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GODDESS DETHRONED: THE EVOLUTION OF MORGAN LE FAY

by

DAX D. CARVER

Under the Direction of Timothy M. Renick

ABSTRACT

In the Arthurian romances of the Middle Ages, the character of Morgan le Fay was transformed dramatically from her Welsh original, the goddess Modron. The effect was to vilify the enchantress so that medieval Christians would not be sympathetic to her character. This study consults the oldest available Welsh mythological and historical texts as well as the medieval romances surrounding King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Also consulted are some of the top contemporary Arthurian scholars. By unraveling Morgan's transformation and the reasons for such change, it is revealed that medieval demonizing of old pagan deities was not limited to male deities. Instead, the most ancient deity of all, the Great Mother Goddess slowly became one of the most infamous characters in literature, Morgan le Fay.

INDEX WORDS: Morgan le Fay, Arthurian studies, Avalon, King Arthur, Guinevere, Knights of the Round Table, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes, Malory, Celtic mythology, Welsh mythology, Medieval romance, Religious literature, Women in religion, Women in literature, Feminist studies

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DAX D. CARVER

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

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PREFACE

From the moment I entered graduate school, I knew I wanted my thesis to focus on the Arthurian legends. How to do this, of course, was not quite so clear. I had entered into a program in Religious Studies, and the most famous Arthurian tales were considered literature, not philosophy or religion. Why, then, did I not enter the English Department? I had, after all, received my Bachelors in English literature. The answer is complex.

To begin with, English literature only deals with Arthurian legends in medieval literature courses. These tales deal with medieval romances like Sir Thomas Malory's epic, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, as well as the lives of various saints connected, sometimes superfluously, with King Arthur. Literature courses say little, if anything at all, about the origins of the Arthurian legends. Certainly, these courses spend little time relating the legends to their Celtic roots. The phenomenon that is King Arthur did not begin in the medieval period during which the earliest romances were written. Instead, Arthur and those surrounding him belong to a more remote period, sometimes referred to as the Dark Ages, which is hardly discussed in literature courses.

My second reason for not entering the English program is that mythology has always been my real interest. Since childhood, I have been fascinated with the myths of ancient (and modern) peoples. The Arthurian legends specifically evolved from Celtic mythology, and there are hints of this even in the romances. Yet, my interests do not lie solely in fables or genealogical lists of deities. Instead, I am also interested in the religious practices, symbols and beliefs of ancient peoples. Whether Celtic, Greek, or

any other group, the idea of mythology has, for me, always been tied to religion more than to literature. Therefore, English did not seem like the best environment to gain the skills necessary to understand a people's religiosity, no matter how extinct that religiosity may now be.

Being in a Religious Studies department, then, allows for my thesis to be tied to the study of religion and myth. At first, being the Arthurian enthusiast that I am, I wanted to attempt to explain how the Arthurian legends evolved, as a whole, from Celtic pagan myths into Christian legend. This endeavor properly would include a discussion on every major Arthurian theme: the quest for the Holy Grail, the love affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, the episode concerning the sword and the stone, the birth and life of Merlin, and the darkening of Morgan le Fay. I realized and was quickly informed what might seem obvious: such an endeavor would require me to write a book, if not volumes.

Still, I wanted to focus on the transformation that the Arthurian myths underwent. My objective was to show that the Christian symbolism so heavy in the Romances was not originally there. Things changed as one religion died out and another took its place. The cauldron of plenty became the Holy Grail. The right of a queen (Guinevere) to take any lover that she pleases was replaced with a stern judgement upon her adultery, despite her husband's similar sin. Merlin went from an insane seer living in the Scottish wilderness to the son of the devil. The sword went from being a gift from the pagan gods to their hero, to the symbol of the Christian god's chosen king. Lastly, the mother goddess of the ancient Celts was transformed, slowly and deliberately, into a vile and evil

enchantress, bent on destruction. It is this last transformation that is the subject of this thesis.

Why did I choose the evolution of Morgan le Fay as the focus? Quite simply, she was possibly the most affected by the emergence of Christianity. This complicated woman was not just a fairy or a witch. She was something much more to the ancient Celtic people. Indeed, she was in origin their great and powerful mother goddess. Furthermore, one only has to peruse the shelves of libraries and bookstores to see that many volumes have been written on the Grail, Merlin, the various love triangles, and on Arthur himself. In fact, most modern Arthurian works found on bookstore shelves deal more with the question of Arthur's existence than the literary origin of the stories that surround him. While most of these books mention Morgan, and others deal with her in part, there are very few studies that focus on her individually.

A character, whether real or imaginary, as complex as Morgan le Fay deserves more than a few lines or pages here and there in various tomes. She is too complex for such brevity. So, for this reason, I chose to make her the central focus of my thesis.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The early twentieth-century anthropologist Margaret Murray is most famous for her much criticized theory that the witchcraft of the Inquisition was not only real, but the surviving remnant of an organized pre-Christian “fertility cult, in the tradition described by Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*.”¹ Indeed, Murray’s work has always been noted as the launching pad for the neo-pagan religious movement despite sharp and convincing arguments against her theories. Despite her detractors, whose arguments are outside the scope of this thesis, Murray did make significant contributions to the study of religion and mythology. According to Margot Adler, “[t]he primary value of Murray’s work was her understanding of the persistence of Pagan folk customs in Britain and her realization that Witchcraft could not be examined in isolation from the comparative history of religions or from the study of anthropology and folklore.”² Though the belief that paganism survived until the Middle Ages in any form other than in folklore has been almost completely, if not universally, denied, Murray’s thoughts concerning the relationship between existing and emerging religions during times of flux have withstood the test of time. Most famous, perhaps, is Murray’s assertion, “The God of the Old Religion becomes the Devil of the New.”³

Murray’s point here can be exemplified by the briefest look at the Hebrew legends, wherein, for example, the god of the city of Ekron, Ba’al-zebub is associated with the adversary (Satan) of the Israelite god, YHWH. Furthermore, during the Middle Ages, “the Church took the god of the Old Religion and—as is the habit with

conquerors—turned him into the Christian devil.”⁴ During the same era, the devil began being depicted with horns, hooves and a tail—an attempt to associate Satan with the Greco-Roman woodland divinity Pan and the Celtic Cernunnos. According to Jeffrey Burton Russell, “[t]he iconographic influence of Pan upon the Devil is enormous. . . . The root of the similarity is the association of the Devil with the chthonic fertility deities, who were rejected by the Christians as demons along with other pagan gods.”⁵ Likewise, Satan was associated with the Roman Neptune or Greek “Poseidon, whose trident . . . passed into the iconography of the Devil as the modern ‘pitchfork’.”⁶

Many other associations can be made between the Christian devil and the pagan gods. Less often focused upon, however, are the transformations that female divinities underwent when one religion overwhelmed another. Yet such transformations did occur. In this essay, I will detail one such transformation, explaining how a pagan goddess once worshipped throughout Western Europe became one of the most villainous characters in literature, King Arthur’s villainous half-sister, Morgan le Fay.

Like King Arthur and Merlin, Morgan le Fay is a character out of medieval romance that is known throughout the world. One can read about her in dozens of tomes, both medieval and modern, that line bookstore and library shelves. Morgan is so renowned, in fact, that a common mirage seen in the Straits of Messina is named Fata Morgana after the enchantress. She has been portrayed variously as good, bad, beautiful and hideous in modern films, novels, cartoons and even comic books. In fact, in almost every book, film or television series in which King Arthur and his knights appear, so too does Morgan le Fay.

Despite the popularity of the character, Morgan is still elusive to us. Excepting more recent fiction, such as Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon*, Morgan is known to us almost entirely from Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth century text, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, where she is the evil enchantress half-sister of Arthur as well as his greatest enemy. Yet, this is not from where Morgan's story began. Malory was not creating fiction, but rather translating Arthurian stories and updating them for his time. Due to this fact, earlier texts and legends must be revisited so that we can truly understand this enigmatic woman.

Unfortunately, this is not an easy endeavor. Every surviving version of the Arthurian saga tells a different story of Morgan. A detailed treatment of every medieval romance in which Morgan appears would take the length of a book, so only the most relevant are discussed here. In most versions she is the half-sister of the king, but in some she is not his relative at all. Later romances make her irretrievably bad, while she is good natured and helpful in earlier tales. Most importantly, perhaps, is the confusion over Morgan's humanity. Some tales make her entirely human, but others realize her otherworldly, even divine, characteristics.

For this reason, and because books that focus on the character of Morgan specifically are so rare, I have attempted in this essay to paint the clearest picture of Morgan possible. The oldest texts available to those interested in Arthurian legend and Celtic mythology were consulted. With these resources, I have, in the second chapter, reconstructed the popular version of Morgan's history. In the third chapter, I have divulged the truth behind her mythical origins. Finally, the fourth chapter attempts to explain exactly what transpired in history and in modern fiction that lead to Morgan's evolution from a goddess to a healer to the evil enchantress so well known today.

The Significance of the Work

As with literature in general, Arthurian enthusiasts would do well to realize that they are not simply looking at fairy tales when reading medieval stories of King Arthur and those who surround him. There are deeper meanings intertwined in those stories, with origins dating far beyond the dawn of Christianity. Literature should always be considered in accordance with the social, political and religious conditions in which the authors lived. Thusly, literature often expresses the beliefs and prejudices prevalent during the time period in which it is written. Arthuriana is no different. The Welsh and British myths speak of overcoming barbaric invaders who truly existed. The romances, at first, focus on the chivalric attitudes of the troubadours so devoted to the cult of Mary. Later, the romances become increasingly anti-gynocratic when the religious atmosphere takes a similar turn. Though literature and myth should never be taken as fact, they do serve as windows into the past. They are useful tools for deciphering the world and mentality of our ancient ancestors.

Still, there is another significance of the work that should be mentioned here. Morgan le Fay might be considered a rather minor figure in the literary or even Arthurian schema, but it is the contention of this thesis that the goddess from whom she evolved was anything but minor. I will suggest that she was, under many different names, the prime mover of the ancient Indo-European religions. She was not just one god among many, but the Mother Goddess from whom all other gods were born. She was the divine creatrix of gods, mortals and the universe. The vilification of the Mother Goddess is significant because of the impact it must have had on the people so devoted to her

worship and on the development of religion in the West. Those people must have thought such a transformation unthinkable, just as modern devotees of the Judeo-Christian religions could never imagine the vilification of their God. Yet the impact must have been the same.

A Note on Arthurian Sources and Names

There are two issues that Arthurian scholars and writers cannot escape. The first, and the most problematic, is that the sources (chronicles, folktales and romances) we can reference are simply those which have survived the passage of time. Numerous stories in oral and written form were circulating around Britain and Europe before Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote his twelfth century chronicle, the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, which is the first known text to give a full history of Arthur. We know this because Geoffrey, Chrétien de Troyes and other authors mention texts no longer in existence as well as texts that exist in only fragmentary form. Also, the Celts were notorious for preferring the oral tradition of storytelling to the written. By the time that any tales regarding Arthur had been written down, monastic transcribers had transformed them, oftentimes quite drastically. Therefore, it is always smart to approach any study of Arthuriana, or Celtic myth in general, cautiously.

The second issue is that there is no real standard for name spelling in the Arthurian legends. Excepting Arthur himself, there are almost as many spellings of the various characters' names as there are existing texts. In this essay, I have attempted to utilize the most common spelling of names, using parenthetical remarks to point out

differences when necessary. Regardless, there should be no confusion as to which character is being referred at any given point in this thesis.

CHAPTER TWO: THE STORY AS WE KNOW IT

In the year 2005, the first printing of Sir Thomas Malory's epic romance, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, turned five-hundred-and-twenty-years old. Printed as one volume "by William Caxton in 1485,"⁷ years after Malory's death, *Le Morte D'Arthur* was an immediate and overwhelming success. Malory's masterpiece, typically viewed as the penultimate Arthurian romance, is a gathering of stories he had completed around 1469, during the last years of his life.⁸ Based on a previously unpublished manuscript of Malory's found in Winchester in 1934, it is now generally thought that Malory had actually intended his work to be published in eight volumes.⁹ Malory had titled his work *The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table*, originally intending "Le Morte D'Arthur" to be the name of the last book alone.¹⁰ Regardless, the episodes within can be described as creative English translations of French works that had, in Malory's time, become obsolete.¹¹ In actuality, excepting *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, no Arthurian work of great importance had been written for centuries. Quite simply, no piece of Arthurian literature has influenced the modern conception of the Arthurian legend more than *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

This was also the last romance to really deal with Morgan le Fay, and it certainly was the version most descriptive of her character: the jealous and evil half-sister to Arthur who attempts to use her vast magical resources to ruin her brother's life and kingdom. The enchantress would not become popular again until the fiction of the twentieth century, when she would be both the evil witch and the benign healer according

to the author's whim. Most readers would come to understand Morgan only from modern fiction, children's books, comic books, cartoons and movies; not from the romances of the Middle Ages. Though these works disagree on some points, there are still major themes that tend to run throughout modern Arthurian fiction.

In the section below, I have attempted to compile the biography of Morgan le Fay that is common in most, but certainly not all, modern fictional works. The majority of Arthurian episodes related to Morgan do stem from *Le Morte D'Arthur*, but such is not always the case. In some instances, when Malory neglects an episode concerning Morgan that is otherwise still famous, I have consulted the much older works compiled within the Vulgate (or Lancelot-Grail) Cycle. Furthermore, certain themes, such as the theme of incest, have only been attached to Morgan in recent times but are commonly thought to be part of Morgan's history and, therefore, deserve attention here.

Mine is not a full retelling of the Arthurian epic. Instead, I will focus specifically on those major episodes in which Morgan le Fay plays an important role. This is our starting point, for it is imperative to know a character's story before one can appreciate the evolution of that character throughout the history of literature. She, at first, appears by her mother's side and somehow gains Arthur's trust. Then, out of revenge or jealousy, she turns her arts against Arthur, Guinevere, and various knights, especially Lancelot. Curiously, as in the majority of the romances, it is still Morgan in the end who takes the dying Arthur to Avalon to be healed of his wounds from his last battle.

Morgan le Fay, a Biography

Morgan was the youngest daughter of Gorlois, the Duke of Tintagel in Cornwall, and the Lady Igraine, his wife. Uther Pendragon, the high king of Britain, became wildly attracted to Igraine and bid Merlin to help him devise a scheme so as to satisfy his lust. To this end, Uther ordered Gorlois and his men to fight in a battle far away. While the duke was away, Merlin magically transformed Uther into the visage of Gorlois. In this guise, Uther gained entrance to Tintagel Castle and slept with Igraine, impregnating her with Arthur. That same night, Gorlois was slain during the battle. Due to this, Uther took Igraine as his queen and soon gave her eldest daughters away in marriage. Morgause, the eldest, married King Lot of Lothian and Orkney while her sister Elaine wed King Nentres of Garlot. The youngest daughter was named Morgan and she hated Uther, and therefore Arthur, because she was aware of Uther's part in her father's death. Morgan was "put to school in a nunnery, and there she learned so much that she became a great clerk of necromancy,"¹² as well as "astrology, and she worked hard all the time and learned a great deal about the healing arts. For her mastery of knowledge people called her Morgan the Fay."¹³

Years passed and Arthur became High King of all Britain. One day a beautiful lady came upon Arthur and "the king cast great love unto her, and desired to lie by her. So they were agreed, and he begat upon her Mordred, and she was his sister, on the mother side."¹⁴ The damsel departed and Arthur had no clue that it was his sister, Morgan le Fay, in disguise, or that he had committed incest.

Eventually, Queen Igraine, long a widow, came to visit with Arthur and brought with her Morgan. “While they were staying in the city, Morgan and Merlin became friends; she was endowed with great learning, and she grew so close to him and came around him so much that she found out who he was. He taught her many wonders in astrology and necromancy, and she kept them all in her mind,”¹⁵ for Merlin taught her things she did not learn from her schooling.

Thereafter, Morgan became a lady in waiting to Guinevere. One day when the queen’s nephew, Guiomar, was at court, he happened upon Morgan:

in a bedroom under the great hall where she spun golden thread, for she wished to make a headpiece for her sister, wife of King Lot. This Morgan was a young lady, very cheerful and merry, but her face was somber; she had a rounded build, not too thin and not too plump. She was quite clever and comely in body and in features; she stood straight and was wonderfully pleasing and a good singer. But she was the most lustful woman in all Great Britain and the lewdest She was the best worker with her hands that anyone knew about in any land, and she had the fairest head of any suited for a woman, the most beautiful hands, and wondrously well-made shoulders, and she was the cleverest of all. Her skin was softer than millet. And she had yet another quality that must not be skipped over, for she had a sweet, soft way of talking, and she was well spoken. And as long as she was in her right mind, she was more courteous than any, but when she was angry with anyone, there was no need in trying to reconcile them.¹⁶

Guiomar immediately became enraptured with Morgan and she with him. However, because he was Guinevere’s relation, they decided to keep their love a secret. The queen learned of the affair, however, and separated the lovers.

Distraught and full of hatred for Guinevere, Morgan left the court to find Merlin “for she believed she could find no help in her plight from any other man.”¹⁷ She found Merlin and the two had an affair. Longing to be even more powerful, she convinced the

wizard to teach “her all the spells and bewitchments that she knew later on, and she stayed with him for a long time.”¹⁸

She eventually came back to Arthur’s court and married King Urien of Rheged and by him became the mother of Sir Owain. Many years passed and after an uprising during which Arthur received an injury that produced no blood, Merlin said to Arthur, “keep well the scabbard of Excalibur (a gift from the Lady of the Lake), for ye shall lose no blood while ye have the scabbard upon you.”¹⁹ However, Arthur had apparently become close to Morgan le Fay:

for great trust, Arthur betook the scabbard to Morgan le Fay his sister, and she loved another knight better than her husband . . . or King Arthur, and she would have had Arthur her brother slain, and therefore she let make another scabbard like it by enchantment, and gave the scabbard of Excalibur to her love and the knight’s name was called Accolon.²⁰

Morgan then instigated a fight between Arthur and Accolon though neither knew their opponent’s identity. She had given the real Excalibur and its scabbard to Accolon and counterfeit ones to her brother, in hopes that Arthur would perish. However, the false sword broke and Arthur recovered the real Excalibur with the sudden help of the Lady of the Lake. When Arthur commanded Accolon explain himself, the knight told him of Morgan’s plot and that King Arthur was “the man in the world that she most hateth, because he is most of worship and of prowess of any of her blood.”²¹ Arthur was grief-stricken by this news, claiming, “God knoweth, I have honoured her and worshipped her more than all my kin, and more have I trusted her than mine own wife and all my kin after.”²² Though Arthur meant to spare Accolon, the knight died of his wounds and his body was sent to back to Morgan. Before receiving the body, Morgan attempted to kill

Urien, but was stopped by Owain, from whom Morgan successfully begged mercy by claiming a sudden fit of madness.

Looking for vengeance for Accolon's death, Morgan again stole Excalibur's scabbard. Arthur pursued her, but she tossed "the scabbard into the deepest of the water so it sank, for it was heavy of gold and precious stones. Then she rode into a valley where many great stones stood, and when she saw she must be overtake, she shaped herself, horse and man, by enchantment unto a great marble stone."²³ King Arthur's men gave up the chase and the scabbard was lost forever.

After a time, a servant of Morgan went to Arthur's court with a cloak heavy with jewels as a gift for Arthur, as if asking forgiveness. Arthur almost put the cloak on, but the Lady of the Lake appeared and stopped him, stating, "put non on you this mantle till ye have seen more, and in no wise let it not come on you nor on no knight of yours till ye command the bringer thereof to put it upon her."²⁴ Arthur did as the Lady of the Lake suggested, and Morgan's servant was burnt to ashes underneath the cloak.

Meanwhile, Morgan turned her attentions to perfecting her magical skills. She "knew more about witchcraft and spells than any other woman; and because of her keen interest in such things, she gave up and forsook all dealings with people and lived day and night in far-off forests, so that many people never spoke of her as a woman but rather called her Morgan the Goddess."²⁵ After this, Morgan's beauty began to fade because "once the enemy entered her and she was inspired with sensuality and the devil, she lost her beauty so completely that she became very ugly, nor did anyone think her beautiful after that, unless he was under a spell."²⁶

During this time, Morgan fell madly in love with an unnamed knight who secretly loved another maiden. Due to this, Morgan placed a spell on the valley in which she lived so that any knight or squire who ventured there and “had been unfaithful to their lovers in any way whatever, even in thought”²⁷ would not be able to leave. For this reason, Morgan’s realm was known as the Valley of No Return or the Valley of False Lovers.

Eventually, Lancelot ventured to Morgan’s realm and because he had never been unfaithful to the woman he loved the most, Queen Guinevere, the spell on the Valley of No Return was broken. When Morgan realized the identity of the knight, she figured out that Lancelot’s lover must be the queen, for “he had performed greater feats of arms for her than any other knight had ever done for any other lady.”²⁸ Convinced “that through him she could cause [Guinevere] greater distress than by any other means,”²⁹ Morgan imprisoned Lancelot for some time.

During Lancelot’s captivity, Morgan switched the ring he wore as a gift from Guinevere with a duplicate and sent a damsel to King Arthur’s court with the real ring. In front of the entire court, the damsel approached Guinevere and stated, “My lady, like it or not, I am duty-bound to state my message. I am sorry, but I would be breaking my oath otherwise, as I swore to Lancelot on holy relics that I would hand you this ring, which he is hereby returning to you.”³⁰ At first the court, including King Arthur, was astonished, but Guinevere was able to easily convince them it was all a lie. She stated, “If some people find it reasonable to reproach me, I don’t care; their reproaches are groundless!”³¹ Eventually, Morgan allowed Lancelot to leave her prison so long as he avoided King Arthur’s court, and all within, for a full year.

Some time later, Morgan and her companions found Lancelot asleep in the woods. Morgan cast a sleeping spell on Lancelot and the maidens transported the knight to her castle. When he awoke in the castle, he was told that he must choose one of the four maidens to be his lover. He refused and was left trapped in the castle until he made his escape.

Later still, Morgan le Fay attempted to have Lancelot ambushed by thirty knights, but he was saved thanks to the intervention of Sir Tristan. For this, Morgan decided to take revenge upon Sir Tristan as well. She sent maidens out to find Sir Lancelot or Sir Tristan and to bring them to her castle where she had thirty knights waiting to ambush them. One such maiden found Sir Tristan, but Sir Gawain knew she worked for Morgan le Fay and forced her at sword point to tell the truth of her mission. Thereafter, Sir Gawain and Sir Tristan rode to Morgan's castle to do battle with the thirty knights but the thirty knights were too frightened to attack.

Sometime later, Tristan became the prisoner of Morgan le Fay. She allowed him to leave under the condition that he fight at an upcoming tournament with a shield she had made. The shield depicted a king and a queen, whom Morgan stated represented Arthur and Guinevere. A knight above the royal couple had one foot on either's head. Morgan explained that this meant the knight had power over both the queen and king, though Morgan would not say whom the knight represented.

Tristan ventured to the tournament and did, indeed, fight with Morgan's shield. Guinevere saw the shield and became nervous because she knew the knight depicted upon it was Lancelot and this depiction would give away her affair with him. Arthur also noticed the shield, but could not figure out the symbolism. When Tristan could not

explain the symbolism to Arthur, the king became enraged and the two fought. After the battle, which had no real victor, Tristan left with shield in hand.

Morgan captured Lancelot several times over the years and in doing so she caused Guinevere great sorrow. During one such captivity, Lancelot painted his life story on the prison walls, including his devotion to the queen. Years later, King Arthur and his knights were roaming the countryside and came upon Morgan's castle. The king, who thought his sister dead because he had not seen her in so long, was overjoyed at their reunion and offered to allow Morgan to come back to Camelot. She refused him, however, stating, "don't ask me this, for I swear to you that I'll never go to court; instead, when I leave here, I will most certainly go to the Isle of Avalon, where the women live who know all the world's magic."³² Instead, Morgan revealed to Arthur the paintings on the prison wall that Lancelot had painted while in her captivity. Arthur immediately realized that Lancelot and Guinevere had been having an affair and Morgan pushed the king to avenge the wrong.

This eventually led to a great war between the king and Lancelot. Arthur pursued Lancelot throughout Europe and, while away, his kingdom was usurped by Mordred, the incest-begotten son of Arthur and Morgan le Fay. When Arthur heard news of this, he turned his knights around to defend his kingdom. This led to the battle of Camlann, where Arthur slew his son, Mordred, and was himself mortally wounded. "Thus of Arthur I find never more written in books that be authorised, nor more of the very certainty of his death heard I never read, but thus was he lead away in a ship wherein were three queens [including] . . . King Arthur's sister, Queen Morgan le Fay,"³³ and they took him to Avalon to be healed.

* * *

With some less famous episodes omitted, this is the biography of Morgan le Fay. Though many modern writers and filmmakers alter Morgan's story to suit their individual tastes, most often the main themes stay the same. That is, Morgan Le Fay is Arthur's half-sister who has learned magic in a nunnery and under Merlin's tutelage. She hates Arthur and Guinevere for various reasons and intends to use her skills at magic to ruin them. In the end, however, Morgan seems to have changed her ways, for it is she who shows up, in almost every story, to take Arthur to Avalon to be healed.

Though the story of Morgan le Fay compiled above gives insight into her character in the medieval romances, it does little to uncover her origins. To understand these origins, research into Celtic myths, legends and folk beliefs formed long before the Middle Ages must be explored. Who Morgan really is and how she evolved into the character we commonly know is the subject of the rest of this essay.

CHAPTER THREE: ORIGINS

The character of Morgan le Fay is believed to have been first mentioned in written form (as *Morgen* and without the *le Fay* suffix) around 1150 by Gaufridus Monemutensis, generally called Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his poem the *Vita Merlini* (Life of Merlin).³⁴ Geoffrey, according to Jean Markale, was “an erudite, latinized Welshman in the sphere of influence of the dukes of Normandy and, later, that of the Plantaganets.”³⁵ Though Geoffrey “describes himself as *pudibundus Brito*, ‘a modest Briton’,” his name is not British as “Gaufridus Monemutensis is a Latinized Norman name.”³⁶ This is only further evidence of the Norman influence that took place during and after the reign of William the Conqueror. Regardless, Geoffrey was a clergyman and “a teacher at Oxford . . . before the university was granted its official charter.”³⁷ It was Geoffrey’s earlier work, the *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain), written around 1138,³⁸ that would become the written platform from which the Arthurian Romances would launch.

Though the *Historia Regum Britanniae* mentions in passing that Arthur’s sword, “Caliburn . . . was forged in the Island of Avalon,”³⁹ and that Arthur was taken there after the battle of Camblam (Camlann), “so that his wounds might be attended to,”⁴⁰ it makes no mention of Morgan. Instead, Arthur’s sister is named Anna and she shares both parents with him. Though some have speculated that Anna and Morgan are one and the same, evidence is severely lacking. In the Arthurian Romances it is another half-sister, Morgause, who takes Anna’s place in the Arthurian schema. In popular fiction and

film, writers and directors have simply combined the characters of Morgan and Morgause. Yet, in origin they are quite different.

In fact, the *Vita Merlini* makes no mention of any type of familial relationship between Arthur and Morgan. Instead, she is presented as a benevolent healer and the ruler of a magical island to which Arthur is taken after his final battle. In the text, the bard Taliesin (here called Thelgesinus) tells Merlin of Insula Pomorum (Island of Fruit or Apples):

The Isle of Apple Trees, or of Apples [literally, ‘of fruits’] is also called ‘Blessed Isle’ because all its vegetation is natural. . . . The people there live for a hundred years and more. It is ruled by nine sisters under a system of benign laws to which visitors coming from our regions are introduced. Of these nine sisters, one surpasses the others in beauty and power. Her name is Morgen [Morgan] and she teaches the uses of plants and how to cure sickness. She knows the art of changing one’s appearance and of flying through the air with the aid of wings, like Daedalus. . . . It is there that, after the battle of Camblan [Camlann], we took the wounded Arthur on the ship Barintho, guided by the waves and the stars. . . . She had the king carried to a golden couch in her chamber and carefully laid bare his wound. She watched over him for a long time, finally saying that he could recover his health if he remained on the island with her and was willing to accept her treatments.⁴¹

Nothing more is said of Morgan le Fay in the *Vita Merlini*. Yet, the portrait painted is vivid enough to suggest that she is not the evil witch of later tradition. Furthermore, nothing in the passage suggests any sort of relationship between Morgan and Arthur. There is not even any mentioning of them having previously met, though the fact that Arthur’s sword was forged on the island creates an obvious link. What Geoffrey does give us, however, is a brief yet clear reference to ancient Celtic traditions regarding magical islands, fairy women and Celtic goddesses.

Historically, islands inhabited solely by orders of priestesses seem to possibly have truly existed. Around 44 AD, Pomponius Mela, a Spaniard, wrote a geography of the ancient world called *de Chorographia* in which he describes such an island. He states:

In the Britannic Sea, opposite the coast of the Ossismi, the isle of Sena [Sein] belongs to a Gallic divinity and is famous for its oracle, whose priestesses, sanctified by their perpetual virginity, are reportedly nine in number. They call the priestesses Gallizenae and think that because they have been endowed with unique powers, they stir up the seas and the winds by their magic charms, that they turn into whatever animals they want, that they cure what is incurable among other peoples, that they know and predict the future, but that it is not revealed except to sea-voyagers and then only to those traveling to consult them.⁴²

It is almost as if Geoffrey of Monmouth simply copied his description of *Insula Pomorum* from Mela's work. Both islands were places of mystery, ruled over by nine holy women with the power to change their shape, heal the wounded and perform various other magical feats.

These priestesses were almost definitely druidesses, for lack of a better term, and therefore, Celtic. For one, the island was located in the British Sea, which was certainly Celtic waters in the first century. Secondly, the root of the term "gallizenae," *gall*, refers specifically to the Celts. "The Roman historians writing of the migrations from north of the Alps to the Po Valley and beyond called [the Celts] *Galli*, and this tradition was followed by Polybius, to whom they were *Galatae*, a name also commonly used in other Greek sources."⁴³ The Greeks believed that the term *galli* derived from the myth that the Celts were descended from Galatea, the statue that the love goddess Aphrodite turned to life in the myth of Pygmalion. Yet, it seems that the Celts referred to themselves as *galli*, which may point to a non-Greek origin of the term. It shows up in various place names

such as “*Gallia* (Gaul), Galatia, Galicia (provinces of both Spain and Poland), and Portugal,”⁴⁴ as well as in the linguistic name Gaelic (Irish and the Scottish Celtic tongue). Regardless, the connection with the Isle of Sena serves only to cement Geoffrey’s *Insula Pomorum* in the depths of Celtic lore.

The island is also reminiscent of any number of magical islands from Celtic myth, such as the Irish *Tír na nÓg* (Land of Youth), *Tír na mBan* (Land of Women), *Tír na mBeo* (Land of the Living) or, linguistically the most obvious, *Emain Abhlach* (Land of Apple Trees).⁴⁵ More closely related, perhaps, is the Welsh land of the dead *Annwfn*. In fact, it is in *Annwfn* that we find an early mythical reference to nine priestesses.

The Welsh poem “*Preiddeu Annwfn*” (The Spoils of *Annwfn*), found in “*The Book of Taliesin*, a manuscript dating from about 1275 but preserving poems that are clearly far older,”⁴⁶ tells of an expedition led by Arthur to capture a cauldron from the otherworld, *Annwfn*. The cauldron itself is a cooking vessel with magical properties (and most likely a precursor to the Holy Grail of later Arthurian romance) that belongs to the chief of *Annwfn* and “from the breath of nine maidens it was gently warmed.”⁴⁷ This reference is important because despite the fact that *The Book of Taliesin* was written in the thirteenth century, scholars have dated the language of “*Preiddeu Annwfn*” to the tenth or earlier. This suggests that the poem was circulating, either in an earlier written form or in the oral traditions, before Geoffrey wrote his *Vita Merlini*. Quite possibly, if not probably, this poem served as source material for Geoffrey.

Either way, the recurring “nine” is not surprising. The druids, or priests of the Celtic peoples, considered multiples of three to be holy. Throughout Celtic religion, or Western pagan religion in general, gods and goddesses appeared in triads. The Irish

goddess Brigit had two sisters with the same name. The Irish war deity, the Morrigna, appeared as three goddesses with various names according to the Irish myth one reads. Even the Greeks and Romans had their triads; three Fates, three Erinyes (Furies), three Gorgans. The sacred triad is also obvious in modern Hindu and Christian belief. In Western paganism, it was often the case that each member of a sacred trinity would also appear with three aspects. Three times three is nine and thus the sacred number.

Geoffrey's *Insula Pomorum* yields further clues to Morgan's origin as well. In his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Geoffrey calls the island *Avallo*.⁴⁸ This of course becomes *Avalon* in the French Romances, perhaps influenced by the Burgundian town of Avallon in order to legitimize a French connection to Arthur. Either way, *Avallo* corresponds to the "Old Irish *aball*, Middle Welsh *afall*, Middle Breton *avellen*"⁴⁹ all Celtic variants of *apple*, a fruit with many mythical associations.

"In Welsh [the island] is still known as Ynys Afallach"⁵⁰ or *Isle of Apples*. Afallach is anglicized as *Avalloch*, which is the name of another character from Welsh myth who "according to William of Malmesbury [writing around 1125], lived [on the island] with his daughters."⁵¹ Welsh scholars know little about Avalloch, though many take for granted the idea that he was an ancient deity in origin. However, in my own view given the evidence, Avalloch could have simply been created to explain the island's name when writers who did not know the meaning of *Afallach* came across the story. It would certainly not be the first time a Celtic deity was named after a locale. The Irish sea god Manannán mac Lir, for instance, is generally assumed to be named after the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea.⁵² Regardless, it is with Avalloch that we again find Morgan le Fay.

The Welsh pedigrees refer to an Avalloc[h] as the father of a certain Modron.⁵³ “Modron” translates simply to “Mother,”⁵⁴ which was itself derived from the Continental “Matrona,” the title of the goddess for whom the Marne River in France is named.⁵⁵ Further evidence that we are dealing with a goddess here comes from the Welsh epic, the *Mabinogion*. In the story of “Culhwch and Olwen,” Arthur has to “save Mabon son of Modron, who was taken away when three nights old from his mother.”⁵⁶ Mabon’s name simply translates to “son of the Mother.”⁵⁷ Mabon, or the Continental Maonos, was a god of youth.⁵⁸ His mother was, of course, the Mother Goddess.

It would be an oversimplification to equate Morgan with Modron based solely on the fact that both are associated with Avalon. Yet, there are other clues in Welsh mythology. In the Welsh *Trioedd Ynys Prydain* (Triads of the Isle of Britain), or simply the *Triads*, compiled in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries from much older legends, Modron is the mother of Owain ab Urien. “In a folk-tale Urien Rheged meets a mysterious unnamed washerwoman at the ford of Rhyd y Gyfarthfa who declares herself to be the daughter of Annwfn; later she bears him the son Owain and the daughter Morfudd.”⁵⁹ The washerwoman at the ford is an ancient folk motif that runs throughout Celtic lore and only serves as further proof that Modron was a goddess in origin.

The more interesting point here is that Modron was, indeed, thought to be Owain’s mother in Welsh legend. However, the Arthurian romances from early on make Morgan the wife of Urien of Rheged and the mother of Owain/Uwain/Yvain. Urien and Owain are historical characters later introduced to the Arthurian cycle. Urien was king of Rheged (North England) in the later half of the sixth century and he was indeed the father of Owain, who succeeded him.⁶⁰ Despite this, Owain is depicted in Welsh myths as

having a flock of ravens at his command, a gift from his mother. This echoes fairy bird-women found throughout Celtic legend,⁶¹ but also is reminiscent of Geoffrey's Morgen who can fly with feathered wings and transform into any form she wishes.

There is little doubt, then, that the character of Morgen derived from the Welsh goddess Modron and, therefore, the Continental Matrona. Yet, why the change in nomenclature, especially since "Morgan" is a masculine name in Wales? The answer lies across the English Channel. The Bretons, descendants of those British who settled in Brittany (Armorica in Northern France) during the fifth and sixth centuries, believed in a class of water fairies known as Mari-Morgans or just Morgans.⁶² We know that there were Bretons in Monmouthshire in the twelfth century.⁶³ It is easy to speculate that when the Bretons came across the story of Arthur and Avalon, they simply replaced the name Modron with the more familiar Morgan. This transformation possibly had already taken place before Geoffrey wrote his *Vita Merlini* and, therefore, he used the name Morgen.

Either way, writers throughout the history of Arthurian legend have seemed to understand that Morgan was a goddess in origin. "Indeed, Giraldus Cambrensis [around 1190] refers to Morgan as a *dea phantastica* (imaginary goddess)."⁶⁴ Furthermore, the *Roman de Troie* (written around 1160), claims that Morgan lived during the time of the Trojan War, a definite hint towards her immortality. Both the *Lancelot-Grail* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (line 2452) refer to her as "Morgan the goddess." Lastly, Morgan's title "le Fay" itself gives away her divinity. Fay means *fairy* and fairies originated in pre-Christian divinities reduced in status and power by the new religion.

Morgan's original divinity is rarely debated. For example, Jean Markale states that Morgan's status as "the sovereign of the Lost Island . . . revolves round the theme of

the mother goddess who alone can assure the prosperity and happiness of men, but on the strict condition that they do not know exactly who she is.”⁶⁵ Barbara G. Walker calls Morgan “a Ninefold Goddess,”⁶⁶ due again to Morgan’s status as queen of the nine priestesses or fairies of Avalon. Furthermore, clues from both Geoffrey of Monmouth’s twelfth-century works and earlier Celtic myths and legends reveal that Morgan is in origin Modron or Matrona. She is the Great Mother, the healing goddess who offers her gifts to only the worthiest of heroes. She is like Hera to Jason, Athena to Perseus, or even Artemis to Hippolytus. It is only when Continental and Christian writers came across her myth that she became something else, something sinister. The reason for this transformation is complex and is discussed in the remainder of this thesis.

CHAPTER FOUR: REASONS FOR CHANGE

The philosopher historian Jean Markale once stated, “Every mythical character is the result of a complex and sometimes unfathomable creative process.”⁶⁷ Some mythical characters have their beginnings in remote persons who truly existed, like many have claimed to be the case with Arthur himself. Others are deities subsequently humanized, such as Sir Gawain⁶⁸ and our Morgan le Fay. Still other characters in myth were created to serve a specific function, such as Sir Galahad, who was developed specifically to receive the vision of the Holy Grail when all other knights were deemed too sinful to do so. What is clear is that most, if not all, mythical characters go through some form of evolution. The study of comparative myth reveals to us this evolution, and hints at historical, religious and political changes in a given area over time. Examining comparative myths grants the modern scholar insight into religious beliefs and practices that simple historical texts cannot reveal by their very nature. So the question is not, did Morgan le Fay evolve over time, but why?

From reading the early Welsh texts, there is no evidence of Morgan having been sinister during the time in which she evolved from the British goddess Modron, whose personality is never illustrated, to Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Morgen, the priestess who rules the Blessed Isle “under a system of benign laws” and teaches her followers “how to cure sickness.”⁶⁹ Even in the earliest extant Arthurian romances, written by Chrétien de Troyes in the twelfth century, Morgan appears as the savior of Arthur and those who

surround him. However, it was Chrétien that humanized Morgan. In his *Erec et Enide* (c.1165), the first extant Arthurian romance, the hero Erec is wounded in battle and comes to the court of King Arthur. When Erec's wounds are revealed, Arthur "had an ointment brought out that had been made by Morgan, his sister."⁷⁰

No more details are given concerning the relationship between Morgan and Arthur. Yet, Geoffrey's works most likely did not serve as Chrétien's only source material. We know that there were stories circulating all around Europe well before Chrétien penned them. Chrétien admits as much by stating at the beginning of *Erec et Enide*, "This is the tale of Erec, the son of Lac, which those who wish to make their living by storytelling in the presence of counts and kings usually mutilate and spoil."⁷¹ This suggests the existence of oral versions of the romance throughout Europe in the twelfth century, if not earlier. The relationship between Morgan and Arthur might have then, by Chrétien's time, been common knowledge. However, considering that a mere thirty years had passed since Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, and that neither Geoffrey, nor his translators Wace and Layamon (or even the author of the Welsh version of the romance, *Gereint*), knew anything of a familial relationship between Morgan and Arthur, it seems more likely that Chrétien was the first author to mention the relationship, and thusly humanize Morgan.

Either way, Morgan certainly is not described as sinister in Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*. In fact, in Chrétien's later work, *Le Chevalier au Lion* (The Knight with the Lion, or, more simply, *Yvain*), the author refers to our heroine as "Morgan the Wise"⁷² and again mentions that she is the creator of healing ointments. A mistake in gender in the

Welsh parallel text to *Erec et Enide*, called *Gereint*, makes Morgan male and Arthur's court physician.⁷³ The character's benevolence, however, remains unshaken.

After Chrétien de Troyes, Arthurian sagas began appearing all over Europe. Robert de Boron, a cleric from Burgandy, wrote some of the most important Arthurian romances in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. It is Robert's romance known as *Merlin* in which we learn a bit more about Morgan's relationship with Arthur. Robert simply calls Morgan Arthur's half-sister, the daughter of Arthur's mother by the Duke of Cornwall. Robert is also the first writer to say that Morgan was sent to school and that she learned so much that she became a great sorceress. Whether Robert de Boron had meant for Morgan to be sinister is, unfortunately, unknown as we only have fragments of his *Merlin*.

Perhaps, however it is not insignificant to mention that it was Robert de Boron, in his only extant complete work, *Joseph d'Arimathie*, who first gave the Grail its specific Christian significance "by linking it to the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper and subsequently by Joseph of Arimathea to collect the blood of the crucified Christ."⁷⁴ Though Chrétien de Troyes was the first to write of the quest for the Grail in his incomplete *Perceval* or *Le Conte Du Graal* around 1180, he never explained why the object (in his case a bowl containing a single wafer) was especially sacred. In fact, like Morgan le Fay, the Holy Grail has obvious Celtic antecedents, that is the various cauldrons of plenty that populate the whole of Celtic myth. It was Robert's Christian "innovation that led . . . to great compilations like the Vulgate (or Lancelot-Grail) Cycle of French romances,"⁷⁵ the first known texts to demonize Morgan le Fay.

The Cistercian Influence

After Chrétien de Troyes' French romances, the character of Morgan le Fay was irreparably blackened. As David Day explains, "Within a century, the clergy took these popular tales and edited them to suit their own didactic purposes."⁷⁶ The result was "among the most significant developments in the Arthurian tradition . . . a sequence of prose romances written in France between 1215 and 1235 . . . [k]nown as the Vulgate Cycle or the Lancelot-Grail Cycle."⁷⁷ In these romances, Morgan becomes "the most lustful woman in all of Great Britain,"⁷⁸ a jealous and malicious queen, "inspired with sensuality and the devil,"⁷⁹ who is hateful towards Guinevere especially.

The exact authors of the Vulgate Cycle are still unknown to us today. "The statement in the *Queste [del Saint Graal]* and the *Morte Artu* [two of the romances within the Vulgate Cycle] that these romances were composed by Walter Map (c.1140-c.1210), a clerk at the court of Henry II, has long been recognized as false (since Map died before the works attributed to him were written)."⁸⁰ Still, the stories themselves give significant clues to their authorship. For one, while the characters within the pre-Vulgate romances were notably Christian, the stories focused more on the ideas of chivalry (courtly love and knightly honor) than religious sanctity. The authors of the Vulgate Cycle, on the other hand, were staunchly religious, redirecting the focus of the stories to the search for salvation (whether it be via the Holy Grail or obtaining absolution for some past sin).

However, the authorship can be narrowed even further to a specific sect within the Christian church, a rather new group at the time known as the Cistercian Order. "The evidence for Cistercian authorship is spread through the *Queste*. We meet with no black

monks, Benedictines, but only with a white hermit, white monks and white abbeys—the Cistercian habit was white.”⁸¹ Furthermore, after Lancelot realizes the destruction his affair with Guinevere has caused (the fall of the Round Table Knights), he decides to seek absolution. “The stages through which Lancelot passes before he obtains absolution . . . are those which are systematically set forth in a manual of confession by Nicholas of Clairvaux [Clairvaux being the site of the most powerful Cistercian monastery at the time], possibly a friend of our author, and surely bound by the same vows.”⁸² There is little debate, then, amongst Arthurian scholars that Cistercian monks, or at least sympathizers, composed the Vulgate Cycle.

To understand the darkening of Morgan le Fay’s character, then, we must look a bit closer at the beliefs and practices of the Cistercian community. The Order began at the “Abbey of Citeaux . . . [which] had been founded in 1098 by a Benedictine abbot, Robert of Molesme, who felt that the Cluniac communities had abandoned the rigours and simplicity of Benedict of Nursia’s rule.”⁸³ The Benedictine monks had become too caught up in worldly affairs to devote the proper time to prayer, manual labor (which Benedict thought necessary) and contemplation. The new order, the Cistercians, then, were strict and rigorous to the point of becoming separatists. It was not enough for the Cistercians simply to deny worldly temptations. Instead, they removed themselves completely by founding their communities on the outskirts of society and not allowing themselves worldly comforts, desires and goods.

Without a doubt, one of the most dangerous temptations from which the Cistercians believed they had to remove themselves was sexual desire. According to Pierce Paul Read, “[t]he very power and intensity of sex, and the way in which it engages

the will, made it an impediment on the path to sanctity.”⁸⁴ For these monks, many of whom had left their wives behind to become clerics in the first place, the only way to ensure that they would overcome temptation was to avoid the object of their temptation, that is women. It was, therefore, “axiomatic that monks should not mix with women, whose come-hither looks had lured many a good man to perdition.”⁸⁵ For the Cistercian monks, the only female allowed in their halls was the Virgin Mary.

Now, it can easily be observed that all Catholic monks, not just Cistercians, took vows of celibacy beginning in the last few decades of the eleventh century, and therefore during the time that the Vulgate was written. Also, it certainly true that, as James Burge claims, in “medieval society, religion, custom, and received wisdom did indeed combine to make women appear inferior and even unacceptable at many levels.”⁸⁶ Yet, there is a difference between celibacy, or even cultural misogyny, and a staunch denial of the feminine. Even misogynistic societies admit the necessity for the presence of the female. However, as R.W. Southern states, “[n]o religious body was more thoroughly masculine in its temper and discipline than the Cistercians, none that shunned female contact with greater determination or that raised more formidable barriers against the intrusion of women.”⁸⁷

Furthermore, the Cistercians were the monastic power most associated with the Knights Templar and, therefore, the Crusades.⁸⁸ The Templars followed the Rule of Benedict as did the Cistercians. Templar Knights who had totally renounced worldly sins (such as their wives) were to wear white, the color of the Cistercian Order.⁸⁹ Also like the Cistercians, the Templars, according to the *Rule of the Templars*, believed

it to be a dangerous thing for any religion to look too much upon the face of a woman. For this reason none of you may presume to

kiss a woman, be it widow, young girl, mother, sister, aunt or any other; and henceforth the Knighthood of Jesus Christ should avoid at all costs the embraces of women, by which men have perished many times, so that they may remain eternally before the face of God with a pure conscience and sure life.⁹⁰

The anti-gynocratic beliefs of the Cistercians and the Templars could not bode well for any Arthurian female character whose origins were so evidently grounded in pagan concepts. Indeed, Morgan's pagan origins marked her as evil by all of Christian Orthodoxy in the Middle Ages. According to Richard Kieckhefer, "Orthodox opinion held that pagan religion was no true religion but mere demon-worship, and that magic was inseparably linked to this demonic cult."⁹¹ Therefore, it certainly did not help Morgan's situation that she was a great wielder of magical forces. During the Middle Ages, as much today, Christianity in general "identified the traditional gods as demons, and thus all magic that called on the services of these gods, explicitly or implicitly was demonic magic."⁹²

Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chretien de Troyes and even the author of *Gereint* tried to neutralize the negative effect of Morgan's magical powers by focusing on her healing faculties. Unfortunately, however, "the Cistercians believed that it was blasphemous to attribute healing or prophetic powers to a female who was not a member of a religious order and, furthermore, that such powers undermined the authority of the priesthood and the church."⁹³ Quite simply, the Cistercians, and all Arthurian romance writers that followed in their shadow, could not abide a strong, powerful woman who was essentially benign. Such would not only be giving credence to the power of the female, but in Morgan's case, to a pagan god. The result was to transform, almost single-handedly,

Morgan's character from the kindly healer presented by Geoffrey of Monmouth to the malicious witch of the later traditions.

The Incest Motif, a Modern Addition

For the most part, the story of Morgan Le Fay told in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, in which she is described as a great and evil enchantress, is the one that is popular today. The only real exception, which deserves space here, is that most modern depictions of Morgan le Fay reveal her to be the sister with whom Arthur commits incest and, thereby, fathers the evil Mordred who instigates Arthur's downfall. Despite the popularity of this theme, it is important to note that Morgan does not play this role in the Romances. Instead, it is with Arthur's other half-sister, Morgause (Malory's Margawse) that Arthur commits incest.

Though it is simply conjecture, modern writers may have confused Morgan with her more benign sister due to the similarity of their names or, perhaps, purposely combined the characters for simplicity's sake. Another more interesting possibility lies within the myth of Morgan's antecedent, Matrona/Modron who, as mentioned earlier, was the mother of the god of youth, Maponos/Mabon. Themes of the divine mother and her especially blessed son are common throughout mythology. The Egyptians knew of Isis and Horus. The Nordic lands had Frigga and the eternally kind Balder. For the Greco-Romans, it was Aphrodite/Venus and Eros/Cupid. In India, the myth of Parvati and Ganesha is similar. Finally, one cannot dismiss the relationship between the Christian Mary and her divine son Jesus.

It is possible that modern writers have, perhaps subconsciously, used Mordred and the vehicle to return Morgan to her roots as the divine mother. This certainly seems to be the case in the John Boorman film *Excalibur* (1981), where Morgan is not only combined with Morgause, but also with Malory's Nimue (Niniene or Vivienne in earlier romances) who learns magic from Merlin and then traps him under a stone. In the film, Arthur and Morgan's illicit union results in the birth of the eternally young, yet evil Mordred. Even in Marion Zimmer Bradley's novel, *The Mists of Avalon*, in which the author attempts to portray Morgan (here Morgaine) in a positive light, it is with Morgan whom Arthur commits incest and father's the youthful usurper Mordred.⁹⁴ This theme has even been transferred to cartoons, wherein recently a child-like Modred appeared alongside his mother, Morgaine le Fay, menacing the Justice League and bemoaning his situation of never growing to adulthood.

Still, for whatever reason, the characters of Morgan and Morgause have become almost helplessly confused in modern works, stigmatizing Morgan with the theme of incest. These two ladies, however, were originally entirely separate characters. Morgause is Arthur's sister, under another name, from the beginning of his legend. In the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, she is named Anna and is married to King Lot of Lothian. As the romances evolved, Lot became associated with the Orkneys (a chain of islands off the coast of northern Scotland), which he supposedly inherited from his uncle, the king of Norway.⁹⁵ Historical inaccuracies aside, Anna became, therefore, the queen of the Orkneys. In the thirteenth-century *Diu Crône*, she "is called *Orcades* or *Morchades*, which seems to be taken from the Orkneys (in Latin: *Orcades*)."⁹⁶ This evolves in the later romances as *Morgause* (the usual form), and hence Malory's *Margawse*. In other

words, the similarity between the names Morgan and Morgause is completely coincidental. Regardless, this conflation, by means of the incest motif, only serves to make Morgan more sinister than even the romances intended.

More recent depictions aside, Morgan le Fay is seen the world over as the destroyer of heroes and all that is holy. It is in this form that Morgan manifested during the Middle Ages, when paganism as a religion had totally vanished from Western Europe and had been replaced by a more paternal belief system. If medieval writers saw through the layers of conspiracy to the goddess within, it was only because paganism had survived, however minutely, in folklore and oral traditions. As detailed in this chapter, there simply was no hope for the Mother Goddess of the Celts once her story had been handed down to writers in a different age when monotheistic paternalism was the rule, especially when these writers themselves were so anti-gynocratic in their belief system. Furthermore, as if kidnapping, attempted murder and diabolism were not enough, modern writers (perhaps themselves confused) have degraded the character even further by adding the stigmatizing incest motif to the mix. There is little wonder that most modern readers know Morgan only as the twisted witch-sister of King Arthur and not at all as the healing goddess of Celtic lore.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Without a doubt, the Arthurian legends represent some of the most enduring myths from Western Europe. Once a story about a simple Celtic hero battling foreign invaders, the legends grew to be so complex and convoluted by the inclusion of various other myths that bookstores and libraries full of volumes on the subject still do not clarify the essential mysterious within. These volumes, ever growing, serve as testament to the popularity and power of the legends. Furthermore, new adaptations of the myth, in every forum available and constantly appearing, reveal the innumerable ways in which the Arthurian legends can be interpreted and enjoyed.

Perhaps it is the unsolved mysteries contained within the Arthurian legends that, in the end, truly attract us. Morgan le Fay is only one such mystery, but she is a major enigma. One could read a hundred different renderings said to represent Morgan and get a hundred different interpretations of her character, motives, life and ethics. She is both heroine and villainous, goddess and she-demon, fairy and human. It is this versatility that makes her so popular, for versatility leads to stories that, in turn, need to be told. Yet, who is she really?

As suggested in this thesis, in origin, Morgan was the great Mother Goddess (Modron or Matrona) of the Celtic peoples. An obscure and almost offhand remark in the poem, *Vita Merlini*, served to change the Goddess' name to Morgen (the Breton word for *mermaid*) and make her a fairy priestess. From there, the early Christian romance

writers, such as Chrétien de Troyes, humanized Morgan and made her King Arthur's kin. The last step took place within the Vulgate Cycle of the twelfth century, where the character of Morgan was vilified and said to be possessed by the devil. This is how she has come down, through the ages, to us, the modern reader.

David Day states in his *King Arthur*:

Goddess, healer, sister, lover, plotter, avenger, seductress—the character of Morgan le Fay has traveled great distances. There is no doubt that her good name was cruelly (and irreparably) slandered by the Cistercians. But then again, perhaps it's just as well. Beyond being an interesting comment on male paranoia in the Middle Ages, the resulting portrait has endured as one of literature's most complex and fascinating women. Morgan is the enchantress whose outlines are still reflected in the images of Lucrezia Borgia, Mata Hari and Eva Peron.⁹⁷

Perhaps Day is correct that the vilification of Morgan has allowed her story to survive. Yet, we are not speaking of a simple character, like Morgan's wholly unimportant sister Elaine in the romances. No, Morgan was much more. She was the holy triad known as the *Matronae*, the mothers who brought peace, fertility and abundance to their children. She was the healing goddess as well as the goddess of plenty. Morgan was, in fact, to the Celts the greatest divinity of all. In ancient Ireland, she was Anu or Danu, the mother of the divine race, the Tuatha de Danann. In Wales, she was Modron, and therefore Don, mother of the gods.

If we would but look closer at her myth, and how it relates to the legends of Arthur, not the king but the Dark Age warrior, we might see something else about Morgan. In early versions of the myths, it is her island from which Arthur's magical sword derives and it is she who saves him in the end. This obviously parallels classical myth. Athena armed and protected Bellerophon and Perseus. Tethys protected Achilles.

Hera stood watch over her favored hero, Jason, as well as his famous Argonauts. Artemis did the same for Hippolytus. Arthur was Morgan's hero, and she his matron goddess.

Over fifty years ago, Margaret Murray claimed that, "the God of the Old Religion becomes the Devil of the New." Perhaps another reading could say, "the Goddess of the Old Religion becomes the witch of the new," and with Morgan le Fay, nothing could be closer to the truth. Obviously, this makes some sense, for how else is one to supercede one religion with another? Still, perhaps it is time to realize that the great mother can not so easily be vilified or hidden. A modern resurgence in religions based on the worship of the Mother makes this apparent. This will always be the case, for as long as humanity lives so too will mothers, and it is in every mother than Morgan or Modron survives.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 1979), p. 47.
- ² Ibid, p. 48-9.
- ³ Quoted from an unknown source, if not Murray's own words, in Margaret Murray, *The God of the Witches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 165.
- ⁴ Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 1979), p. 45.
- ⁵ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 126.
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 129.
- ⁷ Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), p. 128.
- ⁸ It is now generally agreed that the author was Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, who died in 1471. However, it must be noted that this is not unanimously accepted. See Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), p. 128.
- ⁹ Christopher Snyder, *The World of King Arthur* (London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd., 2000), p. 124.
- ¹⁰ Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), p. 128.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 130.
- ¹² Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur: Volume I* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1969), p. 12.
- ¹³ 'The Story of Merlin', in Norris J. Lacy (ed.), *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation: Volume I*, translated by Rupert T. Pickens (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), p. 208.
- ¹⁴ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur: Volume I* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1969), p. 45.
- ¹⁵ 'The Story of Merlin', in Norris J. Lacy (ed.), *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation: Volume I*, translated by Rupert T. Pickens (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), p. 307.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 354.
- ¹⁷ 'Lancelot, Part III', in Norris J. Lacy (ed.), *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation: Volume II*, translated by Samuel N. Rosenberg (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1993), p. 311.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 311.

- ¹⁹ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur: Volume I* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1969), P. 77.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77-8.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- ²⁵ 'Lancelot, Part III', in Norris J. Lacy (ed.), *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation: Volume II*, translated by Samuel N. Rosenberg (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1993), p. 305.
- ²⁶ 'The Post-Vulgate, Part I: The Merlin Continuation', in Norris J. Lacy (ed.), *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation: Volume IV*, translated by Samuel N. Rosenberg (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1993), p. 172.
- ²⁷ 'Lancelot, Part III', in Norris J. Lacy (ed.), *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation: Volume II*, translated by Samuel N. Rosenberg (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1993), p. 305.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 311.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 311.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 324.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 324.
- ³² 'The Death of Arthur', in Norris J. Lacy (ed.), *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation: Volume IV*, translated by Norris J. Lacy (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), p. 106.
- ³³ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur: Volume II* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1969), P. 519.
- ³⁴ Christopher Snyder, *The World of King Arthur* (London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd. 2000), p. 83.
- ³⁵ Jean Markale, *Merlin: Priest of Nature*, translated by Belle N. Burke (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1995), P. 1.
- ³⁶ Christopher Snyder, *The World of King Arthur* (London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd. 2000), p. 80.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- ³⁹ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, translated by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1966.), p. 217.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 261.
- ⁴¹ Quoted in Jean Markale, *Merlin: Priest of Nature*, translated by Belle N. Burke (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1995), P. 5.
- ⁴² Pomponius Mela, *Pomponius Mela's Description of the World*, translated by F.E. Romer (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. 115.
- ⁴³ Barry Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 2.

- ⁴⁴ James MacKillop, *Oxford Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), P. xvi.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, *See Individual Listings*
- ⁴⁶ Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), p. 63.
- ⁴⁷ William F. Skene (tr.), *The Four Ancient Books of Wales* (Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1868), p. 265.
- ⁴⁸ Translations of Geoffrey, such as the one used in this thesis, often translate the Latin *Avallo* as the popular *Avalon*.
- ⁴⁹ Ronan Coghlan, *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Arthurian Legends* (Shaftesbury: Element Books Ltd., 1993), p. 51.
- ⁵⁰ James MacKillop, *Oxford Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), P. 29.
- ⁵¹ Ronan Coghlan, *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Arthurian Legends* (Shaftesbury: Element Books Ltd., 1993), p. 51.
- ⁵² Given this, perhaps it is not altogether coincidental that Manannán mac Lir was the ancient ruler of the Irish Emain Ablach and Avalloch was attributed to be the ruler of the Welsh Ynys Affalch. See James MacKillop, *Oxford Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 321.
- ⁵³ Ronan Coghlan, *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Arthurian Legends* (Shaftesbury: Element Books Ltd., 1993), p. 51.
- ⁵⁴ Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *A Companion to Arthurian and Celtic Myths and Legends* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2004), p. 304.
- ⁵⁵ James MacKillop, *Oxford Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), P. 332.
- ⁵⁶ ‘Culhwch and Olwen’, in Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (tr.), *The Mabinogion* (London: The Everyman Library, 1993), p. 98-9.
- ⁵⁷ Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *A Companion to Arthurian and Celtic Myths and Legends* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2004), p. 304.
- ⁵⁸ James MacKillop, *Oxford Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), P. 317.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 332.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 423.
- ⁶¹ Jean Markale, *King of the Celts: Arthurian Legends and Celtic Tradition*, translated by Christine Hauch (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1994), p. 167.
- ⁶² Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *A Companion to Arthurian and Celtic Myths and Legends* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2004), p. 286.
- ⁶³ Christopher Snyder, *The World of King Arthur* (London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd. 2000), p. 80.

- ⁶⁴ Ronan Coghlan, *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Arthurian Legends* (Shaftesbury: Element Books Ltd., 1993), p. 186.
- ⁶⁵ Jean Markale, *Women of the Celts*, translated by A. Mygind, C. Hauch, and P. Henry (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1972), p. 122.
- ⁶⁶ It must be noted that Walker also calls Morgan a “Celtic death-goddess” because she incorrectly equates Morgan with the sinister Irish death goddess, the Mórrigan. Though generally dismissed, it is tempting to make this association because the similarity of the names, but one must remember that Morgan did not have sinister traits until later myth. Etymologically they are not the same either as *mor* in Welsh means *sea* and the Irish *mór* means *great* or *phantom*. See Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1983), p. 674.
- ⁶⁷ Jean Markale, *King of the Celts: Arthurian Legends and Celtic Tradition*, translated by Christine Hauch (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1994), p. 135.
- ⁶⁸ Gawain’s strength is described as growing stronger and weaker with the rising and setting of the sun, respectively. This has led many scholars to assume Gawain’s Welsh original, Gwalchmai, was a solar deity. See Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *A Companion to Arthurian and Celtic Myths and Legends* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2004), p. 177.
- ⁶⁹ Quoted in Jean Markale, *Merlin: Priest of Nature*, translated by Belle N. Burke (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1995), p. 5.
- ⁷⁰ Chrétien de Troyes, ‘Erec and Enide’, *The Complete Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*, translated by David Staines (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 53.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.* p. 1.
- ⁷² Chrétien de Troyes, ‘The Knight with the Lion’, *The Complete Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*, translated by David Staines (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 292.
- ⁷³ ‘Gereint Son of Erbin’, in Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (tr.), *The Mabinogion* (London: The Everyman Library, 1993), p. 201.
- ⁷⁴ Alan Lupack, *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 224.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 224.
- ⁷⁶ David Day, *King Arthur* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1999), p. 116.
- ⁷⁷ Alan Lupack, *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 104.
- ⁷⁸ ‘The Story of Merlin’, in Norris J. Lacy (ed.), *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation: Volume I*, translated by Rupert T. Pickens (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), p. 354.
- ⁷⁹ ‘The Post-Vulgate, Part I: The Merlin Continuation’, in Norris J. Lacy (ed.), *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation: Volume IV*, translated by Samuel N. Rosenberg (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1993), p. 172.

- ⁸⁰ Alan Lupack, *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 105.
- ⁸¹ Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1963), p. 101-2.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- ⁸³ Piers Paul Read, *The Templars: The Dramatic History of the Knights Templar, the Most Powerful Military Order of the Crusade* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1999), p. 93.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- ⁸⁶ James Burge, *Heloise & Abelard: A New Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, Inc., 2003), p. 17.
- ⁸⁷ Quoted in Piers Paul Read, *The Templars: The Dramatic History of the Knights Templar, the Most Powerful Military Order of the Crusades* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1999), p. 97.
- ⁸⁸ It is no small point that the Knights of the Round Table are often compared to the Knights Templar. The later medieval writers often depicted Arthur's knights as going on a crusade despite the fact that the actual Crusades did not occur for another five-hundred years after Arthur's reign.
- ⁸⁹ Piers Paul Read, *The Templars: The Dramatic History of the Knights Templar, the Most Powerful Military Order of the Crusade* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1999), p. 102.
- ⁹⁰ *The Rule of the Templars: The French Text of the Rule of the Order of the Knights Templar*, translated by J.M. Upton-Ward (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992), p. 36.
- ⁹¹ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 45.
- ⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- ⁹³ David Day, *King Arthur* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1999), p. 65.
- ⁹⁴ Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1982).
- ⁹⁵ Norway's actual rule over the Orkneys would not historically take place until several centuries after Arthur's *flouret*.
- ⁹⁶ Ronan Coghlan, *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Arthurian Legends* (Shaftesbury: Element Books Ltd., 1993), p. 188.
- ⁹⁷ David Day, *King Arthur* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1999), p. 69.

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