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IN A SPACE OF THEIR OWN: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININE TRAUMA  
THROUGH THE ARTHURIAD

by

VIKTORIJA BEZBRADICA

Under the Direction of Edward Christie, MA

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the literary tapestry of trauma wound within representations of femininity throughout the Arthuriad. In many of the legendary Arthurian narratives, women are marginalized, cast as pawns and scapegoats, or erased from the mythology entirely. Although scholarship has done much to uncover and improve the legacy, values, and standing of these characters, particularly through the lens of feminist analyses, the troubling reputation they maintain within past and modern primary texts has yet to be explored. I argue that the adaptations and transformations of a specific feminine voice from across periods and forms within the tradition creates a long-standing traumatic space which echoes, extends, and re-orient the myth. By focusing on Morgan le Fay, I demonstrate how her various representations and manifestations form a collection of traumas which persist through the character's narrative progression, ultimately hindering her struggle to attain autonomy, and thereby illuminating the myth's problematic continuities.

INDEX WORDS: Literary studies, Transhistorical trauma, Mythic women, Empowerment, Feminism, Trauma narratives

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THROUGH THE ARTHURIAD

by

VIKTORIJA BEZBRADICA

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2019

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2019

IN A SPACE OF THEIR OWN: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININE TRAUMA  
THROUGH THE ARTHURIAD

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## 1 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Through the might of Morgan le Fay, that lodges at my house, / By subtleties of science and sorcerers’ arts, / The mistress of Merlin, she has caught many a man ... / Morgan the Goddess, she, / So styled by title true; / None holds so high degree / That her arts cannot subdue” (Boroff 62).

“As she spun out the thread, so she spun the lives of men – was it any wonder that one of the visions of the Goddess was a woman spinning ...” (Bradley 739).

### 1.1 Origins

The pearl poet’s *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, an alliterative poem composed around the late fourteenth century (1350-1400 AD), suggests in its declarative characterization of the woman known as Morgan le Fay a curious resemblance to contemporary fiction writer Marion Zimmer Bradley’s own perspective of Morgaine of the Fairies. With more than five-hundred years between the texts, both representations of the fabled protagonist – or *antagonist*, in many cases – focus on the woman’s power. In Marie Boroff’s translation of the original text, the pearl poet seems to pay homage to Morgan’s true origins, which in one of the very first iterations of the Arthurian myth, found in the *Vita Merlini* (1150 AD), portray her as a divine healer. Boroff alludes to Morgan’s nature by referring to her “high degree” (2454), alluding that no one has the power to overcome her. Consequently, in J.J. Anderson’s annotated edition of the original text, the pearl poet makes the same overtures towards Morgan’s divinity, positing, “Morgne the goddes / Therefore hit is hir name; / Weldes non so hyghe hawtesse / That ho ne con make ful tame” (2451-2455). However, Anderson’s interpretation of the original text in this same quatrain includes a caveat – although it lends credibility to Morgan’s powers of persuasion, proposing “No one has such great pride that she cannot make (him) utterly tame” (274), the

original text doesn't elevate her status. While Boroff's translation adds words that aren't in the original text, they ultimately serve to emphasize Morgan's station. Anderson's edition – however faithful to the original text - fails to make a connection between Morgan's divinity and the true extent of her abilities. By highlighting Morgan's "high degree" as well as her "title true," Boroff's translation suggests that the woman's power holds an immortal endurance (62). Some scholars, such as Carolyne Larrington, point out that "Once historical and literary tradition makes Morgan into the King's sister, possession of innate supernatural powers is by definition ruled out," thereby excluding the possibility that in the romance tradition, Morgan retains a divine status (13). Larrington suggests that the pearl poet coins Morgan as such due to her entanglements with Merlin, indicating that the word *goddess* "should be regarded as a nickname rather than a fact" (13). Even in Bradley's modern conception of the myth, written in the same vein as the romance tradition of the past, Morgaine takes on the attributes and image of the Goddess – a deity celebrated by her fellow acolytes in Avalon as well as some of Arthur's subjects – although she isn't truly the Goddess herself. Ultimately, to wield even the aura of divinity, however contended, lends Morgan's many representations with the power to reorient the larger myth they participate in.

Yet, as readers and scholars, we are instead presented with a myth that has often relegated Morgan's power and importance as diminished, corruptive, and self-serving. For instance, in Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (1485 AD), Morgan applies herself wholeheartedly to the task of destroying her half-brother's kingdom, through whatever power she holds at her disposal. Within "The Tale of King Arthur," in section five, "Arthur and Accolon," Morgan gives Accolon the means to kill Arthur by endowing him with her brother's celebrated magical objects: the sword Excalibur and its accompanying scabbard. To Arthur she

sends replicas, “counterfete and brutyll and false,” out of “grete love” (25-28). Her motivations are not made clear, though we learn from Arthur after the battle that “God knowyth I have honoured hir and worshipped hir more than all my kyn, and more have I trusted hir than my wyff and all my kyn aftir” (32-35). Morgan’s enmity towards Guinevere holds a similar ambiguity; throughout Malory’s tale, she consistently plots to reveal the chaste Queen’s extra-marital affair with Lancelot, seemingly due to an old grievance the two women never bypassed. Malory’s one-dimensional and vapid characterization clashes with an older source, Chrétien de Troye’s French romances (1150 AD), in which Morgan often serves as a benevolent vehicle for healing. Interestingly, as the myth progresses, so does the emphasis on Morgan’s mischief and marginalization. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, her rationale – revealed to us through another character’s voice, at the end of tale - stems from a desire to perturb Guinevere and Arthur’s court. Morgan’s game inevitably backfires, and her motivations make her seem less potent than she is. To make the marginalization worse, in the nineteenth century, we don’t see much of Morgan at all, though the medieval period becomes highly popularized in literature and art. For instance, although in many iterations Morgan receives Arthur into Avalon after his death, in Tennyson’s epic poem, “The Idylls of the King” (1859), her position remains ambiguous, as she is conflated with the enchantress Viviane. She seems to have no individual space in the Victorian poet’s desire to re-popularize King Arthur’s legend for a new audience. Unfortunately, the negative attributes don’t cease in the twentieth century. In contemporary versions of the myth, such as in Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon*, which has often been read as a positive iteration of the character, we face a Morgaine devoid of any sense of self, whose desires run their course by means of exterior sources, rather than any true, inherent power.

Inevitably, as the myth has evolved over time, Morgan's representation in it has transformed as a result of each different audience's changing interests and expectations of her. Indeed, over the course of its long history (spanning from the early eighth century onwards),<sup>1</sup> Morgan has been represented by both positive and negative qualities throughout each narrative tradition, although adverse portrayals have dominated her characterization within the myth as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Whether portrayed as a benevolent healer, semi-divine usurper, or fatal temptress, she holds a diverse reputation - one built from the myth's community of enthusiasts and naysayers. Therefore, Morgan's characteristics in each narrative tradition are not intrinsic; rather, they are the product of her audience's social, cultural, and religious structures. Unfortunately, her perpetually fluctuating nature comes to fruition from audiences at the mercy of their principles and beliefs, which more often than not leads to a promulgation of her weaknesses and failures, ultimately diminishing her identity within the spaces of the Arthuriad.

Indeed, one of the central issues of the Arthuriad remains the problematic representation of women and feminine identity. In many of the legendary narratives, women have been marginalized, cast as pawns and scapegoats, or erased from the mythology entirely. Recent scholarship has done much to improve the legacy of these female characters, particularly through feminist analysis. Scholars such as Thelma S. Fenster, Geraldine Heng, Maureen Fries, and Jill Hebert have explored their extraordinary malleability, or capacity to take feminine complexities

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to the appendix for a chronological timeline of Morgan's manifestations – all direct texts which mention her by name or allude to her presence are highlighted. Sources for the timeline include Derek Pearsall's text, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction*, and Carolyne Larrington's text, *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, the majority of medieval narratives tend to either marginalize or blacken her character, but there are quite a few texts which do the opposite; for example, the Italian *La Tivola Ritonda*, a translation of the French *Tristan en Prose*, places Morgan in the place of destiny, heralding her interventions by "mediating the workings of fate" and thus instilling her character with "more dignity and wisdom" than her neighboring representations (Larrington 81-83). See Carolyne Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006.

from work to work, through various iterations of the Arthurian narrative tradition (Fenster xx). Contemporary approaches by scholars including Sheila Fisher, Lee Thomas McClain, and Michelle Sweeney, focus on the resolution of female representation by exploring how preceding narratives may re-conceptualize modern iterations, establishing a common desire to re-define femininity throughout the *Arthuriad*. However, though much has been done to recover these long misunderstood and misrepresented figures, recent scholarship and criticism has not yet addressed how the marginalization and silencing of Arthurian women over generations, and amid various texts, may have contributed to the development of a long-standing trauma narrative alongside the myth.

Any given narrative, as Rick Altman points out, while “omnipresent and culturally privileged,” also “gains much of its power from its ability to change form easily and repeatedly” (10). The mythic narrative, long-standing and ever-evolving, gains much of its notoriety and popularity because it produces cultural work, often preserving the values and beliefs of a particular society or time period. When we return to the world of a myth, we are directed – as John B. Vickery states – to “the fact that the human world is a story-shaped one and that the human being lives surrounded by fictions” (287). Myths enable audiences to look beyond their packaging; just as the narratives ensconced within them follow predictable patterns and themes, so too do they expose sociocultural realities within their carefully crafted bindings. Because of this dual nature, myths often function as cultural palimpsests,<sup>3</sup> anchoring each set of narratives to the idiosyncrasies of their prospective origins. As myths continue to grow and evolve, they revise

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<sup>3</sup> A palimpsest, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, refers to a “multilayered record” – often, a manuscript in which “later writing has been superimposed onto earlier writing” (OED). Like myths, these special manuscripts shift and change over time, retaining their original text underneath revisions. In a way, they serve as a gateway to understanding a text’s original aims or meanings – something we can also uncover by looking at the origins of a myth.

or build-on these essential tenets, creating multilayered narratives surrounding our understanding of the human condition. After all, as Vickery suggests, both literature and myth “are the meeting point of minds warmed and bedeviled by their perceptions of the world,” often serving as “the means by which [active and passive] responses to experience are fused” (287). I would extend Vickery’s evocative statement further by suggesting that as complex collections of our own cultural burdens, myths also serve as the perfect vehicles to work through them. Thus, a mythical narrative’s evolution and growth may mirror similar redemptive patterns found in the trauma narrative, which Roger Luckhurst refers to as a “repertoire of compelling stories about the enigmas of identity, memory and selfhood that have saturated [Western] cultural life” (80). In its representation of the feminine, the Arthuriad tells a trans-historical tale, detailing both the culturally relevant roles and identities of its female characters, while also weaving – or framing – the story of their systematic denigration and attempted rejuvenation. When we examine characters like Morgan le Fay through the courses of the myth, we are investigating a trans-historical narrative which – at its core – attempts to rehabilitate itself. Morgan’s ever-evolving story doesn’t simply tell us that she’s been a victim of marginalization or silencing as a result of various cultural and political structures, but also how the myth as a whole has attempted to work through her resulting complexities in each major iteration of its narratives. The pattern of continuous revision explains why medieval romances, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte d’Arthur*, Victorian poetry, and contemporary fantasy fiction all project a different and often incomparable Morgan – one whose many representations don’t always result from the same traditions or share the same sociocultural assumptions. As Morgan passes from period to form to genre, the myth exposes its attempts to work through a culture-wide trauma – the misrepresentation and limitation of the feminine. Morgan’s characterizations reflect the myth’s

shift in trajectory and narrative scope, allowing trauma to act as a kind of literary “tapestry” enfolding the Arthuriad in its entirety.

The problematic nature of this claim lies in interpreting Morgan through trauma she undergoes as a character herself; because she’s a fictional, mythical creation resulting from the minds of different authors and literary traditions throughout an extended period of time, she cannot simply be treated as a sentient victim of trauma. In fact, in many iterations of the myth, it’s questionable whether or not she even experiences trauma, as she plays such a one-sided or marginal role. Instead, we must interpret her characterizations and experiences based on the cultural and political structures that define female characters in each variation of the Arthuriad – and their real-life counterparts. Because the myth itself responds to the cultural limitation and misrepresentation of women, Morgan’s fictional characterizations and experiences function as an index of feminine trauma, symbolically representing the sociocultural tribulations of an evolving audience.<sup>4</sup> Take for instance the medieval romance: like the Victorian iterations to come, the female characters within these narratives hold sway over a sphere of their own, at times equal in power, or even more powerful, than their male counterparts. Texts like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* suggest that women are only capable of achieving such power when grouped together in their prescribed space, rather than when they stand alone – or when they have taken on multivalent roles. In due course, the narratives – and Morgan’s experiences through them – represent the limitations women held in their own society and culture. If, like Morgan, these women were to stray outside the boundaries of their roles, the narratives emphasize how they would be perceived and treated: as outsiders, threats to the status

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<sup>4</sup> In semiotics, as Daniel Chandler points out, an index “indicates something” (42). Citing Charles Peirce, Chandler states that an index refers to a “genuine relation between the sign and the object ... standing unequivocally for this or that existing thing” (42). In other words, an index functions as a symbolic sign which is suggestive of a particular ideology or concept. See Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

quo, and even as heretics and witches. Therefore, in these medieval narratives, Morgan's silencing, marginalization, and complex nature may all serve as evidence of feminine trauma, stemming from the cultural limitation and misrepresentation of women in the Middle Ages. The projection of these experiences allows the myth to attempt to work through the trauma with future iterations of Morgan's character – each slightly different than her predecessors, but which still promulgate similar messages. For instance, in Victorian poetry, the anxieties of the period imbue prospective narratives' interpretations of the myth, villainizing female characters with shifting roles in a didactic effort to condemn or quell feminine desire for autonomy and independence. By choosing instead to portray binary analogues of Morgan, these narratives respond to a Victorian author's desire to elevate masculinity and limit or punish the feminine. As a direct result of this subjugation, in contemporary fiction, we see female authors attempt to address these concerns by revising Morgan's role completely. As Diane Purkiss notes, "for feminists, the rewriting of myths denotes participation in these historical processes and the struggle to alter gender asymmetries agreed upon for centuries by myth's disseminators" (441). It's at this point that we see the trans-historical narratives of the *Arthurian* attempt to rehabilitate the feminine, directly addressing their limitations and misrepresentations in society, with Morgan's experiences symbolically guiding the way. Thus, if we consider the precarious standing of Arthurian women - through characters such as Morgan le Fay - created from a narrativized manifestation of trauma, then we must also take into consideration their lingering struggle for agency and power in both an established myth and sociocultural structure. Pervasive critical assumptions that these women attain visibility and empower themselves in contemporary iterations of the myth, as opposed to their older counterparts, do not take into consideration how



experiences of trauma related to the cultural diminishment of the feminine may complicate processes of healing or revision, hindering the progression of Arthurian women.

Therefore, in “A Space of their Own: Literary Representations of Feminine Trauma through the Arthuriad,” I argue that trauma becomes the vehicle through which female characters in the Arthurian narrative tradition examine and attempt to recover their own power, identity or autonomy. I further suggest that the adaptations, transformations, and manifestations of Morgan le Fay’s characterization from across periods and forms in the tradition create a long-standing trauma narrative that echoes, extends, and has consequences far beyond the inception of the texts, ultimately re-orienting the myth as a whole. Approaching the female condition through a framing of trauma studies adds nuance to existent feminist readings of Arthurian women, while also contending that feminine trauma can extend to the mythic form.

## 1.2 Trauma Theory, Myth, and Recovering the Feminine

Roger Luckhurst refers to the ambiguous nature of trauma as “an exemplary [gordian] knot whose successful permeation must be understood by the impressive range of elements that ties it together and which allows it to travel to diverse places” (14). But what’s in a name?<sup>5</sup> In his brief but cohesive genealogy of trauma studies, Luckhurst observes that definitions of trauma have remained stagnant over the course of time, with meanings that have “stalled somewhere between the physical and psychical” (3). Consequently, he defines trauma as “a piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication” (3). Rather than encompassing only the physical or psychical, Luckhurst determines that the term has applicability beyond its wounded origins. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a pathological

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<sup>5</sup> “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet.” (2.2.43-44). Indeed, as Shakespeare had his Juliet question, does it truly matter what we name an experience? From where do we obtain the meaning of a thing, and how do we thereby choose to define it?

and psychological definition of trauma; the experience both refers to “a wound, or external bodily injury,” as well as an internal, mental injury which may be caused by “emotional shock, the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed” (*OED*). With its roots thus firmly planted in psychoanalysis, medical psychiatry, and a wide range of socio-cultural scholarship, perhaps it’s no surprise that trauma, and consequently, trauma theory, has often been perceived by experts as a puzzle in need of a solution, or as a stray piece perpetually unable to fit within the ever-evolving boundaries of the whole. As a result of its early clinical connotations and subsequent medical implications,<sup>6</sup> the scholarship of trauma studies has been both birthed and mired in the pathologizing of an ever-evolving enigma. For theorists and scholars alike, the question has never been, “What is trauma?” but rather, “What encompasses our understanding of trauma?” and, “How can we unpack it?”

As Robert Eaglestone suggests in his introduction to the aptly named collection, *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, trauma theory “is not really a new disciplinary paradigm,” but rather, an amalgam of versatile contexts and ideas which offers us a new perspective of “paying attention to forms of texts” (19). In other words, he implies that the study and implementation of trauma lends it itself particularly well to the analysis of literature, which so often portrays patterns and threads of discombobulated or lingering experiences through the written form. Eaglestone alludes that just as texts shift and

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<sup>6</sup> Trauma was at first defined by its clinical connotations, lumped underneath “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders” within the *DSM-III*, in 1980 (Visser 271), although this classification stemmed from much earlier observations, related to Victorian doctors’ interest in nervous disorders and Sigmund Freud’s research on shell-shocked soldiers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Luckhurst 2-3). Bessel van der Kolk has since expanded our understanding of trauma with the utilization of brain-imaging tools in the twenty-first century, contending that the scans suggest trauma functions as an “imprint left by that experience on the mind, brain, and body,” with “ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present” (21). See Irene Visser, “Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47, no. 3 (2011): pp. 270-282 and Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Penguin, 2014.

change in meaning, so too do the complex structures which define trauma. He isn't indicating something novel here, as all concepts shift in meaning. Rather, Eaglestone purports that what makes trauma distinct as a concept is its ability to keep up with the evolution of different texts thanks to its fluidity. Indeed, referring to it as a "hybrid assemblage," Luckhurst indicates that trauma often tangles up "questions of science, law, technology, capitalism, politics, medicine, and risk" (14). These structures offer unlimited perspectives for analysis because, as Luckhurst re-iterates, trauma as a "tangled object" inspires "perplexed, contentious debate," due to its "enigmatic causation and strange effects which bridge the mental and the physical, the individual and collective" (15). Consequently, to literary critics, trauma theory mirrors and reflects the dynamic nature of a given text, whereby the unraveling of its contents provides fresh perspectives on our understanding of the work as a whole – enlightening the scholarly community with newfound considerations.

Regardless then, of its "practically unknowable and unteachable" (271) nature, as Irene Visser succinctly puts it, trauma studies has dominantly emerged as "one of today's signal cultural paradigms" (270). Indeed, prominent trauma theorists have taken into consideration the overlap between literary studies and trauma theory with great aplomb, from Cathy Caruth's seminal work, *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, to Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, and Roger Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question*. Each of these theorists have tried to uncover how trauma functions in the literary mode. For Caruth, the root of trauma may not be implicitly known or represented, but instead "returns belatedly, repetitively," thus engaging with the Freudian death drive and of the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (Leys 266). In her estimation, trauma functions "not simply [as] an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival" (Caruth 58). The repetition or retrieval of traumatic

events through lived experiences, she argues, “defines the shape of individual lives” (Caruth 59). When Caruth postulates on trauma, she asks, “What does it mean to survive?” (60). Since Caruth’s pioneering work in the field, interdisciplinary research on trauma theory has come a long way. For instance, Dominick LaCapra’s perspective on the intersections between trauma and literary studies considers the correlations between historiography and art. LaCapra asks, “How does trauma or traumatic ‘experience’ disrupt [the human] experience and raise specific problems for representation and writing?” (37). In attempting to address this query, we discover LaCapra’s theory of *empathic unsettlement*, whereby, he suggests, “being responsive to the traumatic experiences of others” allows for a new conceptualization of the traumatic encounter itself (41). He continues by discussing the differences between *acting out* and *working through* trauma, the impacts and importance of recognizing absence and loss, and the connections between mourning and melancholia to these encounters. Ultimately, LaCapra orients us to focus on how trauma can affect the way we analyze a written work, or text, by providing us with alternative conceptions of its structural and historiographical roots. As Luckhurst suggests, LaCapra’s commentary “is a testament both to the transmissibility of trauma and the acts of compulsive repetition trauma narratives can induce in their readers” (91). In other words, that literature – the written word – can function as the perfect avenue through which we can understand trauma.

Taking a cue from Caruth and trauma’s clinical roots, Joshua Pederson connects the psychology of trauma to literary theory by developing a new method for re-evaluating and re-defining the concept in terms of its portrayal in texts, suggesting that the framework should be adjusted with these tenets, or “dicta” in mind: the engagement of trauma in literature should 1) focus on the text itself, rather than on gaps within it, 2) evidence of expanded narrative detail

should be expounded upon, 3) an emphasis should be placed on depictions of distorted experiences (338-339). Intriguingly, in Pederson's re-framing, he deduces that all kinds of art, "can depict recovery, reconciliation, and rehabilitation" (350). He harnesses this certainty to claim that ultimately, it's literature which "remains a valuable tool in the struggle to reclaim our most painful experiences" (350). In other words, instead of pathologizing trauma to make it fit into a mold or function as the uncertain solution to an indeterminable problem, Pederson perceives literary studies as the diagnostic tool by which we can gauge, describe, and, as Dominick LaCapra coins, *work-through* trauma (41). Uncovering trauma thus becomes a process of understanding – a theory which gently provokes us to ask, "How can we best understand the narratives given to us, in terms of the traumatic experiences they portray?"

Given that we have established the importance of trauma theory to literary studies, and defined trauma through its various contexts, how can we then describe what it means to undergo a "feminine trauma" within the narrative form? How does this new understanding change the analysis of a given text? To begin with, we must examine the underlying definition of the feminine, and examine how it functions in conjunction to trauma. The word *feminine* has been described by its categorization as a physical gender, but also by personal attributes and through the written form, or as the *Oxford English Dictionary* phrases it, as having "characteristics of, befitting, or regarded as appropriate to the female sex; of a woman having or exhibiting the qualities, behavior, or appearance considered as typical of the female sex" (*OED*). A meaning based on binary constructions further limited by the scope of cultural and political stereotypes, the feminine appears in pejorative terms.<sup>7</sup> The *OED* defines the word in regard to its historically

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<sup>7</sup> The *OED* last updated this entry in March of 2012, in its third edition. This particular definition falls under the category "senses relating to physical gender", second after "senses relating to language," in terms of the word's use as both an adjective and noun. See "feminine, adj. and n." *OED Online*. December 2018. Oxford University Press.

negative connotations, elucidated best by feminist scholars and theorists in the twentieth century, during the rise of both second and third-wave feminism.<sup>8</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, in what would become one of the most rehearsed phrases in feminist theory, decreed “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (283). The feminine, as Beauvoir theorized, could be defined as a social construction based in relation to the masculine, a product of being marginalized as the *other* throughout history.

Forty years after Beauvoir’s philosophies, Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, complicating long-held second wave feminist theories surrounding the binary constructions of sex and gender in relation to women. Butler critiques views of the feminine as an identity category, which groups women together by shared characteristics or experiences, thus limiting inclusivity. As Mari Mikkola suggests, Butler perceives that women themselves “can never be defined” in ways that speak to the “normative requirements” proscribed by the feminine – in other words, by their gender alone (1). Indeed, she theorizes that gender itself remains a performance, describing it as “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (191). In other words, Butler suggests that gender and the feminine can be alternatively defined as social and political constructions which are maintained and exploited by the status quo, or as Mikkola points out, “prevalent power structures” (1). As both Butler and Mikkola conclude, to define the feminine, we must dig into how these power structures fashion our perceptions and understanding of womankind (1). As a result, a thorough exploration into the marginalization

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<sup>8</sup> These individuals include (but are not limited to): Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Elizabeth Spelman, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Bell Hooks, Audre Lord, Judith Butler, and Maxine Hong Kingston, to name just a few over the course of fifty years, from 1950 through the 2000s. The rise of fourth-wave feminism in the new millennium has sparked contentious debate surrounding similar tropes and can be examined through the texts of individuals including Kira Cochrane and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, among others.

and silencing of women over time, conducted through feminist theory, has naturally led scholars and critics into discussions of trauma.<sup>9</sup> Any narrative, text or otherwise, which portrays the systemic, insidious denigration of the feminine, I argue, consequently becomes a narrative of trauma.

What are trauma narratives limited to, and by? Do they differ in form and function, and if so, what do they perpetuate in terms of theme, structure, and pattern? For the most part, trauma narratives portray an aesthetic, built upon the after-effects of traumatic events or experiences, which in the literary form, come out through fragmentation, narrative gaps, biased narrators, and circumstantial plots. As Roger Luckhurst points out by referring to Kali Tal's theories, these aesthetics leave trauma texts in danger of becoming reduced to a "set of standardized narratives," where the "narrative form replaces content as the focus of attention" (89).<sup>10</sup> If the trauma narrative eschews the very incomprehensibility of trauma by becoming recognizable due to repetitive and not necessarily totalitarian tropes, then it contradicts itself. Luckhurst indicates that in order to overcome this hindrance to our understanding of trauma in literary studies and open up "the different kind of cultural work that trauma narratives undertake," critics and scholars must focus on "narrative possibility" (89). He goes on to suggest that we regard these narratives not through the lens of any particular "canon of works," but rather, "as a mass of narratives

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<sup>9</sup> Take for instance Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, which delves into the cultural, socio-political, and psychological avenues through which women became victims of trauma over time. In a chapter focused on traumatic disorders, Herman discusses the centrality of feminine hysteria to Freud's development of psychoanalysis, suggesting that "the dominant psychological theory of [the twentieth Century] was founded in the denial of women's reality" (14). Preferring to eschew his female patients' adamant stories of sexual exploitation in favor of delving into a study of their internal fantasies and desires, Freud participated in the silencing of their voices, thereby perpetuating the cycle of trauma they remained victims of. See Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> This pattern is often criticized by scholars who see it perpetuated in Caruth's analyses. Some argue that by pathologizing trauma, Caruth treats it as a contagion which can be passed along from host to host. While this conceptualization opens up the idea that trauma can be experienced transhistorically, it simultaneously produces what Michelle Balaev calls "a homogenous interpretation" of how trauma can be represented in literature, or "the interplay that occurs between language, experience, memory, and place" (149). See Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 41, no. 2 (2008): 149-166.

...with wildly different ambitions [but] that frequently share the same narrative devices” (90).

Luckhurst extends the realm of trauma narratives to those outside of the predominant categories, which he indicates reached their peak during the late 1980s. Although he focuses on contemporary, mainstream fiction, I contend that we can further extend these possibilities towards alternative forms and genres, including the mythic.

Myths, be they legends, folktales, or alternative narrative genres, have portrayed the rise and fall of humankind through various historical, cultural, religious, and political contexts. They can be identified as much for their transhistorical manifestations as for the common archetypes that spring from each adaptation.<sup>11</sup> In a sense, myths hold the capability to move from form to genre to period, inevitably shifting narratives to fit into the socio-political climate around their new inception, while retaining the essence of the meanings and archetypes they began with. While a myth’s vehicles may change, their journey stays the same. Yet, like any other narrative, myths also portray trauma. Indeed, as Lillian Feder suggests, myths often violate social norms through “incest, patricide, infanticide, and cannibalism,” ultimately “conveying a perennial struggle between inner demand and external necessity” (52). The narratives promulgated through myths, as Northrop Frye adds, deal “with the world that man creates” – a flawed, unstable landscape (598). For Joseph Campbell, myths “are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life,” where self-discovery brims around every corner (5). What these scholars all seem to perceive lies in the myth’s ability to evoke the breadth of the human experience, including the manner through which we continue to interpret it. If myths contain kernels of trauma located

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<sup>11</sup> I refer here to Northrop Frye’s “archetypes of literature,” where the literary critic suggests “myth is the archetype,” or “central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual and archetypal narrative to the oracle” (103). In other words, that myths inform genres such as romance, comedy, and tragedy, by promoting recurrent symbols, motifs, patterns, or themes. See *Literary Criticism and Myth*, ed. Robert A. Segal (Garland Publishing, 1996).



within their respective iterations, then these same adaptations have the capacity and longevity to perpetuate it – and in many instances, amplify these experiences. In doing so, myths may become active documents of trauma.

The Arthuriad refers to the set of myths surrounding the reign of King Arthur, extending from seventh century Anglo-Saxon histories to contemporary, twenty-first century fiction. Spanning centuries' worth of narratives, the Arthuriad as a myth has traveled from epic to romance, poetry to fiction, and still retained the majority of conventions found within its genres of origin. As a result, the consequent adaptations of the Arthuriad carry with them the narrative fragments of trauma, particularly when it comes to the treatment of female characters. As each iteration of the myth develops, it continues to shift the ways in which these women are portrayed; most often characterizations that leave them without any agency or instill within them a false sense of empowerment. Therefore, the myth conducts a kind of cultural work which ultimately responds to the limitation and misrepresentation of the feminine – a specific form of trauma which itself becomes indexical. As a result, it portrays female characters who often struggle with obtaining autonomy and power on their own terms, submitting themselves to the status quo – or prevalent power structure – in order to improve their positions. I therefore suggest that the Arthuriad comprises of a literary tapestry of feminine trauma, through which the shifting experiences and iterations of characters such as Morgan le Fay, hinder any kind of healing or growth, ultimately re-orienting the myth.

### **1.3 Scholarship on Arthurian Women and Morgan le Fay**

Because they have so often been portrayed negatively, marginalized, or cast aside by both the narratives and early critics, framing Arthurian women through a feminist analysis has done much to uncover and improve their standing within the Arthuriad as a whole. Thelma S. Fenster

asserts that despite “their extraordinary malleability from culture to culture and through the centuries,” most women in the Arthurian tradition consistently “arrive in each new work with a full-set of already-givens that carry the freight of the problem that is woman” (xx). Her statement forms the basis of an argument other critics and scholars have since expanded on, explaining this conundrum as it manifests in different anxieties, themes, and figures. Overall, the general consensus seems to be that through the reconstruction of the status of women within the Arthurian myths, they have now arrived at a positive crossroads where femininity has been re-examined and re-defined. Many would point out that the evidence lies in modern iterations of the narratives.<sup>12</sup> Some scholars suggest that these contemporary takes on females within the Arthuriad present progression, thereby restoring their identity and value. However, too often than not, this does not ring true. While contemporary narratives do present Arthurian women capable of overcoming the obstacles of their predecessors, they too frequently become burdened by their prevalent social and political power structures, and as a result, fail to change in their respective narratives. Indeed, contemporary representations of characters such as Morgan le Fay, which have claimed to give the character a unique voice, do not suggest a return to female empowerment; rather, they imply that power comes through the guise of an exterior source. Ultimately, we need to re-consider how the myth has been shaped and re-told in the context of a contemporary, feminist audience and scholarship.

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<sup>12</sup> See McClain, “Gender Anxiety in Arthurian Romance,” *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy* 38, no. 3 (1997):193-199., Howey, “Queens, Ladies, and Saints: Arthurian Women in Contemporary Short Fiction,” *Arthuriana* 9, no. 1 (1999): 23-38, and Smith, “The Role of Women in Contemporary Arthurian Fantasy,” *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy* 35, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 130-144. See also Kristina Pérez, *Arthurian and Courtly Cultures: The Myth of Morgan La Fey*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, April 2014) and Marion Wynne-Davies, *Women and Arthurian Literature: Seizing the Sword*, (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1996).

In particular, concerning themes such as power and identity, recent scholarship has attempted to resuscitate feminine autonomy through focused analyses of medieval Arthurian texts, such as Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain (The Knight of the Lion)*, the pearl poet's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. For instance, Maureen Fries examines the role different female figures play in these early texts by attempting to categorize them relative to their male counterparts, directly comparing them "in relation to the male heroic roles they complement or defy" (61). Utilizing Joseph Campbell's theories on monomyths, and emphasizing the hero's journey, ultimately unpacking heroic attributes and traits, Fries aligns Arthurian women, such as Morgan le Fay, Queen Guinevere, and the maid Lunette, with figures of power and influence, illustrating their unique place within the early narratives. Most importantly, Fries cultivates a clear understanding that by taking on the roles of either heroine, female hero, or counter-hero, certain figures transcend their roles, while others remain stagnant. By emphasizing the importance of the female counter-hero, revealing the presence of a "split tendency," which allows certain figures to achieve autonomy and power, Fries underlines the fluid nature of specific Arthurian women. Ultimately, her stance contemplates how such a divided state, grappling with the limitations of gender and the appeal of power and self-rule, ripples through Arthurian female figures present in contemporary manifestations of traditional narratives.

Building on the ideas of Fries and her contemporaries, Lee Thomas McClain also explores themes of power and identity related to Arthurian women but analyzes the narrative's progeny through alternative frameworks. Echoing Thelma S. Fenster's assertions surrounding the complications womanhood and femininity bring to the long history of the tradition, McClain maintains that gender anxiety found in Arthurian narratives often "peaks when questions of how

to define gender roles” occupy a collective space (194). Ultimately arguing that this quandary may be explained by cultural and socio-political changes, McClain indicates that the issue resolves itself through modern conceptualizations of the preceding narratives, from the pearl poet’s *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, to Alfred Tennyson’s *The Idylls of the King*, and Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon*. Identifying how the narratives act as vehicles for a specific gender’s anxieties, he suggests contemporary iterations further our understanding of how women’s roles within the larger tradition have evolved, as well as how their power and autonomy has come to the forefront by a collective desire to re-define femininity (193). This “new frontier,” McClain alludes, “will prove just as fertile as the old in helping writers play out their cultures’ concerns about why things are as they are and how men and women ought to behave” (199). In effect, McClain adds to current scholarship by elaborating on an established feminist context, focused on developing the multitudinous and rich roles Arthurian women take on, while linking the progression of Arthurian women’s roles through various narratives to a deeper consideration of the cultures around them at each point in their various conceptions.

In respect to Morgan le Fay, many scholars have done the work of attempting to define the character’s identity in light of her various iterations, utilizing a host of different theories and frameworks. Many of them, as Jill Hebert suggests, portray Morgan through a dichotomous lens, attempting to move her “outside traditional categories of thought,” while simultaneously “relegating her once again to stereotypes, archetypes, and ideological prisons” (2).<sup>13</sup> In opposition to these views, Hebert understands the full complexity of Morgan’s narrative identity, referring

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<sup>13</sup> Hebert directly refers to Maureen Fries’ perspectives on the character here, but she also mentions that scholars such as Elisa Marie Narin, Raymond Thompson, Elizabeth Sklar, Hilda Ellis Davidson and Anna Chaudri, perceive Morgan in a similar fashion, choosing to define her identity through a one-sided definition of her roles in various iterations of the myth. See Jill Hebert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

to her as a “shapeshifter,” thus denoting and connotating her ability to “change shape, to evade being shaped by others, and to manipulate the shape of others” (5). By utilizing Stephen G. Nichols’ study of New Medievalism, which advocates for the view that we “interrogate and reformulate assumptions about the discipline of medieval studies,” and which “upholds fluidity even as it cherishes fixed systems,” Hebert argues that Morgan “literally represents the concept for representation” (4-5). With her ability to complicate “preconceptions of woman’s place, trouble[s] social and gender boundaries,” and take on multi-valent roles, the scholar suggests that Morgan can’t simply be contained by her medieval origins and postmedieval narratives (5). Instead, Hebert contends that Morgan “retains the potential for a range of representations” throughout her appearance in the myth as a whole, thereby allowing her “indefinable nature” to speak for her character’s agency, autonomy, and identity throughout various narratives (6). Hebert’s exploration of Morgan le Fay would open her up to various interpretations, including a consideration of how her character’s accumulated traumatic experiences have impacted her narrative progression through the Arthuriad.

To review, I contend that the excessive marginalization, silencing, and symbolic violence against Arthurian women over generations, amid various texts, requires still further contextualization. McClain and Fries expand the female problem which Fenster and their contemporaries recognize, but understandably, the narratives within the Arthuriad continue to change and shift just as their contexts do. Consequently, Hebert’s consideration of Morgan le Fay’s transfigurations and indefinable identity begins to open up interpretation of how the feminine can be understood in the myth as a whole. However, yet more analysis needs to be undertaken in this field of scholarship in order to present integral nuances in our understanding of women’s roles, power, and identity within the Arthuriad. The scholarly community would

benefit from analyzing the Arthuriad as a narrative of feminine trauma, allowing academics to explore and discuss the resulting implications. After all, the female characters in the myth wouldn't take on the celebrated, vibrant roles critics assign to them without their shared traumatic experiences and would thus change the shape and course of the narratives as they're understood. Rather than limit their profound depth, imminent progression, and overall value, I believe a thorough excavation of how the prevalence of feminine trauma has changed the landscape of the Arthuriad would help present an alternative evolution of Arthurian women – and resultingly, respond to new audiences.

#### **1.4 Developments**

There can be no firm understanding of the progression of specific female characters without first an understanding of their presentation, and how it in turn defines the Arthuriad, and as a result, the myth itself. If our critical conception of these women wishes to be confirmed, that they do indeed overcome their past representations to become the full-fledged characters contemporary iterations of the Arthuriad supposedly paint them as, a vigorous and thorough analysis of their transformative process must be undertaken. Therefore, I propose that the evolution of Morgan le Fay's representations extends how trauma becomes both the vehicle and thus the framework through which female characters in the Arthurian narrative tradition entertain, achieve, or attempt to recover their own power and identity. From a divine healer to a wizened crone, a misunderstood sister to a jealous usurper, and a youthful acolyte to devoted leader, trauma consistently follows Morgan le Fay from form to period to transition, culminating in a collective experience of melancholia which ultimately re-defines the blurred boundaries of the Arthurian narrative tradition in terms of its feminine representation. In effect, I suggest that the adaptations, transformations, and manifestations of Morgan's representations, from across

the Arthuriad, are indexical; ultimately, they create a long-standing narrative of trauma, thus limiting the possibilities of the character's healing and progression. As a result, her struggles echo, extend, and have consequences far beyond their inception, ultimately re-orienting the myth.

Engaging in a transhistorical approach, I examine Morgan le Fay's role from each transition in the myth as a whole: the medieval romance tradition (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Morte d'Arthur*), Victorian poetry ("Idylls of the King"), and contemporary fiction (*The Mists of Avalon*). Morgan, no matter the period or form, almost always becomes caught in a web as sinister as Merlin's prophecies. She takes up an invaluable space within the Arthuriad because she so often figures prominently in narratives which are starkly set against her. In some variants, Morgan triumphs, while in others, she gets lost in the shuffle. Regardless, trauma follows her from story to story, period to period, and transition to transition. At each crossroads, this burden brings out Morgan's best and worst qualities. Inevitably, I argue that a collection of traumas forms from her transitions in each iteration of the myth, influencing how both authors and audiences perceive her representations. To deal with the encompassing experiences of trauma, by reconciling (socio-political, cultural, and even ideological) structures with primary narratives, I will locate and expose Morgan's *founding trauma*, which Dominick LaCapra defines as "trauma[s] that paradoxically become the valorized or intensely cathected basis of identity for an individual or a group rather than events that pose the problematic question of identity" (23). Although she's a fictional character, Morgan represents – or symbolizes – how the feminine can be perceived through historical and literary iterations of various texts. Therefore, her experiences of trauma through these representations come to define her developing identity – but also, importantly, mirror the development of the feminine outside the boundaries of narrative. To

come to terms with the convoluted origins of her traumatic experiences would open up the various iterations of Morgan in the myth to an *empathic unsettlement*, allowing for a *working-through* of the narratives she consequently becomes defined by (LaCapra 78). Ultimately, Morgan's inability to release her collected traumatic experiences, illuminated by her struggle to become an autonomous and powerful figure, calls to attention the need for a vital reconciliation of trauma and myth.

In my second chapter, "Medieval Romance and Morgan's Performance," I explore representations of Morgan le Fey in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. In each of these medieval romances, whether marginalized or hated, Morgan holds the reins. She remains a source of pure, unadulterated power, albeit malevolent and stigmatized. This follows on the footsteps of her initiation to the myth in the *Vita Merlini*, as a worshipped healer and goddess. From a once exalted state to a diminished role she falls, but in actively taking on the role of the "other" she succeeds in determining the future fate of Arthur's court. In other words, she becomes both a victim and champion of epidemic silencing and marginalization. In exploring this transition, the first senses of trauma become evident, as does Morgan's resilient nature.

In the third chapter, "Lost in the Shadows: Morgan's Dark Side," I explore manifestations of Morgan's character in Victorian poetry, namely through Alfred Tennyson's "Idylls of the King". Perhaps thanks to her muddled origins, the Victorian representation of Morgan appears through her analogue, the enchantress Vivian. Overtaken by evil deeds, Vivian's actions produce nothing but damage, thereby perpetuating the trauma she – and her twin – have already become the namesakes of, limiting the two characters' autonomies and further polluting their shared identities.



In the final, fourth chapter, “Morgan’s Mutations: Reclaiming the Myth,” I look at contemporary manifestations of the Arthurian myth through fiction, focusing on Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon*. Although the narrative takes into consideration the long, arduous journeys Morgan has taken to transform herself (without adhering to the same narrative traditions as its predecessors), it simultaneously seems to heighten her unstable origins and transition from a victim to a perpetrator. In other words, the narrative emphasizes Morgan’s pervasive melancholia, consistent desire to act out on her traumatic experiences, and cyclical submission to a recursive past, suggesting that her journey of self-discovery leads nowhere. In doing so, Bradley’s work of fiction becomes a trauma novel, utilizing Morgan’s struggles to impart on audiences the futility of working through loss. Accordingly, this contemporary representation of Morgan galvanizes the myth as a whole, re-orienting it as a narrative of trauma.

In “A Space of their Own: Literary Representations of Feminine Trauma through the Arthurian,” I consider how continuous marginalization, silencing, symbolic and epistemic violence, and negative representations of and against specific Arthurian women have contributed to the creation of a collective, literary manifestation of trauma, which continues to re-shape the Arthurian and alludes to the re-orientation of the myth itself. Whether erased, established, re-centered, forgiven, victimized, or demonized, iterations of Morgan share an experience of trauma which follows the character throughout each of her manifestations within the Arthurian narrative tradition. Though she seems to move forward, towards the reclamation of specific ideals, thus working towards empowerment, with every new narrative transition, period, and form, the continuous presence of trauma prevents her from achieving true progression, limits her growth as a character, and inhibits her achievement of power. Such complex and traumatic representations of the feminine exist, therefore, as the residues of Arthurian myth, simply piecemeal caricatures

of full-fledged, agentic figures. Illuminating these continuities may allow scholarship – as well as future narratives - to change how they perceive and represent Arthurian women.

## 2 CHAPTER 2: MEDIEVAL ROMANCE AND MORGAN'S PERFORMANCE

“Another lady led her by the left hand / That was older than she – an ancient, it seemed, / And held in high honor by all men about” (Boroff 947-949).

“...tell hym I feare hymn nat whyle I can make me and myne in lyknesse of stonys, and lette hym wete I can do much more when I se my tyme” (Vinaver 93).

“Fiction can be used as evidence in a literary archeology of the private” (Régnier-Bohler 315).

### 2.1 Medieval Romance and the Arthuriad

Medieval romance narratives between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries responded to the underlying desires of their authors and society at large by emphasizing the individual and private life.<sup>14</sup> These factors remained complicated new ideologies for medieval audiences, but fiction provided a way to conceptualize them. As Danielle Régnier-Bohler points out, fiction offered “not a portrait of private life as it was actually lived, but a compendium of private difficulties and tensions, pertaining to both communal life and the status of the individual” (331). For instance, with the emergence of the notion of privacy came also the notion of respecting the privacy of others; this pattern pertained especially to women, whose bodies were deemed “the focal point of all virtue and vice” (331). To keep the real-life admonition in place that would keep them away

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<sup>14</sup> I refer directly to Danielle Régnier-Bohler's chapter “Imagining the Self,” in the second volume of *A History of the Private Life: Revelations of the Medieval World*. Régnier-Bohler explores how the conception of the individual emerged from literary sources, specifically from medieval romance narratives between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. See Danielle Régnier-Bohler, “Imagining the Self.” *A History of the Private Life, Volume II: Revelations of the Medieval World*, ed. by Georges Duby, Phillipe Ariès (New York: Harvard UP, 1988) pp. 311-394.

from prying, curious eyes, women in fictional medieval texts held spaces of their very own, purposefully erected to uphold their values and protect them from indecency. Régnier-Bohler refers to these characters as the “gynaeceum,” meaning “a group of women living together in an area set aside for the purpose” (344). Noting that these feminine spaces were often “sharply delineated from the rest of domestic spaces,” and that a “distinctly feminine sense of time prevailed within [them],”<sup>15</sup> the scholar recognizes the dichotomous roles these characters took on, perhaps reflecting on or responding to the plights of their non-literary counterparts (344). In fictional narratives, the individual protagonist, especially if female, could either present herself as a threat to this space, or choose to work within it – albeit at the mercy of an external, male-oriented world. As Régnier-Bohler asserts, the movement of the individual female to the gynaeceum gave rise to “a powerful dialectic of inside and outside which could prove fruitful for the community as a whole,” functioning as a kind of “sovereign motherland,” which allowed it to survive as an “inexpugnable component of domestic society” (348). Therefore, medieval romance narratives between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries uphold the benefits of the gynaeceum, rather than allowing their female protagonists – or in many cases, antagonists – to work as powerful individual forces outside of these boundaries, simply in order to maintain the status-quo. By doing so, these narratives emphasize prescribed roles for women within appropriately designated spaces, further upholding their audiences’ conceptualizations of an idealized society. In particular, the medieval romance promulgates an idealizing rhetoric and

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<sup>15</sup> As Régnier-Bohler suggests, time in women’s spaces was defined differently, with a particularly negative connotation for the individual female: “woman’s time is a time of waiting; time is experienced inwardly, and in despair” – not unlike to how trauma is processed (344). However, for the gynaeceum as a whole, women’s time defined itself in terms of “boundaries,” where groups of women, “deliberately setting themselves apart from the male world,” could in turn “discuss an almost magical form of knowledge and convey a kind of mastery over the community” (345).

tone, though as Barbara Fuchs illustrates, simultaneously reveals a “double valence,” which complicates the genre’s ultimate purpose (40).

Medieval romances depict love and adventure, and are usually anchored to an aristocratic or noble court, which practices chivalry and upholds the tenets of *fine amours* – or practices the arts of courtly love.<sup>16</sup> It’s a narrative pattern which seems immediately recognizable by its familiar conventions. However, the origins of the romance tradition itself remain murky. The etymology of the word *romance* dates back to the Anglo-Norman and Old French word *romanz*, which refers to the linguistic transformation of traditionally Latin texts into the vernacular French language (*OED*). A *romance*, as the *OED* points out, defines a medieval narrative as being written in “the vernacular rather than in Latin,” and usually “relating the legendary or extraordinary adventure of some hero of chivalry” (*OED*).<sup>17</sup> As Fuchs suggests, the generic boundaries for these medieval narratives were “originally very fluid,” with the texts also referred to as “estories (stories/histories),” or “contes (tales)” (37). Accordingly, the *Middle English Dictionary* defines romance through a similar lens; it’s three main definitions suggest the genre can function as “a written narrative of the adventures of a knight, or a narrative poem,” and denotes “the French language itself” (*MED*).<sup>18</sup> Technical definitions put aside, Geraldine Heng astutely points out that romance as a genre has “no beginning, no identifiable moment or text in

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<sup>16</sup> As defined by Derek Pearsall, the practice of courtly love stems from “the belief in the value of sexual love as an intrinsically ennobling experience,” through which, “the lover’s aim is not the satisfaction of desire but progress and growth in virtue, merit, and worth” (22). Although medieval authors never used this term to describe these beliefs and practices, as Barbara Fuchs points out, the courtly love tradition nevertheless “provided a language for thinking about the relation between love and subjectivity, the tension between private feeling and public obligation, and the connection between eroticism and spirituality” (43). Outside of the world of medieval romance, the courtly love tradition allowed audiences to engage, and as Fuchs suggests, “negotiate [over] the place and import of love” (43).

<sup>17</sup> First definition under the term “Romance” in the *OED*, updated in the third edition, November 2010. The terms “romanz” and “romans” came to “denote such works in particular” (*OED*). See Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> In the senses and subsenses of the word, the *MED* clarifies that a romance may also be a written narrative indicative of the source, “real or alleged, of an English chivalric romance or verse narrative,” with another sense suggesting its purpose lies in being “designed purposefully for entertainment” (*MED*).

which it is possible to say, here is the location of the origin” (1). Regardless of its ambiguous beginnings, romance has become part and parcel of the medieval narrative tradition. Indeed, this genre was so compelling that it defined not just an entire age of literature, but also influenced the texts that came afterwards.

To put it further into context, Heng contends that romance has become so remarkably entwined with the Middle Ages – a point at which it was “arguably the most prominent, sophisticated, and widely disseminated species of literary narrative” – that it seems to be “virtually synonymous” with that age itself (2). As a result, with the “problematic metonymic association” of romance and the Middle Ages, Fuchs argues, “the entire historical period is bathed in a sentimental glow of fanciful idealization” (38). Medieval romance narratives do not represent the stories of actual historical figures and events, and certainly don’t advocate for any loose morals or behaviors from courtiers battling over their personal and public feelings – needless to say, they also don’t insinuate that dwarves and unicorns truly exist. Instead, Derek Pearsall asserts, they embody “the social and political attitudes, needs and fears of their authors, patrons, audiences, and the class to which they belonged” (23). With tumultuous political structures, rapidly changing social and cultural beliefs, and religious turmoil, the Middle Ages were a time of great instability and transformation.<sup>19</sup> Referring to the rise of romance as “re-beginning” in early twelfth century England, Heng suggests that it was at this point where “a species of magical narratives coalesced into an extraordinary pattern, out of a field of forces and culture, to create an exemplar for the romances that followed” (2). In other words, that medieval

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<sup>19</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the literature produced during this age reflected on these tensions, exploring a wide range of themes, including “explorations of love, honor, prowess, duty, fame, reputation, faith, salvation, meaning and identity” (Weisl and Cunder 4). As Angela J. Weisl and Anthony J. Cunder point out, the methods of exploring these themes correlate directly to the “very alterity” of medieval literature, with narratives delving into “the strange worlds of the monstrous and miraculous, the complex structures of tribal society, the devotion to codes of behavior, and the literal quests taken for transcendent meaning” (4). See Angela J. Weisl and Anthony J. Cunder, *Medieval Literature: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

romances served as conduits for imagining an idealized alternative reality, whose desires and goals rapidly spread to other narrative traditions, inevitably extending our definitions of romance itself. I would add a caveat here, per Fuchs: just as romance is “frequently described as an escapist genre that erases or whitewashes social conflict, it represents a dialectical relation to court ideology,” meaning that it is “often skeptical of absolute distinctions between good and evil, civilized and uncivilized violence, and of the compatibility between erotic and military pursuits” (40). Similarly, I contend that the medieval romance – in certain iterations – remains skeptical of absolute distinctions between feminine and masculine roles. Indeed, by portraying characters like Morgan le Fay – who have an indefinable or shifting characterization.

Although the genre of medieval romance can first be located in the mid-twelfth century, with a group of narratives written in the vernacular from the Anglo-Norman court of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine in England, the subject of these romances was not divided into clear categories until the thirteenth century (Fuchs 39). It was at this point that the narratives of King Arthur flourished and were popularized by the nobility, having first come from a series of historical stories – often referred to as “national epics” – dating back to the eighth century, beginning with Geoffrey of Monmouth’s influential pseudo-historical account, the *Historia regum Britanniae* (1130-1136) (Pearsall 7). With the relocation of Arthur’s story from its original English origins to the courts of France in the twelfth century, the national epics transitioned to courtly romances, concerned with matters of love and chivalry, ultimately emphasizing social concerns (Pearsall 21). In doing so, as Fuchs illustrates, “there [was] a much greater emphasis on the private over the public, on the perspective of women, and on the knights’ experience of love” (39). The collection of King Arthur’s texts – an amalgam of both the epic and romantic, a myth based on multiple traditions – reached their peak when the narratives

returned to the English courts of the fourteenth century, separating into dual traditions.<sup>20</sup> While some texts retained the myth's nationalistic trajectory, others took on a courtier perspective, focusing on the conflicts between passion and duty (Pearsall 60-63). These dual traditions inform Heng's postulation, cementing the idea that medieval Arthurian romance narratives formed an extraordinary pattern in order to influence later traditions. I would add that because the dual traditions existed side-by-side, the narratives worked together to respond to certain ideological, cultural, and political structures. Therefore, in my analysis, I propose that the traditions of medieval Arthurian romance narratives allow for the conceptualization of a structured, idealized society, which ultimately emphasizes the prescribed, dichotomous roles of women. I further contend that female characters in these narratives, specifically Morgan le Fay, remain marginalized even as they are given a space – a gynaeceum, of sorts – to attempt to obtain agency, restore their voices, and achieve empowerment. Consequently, these same characters undergo traumatization, thereby polluting the idealized nature of the medieval romance narrative, and instilling women of the Arthuriad with a founding trauma.

## 2.2 Morgan le Fay in the Pearl Poet's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Referred to by scholars as one of “the greatest poets of the English language” (Pearsall, Howes, Anderson, Boroff, etc.), the eponymous pearl poet wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green*

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<sup>20</sup> The predominant tradition focused on courtly intrigues, where the illicit relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere took precedence over King Arthur's desires to unify Britain. As Derek Pearsall indicates, this was the dominant tradition because the upper echelon of English society spoke French (61). Nevertheless, in the same time frame, the Arthurian romances had become dated in France, which made “English taste in French romance increasingly provincial and old-fashioned” (61). The dominance was exerted once again with the English adaptations of French Arthurian romances, which were made for a new class of English audiences (“the urban bourgeoisie and the provincial gentry”) aspiring to read the same texts as their more noble counterparts (62-63). For these individuals, the “newly translated French Arthurian romances” provided a window into the idealized lives of their “social superiors” (63). To put it in baser terms, the translations allowed a new generation of individuals to play pretend; real life wasn't filled with dashing knights on white horses, or couples who pursued amorous conquests outside the sanctioned walls of marriage and got away with it, but through the stories of Arthur's court, audiences could experience an alternative reality, free from the pressures of their collective society.

*Knight* in alliterative verse, sometime in the late fourteenth century (1350-1400 AD).<sup>21</sup> Like other conventional medieval romances, the story follows one of King Arthur's knights, Sir Gawain, through a series of quests, disguised as games, in order to test his chivalric *troth*, or pledge to the knightly code of honor. Along the way, Gawain encounters obstacles to his ultimate desires from multiple sources: the Green Knight, who spurs his initial call to action and forthcoming adventures, Lord Bertilak, who tests his honesty through a game of exchanges, and Lady Bertilak, who attempts to seduce him so that he breaks his vows to his other duties. Each of these characters attempts to trick Gawain by meddling with his moral fiber, code of chivalry, and loyalty to his King. Unfortunately, Gawain does succumb to his natural instincts for survival, and gets reprimanded by the Green Knight. As a result, his weakness gets displayed as a reminder of chivalric honor in Arthur's court from there on out – through a fashionable green sash, not unlike the knight's hidden girdle – worn by all the other knights at court in a didactic fashion. Given that the pearl poet portrays Camelot in the early days of its prominence, this subtle dig at premature perturbations in codes of chivalry foreshadows the downfall of Arthur's empire. What makes this medieval romance truly captivating however, lies in what Pearsall refers to as its transplantation “into a new dimension of the real” (78). Gawain remains a recognizable figure in the landscape of romance narratives, but by putting him “into a new kind of story in which the usual roles do not pertain,” all of the conventions of the genre become snarled, including “public

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<sup>21</sup> The primary source utilized in this analysis is Marie Boroff's translation of the original text, printed in the Norton Critical Edition. See *A Norton Critical Edition: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by Marie Boroff and Laura L. Howes (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010). A supplementary primary source consulted is J.J. Anderson's edited and annotated version of the Middle English text, printed in an updated Everyman collection. See *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience*, ed. by J.J. Anderson (London: Orion Publishing Group, 1996).



honor and private virtue, the public self and the private self,” and I would add, the perspectives and representations of female characters (78).

Indeed, like other medieval romances of this time, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* gives female characters specific roles.<sup>22</sup> For instance, Lady Bertilak’s voice of seduction holds its own power, whatever her arguably malicious intentions turn out to be. Her role in the narrative lies in her success as a pawn to Morgan le Fay’s over-arching plans, thereby limiting her identity by vilifying her deeds. One need only refer to Gawain’s anti-feminist diatribe in order to gauge how his perspective of women changes the shape in which they appear in the text, as he emphatically decries that “through the wiles of a woman [men] be wooed into sorrow” (2415). Although *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does emphasize the narrative space women work within, the pearl poet nevertheless diminishes their autonomy and value.<sup>23</sup> Even Queen Guinevere becomes relegated to a glorified statue, her only action in the poem defined by the verb “glanced” (82).<sup>24</sup> If medieval romance narratives portray idealized representations of life, but *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* muddles these conventions, then what the pearl poet actually presents to us in terms of representing the feminine, lies in some of these characters’ abilities to retain multivalent roles. Indeed, what makes this medieval narrative so unique in

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<sup>22</sup> Unlike other medieval romances, as Michelle Sweeney points out, everything in this iteration, “including who has power, has been reconfigured” (171). Traditionally, the men save the damsels – but in Gawain’s case, the only damsel that needs saving is …well, himself! See Michelle Sweeney, “Lady as Temptress and Reformer in Medieval Romance,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 30, (2014):165-178.

<sup>23</sup> Sheila Fisher argues that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has an ulterior agenda as a revisionist text of Arthurian history; the pearl poet marginalizes characters such as Morgan le Fay because their marginalization “is central to [the text’s] own revision of Arthurian history” (78). By placing women on the periphery of the text, they have less power to do damage to the Round Table, Fisher extends, claiming that “in the name of a lost but presumably worthy cause, [the text] attempts an uneasy …erasure of women from the poem” (78). See Sheila Fisher, “Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History, and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, ed. by Thelma S. Fenster, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> As Maureen Fries notes, “Romance females are patriarchally predicated by passive verbs; to romance males belong the active ones” (63). While in this case, Guinevere’s action is not in the passive voice, it is narrated by a male. The same can be said of Morgan’s activities; they do not come from her own narrative voice, but that of Lord Bertilak. See Maureen Fries, “Female Heroes, Heroines, and Counter-Heroes: Images of Women in Arthurian Tradition.” *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, ed. by Thelma S. Fenster (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996).

terms of its feminine perspective lies in the duplicitous but engaging representation of Morgan le Fay. In this particular text, we are only informed of Morgan's role in orchestrating the protagonist's entire adventure, but never bear witness to her machinations. Considering that nothing in the text even alludes towards her ultimate designs until it's near conclusion, Morgan seems to play the part of a plot device – rather than a full-fledged character. With Lord Bertilak's revelation that he's actually the Green Knight in disguise, he also lets it slip that it was Gawain's own Aunt, Morgan, who controlled the entire operation, divulging:

“[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 ... She was with my wife at home, that withered old lady...” (2456-2463).

Hidden at Castle Hautdesert in the guise of an old woman, we are expected to believe that Morgan concocts a scheme to reveal her brother's weaknesses, and those of his court, in the most devious manner – all by doing it behind the scenes. It's as though the pearl poet likens her representation to a puppet-master, lying on the fringes of the narrative, as Morgan retains control of her domain and all those who play in it. In terms of spaces, she dominates the domestic by assembling a gynaeceum, allowing her to bypass the boundaries which typically enclose the feminine. One might interpret this as an achievement of some form of power, except that Morgan remains silent (but not invisible) throughout the text. Because Lord Bertilak speaks on her behalf, he doesn't reveal her true intentions; furthermore, in assuming her narrative voice, he twists Morgan's representation within the work as a whole. By silencing Morgan, the pearl poet's text endows her with a questionable mobility and purpose, as the negation of her voice

inhibits true character development.<sup>25</sup> Would this have been too reminiscent a reality for a woman in the Middle Ages, one might ask? If the coalition of women within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* achieve a tenuous mastery over their own domain, but are never given a voice or perspective from which to describe it, then their experiences allude to a form of feminine traumatization. Morgan's silence, marginal representation, and flatness of character in this particular work are all evidence of feminine trauma, tying back to the limitation and marginalization of medieval women. The text represents the challenges real women had to face, coinciding with the growth of animosity towards them in the later Middle Ages (Fries 69).<sup>26</sup> Not even Morgan's shifting roles could get past the boundaries of this narrative's desire to promulgate popular ideals. Since the narrative's didactic purpose remains clear, it's possible that audiences were able to respond to Morgan's experiences in the text, thereby allowing them to work through their own traumatization.

Whether we see her as the diviner of Arthur's fate or a meddling Aunt, Morgan's founding trauma within the Arthurian comes to the forefront within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. To clarify, a founding trauma, as Dominick LaCapra coins it, describes not a series of events that "pose the problematic question of identity" (23), but rather, an experience which itself becomes "the *basis* of an identity" (161). Because the pearl poet's fictional representation of Morgan heightens the importance of the gynaeceum, rather than the individual female

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<sup>25</sup> In his study of editorial intervention and the resulting emendation within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Paul Battles remarks that the changes made in the text by editors often produce the same conclusions, positing "they all reduce women's agency and subordinate them to men, even when the poem implies – or explicitly states – that the opposite is true" (324). See Paul Battles, "Amended Texts, Emended Ladies: Female Agency and the Textual Editing of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *The Chaucer Review* 44, no. 3 (2010): 323-343.

<sup>26</sup> Some interesting sources to refer to for further detail on women in the middle ages include: Susan Signe Morrison, *A Medieval Woman's Companion: Women's Lives in the European Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016), Jennifer C. Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe 1200-1500* (New York: Routledge, 2016), and Michelle M. Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

antagonist's role, it complicates her indefinable identity within the margins of the myth – indicating the experience of a trauma. As a result, through later iterations of the myth, many of Morgan's representations become similarly treated. If her narrative experiences are symbolic of her audience's tribulations or desires, then this traumatization of the character extends to those she mirrors. Take for instance the literal way in which women's physical attributes were perceived at this time: beauty and youth symbolized innocence and purity, while more unbecoming traits and old age represented malevolence. In Gawain's perspective, Morgan is described directly in comparison to Lady Bertilak, who remains "fresh," while Morgan herself appears to be "faded" (951). A crone rather than a croquette, her identity becomes encapsulated by Gawain's reference to her as a "beldame" – in Boroff's notes, a "formidable lady" (964). This might be a polite way of referring to her as a woman of advanced years, but as the *OED* points out in one of its definitions of the characterization, it can also be used to denote "a loathsome old woman, a hag; a witch; a furious raging woman, etc." (*OED*). Although this sense of the word was only current during the sixteenth century, Gawain's consequent description of Morgan brings to mind images of popularized witches, complete with pointy noses, chin hair, and beady eyes:

"Her swart chin well swaddled, swathed all in white; / Her forehead enfolded in flounces of silk / That framed a fair fillet, of fashion ornate. / And nothing bare beneath save the black brows, / The two eyes and the nose, the naked lips, / And they unsightly to see, and sorrily bleared ... She was short and thick of waste, / Her buttocks round and wide; / More toothsome to his taste, / Was the beauty by his side" (958-969).

In whatever sense he chooses to refer to her as, it's clear that Gawain emphasizes her wizened age and unappealing exterior. As Maureen Fries points out, "since physical beauty is a

coefficient of moral goodness in medieval literature,” Morgan’s decrepit appearance alludes to a “spiritual darkness” (69). In this medieval representation, she has no beauty or youth – but she *does* have some limited power. For instance, in the original text, the pearl poet uses the words “mensk lady” (instead of “beldame”) to describe her, which in Anderson’s notes refer to a “fine lady indeed” (964). According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, the word “mensk” refers to “an honored state or condition, a reputable station in life, respect, honor, praise, and the state of maidenhood” (*MED*). We can’t speculate whether or not this iteration of Morgan remained a maiden – pure, in other words – but the original text certainly suggests that she was respected: “When Gawayn glyght on that gay, that graciously lokyd, / Wyth leve laght of the lorde he lent hem ayaynes. / The alder he haylses, heldande ful lowe...” (Anderson 970-972). Gawain’s actions indicate nothing but honor, something Boroff also enunciates in her translation, stating “To the elder in homage he humbly bows ...” (972). Ultimately, it’s Morgan’s elderly appearance which grants her respect and an alternative modicum of power. Her age and physical features are thus representative of complex roles.

Indeed, the text further problematizes any clear distinctions of good and evil by portraying the charming Lady Bertilak, so full of beauty and vigor, as seductive and wanton. When paired together, whether young or old, beautiful or ugly, these two women still manage to invoke Gawain’s anti-feminist diatribe. Thus, the text presents audiences with the underlying message that women are not to be trusted (unless, we assume, like Guinevere, they remain in their prescribed, voiceless roles). In the very same scene, Gawain observes that “The old ancient lady, highest she sits” (Boroff 1001) in the banquet hall, higher than even Lord Bertilak and his wife. The original text portrays the same perspective, with the narrator stating “The olde auncian wyf heghst ho syttes; / The lorde lufly her by lent...” (Anderson 1001-1002). Here, it’s evident

that Morgan not only has the respect of her court, but also the ear of the lord, who, as Boroff later translates, leans at her left hand (1001). Morgan topples the hierarchy King Arthur and Guinevere present to their court by placing herself at the head of the table and influencing her peers, thus clearly illuminating, or at least foreshadowing, who's really in charge at Castle Hautdesert. Her total domination of the feminine domestic space and the exterior masculine space subtly places her within a position of power. Yet, as the story progresses, we learn that this power has sprung out of motivations that are both ambiguous and malevolent. Colleen Donnelly points out that this conundrum, or more specifically the "flaws assigned to women in the text," may actually not be intrinsic to them, but rather, function as the "result of Gawain's and the other males' gazes or perceptions" (281). In other words, she implies that the work produces male figures who are too inept to fathom the full complexity of womenkind. The pearl poet's Morgan le Fay is certainly a complex character; however, she's also a representation of Morgan that's rife with damage, unable to move past the boundaries of her prescribed roles, but also maligned as a result of them. Her experiences symbolize the tribulations generations of women faced when misrepresented or limited in a similar manner, outside the boundaries of myth. Unfortunately, Morgan's traumatic experiences bring with them a whole host of negative attributes into the consequent narrative traditions of the Arthurian. As a result, her initial traumatization trickles its way into how she's identified from there on out – a malignant harpy who has one eye on the throne, and the other on Lancelot.

### **2.3 Morgan le Fay in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur***

Like the pearl poet's Morgan, Thomas Malory's version, although not precisely vilified or blackened in the same ways, still retains the stains of her former reputation, chained to the margins of the narrative. Malory's contribution to the myth holds an interesting balance of

themes; on the one hand, the narrative retains the nationalistic desires found in its twelfth century companions, but also explores the personal desires of various characters, attempting to open up their characterization (Guinevere, Lancelot and Palomides come to mind). While his representations of the male characters develop as a result of their expanded fictional experiences, Malory's dedication to representing Arthurian women seems to be far less developed, but intentionally methodical. Indeed, Malory utilizes certain Arthurian women in order to promulgate the experiences and desires of his male characters, thereby limiting, stigmatizing, and even demonizing female roles in the myth. In doing so, his narrative speaks to how women were perceived in this age – as regulators of the status quo, or alternatively, as instigators of the subversive. Again, this limitation rings out most clearly through his representation of Morgan, whose character illustrates both of these roles. I contend that by the marginal but purposeful way she has been manipulated in Malory's narrative, Morgan's character and her fictional experiences become an indexical representation of feminine trauma, responding to the limitation and marginalization of medieval women. By emphasizing the character's multivalent nature, Malory further perpetuates how Morgan comes to be perceived by authors and audiences alike in future iterations of the *Arthuriad*, even extending outside of the medieval romance tradition.

With quite the mystery surrounding its author, Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* was published in July of 1485.<sup>27</sup> Comprised of a series of books with individual but interwoven stories from both English and French sources, Malory's adaptation of the Arthurian myth focuses on chivalry, which according to Eugène Vinaver, he perceived as “an example of loyalty to a great cause” (vi-vii). Accordingly, Malory chose to depict his Arthurian romance as “a record of

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<sup>27</sup> The primary source utilized in this analysis is Eugène Vinaver's edited collection of Malory's work. See *Malory: Complete Works*, ed. by Eugène Vinaver, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971).

the heroic past of England” (vii).<sup>28</sup> With a trajectory that leans more towards the nationalistic rather than the courtly, Malory’s text nevertheless produces an entrelacement of chivalric ideals along with a thorough examination of the internal desires. As John Whitman suggests, the weaving of different kinds of narratives within a single text transformed a “way of telling into a way of understanding” (134). Rather than showing us King Arthur’s exploits, or Lancelot and Guinevere’s adulterous liaisons, Malory attempts to corral his audience into understanding these characters’ motivations and internal drives. Like medieval romances of the same period, his adaptation also emphasizes the private over the public, various experiences of love and betrayal, and the multitudinous perspectives of certain women, while developing the role of the individual. In spite of this, as Janet Jesmok postulates, when it comes to representations of women, it seems as though Malory “expands their action and dialogue,” simply to “develop his views on knightly conduct,” and that elusive, idealistic form of chivalry that Arthurian males exhale (34).<sup>29</sup> In other words, his male gaze examines the stories of Guinevere, Isuelt, the Lady of the Lake, and Morgan le Fay, telling them in relation to the ways they either hinder or help develop the characterization of the knights around them. In Morgan’s case, she’s immediately portrayed as a vengeful sister, an annoying thorn in Arthur’s side, who consistently attempts to de-throne him, expose his weaknesses, and utilize her magical powers for mischievous purposes and ends, which end in Arthur’s embarrassment or ire. The negative characterization persists until the end

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<sup>28</sup> Beverly Kennedy suggests that Malory’s alterations of some of the French and English sources were made particularly because the author wanted to “avoid offending his English readers,” instead seeking to “educate them by creating a more morally and politically instructive history of Arthur’s reign” (65). See Beverly Kennedy, “Adultery in Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*,” *Arthuriana* 7, no. 4 (1997): 63-91.

<sup>29</sup> Geraldine Heng proposes that these characters are read as “adjunctive,” and as such, are never given the opportunity to recover their own perspective, leaving their voices within the text, “subsumed and dispersed within other discourses” (97). See Geraldine Heng, ““Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.” *A Norton Critical Edition: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by Marie Borroff and Laura L. Howes, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010).



of the narrative, at which point Morgan undergoes an almost magical transformation into Arthur's caring sister – sudden and swift, this final representation of her character shifts our understanding of her roles. With Arthur's death comes Morgan's benevolence, but we must ask whether or not it's genuine, or rather, the product of yet another kind of machination? In either case, she serves a complex function: she's a foe when the narrative needs to uphold chivalric codes, but a sympathetic ally when Arthur's kingdom – and all it stands for – crashes down.

In our introduction to Malory's representation of Morgan le Fay, our attention is immediately brought to her “false crauftis” and “fals lustees” (88). While a Queen herself in a respected land, her husband a vassal of Arthur's, Morgan seduces another knight to challenge her brother for the throne, with the intent to place herself on it. The focus of Arthur's ensuing rage doesn't linger on her underlying motivations, but rather the depths of her betrayal: “God knowyth I have honoured hir and worshipped hir more than all my kyn, and more have I trusted hir than my wyff and all my kyn aftir” (88.32-34). Notice that Arthur places her on a pedestal which rises much higher than either his wife's or that of his future progeny. Her actions affect him on multiple levels, but most importantly indicate that Arthur now has the impetus to perceive her in a new, unbecoming light. Indeed, as the narrative continues, there doesn't seem to be any love lost between Arthur and his sister, with Morgan constantly thinking of ways to get under his skin, either by kidnapping his knights (and sword and scabbard), exposing his wife's infidelities, or trying to meddle with his position on the throne. In order to embark on these nuisances, Morgan utilizes her magical powers. Whereas these were once used for good, just as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Malory's Morgan perverts them for her own nefarious purposes. For instance, in order to kill two birds with one stone, Morgan enchants a “fayre horne harneyste with golde,” meant to reveal adulterous wives, and sends it along to Arthur's courts in

the hopes that her sibling catches on to his wife's infidelities (270.30). Had her plan succeeded, Guinevere would have been put on the pyre, leaving Morgan free to wheedle her way into Camelot. Fortunately for Arthur, the horn is sent away to King Mark's court, and instead reveals that most of the women, "but four ladyes of all," were not true to their marriage oaths (270.25). Mark would surely have punished them all as a result, but for his barons' warnings that he shouldn't trust any objects "made by sorcery," that came from Morgan, referred to as "the false sorseres and wycche moste that is now lyving" (270.31). Worse than her new epithets, this episode brands Morgan as "an enemy to all trew lovers" (270.33).

Indeed, Malory's representation of Morgan takes a turn for the murderous when describing her amorous relationships. In her first attempt to overthrow her brother and gain control of the throne herself, Morgan seduces one of his knights, Accolon, in order to do her dirty work. Thinking that Arthur perished at his hands (and unaware of the truth), Morgan decides that it's the right time to behead her sleeping husband. The actions she takes are chilling: "And lyghtly she toke the swerde and pullyed hit oute, and wente boldely unto the beddis syde and awaited how and where she myght sle hym beste" (90.35-36). It's a calculated, cruel move, and it's only halted by the entrance of her son. Insisting that she was "tempted with a fende," Morgan promises never to attempt such deviousness again (90.42-43). However, with the death of Accolon, Morgan continues her assault against Arthur, discovering her powers of enchantment along the way. After disposing of his magical scabbard and transforming herself into a stone, she admits that "I feare him nat," as a result of her magical abilities (93.7). What makes this portrayal of Morgan so fascinating lies in the conundrum she presents to the text; as a woman, she has an opportunity to gain power – yet, her version of it, which stems from mysterious and

misunderstood origins,<sup>30</sup> becomes stigmatized, demonized, and trodden upon. Ironically, as William Fitzpatrick suggests, this representation accomplishes the “reverse of its intent,” emphasizing the “divisiveness” between the public and private worlds in Malory’s adaptation (7). Nonetheless, Morgan’s character seems to metamorphose into a mere tool of destruction, hell-bent on perpetuating spiteful schemes in order to give Arthur and his Knights a reason to maintain order and the chivalric code of honor.

How can we then account for her final appearance in Malory’s iteration? Can we trust the narrator’s representation, which appears to depict a completely new version of Morgan’s character? In Malory’s final book, “The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon,” we encounter Arthur’s final battle and death, astutely titled in chapter six as “The Day of Destiny.” Wounded after battle and aware of his doomed fate, Arthur encounters three Queens who are charged with leading him into the sacred isles of Avalon; as the narrator explains, the women include “kyng Arthur syster, quene Morgan le Fay, the quene of North Galis, and the quene of the Waste Londis” (717.15-17). We hear from none of the women except Morgan, whose final utterance in the narrative isn’t at all what we would expect, given her characterization up to this point: “A, my deare brother! Why [ha]ve ye taryed so longe frome me? Alas, thys wounde on youre hede hath caught overmuch coude!” (716.16-17). From a surface level, her phrases speak of devotion and care; Arthur isn’t simply her brother, but a dear one, and his wound appears to concern her. However, it’s the second phrase Morgan utters which complicates her queries. The word “taryed” holds a number of different senses and subsenses; the *Middle English Dictionary* defines it as “a delay of action, to spend time in an action, to be a hindrance, to obstruct an action, to put off, keep away, reject, to incite wrath, provoke, irritate,

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<sup>30</sup> Indeed, as Heng adds, “...because its operations are secret or indecipherable, and may press even the unwilling into service, it is a thing to be feared, particularly by a warrior ethic, for its mysterious compulsion” (103).

annoy, etc.” (*MED*). The word “taryed” was used in the fourteenth century as a transitive verb and meant “to provoke, vex, worry, harass” (*OED*). While we can’t speculate what sense Malory intended to use the word “taryed,” when Morgan says it in the context of this passage, it seems as though the narrator directly refers to the distance between the two siblings. It certainly sounds like Morgan asks Arthur why he’s kept away from her for so long, indicating that she has worried about him – but then again, it’s a word which also insinuates provocation. Morgan isn’t just worried about Arthur – she’s also annoyed that he’s stayed away from her. This response seems totally out of character for a woman who has plotted against her sibling for seemingly the entire duration of the narrative. What right does Morgan have being vexed by her sibling’s absence when she’s the one who has caused his alienation?

Dorsey Armstrong suggests that when she “suddenly re-enters [the narrative] in a sympathetic and supportive role,” we must “re-consider, re-evaluate, and re-think all of the episodes in which she has played a villain,” ultimately alluding that with this final appearance, her function “suddenly becomes much more potentially complex and nuanced” (144-145). Armstrong further argues that Morgan’s characterization stems from Malory’s “stitching” of various texts to create his iteration of the *Arthuriad*, indicating that he chose not to alter Morgan’s malevolent role from the *Suite du Merlin* (1230-1240) and the prose *Tristan* (1225-1270), or her more benevolent attributes from the French *La Mort Le Roi Artu* (*Mort Artu*, 1230-1240) and the English stanzaic *Morte* (late fourteenth century)(145-146). Malory’s choices illustrate Morgan’s many roles, but because they’re so haphazardly expressed throughout his narrative, it’s difficult to believe they can coexist. Rather than assume Morgan can be both a caring sister and one capable of fratricide and regicide, I suggest that Malory’s narrative portrays Morgan’s character as a method of undergirding his more prominent themes: chivalry,

knighthood, and the nationalistic endeavors of Arthur and his knights. When Arthur needs a reason to garner support for his kingship, Morgan stands as the perfect foe to gather it, and conversely, when his kingdom falls, Morgan remains standing to bring him to a place of honor and rehabilitation.<sup>31</sup> In other words, it's never about her. Morgan's characterization only complements the stories of the male characters and the chivalric order of Arthur's world, thus limiting her own narrative possibilities. However, there are quite a few critics and scholars alike who complicate this stance. For instance, Amy S. Kaufman asserts that "Malory's women are rarely evaluated on their own terms" (166). She argues that we shouldn't interpret his characters based on his "perceived misogyny," which would cause us to "analyze his characters based on the interests of male characters, male writers, and male readers" (166). As Kaufman points out, scholars such as Jill Hebert have instead analyzed Malory's Morgan as a type of political advisor who advances past binaries and gender roles:

"Morgan's ability to test Arthur and his knights and show both personal and systemic flaws comes directly from her ability to evade decisive characterization by authors and critics alike. She moves both within and beyond the dichotomies of male/female, good/evil. Her resourcefulness and adaptability are limitless..." (Hebert 70).

Hebert makes an excellent argument, suggesting that Morgan functions at a level beyond her dichotomous origins in this particular text, particularly with her exemplary powers and decisive actions. However, it is that very "concern over the political consequences" of Arthur's kingdom and "the flawed ideologies of his knights" that suggest Morgan only serves a purpose in the narrative if she's going to be "burdened with the responsibility of critiquing the chivalric system"

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<sup>31</sup> After all, the inscription on his tomb does state "Hic Facet Arthurus, Rex Quondam Rexque Futurus" / "Here Lies Arthur, King Once and King to Be" (717.35). Doesn't the legend indicate some sort of return? Isn't it fortuitous that Morgan aides in this endeavor?

(70) and functioning as a “critic of the court” (79). The narrative never provides us with an expanded picture of Morgan’s hidden desires and internal motivations (unlike those of Guinevere, Tristan, Lancelot, and Arthur, among others), relying on older texts to cobble together her altogether confusing representation. Because Malory’s iteration manipulates her roles in the myth in such a way, Morgan’s representation – yet again – serves an indexical function, responding to the limitation and marginalization of medieval women.<sup>32</sup> Whether they too were defined by restrictive roles, obstructed from utilizing a certain language or from pursuing an education or career as a result of their socio-political status, or conferred to the margins of their own cultures, medieval women can certainly be said to have suffered trauma as a direct correlation of their purpose in society. Ultimately, Morgan’s undefined and underwhelming fictional motivations and experiences speak to the prevalence of trauma alongside the myth. As a result, Malory’s work perpetuates how other authors and audiences engage with her subsequent representations.

#### **2.4 Morgan’s Medieval Tapestry of Trauma**

Authors have a dual purpose: they are both spinners of tales as well as vehicles of cultural phenomena. When observing the weaving of narratives both Malory and the pearl poet have added to Morgan le Fay’s tapestry in the *Arthuriad*, one cannot help but see overlapping sites of trauma. I believe Régnier-Bohler phrases it perfectly: in medieval narratives, “women are tools; their use must be carefully controlled” (350). Whether she’s pushed to the side or treated as a tool, her motivations and desires left unexplored or eclipsed by larger political and cultural structures, in medieval romance narratives, Morgan’s many fictional representations produce a

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<sup>32</sup> See Signe Morrison, *A Medieval Woman's Companion: Women's Lives in the European Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016), Jennifer C. Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe 1200-1500* (New York: Routledge, 2016), and Michelle M. Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

complex perspective. Rather than condemn the medieval iterations of Morgan to fester in the darkness, I encourage the excavation of her representation in these texts and beyond, as scholars such as Amy S. Kaufman, Jill Hebert, and Dorsey Armstrong have done. Only by understanding where she comes from, can we thus comprehend where she's heading. Morgan's medieval representations suggest that feminine trauma lingers alongside the myth. We must therefore ask: do Morgan's consequent iterations ever work through these particular traumas, and inspire change in the ways she's been shaped – and in the ways her character responds to audiences? Most importantly, in what ways do Morgan's narrative “origins” help facilitate her character's resilience through later Arthurian adaptations?

### **3 CHAPTER 3: SHADOWED – MORGAN'S LEGACY IN VICTORIAN POETRY**

“By Heaven that hears I tell you the clean truth, / As clean as blood of babes, as white as milk: / O Merlin, may this Earth, if ever I, / If these unwitty wandering wits of mine / ...Have tripped ... May this heard earth ...nip me flat, / If I be such a traitress” (Tennyson 68).

“The enchantresses move on the periphery of the Arthurian court, but ...their actions, sudden and mysterious, unsettle accepted notions of women's roles ... [with the] potential to disturb prevailing orthodoxies” (Larrington 3).

#### **3.1 The Arthuriad in Victorian Poetry**

Narratives featuring Arthurian myths lay largely dormant between the Renaissance and the Romantic periods, although authors frequently used their tropes in alternative texts, such as Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1589-1596), Richard Blackmore's *Prince Arthur* (1695) and *King Arthur* (1697), Henry Fielding's *Tragedy of Tragedies* (1730), and Walter Scott's *The*

*Bridal of Triermain* (1813) (Pearsall 110-120).<sup>33</sup> As Derek Pearsall notes, it took four centuries for Malory's medieval text, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, to be reprinted after 1485, appearing in print again in 1816 (117). What was the underlying cause for the disparaging absence of Arthur and crew during this time frame? Why did the resurgence happen in the Victorian era, many years after the medieval texts were first printed? Larrington deduces that although romance survived as a genre, "Arthurian themes [went out] of fashion throughout Europe," until the "Gothic revival" of the eighteenth century, when the medieval past took hold of the imaginations of a new audience (144-146). Further suggesting that the nationalistic themes present in some variations of the Arthuriad perfectly matched the "renewed interest" in the English nation's past, and that the Industrial Revolution prompted a search for "alternative values in the workplace and family," Larrington points out that the medieval texts "were nostalgically re-imagined as offering a better alternative" to the Victorians (147). Filled with anxieties surrounding rapid advancements in technology, social mobility, and shifting cultural values and morals, this society craved stability and simplicity. Medieval revivalism in literature and poetry appealed to Victorians because it prompted a return to an idealized age, where the tenets of chivalry and courtly love dominated. For poets, the return to the Middle Ages and to King Arthur, as William E. Buckler suggests, was "fueled by the need to find literary ways of releasing contemporary man from the dead-centeredness, the wrong-headedness, the blinding chauvinism of his own age" (89). Essentially, the Victorians bought into the illusions these texts promulgated, for the same reasons their medieval predecessors did – they wanted to be able to imagine a different world and escape the

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<sup>33</sup> As Larrington asserts, regardless of utilizing similar tropes, Spenser's work "in no way pretends to tell an Arthurian story," as it focuses around an alternative (and personified) quest which features previously unknown characters (144). The rest of the aforementioned texts follow in the same footsteps, utilizing the myth as a vehicle to promote alternative values and morals to audiences.



clutches of looming, uncertain modernity.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, this age can be defined by its battling sensibilities, spurred on by a fear of societal and cultural changes, including the threat of shifting gender roles. The modern woman desired the right to vote, and a space outside the domestic to work and thrive, which clashed with the ideal to keep women firmly in their prescribed spheres.<sup>35</sup> To fit the needs of Victorian society, which emphasized sharply defined gender roles, an adherence to a higher moral ground (and religion), and a righteous sense of national pride (as the old adage goes, “the sun never set on the British Empire”), many Arthurian texts were adapted to dispel tawdry or inappropriate scenes which could interfere with the narrative’s new purpose. As a result, poetic epics such as Alfred Tennyson’s “*Idylls of the King*,” represent not only the author’s conflicts between the private and public, but also echo his audiences’ concerns, ultimately representing the tension between “the private world of sexual transgression and an imagined world of idealized public honor and perfected virtue” (Pearsall 120). Quite obviously, the perspectives of Arthurian women - especially those with ambiguous or fluid natures – were often trivialized, relegating them to one-dimensional representations of familiar characters and perpetuating their conventional dichotomies.

### 3.2 Understanding Morgan le Fay’s Mutability

Morgan’s founding trauma, originating within the medieval romance tradition, lies in her fictional character’s denigration. This transformation informs every subsequent portrayal and critique of her, through the Victorian age and beyond. However, her narrative origins also allude

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<sup>34</sup> For additional insight into Victorian medievalism and Arthuriana revivalism, refer to Megan L. Morris, “‘Recalled to Life’: King Arthur’s Return and the Body of the Past in Nineteenth-Century England,” *Arthuriana* 21, no. 2 (2011): pp. 5-27 and William E. Buckler, “A Precarious Turning: Tennyson’s Redemption of Literature and Life from Medievalism,” *Browning Institute Studies* 8 (1980): pp. 85-102.

<sup>35</sup> Consider Coventry Patmore’s poem, “The Angel in the House,” which presents the male Victorian’s ideal of a woman – a domestic goddess, tied to home and hearth, with a focus on family and keeping up with tradition. Women could function inside of their own space – another version of a gynaeceum – but could never travel past these boundaries without fear of the repercussions (i.e., being ostracized by society).

to the possibility of redemption. For every narrative in which Morgan is cast to the margins, silenced, or vilified, she nevertheless appears as Arthur's guiding light, bringing him home to Avalon after the fall of Camelot, as is evident in Malory's adaptation (among others).<sup>36</sup> In fact, in the Italian *Tavola Ritonda* (1325-1350), written roughly around the same time frame as the pearl poet's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1350-1400), Morgan is cast in the role of prophet, referred to as *Fata Morgana*, and tasked with facilitating foreknowledge of events in Arthur's kingdom (Larrington 80-83). By "recasting its source material," the *Tristan en Prose* (1225-1270), and thereby eschewing her negative qualities, this Italian text, as Carolyne Larrington suggests, "reconfigures the character of Morgan" (83). The *chanson de geste* (late twelfth century), reflects similar representations of benevolence, "thanks to the genre's essential conservatism," (93) subjecting Morgan to a "nostalgic re-imagining" (96). Therefore, Morgan's multitudinous medieval representations illuminate the character's mutability between texts, periods, and genres. Within her tapestry of trauma, thanks to the weaving of alternative narratives, there's hope for a re-shaping – or re-consideration – of her identity. Ultimately, this development demonstrates that there isn't a true consistency in Morgan's behavior throughout the evolution of the myth; to read her in binaries, as Jill Hebert contends, "reinforce[s] dichotomous categories that many of the original sources also impose ... relegating her once again to stereotypes such as the benevolent healer, the femme fatale, and the Ave/Eva

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<sup>36</sup> Indeed, as Carolyne Larrington clarifies, "...whatever the conflict between the two, from the early thirteenth century onwards, Morgan is always a comforting presence on the barge that bears Arthur away from battle..." (30). As soon as she's cast in the role of Arthur's sister, beginning with Chrétien de Troye's *Erec and Enide* (1170) in the latter half of the twelfth century, Morgan develops an alternative identity; although medieval texts focus on the sibling rivalry between the two, and Morgan's ensuring enmity towards Arthur, it can't be denied that she's often portrayed as the last individual to guide him to his final resting place, all their differences put aside. See Carolyne Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

dichotomy” (2).<sup>37</sup> Instead, Hebert proposes that we view Morgan through her fluid and changeable role as a shapeshifter, utilizing the metaphor to signify “...her potential to evade and resist the shape(s) that others – critics, authors, and characters – attempt to impose upon her, to use the expectations of others against them, and to move among, outside of, and around assumptions as necessary”(6). Morgan’s mutable transformations raise the question of her fluid identity in consequent representations, thus illuminating how the traumatization of her character effectively influences the Arthurian narratives which follow in the footsteps of the medieval romance tradition.

### 3.3 Morgan le Fay’s Transmutations in Victorian Poetry

Although many Victorian poets wrote about the Arthuriad, there are practically no individualized representations of Morgan le Fay within any singular text. Rather, authors like Matthew Arnold, William Morris, and Alfred Tennyson focused on characters such as Elaine, Yseult (Iseult), Guinevere, and Vivian (Nimue). Their representations of these women were often based on what Lee Tobin McClain refers to as “gender anxiety,” stimulated by the period’s shifting notions of male and female roles, inculcating concerns surrounding masculinity (195). For instance, in many adaptations, Guinevere’s adultery had to be transformed into an act which made her a martyr, rather than allowing Arthur to remain a cuckold. In other famous iterations, Lancelot retained his moral, chivalric reputation regardless of Elaine’s mortal obsessions, prompting the Lady of Shalott to kill herself.<sup>38</sup> Nowhere are these tensions more

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<sup>37</sup> Utilizing New Medievalism as the driving theoretical approach to her analysis, Hebert further suggests that Morgan “embodies characteristics and behaviors that cannot be classified by simple-minded dichotomies” (3); in doing so, she acts as a “shapeshifter,” more often than not “retain[ing] the potential for a range of representations” (5). See Jill Hebert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

<sup>38</sup> In Tennyson’s work, this can also be interpreted as the artist confronting their desire to go out into the world and create, which for any burgeoning creator, remains a task that seems tantamount to death. In this case, whether or not the creator is male or female doesn’t seem to matter; however, the fact that Elaine stands in for the creator indicates

evident than in Tennyson's "Idylls of the King," which represent his own culture's anxieties by suggesting Arthur's kingdom cannot live up to the expectations of a chivalric society, presenting it as "an inadequate fence against the decadent passions and ennui that bring down more and more of his [men and women]" (McClain 196). Consequently, in order to address these discrepancies, Tennyson (like many of his fellow poets) portrayed his female characters through binaries. What better way to elevate and re-affirm masculinity by both limiting and punishing the feminine? For this reason, female characters who behaved badly – meaning, in ways which did not adhere to their ascribed roles, like Guinevere and Vivian, suffered from the repercussions – as did their reputations.

As Stephen Ahern points out, in Tennyson's era, "the ideal of woman as ennobling influence gained especial force" (90), meaning that female characters often functioned as tools which enabled male characters to reach their own goals or desires – or, alternatively, as "agent(s) of the overwhelming forces of nature" which prevented them from achieving or promulgating popularized chivalric ideals (91). Ergo, we see why Tennyson had to redeem Guinevere's representation; as Arthur and Lancelot's most "ennobling influence," her role in this timely piece of literature should have substantiated their identities. However, because she engaged in an illicit affair with Lancelot, her reputation became tarnished, thus undermining the effects her character had on both men. At one decisive point in the narrative, we see Lancelot struggle with his desire to maintain his loyalty to Arthur and Guinevere both:

"For what am I? what profits me my name / Of greatest knight? I fought for it, and have  
it: / ...but what use in it? / To make men worse by making my sin known? / Or sin seem  
less, the sinner seeming great? / Alas for Arthur's greatest knight, a man / Not after

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an assumption on the behalf of the author that anyone who retains this vulnerability surrounding their art must be womanly – in other words, that their masculine traits are subsumed through the creation of art.

Arthur's heart! I needs must break / These bonds that so defame me: not without / She wills it: would I, if she willed it?" (95).

Lancelot feels as though he doesn't have a chivalric identity without upholding his knightly purpose to his King and fellow knights. He suggests here that his relationship with Guinevere defines not just who he perceives himself to be, but also that he recognizes he must be a role model to other knights. Guinevere's influence on him - rather than make him into something more, someone noble and truly great, someone to look up to - instead leaves him as just a *man*, flawed and imperfect. The passage implies that Lancelot blames his relationship with Guenevere as the cause of his misfortune, describing it as a set of "bonds that so defame me" (95).

Guenevere herself must will the bonds to break, or else doom him. Tennyson's quick-fix to Guinevere's problematic role is to present her as a martyr at the end of the work, retreating to a nunnery to be both reminded of and then pardoned for her sins, for which Arthur so quickly condemns her:

"My love through flesh hath wrought into my life / So far, that my doom is, I love thee still./ ...and so thou purify thy soul, /And so thou lean on our fair father Christ, / Hereafter in that world where all are pure / We two may meet before high God, and thou / Wilt spring to me, and claim me thine, and know / I am thine husband not a smaller soul,/ Nor Lancelot, nor another..." (136).

Forgiveness only comes in the afterlife, as Arthur's parting words insinuate, "...hither shall I never come again ...Farewell!" (136). Ahern alludes that this pattern of blame and failure appears consistently throughout Tennyson's work, suggesting that the text perhaps remains critical of how these female characters are exploited (90). However, their underlying representations, as either positive or negative influences - good or evil forces - indicates that this

particular iteration of the myth doesn't do much for the female characters other than dichotomize their roles in order to appeal to the predominant culture's desires. Therefore, one would think based solely on the circumstantial evidence, that Morgan would play a perfect role in this approach to edifying masculinity for a Victorian audience.<sup>39</sup> However, as we've discovered, each time a representation of Morgan has been portrayed as a scapegoat or villain for anything in an Arthurian text, the character has been absolved thanks to her relationship with Arthur.<sup>40</sup> The character's malleability – an effect of the sibling dynamic and her diverse roles – allows her representations to go beyond simple binaries and familiar dichotomies.

To put it simply, Morgan's moral ambiguity and fluid nature prevent Victorian authors from presenting her as a villain. Instead, Victorian poets, like Tennyson, solely utilize her negative attributes to both create and subsequently demolish the representations of characters who mirror her, and who ultimately present more dangerous threats to the nature of the Arthurian world, as well as to their own cultural mores. In his "Idylls of the King," Tennyson's female characters function on a "spectrum of ethical capacity," where femininity "is elaborated in the terms of truth and falsity" (Ahern 88). Relying on binaries to represent the characters of Guinevere and Vivien (as quite literally either the figures of the Madonna or the whore), as Stephen Ahern suggests, these women "embody aspects of morality in a quintessentially Victorian construction of woman as a symbolic repository of social values" (89). Placing Morgan in this text would have disrupted Tennyson's desire to adhere to these dichotomies, as she

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<sup>39</sup> Indeed, as Maureen Fries has suggested, Morgan's shift "from a connector of life ... into a connector of death," indicates that male authors couldn't "cope with the image of a woman of power in positive terms" (70). See Maureen Fries, "Female Heroes, Heroines, and Counter-Heroes: Images of Women in Arthurian Tradition." *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, ed. by Thelma S. Fenster (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996). Jill Hebert extends this by suggesting she may "still have been too threatening to present as independent and beyond male control" (102).

<sup>40</sup> See Raymond Thompson, "The First and Last Love: Morgan le Fay and Arthur." *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen* (New York: Scriptorium Press, 2001), pp. 331-344.

transcends them; Morgan functions through malleable roles, shifting from one representation to another – sometimes in the same work. For instance, as I’ve discussed, while in much of Malory’s text Morgan acts impishly, attempting to harm Arthur, in the end she’s one of the women which lead him to his final resting place – a pattern we see repeated throughout many iterations of the myth. To call her a villain at this point would be a falsification of her character, although it’s true that she’s often been described or represented as having a villainous streak. However, the same cannot be said of other enchantresses, like Vivien (also referred to as Nenyve, Nimue, and the Lady of the Lake), who share Morgan’s characteristics.

As an enchantress herself, or at least when endowed with magical powers, Morgan shares a commonality with female characters who portray the same abilities. Indeed, both Vivien and Morgan utilize their skills for versatile purposes, whether they are nefarious or virtuous. Often, they are seen as mirroring each other. For instance, in many medieval texts, Vivien opposes Morgan’s scandalous deeds by providing aid to knights and helping Arthur, rather than attempting to harm him or his court.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, Vivien also bears a mortal grudge against Merlin, while Morgan simply utilizes him as a conduit of learning and foreknowledge for her own ambiguous purposes, depending on the text. As a result, neither character can ever be simply defined through the dichotomous lens of villain or heroine; rather, they take on versatile roles which allow them to create their own unique position in medieval texts, influencing later adaptations. However, Victorian authors, as opposed to their medieval counterparts, desired to

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<sup>41</sup>There are quite a few representative examples of this pattern, from texts like the *Tristan en Prose* (1225-1270), Chrétien’s “Alexander the Orphan” (1170-1190), *Les Prophéties de Merlin* (1276), and the *Tavola Ritonda* (1325-1350). A comical example extends from the *Tristan en Prose*, with the way both Morgan and Vivien treat the confinements of men. Morgan prefers to kidnap knights and keep them prisoners in her castle for sexual dominance, while Vivien keeps them confined in her underwater fairyland from infancy to adolescence, in order to “preserve their lives and provide a gentle but thorough introduction to courtly life, removed from the complexities of feudal politics” (Larrington 23). These are conflicting desires which showcase one woman’s more devious intentions while lauding her fellow enchantresses’ good deeds. For more examples, see Carolyne Larrington’s *King Arthur’s Enchantresses: Morgan and her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

evoke that same, limiting characterization, in order to mitigate the gender anxiety both Morgan and Vivien present to the nature of the myth itself.<sup>42</sup> Because in many iterations, Vivien threatens and destroys Merlin, a figure who has often been interpreted as a protector of the Arthurian world, as well as its historian, Victorian poets, like Tennyson, perceive her as a larger threat to the aura of masculinity and chivalric values which they purport the myth upholds (Larrington 97). To maintain the strict binaries between male and female roles, and to suggest that overt female sexuality leads to disaster and damnation, in Tennyson's "Idylls of the King," Vivien becomes synonymous with *villain*, based solely on her negative characteristics. The reduced characterization of Vivien in the Victorian texts transforms her into an "analogue" of Morgan, rather than a mere mirror image, tying the two characters together based on their shared treatment (Hebert 92).

Nowhere can this pattern be seen more vividly than in Tennyson's portrayal of Vivien as a wanton harlot, scheming after Merlin's power and seducing him in order to enhance her own. Born from "death," as her mother lay in an open field of battle, next to the corpse of her father, Vivien utilizes her origins as an "orphan maid" to enter Camelot and find a way to topple Arthur's kingdom (64-65). Poignantly, Vivien refers to Guinevere here as a "woman of women," and "Heaven's own white / Earth-Angel, stainless bride of stainless King," in direct opposition to the ways she's seen by others, always as something repulsive, damaged, and reminiscent of the fallen Eve (65). Regardless of the irony within this description of the Queen, who was anything but a "stainless bride," Vivien's demeanor and actions inform her duplicitous nature. As if the biblical connotations weren't overt enough already, time and time again, the author aligns Vivien

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<sup>42</sup> As Hebert contends, although the Victorians attempted to present "severely reduced" characterizations of women, and in particular, of Vivien, these very same adaptations remain "suggestive of Morgan's complexity" (92). In other words, by limiting Vivien, these authors nevertheless allude to her shared characteristics with Morgan, illuminating "the literary history of Morgan's versatility" (92).



directly with the serpent in the Garden of Eden, describing her physical actions as “lissome,” “writhing,” “twined,” and “clinging” – taking her characterization one step further than simply likening her to Eve (67). Therefore, it comes as no surprise, least of all to Merlin, that Vivien desires not just his destruction, but also the doom of the men she perceives as “babbling” of her, the “full-fed liars” who, “ride abroad redressing human wrongs,” and “sit with knife in meat and wine in horn, / They bound to holy vows of chastity” (73). When she declares, “Were I not woman, I could tell a tale,” Vivien references her powerlessness to voice the debasement she has observed within Arthur’s court, perhaps inciting the fervorous desire to reveal it (73). Destroying Merlin remains a means to an end; revealing the rotten core of Arthur’s decaying court, amid all of its presumptuous assertions surrounding moral values and the chivalric codes of honor, becomes the true goal. For this interior desire, the narrator refers to her as a harlot (76). What Tennyson truly references with this caustic identifier is his society’s inability to work through the tensions between the public and private, by illustrating how feminine wiles expose the façade of chivalry and *fin amors* in the Arthuriad. By utilizing Vivien - as an analogue of Morgan le Fay - to present this message, Tennyson facilitates and extends the trauma which lingers in representations of female characters within the Arthuriad who aren’t given the space to explore their multifaceted identities.

### **3.4 The Transmission of Trauma and Beyond**

With the transmission of trauma of one female character’s representations onto those of another, the tapestry of Arthurian myths becomes further contaminated. Identifying Morgan or her analogues as either victims of circumstance or perpetrators of wrong-doing would be far too simplistic, much like arguing about whether or not they are the villains or heroes within these narratives. Rather than place her and her counterparts in those dichotomies, I suggest that they

take on both roles. Whether victim or perpetrator, each of these female characters represents “individual experiences of trauma that necessarily oscillate between private and public meanings, personal and political paradigms” (Balaev 156). Morgan’s representations in consequent adaptations of the myth suffer from the same pattern of contamination as her previous incarnations, originating from a collection of traumas, enhanced over time through cultural and socio-political structures. In contemporary iterations of the myth, Morgan becomes both a victim and a perpetrator, suffering at the hands of her progenitors, while ultimately desiring to punish them. While these dualities highlight Morgan’s fluid nature, they do nothing to dispel the aura of traumatic experiences which inform her shifting identity, particularly in the context of narratives which purport to give her autonomy, and most importantly, a voice. Therefore, we must ask, does Morgan’s resilience, originating from the mutability in her representations, allow for a working through of the traumas she has undergone over the course of several periods, genres, and texts? Can Morgan ever recover from the tapestry of trauma which the *Arthuriad* weaves around her characterizations?

#### **4 CHAPTER 4: MORGAN’S MUTATIONS – RECLAIMING THE MYTH**

“New versions of her story, however reliant on the ‘old’ stories they may be, should only add to the complexity of a character ...[enabling] the possibility of ‘rehabilitating’ Morgan, turning her ‘negative’ interpretations into ‘positive’ formulations” (Hebert 127).

“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, and whether, at the end, you arrive ...” (Bradley x).

#### 4.1 Contemporary Fiction and the Arthurian

Like the periods and genres before them, the Arthurian narratives written within the twentieth and twenty-first centuries reflect a multitude of anxieties, correlating to socio-political events, movements, and evolving ideologies.<sup>43</sup> Although Lee Tobin McClain identifies the “the third great period of Arthurian popularity” (197) as beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century and on, Carolyn Larrington points out that contemporary treatment of the myth began much earlier, with Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur’s Court*, published in 1889 (172). As Scott Pearsall astutely suggests, Twain’s narrative imparts upon its audience the futility of a protagonist stuck “between naïve idealistic hope of change and reform,” and “homicidal irritation at people for not wanting to be changed and reformed in the way he proposes” (139). A truly modern text, Twain utilizes the Arthurian myth as “a vehicle for new ideas and ideals about how society might be run,” thus sharing the motives of his medieval and Victorian predecessors (141). The middle of the twentieth century saw the emergence of T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King* (1958), which eventually became a series of novels, thanks to the great popularity the texts held for younger audiences. However, regardless of its child-friendly packaging, as Pearsall indicates, the texts were “made into a commentary on the politics of the 1930s,” through which White encapsulated his own “hatred of popular democracy [...and...] totalitarianism” (150). Around the same timeframe, American novelist John Steinbeck was writing his own dedicated adaptation of the Arthurian myth, focusing specifically on depicting Malory’s text in a modern way; yet, however closely the author tried to follow in

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<sup>43</sup> As adaptations of the myths, Anne F. Howey elucidates, these texts also “adapt” to the “conventions of particular genres or media,” and to the “cultural milieu in which [they] are produced” (39). Utilizing adaptation theory to explain this pattern, Howey, by way of John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, proposes that the relationship between adaptations of myths and cultural intervention functions symbiotically; just as “culture influences the nature of adaptations,” so too do adaptations have an impact on prevailing cultural movements and popular (dare we say, *trendy*) ideologies (39). See Anne F. Howey, “Arthur and Adaptation,” *Arthuriana* 25, no. 4 (2015): pp. 36-50.

Malory's footsteps, Steinbeck's own "opinions and observations on the nature of humanity" informed his narrative (Paolini viii). Steinbeck never finished his adaptation, although the incomplete first and second drafts were published in 1976, in a collection aptly named *The Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights* (Paolini x). Each of these authors and their contemporaries projected their own set of anxieties within the Arthurian narratives they chose to adapt, adding modern perspectives to illusory tenets such as chivalry, honor, and the pursuits of courtly love. Just as the Victorian poets desired to justify the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere to avoid portraying Arthur as a cuckold, and thereby revising aspects of the myth to better align with their society's moral compass, so too do contemporary authors practice a form of ideological revision within their own Arthurian adaptations. In due course, with the rise of the novel (in all of its myriad forms), and the late twentieth and early twenty-first century burgeoning popularity of fiction and fantasy, the myth's familiar borders have mutated, particularly in terms of feminine representation. The fantasy genre, unlike historical fiction, allows narratives to tell alternative tales without the need to stay true to tradition or reality, making it a perfect vehicle for Arthuriana adaptations. In terms of feminine representation, Lee Ann Tobin asserts that contemporary feminist medievalism has had to "venture outside the historical Arthur story," since it "pays little attention to female experience," and if it does, in ways that have "left women aside or objectified them" (148). Contemporary feminist medievalism functions through the fantasy genre, creating narratives which value and uphold the roles of Arthurian women, thus moving away from the "belated nostalgia of most male medievalist authors from the past six centuries" (148). Predictably, there are stark differences between the adapted narratives written by contemporary male and female authors.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Twain and White treat their female characters with the same underwhelming representations as their literary predecessors, endowing them with limited narrative space to attain any true autonomy. Interestingly, when it comes to their portrayals of Morgan le Fay, the more decadent Twain ties his protagonist's name to that of the famously wily woman, suggesting, as Jill Hebert points out, that this new character "shares her name purposefully," illuminating the author's own "unease about the role of his protagonist" (120). Hank Morgan, like the re-vamped Morgan le Fay, retains a "conflicted nature about the uses and abuses of power" (Hebert 120). Nevertheless, Twain's actual representation of the female Morgan still rings with depravity: "She was held in awe by the whole realm, for she had made everybody believe she was a great sorceress. All her ways were wicked, all her instincts devilish. She was loaded to the eyelids with cold malice. All her history was black with crime..." (Twain 132). Twain emphasizes her physical beauty and youth only to heighten her ugly interior motives and actions, at one point having Hank Morgan surmise, "I felt persuaded that this woman must have been misrepresented, lied about," while then showing the audience her true colors, when she proceeds to kill a page in front of her entire court (132). No one can deny that this representation of Morgan retains its own sense of power; however, it's a form of power achieved through manipulation, fear, and coercion. Indeed, Larrington remarks that Twain's Morgan, although a "vesuvius," remains "ignorant, unimaginative, and used to the casual exercise of power over life and death" (174). As Hank Morgan repeats throughout the narrative, her "reputation" precedes her, shrouding Morgan in darkness, and continuing to represent and define her character by the finite perspectives the former Arthurian narratives perpetuate. In White's child-friendly adaptation of the myth, the enchantress Madame Mim stands in for characters such as Morgan le Fay, Morgause, and Viviane. As an analogue of each of these women, Madame

Mim takes on their negative attributes, serving only as a foil to the benevolent Merlin. To Larrington, this new character “teeters uneasily between comedy [...] and horror,” enhancing the ulterior darkness woven into the children’s story (175). While male characters get the chance to redeem themselves, White’s female characters have no such opportunities. Why the imbalance? As Kurth Sprague asserts, White was no fan of writing about women fairly, “labor[ing] under an immense disadvantage,” brought forth from the trauma of his own youth (9). Indeed, in his adaptation, female characters were frequently “omitted or diminished,” emerging only to be “condemned for their evanescent nature affairs of the heart” (10). While this rationale isn’t enough to help explain why White chose to represent the enchantress within his story in such a disparaging perspective, it does shed light on how his own circumstances informed the way he chose to re-interpret, or mutate, the myth. Inevitably, whether through a novel or a children’s story, Twain and White’s contemporary adaptations still falter in their dichotomous representations of the feminine, specifically in terms of characterizing Morgan le Fay. It was not until Marion Zimmer Bradley’s revolutionary fantasy text, *The Mists of Avalon* (1983), that audiences entertained the perspectives of a new Morgan, purportedly fully-fleshed out and ready to take on the idiosyncrasies of her past.

#### **4.2 Re-Writing the Myth with Morgan in Mind**

While it’s certainly not on the same high-brow or renowned literary caliber as the pearl poet’s canonized *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or Malory’s *Le Morte d’ Arthur*, scholars contend that Marion Zimmer Bradley’s contemporary work of fantasy fiction, *The Mists of Avalon*, remains a valuable text because it upholds the feminine voice.<sup>44</sup> Written by a female

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<sup>44</sup> Notably, as Lee Ann Tobin illuminates, the text does not follow in the footsteps of the male tradition, as it “does not raise up the past as ideal,” but instead “seeks to reinscribe power for female characters” (1). For instance, Christopher Snyder mentions that in abandoning history to retell Morgan’s story, Bradley emphasized matriarchal paganism, and thereby the prevalence of feminine power (118). Whether or not the author succeeds in attaining

author at the height of the second-wave literary feminist movement, Bradley's text develops the marginalized identities of various key female figures in the *Arthuriad*, including that of Morgan le Fay, or as she's known in this text, Morgaine. By reviving the feminine in her interpretation, Bradley tells the story through a revisionist lens, bestowing her female characters with the agency to voice their prospective tales. For the first time in the *Arthuriad*'s long history, audiences see the rise and fall of Arthur's kingdom from the direct perspective of Morgaine, told over the course of her life-span. While this all sounds remarkable, given the narrative's seemingly redeemable qualities, Bradley's text doesn't quite live up to its early hype, as many scholars have pointed out. Although the author endows Morgaine with a fresh identity and voice, giving her the tools to change her foothold in the larger myth, this representation swiftly becomes overshadowed by lingering biases and binaries, brought forth from the character's past iterations. As Carolyn Larrington puts it, "Despite the revisionist intentions of Bradley's retelling, Morgaine cannot redefine the roles assigned to women," suggesting that she cannot move past her own dichotomous origins (191). Indeed, Jill Hebert reiterates this point, claiming that any complexities which Bradley's Morgaine may hold, ultimately allowing for positive readings of her representation, are inevitably "undercut by Bradley's inability to move Morgan's characterization beyond the limiting influences of her sources and perhaps her society" (128). It's difficult to render Morgan in a positive and truly transformative light, when her origins – continuing through the ages, but present even in recent contemporary models – refer to her in limiting and static perspectives. Bradley's text may mutate the myth by allowing the fantastical

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these novel ideals remains heavily debated; many critics (including Jill Hebert, Carolyn Larrington, and Charlotte Spivak) applaud the work for its attempts to attain reification, but ultimately conclude that Bradley's work complicates the position of women, as they are still often portrayed in the same binaries as their previous incarnations. See Lee Ann Tobin, "Why Change the Arthur Story? Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*," *Extrapolation* 34, no. 2 (1993): 1-13, and Christopher Snyder, "'The Use of History and Archeology in Contemporary Arthurian Fiction,'" *Arthuriana* 19, no. 3 (2009):114-122.

representation of Morgaine to speak her truth, but it in no way means the character achieves any sense of autonomy, defined instead by her all-too familiar identifiers and circumstances.

Therefore, I suggest that alongside her revision of Morgan's role in the myth, Bradley creates a narrative of trauma, representing the famous feminine figure through her many trials and tribulations. In doing so, Bradley extends the overarching tapestry of trauma woven through Morgan's multi-faceted narratives, putting into question whether it's possible to re-establish and recover her characterization and roles in the Arthurian as a whole.

Bradley's interpretation of Morgan's character relies heavily on the mythical female's shifting identities, which stem from the presentation of her unstable origins. In depicting Morgaine's experiences through the course of her life, Bradley represents her as both a victim and perpetrator of trauma.<sup>45</sup> However, the author doesn't conflate these identifiers in her representation of the character, choosing instead to portray Morgaine's chronological shift from a victim of traumatic experiences to a perpetrator of trauma herself. Therefore, although she does imbue her representation of Morgaine with a slightly more nuanced reflection of her identity, Bradley ultimately reduces the character's position in the myth at large by depicting her degeneration through these transitory shifts in her nature. It must be noted that it's not simply Morgaine's actions or the events she undergoes that define her in these terms; the status of a victim or perpetrator cannot be referred to solely through a "psychological category," but as Dominick LaCapra points out, "a social, political, and ethical category" (79). Although Morgaine's character experiences terrible things, as well as enacting atrocious deeds onto others, she's both a victim and perpetrator of her circumstances due to the social, political, and ethical

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<sup>45</sup> In other terms, she represents her in dualities – as both good and evil. By choosing to illuminate how Morgaine shifts from a state of good to evil and back again, Bradley at least allows her representation of the character to play with these dichotomous identifiers.



structures which guide the actions of those who mold and motivate her within Bradley's narrative. In other words, her experiences do not make up the totality of her identity, but are instead influenced by the manipulations of the fictional world around her. When utilizing traditional, or well-known, materials to construct new narratives, some authors have had the tendency to re-affirm their conventions or inherent values. However, in contemporary fantasy fiction, more writers have taken up the task of asking readers to re-examine their cultural values, a trend C.W. Sullivan connects to the fantasy writer's desire to go above and beyond liminal Western conceptualizations of good and evil (288). Marion Zimmer Bradley follows tentatively in these footsteps, creating a narrative which questions not just the roles women have in the Arthurian legends, but also tensions between opposing religions, and the society's transition from a "matrilineal to a patrilineal and patriarchal" culture (288-289). Accordingly, Bradley asks readers to question the "cultural worldview," (287-288) or cultural consensus, of both the myth she adapts, as well as the characters she represents anew. In order to understand Bradley's representation of Morgaine, we must thereby recognize that she's a product of the fictional world Bradley adapts, and thus limited by the social, cultural, and ethical structures which inform her characterization. Therefore, she assumes both the roles of victim and perpetrator in order to play by the narrative's rules, which may allow for a shift in a reader's conception of this traditional material, but unfortunately, which also undermine the position of the feminine.

Take for instance Bradley's depiction of Morgaine's fluctuating self-esteem, which stems from both maternal neglect and abandonment, but more insidiously, pervasive negative commentary surrounding the supposed abnormalities present within her physical appearance; outside the realms of Avalon, Morgaine's diminutive stature and dark features are often mocked and feared, instilling within her an ever-present ache to belong, which manifests itself through

self-destructive actions, resulting in dastardly deeds. She's a victim of bullying in this circumstance, but simultaneously, in order to combat her status as the *other*, she becomes the bully. Of the many parts in the novel which describe Morgaine's inadequacies in terms of her physical appearance, it's Lancelot's first rejection of her that seems to be the most transparent, and inevitably, the most transformative. Upon their jaunt through the forests of Avalon as young adults, Morgaine proclaims that "she had never known what it was to be happy," until this moment with Lancelot, when "she saw herself mirrored in [his] eyes and knew that she was beautiful, and that he desired her, and that his love and respect for her were so great..." (154). Other than the misogynistic message that her only happiness in life thus far comes from the admiration of an adolescent boy, this scene illuminates her desperation for finding love. With the ill-fated arrival of Gwenhwyfar, who almost immediately refers to her as "little and ugly like the fairy people," Morgaine experiences self-hatred, reminding herself that her polar opposite's cutting remarks sound just like the taunts of her early childhood (158). The seeds of Lancelot's betrayal in choosing Gwenhwyfar over her as the object of his affections, coupled with the stark reminder of her outer – and thus, inner – differences, bloom within Morgaine's future conceptions of herself, and influence the actions she takes against both of these supporting characters in ensuing chapters.<sup>46</sup> While she deems these later actions have a necessary purpose, they seem unnecessarily cruel, and only serve to alleviate the simmering grudge she bears for the ostracization she undergoes at this young and impressionable age. Unfortunately, the heart of

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<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, as the relationship between Gwenhwyfar and Morgaine develops throughout the novel, the two women remain consistently blind to each other's faults. For instance, just as Morgaine admits that her only happiness comes from Lancelot's affection at the beginning of the text, Gwenhwyfar ironically assumes that Morgaine "does not need a man's love to feel herself alive and real," in the culminating chapters (841). In the pages that elapse between this frame, it's quite obvious that Morgaine does indeed need a man's love to fuel her own happiness; only, at this stage, it's not of a romantic nature, as Gwenhwyfar mistakenly assumes, but out of love for her brother – the only kind of love which forces her to accept herself for who she is, faults and all.

Morgaine's mutation from victim to perpetrator lies in her own ironic inability to see past her traumatic origins and move towards a different kind of future.

If we were to locate the most potent catalyst of Morgaine's transformation, it would lie in one singular act, with far-reaching consequences. With Morgaine's attachment and trust placed in Avalon's High Priestess - her aunt Viviane - comes her greatest fall. It's due in part to the mimetic association she shares with this alternative female character which drives all of Morgaine's actions, including the development of her complex identity. Beyond sharing physical traits, Morgaine and Viviane share kindred spirits, following the paths of the early pagan traditions that came before them, and favoring the great mysteries and Goddess-based religion, over the encroaching tenets of Christianity. Morgaine looks up to Viviane as a kind of mother-figure and role-model all in one, seeing and accepting her in both her human form, as well as when she takes on the guise of High Priestess, exhibiting a magical aura of power. Like a duckling, Morgaine imprints on her aunt, following in her footsteps in all things, to achieve ideals set out by the elders around her (including the influential wise-men of Avalon, such as Taliesin and Kevin). For her part, Viviane looks upon Morgaine like the daughter she never had, ultimately questioning whether her manipulations are worth betraying the girl's trust, at one point early in the narrative asking herself: "Am I prepared to be ruthless with this girl too? Can I train her, never sparing, or will my love make me less harsh than I must be to train a High Priestess? Can I use her love for me, which I have in no way deserved, to bring her to the feet of the Goddess?" (122). In essence, Viviane asks whether or not it's worth using Morgaine as a way to propel her own ideological agenda and religious beliefs, which in no way differ from the unilateralism present within the adjoining society's depictions of the Christian faith. Bradley's text, and thus her re-working of characters like Viviane and Morgaine, hinge upon the author's

adaptation of the myth, which Carrol Fry identifies as working on two levels: first, the “basic story line on the Matter of Arthur,” and second, on “the Neo-Pagan monomyth” (337). By utilizing religion as a way of giving her female characters agency and power, Bradley allows them to work within the dark corners of the *Arthuriad*. Instead of focusing on knights galumphing off on errant quests, she develops an alternative pursuit for her female characters to tangle with, attempting to validate their experiences through a larger ideological framework. While she thus achieves enhancing the feminine role through her adaptation, Bradley’s reliance on religious structures to both inform and motivate her main protagonists leads to a depreciation of their representations. Viviane expects Morgaine to follow not just in her footsteps, but to herself herald the dawn of a new age, worshipping one pagan Goddess in favor of the Christian’s God. She realizes too late that these religious figures conflate, and in doing so, eliminate the strife which tears the bindings of Bradley’s *Arthuriana* apart – unfortunately, her too-willing pupil follows blindly in her path. Therefore, when Viviane decides in favor of moving forward with her plans, in the process she not only destroys her relationship with Morgaine, but also the very fabric of her foster daughter’s identity.

When Viviane allows Morgaine to go through the “Great Marriage,” she tells her that she has been chosen to complete a “service” to the Goddess (171). She neglects to tell her that by partaking in this ritual, she’s expected to copulate with her own brother and produce a true heir to the throne of Britain, who will return the people to the worship of the pagan religion. For a young woman still grappling with her own self-esteem, tortured by the memories of a terrible childhood, and whose only desire seems to be finding love, this betrayal manifests itself as “one great knot of anguish,” leading Morgaine to think that Viviane has “played upon me as I would play upon the harp” (183). Viviane’s confirmations that “Done is done,” and that “the hope of

Britain” remains more important than the young woman’s feelings stoke Morgaine’s rage, yet she harbors no ill will towards her, instead finally weeping for “a trust and belief she would never know again” (186-191). Whereas once Morgaine may have been certain of her path, this singular act sets her at odds for the remainder of her adulthood, consistently struggling to come to terms with a duty she never wanted to bear. It’s at this point in the text that Morgaine begins her mutation from victim of trauma to perpetrator – mirroring Viviane’s actions as an adult, instead of mitigating, or better yet, disintegrating, the harm she herself underwent. In a stunning reversal, when it’s Morgaine’s turn to fulfill her role as High Priestess, she also manipulates the next young novitiate of Avalon, coercing her to partake in acts that are just as destructive as those set out by Viviane, directly telling her to bring harm to the Merlin by seducing him – all in the name of religious intolerance. In a catchphrase that rings all-too familiar, when Nimue’s work has been completed, Morgaine states “Done is done,” indicating that the girl has played her part – to her inevitable demise (799). The consequences of mirroring Viviane cost Morgaine her autonomy and voice; as a result of carving her identity from the trauma her aunt inflicts upon her, Morgaine shifts into an intolerant, manipulative woman, perpetuating harm rather than alleviating it. Only the eventual seeds of her destruction force Morgaine to re-examine her life, by which point, it’s far too late to make amends. At the end of Bradley’s text, with the crumbling of Morgaine’s characterization comes the downfall of Arthur’s kingdom.

Given the shift in her nature, from a victim to a perpetrator, we might ask whether Bradley allows Morgaine to regress or progress through her journey of self-discovery, and whether this lends her representation a positive perception, or allows it to fester? I believe the answers lie in Morgaine’s mutations throughout the text, specifically concerning her identity as both a victim and perpetrator of trauma. Although there are often blurred lines between victims,

perpetrators, and bystanders, these identifiers all relate back to Dominick LaCapra's definitions of absence and loss. As unstable binaries, absence and loss are essential to both working through and acting out on experiences of trauma and as such, should never be conflated. With the transition from absence to loss, a misplaced nostalgia for an object, experience, or community that never was gives way to the fabrication of prominent ideologies or philosophies (which may or may not allow healing), while with the transition from loss to absence, an endless melancholia emerges, halting the process of working through trauma (46-47). LaCapra mentions that when absence "itself is narrativized, it is perhaps necessarily identified with loss," and furthermore, that in general, it's often "differently articulated with loss" (49-50). Because these terms are thus conflated in certain ways, as Michelle Balaev affirms, the blurring of distinctions between them leads to "the view that both victim and perpetrator maintain the same relationship to a traumatic experience and exhibit the same responses" (153). Obviously, such a conceptualization unfairly appropriates the experiences of these individuals. Rather than conflating absence and loss, I contend that Bradley's portrayal of Morgaine reflects the transition from loss to absence, inducing in the female character a melancholia which prevents her from working through her individual traumas, and which facilitates her mutation into a perpetrator of trauma herself. Morgaine's experiences lead her into a spiral of mourning which manifests into an interminable melancholia, nearly leading her to the point of fatalism. As LaCapra points out, there's very little distinction between mourning and melancholia, further affirming that excessive mourning may be "indistinguishable" from melancholia, and that it in turn hinders working through trauma (151). There are quite a few points in the text which suggest that Morgaine remains incapable of overcoming her trials, tribulations, and cunning (questionably devious) comebacks, the most compelling being the sections which detail her failure to keep Arthur from allowing Christianity

a strong foothold in their land. Once her final plans end in the death of her lover, her unborn child, and the loss of her brother's love, Morgaine laments:

“I mourned without ceasing for Accolon, and for the child whose life had barely begun before it was ended, cast aside like offal. I mourned too for Arthur, lost to me now, and my enemy ... I had killed or thrust from me or lost to death everyone in this world I had ever loved. There was none to care whether I should live or die, and so I did not care either...” (752).

Rather than “generating countervailing forces to re-engage in interest in life” (151), as LaCapra posits remains an integral part of working through trauma, Morgaine proceeds to simply ruminate upon her choices throughout the rest of the novel, stuck in an endless loop of grieving, while submitting to her recursive past. However, while stuck in this ouroboros of grief, she does finally begin to understand how being both a victim and perpetrator of trauma have shaped her and attempts to reconcile these experiences through an inquisition of her interior self, beginning a process Jill Hebert refers to as “rehabilitation” (127). Can we call Morgaine a survivor of these experiences, and if so, is rehabilitation a strong enough process to reclaim her autonomy in the text? As LaCapra would suggest, “simply attaining a voice able to bear witness or give testimony – to express certain unspeakable injuries, insults, and forms of abjection – is itself a remarkable accomplishment” (211). But I would ask, is it enough to simply survive and “bear witness” (211)? One thing is clear: by the end of the novel, Bradley's Morgaine utilizes her collective, traumatic experiences to embark upon a restoration of the self – enduring long past the limits of her recognizable identifiers.

### 4.3 Morgan's Mutability

Bradley's revision of Morgan's role in the myth remains complex; while she's certainly, as Jeanette C. Smith astutes, represented "positively, as a pagan wise-woman, priestess, and as the Lady of the Lake, the high priestess of the Goddess" (137-138), and retains, as Lee Ann Tobin suggests, "a vision of positive female power" (150), Morgaine nevertheless acts through the ideological frameworks which guide Bradley's adaptation. Because the roles of women in adaptations of the Arthurian myths are comprised from what Mary Frances Zambreno terms a "piecemeal" narrative structure (118),<sup>47</sup> they are at risk of being misrepresented through the revisionist perspectives of different authors. In Bradley's case, religion serves as the conduit through which Morgaine achieves a sense of power, but also the catalyst which destroys her ability to retain a voice – and truly, any kind of autonomy. If Bradley emphasizes anything in her representation of Morgan le Fay, I would argue that it's the character's traumatic journey. Any adaptation of the Arthuriana material, Ann F. Howey suggests, seeks to theorize "repetition, alteration, and fragmentation" – patterns also commonly studied in relation to trauma texts (36). Indeed, *The Mists of Avalon* isn't simply an *adaptation* of the Arthurian myth, but also a *narrative of trauma* which prioritizes the protagonist's inner struggles to overcome her experiences – and in the process, to reconcile the trauma of her origins. In her discussion of how trauma allows characters in novels to enter into a state which allows for an evaluation of their experiences, Balaev notes:

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<sup>47</sup> Mary Frances Zambreno isn't the first scholar to discuss the *piecemeal* nature of the Arthurian narratives; she utilizes W.R.J. Barron's term from his discussion of Malory's text (119). I would also add that Derek Pearsall's phrase, "residues of narrative" (83), may be applied in a similar discussion, as he refers to the fragmentation present within Malory's iteration of the myth – a trend we see continue through Victorian and contemporary adaptations. See Mary Frances Zambreno, "Why Do Some Stories Keep Returning? Modern Arthurian Fiction and the Narrative Structure of Romance," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 26 (2010): 117-127 and Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction* (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).



“The traumatized protagonist’s inquiry into previous ‘truths’ of the self or formulations of identity produces a change in consciousness, however painful this might be, that takes the protagonist on a transformative journey, one that does not necessarily provide relief from suffering or [offer] redemption” (164).

Bradley’s representation of Morgaine speaks volumes for the character’s growth through the myth at large, even if the author doesn’t quite reach the pinnacle of feminist revision most scholars would like to ascribe to her.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, I believe Bradley bestows upon her protagonist yet another identity, stimulating our perception of Morgan le Fay’s continued mutability – in this iteration, as she confronts her experiences of trauma head-on. The narrative may not recover Morgan’s characterization from its early debasement, or present her in a necessarily positive light, but it certainly illustrates how new conceptions of her place in the myth can give scholars an alternative means to investigate her role at large. Inevitably, when it comes to understanding Morgan le Fay, the point isn’t to wonder whether or not she’s regressed or progressed within subsequent adaptations of the Arthurian narratives, but instead, to uncover how each variant has reclaimed her particular origins and given her a new life in each consequent text she appears in.

## 5 CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

“The plots of trauma narratives can belatedly and magically reconfigure entire life stories” (Luckhurst 88).

Roger Luckhurst’s quote affirms that literary experiences of trauma have an indelible effect on the way fictional characters progress through their respective narratives. In Morgan le

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<sup>48</sup> In fact, Bradley never considered herself a feminist, as Smith points out, denying the identifier altogether (132). However, she was still able to create “independent and assertive women protagonists” from marginalized and largely silenced female Arthurian characters (132). See Jeannette C. Smith, “The Role of Women in Contemporary Arthurian Fantasy,” *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy* 35 (no 2.), 1994: 130-144.

Fay's case, the literary tapestry of trauma wound within her many representations reconfigures the legacy of her character throughout the myth at large. Indeed, one could liken her evolution through literature to a coming-of-age story, which explores the construction of identity by way of overcoming trials and tribulations – often, by trying on different roles simultaneously. As she's traveled from the early narratives into contemporary texts, Morgan has exhibited a mutability which has allowed her various representations to grow beyond their dichotomous, linear origins. Jill Hebert asserts that in order to reconfigure our critical engagement with her character, we must acknowledge that “she may be represented in a myriad of ways without being restricted to a pattern that implies character development from primitive past to progressive future” (154). When we analyze her narrative progression, it's obvious that it goes well beyond the limits previous critical assumptions have lauded, including those which would limit her to identifiers that only expose her binary characterizations. Morgan's varied roles are more than the sum of her perceived parts; whether she's interpreted through the long course of her literary history as a hero, heroine, villain, shrew, or plot device, Morgan has proven that with each iteration of the Arthurian myth, her fictional representations have molded her character anew, adding to the many threads which piece together her narrative tapestry. Although Morgan's representations move towards the reclamation of specific ideals, working towards empowerment, with every new narrative transition, period, and form, the continuous presence of trauma prevents them from achieving true progression, limiting the character's development, and inhibiting her achievement of power. By examining how Morgan's multitudinous representations handle the collection of trauma which travels with her from narrative to narrative, we may extend our critical interpretations of her character in the myth as a whole, thereby reorienting how we perceive the

dynamics of the feminine in the *Arthurian*, as well as how Morgan's character functions on an indexical level, responding or speaking to the collected traumas of the myth's audiences.

What will be the next iteration of Morgan's character to take hold of our imaginations and guide scholarly debates? Will it also follow in the footsteps of previous narratives, representing her through binaries and stagnant, divisive types? Or will it extend the character's transformative roles? Morgan's representations have most often functioned as literary tools, promulgating the ideological, socio-cultural, or political desires of the narratives they have appeared in. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries are no different, having shown a predilection for portraying Morgan through alternative literary genres, such as the Graphic novel (comic books) and through Young Adult fantasy fiction. Such genres do not so much focus on the character's transhistorical continuity, but rather reconceive her roles in order to suit alternative needs. Graphic novels which portray superheroes quite obviously rely on the dynamic between good and evil, and thus utilize Morgan as a villain to better emphasize the qualities of their chosen heroes. The presentation of Morgan as a villainous sorceress in these narratives has no correlation to the true mutability of her character in the myth as a whole; as we've discovered, Morgan transcends these binaries – sometimes in the same text, but also often in the same narrative tradition. Young adult fantasy fiction has a formulaic agenda, responding to the preoccupations of adolescents. In doing so, the genre itself pays little to no heed to the transhistorical continuity of the character, instead utilizing Morgan as a springboard from which to explore typical themes present in YA fiction: unrequited love, exploring boundaries, and coming of age. Novels like Nancy Springer's *I am Morgan le Fay: A Tale of Camelot* (2001), Barbara Tapa Lupack's *The Girl's King Arthur: Tales of the Women of Camelot* (2010), Felicity Pulman's *I, Morgana* (2014), and Alessa Ellefson's *Morgana* trilogy (2015) all place an

emphasis on the development of identity, generating characters who are often given the narrative space to explore how their experiences – and traumas - shape them. However, these experiences are markedly adolescent in nature, and thus, only illuminate Morgan’s mutability through a singular, often biased, lens. As we continue to unpack Morgan’s legacy, through whatever literary container she appears in, we must continue to investigate her motivations and development, ascertaining how she effects portrayals and representations of femininity in the ever-evolving boundaries of the myth.

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## APPENDIX: CHRONOLOGICAL TIMELINE OF PRIMARY ARTHURIAN TEXTS

All dates and texts are compiled from two sources: Derek Pearsall's text, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction*, and Carolyne Larrington's collection, *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*. Although this is far from a conclusive list of all the Arthurian texts currently in existence or circulation, it does cover many of the texts through which Morgan le Fay (in various manifestations) appears throughout prominent literary periods. All highlighted texts cover Morgan's presence in the narratives.

1. *Historia Regum Britannie* (1136)
2. *Vita Merlini* (1150)
3. Wace, *Brut* (1155)
4. Layamon, *Brut* (1189)
5. Chrétien de Troyes (1170-1190)
  - a. Four "complete" poems
    - i. *Erec and Enide* (1170)
    - ii. *Cligès* (1176)
    - iii. *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion* (1177-1181)
    - iv. *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart* (1177-1181) - collaborative
    - v. *Perceval, the Story of the Grail* (1181-1190)
6. Hartmann von Anue (1180-1210)
  - a. Verse translations of Chrétien de Troyes's poems in Middle High German
    - i. *Erek* (1190)
    - ii. *Iwein* (1202)
7. Ulrich von Zatzikhoven (1195)
  - a. Translation of older, Anglo-Norman verse romance
    - i. *Lanzelet* (1195)
8. Robert de Boron (1195-1210)
  - a. Inspired by Wace's *Roman de Brut*, forms trilogy known as *Le Roman du Graal*
    - i. *Joseph*
    - ii. *Merlin*
    - iii. *Perceval*
9. *Vulgate Cycle* (1215-1235) – reshaped/revised (1230-1240)
  - a. Written in French rather than in Latin, compilation of Arthurian prose romance
    - i. *Lancelot*
      1. Prequels: *Estoire de Graal* and *Estoire de Merlin*
    - ii. *La Queste del Saint Graal*
    - iii. *Mort Artu*
      1. Full sequence referred to as the "Lancelot-Graal" Cycle

iv. *Le Roman de Tristan de Lèonois* (1225-35)

10. Post-Vulgate Cycle (1230-1240)

- a. Revision of earlier source materials
  - i. *Estoire del Saint Graal*
  - ii. *Estoire de Merlin*
    - 1. Includes the *Suite de Merlin* (known as *Huth-Merlin*)
  - iii. *Queste del Sainte Graal*
  - iv. *Mort Artu*

11. *Tristan en Prose* (1225-1270)

12. *Les Prophéties de Merlin* (1276)

13. *La Tivola Ritonda* (1325-1350)

- a. Italian translation of the *Tristan en Prose*

14. Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* (14<sup>th</sup> century)

- a. Translated into English, in prose

15. Alliterative *Morte Arthure* (1400)

- a. Translated into English, in verse

16. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1350-1400)

17. Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485)

18. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1589-1596)

19. Alfred Tennyson (1830-1872)

- a. "Lancelot and Guenevere" (1830)
- b. "The Lady of Shalott" (1832)
- c. "Morte d'Arthur" (1842)
- d. "Idylls of the King" (1859-1872)

- i. Written in intervals, arranged in first full edition (1891)

20. Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1886-1890)

21. T.H. White, *The Once and Future King* (1958, revised from 1938-41)

22. John Steinbeck, *The Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights* (1976, written 1958-59)

23. Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (1983)