Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in
Lingue e Letterature Europee e Americane
Classe LM-37

Tesi di Laurea

Morgan le Fay
Medieval Sources and Modern Novels

Relatrice
Prof. Alessandra Petrina

Laureanda
Miriam Tosadori
n° matr.1179826 / LMLLA

Anno Accademico 2020 / 2021

Table of Contents

Foreword

Most readers are familiar with Morgan Le Fay or have at least an idea of who she is. She is, indeed, one of the most renowned characters in Arthurian literature, on a par with Sir Lancelot, Queen Guinevere and King Arthur himself. Morgan's most famous features are her skills in sorcery, of which she makes use mostly for infamous purposes, since she seems to be constantly attempting to cause harm to King Arthur and his knights. She is, essentially, depicted as the antagonist of the story — if she were a character in a fairy tale, she would have been the evil witch, operating for wicked purposes for the sake of it. However, when reading and researching more thoroughly the works in which Morgan appears, readers might discover that she is much more complex than the role of the antagonist she has been appointed. The aim of this thesis is to bring to light the complexity of Morgan Le Fay, even if due to the vastness of the subject and the material available, it is necessarily limited to a few significant moments in the history of this character. I have thus chosen three salient moments in literature that, I believe, represent the various stages of Morgan's life as a literary character — her origins, her probably most famous moment in literary history, and one of her contemporary representations.

The first chapter takes into consideration Morgan's first "official" appearance in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* — we have no other written work before it, but we do not have the certainty that she has not existed at all before, either. In *Vita Merlini,* her name was Morgen, and it will be the one I will be using when referring to Geoffrey of Monmouth's work. *Vita Merlini*'s portrayal is certainly surprising for readers that are not familiar with it, as it presents a very different Morgan from the one most are used to. There is no trace of her negative purposes and propension to evil and she is learned not only in magical crafts, but also in scientific arts, especially in healing. However, the passage introducing Morgen sets the foundation on which later portrayals are based, since some crucial elements are already present in Geoffrey of Monmouth's work, starting with the place Morgen and her sisters reside in. The "Fortunate Isle", is, in fact, a paradisiac, all-female inhabited island that

will evolve into the famous Island of Avalon. However, this research shows how the basis for the construction of both setting and character are even more ancient than *Vita Merlini*. Indeed, several classical sources and Welsh and Irish myths mention similar places. Most importantly, Morgen herself has not appeared from nowhere, and this thesis will take into consideration the most relevant female figures that helped the future Morgan le Fay emerge — most notably, the Welsh Modron and the Irish Morrigan, but also other lesser known characters from Celtic pantheons. Moreover, I found it worthwhile to add a short analysis of Norse female deities, such as Freyja and the Valkyries, since they share several characteristics with their Celtic counterparts. It is but an outline of what might have helped later authors to build "their own Morgan" and sources might be richer than those I chose to mention, but I felt that these are the most relevant for this research — and also, what most probably later authors might have had available to read or, at least, as general knowledge when they wrote their own works.

The second chapter takes into consideration one of the most famous and comprehensive collections of Arthurian material, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. It might be defined an "arrival point" for Arthurian literature, as it was composed in the fifteenth century after a long tradition of previous works, in particular French romances and a number of English works in verse. What is remarkable is the degradation Morgan undergoes from *Vita Merlini* to *Le Morte Darthur.* She is no longer benign, nor she has manifest healing abilities and embodies in fact the conventional, almost fairy tale-like antagonist. She has a considerable reputation but is not frequently present in the scene. This has made it possible for this thesis to take into consideration all the episodes which feature her presence that are included in Helen Cooper's edition of *La Morte Darthur*. The main purpose of this analysis is to describe the way she operates against primarily King Arthur and secondarily other Kings, Knights and tangentially, also Queen Guinevere. Furthermore, I have attempted to pinpoint which similarities she might retain from the earliest versions of her portrayal and to explain if and why she diverges from them instead. This means taking into consideration what reasons she might have *in* the story, which means what is driving her to act the way she does and what objectives she is

trying to achieve, and *outside* the story, that is the reasons why Malory has adopted this mostly negative portrait and which historical factors might have come into play during the time he wrote his work. Lastly, I have included the last portion of the story, the famous carrying of the dying Arthur to Avalon, which is one of the few moments in which Malory concedes to Morgan a forgiving portrayal, in which she shows a face which is different from the usual, hostile one. I have also mentioned the point of view offered by several scholars, who attempt to give a different interpretation to Morgan's demeanour and to state if she is completely evil or there is something more deep and complicated on her agenda.

The last chapter focuses on Marion Zimmer Bradley's novel *The Mists of Avalon.* This book offers a unique perspective on Arthurian material, since it retells the *Le Morte Darthur*'s story from the point of view of Arthurian women — the ones that often feel overlooked in Malory, along with the characters inner dimension. *The Mists of Avalon* was published during the 1980s, a period in which Neopaganism, a Goddess-worshipping faith that serves as a basis for Zimmer Bradley's construction of Avalon, was thriving. Thus, the first section of this chapter will offer an insight on the beliefs of Neopaganism, in order to understand on which basis the story is told. The following subchapters will aim to present how differently Zimmer Bradley portrays her main protagonist, Morgan, or Morgaine, the spelling used by the author and that I will use when considering the novel, in comparison to Malory's work and the earliest sources. Therefore, this chapter will essay to describe how Morgaine morphs from an evil sorceress into a round, "grey" character, with thoughts, feelings, and justifications for her actions. To do so, I have chosen a few crucial episodes to be analysed — Morgaine's introduction on the scene and her upbringing, the pagan ritual which will shape her relationship with Arthur, the attempted theft of Excalibur and its scabbard and the finale of the story. As this brief list might suggest, most of them retrace those of *Le Morte Darthur*, and I will try to present how Zimmer Bradley adapted her source material for her narrative purposes. Given the length of *The Mists of Avalon*, the choice of episodes to be taken into consideration I operated is rather narrow and what this thesis presents is but a portion of the much broader endeavour by Zimmer

Bradley. However, I feel that they were the most representative for my purpose, especially when compared with chapters one and two. Thus, the thesis as a whole will present three different moments in Morgan as a character's history — her birth, her degeneration, and her recuperation.

Chapter 1

Reconstructing the Origins of Morgan Le Fay

Morgan Le Fay is a familiar figure for the collective imagination and her portrayal as a malicious sorceress might be the most popular. However, Morgan has not always been King Arthur's antagonist and appears to have a much more complex background— the aim of this first chapter is to investigate the origins of this character in order to pinpoint what elements led to the birth of such a distinctive representation during the Middle Ages, starting from the first time she is mentioned by name.

1.1. Geoffrey of Monmouth's Morgen

The assumed first time the name of Morgan, spelled *Morgen,* makes its appearance in a written text the year is circa 1150, when Geoffrey of Monmouth (or Gaufridus Monemutensis, according to contemporary spelling)[1] completed his poem *Vita Merlini*. As of today, there is little information available on Geoffrey's life. He was born around 1100 of Breton or Breton-Welsh ancestry and around thirty years of age he became magister, a cleric (maybe an Augustinian canon) at St. George College in Oxford. After that event, we only know that he wrote *Vita Merlini* and, before that, his most famous work *Historia Regum Britanniae* (which would become the basis on which the Arthurian cycle grew). He died in 1155.[2]

Vita Merlini, in Jill Hebert's words, is a telling of "the more intimate and personal aspects of Merlin's life"[3] and the presence of Morgan occupies but a small section in the whole poem. She is mentioned by the Welsh poet Taliesin, who appears as Merlin's interlocutor and whom Merlin had previously sent for to learn "what wind or rain storm was coming up"[4]. Taliesin goes to Merlin, reporting what he has discovered and providing a rich geographic description, which includes around

[1] Carver, Dax Donald, "Goddess Dethroned: The Evolution of Morgan le Fay", Georgia State University: Religious Studies Thesis, 2006, p. 25.
[2] Hebert, Jill M., *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 20.
[3] Hebert, p. 20.
[4] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, translated by John Jay Parry, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1925, p. 21.

thirty lines (from 908 to 941) about an "island of apples" and its mistress. The passage, originally in Latin, recites as follows:

> The island of apples which men call "The Fortunate Isle" gets its name from the fact that it produces all things of itself; the fields there have no need of the ploughs of the farmers and all cultivation is lacking except what nature provides. Of its own accord it produces grain and grapes, and apple trees grow in its woods from the close-clipped grass. The ground of its own accord produces everything instead of merely grass, and people live there a hundred years or more. There nine sisters rule by a pleasing set of laws those who come to them from our country. She who is first of them is more skilled in the healing art, and excels her sisters in the beauty of her person. Morgen is her name, and she has learned what useful properties all the herbs contain, so that she can cure sick bodies. She also knows an art by which to change her shape, and to cleave the air on new wings like Daedalus; when she wishes she is at Brest, Chartres, or Pavia, and when she will she slips down from the air onto your shores. And men say that she has taught mathematics to her sisters, Moronoe, Mazoe, Gliten, Glitonea, Gliton, Tyronoe, Thitis; Thitis best known for her cither. Thither after the battle of Camlan we took the wounded Arthur, guided by Barinthus to whom the waters and the stars of heaven were well known. With him steering the ship we arrived there with the prince, and Morgen received us with fitting honour, and in her chamber she placed the king on a golden bed and with her own hand she uncovered his honourable wound and gazed at it for a long time. At length she said that health could be restored to him if he stayed with her for a long time and made use of her healing art. Rejoicing, therefore, we entrusted the king to her and returning spread our sails to the favouring winds."[5]

What stands out in this text is how Morgen is noticeably different from the Morgan Le Fay the readers of Arthurian literature might be used to It is, in fact, a remarkably positive portrait. Sandra Elaine Capps suggests that Geoffrey of Monmouth granted Morgen no less than the status of a goddess, along with "a wealth of knowledge and divine powers passed down from her Celtic foremothers"[6], a perspective that will be investigated further ahead in the chapter. Fiona Tolhurst also underlines the most significant features of Morgen's character, starting from her teachings to her sisters, whom she surpasses in both beauty and skill[7]. She is learned in mathematics and astrology, which might allude

[5] "Insula pomorum que Fortunata vocatur / Ex re nomen habet quia per se singular profert. / Non opus est illi sulcantibus arva colonis / Omnis abest cultus nisi quem natura ministrat. / Ultro fecundas segetes producit et uvas / Nataque poma suis pretonso gramine silvis. / Omnia gignit humus vice graminis ultro redundans, / Annis cententis aut ultra vivitur illic. / Illic jura novem geniali lege sorores / Dant his qui veniunt nostris ex partibus ad se, / Quarum que prior est fit doctior arte medendi / Exceditque suas forma prestante sorores. / Morgen ei nomen didicitque quid utilitatis / Gramina cuncta ferant ut languida corpora curet. / Ars quoque nota sibi qua scit mutare figuram / Et resecare novis quasi Dedalus aera pennis. / Cum vult, est Bristi Carnoti sive Papie, / Cum vult, in vestries ex aere labitur horis. / Hancque mathematicam dicunt didcisse sorores / Moronoe, Mazoe, Gliten, Glitonea, Gliton, / Tyronoe, Thiten, cithara notissima Thiten. / Illuc post bellum Camblani vulnere lesum / Duximus Arcturum nos conducente Barintho,/ Equora cui fuerant et celi sydera nota. / Hoc rectore ratis cum principe venimus illuc, / Et nos quo decuit Morgen suscepit honore, / Inque suis talamis posuit super aurea regem / Fulcra manuque sibi detexit vulnus honesta / Inspexitque diu, tandemque redire salute / Posse sibi dixit, si secum tempore longo / Esset et ipsius vellet medicamine fungi. / Gaudentes igitur regem commisimus illi / Et dedimus ventis redeundo vela secundis." (Geoffrey of Monmouth, pp. 26-27, 67)

[6] Capps, Sandra Elaine, "Morgan le Fay as Other in English Medieval and Modern Texts", University of Tennessee: PhD Thesis, 1996, p. 28.

[7] Tolhurst, Fiona, *Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Feminist Origins of the Arthurian Legend*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 127-28.

to a preparation in the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy), which is by itself something rather extraordinary even among most of the wealthiest noblewomen of the time[8], or, as Capps proposes, a rationalization of her otherwise goddess-like powers[9]. Morgen's knowledge of herbs and plants is also outstanding. Capps includes her botanical expertise in the realm of the divine powers as well as in the "secret knowledge" of the wise women[10]. Morgen is also able to shapeshift and fly, surpassing even Merlin in terms of power — Geoffrey of Monmouth granted him the ability to soar through the air in none of his works[11]. In fact, Morgen has essentially any kind of power at her disposal, save for prophecy, which in *Vita Merlini* is bestowed on Merlin's sister Ganeida.[12]

Geoffrey of Monmouth's work seems to shed a positive light on learned women and, in Tolhurst's words, associates them with positive outcomes[13]. All the critics taken into consideration for this research agree that Morgen represents a positive alterity which poses no threat to the outside world, court included[14]. Her magic and knowledge are seemingly devoted to good deeds only, to the point that she is considered so trustworthy that she can take care of the wounded King without supervision, as no members of the court are mentioned to follow Arthur on his voyage to the Island. Tolhurst defines Morgen both a "female hero", as she aids the male hero and she poses no threat to the male-dominated world of her time, and "virgin hero", considering the lack of sexuality associated with the character.[15] Even if these feminine definitions are given to her, she displays nonetheless features that are typically masculine — Morgen is a ruler and has no male presence at her side to rule with her and, in addition, she is essentially a scholar knowledgeable in traditionally masculine subjects such as those of the *quadrivium.*[16]

[8] Capps, p.42.
[9] Capps, p. 43.
[10] Capps, p. 48.
[11] Tolhurst, p. 128.
[12] Capps, p. 41.
[13] Tolhurst, p. 128.
[14] Tolhurst, p. 128.
[15] Tolhurst, p. 130.
[16] Reko, Rachel, "The Anti-Feminist Evolution of a Monster", pp. 18-19.

This portrait by Geoffrey of Monmouth is but one of the earliest versions of this character. As a matter of fact, as time went by Morgan developed and took the shape of "a composite figure […] whose various roles included fairy enchantress, goddess of battle and sorceress extraordinaire"[17]. What stands especially out, however, is the progressive degradation this figure underwent during the Middle Ages, as she was "rationalised and demonized"[18]. Therefore, as the Arthurian tradition took a more definite form, Morgen lost progressively her power and her beauty, sometimes both in her body and her spirit.[19] This might find proof in the analysis of later rendition of this character, such as in the Malorian Arthurian material that will be taken into consideration further on in this thesis.

1.2 The Island of Avalon

Before venturing into Morgan's very origins, it might be worth examining briefly how the Island of Apples is described. The excerpt quoted at the beginning of this chapter shows how Geoffrey of Monmouth chose to present the Island as a paradisiacal place requiring no human intervention in order to support itself and its dwellers, Morgen and her sisters. Tolhurst appropriately describes the place as a "variation of the *topos* of a lost paradise or Golden Age"[20] which provides an example of stability, guided by a female leader, in sharp contrast with the belligerent British past described in Geoffrey of Monmouth's work[21]. In addition to this, Capps underlines how the insularity of the place strengthens the sense of autonomy and power that permeates the Island.[22] However, as blissful as the island might seem, Geoffrey's text owes much more to classical and Celtic sources rather than biblical ones, which might come to mind through the notorious reputation of apples in the Garden of Eden. According to Hebert, Isidore and Bede were likely consulted to put together the geographic description[23], as well as the description of the Fortunate Islands by Rabanus Maurus, which, according

[17] Capps, p. 1.
[18] Capps, p. 1.
[19] Tolhurst, p. 130.
[20] Tolhurst, p. 129.
[21] Tolhurst, p. 129.
[22] Capps, p. 39.
[23] Hebert, p. 24.

to Lucy Allen Paton, is so similar to the first eight lines of the passage written by Geoffrey of Monmouth that the latter seems almost a versified rendition of Rabanus' account.[24] In addition, Hebert also reminds her readers of Geoffrey's Welsh heritage, which might have come into play when he composed the passage of Arthur being carried to the Island to heal his mortal wound and where he is supposed to dwell until his future coming. She mentions how Geoffrey was likely familiar with the "descriptions of a Celtic paradise where heroes reside for hundreds of years".[25] One example is to be found in the legend of Bran the Blessed, a chieftain that, mortally wounded, asks his men to decapitate him. His still living head then proceeds to guide them to a castle on an island in the middle of the sea, where it "kept them company for a number of years, which they passed in feasting... The head, like a *cornu copia*, providing them with food and drink".[26] Paton offers an account of a similar story involving the Irish hero Cuchulainn. After being deprived of his strength by two "strange women", Cuchulainn receives a message from a stranger about two ladies living in the Plain of Delights, Liban, wife of Labraid, and Fand, who is "filled with love" for him. According to the messenger, they can heal him of his disease, given that Cuchulainn accepts to fight Labraid's enemies and Fand's love as a reward. Cuchulainn is enticed by their promises and sails to the Plain of Delights, where he accomplishes his duties and lives a "period in the oblivion of the other world with a fay that has summoned him to her".[27] Eventually Fand's spell wanes and Cuchulainn regains memory of his own wife and goes back to her, even though this implicates the loss of the fay's love.[28] This story bears a rather clear resemblance to the traditional episode of the wounded Arthur being carried to the Island, even though the latter was not crystallized into any fixed form until the twelfth century, when the mortal wound in battle, the future return to this world after death and the presence of the fay merged together in a single narration.[29] Paton also notices how Geoffrey chose to disregard the fairy

[24] Paton, Lucy Allen, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, Boston: Ginn & Company, 1903, p. 41.
[25] Hebert, p. 24.
[26] Hebert, p. 24.
[27] Paton, p. 30.
[28] Paton, pp. 29-31.
[29] Paton, p. 33.

messengers of this story in favour of Barinthus as a guide towards the Island, a Celtic sea-deity serving as a messenger from the other world.[30] Moreover, according to Dax Donald Carver, what Geoffrey of Monmouth is offering in his passage about the Island "is a brief yet clear reference to ancient Celtic traditions regarding magical islands, fairy women and Celtic goddesses".[31] Even though it is not easy to have precise information on the matter, islands inhabited by priestesses might have existed and a possible proof is provided by the following passage by Pomponious Mela, included in his *De Chorographia* (circa 44 AD):

> 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.[32]

The similarities with Geoffrey of Monmouth's text are evident — the island is inhabited by the same number of priestesses endowed with powers such as shapeshifting and the healing of mortal wounds. These priestesses where likely druidesses, as indicated by the geographic location of their island in the British Sea and the way they were called, *Gallizenae,* whose root*, gall*, points directly at the Celts — as it is evident, for example, in the Latin epithet *Galli*.[33]

Moreover, Carver mentions several other Celtic magical islands similar to Geoffrey's Island of Apples, most notably the Irish *Emain Abhlach* (Land of Apple Trees) and the Welsh land of the dead *Annwfn*, in which an early mention of nine priestesses is to be found.[34] The latter is included in *The Book of Taliesin,* a manuscript dating back to 1275, but including texts that circulated much earlier and was therefore available as a possible source for Geoffrey of Monmouth.[35] One of the most influential scholars on Arthurian literature, Roger Sherman Loomis, also highlights the importance of islands in British and Breton tradition. As in Greek ancient tradition, islands were the designed

[30] Paton, p. 43.
[31] Carver, p. 26.
[32] Quoted in Carver, p. 27.
[33] Carver, p. 27.
[34] Carver, p 28.
[35] Carver, p 28.

unearthly abodes of several divinities and became paradises in the eyes of the watchers on the shore, as it happened, for example, with the Isle of Man and the Ile de Seine.[36] In addition to this, Loomis remarks how Plutarch's *De Defectu Oraculorum* contains a few lines about the sacredness of British islands:

> Demetrius further said that of the islands around Britain many lie scattered about uninhabited, of which some are named after deities and heroes. He told us also that, being sent by the emperor with the object of reconnoitring and inspecting, he went to the island which lay nearest to those uninhabited, and found it occupied by few inhabitants, who were, however, sacrosanct and inviolable in the eyes of the Britons.[37]

In addition to this, he also gives special attention to the place called Glastonbury, or *Ynis Witrin* in Welsh ("Island of Glass" is a possible interpretation), which used to be an island in prehistoric times. At the top of the "picturesque, cone-shaped hill", as Loomis describes it, a church in St. Michael's honour was erected and might have substituted a pre-existing sun-god cult — just as it had happened with St. Michael's Mount in France, whose Celtic name was *Din Sul*, rendered in Latin as *Mons Solis* ("Sun Mount"), pointing to a possible sun-related cult in the area.[38] Glastonbury was regarded as a Celtic paradisiac otherworld, described also by Chrétien de Troyes — on the *Ile de Voirre* "no thunder is heard, no lightning strikes, no tempests rage, no toads or serpents exist, nor is it ever too hot or too cold".[39] Moreover, Glastonbury is the location where the Avalon of the French Romances is traditionally placed[40]. In addition to this, in his *Historia Regum Britanniae,* Geoffrey of Monmouth called Morgan and her sisters' island "Avallo", which will of course give origin to the renowned Avalon. The name's root originated from the Old Irish *aball*, the Middle Welsh *afall* and the Middle Breton *avellen,* which are, according to Carver, "all Celtic variants of apple".[41]

At this point, it is significant to consider what apples represent in folklore. First, they symbolise love and fruitfulness, which in Celtic mythology was represented by the apple as a love

[36] Loomis, Roger Sherman, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1997, p. 188.
[37] Quoted in Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, p.188.
[38] Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, p. 189.
[39] Quoted in Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, p. 190.
[40] Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, p. 191.
[41] Carver, p. 29.

gift from a fay to a hero to lure him into her domain. Therefore, it became a fruit with otherworldly, magical qualities,[42] providing thus a connection with the island described in *The Life of Merlin*. Moreover, the Welsh name *Ynys Afallach* (which translates into "Isle of Apples"), has been anglicised to Avalloch, which happens to be also the name of a rather obscure character of Welsh mythology,[43] who "is said to have lived there with his daughters because of the secrecy of the place".[44] Therefore, this provides a link to the more ancient, goddesses-related origins of Morgan's character.

1.3. Morgan and her Divine Roots

Loomis defines Morgan as "a creature of tradition rather than invention"[45] and this assertion will become clear as soon as copious influences which merged into her figure are investigated. As I just mentioned, Avalloch is a character of Welsh mythology that is identified with the "father of Modron". Modron translates to "Mother" and derives from the Gaul *Matrŏna* ("Great Mother").[46] Carver identified a further link to the divine origin of Modron in the *Mabinogi,* the Welsh epic, which includes an episode about Arthur saving "Mabon son of Modron". Since Mabon has been identified with the Gaul Apollo Maponos, whose name translates with "great youth",[47] it is easy to identify Modron with the Mother Goddess.[48] In addition to this, there are other links between Modron and Morgan as well. The Welsh legend *Trioedd Ynys Prydain* ("Triads of the Isle of Britain"), attributed to Modron also Owain ab Uriens' motherhood, which will later find a correspondence with Morgan being the wife of Uriens of Rheged and the mother of Owain/Uwain/Yvain in Arthurian romances. Carver remarks also that Owain was gifted a flock of ravens by his mother, which on one hand are a

[42] Paton, Lucy Allen, p.93.
[43] Carver, p. 29.
[44] Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, p. 191.
[45] Loomis, Roger Sherman, "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses", Speculum, 20 (1945), p. 188.
[46] Carver, p. 30.
[47] Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, p. 193.
[48] Carver, p. 30.

further link with Celtic goddesses, as will be explained later in this subchapter, and on the other are reminiscent of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Morgen's ability to shapeshift and fly on feathered wings.[49]

Nomenclature-wise, it is not clear how the passage from Modron to Geoffrey's Morgen occurred. Until 1600, however, Morgan was an exclusively male name[50] (e.g. Morgan Tud in the *Mabinogi* who is, incidentally, a physician) and this might provide a reason why Geoffrey chose to change the last vowel of the name. Nonetheless, it does not provide an explanation for the substantial change of spelling from Modron to Morgan. Carver attempts to justify it with a greater familiarity with the spelling Morgen/Morgan due to a Breton belief dating back between the fifth and sitxth century, the existence of a group of water fairies called Mari Morgans or just Morgans.[51] Hebert provides further explanation, remarking that in the Welsh language "mor" (as well as the earlier spelling *muir*) means sea, which Geoffrey of Monmouth might have found suitable to name the lady of an island.[52] Paton provides further possible etymologies for Morgan's name which are, in her own words, "invariably connected with the sea"[53] — it might be an alteration of *Morg-wen,* meaning "Sea Whiteness" or "Sea Foam". Besides, Paton reports the similarities between Morgan's name and *muir gheilt* and *murd huch'a merrow*, the Irish names for mermaids, and adds the further connection between Geoffrey's Morgen and the Welsh epithet *Murigenos/Murigena,* "born from the sea".[54] This Welsh "sea born" has been identified with the Irish Muirghein, one of the names for Liban, an aquatic lady whose story, *Aided Echach mheic Mhaireda* ("Destruction of Eochaid Mac Mairidh") is included in the *Lebor na h-Uidre.*[55] Liban, daughter to the King of Ulster, is the last of her kind, having survived a flood and transformed into a salmon from the waist down, along with her pet dog,

[49] Carver, p. 31
[50] Hebert, p. 26.
[51] Carver, p. 31.
[52] Hebert, p. 26.
[53] Paton, p. 9.
[54] Paton, p. 9.
[55] "The Book of the Dun Cow, Irish *Lebor na h-Uidreor Leabhar na h-Uidhri*, oldest surviving miscellaneous manuscript in Irish literature (…). Compiled about 1100 by learned Irish monks at the monastery of Clonmacnoise from older manuscripts and oral tradition, the book is a collection of factual material and legends that date mainly from the 8th and 9th centuries". (britannica.com)

which metamorphosed into an otter. She has spent three centuries in the depths of the lake originated from the flood, until a Bevan mac Imle hears an angelic choir coming from the waters below his boat. It is Liban chanting and she reveals herself to him, giving him a *rendezvous* in a year's time. At the appointed day and place, she is captured in a net and brought to land, where numbers of people come to admire her beauty. Bevan and other two men, Comgall and Fergus, participate in a contest for her possession and win the heavenly revelation that they should yoke two stags to the chariot where Liban is placed and allow them to choose where to bring her. The stags choose a place called *tech Dabheoc,* where the clergy receiving Liban makes her choose between being baptized and going to heaven or living on earth for another three hundred years. Liban chooses the former, is baptized as Muirghein ("Sea-birth") or alternatively as Muirgheilt ("Sea-prodigy") and, after her ascension to heaven, is worshipped as a saint in the town of Tec-Da Beoc.[56] As Paton remarks and as it is evident from this story, the association between Morgan and Liban is made only on the basis of a name and thus might provide only feeble evidence for the correlation between Morgan and the sea.

However, this is not the only connection between water and the figure of Morgan. Another link is represented by the already mentioned continental Matrŏna. She was a water goddess connected with rivers, after whom the French rivers Marne and Maronne were named.[57] Other goddesses share some traits with Morgan, for example the classical Sulis, Sirona and Sequana, the goddess of the river Seine. Above all, Sulis, associated to the Aquae Sulis spring in Bath, was a bivalent figure, being worshipped for healing powers as well as for being an avenger of wrongs.[58] The relationship with Sulis is particularly interesting because the ambiguity is shared with Morgan, who might be not only "a nurturing healer" as Hebert defined her.[59] In fact, Geoffrey of Monmouth presented her as an expert healer, but willing to offer her services only if the conditions she poses

[56] Paton, pp. 9-10.
[57] Carver, p. 30.
[58] Hebert, p. 18.
[59] Hebert., p. 16.

("At length she said that health could be restored to him if he stayed with her for a long time and made use of her healing art"[60]) are respected.-In addition to this, he specifically chose the word *medicamine,* which designates both antidote and poison and which echoes in the nature of Sulis, being related both to health and illness.[61]

In the Arthurian romance tradition, Morgan is identified with Arthur's half-sister. However, *Vita Merlini*'s Morgen has no trace of this family relation and she does not appear at all in *Historia Regum Britanniae.* In the latter work Arthur's sister Anna (alternatively spelt as Anne) is mentioned instead.[62] Although some claim that evidence is too scarce,[63] others assert that Morgan assimilated Anna, who has indeed disappeared over time.[64] In any case, both appear to have common ground in Irish mythology, which plays a relevant role in identifying Morgan's origins. In fact, Anna's name reminds us closely of Ana (alternatively spelt as Dana, Danu or Anu), the mother of the *Tuatha De-Danann*, the divine race of Irish mythology whose name translates to "the people of the goddess Ana".[65] The theme of the Mother Goddess, already encountered with Modron, seems thus to resurface here. In addition to this, Ana has been also defined the "queen of heaven" and related to the worship of the moon.[66] She may appear with this rather benevolent face, or, alternatively, that of a war goddess. Ana is often included in the multifaceted manifestation of the Irish battle-goddess Morrigan (spelt also as Morrígna when the name is intended as the whole group of goddesses). Other goddesses that appear in the Morrigan group include, along with Morrigan herself, Macha, Badb and often Nemain.[67] However, some propose Badb as the generic name of the group, with the original meaning of "rage, fury, or violence" and ultimately implying "a witch, fairy, or goddess",[68] while

[60] Geoffrey of Monmouth, p. 27.
[61] Hebert, p. 29
[62] Martins, Ana Rita, "Morgan le Fay: The Inheritance of the Goddess", *Brathair*, 15 (2015), p. 156.
[63] Carver, p. 25.
[64] Martins, p. 162.
[65] Martins, p. 162.
[66] Macbain, Alexander, *Celtic Mythology and Religion*, Inverness: A. & W. MacKenzie, 1885, p. 73.
[67] Martins, p. 162.
[68] Evans-Wentz, Walter Yeeling, *The Fairy Faith in the Celtic Countries*, London: Oxford University Press, 1911, p. 260.

others offer "scald crow" as a possible meaning, the bird in whose form Badb is said to manifest.[69] Each of them is endowed with a specific set of powers, but this analysis will focus mainly on the Morrigan, who is the most relevant when inquiring about Morgan's origins.

At a first glance, the resemblance between their names is noticeable, but there is no actual proof that Morgan's name originated from the Morrigan's. In fact, the etymology for Morrigan radically differs from those already proposed in this thesis — in this case, *mor* is related to the Old English *mære,* linked, for instance, to the modern *nightmare,* while *rigan* means "queen" in Old Irish.[70] The Morrigan is the most prominent in her group of war goddesses and is said to be the consort of The Dagda, the father-king of the *Tuatha De Danann.*[71] Along with war, the Morrigan has been associated also with fertility, life, death, protection and monstrousness. She is also famous for her shapeshifting power,[72] for which I will shortly provide more details, and she is said to have the ability to cure the sick and the dying,[73] two features she shares with Geoffrey of Monmouth's Morgen. However, the most striking similitude is perhaps the Morrigan's relationship with Cuchulainn, which resembles closely the ambiguous connection between Morgan and King Arthur, which will be investigated more in depth in the following chapter. In Hebert's words, the Morrigan is "sometimes interpreted as inconsistent and contradictory" as she "alternatively helps and harms the hero Cuchulainn".[74] A first skirmish between the two is reported by Paton and is contained in the *Tain Bo Regamna,* an introductory tale to the *Tain Bo Cuailgne.*[75] The incident starts while Morrigan is driving away a cow for unspecified purposes. She appears as a woman with "her eye-brows red and a crimson mantle round her",[76] sitting on a chariot harnessed with a one-legged horse and

[69] Macbain, p. 73.
[70] Hebert, p. 26.
[71] Martins, p. 157.
[72] Hebert, p. 19.
[73] Martins, p. 157.
[74] Hebert, p. 19.
[75] "*The Cattle Raid of Cooley (...)* Old Irish epiclike tale that is the longest of the Ulster cycle of hero tales and deals with the conflict between Ulster and Connaught over possession of the brown bull of Cooley. The tale was composed in prose with verse passages in the 7th and 8th centuries. It is partially preserved in the Book of the Dun Cow (c. 1100) and is also found in the Book of Leinster (c. 1160) and the Yellow Book of Lecan (late 14th century)." (britannica.com)
[76] Quoted in Paton, p. 24.

accompanied by a man and the cow. In the meanwhile, Cuchulainn is asleep. A loud cry wakes him up and, as he inquiries about the noise, he sees the group approaching. He reproaches the woman for driving away the cow, as he claims "that all the cattle in Ulster belong to him".[77] The woman is defiant and, when Cuchulainn is about to threaten her with his spear, she disappears along with the chariot, the man and the cow. Soon after that, Cuchulainn realises that she has shapeshifted in the blackbird perched on a branch nearby and accuses her to be a "dangerous enchanted woman".[78] The Morrigan, unafraid, replies with a threat — "Whatever you had done, will bring you ill-luck!"[79]. This is not the only encounter between the Morrigan and Cuchulainn, as she later attacks him in battle in the guise of various animals — an eel, a grey wolf, a red heifer.[80] Cuchulainn fights back each time and each time he wounds her. However, the Morrigan is not done with testing the hero yet, as she once again appears to him, this time in the guise of a hag. She is milking a cow and Cuchulainn asks her thrice for some milk to drink, blessing her each time in gratitude. These blessings are necessary to heal the wounds she has received in their previous battle and only once she is healed, she reveals her identity. At this point, Cuchulainn replies once again with resentment, telling the Morrigan that he would have never healed her if he knew who she was from the beginning.[81] These episodes all underline both the goddess' ability to change her shape at will and the constant clash between her and the hero. However, despite these skirmishes, the Morrigan's attitude is not completely negative, as she behaves as "Cuchulainn's tutelary goddess" [82] on other occasions. She appears to care for him, in a way, for example when she chooses to warn him of his imminent death and breaks his war chariot the night before his final battle.[83] In addition to this, the Morrigan is said to be also "the guardian of Cuchulainn's deathbed",[84] which might have developed into Morgan's presence when wounded

[77] Quoted in Paton, p. 24.
[78] Quoted in Paton, p. 24.
[79] Quoted in Paton, p. 24.
[80] Oliver, Cheyenne, "Which Witch? Morgan Le Fay as Shape-shifter and English Perceptions of Magic Reflected in Arthurian Legend", Florida Atlantic University, Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters Thesis, 2015, p. 19.
[81] Oliver, p. 19.
[82] Oliver, p. 19.
[83] Oliver, p. 19.
[84] Oliver, p. 19.

King Arthur is accompanied to Avalon. Moreover, Loomis considers another episode of the *Tain Bo Cuailgne,* taking place before the battle in which the shapeshifting Morrigan interferes with Cuchulainn's fighting, that is relevant for evidence of the goddess' positive attitude towards the hero. In this tale, the Morrigan is waiting at a ford in the guise of a young woman covered in a colourful mantle. When Cuchulainn arrives, she introduces herself as the daughter of King Buan and declares herself — "For the record of thy deeds I have loved thee, and all my valuables and cattle I bring with me".[85] Unfortunately, the hostility between the two is re-established, as Cuchulainn rejects her and the Morrigan, outraged by his refusal, replies with a promise of vengeance.[86]

In his studies, Loomis also attempts to establish a connection between the "Modron origin" and the "Morrigan origin" through a research of common features between the two goddesses and raises some interesting observations, despite remarking the scarcity of information on Modron. Above all, he traces a parallel between the episode of the Morrigan meeting Cuchulainn at a ford and a similar tale involving Modron reported in a Welsh manuscript dating back to around 1556.[87] In this narrative, Uriens, King of Rheged, meets a woman washing her laundry on the banks of a ford in Denbighshire, and has a sexual encounter with her. The woman then blesses him and introduces herself as the daughter of the King of Annwn, the Welsh afterworld. The King promises to come back to her in a year, at the end of which the woman presents him their twin children, the boy Owein and the girl Morfydd. Loomis at this point remarks how this tale does not provide the name of the woman, but the twins' names correspond to those of Modron and Uriens' children. It is thus easy to identify her as Modron herself. [88] Moreover, he notes that Macha, a member of the Morrigan group, also bears twins to a human lover, and adds further similarities with the Morrigan. Aside from the meeting with Cuchulainn at a ford, *The Second Battle of Moytura,* a text from the ninth century,

[85] Quoted in Loomis, "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses", p. 193.
[86] Loomis, "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses", pp. 192-193.
[87] Loomis, "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses", p. 194.
[88] Loomis, "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses", p. 194.

includes another episode involving the goddess in a similar setting — the Dagda meets the Morrigan in the guise of a woman washing along the banks of the river Unius in Connaught and unites with her.[89] Furthermore, Loomis underlines how Modron has some sort of shapeshifting power too. She appears in several Welsh folk tales and displays a dual nature, as she might appear as a beautiful and benevolent aquatic fay or a repulsive and malevolent hag haunting pools of water.[90] Moreover, when in the shape of a hag, Modron display some features of the crow-like nature of Morrigan, as she has "batlike wings and would claw and peck a man".[91] Given this evidence, Loomis concludes that "Modron was as imposing and as ubiquitous a figure in Welsh legends of the Middle Ages as were her counterparts, the Morrigan and Morgain, in Irish saga and Arthurian romance".[92] He also explains that the Morrigan and Modron might have possibly originated from a common ancient Celtic divinity and that their tales have merged and overlapped in the developing of the Arthurian legend,[93] creating the compound figure of Morgan Le Fay.

1.4. A Glance at the Scandinavian Tradition

As explained in the previous pages, it is undeniable that Morgan arises from deep roots in Irish and Welsh mythology and folklore. However, some scholars, such as Clark Colahan, remark that restricting the research only to the Celtic side of the matter might offer only a limited point of view. Colahan, particularly, claims that Celtic and Scandinavian religion and folklore share a fair number of common features to which Geoffrey of Monmouth's Morgen might be indebted.[94] The first figures Colahan mentions are the Valkyries. Their Norse name, *valkyrja* in the singular form, means "[she who] chooses the fallen" (formed by *valr*, "fallen" and -*kyria*, from *kjósa* "to choose"),[95] which self-

[89] Loomis, "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses", p. 195.
[90] Loomis, "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses", p. 197.
[91] Loomis, "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses", p. 197.
[92] Loomis, "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses", p. 197.
[93] Loomis, "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses", p. 199.
[94] Colahan, Clark, "Morgain le Fay and the Lady of the Lake in a Broader Mythological Context", *Journal of the Spanish Society for Medieval English Language and Literature*, 1 (1991), pp. 90-91.
[95] Chiesa Isnardi, Gianna, *I Miti Nordici*, Milano: Longanesi, 1991, p. 307.

explains one of their roles in the mythology they belong to. As Colahan writes, "they are part of the world of men and warfare"[96] and are, to begin with, daughters (although "adoptive") of the god Odin, who resembles the Norse counterpart of the Dagda, and those who escort fallen warriors to Valhalla, the place were these men, the *Einherjar*, are rewarded with a perpetual fighting by day and reconciliating and feasting by night. In Valhalla, Valkyries are appointed to serve mead and beer to the *Einherjar*.[97] Therefore, the similarity with the Celtic tradition is clear, since both mythologies offer a concept of the afterlife in which valiant heroes are granted a female, divine escort towards their eternal life and the rewards connected with it. In addition to this, the Valkyries are associated with ravens due to their presence on the battlefields, as the Morrigan was — as carrion birds, ravens were a common sight, eating the dead once the battle ended.[98] Valkyries are often portrayed as having a relationship with the heroes which is similar to that of the Morrigan and Cuchulainn, when the Irish goddess chooses to manifest her benevolent side. Gianna Chiesa Isnardi defines Valkyries as "spiritual brides" to the heroes[99] and sagas often mention them as the protectresses of heroes, healing them of the wounds they receive in battle and escorting them to Valhalla.[100] Moreover, Valkyries are said to be able to ride on air and on water[101] and are sometimes represented as carriers of hidden knowledge, even though it is limited to the fate of the heroes who participate in battles — a particular case is represented by Brynhildr, who offers the mead of knowledge to Sigurðr, allowing him to learn the runes which hold the secret of life.[102] Just like Morgen, they are presented as benevolent beings, even though they sometimes appear with no distinct personality or with names that might suggest a more sinister nature which might cause confusion between them and giantesses and witches — e.g. Göndul, "Sorceress", Leikn, "Bewitched", Sangriðr, "Very Cruel" and Tanngnidr, "[She who] grinds her teeth".

[96] Colahan, p. 92.
[97] Chiesa Isnardi, pp. 58-59.
[98] Colahan, p. 92.
[99] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 307.
[100] Colahan, p. 92.
[101] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 307.
[102] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 308.

Valkyries are sometimes the form in which the *dísir* manifest. *Dísir* (singular *dís*) are "goddesses", "high-ranking women" or "sisters"[103] and are feminine deities who often do not have clear-cut personalities and characteristics. Alongside Valkyries, *Dísir* might also manifest as fecundity goddesses, guardian spirits or Norns, the deities who rule fate — especially Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld are remembered and are roughly the equivalent of the *Parcae* and the *Moirai*.[104] Although there is no distinct indication about the exact function they served in Norse communities, *Dísir* are without a doubt linked with fertility. Chiesa Isnardi observes that some sources report that rituals in their honour were performed during autumn, the typical timespan in which sacrifices were offered to fertility deities, while others associate the *Dísir* with women in labour.[105] In addition to fertility, thus consequently with the growth of families, they are responsible for the protection of said families and the damaging of their enemies. Similar figures are mentioned in the first of the Merseburg Charms[106] as *idisi*, indicating women who practice magic and, in addition to this, are associable with *matronae* and *matres,* local female deities linked to fertility cults worshipped in British and Gaulish areas[107] (related also to the aforementioned Matrŏna). What links Valkyries, *Dísir* and Norns is that they usually appear in groups of three, six or nine. Chiesa Isnardi provides the symbolic explanation for the three numbers in Norse tradition. Three represents thus the perfection and completeness of a being or an action, along with the entirety of space (underworld, earth and heavens) and time (past, present and future), e.g. the three "main" Norns; six, which is two times three, represents a stalemate, an incomplete cycle which includes a "positive" three and a "negative" one; nine stands for a complete cycle, its conclusion and renovation; for instance, the Valkyries, often appearing in nines, mark the end of the hero's life and often his rebirth in Valhalla.[108] Looking back at *Vita Merlini*, a common

[103] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 301.
[104] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 301.
[105] Chiesa Isnardi, pp. 301-302.
[106] The Merseburg Charms were found in a manuscript dating back to 900 circa and are composed in Old High German and in alliterating verse. They are regarded as one of the main vernacular sources for Germanic religion and mythology. (britannica.com)
[107] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 303.
[108] Chiesa Isnardi, pp. 501-507.

point stands out. The inhabitants of the Fortunate Island are nine sisters, and, as Colahan remarks, there is more to it. Indeed, they are grouped by their initials into three groups of three[109] — Morgen, Moronoe, Mazoe, Gliten, Glitonea, Gliton, Tyronoe, Thitis and, even if Geoffrey does not specify the last sister's name, it might be easily inferred from the other names' pattern that hers starts with "T".

In his study, Colahan adds some observations about the two groups of major Norse deities, the Aesir and the Vanir. While the Aesir are more concerned with war and male-related social duties, the Vanir are most closely related to earth, fecundity and the feminine and generally avoid war.[110] Moreover, Colahan remarks how the "male gods" had a shorter life than the Vanir and faded sooner, while the latter group transformed and survived longer in popular culture.[111] Among the Vanir group, there is a goddess who might be relevant to my research, Freyja. Although it might be far-fetched to assume that she had a direct influence in generating the character of Morgan, it might be worth taking Freyja into consideration. First, Freyja is known under several other epithets — for example, Vanadís and Vanagoð, "Goddess of the Vanir", but also Mardöll, "Sea splendour" or "[she who makes] the sea swell".[112] She has, then, some sort of connection with the sea, that she shares with the goddess Frigga, who is the spouse of Odin and resides in *Fensalir*, "Marshy abode" or "Hall in the Sea Depths".[113] At this point, it is important to notice that, according to some scholars, Freyja and Frigg might be the same goddess that "split" over time — a theory reinforced also by the respective spouses, Oðr and Odin, who are protagonists of similar episodes and have the same name root connected with agitation and fury.[114] Coming back to Freyja, she is mainly a fertility goddess and is said to be also the goddess of love and lust — in a famous episode, the god Loki accuses her of having slept with all the gods, including her own brother Freyr.[115] She is also a mistress of magic, which she has taught to

[109] Colahan, p. 93.
[110] Colahan, p. 96.
[111] Colahan, p. 96.
[112] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 285.
[113] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 215.
[114] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 286.
[115] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 258.

the Aesir. Her practice is called *seiðr* and, although it used not to be exclusively female, it was regarded as inconvenient for men due to the obscene nature of some of the rituals.[116] Despite her belonging to the Vanir, Freyja is not completely estranged from the warfare world. In fact, what is maybe the single feature that brings her closer to Valkyries and the Morrigan is her closeness with the battlefield. She resides in a hall called *Fólkvangr,* which means "People's Hall" or "Battlefield" and she holds the right to claim half the warriors who have fallen in battle, while the other half is brought to Odin by the Valkyries.[117] Chiesa Isnardi connects Freyja's link with battlefield with some sort of "bird nature" — unlike Morrigan, it is not a shapeshifting power, but a falcon costume, [118] a disguise that some sources attribute also to the previously mentioned Frigg.[119] Falcons were, in fact, associated to battles due to their predatory qualities and they appear in *kenningar*[120] designating crows, which, as I already mentioned, are known for being carrion birds frequently seen after battles.[121]

1.5. Conclusion

This chapter has been introduced by a brief presentation of Geoffrey of Monmouth and his work. *Vita Merlini* is especially relevant for this research for including, along with the prototype of the Arthurian Avalon, the first documented appearance of Morgen, which is believed to be the starting point for Morgan Le Fay. However, we as modern readers cannot be entirely sure if Morgan made her first appearance with Geoffrey of Monmouth. In fact, we have a wide overview on more ancient myths and folklore which allows us to go further back in time to find Morgan's origins. The most relevant are the Welsh and the Irish traditions, which are the source for the most important and best known

[116] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 34.
[117] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 285.
[118] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 285.
[119] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 214.
[120] "Kenning [is a] concise compound or figurative phrase replacing a common noun, especially in Old Germanic, Old Norse, and Old English poetry. […] Many kennings are allusions that become unintelligible to later generations. A non-Germanic analogue is the Homeric epithet". (britannica.com)
[121] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 554.

"foremothers" of the protagonist of this research, respectively Modron and Morrigan. As some scholars write, however, these two goddesses might be the result of mutual contamination, an exchange of legends and myths. Along with Modron and Morrigan, Welsh and Irish cultures offer several other lesser-known characters that might have provided features that influenced Morgan, such as the mermaid Liban. Moreover, other elements from the Gaulish and Breton traditions influenced the early portrait of Morgan, such as water goddesses and feminine guardian spirits. Lastly, Norse culture might have also played a role in shaping Morgan, with some feminine deities, the Valkyries in particular, who are remarkable for the similarities they share with their Celtic counterparts.

However, since these cultures possibly met in the course history, it might be also possible that they merged and influenced one another — or, on the contrary, they might have had common origins that acquired different nuances and unique characteristics as the communities developed and took shape. This chapter, in any case, has analysed only a part of the probable connections Morgan shares with more ancient figures of the European tradition. It might be indeed possible to identify more myths and legends belonging to other European populations of the past, as well as more examples from the cultures already taken into account, which contribute to create this "female pantheon in miniature".[122]

[122] Loomis, "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses", p. 200.

Chapter 2

The Malorian Morgan le Fay

Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* was written roughly three centuries after *Vita Merlini* and is most probably the most famous collection of Arthurian romances. It offers the best-known renditions of narratives and characters, including Morgan le Fay and her nasty deeds. This chapter aims to analyse how Malory deals with her. In addition, it compares Malory's Morgan to Geoffrey of Monmouth's Morgen and to her divine precursors, in order to understand which of the original features have been preserved over time, how this character changed and, possibly, why.

2.1. *Le Morte Darthur:* A Brief Introduction

Malory's life is curiously almost as uncertain as our sorceress' origins. We are not completely sure of who exactly Thomas Malory was, but critics agree on identifying him with a Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revell, and while the birthdate is uncertain, he probably died in prison in 1471.[1] In fact, he led a rather infamous life, scattered with several crimes, and his career as a knight eventually failed.[2] While practically nothing is known about his early years, except for his being knighted in 1441, if he is indeed this Sir Malory of Newbold Revell in Warwickshire, scholars have identified an uncle of his, Sir Robert, who was a member of the Hospitallers knights and, most notably, was the source of the inspiration for his nephew to write about knighthood.[3] He began writing during the 1460s and he chose to use prose, even though his English sources, such as the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, are all in verse.[4] Between *Le Morte Darthur* and the earliest sources, e.g. those taken into consideration in the previous chapter, there are in fact quite a number of French romances, which at the time knew a period of revival (they date to around two centuries before Malory's writing) and which were crucial for Malory's work —

[1] Hebert, pp. 65-66.
[2] Hebert, p. 65.
[3] Hebert, p. 65
[4] Malory, Sir Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, edited by Helen Cooper, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. ix.

e.g. the *Suite du Merlin*, the *Lancelot*, the *Tristan,* the *Queste del Saint Graal* and *La Morte le Roi Artu*.[5] However, Hebert observes that Malory's treatment of the Arthurian material might have been influenced both by having an Hospitaller uncle and by the tumultuous events that characterized his life. She remarks, that due to these reasons, "Malory's writing […] seems to reflect the knight's own simultaneous love for and disillusionment with the tenets of chivalry and how they are acted on and tested in actual life",[6]explaining the difficulties to maintain the idealistic standard expected from a knight in an uncertain world such as *Le Morte Darthur* depicts. Moreover, this premise might also serve as a justification for Morgan's behaviour in *Le Morte Darthur*. As I anticipated earlier, her portrayal in Malory radically differs from the one in *Vita Merlini* and might be influenced by the crisis that the chivalric ideals are experiencing in the text. Speaking of narrative style, which is obviously reflected on Morgan's portrayal as well, Helen Cooper points out how Malory presents actions and speech, without thoughts and motives from the character — it is mostly up to the reader to imagine the inner life of the characters through their actions and words.[7] In general, the style resembles a chronicle and "he [Malory] repeatedly insists on the fact that Arthurian adventures were a matter of record".[8] As for the audience, Malory's seems to be male, with an attentive eye to battle and chivalric deeds, in contrast with the female audience of French romances, which required more attention to the realm of emotions. However, although there is no woman warrior, women in Malory have rather an active role and, as I will analyse in this chapter, Morgan is no exception.

It should be noted that, as more than one version of *Le Morte Darthur* exists, the edition I refer to is edited by Helen Cooper, based on the Winchester Manuscript and rendered as close as possible to what contemporary readers might have seen. The edition is slightly abridged on the most digressive

[5] Hebert, p. 66.
[6] Hebert, p. 66.
[7] Malory, pp. xvii - xx.
[8] Malory, p. xvii.

passage and Arthur's campaign, which are however not a concern for this research, and adopts modernized spelling and punctuation.[9]

2.2. Enter Morgan Le Fay

When pinpointing each appearance of Morgan Le Fay throughout the unfolding narrative, we realize that she is clearly not the most ubiquitous character. However, her presence, even when she is not physically there, causes turmoil among the other characters and provoke agitation in the story without fail. I will analyse each episode in which Morgan appears, starting from the very first time Malory mentions her. In this case, she does not enter directly the scene, but she is nonetheless presented at the very beginning of the story, shortly after the marriage between Lady Igraine and King Uther Pendragon, Arthur's parents. Morgan, as well as her sister Morgause, is the daughter of Lady Igraine and her previous husband, the late Duke of Tintagel, and is introduced by the following passage:

> And the third sister Morgan le Fay was put to school in a nunnery, and there she learned so much that she was a great clerk of necromancy; and after she was wedded to King Uriens of the Land of Gore, that was Sir Uwain le Blanchemains' father. (p. 6)

In this small excerpt it is not specified whether she is the elder sister or not, even if the fact she is mentioned after Morgause might suggest that Morgan is younger, which would make her the middle sister once Arthur is born. Concerning this, as I already mentioned in the first chapter, she seems to replace Arthur's sister Anna, who is mentioned in *Historia Regum Britanniae*. The most interesting element of this short introduction is of course the mention of her education which, as Dalicia K. Raymond points out, is the most relevant element for the author too, even before her being the Queen consort of the Land of Gore.[10] She is schooled in an all-female, religious environment, but the area of interest she specialises in is rather peculiar and, in addition, is also the most relevant feature of this character, as suggested by her epithet, the magic-evoking "le Fay". Nowadays, as per Cambridge

[9] Malory, pp. xxiii-xxvi.
[10] Raymond, Dalicia K., "Motives, Means, and a Malevolent Mantel: The Case of Morgan le Fay's Transgressions in Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur" in Albrecht Classen, ed., *Magic and Magicians in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter. 2017, p. 559.

Dictionary definition, when we hear the word *necromancy* we think of "the act of communicating with the dead in order to discover what is going to happen in the future, or black magic", which suggests a rather macabre, if not explicitly negative, practice. In Malory's times, during the fifteenth century, the perception of this practice was equally negative, but was given an even more precise connotation. In the early Middle Ages magic practices were split into two distinct groups — necromancy, "divination […] by conjuring the spirit of the dead"[11], that might have included also the use of body parts and a more general work with demonic magic,[12] and "a widespread and diffuse system of common spells, charms, blessings, potions, powders and talismans".[13] The Church was initially only concerned with the former, but between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the distinction faded and both were restricted accordingly to the then developing theory of witchcraft.[14] Coming back to Morgan, it is not clear whether she is taught necromancy at the nunnery or whether she is so good a student that she dares to enter such a field of studies by herself. Raymond observes, however, that monks frequently used to own books of necromancy and it is not too far-fetched to think that Morgan was able to learn about it because she was in a nunnery, whether she had a teacher or not.[15] Two relevant items of information emerge from this introduction. First, as necromancy was "practiced by clerics above all others",[16] and the books where usually owned by monks, it is clearly a male-connotated form of magic, which determines a trespassing of roles that is typical of Morgan throughout the entirety of *Le Morte Darthur*,[17] as I will explain later in this chapter. Secondly, it exposes the danger of letting women out of their "appropriate sphere" to learn more than it is proper for them.[18] In addition to this, Maureen Fries underlines how Malory chooses to downscale Morgan's

[11] Saul, MaryLynn. "Malory's Morgan le Fay: The Danger of Unrestrained Feminine Power", *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 42 (2010), p. 87.
[12] Raymond, p. 561.
[13] Saul, p. 87.
[14] Saul, p. 87.
[15] Raymond, pp. 560-561.
[16] Saul, p. 87.
[17] Saul, p. 87.
[18] Fries, Maureen, "From the Lady to The Tramp: The Decline of Morgan le Fay in Medieval Romance", *Arthuriana*, 4 (1994), p. 10.

education in comparison to the French sources, according to which she is learned "in the seven arts".[19] French sources thus are closer to Geoffrey of Monmouth's text, in which Morgen seems to be cultured in the same way, since she is so expert in mathematics that she is able to teach it to her sisters.

What remains essentially unchanged from the myths where Modron is the protagonist is that both she and Morgan are mothers to Uwain and wives to Uriens, even though Uriens' kingdom changes from Rheged to the Land of Gore. In addition to this, it is almost taken for granted that theirs was not a marriage of love, but due to political convenience, as it was customary among the ruling class of the time. To exacerbate this, Morgan's love and care for her husband are quite debatable, as her behaviour in the story I will take into consideration suggests otherwise. As for her appearance, Malory gives us but a short line briefly remarking that "she was a fair lady as any might be" (p. 23) — neither ugly, nor extraordinary beautiful. The only thing the reader might assume is that she might be still fairly young for our standards, given the shorter life expectancy and the fact that her mother Igraine is still alive at this point of the story. Malory's Morgan, in any case, is different both from some of the folkloristic versions of Modron in which she is either a beautiful fay or a grotesque hag, and from later sources such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where Morgan is portrayed as an old crone.[20]

2.3. Of Swords and Scabbards

After the short introduction analysed above, the subsequent episodes start to delve into Morgan's real endeavours. Before examining the first of those, a short premise might be useful in order to understand what is happening. King Arthur has received his sword Excalibur, "Cut-steel", as a gift from the Lady of the Lake.[21] As Geraldine Heng remarks, swords are essential to male accomplishments and to outline male identities and force, but in this case it is curiously associated

[19] Fries, p. 10.
[20] Capps, p. x.
[21] Malory, p. 36.

to feminine ownership. The gifting of Excalibur to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake is the first of several otherworldly, feminine interventions in the King's life, deviating thus from the early, very well-known motif of acquiring the sword by drawing it from the stone or anvil.[22] However, Excalibur's scabbard is even more important than the sword itself, due to its unique power to protect its owner from every wound, as Merlin carefully and repeatedly explains to Arthur:

> "Sir"; said Merlin, "Look ye keep well the scabbard of Excalibur, for ye shall lose no blood while ye have the scabbard upon you, though ye have as many wounds upon you as ye may have." (p. 41)

Merlin repeats it a second time, adding a prophecy about what it is to befall to Arthur next:

> And so he told the King many things that should befall, but always he warned the King to keep well his sword and the scabbard, for the told him how the sword and scabbard should be stolen by a woman from him, that he most trusted. (p. 58)

From Merlin's words, we discover two crucial elements of the story — first, that Morgan has in mind to steal both sword and scabbard from her brother, and secondly, that Arthur does not suspect any evil doings from her and, on the contrary, trusts her greatly. After the short introduction I quoted above, included in the very first pages of *Le Morte Darthur,* Malory does not tell the readers anything else about Morgan until this point. We have thus no idea about the relationship between the two siblings, although we may suppose that it was good, given the trust Arthur grants her. Instead, what Morgan feels remains obscure and we have nothing to make assumptions on; we do not even know whether she has always been evil-minded or whether at one point something made their relationship deteriorate instead. However, Laura Calvo Zafra offers an interest insight on how the brother and sister bond was perceived in the Middle Ages and that might give us an idea of how this relationship might have been perceived by Malory's readers. Calvo Zafra underlines that the bond between siblings was very important among the kin relationships, even more, as in Arthur and Morgan's case, in noble households.[23] What Morgan is about to betray is a "sacred bond" where the aforementioned

[22] Heng, Geraldine, "Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory", in Fenster, Thelma S., ed., *Arthurian Women*, New York and London: Routledge, 2000, p. 98.
[23] Calvo Zafra, Laura, "The Female Figure as the Antagonist in the Arthurian World: The Role of Morgan le Fay in Thomas Malory´s Morte Darthur", Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona: English Studies Thesis, 2015, p. 8.

trust finds a strong basis. She also adds that "brother and sister relationships tend to be based on extreme loyalty, which goes even further than the loyalty expected in marriages"[24] — at this point of the story, Arthur is already married to Guinevere and this would mean that he holds Morgan in higher consideration than his wife. In addition to this, older sisters were traditionally nurturing towards their brothers, while brothers protected their sisters' honour[25] — Malory provides us no detail about this either, but this might have been the case for Arthur and Morgan as well.

Morgan's first action is therefore betrayal without any explicit reason. Before advancing a hypothesis about the reasons of her hatred and analysing the consequences of her theft, it is appropriate to consider how the action unfolds. In the edition of *Le Morte Darthur* I use, the episode is preceded, in the previous chapter, by the first warning Merlin gives to king Arthur and a summary of the events that will happen soon after:

> So, after great trust, Arthur betook the scabbard unto Morgan Le Fay his sister, and she loved another knight better than her husband King Uriens or King Arthur. And she would have had Arthur her brother slain, and therefore she let make another scabbard for Excalibur like it by enchantment, and gave the scabbard Excalibur to her love; and the knight's name was called Accolon, that after had near slain King Arthur. But after this Merlin told unto King Arthur of the prophecy that there should be a great battle beside Salisbury, and Mordred his own son should be against him. (p. 41)

From this passage, we can retrieve several items of information about Morgan. First, she is unfaithful to her husband, since she has a lover named Accolon whom she has in higher consideration than her own brother and is seemingly the hand that will perform the assassination attempt. She unfolds her betrayal to her brother's "great trust" by making an exact copy of Excalibur and its enchanted scabbard in order to give Accolon the original without Arthur suspecting anything. By doing so, she is allowing her lover to wound and possibly kill the King. However, Merlin offers King Arthur another prophecy, which hints at the fact that Morgan's attempt is eventually going to fail, since Arthur will be the protagonist of another battle near Salisbury in the near future, against his own son — the one in which he will be killed, also because of not having his protective scabbard anymore.

[24] Calvo Zafra, p. 8.
[25] Calvo Zafra, p. 8.

The episode begins with the "three men of Morgan Le Fay", King Arthur, King Uriens and Sir Accolon of Gaul, hunting a "great hart" (p. 61). They chase it for so long that they get separated from the rest of their fellowship and their horses die of exhaustion, so they are forced to proceed on foot to reach some kind of lodging. Suddenly, a small ship appears on the water nearby and there is oddly "no earthly creature therein" (p. 61). Once on board, the three men can see how the ship is enriched with silk drapery and they are served a rich meal by twelve damsels before being led to their chambers. After a good night's sleep, each wakes up in a different place — King Uriens wakes up "in Camelot abed in his wife's arms, Morgan le Fay" (p. 61), King Arthur "in a dark prison" (p. 61) and Sir Accolon "by a deep well's side […] in great peril of death" (p. 61). What has happened is unclear, but we have a clue about the culprit. King Arthur is informed by the other imprisoned knights of a dispute between Sir Outlake and his brother, the treacherous Sir Damas. No one wants to fight for Sir Damas and at this point a damsel appears, offering King Arthur his freedom as a reward if he is willing to fight for him. Even if King Arthur accepts, he realises that the damsel has lied to him — she has told him that she is the lord of the castle's daughter, but Arthur recognises her as "one of the damosels of Morgan le Fay" (p. 63). There is no other evidence that Morgan is responsible for the ship deceit, but the presence of one of her damsels, along with what is to happen next, might as well raise suspicions in the readers. We do not know how exactly King Arthur lost his sword either, even if we might suppose that it has been taken away when he was put in prison, but we do know how Sir Accolon receives it. He is reached by a dwarf, who informs him that it was Queen Morgan Le Fay that has sent him there with a message for Accolon:

> "And she greets you well, and biddeth you be of strong heart, for ye shall fight tomorrow with a knight at the hour of prime. And therefore she has sent thee Excalibur, Arthur's sword, and the scabbard, and she biddeth you as ye love her that ye do that battle to the uttermost, without any mercy, like as ye promised her when ye spoke last together in private. And what damosel that bringeth her the knight's head, which ye shall fight withal, she will make her a queen." (p. 64)

These lines underline the relationship between Sir Accolon and Morgan, since they had an encounter in order to speak "together in private". Furthermore, Morgan seems to be appealing to his love for her to encourage him to perpetrate her plan. The two have apparently already spoken about a fight

Sir Accolon should undertake, but apparently, he has not been told the identity of the knight he should be fighting against. However, he accepts without complaint:

> "Recommend me unto my lady the queen, and tell her that all shall be done that I promised her, and else I will die for it. Now I suppose", said Accolon, "she hath made all these crafts and enchantment for this battle": (p. 64)

He is well aware that Morgan is an enchantress, but either he does not grasp any evil intention from Morgan or he is a willing accomplice to her deeds — however, at this point of the story, we may only assume that, given their relationship, he is ready to fulfill any request Morgan has and, as he says, to be true to his promise. "By the means of Morgan Le Fay" (p. 64), he is lodged at Sir Outlake's. There he learns that Sir Outlake has been wounded and he will not be able to fight against Sir Damas. Since Sir Accolon has received both sword and scabbard from Morgan, he feels safe enough to fight in Sir Outlake's place. In the meanwhile, Morgan has arranged the substitution of King Arthur's sword without him realizing:

> And right as Arthur was on horseback there came a damosel form Morgan le Fay, and brought unto Sir Arthur a sword like unto Excalibur, and the scabbard, and said unto Arthur, "She sends here your sword for great love". And he thanked her, and weened it had been so; but she was false, for the sword and the scabbard was counterfeit, and brittle, and false. (p. 65)

King Arthur still places his full trust on his sister, believing she has sent it "for great love", and he is thankful to have received Excalibur back. There is one person, though, who is aware of what is really happening, the Lady of the Lake. She is planning to halt Morgan's plan, as Malory explains:

> The meanwhile that they were thus at the battle, came the Damosel of the Lake into the field, that put Merlin under the stone; and she came tither for the love of King Arthur; for she know how Morgan le Fay had ordained, for Arthur should have been slain that day, and therefore she came to save his life. (p. 65)

The Lady is swift in reaching the battleground, where King Arthur and Sir Accolon are fighting relentlessly. The King is coming off worst due of his lack of protection from the scabbard and having but a counterfeit sword. In seeing that Arthur is being wounded and Accolon is threatening him with death, the Lady of the Lake has "great pity that so good a knight and such a man of worship should be so destroyed" (p. 67). Thus, by means of enchantment, she makes Excalibur slip out of Sir Accolon's hand so that King Arthur might retrieve it.

At this point, it is worth introducing a short digression on the Lady of the Lake's character. As Maureen Fries writes, she is the "split-off and modified avatar" of Morgan le Fay. [26] In a way, she is more similar to Geoffrey of Monmouth's Morgen than Morgan herself. First, there is not only one Lady of the Lake throughout the narration, but an indefinite number of Ladies and Damosels of the Lake, akin to Morgen and her sisters. In addition, both the Ladies of the Lake and the earliest versions of Morgan share a clear connection with water. What is even more important is their strongly positive function, "mainly pro-Arthur and Arthurian and anti-Morgan and/or other spoilers or disrupters of Arthurian harmony".[27] In the stolen sword episode, it is Nenive who comes forth and helps King Arthur and it is but the first time in which the Lady of the Lake foils Morgan's plans. Moreover, she and Morgan can be considered equally skilled in performing enchantments, even though they use them for diametrically opposite purposes most of the time. In fact, Nenive is portrayed using her magic also in a more debatable way, since she uses it to trap Merlin under a stone just before the episode of Excalibur's theft — however, since her purpose is to get rid of Merlin's undesired attentions, her enchantment might not have ultimately had too evil an intention.

After the intervention of the Lady of the Lake, the fight between King Arthur and Sir Accolon briefly resumes. Arthur spares no blow and announces that he will "slain him" (p. 67), a moment before wounding him. Only at this point, the King recognises Sir Accolon and starts to understand about what happened:

> Then was Arthur more dismayed than he was beforehand, for then he remembered him of his sister Morgan Le Fay, and the enchantment of the ship. (p. 67)

Arthur seems to suspect that the whole affair is a wrongdoing orchestrated by his sister and asks Accolon what exactly has led to their fight. Sir Accolon promptly gives his version to "the best knight he ever found" (p. 67), even though he does not know yet that he is speaking to his King:

> This sword hath been in my keeping the most part of this twelvemonth; and Morgan Le Fay, King Uriens' wife, sent it me yesterday by a dwarf, to the intent to slay King Arthur, her brother — for ye shall understand

[26] Fries, p. 3.
[27] Fries, p. 13.

> that King Arthur is the man in the world that she hateth the most, because he is most of worship and of prowess of any of her blood. Also she loveth me out of measure as paramour, and I her again; and if she might bring about to slay Arthur by her crafts, she would slay her husband King Uriens lightly. And then had she devised to have me king in this land, and so to reign, and she to be my queen. (p. 68)

In the readers' perspective, it is clear he is telling the truth. Most notably, he is providing us with the most complete insight on Morgan's thoughts and purposes we have read so far. We discover that she hates her brother with a passion and we may assume that she is quite the resentful type when it comes to the hierarchy of her kin. Sure enough, she is driven by the fact that no one else in her family, let alone herself, is as loved as King Arthur — we do not know whether it is only the devotion she craves or the political power as well, but envy appears to be certainly there. As a consequence, she is planning not only to have her brother killed, but also to free herself from her own husband, King Uriens, in order to be able to reign in King Arthur's place and with Accolon at her side. Speaking of this, Sir Accolon also admits candidly the affair between him and Morgan. If we are to trust his words, their sentiment is true, even though at this point, given Morgan's *modus operandi*, we might get at least a doubt that Accolon might be one of her pawns as well. It is only then that Arthur reveals Accolon his identity and, when the latter begs for mercy, the King concedes — not without underlining that, even if he understands that it is not completely Accolon's fault, he is a traitor nonetheless. However, the King's rage is directed mainly towards his sister:

> But I wite thee the less, for my sister Morgan Le Fay by her false craft made thee to agree to her false lusts. But I shall be sore avenged upon her, that all Christendom shall speak of it. God knoweth I have honoured her and worshipped her more than all my kin, and more have I trusted her than my wife and all my kin after. (p. 68)

Arthur says that Morgan's treacherous skills are to blame and Sir Accolon has been deceived and compelled to fulfill Morgan's requests through said skills. His trust has been betrayed and he remarks how high the consideration he held his sister in was — confirming what Calvo Zafra writes, as I explained above, this bond was indeed deeper than any other, even more than with the rest of his family and his own wife. In any case, this excerpt, like all the others mentioning their relationship. does not explain the reason of so deep a bond between the two — readers might wonder why it was apparently so only with Morgan and not with his other sister, Morgause, as well. However, Arthur

underlines that her crimes will not remain unpunished and will be exemplarily avenged. How the King's vengeance is executed is soon explained. Even if the king granted him mercy, Sir Accolon eventually dies because of the wounds he received and King Arthur gets the chance to seek revenge for the conspiracy against him:

> So when Accolon was dead he let send him in a horse-bier with six knights unto Camelot and bade, "Bear him unto my sister Morgan Le Fay, and say that I send her him as a present. And tell her I have my sword Excalibur and the scabbard". (p. 70)

Once the lifeless body of Sir Accolon reaches its destination, Morgan's reaction is natural for a person who has just received such news, yet surprising, given how she has been portrayed until this moment:

> But when Queen Morgan wist that Accolon was dead , she was so sorrowful that nigh her heart tobrast; but because she would not it were known out, she kept her countenance, and made no semblant of dole. (p. 71)

This is one of the few occasions in which Malory describe his characters' feelings without letting the characters' action explain them and he makes clear that Morgan feels heartbroken for Accolon's loss ("she was so sorrowful that nigh her heart tobrast"). Even if there might be also a hint of regret for the failure of her plan, there is no doubt about the sorrow she feels for her lover's death. Nonetheless, she is careful to hide her grief in order not to expose the fact that Sir Accolon was her lover. Considering her reaction, even if it is kept on check, and the fact that Arthur has chosen to present Accolon's body as a "present" for her in an act of vengeance, it is safe to assume that, as deceitful as Morgan can be, she is at least sincere in her love towards her knight. For sure, she loves him more than her own husband, whom risks to fall victim of her plots shortly before the sorrowful news arrives at court.

Sure enough, before this turn of events Morgan is confident that Arthur has been killed and is ready to perform herself the last part of her plan — getting rid of the cumbersome presence of King Uriens in order to rule side by side with her lover:

> The meanwhile Morgan le Fay had weened King Arthur had been dead. So on a day she espied King Uriens lay asleep on his bed, then she called unto her maiden of her counsel and said, "Go fetch me my lord's sword, for I saw never better time to slay him than now". (p. 70)

The maiden does not dare to contradict her lady's order and goes to fetch the sword. However, she does not intend to let Morgan kill Uriens, so she goes to their son, Sir Uwain, and warns him of his mother's plan. He tells the damsel to do as she was requested, while he will deal with the situation. Scholars have noticed how this part of the episode stands out when taking Morgan's action into consideration. First, this is her second challenge to the rule of marriage — she has a lover and now she is attempting to her husband's life.[28] Moreover, while until this moment Morgan has acted through feminine means, specifically relying on a knight acting on her behalf, she is now acting with masculine means — that is, acting personally with a sword in hand.[29] She is indeed trespassing the boundaries imposed on her for being a woman by taking possession of a markedly masculine symbol such as King Uriens' sword. In the following quotation, Raymond explains very clearly what Morgan's action means and why Morgan might be considered such a dangerous woman:

> Swords are phallic symbols, and Morgan, having been given to King Uriens in matrimony, would have been subject to his phallic desires, so the use of his own sword, a symbol for his marital and martial prowess, against him shows her confiscation of his masculinity and her use of masculine means against him. (p. 556)

She is quick and methodical to act once her apparently compliant maiden brings her Uriens' sword — with the weapon in hand she "went boldy unto the bed's side" (p. 71) and takes her time to decide "how and where she might slay him best" (p. 71). Unaware that her plan has already begun to fail, she is careful to take all necessary action in order to succeed. She does not know that Sir Uwain is already there and he surprises her by stopping her as soon as she raises the sword. An exchange between mother and son ensues and it is notably meaningful for the portrayal of Morgan offered in Malory's work:

> And as she heaved up the sword to smite, Sir Uwain leapt unto his mother and caught her by the hand and said, "Ah, fiend, what wilt thou do? And thou were not my mother, with this sword I should smite off thy head. Ah", said Sir Uwain, "men said that Merlin was begotten of a fiend, but I may say an earthly fiend bore me."
> "Ah, fair son Uwain, have mercy upon me! I was tempted with a fiend, wherefore I cry thee mercy. I will never more do so; and save my worship and discover me not." (p. 71)

[28] Calvo Zafra, p. 19.
[29] Raymond, pp. 555-556.

Sir Uwain is obviously outraged and accuses his mother to be no less than a devil. This definition establishes an interesting link with Merlin, since he is said to be a devil's son — on the other hand, Morgan is an "earthly fiend", an epithet defined by Heng as "a suitable description perhaps for one who is ultimately an overreacher".[30] However, he chooses to have mercy, firstly because of their relationship, and then because Morgan claims that it is not her own fault for acting so thoughtlessly towards her husband, but it was the temptation of a fiend. This excerpt is particularly symptomatic of the attitude towards women and especially alleged witches at the time Malory composed *Le Morte Darthur* and that might thus justify a negative deviation in Morgan's character. Suffice it to know that "the definitive manual for witch hunting",[31] the *Malleus Maleficarum*, was published in 1486, shortly after *Le Morte Darthur* — however, it is only the most famous work on the matter, but there are earlier treatises as well.[32] The *Malleus Maleficarum*'s authors, Sprenger and Kramer, state that "For the basis of all the faults of women is greed",[33] meaning that women acting upon ambition and desire are to be considered transgressors of the social norms, along with "When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil thoughts".[34] These two quotes compose a fitting description of Morgan le Fay's behaviour and her claims to power. Saul underlines that in the eyes of medieval men, the attempted murder of Morgan's husband is the perfect example of the evil women are capable of, and that her subsequent behaviour would have been expected as well. Morgan is in fact almost claiming her innocence in taking the fault off herself and blaming a tempting fiend instead, that means she is "possessed by a demon and out of her right mind"[35]. Sir Uwain believes his mother's version and spares her life, even though is reaction is mild compared to the fate awaiting women who stipulate a pact with the Devil. According to contemporary demonologists, the only chance for these women to have their soul saved would be to be arrested and executed even in the case in which they choose to

[30] Heng, p. 107.
[31] Saul, p. 86.
[32] Saul, p. 86.
[33] Saul, p. 88.
[34] Saul, p. 88.
[35] Hebert, p. 70.

recant.[36] Furthermore, the *Malleus Maleficarum* underlines that, even if a woman falls under the Devil's temptation, the responsibility remains hers because it is her free will that allows her the choice to accept or refuse the pact.[37] However, in the case of Uwain's moderate reaction, it might be also due of the fact that he is completely unaware of his mother's complex plan and he does not realize that she is lying to him.[38] To reinforce the demonologists' thesis, since Morgan has not recanted nor has received an exemplary punishment, it is no surprise to see her continuing to pursue her plan and attempt a different approach once she realizes she failed the first time.

Morgan chooses a more direct approach to attack King Arthur a second time. She rides "all that day and most of the night" (p. 71) after asking Queen Guinevere permission to leave to go back to her country in order to reach the "abbey of nuns" (p. 71) where the King is resting after the battle. She asks the nuns where he is and once she learns that he is asleep in his bed, she orders the nuns to "not awake him till she do" (p. 71). Morgan is thus free to act undisturbed and sets her plan into motion:

> And then she alit off her horse, and thought for to steal away Excalibur his sword. And she went straight unto his chamber, and no man durst disobey her commandment. And there she found Arthur asleep on his bed, and Excalibur in his right hand naked. When she saw that, she was passing heavy that she might not come by the sword without she had awaked him, and then she wist well she had been dead. So she took the scabbard and went her way on horseback. (pp. 71-72)

Morgan's plan encounters a setback once again. She does not expect to find Arthur asleep with his sword in hand and she knows better than to simply slip it out — after receiving Accolon's body as a present accompanied by the King's regards, she knows that Arthur is aware of her plot and that he will not hesitate to kill her if he caught her red handed. Therefore, Morgan opts in favour of stealing only the scabbard — as an enchanted object with the purpose to protect King Arthur, she might consider it enough damage. Raymond gives Morgan's choice an interesting interpretation. She observes that Morgan does not steal the masculine, phallic symbol, the sword, but the scabbard, which

[36] Saul, p. 89.
[37] Saul, pp. 90-91.
[38] Saul, p. 89.

on the contrary can be considered a feminine, yonic[39] symbol.[40] The protective function of the scabbard connects Morgan with her origin as a skilled healer and, in addition to this, her reclaiming the scabbard symbolizes her reclamation of her own identity as a woman.[41] Therefore, in Raymond's interpretation, this provides an explanation for Morgan's behaviour, which is driven by "a desire for ownership over herself":[42]

Coming back to the story, Morgan manages to ride away with the scabbard and Arthur does not realize the theft until he wakes up. He asks if someone entered his chamber during his sleep and the nuns answer that "Queen Morgan le Fay had been there, and had put the scabbard under her mantle" (p. 72). The news angers the King, who reprimands the nuns accusing them of having watched him "falsely" (p. 72). Promptly, the nuns reply that they did not dare to disobey Morgan's orders. Thus, King Arthur decides to depart as quickly as he can, in order to reach his sister and recover his scabbard. He encounters a cowherd and when asked, the man tells him that he has indeed seen a woman riding towards the forest with forty horses. Arthur follows the cowherd's directions and finally "has a sight of Morgan le Fay" (p. 72), chasing her as fast as he can. Morgan, however, realizes she is pursued:

> When she espied him following her, she rode a great pace through the forest till she came to a plain. And when she saw she might not escape, she rode unto a lake thereby, and said, "Whatsoever come of me, my brother shall not have this scabbard." And then she let throw the scabbard in the deepest of the water. So it sank, for it was heavy of gold and precious stones. (p. 72)

She realizes that Arthur is getting closer and she begins to think that her escape is not to be taken for granted after all. Therefore, she decides to get rid of the scabbard in order to have the certainty that her brother will not be able to retrieve it. At this point, she seems more concerned with creating damage to King Arthur rather than being successful in taking the power for herself. She decides to throw the scabbard into a nearby lake, accompanying the gesture with a phrase that might sound

[39] A stylized representation of the female genitalia, from the Sanskrit *yoni*, vulva. (Merriam-Webster dictionary)
[40] Raymond, p. 557.
[41] Raymond. p. 558.
[42] Raymond. p. 558.

almost like a magic formula. Her choice of throwing the scabbard into the lake might be the result of simply finding by chance a suitable place to hide it forever, but it might as well be more meaningful than that. As I mentioned, Excalibur is given to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake and the fact that the scabbard now returns to the water might remind the reader of where the King's weapon comes from. Moreover, the whole ordeal of hiding the scabbard might serve as a reminiscence of the water-connection of the mythical figures included in Morgan's composite origins. In addition to this, Morgan's gesture might also count as a foreshadowing of the epilogue of *Le Morte Darthur*. In fact, the mortally wounded Arthur asks Sir Bedivere to throw Excalibur into the lake, where "an arm and a hand above the water" (p. 515) takes it and shakes it thrice before vanishing under the surface along with the sword. This might be symbolic of the fact that it is due to the loss of the scabbard that Arthur is made vulnerable and receives the wound that causes his death.

After the scabbard is safely hidden at the bottom of the lake, Morgan tries to reach safety. Once again, she taps into her magical skills to hide herself from Arthur, who is still on the chase and is getting closer:

> Then she rode into a valley where many great stones were, and when she saw she must be overtaken, she shaped herself, horse and man, by enchantment unto great marbles stones. (p. 72)

Disguised as a stone, she goes unnoticed when Arthur reaches the valley. He looks around searching for the scabbard, but he does not manage to find it nor does he find traces of his sister. As written by Hebert, until this moment Morgan is a "metaphorical" shapeshifter, as "she manipulates stereotypes, deploying a 'woman's' adaptability and unpredictability and a 'man's' resolution".[43] This is really clear in this whole episode, especially when she attempts to kill King Uriens, as she is strongly challenging the social norms she is expected to obey, from disrupting the sacred bond of marriage and trespassing gender roles to attempting murder by using strictly masculine means. Instead, now Morgan displays her ability to be physically a shapeshifter, an ability that even the Lady of the Lady

[43] Hebert, p. 72.

does not have — in fact, in *Le Morte Darthur*, only Merlin shares this skill with Morgan.[44] If the previous section of this story is influenced by the witch trials of the time it was written, this might not be the case for this episode of shapeshifting. Saul observes that it is not common to find instances of shapeshifting in witch trials reports and when instead there is some mention of it, "it usually involved the witch becoming an animal, most often a wolf or a cat"[45] and it is not the case here. Therefore, Morgan's shapeshifting might owe less to contemporary theory and more to the earlier Celtic tradition I described in the first chapter. Indeed, Morgan escaping from Arthur closely resembles the Morrigan eluding Cuchulainn.[46] The Morrigan too steals something (a cow) while Cuchulainn is asleep and when discovered and threatened, she escapes by shapeshifting into a blackbird. This is the most strikingly similar episode, but, as I wrote in the previous chapter, there are several other occasions on which the Morrigan meets Cuchulainn in a shape different than her own.

Arthur gives up the search for his sister, unable to distinguish people from stones, and Morgan escapes successfully towards the Land of Gore, where she is "richly received" (p. 73). There she makes "her castles and towns strong, for always she dreaded much King Arthur" (p. 73). Indeed, the King does not consider the issue solved, as he once again promises revenge and, in addition, "many knights wished her [Morgan] burnt" (p. 73), in typical fifteenth century fashion. However, it is significant to underline that Morgan has her own castle given to her by Arthur himself,[47] which works as a "metonym for Morgan's power".[48] The castle as a symbol, as Saul remarks, can be read in two ways. On one hand, the enclosed spaces evoke a feminine presence that is necessary to guarantee harmony, stability and potentially an heir.[49] On the other hand, since the castle stands for Morgan's power, she is once again reversing the gender role it is expected from her — she does not perform a strictly domestic function, despite the fact that she actually has an heir and she seems to assume

[44] Saul, p. 91.
[45] Saul, p. 91.
[46] Saul, pp. 90-91.
[47] Saul, p. 92.
[48] Saul, p. 93.
[49] Saul, pp. 92-93.

instead the role of the lord of the castle.[50] Sure enough, she is not discouraged by the fact that her grand plan has achieved only minimal damage in comparison to what she estimated, and it is from her castle that she launches her next attack.

2.4. Evil Mantles, Kidnappings and Other Misdeeds

After Accolon's death, Morgan's presence is less conspicuous throughout the text. She chooses also to take more direct action, as exemplified by her going personally to steal Arthur's sword in order to at least dishonour him.[51] As I have written above, after that she is ready to strike again personally, but from the safety of her castle. She is then back at using more feminine means, namely deception, which do not require her physical presence like the masculine ones, such as the sword, would do.[52] Once again, she proves her ability of "social shapeshifting" and disguises her true intentions. This time she feigns repentance for what she has done and sends a gift to her brother as a sign of reconciliation:

> So on the morn there came a damosel on message from Morgan le Fay to the King, and she brought with her the richest mantle that ever was seen in court, for it was set all full of precious stones as one might stand by another, and therein were the richest stones that ever the King saw. And the damosel said, "Your sister sendeth you this mantle and desireth that ye should take this gift of her; and what thing she hat offended, she will amend it at your own pleasure. (p. 73)

Not only does Morgan send a gift, but she also sends word that she is ready to do whatever Arthur asks her in order to amend the offence she has inflicted him. The King appears to be pleased with the magnificence of the mantle, even though he does not comment. However, he does not seem to realize any hidden malevolent intent — perhaps, he wants to think of Morgan as truly repentant, in the name of the profound trust he once placed in his sister. At this point, the Damosel of the Lake intervenes and once again it seems that the Lady of the Lake (or the Damosel in her behalf) is the only one that

[50] Saul, pp. 92-93.
[51] Raymond, p. 556.
[52] Raymond, p. 558.

can counterbalance Morgan's destructive power towards King Arthur.[53] She asks to speak with him in private, as she has a warning to give him:

> "Sir," said this damosel, "put not upon 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." (p. 73)

The reason for the Damosel's concern is soon explained. King Arthur calls for the maiden that arrived at court bringing Morgan's gift and asks her to try on the mantle, insisting on it when she first refuses. She finally wears it and the consequences take the bystanders by surprise:

> And so the King made to put it upon her, and forthwith she fell down dead, and never spoke a word after, and burnt to coals. (p. 73)

The maiden is instantly turned into ashes by what is clearly another enchanted object, making enchantment the common thread for all of Morgan's misdeeds. Saul acknowledges the irony of the gift — the mantle's purpose is to burn Arthur, which was the customary punishment for witches (even if it was more common in continental Europe than in England) and what many knights wish for Morgan.[54] However, Raymond remarks that, even though deception is in fact a feminine strategy to achieve a goal, in the case of *Le Morte Darthur*, magic does not belong for certain either to the feminine or the male field of action — too few a character have this tool available in order to decide to which gender to associate it.[55]

At this point, King Arthur cannot continue to ignore the problem that is afflicting his court and decides to act against it in order to prevent other attacks. Therefore, he decides to confront King Uriens on the matter:

> "My sister, your wife, is always about to betray me , and well I wot either ye, or my nephew, your son, is of counsel with her to have me destroyed. But as for you," said the King unto King Uriens, "I deem not greatly that ye be of counsel, for Accolon confessed to me by his own mouth that she would have destroyed you as well as me, therefore I hold you excused- But as for your son, Sir Uwain, I hold him suspect; therefore I charge you, put him out of my court". (p. 74)

[53] Calvo Zafra, p. 15.
[54] Saul, p. 92.
[55] Raymond, pp. 558-559.

King Arthur reveals to King Uriens that Morgan has been plotting against them both. Arthur thought that Uriens might have been involved as well, before hearing from Accolon that Uriens is just another target of the conspiracy, since Morgan wants both dead. However, he does not trust his own nephew, Uwain — perhaps, according to the fifteenth century views on the matter I mentioned earlier, he might deem his reaction too mild not to suspect he might play a part in this plot. Thus, King Arthur orders King Uriens to distance his son from the court. Therefore, Morgan's actions cause the loss of not only one knight from the court, but two, as Arthur's other nephew Gawain, Morgause's son, decides to leave with Uwain. At this point, it is obvious that Morgan is banished from the court as well, in the attempt to defend it from the danger she poses. She is, in fact, the only threat worrying the court with her constant plotting against it — at this point of the story, there is no other danger with this power to disrupt the order of society.[56] As I have already mentioned, she challenges the *status quo* and trespasses the rules that medieval society expects her to obey and a woman with this kind of power is far too dangerous to be granted free access to the royal court. However, Morgan is already used to acting from the margins, as she is never the most present character on the scene, and this estrangement is not enough to stop her. Her being more distant makes her even more elusive and thus, even more difficult to subdue.[57] Indeed, she is ready to strike again, even if her targets slightly shift from this point forward.

The next episode, in fact, has Sir Lancelot as a protagonist instead of the Kings whom Morgan attempts to dethrone. We are not given a clear reason why she turns against one of the most famous of King Arthur's knights and once again we might only speculate. Perhaps attacking Lancelot might be a ploy to indirectly damage Arthur. On the other hand, given how the narrative develops, as I will soon explain it might suggest that for Morgan it is only a game played out of lust or, instead, a device to test Lancelot's faithfulness to Guinevere. However, before describing the events, it is worth taking

[56] Calvo Zafra, p. 14.
[57] Calvo Zafra, p. 14.

into consideration the circumstances in which the events unfold. The story begins with Lancelot taken by surprise by Morgan's misdeed, as he is asleep:

> Speak we of Sir Lancelot du Lake that lieth under the apple tree sleeping about the noon. So there came by him four queens of great estate; and for the heat should not nigh them, there rode four knights about them and bore a cloth of green silk on four spears betwixt them and the sun. And the queens rode on four white mules. Then they looked and were ware of a sleeping knight lay all armed under an apple tree. And anon as they looked on his face, they knew well it was Sir Lancelot, and began to strive for that knight; and each of them said they would have him to her love. (p. 97)

The first line alone provides several items of information about the circumstances and, possibly, provides a connection to Morgan's most ancient origins. First, it is worth mentioning that the shadow of various trees was thought to have dangerous effect on those who ventured under it since classical times. For example, several authors, such as Dioscorides and Pliny the Elder, claim the association of yew trees' shadow with death and the walnut trees' shadow with causing headaches to humans and death to other plants.[58] In general, trees' shadows are considered to have a "disruptive influence over the regular course of the natural world".[59] In addition to this, apple trees like the one Lancelot is sleeping underneath are typically linked with the Celtic Otherworld[60] and, as I explained in the first chapter, are deeply connected with Avalon, the Island of Apples. Moreover, encounters of erotic or otherworldly nature, for example a group of fairies, under a tree are also typical of the medieval English tradition, as it is possible to read, for instance, in the lays of *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Launfal*.[61] The time of the day in which this event happens is also relevant — both folklore and Christian sources mark noon as a dangerous time,[62] which favours the encounters with the supernatural.[63] It is at this time that the uncanny procession appears and approaches the sleeping Sir Lancelot, with four knights escorting four queens riding white mules. In that regard, white mounts and possibly white clothes

[58] Jirsa, Curtis R. H., "In the Shadow of the Ympe-tre: Arboreal Folklore in *Sir Orfeo*", *English Studies*, 89 (2008), pp. 144-145.
[59] Jirsa, p. 146.
[60] Burrow, J.A., Turville-Petre, Thorlac, *A Book of Middle English*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, p. 116.
[61] Jirsa. p. 142.
[62] Laskaya, Anna, Salinsbury, Eve, ed., "Sir Orfeo", https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-orfeo (accessed 27 December 2020)
[63] Burrow, Turville-Petre, p. 116.

worn by these otherworldly figures "are common in romance and dream vision literature".[64] Given all of this, we are provided with several elements that justify Morgan's epithet le Fay, and with a reminder of who she used to be in the ancient tradition before becoming a medieval witch to be burnt at the stake. However, her behaviour in this episode is not completely unrelated to fifteenth century witchcraft theory, as I will explain later. Soon enough, Morgan explains to Lancelot what is happening:

> "We shall not strive," said Morgan le Fay, that was King Arthur's sister. "I shall put an enchantment upon him that he shall not awake of all these seven hours, and then I will lead him away unto my castle. And when he is surely within my hold, I shall take the enchantment from him, and then let him choose which of us he will have unto paramour." (p. 98)

Morgan is introduced as the first of these four dames and encourages her fellow ladies not to quarrel — shortly before they are indeed presented arguing as "each of them said they would have him to her love" (p. 97). Morgan poses herself as a mediator and explains them that she will enchant Lancelot in order to carry him still asleep to her castle and let him awake only when he is safely in her hold. Only then will he be able to choose his lover among the four ladies in a sort of "who's-the-fairest of-us-all" ploy or, to quote a classical myth, a medieval version of the Judgement of Paris.[65] However, his power of choice is rather limited, as Morgan and the other queens explain directly to him:

> "Sir knight," the four queens said, "thou must understand thou art our prisoner. And we know thee well that thou art Sir Lancelot du Lake, King Ban's son; and because that we understand your worthiness, that thou art the noblest knight living, and also we know well there can no lady have thy love but one, and that is Queen Guenivere, and now thou shalt lose her love for ever and she thine. For it behoveth thee now to choose one of us four: for I am Queen Morgan le Fay, queen of the land of Gore; and here is the Queen of Northgales, and the Queen of Eastland, and the Queen of the Out Isles. Now choose one of us which thou wilt have to thy paramour, or else to die in this prison" (p. 98)

Lancelot's choice is thus only between choosing amongst the four queens and death in prison — he has not the option to refuse and he should better forget about Guinevere's love. Morgan then introduces the other queens, identifying them by the land they rule on. We know little about them and it might be quite far-fetched to assimilate them to Morgen's sisters in *Vita Merlini*, but we can retrieve

[64] Laskaya, Salinsbury.
[65] Fries, p. 12.

a few details through Lancelot's words. As a righteous knight, Lancelot obviously refuses their offer and calls them "false enchanters" (p. 98) and later admits that he is "afraid of these queens' craft, for they have destroyed many a good knight" (p. 99). Therefore, we may assume that all the four women use witchcraft in some measure, even though we do not know if they are as skilled as Morgan, and that they have a habit of using it to accomplish rather debatable deeds. As for the association with witchcraft theory, Saul remarks that this small group of "witches" is far from the grandness of the typical sabbat that was usually depicted at the time. However, it seems that this episode "shares with those beliefs the emphasis on women's supposed insatiable need for sex"[66] or, to put it in the *Malleus Maleficarum*'s authors' words, "everything is governed by carnal lusting, which is insatiable in them [women]".[67] Morgan and the other queens seem to be acting on this impulse. Moreover, when speaking of Morgan, it shows that she is neither controlled by nor satisfied with her husband, as she takes several lovers which, irremediably, she puts in danger — besides Accolon, Saul mentions another lover, Hemison (who is not included in this thesis' reference edition of *Le Morte Darthur*), who dies as well.[68] In addition to this, the *Malleus Malleficarum* is concerned with witches rendering men physically impotent. In Malory, instead, the four sorceresses seem to inflict Lancelot a symbolic impotence through their constricting magic and by depriving him of his armour and weapons while he is held prisoner in Morgan's castle.[69] Eventually, order is restored when one of Morgan's damsels approaches Lancelot, promising to give him back armour, horse, shield and spear as long as he is willing to help her father, King Bagdemagus, to win a tournament, a proposal Lancelot gladly accepts.

The "who's-the-fairest of-us-all" *topos* resurfaces briefly in another episode involving Lancelot. He is told that a young lady is held prisoner in a tower and that she "hath been there in pains many winters and days, for ever she boileth in scalding water" (p. 281) and he should thus deliver her from her prison. He leaves for the tower and, once he reaches the girl, he realises that she is indeed

[66] Saul, p. 94.
[67] Saul, p. 94.
[68] Saul, p. 94.
[69] Saul, p. 95.

the fairest lady that he ever saw. Soon enough Malory explains the readers why the girl has been kept captive in such a miserable condition:

> And by enchantment Queen Morgan le Fay and the Queen of Northgales had put her there in that pains, because she was called the fairest lady of that country; and there she had been five years, and never might she be delivered out of her pains unto the time the best knight of the world had taken her by the hand. (p. 281)

Once again, we find Morgan associating with another woman, the Queen of Northgales, the same that we already encountered while she was participating to Lancelot's kidnapping. Yet again, we are not given an exhaustive background on the motives for the enchantresses to behave so, save for a revealing sentence. The young lady has been imprisoned for the sole reason of being called the fairest of her country and it looks like the two Queens are acting out of pettiness and envy, just like the evil queen of fairytales all readers are familiar with would do. However, Lancelot proves to be the knight the enchantment requires, and he manages to finally free the lady from the tower.

After her failed attempt to kill King Arthur, thus, Morgan focuses on Sir Lancelot instead. Moreover, she seems particularly bitter towards Lancelot and his relationship with Queen Guinevere. As per usual, Malory does not expose her motives, but given how this persistence against Lancelot and Guinevere happens after Accolon's death, readers might imagine a certain degree of resentment towards the lovers on Morgan's part after having lost her own. Moreover, she has also been rejected by Lancelot, since he has not chosen her nor one of the other sorceresses-queens, so even if it was in fact a forced choice, she might hold a grudge for that reason nonetheless. Once more, Morgan chooses to send an enchanted object to court:

> A knight that was sent from Dame Morgan le Fay unto King Arthur. And this knight had a fair horn harnessed with gold, and the horn had such a virtue that there might no lady nor gentlewoman drink of that horn but if she were true to her husband; and if she were true to her lord she might drink thereof peaceably. And because of the Queen Guenivere and in the despite of Sir Lancelot, this horn was sent unto King Arthur. (pp. 203-204)

The enchantment of choice is then a refined drinking horn intended for the women participating at royal banquets. The peculiarity of the horn is that only those ladies who are faithful to their husband can drink from it without spilling. Morgan's aim is thus to expose the affair between Lancelot and

Guinevere, but, given that the horn is to be used at a banquet, its enchantment might achieve a broader resonance. In fact, the horn might cause indirect damage to King Arthur himself. Since everybody would be seeing Guinevere unable to drink "peaceably", the court would be aware that the King has been betrayed by his own wife — and a King who cannot control his own wife might not hold much credibility among his subjects after all. Thus, the horn would stain, as Capps writes, "literally and figuratively (…) the reputation of Arthur's court".[70] However, Morgan is preceded by her own fame and this time her plan fails from the very beginning, since the horn never reaches King Arthur's court. Indeed, the knight bearing this new gift is soon intercepted by Sir Lamorak, who makes him confess the whole truth about who is sending it and for what purposes. Eventually, Sir Lamorak orders him to deliver the horn to King Mark of Cornwall instead. There, the horn performs its function and while the Queen and a hundred other ladies drink from it, only four of them manage to drink cleanly. King Mark wants his wife and all the guilty ladies burnt, but his barons meet in council and decide otherwise, holding Morgan responsible and voicing the fact that her evil reputation ranges even outside King Arthur's court:

> Then the barons gathered them together and said plainly they would not have those ladies burned for a horn made by sorcery, that came "from the false sorceress and witch most that is now living". For that horn did never good, but caused strife and debate; and always in her days she was an enemy to all true lovers. So there were many knights that made there a vow that and ever they met with Morgan le Fay, that they would show her short courtesy. (p. 204)

The barons decide that it is not the ladies' fault, for the horn is in itself an object that causes "strife and debate", even though it is not specified if this very horn has caused discord across the realm before or it being "made by sorcery" is enough to consider it dangerous. To make this picture worse, the horn comes from a woman that now it is called a witch — and not any witch, but the worst existing. Finally, the courtiers and the knights state who they truly think she is. Moreover, the barons claim that "always in her days she was an enemy to all true lovers", so there might be some degree of truth in the resentment she might held towards lovers and in the fact that she might try to damage

[70] Capps, p. 122.

them out of spite. In addition to this, the great majority of knights wish for her to receive a punishment and many have made a vow so that in the eventuality they will cross paths with Morgan, they will be able to deliver the punishment themselves. After this event, she does not suffer any consequence since no one involved encounters her, and she continues to conjure against Sir Lancelot. Further ahead, after the issue about the drinking horn, we discover that she has ordered an ambush in which Lancelot should be killed:

> For he [Lancelot] was ordained for by the treason of Queen Morgan le Fay to have slain him, and for that cause she ordained thirty knights to lie in wait for Sir Lancelot; and this damosel knew this treason, and for this cause she came for to seek noble knights to help Sir Lancelot. (p. 219)

From this excerpt, we learn that once again Morgan's endeavour is doomed to fail and once more it is a damsel who steps forward and prevents the worst from happening. In some non-specified way, she has learnt about the thirty knights lying in wait for Sir Lancelot to assault and slay him and she warns the knights she encounters along her way — first Sir Tristram and Sir Dinadan, then Sir Bors, Sir Ector and Sir Driant. Therefore, the damsel's warning allows the knights to easily foil the attack and avoid Lancelot being harmed by it.

Le Morte Darthur offers two other episodes in which Morgan attempts to unsettle the court by exposing the love affair between Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere. The first is not reported in full in the reference text, but Cooper mentions a shield given by Morgan to Sir Tristram in order to carry it before King Arthur at a tournament. Her gesture is seemingly innocuous, except for the representation on the shield, since it bears "an emblematic device of a knight standing on the heads of a king and queen" (p. 546). However, even if the allusion is clear for the readers, it appears that it does not raise too much suspicion among the bystanders, not even the King. Furthermore, sir Tristram remaining anonymous throughout the tournament does not help them to make something meaningful out of that representation. The other episode is later in the story, and it is through the words King Mark of Cornwall writes in a letter to King Arthur that the relationship between Lancelot and the Queen is heavily alluded to, saying that he is "able to rule his wife and his knights" (p. 245), while

King Arthur, in his opinion, clearly is not. These words however do not achieve the desired result and we understand that it is partially Morgan's fault:

> When King Arthur understood the letter, he mused of many things, and thought on his sister's words, Queen Morgan le Fay, that she had said betwixt Queen Guenivere and Sir Lancelot; and in this thought he studied a great while. Then he bethought him again how his own sister was his enemy, and that she hated the Queen and Sir Lancelot to the death, and so he put that all out of his thought. (p. 245)

This passage informs us that at some point Morgan has spoken about the matter to her brother. At first King Arthur seems to ponder a while and to have at least doubts about it, now that he has King Mark's letter to reinforce what he heard from his sister. However, he dismisses his suspicions because he is well aware of the state of his relationship with Morgan. She is "his enemy" and she has no reason to warn Arthur about a potentially hazardous situation. In addition to this, she hates "to the death" both Queen Guinevere and Sir Lancelot, so she might have just been spreading false news in order to cause a scandal and damage them. On this basis, King Arthur decides to "put that all out of his thought".

Given how they are presented and how the other characters react to them, all Morgan's actions seem completely negative and driven by evil purposes and noxious ambition. Nevertheless, Hebert offers a different point of view, exploring an alternative interpretation to Morgan's behaviour. She describes Morgan as "Other and fluid"[71] for she can act outside the established rules of the court, and this ability allows Morgan to have a standpoint from which she can critique King Arthur's kingship. For Arthur and his court, the easy way is to dismiss her as evil and point to her as the scapegoat, instead of admitting that the court is not as virtuous as they like to perceive it. Morgan's appearances are thus in points of conflict, where she can address the potential disloyalty of knights and all the other issues, acting "as Arthur's backbone"[72] when the King does not address them publicly. When she appears as harassing the knights, she is in fact trying to make Arthur a more effective King.[73] For

[71] Hebert, p. 72.
[72] Hebert, p. 72.
[73] Hebert, p. 79.

example, in Hebert's interpretation, in the last episodes I described Morgan is trying to make Arthur realise that he is being blind to the fact that the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere represents treason. In fact, Hebert addresses as his major weakness the fact that "his love for Guinevere and reverence for Lancelot as friend and knight causes him to ignore their affair" and the warnings about it.[74] In addition to this, while Arthur is limited by his role as King, Morgan inhabits a multiplicity of roles — she is Queen three times over, as she is Arthur's sister, Uriens' wife and Queen of Avalon. This variety of roles allows her to have a freedom to act that Arthur has not and she, as a "consummate crosser of boundaries",[75] even those posed by her gender, has the ability to at least attempt "to show Arthur and his knights that boundaries and rules are artificial and should not be trusted in all situations".[76] Nonetheless, her advice remains unheard or is misinterpreted and dismissed on the basis of her being a fiend, a witch and a false sorceress. Moreover, Heng adds other elements in defence of Morgan's actions. She observes that Morgan's actions are actually providing trials for Arthur's knights in order to "increase their abilities and reputation with successful endurance",[77] and have not the mere objective to harm them. Lastly, even if her instruments might be seen as subversive, they are deflected from their damaging purposes by the Lady of the Lake and her damsels, who, in this interpretation, attempts to disclose the concealed meaning of Morgan's actions.[78]

2.5. The Queen of Avalon

When speaking of a change of perspective, Morgan's last appearance is particularly relevant. To begin with, it is important to illustrate the premises leading to the moment she enters the scene for the last time. The battle near Salisbury that was prophesized by Merlin has taken place and King Arthur has been mortally wounded by his own son, Sir Mordred. Sir Bedivere is by his side, and after

[74] Hebert, p. 74.
[75] Hebert, p. 74.
[76] Hebert, p. 74.
[77] Heng, p. 107.
[78] Heng, p. 107.

having thrown Excalibur into the lake, where a rather mysterious hands takes it to safety under the surface, he carries the King closer by the water:

> Then Sir Bedivere took the King upon his back, and so went with him to the water's side. And when they were here, even fast by the bank hoved a little barge with many fair ladies in it, and among them all there was a queen. And all they had black hoods, and all they wept and shrieked when they saw King Arthur. (…) and there [on the barge] received him three ladies with great mourning. And so they set them down, and in one of their laps King Arthur laid his head. And then the queen said, "Ah, my dear brother, why have ye tarried so long from me? Alas, this wound on your head hath caught over-much cold." (p. 515)

This scene is perhaps one of the few that remained almost identical from the very first versions of King Arthur's story to Malory's times. The dying King is carried aboard a barge, where an unspecified number of "fair ladies" welcomes him — they are clearly mourning, for they are dressed in black and are very vocal about their pain, "weeping" and "shrieking" at the sight they have before their eyes. One of them is a queen and she is the one that speaks to Arthur, revealing her identity as his sister Morgan. Her demeanour might be described as reversed in comparison to what the story has presented so far. She has always seemed to be desirous to harm King Arthur, but now she appears to be the very person which Arthur used to trust above anyone else. She indeed appears much akin to the nurturing, protective role that was expected from an elder sister in the Middle Ages, as I have described at the beginning of this chapter, and closer to the role she fulfilled in *Vita Merlini.* She asks why Arthur has been so distant from her and worries about the condition of his wound. Heng comments Morgan's words observing that "the tones are the gentle, chiding ones of a protectrice and a healer, not those of a mortal enemy".[79] Concerning this, Hebert underlines that it sounds as if it were Arthur's faults instead of Morgan's, as she asking why he has "tarried so long" from her can be interpreted as "Why have you ignored all the advice I've tried to give you? Because you would not listen, you're wounded and now I must take care of you again",[80] so it would not be Morgan being hostile, but Arthur unwilling to listen to her advice.

[79] Heng, p. 108.
[80] Hebert, p. 78.

When taking into consideration the similarities with the most ancient renditions of Morgan, she is being accompanied by several apparently benign women, just like Morgen and her sisters. In addition to this, there is also a reference to Morgan's healing abilities that transpires from Arthur's words when he explains to Sir Bedivere what is going to happen to him: "I will into the vale of Avilion to heal me of my grievous wound" (p. 516). However, the reaction of the women on the barge does not sound encouraging, since "the queen and ladies wept and shrieked, that it was pity to hear" (p. 516) —they seem aware that not much can be done in order to heal King Arthur. In fact, the following morning Sir Bedivere goes to a chapel near Glastonbury, where Avalon is traditionally placed, and meets a hermit kneeling next to a "new graven" (p. 516) tomb. The hermit is not certain whether King Arthur is buried there, but he has nonetheless information to give to Bedivere:

> " But this same night at midnight, here came a number of ladies, and brought here a dead corpse, and prayed me to inter him; and here they offered a hundred tapers and they gave me a thousand bezants". (p. 516)

Sir Bedivere quickly understands what might have happened and we can assume it easily as well — it is very likely that the ladies were the same that were on the barge and they brought to the chapel the by then deceased King Arthur, offering a hundred candles and giving a thousand coins to the hermit so he could inter him. Lastly, Malory explains that he does not know anything else about the story of King Arthur, not even the whether it was truly him to be buried at the chapel, but he does provide further information about the ladies on the barge:

> Thus of Arthur I find no more written in books that be authorized, no more of the very certainty of his death heard I never read, but thus was he led away in a ship wherein were three queens; that one was King Arthur's sister, Queen Morgan le Fay, the other was the Queen of Northgales, and the third was the Queen of the Waste Lands. Also there was Dame Nenive, the chief lady of the lake, which had wedded Pelleas the good knight, and this lady had done much for King Arthur. (pp. 516-517)

At last, we learn who the other women are. Along with Morgan, the Queen of Northgales and the Queen of the Waste Lands are there, but except for the former, we do no longer find the other Queens Morgan has previously associated with. Morgan's "alter ego", the Lady of the Lake, is there too — until this moment, they have been on the opposite side, but now they seem more like two parts of the same whole, just like Morgen and her sisters in Geoffrey of Monmouth's work.

Heng offers an interesting comment in this change of behaviour based on the few words Morgan pronounces. Therefore, she is described as "a fellow player in a drama that has now concluded in all its scenes".[81] This means that the identities that Morgan and Arthur have inhabited until this moment of the story are no longer necessary and they can be discarded in favour of the new ones, in which Morgan takes back her ancient role as a healer and Arthur becomes willing, if not eager, to entrust his fate in Morgan's and her sisters-enchantresses' hands. Heng claims that this is a "suggestion of the final instability and impermanence of all constructed identity"[82] and that both Arthur and Morgan share the fact that they are "two actors finally away from the pageant, who need no longer play their temporary assigned roles",[83] so they can finally leave behind their identities of respectively the King and the evil sorceress. Only now, when Morgan shows herself as the Queen of Avalon, Arthur is willing to listen to Morgan and to accept her help.[84] Hebert adds that "Morgan's tests of fidelity to Arthur", all the apparent misdeeds I have mentioned earlier, "are all signs of *her* enduring fidelity",[85] as she has always tried to make him a better king. This would mean that she has never completely lost her core identity as a healer and a helper and the behaviour she assumes in *Le Morte Darthur*'s finale reveals that she might have been actually trying to repeatedly help all along, even though no one truly listened.

2.6. Conclusion

Le Morte Darthur is perhaps the most famous Arthurian work in English and, even though the information about its author's life, Sir Thomas Malory, is scarce, it is possible to say that his own experience contributed to shape his writing. In fact, he had an uncle belonging to the Hospitaller knights and he was himself a knight before failing his career due to his numerous crimes. He might have wished to expose the faults of knighthood and court society, and this is when Morgan le Fay

[81] Heng, pp. 107-108.
[82] Heng, p. 108.
[83] Heng, p. 108.
[84] Hebert, p. 79.
[85] Hebert, p. 79.

comes into play. Even though she seems as a marginal character due to her infrequent appearances, she has a relevant impact on the story and scholars have been able to express several interpretations. Given how Malory portrays his characters, that is presenting them through actions and dialogues and without mentioning their thoughts and feelings most of the time, it may be argued that interpretations of Morgan's behaviour only belong to the realm of hypothesis. Even if this might indeed be true, some interesting observations might be raised.

The first time she appears on the scene, she is described very briefly — we know that she studied in a nunnery, is sister to Arthur and wife to King Uriens. As for her instruction, we learn that she acquired her skills in "necromancy", which is rather peculiar since in the Middle Ages it was usually a male-connotated type of magic. This detail might be regarded as a foreshadowing of her habit of trespassing the roles imposed by her gender. According to her epoch's norms, she is expected to fulfill the role of a nurturing elder sister first, and that of a faithful, submissive wife afterwards. She might have been a good sister to Arthur until a non-specified moment, since the King trusts her greatly, but it is soon clear that she is neither a good sister nor an exemplar wife. She is soon identified as Arthur's greatest enemy and, after her brief introduction, begins to create strife at court and to challenge the social norms she should be following.

Morgan's most striking action and the most substantial episode featuring her presence is her attempt to steal Arthur's sword and scabbard, which are both a powerful symbol and physically important items, since the scabbard prevents the King from being wounded. It appears as a betrayal without other reason than thirst for power and it starts a chain of deceits orchestrated by Morgan. However, it damages her too, since she loses her lover, Accolon, and Excalibur soon returns to its owner thanks to the Lady of the Lake's intervention. The Lady of the Lake appears as Morgan's alter-ego, since she seems to retain *Vita Merlini*'s Morgen qualities better than Morgan herself, in addition to a benign disposition that allows her and her damsels to foil Morgan's plans. However, this incident features also the episode in which Morgan is most similar to the Morrigan — she attempts to steal at

least Arthur's scabbard and, in order to flee from the King, she shapeshifts into a stone, just as Morrigan shapeshifts to avoid being caught by Cuchulainn after her cattle theft. Morgan is not done yet, as the coronation of her plan should be killing her husband Uriens — in doing this she challenges once again the social norms, as she does not respect marriage, given that she has a lover and harbours murderous intentions, and, in addition, she uses her husband's sword as a weapon to kill him. However, her son Uwain stops her in time and she defends herself by claiming that it was a devil that tempted her. From their exchange, we get a glimpse of the reason why Morgan as a character has become evil as time went by, arriving at Malory's portrayal. In this respect, the fact that *Le Morte Darthur* was published almost at the same time as the *Malleus Maleficarum* is emblematic. Therefore, the influence of the contemporary attitude towards women is very present in Malory's work and Morgan is repeatedly addressed as a witch that should be burnt, both because of her sorcery and her defiance. In addition, a woman who thinks for herself and exercises her free will is considered dangerous and represents possibly a symptom of the Devil's work, regardless of her practice of magic.

The attempted theft of King Arthur's sword and scabbard is not the only incident in which Morgan shows her apparently evil nature. After that, she sends a luxurious mantle to her brother as a sign of reconciliation, but it is enchanted and would have burned Arthur into ashes if he were not suspicious and had not made a maiden try it on first. Thus, Morgan is banished from the court, but she is hardly discouraged and continues to target the court, for example kidnapping Lancelot and repeatedly trying to expose his love affair with Queen Guinevere. Several scholars have interpreted these episodes differently from the conventional reading in which Morgan is simply ill-natured. They claim that she is trying to expose the courtly society's faults and the decline of knightly ideals, as her actions are often an attempt to try the knight's loyalty and to show Arthur that his kingdom is not perfect after all. Therefore, she is trying to offer advice and to act when the King refuses to do so and does not recognise the treason perpetrated by Sir Lancelot and his wife, the Queen. This would mean that Morgan has not completely lost the benevolence she had in early works, and the final episode of

Le Morte Darthur seems to confirm this interpretation. She appears as the Queen of Avalon and receives the dying Arthur to carry him to the Island to heal him — or at least this is was he says, since Morgan and the other Queens accompanying her appear rather disheartened. She talks to Arthur in very different tones, compared to the hostile attitude she had until this point. She is no longer the treacherous sorceress that stirred conflict up at court and sounds more like the elder sister nurturing her brother and scolding him for having been so distant and, possibly, refused to listen to her advice. It seems her benevolent nature had never gone for good, but was only dormant under the surface, due to circumstances that made her act otherwise. Finally, she leaves her temporary role as a malevolent witch and recovers her ancient role as protectrice and healer.

Figure 1 How Morgain granted Lancelot a leave from her prison to conquer Dolereuse Gard *(Lancelot en prose,* c. 1494 or later)


Figure 2 Morgan with Lancelot under an apple tree in a Siedlęcin Tower fresco (early 14th century)

Chapter 3

Through *The Mists of Avalon*:

Marion Zimmer Bradley's Portrait of Morgan

Morgan le Fay continues to be a recurring presence in literature even after the Middle Ages. She often appears in popular novels based on the Arthurian myth even centuries after *Le Morte Darthur* was published, but until the nineteenth or even twentieth century, she remains evil. After around five hundred years from the publication of Malory's work, in 1983, *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley was published. The novel, even if it belongs to popular fiction, offers a compelling prompt for this research, since it offers a peculiar revision of Arthurian material, being recounted by Morgan's voice and portraying her in a way that goes beyond the wicked sorceress she usually is. For this reason, it is a particularly valuable portrait and this final chapter will attempt to present it and compare it with both Morgan's origins and Malory's rendition.

3.1 Marion Zimmer Bradley and the Foundations of Avalon

Before analysing in more detail how Marion Zimmer Bradley chooses to portray Morgan le Fay, it is worth taking into account the background on which such a portrait is based. As Diana Paxson remarks, the myth of King Arthur and his knights is one of the most susceptible to reinterpretations and it is important to bear in mind the circumstances and the environment in which each reinterpretation develops.[1] In the case of Marion Zimmer Bradley (Albany, 3 June 1930 – Berkeley, 25 September 1999), it is relevant to mention her career as a writer of "science fantasy" and her interest in Western Esoteric tradition, along with her readings since her young age. Her interest for science fiction was unusual during the 1940s, when she was a girl, and it was regarded as a "sinister weirdness".[2] According to Paxson's account, this sense of alienation served perhaps as an influence for Zimmer

[1] Paxson, Diana L., "Marion Zimmer Bradley and *The Mists of Avalon*", *Arthuriana*, 9 (1999), p. 110.
[2] Paxson, p. 111.

Bradley's portrayal of Morgan, since she feels constantly out of place among the other women at court.[3] Her participation in the then restricted and mostly male science fiction fandom also made her come across a quote from Tennyson's *Tithonus*, reported in a "fanzine", a magazine containing short stories, which perhaps was the spark that led her to her writing career and probably served as a first inspiration for Avalon: "A soft wind blows the mists away; I feel / A breath from that dark world where I was born".[4] Even before that, as a kid, she was given the Sidney Lanier edition of *The Tales of King Arthur* by her grandfather, which was Zimmer Bradley's first encounter with the Arthurian material. In addition, Paxson mentions how Zimmer Bradley's was a fan of 1930s-1940s fantasy literature and, especially, of *Prince Valiant.*[5] However, aside from her childhood readings, Zimmer Bradley herself mentions *When God Was a Woman* by Merlin Stone, which offers an "account of the historical conflict between Hebrews with their patriarchal culture, and their neighbours with Goddesses, holy prostitution, and validation of female sexuality"[6] and represents a basis for the way she chooses to deal with Arthurian material, and especially the treatment of women, in *The Mists of Avalon*. Speaking of Arthurian material in the strict sense, the author's reference is *Le Morte Darthur* — it is Malory's version of the story that Zimmer Bradley follows and reinterprets. She questions the treatment Malory reserves to his female characters and she offers several observations on this matter. She notices how the Lady of the Lake and Morgan le Fay are portrayed either as friends and allies or as enemy, but their motives, as emerged in the previous chapter, are rarely explored. She wonders why, if Malory disapproved of these women as the culture of his time wanted, he did not choose to expunge them completely from his narrative, as he did with many other Celtic elements present in the ancient folktales. Her considerations reach the following conclusion:

> My theory is that he *could not*, because in the originals, now lost, Morgan and the Lady of the Lake were absolutely integral to the whole story and it was unthinkable to tell tales of Arthur without also telling tales

[3] Paxson, p. 111.
[4] Paxson, p. 112.
[5] A comic strip, notable for its fine drawing and authentic historical detail, by Harold Rudolf Foster (1892-1982), first appeared on Feb. 13, 1937. (britannica.com.)
[6] Zimmer Bradley, Thoughts on Avalon", https://www.mzbworks.com/thoughts.htm, (accessed 23 June 2020).

> of the women involved. […] Malory minimized the women; he made them into villains, nitwits, and evil sorceresses […]. But *Malory could not get rid of them entirely*.[7]

Given that the Lady of the Lake and Morgan le Fay were too important to be excluded from the narrative even in a moment of history which was particularly adverse for women, Zimmer Bradley started working on her "revisionist version"[8] to which "female personality development"[9] is key. While working on her novel, she visited the Glastonbury area in order to have a first-hand experience of the tradition's places, but she soon realized that a strictly historical retelling would not serve her purpose well. She adopted the techniques of modern fiction to appeal to a broader public, such as developing "romantic entanglements",[10] but most notably she told the story from the Arthurian women's point of view. Given the scarcity of details about them in the source material, she had the freedom to "invent and embroider"[11] while she developed "in detail the stories of Arthur's female relatives".[12] *The Mists of Avalon* deals in fact with all women present in *Le Morte Darthur* and gives them dimension, choosing specific episodes and adjusting them when needed in order to form a coherent narrative. Five main storylines can thus be identified — those of Morgaine, as Zimmer Bradley chooses to spell Morgan's name, Igraine, Viviane, Morgause and Gwenhwyfar, the chosen spelling for Guinevere. In any case, the predominant voice is Morgaine's, who will remain the main focus of this chapter.

Zimmer Bradley also addresses the "cultural and religious shift […] from Goddess-oriented, female-validating religion to God-oriented, Middle Eastern/Oriental woman-fearing religion"[13]as the main cause for the attitude towards women of Malory's times. She also mentions the fact that, at the time she wrote her article, a few years later after the publication of her novel, the Goddess was

[7] Zimmer Bradley, "Thoughts on Avalon".
[8] Zimmer Bradley, "Thoughts on Avalon".
[9] Zimmer Bradley, "Thoughts on Avalon".
[10] Paxson, p. 118.
[11] Paxson, p. 118.
[12] Paxson, p. 118.
[13] Zimmer Bradley, "Thoughts on Avalon".

"surfacing again"[14] and this revival is another core element of the development of *The Mists of Avalon,* since it is this type of cult that Morgaine is following in this retelling of the story. From the 1960s on, despite being part of a Gnostic Catholic Church, characterized for its "rich and conservative ritual style and extremely liberal theology",[15] Zimmer Bradley was also actively involved in the revival of the Goddess' cult, as she essentially believed that all gods are one and her Neo-Pagan practice was simply the "worship of the female aspect of the deity".[16] In particular, Zimmer Bradley established the Darkmoon Circle, a group of women practicing the Goddess worship, defined by Paxson as "a major influence in the conceptualization of the College of Priestesses on Avalon".[17] In general, this emerging Neo-Pagan movement, which still exists nowadays in numerous expressions, is an attempt to recreate what is defined as "Old Religion" and is, even if in possibly different measure from group to group, polytheistic. Carrol L. Fry defines the movement as "insubstantial as moonbeams"[18] for the inability to give it a univocal definition — Neo-Paganism lacks a central authority, a holy book and a central leader as a mouthpiece for the religion.[19] However, the majority of Neo-Pagan groups shares a number of common characteristics. A common anger towards Christianity is rather widespread since, among the many reasons, Christians co-opted Pagan festivals and cults, for example the cult of Mary in place of the Goddess and the saints as a substitute for a polytheist pantheon. In addition, they claim that the similar looks of the Horned God, the consort of the Goddess, and Satan, who are both depicted as horned, are no accident and consider the burning of the witches, "the wise women who led the worship of the gods",[20] a cruel and systematic purging of a competing religion. In general, they recriminate the Church's misogyny and "distrust of female

[14] Zimmer Bradley, "Thoughts on Avalon".
[15] Paxson, p. 114.
[16] Zimmer Bradley, "Thoughts on Avalon".
[17] Paxson, p. 114.
[18] Fry, Carrol L., "'What God Doth the Wizard Pray to': Neo-Pagan Witchcraft and Fantasy Fiction", *Extrapolation*, 31 (1990), p. 334.
[19] Fry, "'What God Doth the Wizard Pray to': Neo-Pagan Witchcraft and Fantasy Fiction", p. 334.
[20] Fry, "'What God Doth the Wizard Pray to': Neo-Pagan Witchcraft and Fantasy Fiction", p. 335.

sexuality".[21] In addition to this, the most unique feature that Fry mentions is the practice of magic and, even if it is performed differently from group to group, it can be summarized as the creation of some kind of power during the coven (as the small groups they meet in are called) ceremonies.[22] Moreover, this religion is essentially a natural cult and, whatever the Goddess' name is for each coven, she is universally recognised as the Earth Mother.[23]

As I briefly mentioned above, the most common worshipped deities are the Goddess only or the Goddess and her consort, the Horned God.[24] They are often identified, as it is the case in *The Mists of Avalon,* with Ceridwen and Cernunnos. Ceridwen is granted by Neo-Pagans the status of "deity of wisdom and creation, though sometimes liberally mixed with other goddesses",[25] but she originates as a sorceress belonging to the Welsh mythology, as she appears in the *Book of Taliesin*, which is often included in the *Mabinogi*. She is skilled in *Awen,* which is "the gift of poetic wisdom, inspiration, and prophecy",[26] and her most famous "magic item" is a cauldron which she uses to brew powerful potions that can give her or whom she chooses additional powers, such as shapeshifting. She is both mother and wise woman, although she can also appear as a crone figure, which connects her to the Triple Goddess of the Neo-Pagans. The Triple Goddess can manifest with three different aspects, Maiden, Mother, and Crone, which represent the three stages of a woman's life,[27] which in turn is related to the "Jungian fourfold archetypal feminine--maiden, mother, wise woman, and warrior".[28] This reflects the feminist approach that associates several Neo-Pagan groups, since "worship of the Triple Goddess allows the woman to value herself and her knowledge and experience

[21] Fry, Carrol L., "The Goddess Ascending: Feminist Neo-Pagan Witchcraft in Marion Zimmer Bradley's Novels", *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27 (1993), p. 70.
[22] Fry, "'What God Doth the Wizard Pray to': Neo-Pagan Witchcraft and Fantasy Fiction", p. 336.
[23] Fry, "'What God Doth the Wizard Pray to': Neo-Pagan Witchcraft and Fantasy Fiction", p. 336.
[24] Fry, "'What God Doth the Wizard Pray to': Neo-Pagan Witchcraft and Fantasy Fiction", p. 334.
[25] Wright, Gregory, "Ceridwen" *Mythopedia*. https://mythopedia.com/celtic-mythology/gods/ceridwen/ (accessed on January 15, 2021).
[26] Wright, "Ceridwen".
[27] Fry, "'What God Doth the Wizard Pray to': Neo-Pagan Witchcraft and Fantasy Fiction", p. 339.
[28] Capps, Sandra Elaine, "Morgan le Fay as Other in English Medieval and Modern Texts", University of Tennessee: PhD Thesis, 1996, p. 149.

even when her beauty has dimmed",[29] in addition to the belief that a woman is free to love whomever she chooses and that she is the possession of no man.[30] This might sound familiar to those who have read *The Mists of Avalon*, since these are the concepts adopted by Zimmer Bradley when defining the faith in Avalon. On the other hand, the Horned God, Cernunnos, was primarily venerated in ancient Gaul, even though similar figures have appeared also in other cults, both Celtic and elsewhere in the world, and are collectively addressed by scholars as Cernunnos due to the absence of specific names. There is little information about him, but he is believed to have been a god of fertility, beasts and wild places and is often depicted as a bearded man with antlers on his head — in Neo-Pagan religion, he is instead the god of life and death and many traditions claim that his power stems from the Goddess herself, to whom he is both son and lover.[31]

As can be inferred from the description of the two main deities, Neo-Pagans draw some elements from actual historical pantheons and attempt to recreate the "Old Religion" I mentioned earlier — allegedly a primitive nature religion practiced in Western Europe before the advent of Christianity.[32] This supposed primitive religion relies on a number of historical theories. For example, the archaeological findings by Merlin Stone provide evidence that "the notions of great goddess and earth mother were actually appropriate concepts for the earlies objects of worship in past societies".[33] Therefore, Stone claims that women were symbols of fertility, since they were regarded as the only responsible for the creation of a new life. This allowed these women to be held in high consideration in their society, since fertility was believed to be among the most important values.[34] The theories Marija Gimbutas exposes in *The Civilization of the Goddess*, even if they are debated, attempt to provide a timeframe for this Goddess religion. Gimbutas claims that the worship of the Goddess was

[29] Fry, "'What God Doth the Wizard Pray to': Neo-Pagan Witchcraft and Fantasy Fiction", p. 339.
[30] Fry, "'What God Doth the Wizard Pray to': Neo-Pagan Witchcraft and Fantasy Fiction", p. 336.
[31] Wright, Gregory, "Cernunnos" Mythopedia, https://mythopedia.com/celtic-mythology/gods/cernunnos/ (accessed on January 15, 2021).
[32] Fry, "The Goddess Ascending: Feminist Neo-Pagan Witchcraft in Marion Zimmer Bradley's Novels", p. 68.
[33] Sharpe, Victoria, "The Goddess Restored", *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 9 (1998), p. 36.
[34] Sharpe, p 36.

already present 35000 years ago, in the Paleolithic Age, and she, analysing cave art, observes that there are traces of female deities, whereas she has not found traces of a father figure.[35] She also addresses invasions across Europe during the Bronze Age as the cause for the progressive decline of matrilineal society and Goddess worship and she summarizes these changes in the following passage:

> East-central Europe in the period of 4500-2500 B.C. was in a constant state of transformation, due to repeated Kurgan incursions from the Volga and North Pontic steppe zone. By the third quarter of the 3rd millennium B.C., almost all parts of Old Europe were transformed economically and socially. […]These changes were expressed as the transition from matrilineal to patrilineal order, from a learned theocracy to a militant patriarchy, from a sexually balanced society to a male dominated hierarchy, and from a chthonic goddess religion to the Indo-European sky-oriented pantheon of gods.[36]

However, Don Riggs notices how "female-centric" societies appear not to have disappeared completely at the time of these incursions and rather survived in some assimilated forms, just as Pagan feasts survive, for example, in the dates of Christian festivities such as Christmas, which falls around the Winter Solstice and the Roman Saturnalia, and in certain symbols, such as the Easter eggs, which used to represent fertility in Russian culture.[37] In particular, Riggs mentions Petra Wirth's studies, which evidence that Indo-European Celts were "either matriarchal or gylanic",[38] meaning equal society for both men and women, or at least, Romans that came in contact with them perceived them to be so[39] — the passage about the Gallizenae priestesses in Pomponious Mela's *De Chorographia* I mentioned in the first chapter seems to corroborate this hypothesis. Wirth also found evidence that the Mother Goddess worship survived until the first millennium AD in Spain and France.[40] The Mists of Avalon fully embraces these theories, as is evident from Morgaine's mother and former priestess Igraine's words:

> It was a woman's fate to sit at home, in castle or cot — it has been so since the Romans came. Before that, the Celtic tribes had followed the counsel of their women, and far to the north there had been an island of women warriors who made weapons and tutored the war chiefs in the use of arms… (p. 103)

---

[35] Sharpe, p. 37.
[36] Gimbutas, Marija, *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991, p. 401.
[37] Riggs, Don, "The Survival of the Goddess in Marie de France and Marion Zimmer Bradley", *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 9,1 (1998), p. 15.
[38] Riggs, p. 15.
[39] Riggs, p. 15.
[40] Riggs, p. 16.

According to Sharpe, this historical perspective also allows us to understand why Geoffrey of Monmouth has chosen to portray Morgan so similar to known goddesses — *Vita Merlini*'s Morgen seems to embody the wise woman aspect of the Goddess.[41] Similarly, Zimmer Bradley attempted to restore Morgaine "to her original, historically based character",[42] which I will analyse in the following pages. In conclusion of this first section, these historical theories and the Neo-Paganism based on them are used by Zimmer Bradley to be intertwined with the Arthurian matter, which serves as a starting point and as basis for the novel's plot, creating thus, in Fry's words, a "richly ironic narrative" and a "powerful feminist statement".[43]

3.2 The Tale Begins

The Mists of Avalon is a remarkable work in contemporary Arthurian literature, since it is perhaps the most famous attempt to give psychological depth to Morgan le Fay and, through giving justifications for her behaviour, to make her easier to empathize with. As analysed in the previous chapter, Malory's work portrays her in the role of Other and the general medieval context explains why Morgan changed from a healer and wise woman to a sorceress whose hatred and envy are mostly impenetrable to comprehension — as Capps writes, they can only be witnessed.[44] Instead, while Zimmer Bradley's "Neo-Pagan Morgan" is still misunderstood by the people around her, at the same time she is adaptable to every situation and more open to comprehension for the reader,[45] since the author attempts to fill gaps and inconsistencies in Malory's Morgan.[46] This is clear from the very beginning of the book, when Morgaine is but a child. While Malory devotes only a few lines to Morgan's background and formation, Zimmer Bradley describes Morgaine's early years extensively, starting with her physical appearance. Viviane, Morgaine's aunt and Lady of Avalon, tells Igraine,

[41] Sharpe, p. 38.
[42] Sharpe, p. 36.
[43] Fry, "The Goddess Ascending: Feminist Neo-Pagan Witchcraft in Marion Zimmer Bradley's Novels", p. 75.
[44] Capps, Sandra Elaine, "Morgan le Fay as Other in English Medieval and Modern Texts", University of Tennessee: PhD Thesis, 1996, pp. 154-155.
[45] Capps, p. 155.
[46] Hebert, Jill M., *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 128.

her sister and Morgaine's mother, that "it is easy to see she [Morgaine] has the blood of the Old People" (p. 10). Little Morgaine is described as "small, dark, delicately made, so small-boned it was like holding a little soft bird" (p. 8) and shortly after, a rich description of Viviane is provided:

> Freed of her enwrapping cloaks and shawls, Viviane, Lady of Avalon, was a surprisingly little woman, no taller than a well-grown girl of eight or ten. In her loose tunic with its wrapped belt, a knife sheathed at her waist, and bulky woolen breeches, legs wrapped with thick leggings, she looked tiny, a child put into adult clothes. Her face was small, swarthy and triangular, the forehead low beneath hair dark as the shadows beneath the crags. Her eyes were dark, too, and large in her small face; Igraine had never realized how small she was. (p. 10)

They are both small, almost frail-looking, with dark hair and dark eyes and, since Morgaine looks like her already, the reader can already picture her as a grown woman — this is already a substantial difference compared to *Le Morte Darthur* and, while it has to be remembered that times and literary standards are quite different between the two works, it might be easier for modern readers to sympathize with a character whom can be imagined with little effort thanks to the quantity of information the author provides. What is key to the construction of Morgaine's otherness, however, is her having "the blood of Old People", who are depicted as short and dark as well and essentially belong to the fairy folk, the exponents of the Old Religion who worship the Great Mother and the Horned God. Readers are given a little more significative information about them:

> There was the time when the fairy folk, the Shining Ones, withdrew from our world, going further and further into the mists, so that only an occasional wanderer now can spend a night within the elf-mounds, and if he should do so, time drifts on without him, and he may come out after a single night and find that his kinfolk are all dead and that a dozen years have gone by. (p. 15)

They are Other, since they are different from the common people and have been driven away by the growing spread of Christianity in the lands that were once theirs, choosing to retreat beyond the mists where they cannot be reached but on rare occasions, mostly by chance. Therefore, they represent otherness firstly for their appearance, secondly, in comparison to Christianity and, lastly, for the place they reside in currently, where time goes by at a different pace. For these reasons, Morgaine, being so similar in looks, but also being close to them by blood through her priestess relatives, is easily pointed at as "outside the norm". For example, her young aunt, Morgause, mocks her for her

appearance, telling her "You are born of the fairy folk. Why not paint your face blue and wear deerskins, Morgan of the Fairies!" (p. 127), which are words that hurt little Morgaine and that only years later will become a reason for pride — moreover, it is a clear reference to Morgan's epithet "Le Fay", which Zimmer Bradley justifies thus with Morgaine's physical features and ancestry. In addition to this, even her own father, Duke Gorlois, is not happy with her:

> She [Igraine] knew he was discontented because the baby had not been the son he craved—these Romans counted their lineage through the male line, rather than sensibly through the mother; it was silly, for how could any man ever know precisely who had fathered any woman's child? (p. 8)

The first reason for his unhappiness is that she, being a female child, cannot bring forward Gorlois' lineage, as he follows the Roman custom of patrilinear descendance — this choice has Igraine wondering why it has to be so, when it is much easier to establish the mother's identity, rather than the father's. As Sharpe remarks, this is the first mention of the changes that are happening in the world the novel is set in, "where a son is considered more valuable than a daughter".[47] Thus, Morgaine knows that she cannot rely on much support from her father's side, so she should turn to her mother's instead, which will be crucial for her education and development as a person. She grows "from babe to small girl, a serious, quiet, small girl who questioned incessantly everything she saw" (p. 83), giving us a more complete portrayal of Morgaine since we know what kind of person she is developing into. It is time for her to receive an education, and Gorlois has a new occasion to voice his discontentment:

> Morgaine perhaps should be brought up in a convent of holy women, so that the great evil she has inherited from your old blood will never taint her," Gorlois mused. "When she is old enough, we will see to it. A holy man told me once that women bear the blood of their mothers, and so it has been since the days of Eve, that what is within women, who are filled with sin, cannot be overcome by a woman-child; but that a son will bear his father's blood even as Christ was made in the image of God his father. So if we have a son, Igraine, we need not fear that he will show the blood of the old evil folk of the hills. (p. 98)

He claims that she should be put in a nunnery, just as Malory's Morgan was, because her blood is evil due to her mother's lineage and that it will show the evil she is capable of once she will be old enough to manifest it. He adds that all women are faulty, since they have been sinners from Eve's

[47] Sharpe, p. 41.

times, and that they bear their mother's blood, whereas a son would bear the blood of his father — this would render the child similar to Jesus, whom God made in His image. This is a belief deeply ingrained in medieval Christianity, which based the belief that women's souls are essentially deficient on Aristotle's views, but also on St. Paul's, St. Augustine's and others. These additions to Aristotle's theories worsened his belief, since they argued that conceiving a daughter was a mistake due to adverse external conditions.[48] In addition to this, Gorlois appears to be fearful of the fairy folk, as he expresses shortly before addressing Morgaine's education:

> I fear no armed man that I can slay, but I fear those underground folk of the hollow hills, with their enchanted circles and their food that can lead you to wander a hundred years in enchantment, and their elf bolts which come out of the dark and strike a man down, unshriven, to send him to the hells… The Devil made them for the death of Christians, and it is the work of God to kill them, I think! (p. 98)

He is willing, then, to kill the Old People in the name of God, since he believes that their presence is the manifestation of the Devil's attempt to damage Christianity. Given also how several Christians still associate the Horned God, whom the fairy folk worships, to Satan, it is evident that Zimmer Bradley uses Gorlois, who is "pious but not-so-intelligent",[49] to represent the part of Christians which is particularly despised by Neo-Pagans for their bigotry and misogyny. In addition to this, the stance of the characters connected to Avalon, and possibly of the author, on these people's debatable point of view is easily inferable, as "Bradley opposes such attitudes by putting them in the mouth of an unintelligent, even ridiculous, character".[50] This is not the only reason that makes Morgaine feel alienated and Other in her own family. The final portion of chapter eight is told in the first person by Morgaine herself, who as in every other section in which she speaks directly, reflects on the events she is involved in. In this case, she narrates her experience and her feelings during her childhood. She recalls how even Uther Pendragon, his mother's second husband and Arthur's father, "had no particular interest in a girl child" (p. 125), even though he was "never unkind" (p. 125) to her. She recalls hating him "with all her heart" (p.125) because every time he came back from battle, he stole

[48] Tobin, Lee Ann, "Why Change the Arthur Story? Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*", *Extrapolation*, 34 (1993), p. 148.
[49] Tobin, p. 148.
[50] Tobin, p. 418.

all her mother's attention — as a young child, she felt as if she was being forgotten. When her brother Arthur had been born, then, things seemed to take a turn for the worse:

> And when my brother was born it was worse. For there was this crying thing, all pink and white, at my mother's breast; and it was worse that she expected me to care as much for him as she did. "This is your little brother," she said, "take good care of him, Morgaine, and love him." Love him? I hated him with all my heart, for now when I came near her she would pull away and tell me that I was a big girl, too big to be sitting in her lap, too big to bring my ribbons to her for tying, too big to come and lay my head on her knees for comfort. I would have pinched him, except that she would have hated me for it. I sometimes thought she hated me anyhow. […] But from his birth until he was six years old, he was forever at my heels; as soon as he was weaned, my mother, Igraine, handed him over to me and said, "This is your little brother and you must love him and care for him." And I would have killed the crying thing and thrown him over the cliffs, and run after my mother begging that she should be all mine again, except that my mother cared what happened to him. (pp. 125-126)

She finds herself even more neglected, since there is not only Uther to draw Igraine's attention from her, but also the baby. She is resentful, since she feels obliged to love him as much as his parents do and a glimpse of the hate she traditionally harbours towards Arthur might be hinted at here. However, she provides a clear justification for her feelings — she feels this way because her mother perceives her as a "big girl", not as a child that still needs more affection and care than adults are willing to provide her, and this behaviour towards her makes her think that her own mother does not love her anymore. Moreover, Arthur is too young to understand his sister's state of mind and Morgaine is obliged to take care of him, as per their mother's request. In any case, the hate towards Arthur is but a fleeting glimpse, since Morgaine soon realizes that his situation is no better than hers:

> And while I stood weeping at the top of the stairs, waiting for our nurse to come and take us away, he began to toddle down after her, crying out, "Mother, Mother"—he could hardly talk, then—and fell and cut his chin on the stair. I screamed for my mother, but she was on her way to the King, and she called back angrily, "Morgaine, I told you, look after the baby," and hurried on. I picked him up, bawling, and wiped his chin with my veil. He had cut his lip on his tooth—I think he had only eight or ten, then—and he kept on wailing and calling out for my mother, but when she did not come, I sat down on the step with him in my lap, and he put up his little arms around my neck and buried his face in my tunic and after a time he sobbed himself to sleep there. He was heavy on my lap, and his hair felt soft and damp; he was damp elsewhere, too, but I found I did not mind much, and in the way he clung to me I realized that in his sleep he had forgotten he was not in his mother's arms. I thought, Igraine has forgotten both of us, abandoned him as she abandoned me. Now I must be his mother, I suppose. […] I knew what Igraine meant; I was too big a girl to cry or whimper for my mother, because I had a little one to look after now. I think I was all of seven years old. (pp. 126-127)

Once again, Igraine is distracted by Uther's arrival and crying little Morgaine is told to look after her brother, who, while weeping for his mother's attentions, stumbles and hurts his chin. Morgaine finds herself required to fulfill the elder, caring sister's role I mentioned in the previous chapter, even if

she does not do it voluntarily at first. Clearly, Igraine is not coming to take care of them, and Morgaine understands that it is up to her to comfort Arthur and "be his mother". She is convinced that Igraine has abandoned and forgotten them both, finally understanding why she has been denying the attention Morgaine craves— even if she is only seven years old, she is no longer a child and should fulfill her mother's role, despite her young age. It is clear, then, that she feels even more estranged, seeing that her mother and step-father have little care for her and that she, instead, should take up a role that she is too young for and should not belonge to her yet.

For Morgaine, things begin to change when she meets her aunt Viviane for the first time at Morgause's wedding. The Lady of the Lake strikes the young maiden for the way she behaves towards her — she talks to her not with the condescending tone she would use with a child, but as if she were a grown woman, and she makes Morgaine sit next to her, as if they were peers. It is on this occasion that Viviane reveals her that she has the chance to become a priestess of Avalon and that she is gifted with the Sight — an ability shared by the women of their family, but also by other priestesses in different measures, which allows them to perceive things that escape the perception of normal people, if not foreseeing the future, a sort of "sixth sense". A short while after her first visit, Viviane returns to take Morgaine to Avalon to begin her training to become a priestess. She encounters King Uther's opposition; he, not unlike Duke Gorlois before him, thinks that Morgaine should be put in a nunnery, if she will not be able to find a husband who will grant the kingdom a convenient alliance. Viviane rebuts that "she [Morgaine] is like her and their mother", and that "she is not for the convent and the church bell" (p. 148) — a nunnery would condemn Morgaine to a miserable life and, if she will not go to Avalon or in a convent, she would be accused of witchcraft, staining the family's reputation. After being told the reasons why Avalon is Morgaine's only choice, Uther finally agrees and admits that he finds the girl "uncanny" (p. 148), as she looks so alike the people of the fairy folk. On the other hand, Igraine will confess only years later, on her dying bed, that her daughter becoming a

priestess is what she preferred for her, as she did not want her to be educated by people that assumed her evil only on the basis of her gender:

> I sent her from me because I felt it better, if it came to be a choice of evils, that she should be in Avalon and in the hands of the Goddess, than in the hands of the black priests who would teach her to think that she was evil because she was a woman. (p. 413)

However, Viviane does not pave this road for her niece out of benevolence only, to preserve her from such unfair judgements, and, soon after having left the court with the girl, is quite wistful about it:

> 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? (p. 140)

Morgaine's training will not be less demanding and she will not have a preferential treatment, even if she is Viviane's niece. On the contrary, great expectations are placed upon her, since she will not become any priestess, but High Priestess. Moreover, Viviane has a political agenda in which Morgaine will play a key role once she has finished her training and will be ready to fulfill it — however, it will not be explained to her until the time is right. Once Viviane and Morgaine depart in the direction of Avalon, the elder woman starts immediately to test the younger's ability to "endure fatigue and hardship" (p. 149) by setting a hard travel pace. She is expected to conquer her fear too even if Viviane notices how calmly she accepts the rapid changes happening to her life and how she is not scared when the barge to Avalon is summoned. A detailed description of Avalon and Morgaine's reactions follows:

> Ahead of them rose the Isle and the Tor with its tall tower to Saint Michael; over the silent water, the sound of church bells rang a soft Angelus. Morgaine, from habit, crossed herself, and one of the little men gave her so sharp a frown that she flinched and dropped her hand. As the boat skimmed over the water through the overgrown reeds she could make out the walls of the church and the monastery. Viviane could sense the young girl's sudden fear—were they going, after all, to the Isle of the Priests, where convent walls would close about her forever? […] Then, like a curtain being pulled back, the mist vanished, and before them lay a sunlit stretch of water and a green shore. The Tor was there, but Viviane heard the young girl in the boat catch her breath in shock and astonishment. Atop the Tor stood a circle of standing stones, brilliant in the sunlight. Toward it led the great processional way, winding upward in a spiral around the immense hill. At the foot of the Tor lay the buildings where the priests were housed, and on the slope she could see the Sacred Well and the silver flash of the mirror pool below. Along the shore were groves of apple trees and beyond them great oaks, with the golden shoots of mistletoe clinging to their branches in midair. […] Green lawns sloped down to the edge of the reeds along the Lake, and swans glided, silent as the barge, over the waters. Beneath the groves of oak and apple trees rose a low building of grey stone, and Morgaine could see white-robed forms pacing slowly along the colonnaded walk. From somewhere, very softly, she could hear the sound of a harp. The low, slanting light—could it be the same sun she knew?—flooded the

> land with gold and silence, and she felt her throat tighten with tears. She thought, without knowing why, *I am coming home* […] (pp. 150-151)

At first the island appears as Morgaine has seen it for her whole life, with Saint Michael's church at the top of the hill, the Tor, the sound of the bells and the walls of the convent in the distance — this sight is what scares Morgaine for the first time during her travel, as she fears that she is going to be secluded in a nunnery for the rest of her life. She crosses herself out of habit when passing near the church, but the sharp reaction of the boatmen reveals that something quite different is expecting her once they reach their destination. Indeed, when the mist that surrounds the island vanishes, the view changes, much to Morgaine's surprise. Atop the Tor the church and the convent can no longer be seen, but there is a circle of standing stones in their place, reached by a tortuous road. The environment is peaceful and lush, with apple trees and oaks and, in comparison to the traditional description of Avalon, there are no essential changes, but only enrichments and added details to give more definite shape to this world and make it more functional to the plot. The island is a sort of parallel dimension that cannot be seen by everyone, as common people would see the Christian church and its surroundings in its place — Avalon, as it happened to the lands of the Old People, has been hidden into the mists when Christianity became too imposing on society, thanks to the Druids who, "through a great act of magic, removed Avalon from this world so that it was inaccessible to anyone uninitiated in the mysteries".[51] However, Zimmer Bradley does add an interesting piece of information about Avalon:

> Centuries ago […] a little band of priests had come here from the south, and with them had been their Nazarene prophet for schooling; and the story went that Jesus himself had been schooled there, in the dwelling place of the Druids where once the Temple of the Sun had risen, and had learned all of their wisdom. And years later […] of his kinsmen returned here, and struck his staff into the ground on the Holy Hill, and it had blossomed forth into the thorn tree which blossoms, not only with the other thorn, in Midsummer, but in the depth of the winter snow. And the Druids, in memory of the gentle prophet whom they too had known and loved, consented that Joseph of Arimathea should build, in the very grounds of the Holy Isle, a chapel and a monastery to their God; for all the Gods are one. (pp. 130-131)

[51] Fry, "'What God Doth the Wizard Pray to': Neo-Pagan Witchcraft and Fantasy Fiction", p. 338.

According to the belief that all deities are expressions of the same God, the author explains how there was a time in which the new-born Christianity peacefully coexisted with Paganism and Jesus himself spent time with the Druids that dwelled on the Holy Isle, learning about their knowledge. She adds more, since she tells the readers that Joseph of Arimathea came back to Avalon, years after Jesus sacrificed himself, planted on the top of the hill a special thorn tree that can bloom twice, once in summer like every other thorn tree, and exceptionally also during winter, and was granted by the Druids the permission to build the church and the convent, in the name of the affection they all shared towards Jesus. However, the priests eventually became dogmatic and did not wish to share the land with their female, pagan counterpart, so the Druids choose to move Avalon outside the mundane world.[52]

There, Morgaine finally feels that she is truly in a place that she can call home, perhaps for the first time in her life, even though upon her arrival she is not able to understand why Avalon causes her commotion and possibly relief, in place of the surprise and fear she felt earlier, yet. Soon after arriving, she meets for the first time other priestesses beside her own aunt and the author provides an interesting description of how they appear:

> Women, robed in dark-dyed dresses with overtunics of deerskin, some of them with a crescent moon tattooed in blue between their brows, came down the path toward them; some were like Morgaine and Viviane herself, small and dark, of the Pictish people, but a few were tall and slender, with fair or reddish-brown hair, and there were two or three who bore the unmistakable stamp of Roman ancestry. (p. 152)

They are similar to what Morgause used to say when she mocked Morgaine, dressed in deer skins and with blue tattoos on their foreheads — even if she rejected the path of the priestess, given her lineage she has some sort of knowledge about Avalon and the fairy folk. However, these women appear quite different from one another, as some are similar to Morgaine and Viviane, “small and dark”, but others look more like common English women, and few bear the typical features of Roman descendants — this might suggest that there is no prejudice and all women are welcome to follow the

[52] Fry, “The Goddess Ascending: Feminist Neo-Pagan Witchcraft in Marion Zimmer Bradley’s Novels”, p. 73.

path of the Goddess. There, Morgaine will not be judged as "uncanny" for her similarity to the fairy folk and for her predisposition for the priestess' path. Among the priestesses Morgaine meets, there is Raven, who is under a vow of silence; some scholars have interpreted her presence as a reference to the "Morrigan origin" of Morgan. However, Capps further argues that she represents the warrior side of the Goddess, even if it is silenced, as a symbol of a lack of threat from this aspect of the Goddess.[53] However, Sharpe adds that the warrior side is present, instead, when Morgaine decides to act in response to the events in Camelot[54] — events that will be further explored later on in this thesis.

Coming back to the arrival at Avalon, Viviane soon clarifies that their kinship and her own name will have no value once Morgaine enters the House of Maidens, where girls receive their training, and the only favours she will receive will be the ones she will earn by herself. She also explains to her niece who the Goddess is, mentioning, among the others, the warrior side I have written about above:

> Now you think only of learning to use the Sight, and of living in the beautiful land of Avalon, but it is no easy thing to serve the will of Ceridwen, my daughter; she is not only the Great Mother of Love and Birth, she is also the Lady of Darkness and Death […] She is also the Morrigán, the messenger of strife, the Great Raven… oh, Morgaine, Morgaine, I would you had been my own child, but even so I could not spare you, I must use you for her purposes as I was myself used: (p. 156)

Morgaine, thus, receives all the necessary warnings, both about the darkest, most mysterious faces that the Goddess may assume, and that she will be requested to perform deeds in Her name — she is not told yet what exactly she will be used for, but given how Viviane advises her about it, it is clear that it will not be always pleasurable or easy for both the Lady of the Lake and Morgaine herself. The day after this conversation, Morgaine enters the House of Maidens, "and there she remained for many years" (p. 157). Through the use of the first-person narrator, she summarizes how the following seven years have been — Morgaine tells the reader that, while she trained the Sight easily due to being priestess-born, other elements of her upbringing have not been equally easy to master:

[53] Capps, p. 149.
[54] Sharpe, p. 42.

> It was the small magics which came hardest, forcing the mind first to walk in unaccustomed paths. To call the fire and raise it at command, to call the mists, to bring rain—all these were simple, but to know when to bring rain or mist and when to leave it in the hands of the Gods, that was not so simple. Other lessons there were, at which my knowledge of the Sight helped me not at all: the herb lore, and the lore of healing, the long songs of which not a single word might ever be committed to writing, […] Some of the lessons were pure joy, for I was allowed to learn to play upon the harp and to fashion my own, using sacred woods and the gut of an animal killed in ritual; and some lessons were of terror.
> Hardest of all, perhaps, to look within myself, under the spell of the drugs which loosed the mind from the body, sick and retching, while the mind soared free past the limits of time and space, and to read in the pages of the past and the future. But of that I may say nothing. At last, the day when I was cast out of Avalon, clad only in my shift, and unarmed save for the little dagger of a priestess, to return—if I could. I knew that if I did not, they would mourn me as one dead, but the gates would never again be opened to me unless I could bid them open at my own will and command. (pp. 157-158)

She explains that controlling the elements like fire and rain is not difficult to learn in itself, but the complexity lies in having to discern whether human intervention is needed or not. She remarks that, while some teachings are indeed pleasurable, like learning to play the harp or how to build her own, others are rather complicated, since the Sight does not offer help in every field of knowledge. For example, Morgaine mentions the study of the herbs' use and the art of healing, or to endure the effects of drugs which free her mind from its limits but are not as pleasant when it comes to their physical effects. Finally, the last trial is the hardest, since she potentially will not come back — she is cast out of Avalon, with only her priestess' dagger and her shift to protect her and it is up to her to use all the knowledge she has gained across the years to lift the mists and return to Avalon. It is a task that she must obligatorily perform on her own, since help from the other side of the mists will not come. When analysing Morgaine's training, Sharpe observes how she develops characteristics that are essentially "a natural part of Geoffrey's Morgan"[55] — these two versions of Morgan share the abilities of a wise woman and a healer and the knowledge of the herbs and possibly of music, which is part of the *quadrivium,* just like other skills belonging to Morgen. This is knowledge which marks Morgan as different from the norm, and that, at the time in which *The Mists of Avalon* is set, was not commonly shared among women who already accepted the more restrictive patriarchal society.[56] However, unlike Morgen, Morgaine has also the Sight, a sort of gift of prophecy that was one of the few abilities, if not the only one, that Morgen lacked, and belonged to Merlin's sister Ganeida instead. However,

[55] Sharpe, p. 42.
[56] Sharpe, p. 42.

once Morgaine has completed her training process and has successfully passed her final test, the new chapter of her life is about to begin.

3.3. The Maiden Huntress and the King Stag

Le Morte Darthur presents a troubled relationship between Morgan and Arthur, in which respectively hatred and betrayed trust can be identified. Even if with certainly more nuance and complexity, the point of departure for the siblings' relationship is similar in The Mists of Avalon — Morgaine is the elder sister who should take care of her little brother, whom in turn trusts her greatly. However, they do not have really the chance to grow together, since while Morgaine soon leaves for Avalon, Arthur is sent to be educated to Sir Ectorius' castle. They only meet again after several years and it is on this occasion that the narrative deviates most substantially from the source and their relationship suffers the first blow and the possible harmony between the two results compromised. As I have written earlier, Viviane tells Morgaine that she cannot give her a preferential treatment in name of their affection and we learn, through her thoughts, that she wonders if she will be ready to use her niece in the name of the Goddess. What will be perhaps the most difficult trial Morgaine will have to face as a new priestess is about to happen, as Viviane explains to Morgaine:

> The Tribes of the fairy folk, and all the Tribes of the North, have been given a great leader, and the chosen one will be tested by the ancient rite. And if he survives the testing—which will, to some extent, depend on the strength with which the Maiden Huntress can enchant the deer—then he will become the Horned One, the King Stag, consort of the Virgin Huntress, crowned with the antlers of the God. Morgaine, I told you years ago that your maidenhood belongs to the Goddess. Now she calls for it in sacrifice to the Horned God. You are to be the Virgin Huntress, and the bride of the Horned One. You have been chosen for this service. (p. 199)

We learn that the Pagan tribes and the Old People hold an ancient rite around the festival of Beltane, which falls around the first day of May. During this celebration, they choose their new leader through a special hunt, in which the candidate should defeat the previous King Stag and take its place, assuming then the role of the Horned One. He is to be the consort of the Virgin Huntress, who, after having cast her blessings on the hunt, will lie with him in a ritual union. Since a virgin is required and Morgaine has preserved her maidenhood to donate it to the Goddess at the proper time, Viviane has

chosen her to take up the role of the Virgin Huntress. When the time comes, Morgaine is carried to the Dragon Island, the designated place for the ritual to happen, and is prepared by the local women to fulfill the duties her role requires. The ritual proceeds as planned in all its parts, and when the moment of the union comes, Morgaine and the King Stag do not recognise each other and, since they represent the Goddess and the Horned God, have no necessity to ask each other their identity either. Only the morning after, before reuniting to their respective people, they take some time to talk to each other and share some rather affectionate, almost playful moments in which the King Stag asks if the Goddess will be angry if he "likes the woman better" (p. 207) and proposes that, given how the Gods have already had their share of pleasure, now it should be the turn of man and woman. Morgaine agrees and it is after this that the truth is revealed:

> "You were the very first. No matter how many women I may have, for all my life I will always remember you and love you and bless you. I promise you that." There were tears on his cheek. Morgaine reached for her garment and tenderly dried the tears, cradling his head against her.
> At the gesture he seemed to stop breathing.
> "Your voice," he whispered, "and what you just did—why do I seem to know you? Is it because you are the Goddess, and in her all women are the same? No—" He stiffened, raised himself, took her face between his hands. In the growing light she saw the boyish features strengthened into the lines of a man. Still only half aware of why she seemed to know him, she heard his hoarse cry. "Morgaine! You are Morgaine! Morgaine, my sister! Ah, God, Mary Virgin, what have we done?" (p. 208)

The King Stag emotionally tells Morgaine that, whatever his life will bring him from that moment afterwards, he will always feel affection towards her nonetheless, since she was the first woman he lied with. Morgaine uses her clothing to wipe his tears, not realizing that the young man she has in front of her is her own brother Arthur, who remembers about her through her gesture — the same she made when they were both kids and she helped him to mend his chin wound. Arthur seems the most incredulous about realizing they committed incest and Morgaine attempts to calm him by reminding him that before the Goddess they are not brother and sister, but simply man and woman. She does not voice her own upset but the author makes her thoughts known — "Why did you do this to us? Great Mother, Lady, why? And she did not know whether she was calling to Viviane, or to the Goddess" (p. 209). She not only directs her disbelief towards the deity, but her rage towards Viviane too, even if at first, she tries to keep it under control. Only after ten days after the ritual she is allowed to speak

with her.

It is at this moment that we discover that it was no chance that the chosen one for the Horned God role was Arthur — Viviane, the Merlin Taliesin[57] and his future successor Kevin the Bard are pulling political strings, in order to make Arthur King. In fact, they want a king who is accepted both by the Tribes and by Avalon and with no ties with the other contenders. Viviane also adds that she is planning to give him "a sword of legend, never before wielded by a living hero" (p. 218), in order to have him swear allegiance to Avalon, in the hopes that one day Avalon should not have to hide in the mists anymore. Morgaine, knowing this, feels even more betrayed:

> With my brother, my brother. It did not matter when we were priest and priestess, God and Goddess joining under the power of ritual. But in the morning, when we wakened and were man and woman together… that was real, that was sin… (p. 219)

Morgaine, as she told Arthur, has made peace with their union as God and Goddess, but she finds unacceptable what has happened next — she and Arthur have been raised as Christians and thus they react with despair to what is believed to be a sin.[58] Viviane also remarks, as a proof that her niece is still influenced by her early upbringing, that Morgaine "still lives by the world's time, and she can still tremble and weep for what cannot be avoided" (p. 222). She does think that, if there had been another choice with less harm caused to Morgaine, she would have followed it, but she does not say that out loud, leaving Morgaine thinking she had been used without regards of her opinions and feelings. The younger priestess cannot manage to hold her rage any longer:

> Are you truly acknowledging that there is anything on the face of this earth which you feel is not yours to order, Lady? I thought you believed that your will was the will of the Goddess, and all of us puppets to serve you! (p. 220)

Hearing this accusation of basically depriving Morgaine of her freedom of choice, Viviane simply replies that "done is done" and that "in this moment the hope of Britain is more important than your feelings" (p. 220), to which Morgaine reacts by leaving, not wanting to hear more about the matter.

[57] In *The Mists of Avalon*, Merlin is not a proper noun, but the title assumed by the head of Druids.
[58] Thompson, Raymond H., "The First and Last Love: Morgan le Fay and Arthur", in Fenster, Thelma S., ed., *Arthurian Women*, New York and London: Routledge, 2000, p. 334.

What stands out from this passage, is the difference in reaction Morgaine has in comparison to Malory's Morgan — the latter does not go through this specific experience, but her general conduct is to harbour hatred and to plot revenge. The former, instead, does not feel blind hatred towards Viviane, but only legitimate rage for having been used by a person she loves, which makes the reader much more sympathetic towards her and her genuinely human reaction.

However, the consequences of the ritual are not finished, as the prayer the Tribes recited during the festival foreshadows:

> The Goddess receives her consort and she will slay him again at the end of time, she shall give birth to her Dark Son who will bring the King Stag down… (p. 204)

A while after the ritual, in fact, Morgaine realizes she is pregnant — after all she has discovered, she is decided to not keep the child, even after having meet with Morgause at Arthur's crowning and having been explained that it is rather normal for a woman expecting her first child to feel trapped, angry and afraid. Once she is back in Avalon, she goes into the woods to gather the herbs she needs to induce an abortion, but she soon finds herself in an unknow part of the island, or so she thinks — it seems impossible, since she has spent a decade of her life there and knows the place like the back of her own hand:

> She glanced up, looking to take her bearings by the sun, but she could not see the sun anywhere; it was full day now, but the light was like a soft radiance in the sky, seeming to come from everywhere at once. Morgaine began to feel the coldness of fear. She was nowhere, then, in the world she knew. (p. 258)

She has indeed wandered into the territories of the Old People, what can be defined as the fairy realm, which is hidden in the mists even more deeply than Avalon, and thus even more detached from the real world. Riggs notices how Morgaine enters the fairy realm several times throughout the novel and it is always in times in which she feels the most alienated from society[59] — due to her resentment towards Viviane, she is refusing her duty as a priestess and she starts to wonder if she can still call Avalon her only home. In this enchanted place, she meets with a mysterious woman that "carried

[59] Riggs, p. 18.

herself like a priestess or a queen" (p. 259), dressed in the colour of the "willow leaves when they grow old and dusty in late summer" (p. 259), who speaks to her:

> "Life is precious to my people," the woman said, "though we neither bear nor die as easily as your kind. But it is a marvel to me that you, Morgaine, who bear the royal line of the Old People, and thus are my far kinswoman, would seek to cast away the only child you will ever bear."[…] I am not the Goddess, Morgaine, nor even her emissary. My kind know neither Gods nor Goddesses, but only the breast of our mother who is beneath our feet and above our heads, from whom we come and to whom we go when our time is ended. Therefore we cherish life and weep to see it cast aside. (pp. 259-260)

The woman explains that she is not connected to the Goddess in any way and that, in fact, her people only worship Mother Earth. She adds that for her folk is not easy as it is for common women to have a child, that it is a surprise for her that a kinswoman would refuse to have who will be her only child and that her people is always saddened by seeing a life "cast aside". After this mysterious encounter with this fairy woman, she then returns to Avalon, where she faces another harsh conversation with Viviane. She accuses Viviane of having used her in order to have a child who belongs to the royal line of Avalon to have, if she will bear a boy, the chance to place him on Britain's throne and continue the endeavour they have begun in having Arthur crowned. Viviane once again reiterates that she owes no justification for her choices and that Morgaine will learn to do the same when the time will come. Morgaine, however, is unwilling to listen and retorts to the Lady of the Lake, "you [Viviane] have worked upon me and played with me like a puppet for the last time!" (p. 264). She is adamant in claiming the freedom of choice upon herself and she makes her decision — she will keep the baby, but she will leave Avalon. If it were a girl, she would have stayed to consecrate her to the Goddess, but given how she is sure that it will be a boy, she is absolutely unwilling to let Viviane gloat about her accomplishment. She will keep her motherhood a secret, so Arthur will never know he has a son, and she departs towards the Kingdom of Orkney to give birth there, where Morgause will foster the child. What both Morgaine and Viviane do not know, however, is the events this child, once adult, will cause. In fact, he is Gwydion, who will be nicknamed by the Saxons with the well-known name Mordred, "Evil counsel", as Zimmer Bradley translates it, an epithet that betrays his cunning nature. As the prayer of the Old People foreshadowed, he is the "Dark son" who will bring the King Stag,

his father, down, in the attempt to take his place. In this sense, Morgaine's story as told by Zimmer Bradley, reconnects with the traditional version, even if it radically differs from it by the crucial element that the famous incest motif is not realized between Arthur and Morgause, but between him and Morgaine — the order of the Malorian plot is only partly restored when Morgaine chooses to leave Mordred to be raised by Morgause.

3.4. Story of a Theft

In Le Morte Darthur, the famous theft of Excalibur and its scabbard, as discussed in the previous chapter, is the episode in which Morgan is most present in the scene. In The Mists of Avalon, it is equally relevant and, especially, one of the most exemplifying of the treatment Zimmer Bradley gives the source material — that is, providing background, justification, and original details about an episode of the tradition. Before analysing the episode in greater detail, it is thus worth observing the background elements in order to better understand the events and the deviations from Malory's work. The first original information Zimmer Bradley provides is that the magical, protective scabbard that is given to Arthur is sewed and enchanted by Morgaine herself, a few days after the ritual union has been performed:

> She cut, using the sword itself, an undersheath of thin doeskin. […] She was shown the priceless piece of deepest crimson velvet, dyed with colors which, she had once been told, cost more money for an ounce than would buy a villa and hire men to work the land on it for a year. This would cover the doeskin, and on it she must work, in the golden and silken threads provided, the magical spells and their symbols. Fashioning the shapes of doeskin sheath and velvet to cover it, she spent the first day; and before she slept, deep in the meditation of what she must do, almost in trance, she cut her arm a little and smeared the doeskin with her blood. […] It was Arthur who had shed the blood of her virginity, and it was she, also of the sacred line of Avalon, who must fashion the spell-scabbard of his safety, guarding the royal blood. (pp. 227-228)

Morgaine has been required by Viviane to perform the task of producing a scabbard for Excalibur so, as in Le Morte Darthur, Arthur will be protected on the battlefield and, in the eventuality he will be wounded, he will not lose blood. Viviane recommends her to work with Excalibur before her, in order to perform stronger enchantments and achieve a better degree of protection, so that Morgaine herself "shall have a part in the battle to defend the country" (p. 227) — which might be interpreted as defence

against external threats, like the Saxons, but also against the growing power of Christianity. Therefore, Morgaine begins her work and cuts the internal layer of the scabbard out of doeskin, while the exterior is covered in luxurious crimson velvet. She works relentlessly for three days, stitching protective symbols in gold and silk threads and, to provide additional defence, smearing the doeskin with her own blood. As the passage quoted above highlights, it is almost as if this action completes the circle opened by the ritual during Beltane festivities — Arthur shed the blood of Morgaine's maidenhood and now it is Morgaine who sheds her blood in order to give the King protection, strengthening their belonging to the royal line of Avalon. The enchanted scabbard is delivered together with Excalibur to King Arthur the day of his crowning by the Lady of the Lake, as happens in the medieval tradition. However, what Zimmer Bradley adds is that, in order for Arthur to reign, he should have the approval of both the Church and Avalon. Consequently, Viviane makes him swear to "deal fairly with Druid as with Christian" (p. 235) and that he "will be guided by the sacred magic of those who have set you on this throne" (p. 235), to which, not without a few doubts, Arthur complies.

Another element that is preserved from the Malorian tradition is Morgaine's marriage with King Uriens of North Wales, arranged for her by Queen Gwenhwyfar. Morgaine is not completely satisfied with this decision, but she eventually manages to make peace with the choice that has been made for her. Even if Uriens is much older than her, he behaves with kindness towards her and, in addition, she appreciates that he is willing to listen to her and that he does not discard her advice on the only basis that she is a woman — Morgaine says that "unlike the Romans of the South, these men of the Tribes never scorned to listen to a woman's advice" (p. 656). Moreover, after she left Mordred to Morgause's care just after he was born, at Uriens' court Morgaine learns what being a mother and growing a child means, since she takes care of little Uwaine, who was born from Uriens' previous marriage, as if he were her own — "After a year or two I began to think of Uwaine as my own son" (p. 656), she recalls. Most importantly, Zimmer Bradley identifies Accolon with King Uriens' middle

son, adding a parental relationship that was not present in Malory, even if Accolon remains Morgaine's lover. If she must marry with a man of their family, she would have preferred him as a husband, since he is younger and, especially, as she immediately notices the first time she meets him, he has serpents tattooed on his wrists, which represent the initiation in the Old Religion of Dragon Island. In comparison to *Le Morte Darthur,* it is clear that Accolon being merely Morgaine's pawn is to be excluded — to quote Capps, he is a "free agent",[60] and he acts of his own accord. Moreover, when Morgaine encounters him, she is undergoing a period of spiritual crisis caused by several factors, such as a failed relationship with Lancelot, who does not share her religious principles, Viviane's violent death and her marriage with Uriens. As a result, she is no longer attuned to the cycles of nature and she seems to have lost herself in playing the part of the housewife.[61] It is thanks to her relationship with Accolon that she recovers her genuine identity and their union in the name of the Goddess gives her what Lancelot was unable to provide and allows her to heal and recover her position as a priestess.[62] The Old People begin to perceive her and Accolon as their Queen and King, as she explains that, whenever she is outside performing rituals to honour the Goddess, she feels them watching and being there in the eventuality she might need their help — "It was not for nothing that I had been given that old name, Morgaine of the Fairies… and now they acknowledged me as their priestess and their queen" (p. 681), she says.

Furthermore, Capps remarks that "it is in her relationship with Accolon that Bradley's recuperation of Morgan's reputation is most marked".[63] While in Malory this episode provides "the blackest portrait of Morgan with her open threats to Arthur and his kingdom",[64] in *The Mists of Avalon* she is not even remotely so evil-minded. On the contrary, she is not exempt from "pain and anguish"[65] when putting Accolon at risk and when acting against her brother, whom she still loves despite his

[60] Capps, p. 157.
[61] Capps, p. 155.
[62] Capps, p. 157.
[63] Capps, p. 158.
[64] Capps, p. 158.
[65] Capps, p. 158.

disloyalty. Arthur's disloyalty is caused by his actions after his wedding with the fervent Christian Gwenhwyfar — the promised equity between the two religions that should coexist in his kingdom begin to fail and, under the Queen's pressure, Arthur leans more and more towards a completely Christian rule. For example, Queen Gwenhwyfar requests him to carry in battle only the banner bearing the cross that she has embroidered and not to carry it together with the Pendragon banner, which stands for the oath of loyalty towards Avalon and the Old People. Obviously, his decision is noticed and causes discontentment on the betrayed side.

However, Morgaine is worried that even in North Wales Christianity will get a foothold soon as Avalloch, Uriens' first son and a staunch Christian, will succeed on the throne at his father's death. Morgaine has the occasion to act upon it after since, one night, Avalloch sees her leaving Accolon's room and blackmails her — he will stay silent about she being an unfaithful wife if she will spend at least one night with him. Morgaine refuses and makes him retreat by threatening to deprive him of his manhood by magic. Nevertheless, she knows that Avalloch will tell the priest about this and the whole court would soon hear rumours, not to mention that she, Accolon and Uriens will be questioned about it. She makes a drastic and "destructive" resolution[66] and, in a way, appears more similar to Malory's Morgan, even if her action is backed by the justification *Le Morte Darthur* lacks. She has indeed decided to eliminate the threat by killing Avalloch, not with traditional means but through the hand of the Goddess. She makes sure that he goes boar hunting and she is tempted to confess to Accolon what happened the night before, so he could take revenge and kill his brother during the hunt. However, she decides to leave him out of this, since she does not want him to be accused of kin slaying, and she only makes clear that he should not go hunting with his brother. Once Avalloch leaves, Morgaine sits down to "weave him a cloak", since spinning and weaving are actions that trigger her visions from the Sight or allow her, as it is the case here, to perform tasks in a sort of state of trance. Zimmer Bradley writes:

[66] Hebert, p. 136.

> Now she was no longer that Virgin, holding all the power of the Huntress. As the Mother, with all the power of fertility, she had woven spells to bring Lancelet to Elaine's bed. But motherhood for her had ended in the blood of Gwydion's birth. Now she sat here with her shuttle in her hand and wove death, like the shadow of the Old Death-crone. All men are in your hands to live or die, Mother… (p. 773)

Morgaine has thus, in her lifetime, assumed each aspect of the Goddess and now she shows Her final face, the Old-Death-crone. While she weaves, she prays to summon the Goddess and, especially, she appeals to the Great Sow, one of the names for the Goddess, since it is a boar that should attack Avalloch to death. She keeps on weaving, until she is no longer able to distinguish reality from vision and herself from the sow, and finally she collapses once she is sure that Avalloch has been killed and it looks only like a hunting accident. About how Morgaine performs magic through spinning and weaving, later in the book the author adds:

> 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 … from the time a man comes into the world we spin his baby clothes, till we at last spin a shroud. Without us, the lives of men would be naked indeed… (p. 851)

This excerpt underlines both that Morgaine has acted as an embodiment of the Goddess and a possible reference to the female deities I have analysed in the first chapter, the Norns/Parcae/Moirai, who are the incarnation of Fate and decide upon the life of men — especially, the classical versions are portrayed spinning a thread which symbolizes the life of humans and, for each one, they decide its length and cut it accordingly. However, this is but the first step of Morgaine's endeavour to restore monarchs who are loyal to Avalon on the throne and has apparently only long-term consequences, as Uriens is still in good health and might still reign for several years. However, Morgaine has soon another chance to act more directly against King Arthur's Christian rule.

Another occasion to expose Arthur's disloyalty arises soon after Avalloch's death, during the yearly Pentecost festival. During its celebration, it is customary to receive at court all the kings and knights of the realm to feast together, as well as petitioners. Three Saxon kings arrive as well, in order to pledge allegiance to "the most Christian of Kings" (p. 818), a wording which alone unsettles Morgaine once she hears it. What angers her the most, however, is what they ask — "May we take

oath on the cross of your sword, Lord Arthur, in token that we meet as Christian kings under One God who rules us all?" (p. 816), to which King Arthur agrees, even if Excalibur is not a Christian symbol but belonging to Avalon's Holy Regalia. Morgaine is ready to object at once, not caring that she is in front of the whole court, but her husband holds her back. However, she is resolved not to remain silent about the matter. After the feast, she speaks to Uriens and Accolon and they all agree that "the kingdom of North Wales will not fall meekly under the rule of the Christians" (p. 821), since their territory is tied with the Old Religion and King Uriens himself was schooled in Avalon. Before facing Arthur, however, Morgaine thinks about her past:

> I was a fool, she thought. I was priestess at his kingmaking, I bore Arthur a son, I should have used that hold I had on the King's conscience—made myself, not Gwenhwyfar, the ruler behind the throne. While I hid like an animal licking wounds, I lost my hold on Arthur. Where, at one time, I could have commanded, now I must beg, without even the power of the Lady! (p. 821)

She feels as if she had the occasion to avoid all this right after the ritual — she knows that she had a strong influence on Arthur back then and that she could have become the queen and mother of a rightful heir from the royal line of Avalon, if she were not so shocked about having committed incest. What was then a reason of shame and withdrawal from Avalon, is now a reason for regret at not having accepted it earlier, as Viviane suggested. However, she still has the chance to act upon it and she does not shy away from confronting Arthur openly and without hiding her outrage. She speaks in front of King and Queen and she reminds them of the oath Arthur took — she says that she is there to finish what Viviane intended to do before dying, which was to remind Arthur to fulfill his duties towards all his subjects, not only the Christian ones. Gwenhwyfar interferes, remarking that one day all Pagan symbols will be incorporated into Christianity, to which Morgaine retorts that "that day will come over her corpse" (p. 825) and that "you Christians have saints and martyrs — do you think Avalon will have none?" (p. 825). When she pronounces these words, however, she realizes that the Sight has just given her a warning, and in her mind an image appears, "the body of a knight, draped in black with a cross banner over his body" (p. 825). This vision makes her feel uneasy, but she continues with determination to confront the King:

> "How you exaggerate all things, Morgaine!" said Arthur with an uneasy laugh, and that laugh maddened her, driving away both the fear and the Sight. She drew herself up to her full height, and knew that for the first time in many years she spoke mantled in all the power and authority of a priestess of Avalon. "Hear me, Arthur of Britain! As the force and power of Avalon set you on the throne, so the force and power of Avalon can bring you down into ruin! Think well how you desecrate the Holy Regalia! Think never to put it to the service of your Christian God, for every thing of Power carries its own curse"
> "Enough!" Arthur had risen from his chair, and his frown was like a storm. "Sister or no, do not presume to give orders to the King of all Britain."
> "I do not speak to my brother," she retorted, "but to the King! Avalon set you on the throne, Arthur, Avalon gave you that sword you have misused, and in the name of Avalon I now call on you to render it back again to the Holy Regalia! If you wish to treat it only as a sword, then call your smiths to make you another!" (p. 825)

King Arthur minimizes the issue, which angers Morgaine even more. Then, she decides to use one of her abilities her newly recovered status as a priestess gives her to appear more convincing and commanding, even intimidatory — she shares this trait with Viviane and it is essentially a form of "magic charisma" that makes her appear more imposing than her small frame would allow, a device to make her priestess authority heard. She speaks to Arthur with no half measures and she makes clear that Avalon can bring him down with the same ease with which they put him on the throne, remarking that sacred objects of power like Excalibur do not come without a "curse", if they are not respected as they should be. When Arthur tries to stop her, she raises above both their sibling relationship and his status as King, daring to give orders to him — specifically, to give back Excalibur to Avalon if he is not willing to keep his oath. They argue a while — on the one hand, Arthur claims that he has earned through his valiant actions the right to call the sword his, not Avalon's; on the other, Morgaine argues that he should only bear it as he has sworn or give it to whom is willing to do so. Arthur resolutely refuses and says that if the Goddess wants her sword back, she should come and take it from his hands. It is at this point that Morgaine takes her decision:

> And he will never see why what he has said is wrong, Morgaine thought in despair. Yet he has called on the Goddess, if she wants his sword to come and take it. Be it so, then; Lady, may I be your hand. She bowed her head for a moment and said, "To the Goddess, then, I leave the disposal of her sword." And when she has done with you, Arthur, you will wish you had chosen to deal with me instead… (p. 827)

Now, she has been betrayed both by her brother and her husband, since in this instance Uriens recants what he said earlier and defends Arthur's choice instead, telling Morgaine that she is being "unreasonable" (p. 826) and that Arthur had no ill purposes, but only acted so "for political reasons,

to catch the imagination of the crowd" (p. 826). As Arthur has called for the action of the Goddess in person, Morgaine will now act in Her name to restore the order, so not as Arthur's sister, but as the Goddess herself, embodying Her will as she had done in killing Avalloch.

Zimmer Bradley's retelling of the episode of Excalibur' theft follows essentially the same crucial points as the source material, starting from the isolation of King Arthur and his entourage from the rest of his knights — or the rest of the world, as will be the case here. A short while after Pentecost, Morgaine decides to ride to Tintagel with King Uriens, Accolon and King Arthur, who does not suspect that his sister's angry outburst will have a more serious follow-up, with the excuse of reclaiming her castle, which has been usurped by King Mark of Cornwall. Morgaine does not set her plan in motion light-heartedly, as she thinks, "I love Arthur. I would not betray him, but he first betrayed the oath he swore to Avalon" (p. 839). Her actions will take a heavy emotional toll on her, but she must proceed nonetheless. Therefore, she diverts their route, helped by the mist that surrounds them, to the Fairy land where she hopes for Arthur to stay trapped for a few days, which correspond to years in the mundane world's time — in this way, people would forget about him and the problem would be solved without him being killed or harmed in any way. Once they arrive there, King Uriens and King Arthur are left to the fairies' care, while Accolon and Morgaine continue to follow their plan. While Arthur is asleep, a maiden of the fairy folk gives Excalibur to Accolon, warning Morgaine that the King might wake up and ask for his sword. Thus, she asks the maiden that their smiths provide Arthur with a perfect copy of Excalibur and its enchanted scabbard, so he will be unable to tell that the original has been stolen. Soon, the King wakes up and, as expected, asks for his sword with words that makes clear which side he has chosen:

> "Jesus and Mary defend me from all evil," he said. "This is some wicked enchantment, wrought by my sister and her witchcraft!" He shuddered, and called out, "Bring me my sword!" (p. 845)

Morgaine feels these words like a "tearing pain in her heart" (p. 845), as she understands that there is space neither for peaceful confrontation nor for confrontation without loss for one side or the other. She begins to understand what Viviane felt at the time of the Beltane ritual — she should do what is

right, which does not correspond to what she would like or to what would be harmless for either party. This realization comes with a painful awareness:

> Never till this moment had she faced it fully: one of them must die, brother or lover, the child she had held in her arms, the Horned One who had been lover and priest and king—
> Whatever comes of this day, she thought, never again, never again shall I know a moment's happiness, since one of those I love must die… (p. 845)

She does not know who, between Accolon and Arthur, will die, but she is certain that one of the duellists will. She finds no consolation in knowing that one will survive, since she is aware that the one who will die will be in any case a person she loves, be he either her brother or her lover. Morgaine, then, feels that now that Accolon and Arthur have gone "where she could not follow" (p. 845), she is giving up her last chance to be happy — her happiness will be lost along with one of her loved ones. She wonders if she should abandon Uriens in the fairy realm, but she thinks that "there have been enough death, whatever happens" (p. 845) and she chooses to go back to Camelot with him instead. She is tormented by the anxiety of not knowing how the duel is faring and she chooses to go spinning with the other women — as happened before, the act of spinning triggers the Sight, which brings her images of what is happening between Arthur and Accolon. The duel proceeds essentially as in the source material, except for the fact that Arthur does not receive help to recover Excalibur, but he takes it back on his own and kills Accolon with it. Morgaine, however, does not witness the outcome in her vision, and she is still hoping that it will be Accolon to return victorious. However, a quite different news arrives at Camelot, brought by a monk:

> "I have then a message for you," he said. "Your brother Arthur lies wounded in Glastonbury, nursed by the sisters there, but he will recover. He sends you this"—he waved his hand at the shrouded figure on the pack horse—"as a present, and he bid me say to you that he has his sword Excalibur, and the scabbard." And as he spoke he twitched away the pall covering the body, and Morgaine, all the strength in her body running out of her like water, saw Accolon's sightless eyes staring at the sky. (p. 855)

Arthur has probably understood that what has happened was Morgaine's doing and therefore, once the duel is over, addresses a message directly to her. Even if here it is delivered by the monk, the message is quoted almost word for word from Le Morte Darthur and, even if it is described more in length and with more detail, Morgaine's heart-wrenching reaction is the same. To make things worse,

Queen Gwenhwyfar accuses Accolon of treason and does not want him to have a Christian funeral — it is only for King Uriens' and Uwaine's sake that she concedes. However, Morgaine wishes for him to be buried "decently" in the ground with no ceremonies, since Accolon was no Christian, but "to bring no scandal" (p. 856) her voice remains unheard. In addition to this, Uwaine vents his angers towards his stepmother, in a way that reminds much Malory's description of Morgan:

> "Aye, I know it was you who plotted this treachery," said Uwaine, "but I have no pity for Accolon, who let himself be led astray by a woman! Have decency enough, Mother, not to drag my father any further into your wicked schemes against our king!" (pp. 856-857)

In a similar fashion, King Uriens joins his son in accusing Morgaine, with even more rage than Uwaine has just expressed:

> "Your mother, you call her!" Uriens cried out, starting upright and staring at Morgaine with implacable wrath. "Never again let me hear you call that abominable woman Mother! Do you think I know not that by her sorcery she led my good son into rebellion against his king? And now I think by her evil witchcraft she must also have contrived the death of Avalloch—aye, and of that other son she should have borne to me—three sons of mine has she sent down into death! Look out that she does not seduce you and betray you with her witchcraft, into death and destruction—no, she is not your mother!" (p. 857)

He calls her "abominable" and is convinced that Accolon was only a pawn who fell victim of her sorcery, as well as believing that she used witchcraft to kill Avalloch. He accuses her of having "sent down into death" three of his sons — the third being an unborn baby, probably conceived with Accolon, whom she had willingly aborted, knowing that she was too old to bear a healthy child and fearing for her own wellbeing, given how giving birth to Mordred almost cost her her life. Finally, Uriens warns Uwaine not to let her "seduce him" and "betray him with her witchcraft". In this version of the story, Morgaine is not planning to kill her husband, but the scene described by Malory takes place after she hears these accusations. Blinded by rage and pain, Morgaine takes her priestess' sickle and raises it, with the intention of killing Uriens, but Uwaine steps forward and stops her. Zimmer Bradley preserves some details from Malory's work, even if she changes them slightly, as exemplified by Uwaine's words:

> Ah, God, can you not show some pity for his grief? He does not mean to accuse you, he is so miserable he does not know what he is saying, in his right mind he will know that what he says is wild nonsense… I do not accuse you either… Mother, Mother, listen to me, give me the dagger, dear Mother… (p. 857)

In Le Morte Darthur Morgan uses demonic possession as an excuse for her actions, while in The Mists of Avalon it is Uwaine who asks Morgaine, “Mother, is the Devil in you?” (p. 857) to find a reason for a behaviour that is apparently so out of his stepmother’s character. In addition to this, in Malory he excuses his mother and has what is believed a too mild reaction, but in Zimmer Bradley’s novel he excuses his father’s words along with his mother’s behaviour — a plausible reaction for a son who loves both his parents, be they biological or adoptive.

At this point, Morgaine feels that her plan has come to ruins, with Accolon dead and Arthur still in possession of Excalibur and its enchanted scabbard. However, she does have one card left to play and, as the novel says, “One day she would have leisure to mourn him [Accolon]; now she must carry on where he had failed” (p. 859). Therefore, she leaves Camelot before dawn, directed towards the Isle of the Priests, to the abbey where wounded Arthur is. She uses her status as Queen of North Wales and Cornwall and King’s sister to enter the monastery without question, where she can reach Arthur’s bedroom with ease. She finds him asleep, but with Excalibur in his hand. She realizes that he expected her to come back to attempt to take the sword again and she supposes that “somehow, his mind gave him warning” (p. 861) — she deduces that, however untrained and ignored, he has the Sight too, since he belongs to the royal line of Avalon. She stands there, wondering how to proceed, doubtful that taking Excalibur is the right thing to do, after all:

> In some mystical way Morgaine only half understood, the sword Excalibur had grown entangled with the very soul and spirit of Arthur’s kingship. If it had not been so, if it had only been a sword, then would he have been willing to render it back to Avalon and had another made for himself, a stronger sword and a better... but Excalibur had become for him the visible and ultimate symbol of what he was as King. (p. 862)

Since Le Morte Darthur, the sword has been a symbol of male power and here it seems to be no exception, but in the case of Arthur and Excalibur, it seems an even more powerful and personal connection, so that it might be too late to separate them — Morgaine even fears, perhaps irrationally, that such a powerful object might kill her on its own, if she were to take it from the King, due to its deep bond with “Arthur’s soul and kingship” (p. 862). Thus, it is almost as if she does not feel to have

the right to claim it anymore. However, she ponders on killing him, as he is asleep with his neck exposed, and she has her dagger with her — given what has happened until this moment, though, she is unable to find the courage to do so:

> Ah, but this was the child Igraine had placed in her arms, her first love, the father of her son, the Horned God, the King… Strike, fool! For this you came here!
> No. There has been too much death. We were born from a single womb and I could not face my mother in the country beyond death, not with the blood of my brother on my hands. (p. 863)

Morgaine remembers everything she and Arthur went through since their childhood and she cannot ignore everything Arthur has represented for her throughout her life. Moreover, she still feels that another death should be avoided and she thinks about the by now deceased Igraine, mother to both, and how she would not be able to face her in the afterlife if she committed such a crime against her own brother. Therefore, she decides to settle for a compromise and only take the scabbard, justifying her action by explaining that since she has fashioned it, she has at least the right to take it from Arthur. Once she has it, she plans to seek refuge in Avalon, but the boatman she finds on the shore of the Lake explains her that now it is harder to cross the mists, especially so near the church and when the bells are tolling — Morgaine has been away from Avalon for a long time and since then the influence of Christianity has grown and pushed the place further into the mists. Luckily, she knows other ways to reach her destination without going through the mists so near the church and she departs with her horse, knowing, thanks to the Sight, that Arthur has awakened and is pursuing her. Exactly in the same way it happens in Malory, she throws the scabbard into the water before the King can reach her:

> She took it in both hands, whirled it over her head, and flung it, with all her strength, far out into the Lake, where she saw it sink into the deep and fathomless waters. No human hand could ever reclaim it—there it would lie till leather and velvet rotted and the silver and gold thread tarnished and twisted and at last the spells woven into them vanished utterly from the world. (p. 864)

She is able, thus, to accomplish at least a portion of her plan, even if it will not have an immediate result and, if Arthur does not receive a mortal wound, the problem of his too Christian rule would not be solved nonetheless. Morgaine feels that Arthur and his knights are approaching fast, and she disguises herself as she was taught in Avalon:

> Morgaine drew herself into silence, a part of shadow and tree as if some essential part of herself had gone into Fairy; while she stayed there motionless, covered in the silence of a priestess, no one from the mortal world could see so much as her shadow…(p. 864)

Even this last section of the episode follows rather accurately Malory's account, and Morgaine manages to hide from Arthur by disappearing among the shadow of the trees, as if she were not entirely in the mundane world, but half in the fairy realm. As her training taught her, she is able to stand completely still and silent so, after having circled the area without finding a single trace, Arthur and his men are forced to give up their search and go back to Camelot. At this point, Morgaine has done everything she could attempt to accomplish her mission and decides to go to Cornwall, in Tintagel, where she can mourn for Accolon and everything else she has lost during the years. It is only after this long period of crisis that she decides to return to Avalon, where she can still feel at home and begin to heal from her spiritual wounds.

3.5. "The Strife Is Over"

As observed in the previous subchapter, Marion Zimmer Bradley preserves the main plot points of Le Morte Darthur, even if, obviously, with her original contribution. The final chapter of the story makes no exception and the core of the events remains the same, but even here the point of view shifts and the events are enriched with additional details. At this point of the story, Morgaine has retired in Avalon and she believes that "the tides of the world were changing" (p. 996) and not necessarily for the better — on Dragon Island, the ritual hunt is no longer celebrated and she feels that the Goddess is distant even from Avalon. In addition to this, Morgaine is now Lady of the Lake, but there are no other priestesses who can succeed her, and she also feels she has loosed "a monster upon the world" — her son Mordred, who, under Morgause's care, has grown into an ambitious and treacherous young man. Moreover, there is a new foe "plundering and burning" (p. 996), the Norsemen, who bring "a new world, and new Gods" (p. 996), unbalancing once again the social order. Lastly, given that Viviane had renounced the Sight once she reached mature age, Morgaine believes that it has faded

for her too — in general, she believes that her spiritual dimension has dimmed accordingly to the general situation in her world.

Morgaine says, however, that "Yet, one night, some dream, some vision, some fragment of the Sight, drove me, at the hour of the dark moon, to the mirror" (p. 996), the surface of a pond on which visions from the Sight can be seen more clearly. There, she can see her son seeking to challenge the King Stag, his father Arthur, and she hears their conversation — the King is asking Mordred why he is challenging him and why must he follow his mother's will to this extreme. Mordred replies that he is not acting upon Morgaine's will and that he does not know whether he hates his mother or his father more. At this point, Morgaine decides to enter the vision to intervene:

> And then, stepping forth into their dream or vision or whatever it might be, I knew that I stood on the shores of the Lake where they challenged each other, stood between them clad in the robes of a priestess. "Must this be? I call upon you both, in the name of the Goddess, to amend your quarrel. I sinned against you, Arthur, and against you, Gwydion, but your hate is for me, not for each other, and in the name of the Goddess I beg of you—"
> "What is the Goddess to me?" Arthur tightened his fist on the hilt of Excalibur. "I saw her always in your face, but you turned away from me, and when the Goddess rejected me, I sought another God..."
> And Gwydion said, looking on me with contempt, "I needed not the Goddess, but the woman who mothered me, and you put me into the hands of one who had no fear of any Goddess or any God."
> I tried to cry out, "I had no choice! I did not choose—" but they came at each other with their swords, rushing through me as if I were made of air, and it seemed that their swords met in my body... (pp. 997-998)

Morgaine steps forth in her priestess' clothes and tries to stop them in the name of the Goddess, pointing out that their hate should be for her, not for each other, but both Arthur and Mordred refuse to listen. On one hand, Arthur claims that she embodied the Goddess for him, but since he was rejected, he sought a different God; on the other, Mordred tells her that he never had the need for a Goddess, but only for his own mother. Morgaine desperately keeps trying to convince them, but once again her cry goes unheard as father and son duel against each other. It is at this moment that Morgaine wakes up, with the awareness that all the plans she has been pursuing since she became a priestess have failed and come to ruins. She knows, however, that what she has just seen was not only a dream, but a warning from the Sight — she knows that that will be the day in which Arthur and Mordred will face each other for the last time and she departs on the barge to reach them. Here, Zimmer Bradley

follows the tradition according to which three queens and the Lady of the Lake are on board of the barge, but gives to it an original interpretation, since her four queens are all embodied by Morgaine, as she explains in the following quotation:

> I stood in the barge alone, and yet I knew there were others standing there with me, robed and crowned, Morgaine the Maiden, who had summoned Arthur to the running of the deer and the challenge of the King Stag, and Morgaine the Mother who had been torn asunder when Gwydion was born, and the Queen of North Wales, summoning the eclipse to send Accolon raging against Arthur, and the Dark Queen of Fairy… or was it the Death-crone who stood at my side? (p. 998)

Each queen, then, represent a phase of Morgaine's life and a chapter of the story, as well as one of the faces of the Goddess — the Maiden who lied with Arthur during the ritual, the Mother who gave birth to Mordred, the Queen of North Wales who had plotted against Arthur and the mysterious Queen of Fairy, whom Morgaine had met more than once during her life in her journeys to the land of the fairies. However, Morgaine cannot recognise the latter with certainty, since she thinks that that queen might actually be the Death-crone — a role Morgaine has already taken up when Avalloch was killed, but that she might need to assume once again when she reaches the shore. Therefore, Morgaine, after all the challenges life has put her through, realizes that the Goddess and herself are one and the same. As Sharpe observes, Zimmer Bradley "has finally allowed Morgan to come full circle".[67] She "encompasses all sides of Morgan's feminine nature",[68] as her protagonist manifests one side or the other according to the situations she finds herself into and showing both the negative and the positive of each.

Morgaine crosses the mists and reaches the shore, where she soon realizes that the vision she had during her sleep has already come true:

> He lay there, his hair matted with blood, my Gwydion, my lover, my son... and at his feet Gwydion lay dead, my son, the child I had never known. I bent and covered his face with my own veil. And I knew that it was the end of an age. (p. 999)

[67] Sharpe, p. 43.
[68] Sharpe, p. 43.

There, she finds Arthur dying and Mordred already dead — they share the same given name, since their most famous name is what the other characters call them, as if they were parts of the same cycle. She is aware that an age has ended with them, because the King Stag, Arthur, has been thrown down, but the young stag who should take his place, Mordred, is dead too — together with the fact that in Dragon Island the rites are no longer held, it is clear that Arthur is the last King Stag. Having understood that Arthur is dying, Morgaine asks him to throw Excalibur in the lake, to avoid the sword falling in unworthy hands — a task that will be eventually performed by Lancelot, who says that a hand has taken the sword and brandished it three times before vanishing under the surface, exactly as described by Malory. As in Le Morte Darthur, now Morgaine seems ready to give up all the roles she has fulfilled during her life and returns to the role of the sister,[69] as she performs the same gestures she made when they both were children — "I held him close and wiped away his tears with my veil" (p. 1000), she recalls, as the whole scene of Arthur's death is told by her point of view as a memory. Arthur is worried that all their efforts have failed, and Morgaine finally renounces the fight she fought throughout her life in the effort to comfort him:

> It was my own question, and I had no answer; but from somewhere, the answer came. "You did not fail, my brother, my love, my child. You held this land in peace for many years, so that the Saxons did not destroy it. You held back the darkness for a whole generation, until they were civilized men, with learning and music and faith in God, who will fight to save something of the beauty of the times that are past. […] And so you did not fail, my love. None of us knows how she will do her will—only that it will be done." And I knew not, even then, whether what I spoke was truth, or whether I spoke to comfort him, in love, as with the little child Igraine had put into my arms when I was but a child myself; Morgaine, she had told me, take care of your little brother, and so I had always done, so I would always do, now and beyond life… or was it the Goddess herself who had put Arthur into my arms? (pp. 999-1000)

Morgaine is taking up the protective, nurturing role that is expected from an elder sister and nothing else. She has no answer to give to Arthur, but she manages to find reassuring words — she recognises that his reign has been fruitful, despite his different faith, and that he has been able to keep the peace for a generation. She also adds that common people cannot know how the Goddess will do her will and she feels as if it was Her who "put Arthur into her arms" so she could always take care of him

[69] Hebert, p. 129.

throughout his life and even now, in death. Unlike Malory, however, it is not Morgaine who asks Arthur why he has been so distant from her, but it is he who prays her not to leave him again and asks her "Morgaine, take me to Avalon, where you can heal me of this wound—take me home, Morgaine—" (p. 1000). In line with the most ancient tradition, Arthur is convinced that in Avalon his wound will be healed, a hope Morgaine does not have the heart to contradict. She, in fact, only promises "I will never leave you again, my brother, my baby, my love" (p. 1000) as he draws his last breath.

The novel does not conclude here, where most traditional versions of King Arthur's story do. What has happened so far seem to not give enough closure to Morgaine's character and Zimmer Bradley adds one last, completely original chapter to her story. The events are set one year after Arthur's death and begin with a dream — Morgaine dreams of Lancelot, who once refused her religious principles, as a priest. They both drink from the same cup, the famous Grail that in Zimmer Bradley's retelling is part of Avalon's Holy Regalia, and Lancelot tells Morgaine "Take this cup, you who have served the Goddess. For all the Gods are one God, and we are all One, who serve the One" (p. 1001). Once Morgaine wakes up, she is prompted to visit the Isle of the Priests, where she never wanted to set foot before. She dresses in the dark robes of a priestess, with a veil covering her head and concealing the crescent moon all priestesses have tattooed on their forehead — in this attire, she can easily pass for a nun or a pilgrim. She does not formulate her thoughts clearly, but she appears to act upon the words she heard in her dream — she takes a slip from the Holy Thorn to bring it to the Isle of the Priests and plant it there, "so that it might still blossom in the world outside" (p. 1002), as a "symbolic link between the two places",[70] as if she wanted to bring a piece of Avalon to Glastonbury. She is aware, though, that even if in Avalon only a year has passed, outside it might have been longer — Avalon is now more hidden in the mists than it has ever been and she does not know exactly what to expect from her visit. Once she reaches her destination, she chooses to visit

[70] Volk-Birke, Sabine, "The Cyclical Way of the Priestess: On the Significance of Narrative Structures in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*", *Anglia*, 108 (2009), p. 422.

Viviane's tomb, as she had been buried in Christian ground as per King Arthur's request, a choice that Morgaine used to disapprove. She now reflects on it and is surprised crying by a nun, who reassures her that she and her sisters pray for Viviane every day, for she was regarded as a benefactor of the beloved King Arthur. *"*Never did I think I would stand side by side with one of these Christian nuns, joining with her in prayer" (p. 1005), Morgaine observes, as she recalls what Lancelot told her in her dream. She has taken the final step "of reconciliation and acceptance"[71] she still needed to take towards Christianity and thus she is no longer so combative and seems more open to discussion and sharing. She accepts a cup of water from the nun when she offers her some refreshment and she tells Morgaine that they only drink from the Sacred Well, just as the priestesses in Avalon use to, and, once she sends a group of novices to help Morgaine plant the Holy Thorn, Morgaine realizes how similar they are to the young priestesses in training in the House of Maidens. Moreover, the girls surprise her, as they unexpectedly call her "Mother":

> Morgaine, for a moment startled at the word, realized that they were speaking to her with the same deference and respect as any of her own maidens in the House of Maidens, as if she were an elder among them. (p. 1006)

More and more, Morgaine understands the similarities between this place and the House of Maidens in Avalon, and she feels that she has not the right to contradict the novices on the name they call their God. She only tells them that she is grateful, since any form of prayer is equally good, and she believes that, since the place is the same, some "holiness from Avalon" (p. 1007) must have seeped through the mists and influenced the corresponding Christian place. After planting the slip, the novices offer Morgaine to show her their chapel, the moment which surprises her the most:

> There were flowers here, armfuls of apple blossom, before a statue of a veiled woman crowned with a halo of light; and in her arms she bore a child. Morgaine drew a shaking breath and bowed her head before the Goddess. […]
> "And here is a very old statue that our bishop gave us, from his native country... one of their saints, her name is Brigid…"
> Morgaine looked on the statue of Brigid, and she could feel the power coming from it in great waves that permeated the chapel. She bowed her head.
> But Brigid is not a Christian saint, she thought, even if Patricius thinks so. That is the Goddess as she is worshipped in Ireland. And I know it, and even if they think otherwise, these women know the power of the Immortal. Exile her as they may, she will prevail. The Goddess will never withdraw herself from

[71] Volk-Birke, p. 422.

mankind. (pp. 1007-1008).

Morgaine is shown a statue of Mary and, in her eyes, it is none other than a representation of the Goddess — the statue is surrounded by apple trees, which have always been associated to Avalon, and represents Mary carrying a child, as if she were the representation of the mother side of the Goddess. It is not the only statue that surprises Morgaine, since the chapel houses also a statue of Brigid. The nuns consider her an Irish saint, but Morgaine knows that it is the name by which the Goddess is called in Ireland — then, it is not a Christian interpretation like the statue of Mary is, but actually the Goddess herself. In addition, one of the nuns explains that there they have already their own Holy Thorn and that her agency to keep the Goddess in the world was not essential.[72] Only then Morgaine understands that what she had told to the dying Arthur was not a lie, after all. They have not failed, and the Goddess is still in the world — they only have no control on how She chooses to remain present:

> No, we did not fail. What I said to comfort Arthur in his dying, it was all true. I did the Mother's work in Avalon until at last those who came after us might bring her into this world. I did not fail. I did what she had given me to do. It was not she but I in my pride who thought I should have done more. (p. 1009)

Finally, Morgaine realizes that she has done everything that was her power to do — the Goddess gave her a duty to fulfill, and Morgaine obliged. If something seems to have failed, then it means that it was not for her to interfere. Morgaine, then, feels finally at peace and she can retire in Avalon, knowing that her work is done. In conclusion, this observation by Sabine Volk-Birke summarizes comprehensively the realization with which Morgaine finally finds her peace:

> She [Morgaine] understands that the essence of the Goddess will never be completely lost in any civilization or religion because what she represents and protects is so universal, such an integral part of human existence, that it will always find a way of expressing itself.[73]

[72] Volk-Birke, p. 423.
[73] Volk-Birke, p. 423.

3.6. Conclusion

The writing of The Mists of Avalon is very much indebted to Marion Zimmer Bradley's background. Her readings and her beliefs shaped her vision of the Arthurian material, especially of Le Morte Darthur, and her own retelling of King Arthur's story. In particular, what helped Zimmer Bradley develop her rendition of Avalon is her participation in the Neo-Pagan faith, especially the female-centric cult of the Goddess. It served as an inspiration to retell the events of Le Morte Darthur with an original religious frame, the so-called Old Religion as opposed to the rising Christianity. Most importantly, however, is that Zimmer Bradley does so by shifting the perspective to the female point of view, as opposed to the male-centric voice of Malory's work. Therefore, she gives space to the women of the Arthurian legend — Guinevere, Viviane, Igraine, Morgause, but most importantly Morgaine.

Zimmer Bradley attempts to restore Morgaine to a more historically accurate character and closer to her origins and to Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlini. In addition to this, she fills the gaps in Malory's narration and gives a more complete portrait of Morgaine, starting from her introduction on the scene. Morgaine is indeed portrayed with a rich physical description that Malory lacks and Zimmer Bradley extends the few lines of Le Morte Darthur into a detailed account of her childhood and her training in Avalon — from the beginning of the novel, this in-depth characterization surely helps the reader empathize with Morgaine, as opposed to the Malorian Morgan, who appears more as a flat villain whom the readers might perceive as alien and not so relatable.

The author, however, does not only retrace the events that Malory presents, but also adds original elements to her story. One significant episode is the ritual between the Maiden Huntress and the King Stag, celebrated according to the Old Religion principles and where the protagonists are embodied respectively by Morgaine and Arthur. It changes meaningfully the relationships between

them, as it is not based mainly on hatred as it happens in traditional medieval accounts of Arthurian material. In fact, even if they realize they committed incest during the ritual, they do not hate each other for no apparent reason and their love remains instead present throughout the novel, even if it eventually subsides only to resurface towards the ends. Their separation is due to external factors that go beyond the siblings' personal dimension— Morgaine clashes with the King and his entourage because of the Christian deviation of the court, when instead Arthur should have reigned in harmony with the Old Religion as well.

On these premises, lies the episode of the theft of Excalibur and its enchanted scabbard. The development of the main events is the same as in Le Morte Darthur, but the motives changes — Arthur is no longer respecting his oath of loyalty towards Avalon and, since the sword is a sacred object given to him by the Lady of the Lake, Morgaine feels, as a priestess of Avalon, that she should take it away from him to restore order. This episode is representative of how Zimmer Bradley treats her main character, adding psychological depth to the medieval plot. Thus, Morgaine does not act only out of hatred and spite towards her brother, but she feels that she is obliged to behave in a certain way due to what is expected from her role, which is preserving the faith of Avalon and protecting it against the advance of Christianity. Then, she does not embark on her endeavour without doubts, pain and guilt, that she forces herself to ignore in order in name of her higher purposes — in general, in The Mists of Avalon all her actions have reason and justification and are accompanied by the consequent set of emotions, while in Malory only words and actions describe the characters.

The novel's finale is perhaps one of the chapters that are most faithful to Malory's version. The only important change is that Zimmer Bradley chooses to give a more spiritual interpretation to the identity of the four queens on the barge of Avalon, since they all represents the faces of the Goddess which Morgaine has embodied throughout her life. Therefore, this is for her a moment of spiritual understanding, as she and the Goddess are one and the same. What is even more important from a spiritual point of view is another relevant original contribution by Zimmer Bradley, the novel's

epilogue, where Morgaine's journey and spiritual growth reach their conclusion. After Arthur's death, she is finally able to seek reconciliation with Christianity and, in the end, she understands that all Gods are one — all her fighting has not been in vain, even if now she knows that the Goddess has her unique, independent way to manifest herself in the world.

In general, Zimmer Bradley's Morgaine is no longer a wicked sorceress, but a human being with her own complex inner dimension. She goes through a "journey through self-doubt",[74] finding justification and rationalization for her actions — therefore, she is not redeemed, but portrayed along with her own mistakes and emotions, and through her own journey to reach growth and spiritual equilibrium. Lastly, Victoria Sharpe offers an exhaustive reflection on this subject, which represents a suitable conclusion for this final chapter:

> Bradley restores Morgan to her original stature, and she, for first time, is presented as a whole person. Bradley takes the initiative to develop fully the character of Morgan by making her the narrator as well as a participant in the action. Though she spends a good portion of the book going against the wishes of men, as she did in Malory, we are able to learn the reasoning behind her behaviour. She is defending the Goddess whom Christianity is threatening. As the Irish people once believed that existence was circular or cyclical, so has been the history of Morgan as a literary character. She was originally presented by Geoffrey in the image of the goddess […] As women became second class citizens, Morgan was changed from a healer to a witch in the world of Arthurian literature. In Marion Zimmer Bradley's The Mists of Avalon, Morgan has been restored to her role as healer, as representative of the Goddess, and finally as Goddess herself.[75]

[74] Hebert, p. 129.
[75] Sharpe, p. 44.

Riassunto Tesi

Morgan le Fay – fonti medievali e romanzi moderni

Capitolo 1
Ricostruendo le origini di Morgan le Fay

Morgan le Fay è una figura familiare per l'immaginazione collettiva e il suo essere ritratta come malvagia incantatrice è con ogni probabilità la sua rappresentazione più popolare. In realtà, questa figura non è sempre stata dotata di indole malevola, come il primo testo medievale che la menziona per nome testimonia, insieme agli elementi più antichi che potrebbero essere alla base di questo ritratto. Il testo in questione è *Vita Merlini* di Geoffrey di Monmouth (circa 1100 – 1155), noto soprattutto per la sua opera più famosa, l'*Historia Regum Britanniae,* in cui sono contenuti i germogli di quello che sarà il Ciclo Arturiano. Ad ogni modo, è in *Vita Merlini* che incontriamo Morgen, come viene chiamata dal suo autore, seppure per un solo breve ma significativo passo. Viene descritto brevemente il luogo in cui vive, "L'Isola Fortunata", dalla natura florida che provvede spontaneamente ai bisogni delle sue abitanti, Morgen e le sue otto sorelle, alle quali insegna matematica e astronomia, delle discipline inusuali per le donne del suo tempo. Inoltre, Morgen viene descritta come capace di mutare la propria forma, oltre che come una guaritrice molto abile e una esperta conoscitrice delle erbe curative. Per questa ragione, è lei ad accogliere Re Arthur ferito dopo la battaglia finale. Da questo ritratto, sembra emergere un giudizio positivo sulle donne sapienti da parte di Geoffrey di Monmouth, anche quando queste sconfinano nei campi tipicamente maschili del *quadrivium* e del governo di un territorio, dal momento che sono Morgen e le sue sorelle a regnare sull'Isola Fortunata. Nonostante questo, i critici sottolineano come questo giudizio positivo sia dovuto all'innocuità di questo gruppo di donne, visto che, trovandosi in un luogo isolato per definizione, non costituiscono una minaccia per il mondo esterno e per la corte. Queste qualità positive verranno progressivamente perdute man mano che la tradizione arturiana si sviluppa acquisendo forma più

definita e Morgen si ritroverà ad essere demonizzata e spogliata delle sue qualità positive, una tematica che sarà affrontata nel capitolo successivo.

Una, seppur breve, osservazione di come venga proposta "l'isola delle mele", come viene chiamata l'Isola Fortunata, può aiutare a capire da quale tipo di background emerga questa embrionale prima apparizione di Morgan le Fay. La letteratura antica, infatti, presenta numerosi passi che descrivono luoghi dalle caratteristiche molto simili e che possono, in una certa misura, essere assimilati al Giardino dell'Eden. Geoffrey di Monmouth, però, era di origine gallese e la mitologia del suo luogo di nascita può aver esercitato un'influenza più forte sulla sua opera rispetto ai testi in latino e quelli della cristianità. Infatti, anche la mitologia celtica non manca di luoghi ugualmente paradisiaci, ad esempio quelli dove gli eroi Bran il Benedetto e l'irlandese Cuchulainn trascorrono un periodo tra i piaceri. Altre isole della mitologia celtica sono, inoltre, l'irlandese *Emain Abhlach* (Terra dei Meli) e *Annwfn,* l'aldilà gallese. Tuttavia, isole sacre potrebbero essere esistite davvero, come Pomponio Mela e Plutarco esemplificano nelle proprie opere. Pomponio Mela, soprattutto, nomina un'isola in cui vivono nove sacerdotesse chiamate *Gallizenae,* che ricordano chiaramente le nove sorelle di *Vita Merlini.* Uno dei più influenti studiosi della letteratura arturiana, Roger Sherman Loomis, dà particolare attenzione anche a Glastonbury che, anche se oggi si trova in un'area collinare, era un'isola in tempi preistorici. Attualmente ospita i resti di una chiesa dedicata a San Michele, che si pensa possa aver sostituito un luogo di culto di una divinità solare. In particolar modo, romanzi francesi indicano Glastonbury come un altro di questi luoghi idilliaci e vi collocano tradizionalmente l'isola di Avalon. Quest'ultima viene chiamata Avallo da Geoffrey di Monmouth in *Historia Regum Britanniae*, il che etimologicamente si collega a numerosi termini indicanti la mela in lingue celtiche. Le mele hanno infatti un certo rilievo nella mitologia celtica, essendo frutti donati dalle fate agli eroi per attirarli nei loro territori e che rappresentano quindi amore e fertilità. Infine, l'Isola delle Mele è chiamata in gallese *Ynys Afallach,* anglicizzato in Avalloch, un oscuro e poco conosciuto personaggio della mitologia gallese indicato come "padre di Modron".

Modron è un personaggio chiave per le origini di Morgan. Il suo nome significa "Madre", dal gallese *Matrŏna* ("Grande Madre") e si può incontrare nel *Mabinogi,* il poema epico della tradizione gallese, dove è appunto madre di Mabon, identificato con la divinità gallica Apollo Maponos. Questa maternità permetterebbe quindi un'ulteriore associazione di Modron alla Dea Madre. Altre leggende gallesi forniscono punti in comune tra Modron e Morgan, tra cui il suo essere la moglie di Re Uriens e la madre di Owain (anche Uwain/Yvain, a seconda dello spelling). Per quanto riguarda il nome, non è chiaro come sia avvenuto il passaggio da Modron a Morgan, ma vale la pena ricordare una credenza bretone che risale al quinto-sesto secolo e che racconta dell'esistenza di un gruppo di fate acquatiche chiamate Mari Morgans o semplicemente Morgans. Il nome di Morgan sembra quindi essere collegato all'acqua e alcuni studiosi sottolineano come *mor/muir* significhino proprio mare nel linguaggio gallese; si ipotizza addirittura che Morgana derivi da *Morg-wen,* "Schiuma di Mare". Questi appellativi ricordano anche l'irlandese *muir gheilt* e *murd huch'a merrow,* con cui erano designate le sirene, e il gallese Murigenos/Murigena, "nato/a dal mare". Muirghein/Muirgheilt ("Nata dal mare"/"Prodigio del mare") è anche il nome che la sirena Liban della letteratura irlandese acquisisce dopo essere stata battezzata. Questi non sono gli unici elementi che uniscono Morgan all'elemento dell'acqua, dal momento che *Matrŏna* era anche una dea acquatica legata ai fiumi francesi Marna e Maronne.

La tradizione arturiana indica Morgan come sorellastra di Artù, ma in *Vita Merlini* non c'è traccia di questo legame di parentela. In *Historia Regum Britannae* appare invece Anna/Anne come sorella del Re. Anna scompare nel corso del tempo, sostituita probabilmente da Morgan. In ogni caso, entrambe potrebbero avere una comune origine nella mitologia irlandese. Ana, infatti, è la madre dei *Tuatha De Danann,* la stirpe divina irlandese, che riporta quindi in superficie il tema della Dea Madre. Ana può mostrarsi benevola oppure come una dea della guerra, dal momento che spesso viene inclusa nelle manifestazioni della sfaccettata dea Morrigan, insieme a Macha, Badb, talvolta Nemain e la Morrigan stessa. Badb, però, viene a volte indicato come il nome collettivo del gruppo e, tra le varie traduzioni, c'è anche quella di "corvo", l'animale di cui talvolta assume le sembianze. Parlando di

Morrigan, si nota una somiglianza notevole con il nome di Morgan, ma l'etimologia del nome della dea della guerra è molto diversa da quella già proposta per Morgan. Infatti, in antico inglese, *mor-* sembra essere legato a *mære,* lo stesso che si ritrova in "nightmare", incubo, mentre *rigan* significherebbe "regina". Morrigan viene descritta come la consorte del Dagda, il padre-re dei *Tuatha De Danann* e, insieme alla guerra, viene associata a vita, morte, fertilità, protezione, ma anche mostruosità, oltre ad essere in grado di operare guarigioni e mutare la propria forma. La sua caratteristica più simile a Morgan è però il suo ambiguo rapporto con l'eroe Cuchulainn, che alternativamente aiuta e danneggia, come, del resto, Morgan stessa fa con Arthur. Nel racconto *Tain Bo Regamna* la troviamo intenta a rubare una mucca, nelle vesti di una donna vestita di rosso, mentre Cuchulainn riposa poco distante. Una volta che l'eroe si sveglia e si rende conto del furto, rimprovera la donna, sostenendo che tutto il bestiame dell'Ulster gli appartenga e, quando la minaccia con la lancia, la donna non solo non si spaventa affatto, ma si trasforma in un uccello nero che si posa su un ramo poco lontano per sfuggirgli più agilmente. Cuchulainn la accusa quindi di essere una pericolosa incantatrice, a cui Morrigan ribatte che qualsiasi cosa farà, la fortuna gli sarà avversa. Durante un altro incontro-scontro, Morrigan appare a Cuchulainn in forma di anguilla, lupo e giovane mucca, attaccando l'eroe che ogni volta restituisce il colpo. Dopodiché, incrocia nuovamente la sua strada, apparendo stavolta come una vecchia intenta a mungere una vacca. Cuchulainn per tre volte le chiede del latte, benedicendola ogni volta in segno di ringraziamento. Queste benedizioni erano ciò che serviva a Morrigan per guarire dalle ferite ricevute e solo una volta guarita rivela la sua vera identità a Cuchulainn, che reagisce con rabbia, dicendole che non l'avrebbe mai aiutata se l'avesse riconosciuta subito. In questi episodi, si sottolinea l'abilità di mutaforma della dea e il perenne conflitto tra lei e l'eroe. Nonostante ciò, l'atteggiamento della Morrigan non è totalmente negativo, dal momento che a tratti sembra assumere comportamenti protettivi nei confronti di Cuchulainn, come l'avvertirlo della sua morte imminente e il rompere il suo carro prima della battaglia finale. Inoltre, in un altro episodio, la ritroviamo ad attendere l'eroe ad un guado, nelle vesti di una giovane donna, e qui gli dichiarerà il suo amore, anche se Cuchulainn la rifiuterà, innescando nuovamente la

rivalità. Questo episodio rappresenta una delle similitudini che accomunano la Morrigan e Modron. Nel caso di quest'ultima, l'episodio dell'incontro al guado coinvolge invece Re Uriens. Inoltre, come Modron, anche Macha, una delle dee che fanno parte del gruppo della Morrigan, ha due figli gemelli e Modron, come Morrigan, presenta dei legami con la figura del corvo, dato che talvolta si presenta con l'aspetto di una vecchia alata che "artiglia e becca" gli uomini.

Se le tradizioni gallese e irlandese sono senza dubbio la parte più consistente alla base della figura di Morgan, anche la tradizione scandinava annovera alcune figure femminili molto simili a quelle già analizzate in questo capitolo. Le Valchirie, ad esempio, condividono con la Morrigan il legame con i campi di battaglia e con i corvi, oltre ad essere coloro che scortano gli eroi, dei quali talvolta assumono il ruolo di "spose spirituali", al Valhalla. Le Valchirie sono anche assimilabili al più ampio gruppo delle *Dísir,* delle divinità femminili che non sempre hanno tratti distinti, ma generalmente legate alla maternità e tra le quali trovano posto anche le Norne, il corrispettivo delle Parcae e Moirai della tradizione classica. Inoltre, si presentano di solito in gruppi di tre o multipli di tre, così come l'isola di Morgen conta nove sorelle. Infine, si può considerare anche Freyja, che in alcuni suoi epiteti suggerisce una connessione all'acqua e al mare, e che è nota per il suo essere una dea della fertilità versata nella pratica magica del *seiðr.* In più, anche lei è legata alle battaglie, dal momento che reclama la metà dei caduti che non è destinata a Odino, e ai volatili, come testimonia il suo costume da falco, che nella tradizione nordica è associato, come il corvo, ai campi di battaglia.

Capitolo 2
Morgan le Fay secondo Malory

L'opera di Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur,* fu ultimata circa tre secoli dopo *Vita Merlini* e molto probabilmente è la più famosa raccolta delle avventure narrate nei romanzi arturiani e offre il ritratto più conosciuto dei suoi protagonisti. La biografia dell'autore è incerta quasi quanto le origini di Morgan stessa, anche se gli studiosi sono stati in grado di fornire un'identificazione plausibile. In ogni caso, si sa che iniziò a scrivere intorno al 1460, in prosa, sebbene le sue fonti in lingua inglese fossero tutte in versi. Cronologicamente, tra l'opera di Malory e quelle considerate nel capitolo

precedente, si collocano anche numerosi romanzi francesi, che fornirono buona parte del materiale di cui si servì l'autore. Per quanto riguarda lo stile, la presentazione dei personaggi avviene attraverso le loro azioni e le loro parole, con poco spazio per la dimensione emotiva, e Morgan non fa eccezione, per quanto, dal momento che i personaggi femminili tendono alla passività in questo tipo di opere, è invece piuttosto attiva pur essendo una donna.

Le apparizioni di Morgan non sono molto frequenti in *Le Morte Darthur,* ma, anche quando non è in scena personalmente, la sua presenza non manca di causare tumulto a corte. La prima volta che viene menzionata, le si dedicano poche righe, in cui viene presentata come la terza figlia di Lady Igraine e del suo primo marito, il Duca di Tintagel, facendone perciò la sorellastra di Arthur. Malory aggiunge anche che è stata educata in un convento, dove ha appreso l'arte della "necromanzia", e che è sposata con Re Uriens della Terra di Gore, padre di Sir Uwain le Blanchemain. Di questa presentazione, è interessante il suo essere versata nella necromanzia, un'arte magica che, durante il periodo in cui Malory scrive, era condannata dalla Chiesa ed è proprio allora che si svilupparono le teorie sulla stregoneria; dal momento che solitamente i libri a riguardo erano custoditi nei conventi maschili, è inusuale che Morgan abbia potuto servirsene e ciò testimonia come sia un personaggio abile a superare i confini che le sono imposti, oltre che, secondo le credenze dell'epoca, come sia un pericolo lasciare che le donne abbiano libertà di sconfinare in sfere che non appartengono loro. Ciò che rimane immutato dalla più antica Modron, è il matrimonio con Re Uriens, per quanto il loro fosse con ogni probabilità un matrimonio d'interesse politico, e la maternità di Sir Uwain. Infine, Malory non ci fornisce alcuna informazione sull'aspetto fisico di Morgan, se non che si tratta di una bellezza comune, né una megera né una bellissima fata come altre opere medievali propongono.

Il secondo episodio in cui Morgan appare come protagonista è quello in cui pianifica il furto della famosa spada Excalibur, simbolo del potere del Re, e del suo fodero incantato, che impedisce ad Arthur di subire ferite letali. Arthur non sospetta nulla da parte della sorella e anzi, Malory scrive come riponga una profonda fiducia in lei, ancora più di quella che ripone nella Regina Guinevere; non sappiamo se Morgan abbia invece sempre covato intenzioni malvage nei suoi confronti o se sia

accaduto qualcosa, che la narrazione non riporta, che le abbia fatto prendere questa posizione. Ad ogni modo, Morgan sceglie di tradire il Re, facendo forgiare una copia esatta di Excalibur fornita di un fodero identico, in modo che Arthur non si accorga dello scambio. Per fare ciò, tramite un incantesimo, Morgan fa in modo che il Re venga isolato dal suo seguito durante una caccia, imprigionato e privato della sua spada. L'originale viene affidata all'amante di Morgan, Sir Accolon, che però viene ucciso duellando con il Re, che recupera Excalibur grazie all'intervento della Dama del Lago; quest'ultima interviene spesso per sventare gli attacchi di Morgan e, per quanto i suoi intenti siano diametralmente opposti, si può dire che le due siano ugualmente dotate nelle arti magiche. Ad ogni modo, la vendetta di Arthur non tarda ad arrivare e il corpo di Accolon viene mandato a Morgan "in dono"; è in questo frangente che abbiamo una delle poche rappresentazioni del mondo interiore dei personaggi e Morgan viene descritta come addolorata e dal cuore spezzato, una delle poche occasioni in cui i suoi sentimenti appaiono sinceri.

Nel frattempo, prima di sapere della morte dell'amante, Morgan pianifica anche di uccidere Uriens per poter essere libera di salire al trono con Accolon al proprio fianco. Comunque, il suo piano non va come previsto, dal momento che il figlio Uwain viene avvisato delle intenzioni della madre da una damigella a cui Morgan ha chiesto la spada del Re. Appropriandosi di un'arma tipicamente maschile, sconfinando ancora una volta i ruoli di genere, Morgan tenta di uccidere il marito nel sonno, ma Uwain interviene, bloccandola un momento prima che possa sferrare il colpo. Uwain la accusa con rabbia di essere un demone, a cui Morgan risponde difendendosi e incolpando la tentazione del diavolo per le sue azioni sconsiderate. Uwain la perdona, ma la sua reazione è piuttosto unusuale e mite, considerato il clima ai tempi di Malory; basti pensare che il *Malleus Malleficarum* venne pubblicato poco dopo *Le Morte Darthur* e che per le donne che si macchiavano di libero pensiero o, peggio, cedevano ad un presunto patto con il demonio, una reazione indulgente come quella di Uwain era molto poco probabile; anzi, l'unica possibilità di redenzione era l'esecuzione.

Morgan, una volta fallito il suo primo tentativo, non demorde e scende in campo personalmente. Decide infatti di partire alla volta del convento dove Arthur si trova in attesa di guarire

dalle ferite ricevute durante il duello, pianificando di sorprenderlo nel sonno. Ancora una volta, il piano non va come previsto, perché Arthur, forse immaginando di non essere ancora al sicuro, sta riposando con la spada in pugno. Morgan si vede costretta a trovare un'alternativa, quella di rubare soltanto il fodero; essendo un oggetto incantato che fornisce protezione al Re, potrebbe ritenerlo un danno sufficiente. Gli studiosi, inoltre, hanno interpretato l'appropriarsi di un oggetto protettivo come una connessione con le antiche origini da guaritrice di Morgan. Quest'ultima riesce a fuggire con il fodero, ma ben presto Arthur si accorge del furto e parte all'inseguimento. Si ritrova quindi costretta a liberarsi della refurtiva, gettandola sul fondo di un lago, e ad assumere le sembianze, grazie ai suoi poteri di mutaforma, di una grande pietra di marmo, facendo sì che Arthur non trovi traccia del suo passaggio; questa abilità, inoltre, ricorda da vicino quella della Morrigan, che, colpevole di furto, si nasconde da Cuchulainn in un modo del tutto simile. Ad ogni modo, la fuga di Morgan ha successo e lei si ritira nel suo castello, un simbolo di potere inusuale per una donna, la cui presenza in un castello non è di solito associata al potere del signore, ma al mantenimento dell'armonia, della stabilità e alla nascita di eredi. È proprio da qui che Morgan, per nulla scoraggiata, lancerà la sua prossima offensiva.

Per quanto la sua presenza dopo la morte di Accolon sia più rada, infatti, Morgan non si dà per vinta e, per quanto usando metodi tradizionalmente più femminili come l'inganno, torna all'attacco, fingendo un'offerta di riconciliazione con il Re sotto forma di un elegante e ricco mantello che gli viene recapitato in dono. Arthur non dà voce ad alcun sospetto, ma la Damigella del Lago gli dà un avvertimento, raccomandando di far indossare il mantello alla ragazza che lo ha recapitato prima che lui o uno dei suoi cavalieri possano fare altrettanto. Infatti, la ragazza viene ridotta in cenere non appena il mantello viene posto sulle sue spalle; ironicamente, Morgan ha progettato per Arthur la fine che spetterebbe a lei stessa, in quanto accusata di stregoneria. Di conseguenza, Morgan viene bandita da corte insieme a Uwain, di cui il Re ritiene di non potersi più fidare, forse proprio a causa della sua reazione così moderata. A questo proposito, i critici indicano infatti Morgan come l'unico

vero pericolo per l'equilibrio della corte, ma nemmeno l'essere tenuta a distanza la distoglie dalle sue malefatte.

Ancora una volta Malory non ci fornisce dettagli sul perché Morgan agisca in un certo modo, e ora il suo obiettivo si sposta su Sir Lancelot; le sue ragioni rimangono ipotetiche e non sappiamo se sia soltanto un gioco lussurioso o se Morgan voglia testare la fedeltà del cavaliere nei confronti di Guinevere. In linea con la tradizione letteraria medievale, Lancelot viene preso di mira mentre è addormentato sotto un melo a mezzogiorno, condizioni che si riteneva rendere più vulnerabili agli incantamenti e agli incontri ultraterreni. Morgan, accompagnata da altre tre regine, si avvicina a Lancelot, incantandolo e spiegando alle sue compagne che non si sveglierà finché non sarà prigioniero nel suo castello. Una volta sveglio, dovrà scegliere la sua amante tra le regine, per quanto la sua scelta sia piuttosto obbligata, dal momento che, se non volesse nessuna di loro, la sua alternativa sarebbe morire in prigione. Lancelot ammette di essere spaventato da queste donne, che sa abbiano mandato in rovina molti cavalieri valorosi prima di lui. Ancora una volta, l'episodio si può collegare alle teorie del *Malleus Malleficarum,* che punta il dito contro la presunta insaziabile lussuria femminile che potrebbe star governando le azioni di Morgan e delle altre regine, per quanto la vicenda si concluda con un nulla di fatto: Lancelot infatti accetta la proposta di una delle damigelle di Morgan, che gli concede la libertà a patto che aiuti suoi padre, Re Bagdemagus, a vincere un torneo.

Morgan sembra insistere particolarmente sul rapporto tra Lancelot e Guinevere e ancora una volta, sceglie di mandare a corte un oggetto incantato. Questa volta si tratta di un corno potorio da cui le dame infedeli al proprio consorte non riusciranno a bere senza rovesciarne la bevanda. Indirettamente, potrebbe quindi causare un danno anche al Re macchiandone la reputazione, visto che la Regina sarebbe tra le donne che non riuscirebbero a bere in modo pulito. Sir Lamorak, però, viene a conoscenza del piano prima che il corno raggiunga Camelot e fa in modo che venga deviato verso la corte di Re Mark di Cornovaglia, dove il corno assolve il suo compito; là, il consiglio ritiene le dame innocenti e, consci della reputazione di Morgan, l'additano come unica colpevole della vicenda. In più, Morgan organizza anche un'imboscata ai danni di Lancelot, che però viene avvertito in tempo,

e continua a cercare di portare alla luce la relazione tra Lancelot e Guinevere, facendo per esempio recapitare uno scudo dipinto con una raffigurazione allusiva a Sir Tristram durante un torneo o parlandone direttamente con Arthur; in ogni caso, dato che la fiducia che la corte ripone in lei è decisamente scarsa, gli avvertimenti di Morgan vengono ignorati.

I comportamenti di Morgan sono quindi in apparenza marcatamente negativi, ma alcuni studiosi hanno offerto un'interpretazione alternativa secondo cui Morgan starebbe cercando di evidenziare i comportamenti poco virtuosi della corte, che la corte stessa rifiuta di ammettere. Morgan appare quindi in momenti conflittuali, in cui agisce da "spina dorsale" del Re quando questi non sembra voler affrontare pubblicamente i problemi che affliggono il regno. Cercherebbe, quindi, di rendere il fratello un Re più valido, per esempio tentando di evidenziare come la relazione di Lancelot e Guinevere rappresenti un tradimento anche nel senso politico del termine. Inoltre, rivestendo una molteplicità di ruoli, Morgan riesce ad ottenere una libertà d'azione molto maggiore di quella che le regole artificiali di corte lasciano ad Arthur. Infine, per quanto ogni suo avvertimento venga mal interpretato o ignorato e si serva di strumenti sovversivi, Morgan potrebbe anche star mettendo alla prova i cavalieri, per migliorare la loro abilità e reputazione.

Il comportamento di Morgan muta radicalmente durante la sua ultima comparsa in scena, dopo la battaglia che vede Arthur e suo figlio Mordred scontrarsi e che porterà alla morte di entrambi. Arthur, ferito a morte, chiede a Sir Bedivere di gettare Excalibur nel lago, dove una misteriosa mano la trascinerà sotto la superficie, per poi essere caricato a bordo della barca che lo condurrà ad Avalon. Sulla barca vi sono numerose dame che piangono addolorate, tra cui una "regina" che sorregge il Re sul proprio grembo. La regina altri non è che Morgan, che chiede ad Arthur perché si sia allontanato tanto da lei, apparendo molto diversa dalla malvagia incantatrice il cui unico scopo era danneggiare lui e i suoi cavalieri; appare infatti molto più benevola e protettiva, più vicina alla tradizione più antica e alla Morgen di Geoffrey di Monmouth. L'allontanamento di cui Morgan parla, inoltre, potrebbe riferirsi al rifiuto di Arthur di prestare ascolto agli avvertimenti che ha cercato di trasmettergli. Ad Avalon, Arthur crede di poter guarire dalla sua ferita, ma, sebbene Malory non lo confermi

esplicitamente, scrive di alcune dame che, la notte successiva ai fatti, si sono recate alla cappella di Glastonbury, chiedendo ad un eremita di seppellire qualcuno in cambio di mille monete e l'accensione di cento candele votive. Questo cambio di comportamento da parte di Morgan è stato spiegato dagli studiosi con la cessata necessità da parte di Arthur e Morgan di rivestire i ruoli temporanei che hanno interpretato fino a quel momento, rispettivamente di sovrano e malvagia incantatrice. Solo ora Morgan si mostra come Regina di Avalon e Arthur è disposto a dare ascolto ai suoi consigli, prova di ciò che alcuni interpretano come una dimostrazione di fedeltà da parte di Morgan.

Capitolo 3
Attraverso *Le nebbie di Avalon*
Morgan ritratta da Marion Zimmer Bradley

La storia letteraria di Morgan non finisce con il Medioevo e il personaggio continua ad essere presente anche secoli dopo *Le Morte Darthur*, ma in ogni caso rimane un'antagonista. Nel 1983, però, viene pubblicato *Le Nebbie di Avalon,* scritto da Marion Zimmer Bradley, che tratta il materiale arturiano in una luce nuova: Morgan, che l'autrice chiama Morgaine, è la protagonista e ne viene dipinto un ritratto a tutto tondo, un trattamento che nei testi medievali non riceve. Per scrivere la sua opera, Zimmer Bradley fece riferimento soprattutto a *Le Morte Darthur*, mettendo in discussione come Malory decise di rappresentare i personaggi femminili, concludendo che, per quanto l'autore potesse disapprovarle in quanto donne, le avesse ritenute troppo importanti per escluderle completamente dalla trama. Dal momento che le fonti sulle donne arturiane sono comunque scarse, l'autrice ebbe la libertà di ampliare e adattare le narrazioni delle sue protagoniste, che non si limitano infatti alla sola Morgaine, ma includono anche Igraine, Viviane, Morgause e Gwenhwyfar. Ad ogni modo, notevole importanza nella stesura del romanzo ha anche il culto della Dea che, ai tempi in cui Zimmer Bradley stava lavorando a *Le Nebbie di Avalon,* stava attraversando un notevole periodo di revival. Il culto è difficilmente riassumibile in una definizione univoca, non avendo un'autorità centrale né un testo sacro, ma è accomunato da alcune caratteristiche, come il risentimento nei confronti del Cristianesimo, soprattutto per la sua misoginia, la pratica magica durante le cerimonie e il riconoscere

la Dea come Madre Terra, per quanto il suo nome possa cambiare di gruppo in gruppo.

Le divinità più venerate, però, sono Ceridwen e Cernunnos, come accade nel culto di Avalon descritto nel romanzo. Ceridwen appartiene alla mitologia gallese ed ha il dono della sapienza poetica, dell'ispirazione e della profezia, insieme all'abilità di creare potenti pozioni; in particolar modo, si può manifestare come madre, saggia o anziana, un tratto che condivide con la Dea neopagana, anche lei triplice nelle forme di Giovane, Madre e Anziana, che rappresentano a loro volta gli stadi della vita di una donna; ciò rimarca il carattere femminista del culto, sottolineando la libertà e la dignità della donna in ogni momento della sua esistenza. Cernunnos, invece, è un dio dalle corna di cervo di cui si hanno informazioni limitate, ma si sa della sua presenza in numerose culture, sebbene fosse venerato soprattutto in Gallia; è ritenuto essere stato un dio della fertilità, delle bestie e dei luoghi selvaggi, anche se nel Neopaganesimo diventa sia amante che figlio della Dea. Come si intuisce da questa breve descrizione, i Neopagani si rifanno ad elementi storici per ricostruire la "Religione Antica", che si basa su un ipotetico culto primitivo supportato da alcune teorie, per esempio quelle di Merlin Stone e di Marija Gimbutas, che ipotizza l'esistenza di una civiltà preindoeuropea di stampo matrilineare, soppiantata dall'arrivo della civiltà indoeuropea, anche se altri studiosi ritengono che non sia stata spazzata via del tutto, ma inglobata nella nuova cultura. Il passaggio da una civiltà matrilineare a quella patriarcale, inoltre, fa da sfondo al racconto del romanzo di Zimmer Bradley, che cercò quindi di dare una base storica anche al personaggio di Morgaine.

Morgaine viene presentata come un personaggio complesso, talvolta incompreso, ma adattabile alle situazioni che la vita le pone davanti, e soprattutto dotata di una profondità psicologica che permette al lettore di empatizzare con lei. Zimmer Bradley colma le lacune della narrazione di Malory, iniziando a raccontare la storia della sua protagonista dalla sua infanzia. Ne descrive ampiamente l'aspetto fisico, creando per i lettori un'immagine che nei testi medievali manca, e soprattutto, la caratterizza come discendente dell'Antico Popolo, quello che nel romanzo pratica il culto della Dea e che con l'avanzare del Cristianesimo, è stato costretto a ritirarsi in un luogo perlopiù inaccessibile alle persone comuni. Ciò non è motivo di vanto per suo padre, il Duca Gorlois, che

vorrebbe che fosse educata in convento e che è convinto che la discendenza da parte di madre della figlia sia malvagia, dal momento che porta il sangue dell'Antico Popolo. Morgaine si sente quindi estraniata nella sua stessa famiglia, una situazione che si aggrava quando la madre Igraine si risposa con Uther Pendragon e alla nascita del fratello Arthur, visto che ciò la priva delle attenzioni materne. Ben presto, però, si rende conto che Igraine è così devota al marito che finisce per trascurare anche Arthur stesso, che è affidato alle cure di Morgaine, che invece si prodiga a crescerlo come se fosse suo figlio sebbene lei stessa sia ancora una bambina. Le cose cambiano quando la zia Viviane, la Dama del Lago, la porta con sé per essere educata ad Avalon, dove sarà addestrata per diventare una sacerdotessa; anche Avalon è nascosta nelle nebbie, come la terra dell'Antico Popolo, e solo gli iniziati ai suoi misteri possono accedervi. Non è sempre stato così, dal momento che l'autrice narra come in passato Gesù stesso vi si sia recato per studiare con i druidi e le due fedi abbiano convissuto in armonia da allora, fino a quanto il Cristianesimo non si è fatto dogmatico, obbligando i druidi a ritirarsi. Ad ogni modo, per quanto l'addestramento sia duro e Viviane sia chiara nello spiegare alla nipote che la loro parentela non le garantirà un trattamento di favore rispetto alle altre iniziate, finalmente Morgaine arriva in un luogo che sente di poter chiamare casa. Il suo addestramento, inoltre, le fa apprendere abilità di guarigione, di riconoscimento delle erbe e conoscenza della musica, rendendola del tutto simile alla Morgen di *Vita Merlini;* in più rispetto a quest'ultima, però, può servirsi della Vista, una sorta di dono della profezia che invece a Morgen manca.

Il rapporto tra Morgan e Arthur è tradizionalmente connotato da odio e fiducia tradita. In *Le Nebbie di Avalon*, la loro relazione è più complessa e, se durante l'infanzia l'astio di Morgaine può ricordare la tradizione, le loro strade si dividono ben presto e anche la narrazione prende una piega differente rispetto a *Le Morte Darthur.* Morgaine, ora sacerdotessa, deve affrontare quella che è probabilmente la prova più difficile che le è stata sottoposta finora: prendere parte alla celebrazione dell'elezione del nuovo capo dell'Antico Popolo, il cosiddetto Re Cervo. Durante il rituale, il Re Cervo assumerà il ruolo di Cernunnos e dovrà giacere con la Vergine Cacciatrice, il ruolo per cui Morgaine è stata scelta. Tutto procede secondo le regole del rituale, fino al mattino successivo quando

l'autrice rivela che il neoeletto Re Cervo altri non è che Arthur stesso. Complice anche l'educazione cristiana che entrambi hanno ricevuto, per quanto parziale essa possa essere stata, l'aver commesso incesto sconvolge entrambi. Morgaine si sente tradita da Viviane, che l'ha scelta per il rituale, e non manca di dar voce alla sua rabbia, sentendosi privata della propria libertà di scelta, alla quale la Dama del Lago replica che i sentimenti del singolo non sono importanti di fronte a fini superiori, che nel caso di Viviane sono di mantenere il sangue reale di Avalon sul trono. Le conseguenze del rituale non si limitano all'incrinarsi dei rapporti, perché Morgaine scopre di aspettare un figlio da Arthur, quello che Zimmer Bradley identifica con il Mordred della tradizione. Le sue intenzioni sono di non portare a termine la gravidanza e nella ricerca delle erbe di cui necessita per indurre l'aborto, Morgaine si ritrova nelle terre dell'Antico Popolo, dove una misteriosa donna la convince a tenere il bambino. Ad ogni modo, Morgaine non è intenzionata a crescerlo personalmente e una volta nato, lo affiderà alle cure di Morgause, che nella storia di Zimmer Bradley è sorella di Igraine e Viviane.

Da *Le Morte Darthur,* Zimmer Bradley riporta piuttosto fedelmente l'episodio del furto di Excalibur e del fodero incantato, per quanto ne faccia naturalmente un uso originale; ai fatti narrati da Malory, aggiunge numerosi dettagli, come le motivazioni che spingono Morgaine a rendersi ostile nei confronti del Re. Diversamente da Malory, Zimmer Bradley specifica che il fodero è stato confezionato personalmente da Morgaine con un complesso rituale, e che viene consegnato ad Arthur insieme ad Excalibur sotto giuramento di governare equamente sia i sudditi cristiani che quelli pagani. Inoltre, per quanto riguarda Morgaine, che non è più tornata ad Avalon dopo la nascita del figlio, della tradizione si mantiene il suo matrimonio con Re Uriens che, per quanto non la soddisfi pienamente, riesce ad accettare per l'atteggiamento del marito, che non la disprezza in quanto donna e ne ascolta i consigli. Anche se il suo ruolo di amante di Morgaine rimane intatto, Zimmer Bradley identifica Accolon come uno dei figli di Uriens, per quanto nel romanzo non sia una pedina nelle mani della donna come potrebbe invece essere il caso di *Le Morte Darthur.* Inoltre, l'Antico Popolo guarda a Morgaine ed Accolon come i loro sovrani e, proprio grazie ad Accolon, Morgaine riesce a ritrovare la fede che aveva perduto. Ciò la spinge ad agire contro il regno sempre più marcatamente

cristiano di Re Arthur, che viene quindi meno al suo giuramento, ed è qui che viene recuperata maggiormente la reputazione di Morgaine, dal momento che non prova alcun sentimento positivo ad essere costretta ad agire contro al fratello a cui, nonostante tutto, rimane molto legata; non appare, quindi, malvagia come invece sembra dipinta da Malory. Il piano di Morgaine è complesso e, prima di tutto, prevede di assicurare un regno di stampo pagano sulle terre del marito; decide quindi di uccidere Avalloch, il figlio maggiore di Uriens e fervente cristiano, complici anche le minacce che le ha rivolto; Morgaine invoca quindi l'aiuto della Dea e fa in modo che Avalloch venga ferito a morte da un cinghiale durante una caccia.

La goccia che fa traboccare il vaso è per Morgaine l'arrivo di tre re Sassoni a corte durante la festività di Pentecoste, dal momento che Arthur usa Excalibur, un oggetto sacro proveniente da Avalon, come simbolo della croce su cui i re giurano in nome del dio cristiano. Morgaine affronta direttamente Arthur, che rifiuta sia di adempiere al suo giuramento che di restituire la spada; quindi decide di utilizzare lo stesso *modus operandi* di cui si serve in Malory, isolando Arthur dal suo seguito per poterlo privare della spada, sostituirla con una copia e farlo scontrare con Accolon. Morgaine soffre per la consapevolezza che uno dei due non sopravviverà al duello, ma sa che è necessario per poter garantire l'ordine e lo spazio che era stato promesso ad Avalon. Ad ogni modo, a dispetto delle sue speranze, è Accolon ad avere la peggio ed è in preda al dolore della perdita che reagisce alle accuse di Uriens, ugualmente addolorato per la morte del figlio, e cerca di colpirlo con il pugnale da sacerdotessa, anche se Uwain, come nella tradizione, riesce a fermarla in tempo. Morgaine non si dà per vinta e gioca la sua ultima carta: decide perciò di recarsi al convento dove Arthur riposa ferito dopo il duello, nell'intenzione di appropriarsi di Excalibur personalmente, ma il Re, che intuisce di non essere al sicuro, dorme con la spada stretta in pugno. Morgaine, quindi, sebbene ne abbia la possibilità, non ha il coraggio di ucciderlo nel sonno e decide invece di appropriarsi soltanto del fodero, che si sente in diritto di prelevare, avendolo confezionato e incantato lei stessa. Riesce quindi a gettarla sul fondo del lago e a celarsi alla vista di Arthur e del suo seguito, che nel frattempo si sono gettati all'inseguimento, scegliendo infine di ritirarsi ad Avalon.

Dopo questi eventi, i credi pagani, sia quello della Dea che quello dell'Antico Popolo, vanno spegnendosi sotto il peso del Cristianesimo che avanza. Morgaine è convinta che anche la Vista si sia affievolita, ma a sorpresa riceve una visione: lo scontro tra Mordred e Arthur, nel quale sceglie di intervenire, chiedendo loro una tregua in nome della Dea. Entrambi rifiutano di ascoltarla e Mordred le rinfaccia di aver avuto bisogno di una madre e non della Dea; Arthur, invece, di aver sempre visto la Dea in lei, ma di essere stato respinto e aver cercato di conseguenza conforto in un altro dio. Morgaine non può far nulla per fermare lo scontro e si sveglia con la sensazione di aver fallito nel raggiungere i suoi obiettivi. È consapevole, però, che non sia stata solo una visione e si dirige verso le rive del lago, dove scopre che il duello è già concluso, con Mordred morto e Arthur ferito a morte. Come nella tradizione più antica, sulla barca con cui arriva sul luogo dello scontro, con Morgaine ci sono altre tre regine, ma nell'interpretazione di Zimmer Bradley non sono che una rappresentazione di ciascuna fase della vita di Morgaine stessa, così come la Dea che si mostra con diverse facce che corrispondono alle diverse fasi della vita di una donna; è solo allora che Morgaine realizza l'identità tra se stessa e la Dea. Come già accade in Malory, è pronta a rinunciare a tutti i ruoli che ha rivestito nel corso della sua vita, tornando ad essere soltanto una sorella maggiore mentre adagia Arthur morente nel proprio grembo. Cerca di confortarlo quando le dice che i loro sforzi sono stati vani, rassicurandolo che il suo è stato un regno prospero e pacifico, a dispetto delle discrepanze religiose. Morgaine non è certa che sia la verità, ma non contraddice Arthur in un momento così delicato, limitandosi a promettergli che non si allontanerà più come ha fatto in passato.

La narrazione di *Le Morte Darthur* si conclude con la morte di Arthur, ma Zimmer Bradley aggiunge un epilogo differente, ambientato un anno dopo gli ultimi eventi narrati da Malory. Morgaine prende la decisione di visitare Glastonbury, dopo un sogno che le suggerisce che sia il dio cristiano che gli dei pagani siano espressioni di un'unica divinità. Si reca al convento femminile, con la scusa di visitare la tomba di Viviane e, osservando le novizie, si rende conto di quanto siano simili alle apprendiste sacerdotesse di Avalon. Finalmente, complici il sogno e le similitudini tra novizie e giovani sacerdotesse, Morgaine sembra pronta a smettere di combattere il Cristianesimo e di adottare

invece un punto di vista più aperto alla condivisione. Viene invitata a visitare la cappella e, con sua sorpresa, riconosce nelle statue di Maria e di Santa Brigida delle rappresentazioni della Dea; solo allora comprende di non aver fallito e che la Dea, a suo modo, è ancora presente, ma alle Sue condizioni con cui, talvolta, agli umani non è dato interferire.

Bibliography

Primary sources

Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini,* translated by John Jay Parry, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1925.

Malory, Sir Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur,* edited by Helen Cooper*,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Zimmer Bradley, Marion, *The Mists of Avalon*, London: Penguin Books, 1993.

Critical literature

Benko, Debra A., "Morgan le Fay and King Arthur in Malory's *Works* and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*: Sibling Discord and the Fall of the Round Table", in Stephens JoAnna, Janet Doubler Ward, ed., *The Significance of Sibling Relationships in Literatur*e, Bowling Green, KY: Bowling Green Popular Press, 1992, pp. 241-255.

Breuer, Heidi, *Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England*, New York: Routledge, 2009.

Burrow, J.A., Turville-Petre, Thorlac, *A Book of Middle English*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.

Calvo Zafra, Laura, "The Female Figure as the Antagonist in the Arthurian World: The Role of Morgan le Fay in Thomas Malory´s *Morte Darthur*", Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona: English Studies Thesis, 2015.

Capps, Sandra Elaine, "Morgan le Fay as Other in English Medieval and Modern Texts", University of Tennessee: PhD Thesis*,* 1996.

Carver, Dax Donald, "Goddess Dethroned: The Evolution of Morgan le Fay", Georgia State University: Religious Studies Thesis*,* 2006.

Chiesa Isnardi, Gianna, *I Miti Nordici*, Milano: Longanesi, 1991.

Christiansen, Eric, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

Coe, Jon B., *Celtic Sources for the Arthurian Legend*, Burnham-on-Sea, Somerset: Llanerch Publishers, 1995.

Coghlan, Ronan, *The Encyclopaedia of Arthurian Legends*, Shaftesbury: Element Books Limited, 1991.

Colahan, Clark, "Morgain le Fay and the Lady of the Lake in a Broader Mythological Context", *Journal of the Spanish Society for Medieval English Language and Literature*, 1 (1991), pp. 87-110.

Darrah, John, *Paganism in Arthurian Romance*, Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 1997.

Enstone, Zoë, "'Wichecraft & Vilaine': Morgan le Fay in Medieval Arthurian Literature", University of Leicester: PhD Thesis, 2011.

Evans-Wentz, Walter Yeeling, *The Fairy Faith in the Celtic Countries*, London: Oxford University Press, 1911.

Farwell, Marilyn R., "Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Subtexts: Toward a Theory of Lesbian Narrative Space in Marion Zimmer Bradley's The Mists of Avalon", in Fenster, Thelma S., ed., *Arthurian Women*, New York and London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 319-330.

Fries, Maureen, "From the Lady to The Tramp: The Decline of Morgan le Fay in Medieval Romance", *Arthuriana*, 4 (1994), pp. 1-18.

Fries, Maureen, "Female Heroes, Heroines, and Counter-Heroes: Images of Women in Arthurian Tradition"; in Fenster, Thelma S., *Arthurian Women*, New York and London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 41-58.

Fry, Carrol L., "'What God Doth the Wizard Pray to': Neo-Pagan Witchcraft and Fantasy Fiction", *Extrapolation*, 31 (1990), pp. 333-364.

Fry, Carrol L., "The Goddess Ascending: Feminist Neo-Pagan Witchcraft in Marion Zimmer Bradley's Novels", *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27 (1993), pp. 68-80.

Fulton, Helen, *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Fuog, Karen E.C., "Imprisoned in the Phallic Oak: Marion Zimmer Bradley and Merlin's Seductress", *Quondam et Futurus*, 1 (1991), pp- 73-88.

Gilbert, Jane, "Arthurian Ethics", in Archibald, Elizabeth, Putter, Ad, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 154-170.

Gimbutas, Marija, *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991.

Gurevitch, Danielle, "Analytical Psychology Approach to the Love-Hate Relationship between King Arthur and Morgan le Fay in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*", *Mirator,* 1 (2005), pp. 1-17.

Harf-Lancner, Laurence, "Fairy Godmothers and Fairy Lovers", in Fenster, Thelma S., ed., *Arthurian Women*, New York and London: Routledge, 2000, pp.135-152.

Hebert, Jill M., *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Heng, Geraldine, "Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory", in Fenster, Thelma S., ed., *Arthurian Women*, New York and London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 97-114.

Hoolbrook, Sue Ellen, "Nymue, the Chief Lady of the Lake in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*", in Fenster, Thelma S., ed., *Arthurian Women*, New York and London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 171-190.

Jirsa, Curtis R. H., "In the Shadow of the Ympe-tre: Arboreal Folklore in *Sir Orfeo*", *English Studies*, 89 (2008), pp. 141-151.

Kieckhefer, Richard, *Magic in the Middle Ages,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Lambdin, Laura Cooner and Robert Thomas, *Arthurian Writers: A Biographical Encyclopedia,* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008.

Larrington, Carolyne, *King Arthur Enchantresses – Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2006.

Laskaya, Anna, Salinsbury, Eve, ed., "Sir Orfeo", https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-orfeo (accessed 27 December 2020)

Loomis, Roger Sherman, "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses", *Speculum*, 20 (1945), pp. 183-203.

Loomis, Roger Sherman*, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance,* Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1997.

Lundy, Anita G., "The Christianization of Morgan le Fay", *Postscript: A Journal of Graduate Criticism and Theory*, 4 (1998), pp. 22-28.

Lupack; Alan, *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Macbain, Alexander, *Celtic Mythology and Religion*, Inverness: A. & W. MacKenzie, 1885.

Mangle, Josh, "Echoes of Legend: Magic as the Bridge Between a Pagan Past and a Christian Future in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*", Winthrop University: Graduate Theses*,* 84 (2018).

Martins, Ana Rita, "Morgan le Fay: The Inheritance of the Goddess", *Brathair*, 15 (2015), pp. 153-168.

McCarty, Terence, "Did Morgan le Fay Have a Lover?", *Medium Ævum*, 6 (1991), pp. 284-289.

Nickel, Helmut, "About the Knight with Two Swords and the Maiden under a Tree", *Arthuriana*, 17 (2007), pp. 29-48.

Norris, Lacy J., "The Arthur of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries", in Archibald, Elizabeth, Putter, Ad, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 120-136.

Oliver, Cheyenne, "Which Witch? Morgan Le Fay as Shape-shifter and English Perceptions of Magic Reflected in Arthurian Legend", Florida Atlantic University, Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters Thesis, 2015.

Paton, Lucy Allen, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, Boston: Ginn & Company, 1903.

Paxson, Diana L., "Marion Zimmer Bradley and *The Mists of Avalon*", *Arthuriana*, 9 (1999), pp. 110-126.

Pearsall, Derek, *Arthurian Romance – A Short Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

Puškášová, Pavla, "Femininity and Death in Arthurian Legends", Brno: Masaryk University, Bachelor Thesis, 2013.

Raymond, Dalicia K., "Motives, Means, and a Malevolent Mantel: The Case of Morgan le Fay's Transgressions in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*" in Albrecht Classen, ed., *Magic and Magicians in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter. 2017, pp. 547-564.

Reko, Rachel, "A Witch Named Morgan le Fay: The Anti-Feminist Evolution of a Monster", pp. 14-44.

Riggs, Don, "The Survival of the Goddess in Marie de France and Marion Zimmer Bradley", *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 9,1 (1998), pp. 15-23.

Saul, MaryLynn, *A Rebel and a Witch: The Historical Context and Ideological Function of Morgan le Fay in Malory's* Le Morte Darthur, Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilm International, 1994.

Saul, MaryLynn. "Malory's Morgan le Fay: The Danger of Unrestrained Feminine Power", *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 42 (2010), pp. 85-99.

Saunders, Corinne, "Religion and Magic", in Archibald, Elizabeth, Putter, Ad, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 201-207.

Sharpe, Victoria, "The Goddess Restored", *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 9 (1998), pp. 36-45.

Sklar, Elizabeth, "Thoroughly Modern Morgan: Morgan le Fey in Twentieth-Century Popular Arthuriana", in Slocum, Sally K., ed., *Popular Arthurian Traditions*, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992, pp. 24-35.

Tobin, Lee Ann, "Why Change the Arthur Story? Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*", *Extrapolation*, 34 (1993), pp. 147-157.

Tolhurst, Fiona, *Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Feminist Origins of the Arthurian Legend*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Thompson, Raymond H., "The First and Last Love: Morgan le Fay and Arthur", in Fenster, Thelma S., ed., *Arthurian Women*, New York and London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 331-342.

Twomey, Michael W., *Text and Intertext in Medieval Arthurian Literature*, New York: Garland Publishing, 1996.

Valdes-Miyares, Ruben, "Morgan's Queendom: The Other Arthurian Myth", in Alvarez-Faedo, Maria Jose, ed., *Avalon Revisited – Reworkings of the Arthurian Myth*, Bern: Peter Lang Publishing., 2007, pp. 133-54.

Volk-Birke, Sabine, "The Cyclical Way of the Priestess: On the Significance of Narrative Structures in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*", *Anglia*, 108 (2009), pp. 409-428.

Wicher, Andrzej, "Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale*, Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Tale of the Enchanted Pear-Tree*, and *Sir Orfeo* Viewed as Eroticized Versions of the Folktales about Supernatural Wives", Text Matters, 3, (2013), pp. 42-57.

Wright, Gregory, "Ceridwen" *Mythopedia.* https://mythopedia.com/celtic-mythology/gods/ceridwen/ (accessed on January 15, 2021).

Wright, Gregory, "Cernunnos" *Mythopedia,* https://mythopedia.com/celtic-mythology/gods/cernunnos/ (accessed on January 15, 2021).

Wyatt, Siobhán M., *Women of Words in* Le Morte Darthur – *The Autonomy of Speech in Malory's Female Characters*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Zimmer Bradley, Marion, "Thoughts on Avalon", https://www.mzbworks.com/thoughts.htm, (accessed 23 June 2020).

List of Illustrations

Frontespice: Waller, Christian, *Morgan Le Fay*, circa 1927, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/249.1975/ (accessed 22 February 2021).

Figure 1, pp. 63-67: "How Morgain granted Lancelot a leave from her prison to conquer Dolereuse Gard", *Lancelot en prose*, circa 1494 or later, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morgan_le_Fay (accessed 22 February 2021).

Figure 2, pp. 63-67: *Morgan with Lancelot under an apple tree*, Siedlęcin Tower fresco, Poland, early 14th century, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morgan_le_Fay (accessed 22 February 2021).