waste Lands (aunt of the virtuous Sir Percival) symbolize the supernatural forces of good which aid Arthur. Thus, Arthur's end seems rather ambiguous because "he is accompanied by the same two supernatural forces, for evil and for good, which he has regularly faced in the events of his life" [40]. He has failed to overcome evil, and the presence of the two evil queens may symbolize the evil which will survive after Arthur and destroy his dreams of a better world.

However, it is also possible that Morgan's appearance on the barge is a benevolent act which springs out of her mediating Trickster persona. She has not made a personal attack on Arthur since she sent him the poisoned mantle and has spent the later part of the book trying to reveal his wife and best friend's adultery. Therefore, the final appearance of both Morgan and

Arthur may mark a reconciliation between the siblings. Neither Morgan's nor Arthur's actions indicate that she is evil or abhorrent to him. He lays his head in her lap rather than Nimue's, and she calls him "dear brother" [41]. Her healing powers, which were corrupted in the Alisander episode, are once again being used for benevolent purposes. Arthur is confident that "I will into the vale of Avalon to heal me of my grievous wound" [42], but Morgan is worried that "this wound on your head hath caught over-much cold" [43]. Morgan and the other queens do not seem as confident of Arthur's recovery because they "wept and shrieked, that it was a pity to hear" [44].

Arthur's final destiny is very ambiguous in Malory. At first glance, it seems very similar to the French La Mort le Roi Artu's ending. The queens' magic is not powerful enough to stave off the death decreed by God, and thus, they secretly bury Arthur. Malory tries to leave his readers with some hope because he explains,

> More of the death of King Arthur could I never find, but that the ladies brought him to his burials; and such one was buried there... but yet the hermit knew not in certain that he was verily the body of King Arthur [45].

Thus, Malory's ultimate opinion of Morgan le Fay is difficult to ascertain. He may have seen her as a consistent force of evil and disloyalty seeking to oppose and destroy the Round Table. He may have viewed her as a villain who progressively softens towards her brother as she recognizes their common problem in the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Guenevere. Her role may be directed entirely by the context of the scenes in which

she appears, and therefore she is at one moment a powerful opponent to test the prowess of a knight, and at the next, a tender nurse and sibling trying to heal her dying brother. Modern writers will try to explain Morgan's character using all of these explanations. Whatever he truly thought of Morgan, Malory has left Arthurian literature with a true conundrum of a character and later writers with a fascinating subject for numerous articles and novels.

Notes

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3 Malory, Vol.1 117.

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5 Malory, Vol.1 134.

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11 Henry Grady Morgan, "The Role of Morgan le Fay in Malory's Morte Darthur," The Southern Quarterly 2 (1963): 160.

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13 Janet Marie Jesmok, "Malory's Women," diss., U of Wisconsin, 1979, 103.

14 Jesmok 103.

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20 Malory, Vol.1 142.

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23 Jesmok 109.

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25 Malory, Vol.1 143.

26 Malory, Vol.1 363.

27 Malory, Vol.1 364.

28 Jesmok 117.

29 Malory, Vol.1 364.

30 Malory, Vol.1 364.

31 Malory, Vol.1 463.

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37 Malory, Vol.2 73.

38 Jesmok 86.

39 Malory, Vol.2 519.

40 Lumiansky 18.

41 Malory, Vol.2 517.

42 Malory, Vol.2 517.

43 Malory, Vol.2 517.

44 Malory, Vol.2 517-8.

45 Malory, Vol.2 519.

CHAPTER VI

MORGAN IN MALORY'S SHADOW

Although John Steinbeck initially intended The Acts Of King Arthur And His Noble Knights (written 1958 to 1959, published posthumously 1976) to be an adaptation of Malory's Morte Darthur into a modern idiom, the work ultimately becomes an original reworking of the Arthurian legend, and one of the best examples of its originality may be seen in Steinbeck's depiction of the role of Morgan le Fay.

Morgan has two major appearances in Acts, one near the beginning and one in the later portions of the book. Her early appearance in the chapter which bears her name, "Morgan le Fay", is almost identical to her role in Malory's chapters dealing with the Accolon episode. Steinbeck not only accepts Malory's portrayal of Morgan, but also intensifies it in depicting Morgan as a character who is utterly corrupt. She cancels Accolon's "conscience with his lust" [1], but Steinbeck makes it clear that "Morgan le Fay loved no one. Hatred was her passion and destruction her pleasure" [2].

In Malory, there is some question as to whether Morgan is evil before the Accolon episode occurs. There is no doubt in Acts that Morgan has always been corrupt. Arthur himself reveals that "I have trusted her more even than my wife, even though I knew her jealousy and lust of flesh and hunger for power, and even

though I knew she practiced the black arts" [3].

Ironically, in order to follow Malory's example, Steinbeck's more enlightened Arthur still accepts Morgan's gift of the poisoned cloak and must once again be saved by Nimue. Steinbeck explains this away by pointing out that Morgan knows that "men believe beyond proof to the contrary that blood is thicker than water and that a beautiful woman cannot be evil" [4]. This seems to be Arthur's unspoken belief in both Malory and Steinbeck. Why else would he swear at one moment to deal with her in such a way that "the whole world will speak of my revenge" [5], and at the next accept Morgan's gift with the explanation that she was controlled by an evil spirit when she tried to kill him? In both Malory and Steinbeck, Arthur is trying to reestablish order and return cohesiveness to his immediate family, but Steinbeck hints that Arthur is doing exactly what Morgan wants him to do so that she can destroy him. Arthur's adherence to the proverb that blood is always thicker than water is portrayed as unrealistic in Steinbeck.

It is unfortunate that Steinbeck never completed his adaptation of Malory because the reader is left without the final meeting and reconciliation of Arthur and Morgan to compare with their first major confrontation. Steinbeck's ultimate view of Morgan comes out as negative as Malory's, or even more so, because Steinbeck depicts only her early betrayals and her attempts to seduce Lancelot.

However, Steinbeck's portrayal of Morgan's attempt to seduce

Lancelot in the later portions of Acts expands her role and adds new details of motivation and characterization which do not occur in Malory. By the time Steinbeck writes "The Noble Tale Of Sir Lancelot," he has discarded his earlier intention "to set the stories down in meaning as they were written, leaving out nothing and adding nothing" [6] and is producing a more original interpretation.

The episode of the temptation of Lancelot is much more lengthy and detailed in Steinbeck than in any previous work. In Malory and the Vulgate Lancelot, the episode is just one of many challenges Lancelot faces in order to prove that he is a great knight and an ideal lover.In the earlier works, Morgan le Fay and two or three other sorceresses or queens, sometimes named, sometimes not, capture Lancelot, throw him in a dungeon and tell him he must choose one of them to be his consort. Lancelot is never truly tempted in the earlier works. The ordeal is primarily a test of his bravery and prowess in flatly denying the witch-queens without fearing for his life. While Steinbeck depicts Lancelot's bravery in denying the queens as well, he also turns their offers into real temptations and portrays Lancelot as a man with a great deal of insight into the human psyche rather than the pious, sword-wielding, thick-headed paladin in Malory.

Steinbeck's version of this episode begins in a manner similar to Malory's. Lancelot falls into a deep sleep beneath an apple tree. However, where Malory's queens spontaneously happen upon Lancelot, Steinbeck introduces a new player. "A huge and

ancient raven" [7] protects the sleeping knight's bejeweled sword from a thieving jackdaw and then reports the find to Morgan.

This is not the first time that Morgan has been associated with crows or ravens. The Irish Morrigan often assumes crow form, such as when she pays tribute to the dead Cuchulain. In some non-Vulgate French romances, such as the Diderot Percival, Morgan le Fay assumes the shape of a raven. The ancient raven in Acts may be seen as yet another example of Morgan's multiple personae. Although the bird is male, he serves the same purpose as Morgan's damsels: to be Morgan's eyes and ears in a world in which she herself is not welcome.

The raven messenger finds Morgan and her companions in their traditional surroundings, a procession which Steinbeck has the insight to recognize as "unreal" [8]. Only sorceresses can travel in a cavalcade of such pageantry: "four queens robed in velvet and crowned, and four armed knights supported a green silken canopy on their spear tips to protect the ladies from the sun" [9]. Steinbeck makes more of a distinction between the traits of the four queens than any previous author. In Malory and the Vulgate, they might just as well have all been exactly like Morgan le Fay, except for the difference in names. Steinbeck initially distinguishes them by the coloration of their hair, eyes, cheeks, robes, and horses.

> The Queen of the Outer Isles came first, golden of hair as well as of crown, eyes blue as slate when the sea changes, high-colored cheeks of fast warm blood, her cloak sea-blue lined with sea-gray, her palfrey dappled as a spume-flecked rock. Next came the Queen of North Galys, red of hair, green-eyed, green robed, with purple under color in her

> face and her horse was red-roan as her hair was roan. The Queen of Eastland followed her - ashen-haired but warm as ashes of roses, eyes of hazel, clothed in a robe of pale lavender. Her horse was white as milk. Last came Morgan le Fay, Queen of the land of Gore, sister of King Arthur. Black of hair, of eye, of robe, and a horse as black and shining as Satan's heart. Her cheeks were white, the living white of white rose, and her midnight cloak was blacker for its points of ermine [10].

Once the queens discover the sleeping Lancelot, they all desire him, and Morgan notices that "her lovely sister queens (are) licking their lips like wolves about a bleeding slaughter" [11]. Because she knows that none of the queens will share and because "sisters of the earth should not bite sisters" [12], she proposes the contest.

Lancelot is drugged and taken to the dungeon of Maiden's Castle, which is no longer the pleasant otherworldly palace of La Mort le Roi Artu or Sir Gawain And The Green Knight, but rather a "ditched and ramparted hill... shunned by daylight folk as a place of ghosts and a coven for witches" [13]. It more closely resembles the dismal Green Chapel in Sir Gawain, where "might/ The devil himself be seen/ Saying matins at black midnight" [14].

Laura Hodges proposes that Lancelot is not actually physically transported to the dungeon by the queens because the whole episode takes place in his dreaming mind. She argues that the setting is symbolic because "one assumes that all unworthy thoughts are normally imprisoned in the dungeon, while honor lives above ground in the keep" [15]. In this dungeon of his unconscious, Lancelot is tempted by previously suppressed images

of earthly desires. Unlike his son Galahad, Lancelot is not completely innocent and divorced from worldly temptations; rather, "his renunciation of these desires is made despite his knowledge of their attractions" [16].

Lancelot is not the only character who is given new psychological depth by Steinbeck. The four queens are also extensively developed, and their motivations are explored. Morgan explains the reason for his imprisonment to Lancelot.

> We four have everything we can wish for: lands, wealth, power, and pretty things beyond belief. Besides these, through our arts we have access to things beyond the world and under it, but, more than this, if something we wish does not exist, we have the power to create it. You must then understand that to us new playthings are very rare. And when we saw the best knight in the world sleeping, we thought that you are that rarity, a thing we do not have. And so we took you [17].

At the point of near-godhood which the queens have reached, power becomes an end unto itself. Thus, sorceresses do capricious things because they have already achieved everything practical and desirable that power can bring. They are as bored as the spoiled children to which Lancelot will later compare them.

However, if the queens are psychologically fascinating, they are also reasonably adept at psycho-analysis themselves. They are able to select the four things which are the most tempting to Lancelot (and the human race in general) and manifest them for him.

Steinbeck's choice of coloration for each queen is extremely interesting. Not only are the colors linked to the queens'

temptations, but they also seem to relate to the types of personalities associated with the four humors. Thus, the Queen of the Outer Isles, colored yellow, grey, and blue, is choleric, the red and green Queen of North Galys is sanguine, the ash and white Queen of Eastland is phlegmatic, and the black-clad Morgan le Fay represents melancholy.

The Queen of North Galys, who is colored the red of desire and the green of natural urges, produces the most physical temptation. True to her sanguine and sensual temperament, she promises Lancelot "ecstasy, mounting, growing, swelling, bursting - endless and no satiety, no end until you know the crucifixion of love" [18]. Ironically, this most blatant and physical temptation has the most successful effect on Lancelot. He "was breathing in heavy bursts" and the Queen of North Galys asks, "Is it fair to let him cool off?" [19].

The choleric Queen of the Outer Isles follows this performance with a temptation that combines physical and mental desires. True to her own quicksilver humor, she promises change to Lancelot. She weaves her spell, pledging that "every joy will be emphasized with a little pain, rest will follow riot, heat alternate with cold" [20]. She concludes by promising "a proper death, a high and shining death as the final ornament of a proper high and shining life" [21]. Where the Queen of North Galys appeals to his physical desires, the Queen of the Outer Isles tempts his knightly desire for eternal adventure and challenges with the guarantee of a noble and memorable death. Lancelot gives

very little outward indication that he is at all moved by this offer and "the questing queen could not read his thoughts" [22]. However, his eyes are "shining between half-closed lids" and Steinbeck's emphasis on "the scars of his old wounds" [23] from earlier adventures indicate that he is at least slightly tempted by the offer of greater challenges.

The next contender, the Queen of Eastland, aims her temptation at Lancelot's desire not to be lonely and isolated. Lancelot is the best knight in the world, but as such, he is without true peers or "opponents, and he is treated as a legend before his death, which further isolates him" [24]. The Queen of Eastland is rather a medieval Freudian, because she tempts Lancelot with memories of his mother and promises of unequivocal mother-love in the future, "the peace he never found anywhere else, the safety and warmth he still seeks, praise for his virtues, and a gentle and compassionate conscience for his faults" [25]. She even suggests that Lancelot's love for Guenevere is due to an unresolved Oedipus complex because "Guinevere resembles Queen Elaine in looks" [26]. This attempt tempts Lancelot in a way that he cannot tolerate, because he leaps up shouting, "Stop it! Oh! Foul, oh! Rottenness" and then "will not listen" [27]. He can no longer put up even a pretense of humoring the queens and tells them, "Do what you want with me, but be sure I will go down fighting. You have failed" [28].

However, the greatest temptress of all, Morgan le Fay, has not yet had her turn. She offers him what she and the other

sorceresses consider to be the only true temptation: power. The other queens are only parts of an ultimate personality of which Morgan shows her right to be the whole. Morgan dominates the other queens with her explanation of power and they "melted under the heat of her" [29]. All the other queens' temptations may be achieved if one has enough power, according to Morgan. When Lancelot asks Morgan, "What is power?", she cannot describe it except in its own terms: "power is itself- whole- self-contained, self-sufficient, self-sustaining, and unassailable, except by power" [30]. She offers him what she honestly feels to be the only purpose of existence.

The temptations have progressed from the purely physical offer of the Queen of North Galys through appeals to his emotions and memories to Morgan's entirely mental temptation. She herself tells Lancelot, "My sisters spoke to your senses. I speak to your mind" [31].

However, Lancelot is not swayed at all by what the sorceresses feel to be the most irresistible temptation. His only visible emotion is puzzlement and pity for Morgan. Earlier, while he was imprisoned, he remembered his childhood attempt to use magic. Once his true prowess as a knight began to emerge, he no longer had a need for magical dreams. He realizes that the queens have never outgrown this need for magic and worlds of their own creation because they feel "inadequate, ill, or powerless" [32] in the real world. Lancelot points out that the worlds of magic-users are "made without the leavening of pity or the

mathematics of organization" [33], and consequently cause death and fear for common people and rage in the sorceresses because the worlds are inadequate.

Magic in Steinbeck has become not only an evil thing, but a force that is in complete opposition to healthy reality. There is a link between magic and mental illness or lack of maturity. Lancelot describes the child's world of dreams which enchantresses never outgrow.

> And then, because his world has disappointed him, he builds his own world where he is king, where he rules not only men and women and animals, but clouds and stars and sky. He is invisible, he flies. No authority can keep him in or out. In his dreams he builds not only a world but remakes himself as he would wish to be [34].

This description is startlingly similar to Geoffrey of Monmouth's portrayal of Morgan and the Isle of Avalon in the Vita Merlini. Morgan can fly anywhere, rules a paradisiacal island and all its people, and is beautiful beyond belief. However, what was positive and miraculous to Geoffrey is negative and illusory to Steinbeck. The beneficent healer Morgan becomes Morgan le Fay and her sister queens, whom Lancelot describes as "crippled, vengeful children with power" [35].

Unlike her more volatile companions, Morgan does not suggest that they immediately torture or damn Lancelot for his words, but orders that they listen to what he has to say because "I am always glad to hear such things. It stimulates the imagination" [36]. It is possible that Morgan is merely interested in what the new plaything has to say, which is a novelty in itself. She may

feel that Lancelot's theories are worth listening to because knowledge is a type of power and his insights about magical power could give her an advantage over her peers. Ultimately, however, she and the other queens cannot face the truth of Lancelot's words and must escape back to their world of illusion.

Lancelot's understanding that the power gained through magic is illusory allows him not only to resist Morgan's offer but to mount an offensive against the queens. He proceeds to show them the intangibility of their power. Their beauty is unreal and unattractive to him because "I don't know what you started with" [37]. He tells Morgan that he has heard that she can become a wolf and comments, "I wonder which is you - the lovely woman or the wolf or something in between" [38]. He can only love an honest beauty which "has the scars and ravages of pain and defeat, but also it has the shining of courage and love" [39].

The ethereal beauty of Morgan and her companions is not only illusory, but transitory, and cannot survive their emotional turmoil. This is a variation on the medieval theme that association with evil magic causes women to become old and ugly. In this case, the appearance of the sorceresses is subject to their moods. The more violently angry they become, the more hideously ugly they appear to be. By the end of the interview, the Queen of Eastland's face is "white and bloated" and "the red-haired witch of North Galys threw herself on the floor, her hooked fingers clawing the stones" [40]. After Lancelot is put back in the dungeon, he is rescued by a damsel who reports that

the queens "look like ancient white-haired hags" [41]. Their appearance may be the revelation of their true forms or simply the result of their towering rage or their magical activity of "cooking up a brew potent enough to rip the gates from Camelot" [42].

In their final appearance in Steinbeck, Morgan and her companions more closely resemble the witches in Macbeth than any of Morgan's earlier Arthurian incarnations. Steinbeck has embraced Malory's concept of Morgan as an evil enchantress and has proceeded to modify it until modern audiences clearly recognize the wicked-witch stereotype: the old hag muttering words into a hellish cauldron. Whether she would have remained that way, had Steinbeck completed the work, or become a more beneficent character as tradition demands, is impossible to say. Regardless of this question, the completed portions of The Acts Of King Arthur not only present Morgan as one of the great villains of Arthurian lore, but introduce her as one of the most psychologically complex characters in modern Arthurian fiction.

Notes

1 John Steinbeck, The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights (New York: Ballantine, 1976) 133.

2 Steinbeck 134.

3 Steinbeck 143.

4 Steinbeck 153.

5 Steinbeck 153.

6 Steinbeck 6.

7 Steinbeck 270.

8 Steinbeck 270.

9 Steinbeck 270.

10 Steinbeck 270-271.

11 Steinbeck 272.

12 Steinbeck 272.

13 Steinbeck 270.

14 Marie Borroff, trans., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A New Verse Translation (New York: Norton, 1967) 46.

15 Laura F. Hodges, "Arthur, Lancelot, and the Psychodrama of Steinbeck," Steinbeck Quarterly 13.3 (1980): 77.

16 Hodges 77.

17 Steinbeck 280.

18 Steinbeck 281.

19 Steinbeck 282.

20 Steinbeck 282.

21 Steinbeck 283.

22 Steinbeck 283.

23 Steinbeck 283.

24 Hodges 77.

25 Steinbeck 284.

26 Steinbeck 284.

27 Steinbeck 284.

28 Steinbeck 284.

29 Steinbeck 286.

30 Steinbeck 286.

31 Steinbeck 286.

32 Hodges 78.

33 Steinbeck 289.

34 Steinbeck 289.

35 Steinbeck 290.

36 Steinbeck 288.

37 Steinbeck 287.

38 Steinbeck 288.

39 Steinbeck 287.

40 Steinbeck 290.

41 Steinbeck 293.

42 Steinbeck 293.

CHAPTER VII

MORGAN UNBOUND

Marion Zimmer Bradley's The Mists Of Avalon (1982) is the first work to present the complete Arthurian legend in a feminist as well as a historical perspective. Although Bradley deals with many of the topics which occur in Malory, such as disloyalty, family relationships, and the use of and morality behind magic, Mists focuses on the experiences and opinions of the female characters. The action and conflicts take place in a domestic atmosphere rather than on the fields of war. Bradley also introduces themes of her own which Malory never greatly considers, such as the role of women in Arthurian society, the conflicts between the older Goddess religion and Christianity, and the problem of fate versus free will.

Although the story is told through the points of view of many women, it is primarily Morgan's story. Her experiences and her relationships with the other characters tie the whole tale together. Just as Morte Darthur is the story of Arthur's life, Mists is the tale of Morgan's development, downfall, and reconciliation, not only with her brother, but with her deity and herself. Despite the fact that Morgan is not even born until a good hundred pages of the book have already gone by, she introduces the work. Furthermore, she is the only character who is allowed to speak directly to the reader from time to time in

first person narrative. Thus, there is a more personal bond between Morgan and the reader than with any other character and Morgan is awarded more sympathy and understanding than might otherwise be the case.

Morgan's first words in the Prologue of Mists demonstrate that Bradley has some knowledge of even the oldest and most persistent aspects of the Morgan le Fay tradition. Morgan states that "In my time I have been called many things: sister, lover, priestess, wise-woman, queen" [1]. This is an example of Morgan's multiple personae. In the Vulgate Cycle, Gawain, and Malory, the authors want to make perfectly sure that the audience perceives Morgan as old, evil, or corrupt, and thus have to create other physical manifestations of any contrary views of Morgan, such as the young damsels. Mists is different from previous works because Morgan's character is developed and expanded so that she may experience all of the different aspects of a powerful woman's life. Although the ways in which the world and the other characters perceive her change, Morgan is still the same person, regardless of whether she is Arthur's sister, a priestess of Avalon, or the Queen of North Wales.

Morgan's four incarnations - maiden, mother, wise-woman, and death crone - are the traditional faces of the Goddess. As Spivack points out,

> In Jungian terms there are four dimensions in the feminine psyche: mother and maiden at opposite poles and wise woman and warrior at opposite poles. Every woman to a certain extent participates in each of these four cardinal dimensions, but most women tend to favor one aspect over the others [2].

For example, Viviane remarks early in the novel that she is the wise-woman, Morgan is the maiden, and Igraine is the mother, and "together we make up the Goddess, and she is here present among us" [3]. Viviane also fears that her sister Morgause may become the death crone, which ultimately occurs when Morgause ruthlessly tries to gain power through her control of Morgan and Arthur's son.

Unlike Viviane and the other female characters in the novel, who only represent a single aspect of the Goddess, Morgan passes through all four stages as she develops. She is the maiden as she learns the secrets of the priestesses of Avalon and sacrifices her virginity in the Sacred Marriage ceremony. As the mother, she gives birth to Arthur's son but is forced to abandon him. She learns the true meaning of motherhood as the step-mother to King Uriens' son, Uwain. In the guise of the wise-woman, she and her druidical lover Accolon plot to return Britain to the rule of a king of Avalon. Finally, as the death crone, Morgan kills her step-son Avalloch and plots the death of her brother.

At the end of the novel, Morgan reconciles all of her different aspects and is able to see the true unity of the Goddess behind them. This first occurs when Morgan assumes the form of the Goddess who offers the Holy Grail to the Round Table. No one except her fellow priestess Nimue recognizes her, and each person seems to perceive her differently. Morgan, however, knows the truth of both her own multiple aspect and that of the Goddess she serves;

> I am all things- Virgin and Mother and she who gives life and death. Ignore me at your peril, ye who call on other Names... know ye that I am One [4].

Morgan's perception of her multiple aspects occurs again when she comes for Arthur after his final battle.

> I stood in that barge alone, and yet I knew there were others standing there with me, robed and crowned, 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 was born, and the Queen of North Wales, summoning the eclipse to send Accolon raging against Arthur, and the Dark Queen of Fairy... or was it the Death-crone who stood at my side? [5].

One aspect of Morgan's multiple persona which does not fit into the Goddess mythos as cleanly as the others is the fairy queen. At first, Bradley treats Morgan's "le Fay" appellation as a scornful nickname. Morgause and Lancelot call the young Morgan "Morgaine of the Fairies" [6] because she is small and dark like the fairy people, who are the original inhabitants of Britain. The nickname acquires truth when Morgan accidentally blunders into the fairy country and is greeted by the Queen as "Morgaine of the Fairies" [7]. The Queen is the only one of Morgan's multiple aspects whom she actually meets face to face as a seemingly separate entity. However, the second time Morgan comes to the fairy land and visits the Castle Chariot, she does not see the Queen and is herself addressed as "Queen of Britain" [8]. As the Queen of North Wales, Morgan again meets the Old People and this time "they acknowledged me as their priestess and their

queen" [9]. The final time she visits Castle Chariot, she again meets the Queen and thinks that she "had something of the look of Viviane about her as if she and Morgaine were blood kin" [10]. Morgan does not realize the truth of the matter until after her experience with the Grail and her understanding of the unification of all of her aspects into the person of the Goddess.

> And now she knew why she had never again caught sight of the queen within the land of fairy.
> *I am the queen now.*
> *There is no Goddess but this, and I am she...* [11].

Morgan is not the only thing in Mists Of Avalon which has multiple aspects. The world itself is divided into three different types of reality; the world of Britain, the world of Avalon, and the world of Fairy. These worlds are divided from each other by the novel's namesake, the mists of Avalon. Bradley's Avalon resembles Geoffrey of Monmouth's in many respects. It is a paradisiacal place with mirror pools, a circle of stones, and, most importantly, "groves of apple trees" [12], linking the place back to its ancient name of the Isle of Apples. Morgan cannot believe that such a place could be real when she first arrives. Viviane cryptically informs her that "it is more real than any other place you have ever seen" [13]. At the end of the novel, although Avalon has gone far into the mists, there will always be those who will be able to pierce the mists and find it if they are devoted deeply enough to what Avalon stands for. The shadow of Avalon's Grail will comfort the rest of humanity because "it is in Avalon, but it is here. It is everywhere. And those who have need of a sign in this world will

see it always" [14].

Time flows differently in each of the three worlds. After Morgan's second visit to Fairy, she relates,

> To this very day I have never known how many nights and days I spent in the fairy country... Try as I may I can make it no fewer than five and no more than thirteen. Nor am I certain how much time passed in the world outside, nor in Avalon, while I was there, but because mankind keeps better records of time than the fairy folk, I know that some five years passed [15].

Time also passes differently in Avalon than it does in Britain. This difference becomes more and more pronounced as the novel progresses, until, at the end of the book, Morgan realizes that "Avalon, now, had gone so far into the mists that it might be with Avalon, as it had been with the fairy country when she was young" [16].

The timelessness of the worlds of Fairy and Avalon is Bradley's explanation for another long-standing Morgan tradition; Morgan's defiance of the normal laws of aging. Although she occasionally appears as an old crone, such as in Gawain, most Arthurian works portray Morgan le Fay's youthful appearance as an illusion. The Vulgate Cycle and Malory hint that Morgan is truly old and ugly, but uses her magic to alter her age and appearance. Steinbeck's Lancelot uses this argument to refuse the queens' advances because, for all their illusory beauty, he does not know what they started with. Although Bradley's Morgan is an old woman at the end of the novel, she has aged less rapidly than her counterparts because of the time she spends in Avalon and the

fairy country. After her longest visit to Fairy, she recounts, "Within the fairy country I knew nothing of the passing of time, and so for me it did not pass" [17]. Thus, Morgan is unwrinkled and dark-haired while women who should appear much younger than her are growing gray.

Bradley departs from tradition in her portrayal of Morgan's physical appearance. Previous authors have depicted Morgan as either ethereally beautiful, in the case of Geoffrey and Steinbeck, or impossibly ugly, as the Gawain-poet does. The reader is never completely certain about Bradley's Morgan. She is small and dark and, in her youth, Morgause taunts her by telling her that she is "born of the fairy folk" [18]. Next to the young, "exquisite golden" [19] Guenevere, Morgan feels ashamed because she is "little and ugly like the fairy people" [20].

Morgan's aunt Viviane thinks that Morgan is not beautiful, but also recollects,

> When you are my age, my girl, it will not matter whether or not you are beautiful, for everyone you know will believe that you are a great beauty whenever you wish them to believe it" [21].

This statement is ambiguous because it could mean that Morgan will be able to cast a glamour over herself to make her appear beautiful, as she does when she takes on the identity of the Lady of the Holy Grail, or that her inner strength of character and compassion will make her outward appearance seem beautiful to those who know her. The latter is much more often the case. Because she is not a raving beauty, Morgan knows better than to

judge people completely by their appearances. Thus, she is able to share love with the deformed harper Kevin, healing them both of their resentment against a society which judges by outward beauty. Kevin tells her, "I had known you were wise and a priestess, but somehow I had never thought you were beautiful" [22], until she looks beyond his ugly exterior and appreciates the beauty of his soul.

The more Guenevere sees of Morgan, the more she perceives Morgan as being beautiful. She connects this perception with Morgan's knowledge and skill, although she does snidely comment that "it was no wonder all men thought her a sorceress" [23] because of Morgan's supernatural youthfulness. Morgan's true beauty is finally summed up by Kevin to an incredulous Morgause; "There is an old saying in the wisdom of the Druids... beauty is not all in a fair face, but lies within" [24]. Ultimately, Morgan is attractive to other people because she is strong- willed, intelligent, and compassionate rather than a shallow beauty.

Morgan's strength of character and intelligence is evident in her use of magic and affiliation with music in Mists Of Avalon. Although magic is widely used in the novel, it is treated in a completely different way than in any previous work. Where Malory and Steinbeck perceive magic as evil and unnatural, Bradley portrays it as a completely natural force which can be harnessed for both good and evil purposes. Bradley's depiction of magic and many of the details of the training of priestesses are drawn from a book by a modern witch, Starhawk, entitled The

Spiral Dance. Starhawk defines magic as

> the art of sensing and shaping the subtle, unseen forces that flow through the world, of awakening deeper levels of consciousness beyond the rational [25].

This definition applies to all of the forms of magic which occur in Mists.

The most widely used type of magic in the novel is what Bradley calls "the Sight" [26]. The Sight allows priestesses to see events which occur far away in space and time as well as look "within the minds of men and women" [27]. Therefore, in addition to being a useful, if not always desired, talent to Morgan, it is also a clever narrative device. Through Morgan's use of the Sight, Bradley can depict action which occurs outside of the female sphere of existence and foreshadow future events. Morgan complains,

> The Sight came easily, Viviane had said I was priestess-born. It was not so easy to bid it come when I willed and only when I willed, and to close the gates of the Sight when it was not fitting I should see [28].

Several of Morgan's flashes of Sight portray things she would rather not see. Starhawk states,

> There are many methods of trance induction, but all seem to function on one or more of four related principles: relaxation, sensory restriction, rhythm, and boredom [29].

Usually, Morgan's unwanted moments of Sight occur while she is spinning, an activity which contains the elements mentioned by Starhawk [30]. Morgan herself reveals that "all too easy it was to sink into trance" [31] while spinning. During this episode she

has a vision of Viviane's slaughter at the hands of Balin.

In fact, Morgan foresees most of the major disasters of the Arthurian legend, including Lancelot's fruitless quest for the Grail, the death of Kevin the Merlin, the deaths of Arthur and Mordred, and even her own plot to overthrow Arthur and deprive him of his scabbard. Prophecy is one of the most ancient talents in the Morgan tradition, but one that is removed from her by Malory and given to Merlin instead. In Mists, Morgan gives up the gift of her own volition. She tells Lancelot her reasons:

> I think the Sight is given to mock us - we see what the Gods give us to see, but we know never what it means. I think I will never use the Sight more [32].

The Sight is not Morgan's only magical talent. Morgan is trained as a priestess and learns "to call the fire and raise it at command, to call the mists, to bring rain" [33],"the herb lore and the lore of healing" [34], astral projection, and the spells to part the mists surrounding Avalon. One of her first tasks as a priestess is to create the magic scabbard of Excalibur, which has the power to prevent blood from flowing out of the wounds of its bearer. Morgan enspells the scabbard using sympathetic natural magic. She sheds her own blood on it "so that none need be spilt upon it when it is carried into battle" [35].

In Spiral Dance, Starhawk comments on the importance of music in magic rituals. Not coincidentally, Kevin the Merlin, Taliesin, and Morgan are all accomplished harpers. Music is Morgan's conciliation for what she perceives as her defects. She tells herself, "Gwenhwyfar may be beautiful, but I have the voice

of a bard" [36]. Music is one of the many things which demonstrates the differences between Goddess worship and Christianity. Morgan's singing causes a debate between Bishop Patricius and the forces of Avalon, in which Guenevere states, "It is unseemly for a woman to raise her voice before the Lord" and Morgan feels, "In music, the Gods only are served" [37]. John Giannini picks up on this contrast between the two religions and the two women as expressed in views about music and expands on it by explaining, "For Jungians, music is the highest expression of the feeling type for whom people and relationships are valued above logic and systems" [38], and Morgan, "whose rhythms are in tune with all of nature" [39], is a more fertile and fully alive woman than sterile, Christian Guenevere.

Another scene which occurs between Morgan and Guenevere demonstrates the unpredictable nature of magic. Guenevere asks Morgan for a charm which will cause her to carry a child to term and Morgan warns her, "Charms often work as you would not they would do" [40]. Indeed, the charm, while allowing her to take Lancelot as her lover, does not work in quite the way Guenevere had envisioned.

Morgan's knowledge of herbal lore and healing save the court from a fever epidemic, but many people perceive this skill as being magic, although Morgan points out that anyone "could do what she did if she was neat-handed and willing to take the time and trouble to see to it" [41]. However, Morgan does participate in some acts which cannot be described by any term other than

supernatural. At the end of the novel, Morgan seems to project her astral presence to Arthur and Mordred as they prepare to slaughter one another. When Guenevere is taken hostage by Meleagant, she psychically calls to Morgan and Morgan sends Lancelot to rescue her.

Only once in the novel does Morgan participate in what could be termed black magic. Her step-son Avalloch becomes a threat both to her person and her plans to turn Britain back into a pagan land, and she decides to kill him. Utilizing sympathetic magic in the form of one of Avalloch's rings and throwing herself into a trance by weaving, Morgan projects her spirit into the body of a sow which kills Avalloch as he slays it. The "Great Sow, eater of your young" [42] is the animal incarnation of the Goddess as the death crone. This act causes Morgan's identity to shift from that of the Goddess as priestess to the Goddess as death crone who will execute Arthur if he does not amend his betrayal of Avalon.

Arthur and Morgan's relationship is best summarized by Arthur just before he dies; "I will always see the Goddess with your face" [43]. Morgan replies, "I will never leave you again, my brother, my baby, my love" [44]. In fact, Morgan does assume every face of the Goddess at some point during her relationship with Arthur.

In the beginning, Morgan resents Arthur because the small part of her mother's affection which is not lavished on Uther must be divided between them. Once she realizes that they are

both neglected, she decides, "I was too big a girl to cry or whimper for my mother, because I had a little one to look after now" [45], and she becomes a mother to Arthur until he is sent away for fostering.

The next time they meet she is a priestess and maiden during the Sacred Marriage rite and Arthur plays the role of King Stag. He promises her that "no matter how many women I may have, for all my life I will always remember you and love you and bless you" [46]. Both of them are unaware of the incestuous relationship until Morgan makes a remembered maternal gesture. Both of them are shocked in their own way about the affair; Arthur, because incest is a major sin in his Christian upbringing, and Morgan because she cannot believe that Viviane and the Goddess could use her in such a manner. However, this event is perhaps the most important episode in The Mists Of Avalon because all of the other plot lines are linked to it, including the birth of Mordred, the conflict between Christianity and Goddess worship, and the four-cornered love triangle between Morgan, Arthur, Lancelot, and Guenevere.

The theme of two men torn between loyalty to each other and devotion to a woman who loves them both has been a favorite plot device since the Middle Ages. The relationship between Lancelot, Guenevere, and Arthur is probably the most famous example of this genre. Bradley introduces a new twist to the tradition by adding Morgan as a fourth side. In previous works, Morgan is merely an impediment in Lancelot and Guenevere's love affair and is not a

true part of the triangle because there is no love exchanged between Morgan and the other characters.

The bond between Arthur and Morgan in Mists is one of close siblings, but, at least for Arthur, also includes aspects of incestuous sexual desire. Morgan cannot in good conscience return these feelings because "He says he will always love me and long for me, and that is the one thing he must not do! If Lancelot only felt so" [47]. Morgan has an extremely frustrating relationship with Lancelot. He feels attracted to her, but his all-consuming passion is still directed towards Guenevere. Morgan justifies her attempts to seduce Lancelot by claiming that if Lancelot devotes himself to her she may prevent the scandal between the knight and the Queen which could cause irreparable harm to the Round Table.

However, it is the relationship between Morgan and Guenevere that Bradley explores most deeply. In many ways, the two women are complete opposites. Morgan is small and dark, while Guenevere is pale and golden. Morgan is a priestess of Avalon and Guenevere is an ardent Christian. Morgan strives to exercise her free will. Guenevere tries to reconcile herself with her fate. Their love-lives are inexorably linked together.

> And for a bizarre moment Morgaine saw herself as the Queen's shadow... *somehow her fate and mine have gotten all entangled*... she, Morgaine, had had Arthur and borne him a son, which Gwenhwyfar longed to do; Gwenhwyfar had had Lancelet's love for which Morgaine would willingly have given her soul [48].

The combination of their religious differences and the love

diamond cause a strange love-hate relationship to grow between Morgan and Guenevere. When they first meet in the mists behind Avalon, Morgan hates Guenevere because Lancelot seems more attracted to her than to Morgan, and Guenevere fears that Morgan is a demon because she looks like one of the fairy folk. Unlike Morgan, Guenevere spends most of her life judging people by their outward appearances, despite Christian premises to the contrary. She is frightened of Kevin the Merlin and blames him for one of her miscarriages.

Guenevere rarely takes responsibility for her own actions. At the same time as Morgan is fighting for control of her own life, rather than be a pawn for Viviane or the Goddess, Guenevere is imploring Morgan to give her a charm "so that she had no choice but to love Lancelot (and) then she would be freed of that fearful choice" [49]. Her guilt is so great that she dislikes Morgan because "she has the Sight; does she know all my sinful thoughts" in spite of the fact that "Morgaine had never shown her anything but a sister's kindness" [50].

Guenevere constantly oscillates between crucifying herself with guilt about every little thing she may have done wrong in the sight of God and finding some scapegoat upon which to shift both the blame and the responsibility. In time, Guenevere begins to blame Morgan for all of her unchristian adulterous desires. Because of dreams in which Morgan tells her to have an affair with Lancelot, Guenevere links Morgan with the Devil, since "in all of hers that gave such evil counsel that no Christian wife

could heed, oftenest it was Morgan who spoke it" [51]. Guenevere's discovery of Arthur and Morgan's incestuous tryst provides her with the perfect excuse as to why she has not been able to conceive and also how it cannot possibly be her own fault.

Although she initially hates Guenevere, Morgan later decides to do her utmost to make peace between them because they are both victims of the love diamond, and also because "all women, indeed, are sisters under the Goddess" [52]. This assumption of sisterhood is sorely tested by both Morgan and Guenevere. Their battles, although confined to the domestic sphere, are as destructive and passionate as any fought by Arthur on the fields of war. Morgan gives Arthur a son, which Guenevere is never able to do, but the birth of Mordred is as bloody and violent as any male combat. Likewise, Guenevere's miscarriages are just as debilitating to the future stability of the kingdom as an invasion would be.

However, the true clash of wills between Morgan and Guenevere begins when Morgan decides that if she cannot have Lancelot, she will help Guenevere's cousin Elaine to seduce him so that the scandalous affair will never be revealed. Morgan relates, "From that day, Gwenhwyfar hated me; and that I regretted most, for in a strange way I had loved her" [53]. Guenevere retaliates in the style of true Old Testament justice; with an arranged marriage for an arranged marriage. She encourages Arthur to make a match between old King Uriens and

Morgan, which Morgan accepts under the mistaken surmise that she is going to marry Uriens' son, Accolon. Guenevere actually has doublefold revenge. Not only does she do to Morgan what was done to Lancelot, but she also remembers her own situation and Arthur's affection for Morgan when she thinks, "Now, let Morgaine see what it is like to be given in marriage to a man she does not love" [54]. Morgan accepts the match, partially because "we will at least be rid of one another. And no more pretence of friendship between us" [55].

Despite Morgan's thoughts, the two women are destined to meet again many years later, when Morgan returns to court. Guenevere and Morgan are surprised to find that "in spite of all old enmities, there was love too... *Or is it only there are so few of us, now, who were young together?*" [56]. A casual observer, Nimue, notes that "If Gwenhwyfar were not so fanatically, mindlessly Christian, she would have loved Morgaine well" [57]. Bradley's ultimate view of the relationship would seem to be that, despite religious and personal differences, sisterhood will ultimately prevail.

Religious conflicts are not confined to the sphere of Morgan and Guenevere's relationship. The opposition of Christianity to the religion of the Goddess, the place of women in religious society, and the concept of religious tolerance are major themes of The Mists Of Avalon. Morgan's development is deeply influenced by the ways in which she must reconcile the two religions.

Morgan is brought up in a Christian household, but is sent

to Avalon to train as a priestess. She dedicates her life completely to the Goddess and never questions what is asked of her until she realizes that she has consummated the Sacred Marriage with her own brother. She tries to comfort Arthur by explaining that in her religion "we are not brother and sister here, we are man and woman before the Goddess, no more" [58]. However, vestiges of her Christian upbringing or her stubborn desire to assert her own will in the running of her own life will not allow her to accept her own explanation. She rebels when Viviane demands that she carry the resultant child to term because "the royal blood of Avalon is not to be cast aside" [59], and runs away from Avalon. Ironically, this exercise of her free will on Morgan's part leads to nothing but disaster. In refusing to allow herself or her child to be forced to do the will of the Goddess or her Machiavellian aunt Viviane, Morgan gives her baby to her other aunt, the ruthless, power-mad Morgause, who will twist him into the patricidal Mordred.

Morgan still believes she is serving the Goddess and often debates on the side of her deity against Guenevere and the fanatical bishop Patricius. Religion also intrudes into her relationship with Lancelot. In spite of the fact that he is Viviane's son, Lancelot has taken Christian vows which make "the way of the Goddess" [60] seem sinful to him. Repulsed by what she perceives as a belief which negates nature and life, Morgan tries to return to the Goddess and Avalon. Perhaps because she is not yet worthy, she stumbles into the land of Fairy instead, and

spends five years serving the Goddess in the most ancient and primitive ways.

After Morgan returns to court, her dedication to the Goddess is tested once more when her aunt Viviane, the chief Lady of the Lake, is brutally murdered by the fanatical Christian, Balin. The people who serve the Goddess view her death as a "sacrifice to Avalon" [61], but this incident causes the first major division between Arthur and Morgan. Arthur wishes to bury Viviane at the church of Glastonbury so that "her tomb shall be made a place of pilgrimage" [62]. Morgan views this as a blasphemy against the Goddess and Avalon because she should lie "where all the priestesses of the Mother have been buried since time began" [63].

Morgan is finally made aware of how unfaithful she has been to the beliefs which she attempts to defend. She is rendered powerless to prevent Arthur from giving Viviane a Christian burial because Kevin the Merlin will not acknowledge her as Viviane's chosen successor due to her earlier abandonment of Avalon. Nonetheless, when Kevin begins to broach the possibility of Christianity melding with the old religion to produce a new belief, Morgan reacts as vehemently and fanatically as the Christians she denounces. Having once again found the Goddess (or so she believes), she will do anything to keep the old religion pure. Morgan's intolerance will contribute as greatly to the downfall of Avalon and the Round Table as Guenevere's Christian fanaticism.

Only after she makes the decision to bring Britain back under the rule of Avalon's Goddess and Avalon's king does Morgan become more like the disloyal enchantress in Malory. Not coincidentally, Bradley places the episode of Accolon and the theft of Excalibur much later in the legend than does Malory. Morgan's conviction that she is doing what is best for Britain and her Goddess make her a more sympathetic figure than Malory's Morgan, but her ruthlessness is her main attribute during the Accolon episode.

Morgan becomes so obsessed with the idea of returning power back to Avalon that she loses touch with the Goddess she purports to serve. On Midsummer's Eve, as she ponders whether to attempt to seize power with Accolon, she sees a falling star. Misinterpreting what is consistently a symbol of the downfall of glory, Morgan decides that it is "a portent. The Goddess welcomes me back to herself" [64].

Morgan changes from a loving woman who is devoted to her family above all else into a religious zealot who barely stops short of murdering her young step-grandson because he blocks her way to power in North Wales. She does murder her step-son and turns away from her brother because "he is not ruthless enough to be High King" [65]. At this point, Morgan is ruthless enough for both of them. Despite momentary flashes of conscience, such as when she realizes that she is using Accolon "as ruthlessly as ever Viviane did me" [66] and "would have used the oath of a companion against Arthur now" [67], the murder of Avalloch seems

to overcome any reticence Morgan has about other murders.

Although she promises to give Arthur "every opportunity to become what he has sworn to be" [68], Morgan will execute him and set Accolon in his place if he does not honor his oaths to Avalon. She justifies her actions by claiming that Arthur's betrayal is the cause of hers, but despite his dedication to the fanatically Christian Guenevere, Arthur is honestly trying to create a world in which the two religions are merged. As Kevin points out, most of Britain is a Christian land and Avalon is slowly being allowed to fade away by popular preference, even if Arthur does nothing.

Morgan herself observes the commingling of beliefs during the Midsummer celebration in North Wales, but does not yet understand the significance of the event. Likewise, she is scandalized by Arthur and Kevin's suggestion that the Holy Regalia of Avalon be used in a Christian ceremony. Morgan demands that the Avalonian sword Excalibur be returned to her if Arthur does not honor his oath. Arthur argues that he is trying to preserve Avalon in Britain since "if the sword of Avalon also serves as a cross for an oath, does it not mean that Avalon's powers are joined in the service of this land?" [69]. However, Morgan still cannot see any possible combination of the two religions. Just as Guenevere blindly argues that Christ put Arthur on the throne, Morgan declares that "the force and power of Avalon set you on the throne, so the force and power of Avalon can bring you down into ruin" [70].

Naturally Morgan's misguided scheme falls to pieces and she realizes that "I had killed or thrust from me or lost to death everyone in this world I had ever loved" [71]. Accolon is killed by Arthur, Uriens and Uwaine turn away from her, and Arthur becomes her enemy. Morgan even miscarries her child by Accolon, which indicates the Goddess's extreme displeasure with her methods.

Morgan also fails to retrieve Excalibur and instead takes back her gift, the miraculous scabbard. She throws it into the lake, where

> it would lie till leather and velvet rotted and the silver and gold thread tarnished and twisted and at last the spells woven into them vanished utterly from the world [72].

Not only has Morgan deprived Arthur of his invulnerability and guaranteed his eventual death at the hands of Mordred, but she has also negated one of the great achievements of her own life. She sheds her own blood onto that scabbard and works on it until it appears to be "a thing surpassing human work" [73]. Now, her incomplete understanding of her duty to her deity causes her to destroy it.

The loss of the scabbard as well as all the loved ones in her life causes Morgan to degenerate into a state where she does not care if she lives or dies. This is in itself a blasphemy against a religion that values life above all else. Morgan has been soundly chastised by her Goddess for her presumption and is ready to once again take up her service when Kevin calls her back

to Avalon. However, she still has not learned tolerance.

When Kevin steals the Holy Regalia and takes it to be used in a Christian ceremony, Morgan goes after him, intending to punish him and regain the holy items before they are blasphemed. She takes on the shape of the Goddess as she offers the Grail to the Round Table, but she still does not understand the significance of the successful combination of the Grail with the Holy Communion. Despite the fact that the Goddess in Morgan intones, "I am all things - Virgin and Mother and she who gives life and death. Ignore me at your peril, ye who call on other Names... know ye that I am One" [74] while participating in the Communion, Morgan sees the act as one of vengeance rather than synthesis. Exerting her will and causing the death of her sister priestess Raven, Morgan causes the Grail to be transported to Avalon forever. She knows that the fruitless search for the Grail will mark the beginning of the end for the Round Table.

What Morgan does not realize until later is that, despite her best efforts, the fates of Avalon and the Round Table are inexorably linked.

> Morgan thought often, in the bleak days which followed upon Kevin's death, now indeed the Goddess has taken it upon herself to destroy the Companions of the Round Table. But why had it been her will to destroy Avalon too? [75].

Morgan finally understands the synthesis of the Goddess and Christian beliefs when she observes Galahad's perception of the Grail even through the mists, and realizes that she cannot herself determine in which world the Grail belongs. In the

overthrow of her intolerance and the acceptance of the Goddess's will, Morgan finds a measure of peace with those she loves, as well as with herself, and discovers the Goddess within herself.

Morgan's final appearance in The Mists Of Avalon graphically depicts her acceptance of the synthesis of old and new religions. She has a dream in which Lancelot offers her the Holy Communion and tells her, "Take this cup, you who have served the Goddess. For all the Gods are one God, and we are all One, who serve the One" [76]. Journeying to Glastonbury to pay her respects to the dead Lancelot and plant Avalon's Holy Thorn on Viviane's grave, Morgan is struck by the similarity between the novice nuns and the maidens of Avalon. One of the girls takes her to the chapel of the Virgin Mary and Morgan realizes that "the Goddess will never withdraw herself from mankind" [77], but rather will adapt new incarnations as other religions come and go. Realizing this, Morgan is able to mediate somewhat the tragedy of the disappearance of Avalon and the Round Table, and come to terms with her own place in the legend.

> No, we did not fail. What I said to comfort Arthur in his dying, it was all true. I did the Mother's work in Avalon until at last those who came after us might bring her into this world. I did not fail. I did what she had given to me to do. It was not she but I in my pride who thought I should have done more [78].

Thus, the story of the corrupt enchantress who seduces virtuous knights has been transformed by Bradley into a tale about one woman's struggle with intolerance, free will, and her place in the world. Morgan has gone from being a two-dimensional villainess to a woman, who, at the end of her story, recognizes

that there is no supreme right or wrong. Rather,

> truth has many faces and the truth is like to the old road to Avalon; it depends on your own will and your own thoughts, whither the road will take you [79].

This acceptance of mutability and denial of absolute truths is what makes The Mists Of Avalon a modern novel.

Mists seems to fall under the classification of *Bildungsroman*. Morgan's life is depicted from her birth to her disappearance into the mists. Morgan's death is not portrayed for two reasons. First, it is unecessary because the Arthurian legend is finished. As the last words of the novel indicate, Morgan's "work is done" [80]. In addition to this, Morgan tradition never depicts Morgan's death. She is the single character who is consistently left alive at the end of the Arthurian legend, either as a witness to the death of Arthur, or perhaps because her supernatural aspects and association with the Goddess and the timeless land of Avalon give her a strange immortality.

Despite the fact that Morgan does not die in Mists, she is nonetheless a certifiable *Bildungsroman* protagonist. Unlike some medieval works and their descendants, in which a character who is evil predictably and comfortably stays that way, the modern *Bildungsroman* delights in exploring motivation and changing the opinions and beliefs of a character as she develops. Morgan is not completely heroic nor completely villainous in The Mists Of Avalon, but she is undeniably more human than any of her earlier manifestations.

Notes

1 Marion Zimmer Bradley, The Mists of Avalon (London: Sphere, 1982) ix.

2 Charlotte Spivack, Merlin's Daughters: Contemporary Women Writers of Fantasy (New York: Greenwood, 1987) 150.

3 Bradley 26.

4 Bradley 888.

5 Bradley 998.

6 Bradley 164.

7 Bradley 259.

8 Bradley 446.

9 Bradley 681.

10 Bradley 842.

11 Bradley 938.

12 Bradley 151.

13 Bradley 151.

14 Bradley 1009.

15 Bradley 470.

16 Bradley 1002.

17 Bradley 470.

18 Bradley 127.

19 Bradley 182.

20 Bradley 182.

21 Bradley 160.

22 Bradley 182.

23 Bradley 508.

24 Bradley 538.

25 Starhawk, The Spiral Dance (San Francisco: Harper, 1979) 13.

26 Bradley x.

27 Bradley x.

28 Bradley 157.

29 Starhawk 148.

30 Meredith J. Ross, "The Sublime to the Ridiculous: The Restructuring of Arthurian Materials in Selected Modern Novels," diss., U of Wisconsin, 1985, 408.

31 Bradley 352.

32 Bradley 938.

33 Bradley 157.

34 Bradley 150.

35 Bradley 228.

36 Bradley 332.

37 Bradley 332.

38 John Giannini, "Merlin and Morgaine: The New Playful Child in Arthur," Avalon to Camelot 2.3 (1987): 17.

39 Giannini 16.

40 Bradley 510.

41 Bradley 507.

42 Bradley 773.

43 Bradley 1000.

44 Bradley 1000.

45 Bradley 127.

46 Bradley 208.

47 Bradley 253.

48 Bradley 614.

49 Bradley 388.

50 Bradley 364.

51 Bradley 484.

52 Bradley 329.

53 Bradley 626.

54 Bradley 652.

55 Bradley 652.

56 Bradley 835.

57 Bradley 908.

58 Bradley 209.

59 Bradley 263.

60 Bradley 376.

61 Bradley 576.

62 Bradley 579.

63 Bradley 579.

64 Bradley 678.

65 Bradley 716.

66 Bradley 776.

67 Bradley 777.

68 Bradley 778.

69 Bradley 826.

70 Bradley 825.

71 Bradley 866.

72 Bradley 864.

73 Bradley 229.

74 Bradley 888.

75 Bradley 925.

76 Bradley 1001.

77 Bradley 1008.

78 Bradley 1009.

79 Bradley xi.

80 Bradley 1009.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

The character of Morgan le Fay changes shape as quickly as any Celtic goddess, and, the moment the critic thinks that Morgan has finally been pinned down, she assumes another aspect and prompts new considerations. Having now examined Morgan's lineage from her misty mythological beginnings through the chronicles, the French romances, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the Morte Darthur, Steinbeck, and finally concluding with The Mists of Avalon, two explanations for Morgan's mutability seem possible.

The first explanation applies primarily to the sources up to and including Malory's Morte Darthur. In these works, the character of Morgan le Fay changes according to the plot demands of the individual works. Geoffrey of Monmouth needs a benevolent island queen to heal Arthur and provide him with a haven so that the people of Britain may hope for his eventual return. Roughly ninety years later, the more conservative Giraldus Cambrensis decides that the death and burial of Arthur would be made more dignified by the attendance of a powerful kinswoman. Since Morgan is already connected to Arthur's final days, she is the logical choice.

Chrétien de Troyes most likely adapts his Morgan from Geoffrey's. He uses her fabled healing powers as a panacea to restore his heroes when they seem beyond all help. The unknown

author of the Vulgate Merlin capitalizes on the fact that Chrétien makes Morgan Arthur's sister. She is the only female character who is of similar rank to Guenevere, and thus she is portrayed as a foil to the Queen by placing both women in courtly love situations and depicting how they react to their lovers and to each other. From Morgan as Guenevere's foil, it is but a short step for the author of the Vulgate Lancelot to portray her as Guenevere's enemy, and thus also the enemy of Lancelot and all true lovers. Lancelot as well as La Mort le Roi Artu demonstrate the usefulness of Morgan as a challenge to knights. As a powerful woman, she tests not only their courage and prowess, but also their courtesy, faithfulness, chastity, and adherence to the codes of courtly love.

It is in her role as a tester of chivalry and chastity that the Gawain-poet utilizes Morgan. Although direct mention of her in the poem is slight, Morgan is portrayed as the prime mover of the action and provides the poet with both an explanation for the supernatural occurrences and a means of tying his poem into the larger Arthurian tradition.

By the time Malory writes the Morte Darthur, Morgan is well established in the non-Vulgate French romances as the enemy of Arthur as well as Lancelot and Guenevere. Malory decides to transform her from merely an incidental villainess into the major force of disloyalty in the early sections of his book. He capitalizes on her relationship with Arthur to symbolize both the treachery of women and the concept of evil and disloyalty even in

the heart of seemingly perfect Camelot.

The second explanation of Morgan's changeable character is that different authors have different opinions about the qualities Morgan represents. Malory's Morgan becomes one of the most evil, treacherous, and unnatural females ever to grace the printed page. She represents everything that Malory finds objectionable in women: an anti-social personality, a strong will, a genius for intrigue, loose sexual mores, and a desire for power and independence.

Once Morgan is taken up by modern writers, these fundamental characteristics do not greatly change. However, the attitude of modern writers toward Morgan is radically different. Steinbeck, although relying on Malory for the bulk of his opinions, nonetheless portrays Morgan as a being who is to be pitied rather than despised. Steinbeck's Morgan chooses unhealthy and unrealistic methods by which to attain power and status and thus is never completely satisfied with her realm or herself.

Morgan le Fay finally acquires a defender in the writings of the feministic Marion Zimmer Bradley. Bradley portrays the female desire for independence, power, sexual freedom, and control of her own life as no better or worse than that of the male. Morgan certainly makes mistakes in her dealings with her deity and her king in Mists of Avalon, but these are errors of human nature, not the devious machinations of a scheming female. Thus, Morgan changes from a two-dimensional symbolic villainess in medieval Malory into a modern, multi-dimensional, empathic human being.

The future of Morgan le Fay in Arthurian literature is as uncertain as her past. Will future authors continue to depend on Malory for their depiction of Morgan, or will there be a surge towards Bradley's more sympathetic and feminist interpretation? Works such as Parke Godwin's Firelord (1980), Phyllis Ann Karr's The Idylls of the Queen (1982), and Joan Wolf's The Road to Avalon (1988) indicate that Marion Zimmer Bradley is not alone in her perception of Morgan as a sympathetic and even heroic character. However, modern popular culture seems more inclined towards Malory's view, as is shown by Peter David's novel Knight Life (1987), the film Excalibur (1980), and the graphic novel by Mike Barr and Brian Bolland, Camelot 3000 (1988).

The eventual resolution of these conflicting views is impossible to predict. One thing is certain, however. Morgan le Fay undoubtably will continue to perplex critics just as greatly as she has in the past. She provides the aura of magic and mystery that is such an integral part of the lasting fascination of the Arthurian legend. As Vera Chapman states in The Green Knight, Morgan "is Dream and Fantasy and Shaping, and without her the world would be poor indeed" [1].

Notes

1 Vera Chapman, The Green Knight (New York: Avon, 1975) 172.

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