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DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der wissenschaftlichen Arbeit

Different Phases/Faces of Morgan le Fay:
The Changing Image of the Sorceress in Arthurian Literature

Verfasserin

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Angestrebter akademischer Grad

Magistra der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Betreuer:

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Wien, September 2008

Studienkennzahl: A344 299

Studienrichtung: LA Anglistik und Amerikanistik

LA Philosophie, Pädagogik, Psychologie

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Acknowledgements

I owe a great deal to a number of friends and family members who shared their advice and lent me support. Special thanks must go to the following people:

First of all, I would like to thank Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Franz Wöhrer who guided me through the writing process of this thesis. He has been helpful and encouraging all along and at any time. I could not have wished for a better tutor and I owe him a special debt of gratitude.

Judith S. Morgane, a very talented and dear friend of mine. She suggested that I should attempt to write about the character of Morgan le Fay. Without her, this thesis would not have come into existence. Thanks for sharing your thoughts and friendship with me. May all your wishes come true and blessed be! ☺

I am very indebted to my parents Gottfried and Philippine Dalecky and my sister Carmen. Without their love, understanding and of course financial help, I would not have made it. I am sorry that it took me so long. I love you.

Thanks to Gregor Kutschera. You know what for. I love you.

Judith Büger, my beloved cousin and closest friend. She knows better than anybody else what I have been through. Thanks for your love and friendship.

Petra Lipautz. I owe you so much. I will always be by your side. Do not forget: VINCO!

Thanks to Kati Tratz, my dear friend for always being there when I needed someone. You are a very special person to me and I wish you all the best for your musical career.

I regret that my grandmother Philippine Bürger who always believed in me could not see me complete this thesis. I wish you were still with us!

Astrid Schmoliner for being the best friend I have ever had!

Special thanks must also go to Tobias Schwenner, my boss and dear friend at *Vienna's English Theatre* for always showing reams and reams of understanding and for giving me so many days off!!!

My cat Piero for always being on my side while I was sitting on the computer. Thanks for keeping me aware of the fact how important it is to relax! ☺

Last but not least, I would like to thank a few people who supported and/or inspired me during the last few years of my studies: Elfriede, Michael and Christoph Buksnowitz; Carina Kny, Beatrix Kutschera and Eugen Kohler, Heidi Hinteregger, Kathryn and Howard Nightingall, Daniel Resch, Noel Razzak, Hannes Haberl, Julia Storm, the whole crew at *Vienna's English Theatre*, Christine Buchwald, Kristin Baumann and finally my band Transceiver. Thanks!!!!

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Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to trace back to its beginnings and show the different phases/faces of Morgan le Fay, one of the central characters in Arthurian literature and in English literary tradition. Through history and time, Morgan le Fay goes through many stages and she puts on a wide variety of different masks. She is half-sister to King Arthur, mother of Mordred, lover of Sir Accolon, fancier of Sir Lancelot, popular Sorceress, benevolent fairy, shape changer, healer, priestess, dark magician and many many more.

First, attention shall be drawn to Morgan le Fay and her representation in the chosen primary texts. The question of how she is portrayed in the texts under consideration and why she is depicted that way will be explored.

Next, the different times in which the texts have their origins shall be explored. Societies reflect the times they live in and thus, they inevitably share or concur in their perception of women. In this respect, Morgan le Fay can also be seen as a mirror of the given society and may act as a representation of the idea of 'womanhood' sustained in the given historical context. Furthermore, her character has been used by some writers to demonstrate a period's shortcomings and for other writers she may even constitute as a perfect means of catharsis¹. Sometimes she may emerge as the product of her very own history and the writer's self-reflection and/or emotional life. At other times, however, she mirrors the writer's very personal perspectives and beliefs, and due to her longevity, she may at last even figure as the leading character of one of the most famous retellings of the Arthurian saga in the 20th century.

Morgan le Fay's history is long and one might even call it a winding road. Her character has transformed dramatically from the very beginning. One retelling of the Arthurian saga would not exist without its antecedents. Each of the primary texts can be perceived as a corner stone of Morgan le Fay's historical

¹ 'Etymology: New Latin, from Greek *katharsis*, from *kathairein* to cleanse, purge [...]' Cf. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/catharsis> (6.8.2008) A Greek word meaning 'purification' or 'cleansing'.

development and it is interesting and exciting to take a closer look at some of them. To discern how she developed from one impressing literary figure to the next will arouse the reader's interest and hold them captivated.

[...] Morgaine, [...] from extreme repugnance to charmed wonder, [...] the medieval romancers exhibit in their descriptions of her person and their delineation of her character. Morgaine may be the most beautiful of nine sister fays, or an ugly crone. She may be Arthur's tender nurse in the island valley of Avilion, or his teacherous foe. She may be a virgin, or a Venus of lust. In her infinite variety she enthralled the fancy of the Middle Ages, and has lived on to our day [...] [.]²

If one intends to write about such a notorious, many-faced and multi-layered character as Morgan le Fay, it is indispensable to explore, in the first place, her origins. Where can we find the roots of Morgan le Fay, one of the most complex but also most captivating and enthralling characters of Arthurian literature?

In order to be able to understand why Morgan le Fay has undergone so many changes in her evolution in the course of history the following chapter will provide a concise introduction to the heroine and her fascinating, mystical world.

² Roger S. Loomis. "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses". *Speculum* 20, No.2 (April 1945): 183. (cf: <http://links.jstor.org> 18. 07.2007)

1 The Origins of Morgan le Fay

The theme of ‘Avalon’³ raises the question of Morgan le Fay’s Celtic origin. The view that her name derives from the Celtic tradition has been supported by scholars like Lucy Allen Paton or Roger Sherman Loomis who associate Morgan le Fay with an Irish goddess of war who was known as the Morrígan (or sometimes also known as Morrígu), or else with the Welsh goddess Modron⁴, who herself, derived from the Celtic goddess Matrona⁵. According to numerous documents it is likely that the Arthurian matter developed even before the first written Arthurian narratives and it was ‘transmitted by Celtic (Welsh Breton, Cornish) troubadours/bards’⁶ who handed down veiled derivations of the characters of Celtic goddesses. According to their lore, ‘the fays (Old French - fee, Latin - fata) are euhemerized [*sic!* euphemised] goddesses and Morgan is a version of a Celtic water goddess⁷, one of the Matres or Matronae who appear in Gaulish funerary monuments in groups of three.’⁸ Today, neo-pagan and “New-

³ Cf. Carver, 29: “Geoffrey [of Monmouth]’s *Insula Pornorum* yields further clues to Morgan’s origin [...]. In his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Geoffrey calls the island *Avallo* [at this point, Carver adds, that some translations translate the Latin *Avollo* as the popular *Avalon*]. This of course becomes Avalon in the French Romances, perhaps influenced by the Burgundian town of Avallon in order to legitimize a French connection to Arthur. Either way, *Avallo* corresponds to the “Old Irish *aball*, Middle Welsh *afall*, Middle Breton *avellen*” (Ronan Coghlan quoted in Carver) all Celtic variants of *apple*, a fruit with many mythical associations. “In Welsh [the island] is still known as *Ynys Afallach*” (MacKillop quoted in Carver) or *Isle of Apples*. *Afallach* is anglicized as *Avalloch* [...] [.] [According to Carver’s own view] *Avalloch* could have simply been created to explain the island’s name when writers who did not know the meaning of *Afallach* came across the story [...] [and] it is with *Avalloch* that we again find Morgan le Fay.”

⁴ Cf. <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/m/modron.html> (19.07.2007)

⁵ Cf. Carver, 30: ““Mordron” translates simply to “Mother,” (Dixon-Kennedy quoted in Carver) which was itself derived from the Continental “Matrona,” the title of the goddess for whom the Marne River in France is named (MacKillop quoted in Carver).”

⁶ Cf. http://www.celtic-twilight.com/camelot/infopedia/m/morgan_le_fay.htm (19.7.2007)

⁷ Coghlan quoted in Carver, 31: “The Bretons, descendants of those British who settled in Brittany (Amorica in Northern France) during the fifth and sixth centuries, believed in a class of water fairies known as Mari-Morgans or just Morgans.” Markale quoted in Carver, 31: “We know that there were Bretons in Monmouthshire in the twelfth century.” Carver, 31: “It is easy to speculate that when the Bretons came across the story of Arthur and Avalon, they simply replaced the name Modron with the more familiar Morgan. This transformation had already taken place before Geoffrey wrote his *Vita Merlini* and, therefore, he used the name Morgen.”

⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*

Age” specialists on Arthurian literature agree with this point of view and see Morgan as the manifestation ‘of the goddess – die Göttin’.⁹

Folklorists, however, try to corroborate the view, and are in mutual accord with the theory that Morgan le Fay’s origin lies in the Celtic oral tradition – either of insular or continental provenance. This legend is continually pursued and leaves its traces in Arthurian literature.¹⁰ Although there is no disagreement or doubt regarding the existence of this oral tradition, it is rather difficult to reconstruct such a tradition with certainty due to the lack of available or reliable sources. This argument often constitutes a reference for scholars who aim to support the assumption that Arthurian characters and their actions can be traced back to specific, mythical ancestors.¹¹

Nonetheless, to return to Morgan’s Celtic counterpart, the Morrígan yields to Morgan le Fay’s ‘divine’ origin. In order to introduce this origin to the reader, it is Danielle Dee who writes the following about the ancient Celtic goddess:

The Morrigan is a goddess of battle, strife, and fertility. Her name translates as either “Great Queen” or “Phantom Queen”, and both epithets are entirely appropriate for her. The Morrigan appears as both a single goddess and a trio of goddesses. The other deities who form the trio are Badb (“Crow”), and either Macha (also connotes “Crow”) or Nemain (“Frenzy”). The Morrigan frequently appears in the ornithological guise of a hooded crow.¹²

Jessica A. Choronzy complements this definition by stating that

The Morrígan translates into “The Great Queen” of the Túatha Dé Danann, the fairy race and once pagan deities that lived within mounds of earth and/or beneath lakes. [She] is an earth and fertility goddess, representing life, and a goddess of war, which unites her with death and destruction. [...] [She] had conferred destruction upon Celtic Irish society, while conversingly mitigating its revivification. (Choronzy, 24-25)

⁹ Cf. Müller and Wunderlich, *Mittelalter Mythen*, 694-695. (my translation)

¹⁰ The most important work in this respect was written by Roger Sherman and Loomis in ?:
Morgan la fée in Oral tradition.

¹¹ Cf. Müller and Wunderlich, *Mittelalter Mythen*, 694-695. (my translation)

¹² <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/m/morrigan.html> (19.07.2007)

As a goddess of life, Morrígan ‘represented terrestrial fertility’¹³ and also came to be known as the ‘goddess of cattle’. Since the Irish society depended on the fertility of cattle, the basis of the ‘[e]arly Irish Economy [...], magical or god-like cows’¹⁴ paved their way into early Irish literature. Consequently, the Morrígan gained the position as the ‘ultimate Celtic symbol of life and land’.¹⁵

Monastic scribes, who were the first authors of early Irish texts and responsible for writing down the mythology that had accumulated since the 8th century BC, ‘struggled with making sense of [...] [this] strikingly dualistic countenance [of the Morrígan]’. Unable to find a respectable counterpart for the Morrígan that could fit into their Christian view of saints and demons, the Morrígan was hard to classify. The Celtic goddess called Brigit or Brigid for example, found herself transformed into a Christian saint. With her solely positive traits, and known as ‘a goddess of healing and fertility’¹⁶, she perfectly fed into that prototype. When it came to the Morrígan on the other side, the monastic scribes had to revert to their classical studies of Greek and Roman Furies. ‘The Morrígan closely resembled the Morta¹⁷, the Fury who controlled and destroyed the life thread of every human.’¹⁸ This classical understanding of the Morrígan, helped to preserve her polemical nature up to later medieval texts that totally ignored her dualistic heritage but rather favoured an unmitigated image of evil womanhood.¹⁹

Geoffrey of Monmouth, in contrast, wrote a story that became most influential to Arthurian literature. For many authors writing in this tradition served as a basis for the understanding of Arthur’s story and the various Arthurian characters who originate from the *Historia Regum Britanniae*.

If one really intends to write about the evolution of a character as complex as Morgan le Fay, it is necessary to trace her origins. The most important sources for such a study are certainly Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*

¹³ Choronzy, 26.

¹⁴ Rosalind Clark cited in Choronzy, 26.

¹⁵ Cf. Choronzy, 26.

¹⁶ Cf. Cotterell, 110.

¹⁷ “The Roman goddess of death.”(www.pantheon.org ; 23.08.2007)

¹⁸ Choronzy, 25.

¹⁹ Choronzy, 25.

and his *Vita Merlini*. Morgan le Fay makes her first appearance in the latter, and if we take a closer look at her first appearance in Arthurian literature, we will notice that she entirely lacks the viciousness and malignity ascribed to her in later retellings of the Arthurian saga. Why such a transformation could happen at all and what the circumstances were, that finally initiated this transformation, shall be explored in this thesis. But for a start, attention will be directed to Britain around 1138 - to a man who had such a great influence on this myth that it must be considered in some detail.

2 Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and his *Vita Merlini*

While Welsh literature and saints' lives offer fascinating early views of Arthur, the character and his legend became central to medieval literature and literary tradition when Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1100-1154 or 1155) told his story. The account of Arthur's reign told by Geoffrey in his *Historia regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*, completed in 1138, though revisions were made until about 1147) is one of the most significant and influential developments in the history of Arthurian literature. (Lupack, 24)

The first interesting question that arises when talking about the *History of the Kings of Britain* is certainly the following: Who was Geoffrey of Monmouth actually and what was his purpose in writing it?

The answer to the latter question has been given by Thorpe in his introduction to *The History of the Kings of Britain* (1966) in the following way:

Geoffrey's purpose in writing the book was to trace the history of the Britons through a long sweep of nineteen hundred years, stretching from the mythical Brutus, great-grandson of the Trojan Aeneas, whom he supposed to have given his name to the island after he had landed there in the twelfth century before Christ, down to his last British King, Cadwallader, who, harassed by plague, famine, civil dissention and never ending invasion from the continent, finally abandoned Britain to the Saxons in the seventh century of our era. Between these two extreme limits in time, [Geoffrey] planned to relate for us the history of the British people sometimes of a mere genealogy of royal primogeniture, sometimes in succinct chronicle form, more often as a dynastic sequence told with

considerable detail, reign by reign, and occasionally even, when he considered this to be worthy of our close attention, by permitting an individual incident or anecdote to swell out of proportion and to become a narrative in its own right. For Geoffrey, his history was a pageant of striking personalities moving forward to the greatest personality of them all, Arthur, son of Utherpandragon and Ygerna. With the passing of Arthur his interest gradually died away, and so indeed, does that of the modern reader. (Thorpe, *Introduction*, I)

Furthermore, Thorpe also mentions that besides Geoffrey's interest in tracing back Britain's history, his intention in writing the book was also fueled by a mere patriotic inspiration. When the book ends, which happens to be 'in the six hundred and eighty ninth year after our Lord's Incarnation', Britain still finds itself as one of the world's most thriving countries, but nevertheless, the Britons who once ruled their land united, suddenly find themselves 'divided into two separate nations' and threatened by the Saxons. Thorpe also points out that Geoffrey's reasons for writing the History were certainly influenced by 'clear-cut political ones'²⁰ and 'his wish to ingratiate himself with his various dedicatees'.²¹

Geoffrey's works were certainly perceived as highly influential but we have to be careful when we deal with the information that he hands down. For sure, not everything that he wrote down can be considered true facts of history. Nevertheless, he 'shows that he uses history, exaggerating, inflating, contorting, inventing, but seldom fabricating at any length out of nothing at all' (Lacy, 39).²²

Unfortunately, little is known about Geoffrey's life, as his fame derives ultimately and almost exclusively from his literary works and '[a] variety of obscure medieval records give [us] only glimpses of the man's real life.'²³ What is known is that Geoffrey was probably born around the year 1100 'somewhere in the

²⁰ Tatlock mentions in his *The Legendary History of Britain* when he writes about *Geoffrey's motives in writing the Historia* (Chapter XVIII), p. 426: "The political tendency is to show encouraging precedents for the course of action which the actual rulers of England were tending to; "propaganda" is too farsighted, deliberate and organized, though [...] [i]t is clear that Geoffrey's social station was central rather than peripheral; he had connections which he valued, with the ruling race, caste, and family. [...] The matters of political promotion [...] are imperialistic and dynastic. [Geoffrey's chapter on Imperialism shows] with a good deal of detail the appositeness in his picture of widespread imperial dominions of one British king after another, as precedent for the dominions and ambitions of the Norman kings."

²¹ Cf. Thorpe, *Introduction*, 9-10.

²² Cf. Lacy, 39.

²³ <http://www.britannia.com/history/arthur/geofmon.html> (23.7.2007)

region of Monmouth' and he died in 1154.²⁴ He wrote the *Historia Regum Britanniae* between the years 1136 and 1138. His presence at Oxford between 1129 and 1151 is authenticated and may indicate a connection between him and the secular college of St. George where 'he [probably] was a member of the college community [...], [or] a tutor [or even a secular canon] of some kind [...]'²⁵

Geoffrey's three important writings are '[t]he *Prophetiae Merlini*²⁶ (written before 1135), [later incorporated in the] *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1138) and [his] *Vita Merlini* (c. 1150)'.²⁷

He dedicated his works exclusively to politically important men of his time. Robert, Earl of Gloucester, 'who had been close to his father Henry I', King Stephen, Waleran de Beaumont, Count of Meulan, Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln 'to whom Geoffrey addressed the Prophecies of Merlin' and his successor Robert de Chesney to whom Geoffrey dedicated his *Vita Merlini*. All were 'Norman magnates' and highly influential personalities of their days. 'From these five dedicatees we cannot avoid the inference that Geoffrey was close to the Norman ruling caste [...]'²⁸

Our Geoffrey according to all evidence was always called by contemporaries Galfridus Arturus (with close variants); [...] The Arturus appears years before the *Historia* was known or begun; if one wished one might counterguess that Geoffrey's interest in the king derived from a father who bore the uncommon name. Geoffrey on the other hand always calls himself Galfridus Monemutensis in the *Historia* and Gaufridus de Monumeta in the *Vita Merlini*. Since as it seems his contemporaries called him by his patronymic (or possibly nickname), but he, when he could, called himself "of Monmouth" [...]' (Tatlock, 438-439)

Geoffrey most probably spoke a vernacular of Norman-French and to some extent he might have had some knowledge of Welsh as well. With his family he surely

²⁴ <http://www.britannia.com/history/arthur/geofmon.html>

²⁵ <http://www.britannia.com/history/arthur/geofmon.html> and Cf. Kugler, 92. (my translation)

²⁶ Geoffrey of Monmouth incorporated the *Prophetiae Merlini* (*The Prophecies of Merlin*) in *The History of the Kings of Britain* as book VII. Merlin's prophecies are predominantly made to Vortigern, but they also foreshadow the rise and fall of Arthur.

²⁷ The Literary Encyclopedia; <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=1715> (25.7.2007)

²⁸ Cf. Tatlock, 443-445.

spoke Breton, which was very close to Welsh at that time and largely used as ‘the popular tongue in Monmouth.’ As a regular attendant at Oxford, one can assume that he also knew English in some degree as it was spoken as the vernacular there. ‘Unquestionably he was a very able man, capable of any ingenuity and cleverness.’²⁹

Another question which is certainly of importance is the following: ‘Where did Geoffrey of Monmouth find his material?’³⁰ According to Thorpe there are two simple answers to this question: ‘[S]imple in the sense that they are naïve: these are that he took his material from a little book which a friend had given to him; and alternatively that he made his material up.’³¹

[...] [A]t the beginning of his *History*, Geoffrey stated categorically that Walter the Archdeacon presented him with a ‘certain very ancient book written in the British language’ and that he then proceeded to translate the book into plain, straight-forward Latin. This source book is mentioned again casually [...] and then referred to [...] in the short epilogue which appears at the end of some versions of the *History*, with the variation that its antiquity is not stressed [...]. The essential problem of Walter’s very ancient book is that we do not possess it. (Thorpe in Monmouth, 14-15)

The mere fact that we cannot hold Walter’s ancient book in our hands does not mean that we have to question entirely its existence. Most likely it was a manuscript or a unique copy and if we take into account that a lot of medieval manuscripts failed to be delivered to us because of destruction, the same fate could also have happened to our mysterious ancient book.³²

Other theories, however, draw on different assumptions. One is that ‘we may have it in our possession without realizing it, [in other words,] evidence of the book’s one time existence’ (Thorpe, 15). This means that Geoffrey had at least one written Old Welsh source at hand which becomes manifest in his ‘reproduction of the names preserved in the dynastic genealogies of MS.Harl.3859 and in the Nennian list of the cities of Britain’ (Thorpe, 17). In England and Wales one can find manuscripts or fragments of manuscripts which include early Welsh

²⁹ Cf. Tatlock, 445.

³⁰ Thorpe in Monmouth, 14.

³¹ Thorpe in Monmouth, 14.

³² Cf. Introduction written by Thorpe in Monmouth, 15.

chronicles. They have to be dated later than the *History of the Kings of Britain*, but some material in them may antedate Geoffrey's work.³³

Again, other theories assume that all sources that Geoffrey had ready at hand were delivered orally and most likely his friend Walter the Archdeacon had a say in that matter³⁴

‘[...] or that behind the Geoffrey of Monmouth of the Vulgate text of the *History* there [...] [was] a pseudo-Geoffrey who had earlier written the variant text, an arch-hoaxer, who not only left no clue whatsoever to his own personality but was happy to see his history fathered on to Geoffrey. (Thorpe, 17).

We may believe in those theories or not, we may combine them or rather prefer some ‘intermediary position between some pair of them’³⁵. Whatever position we take, we are free to choose.

2.1 Monmouth's portrayal of Morgan le Fay

However it may have been, this thesis is aimed at dealing with Morgan le Fay and her evolution through the history of Arthurian literature. Most scholars agree that one can find the earliest reference to Morgan's first appearance in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, which he most probably wrote around 1148. With this narrative poem originally written in Latin, Geoffrey of Monmouth deliberately focused ‘on a more individual subject – the life of the famous enchanter Merlin – as opposed to the greater public focus of [the History of the Kings of Britain]’.³⁶

The latter one makes no mention of Morgan le Fay. Geoffrey simply mentions that ‘Caliburn [Excalibur, Arthur's sword] [...] was forged in the Island of Avalon’³⁷, the place where Arthur had been taken to after the battle of Camblam³⁸

³³ Cf. Introduction written by Thorpe in Monmouth, 15-17.

³⁴ Cf. Introduction written by Thorpe in Monmouth, 17.

³⁵ Cf. Introduction written by Thorpe in Monmouth, 17.

³⁶ <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/CAMELOT/Geoffbio.htm#IV.%20%3Ci%3E%20Merlini%3C/i%3E> (15.08.2007)

³⁷ *History of the Kings*, 217.

‘so that his wounds might be attended to.’³⁹ In the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Arthur’s sister is named Anna and compared to other works they share the same blood and are not half-siblings. There are speculations that Anna and Morgan might be actually one, but substantiating evidence is lacking.⁴⁰

Heavily influenced by Welsh and Scottish sources, Geoffrey’s *Vita Merlini* basically focuses on Merlin’s prophecies. In a battle, Merlin (a Latinized version of the Welsh word Myrddin⁴¹) the bard, fights along with Peredur of the Venedotians against Guernolus⁴² of Scotia and King Rodarch of Cumbria. Peredur loses three of his brothers because of this utterly brutal battle. Merlin fails to overcome the terrible loss of his fellowship and subsequently loses his sanity and becomes a madman. As a consequence, he flees into the Caledonian forest where he lives ‘like a wild animal, [...] forgetful of himself and of his kindred.’⁴³ ‘It appears that Geoffrey had become better acquainted with the folkloric tradition of Myrddin as the wild man who gained his prophetic powers⁴⁴ but also went mad with grief after seeing the defeat of his lord [...].’⁴⁵

Here, within Geoffrey’s poem called *Vita Merlini*, the initial portrait of the character of Morgan is provided who will later develop into Morgan “le Fay”, a surname that Sir Thomas Malory invented in his famous work *Le Morte d’Arthur* (which will be discussed later). For the first time we become acquainted with Morgan when Taliesin⁴⁶ tells us in detail about the Fortunate island:

³⁸ Arthur’s battle against Mordred who had ‘brought the Scots, Picts and Irish into his alliance, [and] with anyone else whom he knew to be filled with hatred for his uncle.’ (*History of the Kings*, 258.)

³⁹ *History of the Kings*, 261.

⁴⁰ Cf. Carver, 26.

⁴¹ cf. <http://www.britannia.com/history/biographies/merlin.html> (15.08.2007)

⁴² In other translations he is also called Guennolus, Gwenddolau or Gwendoleu in Welsh for example. Cf. <http://www.timelessmyths.com/arthurain/merlin.html> (15.08.2007)

⁴³ <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/Camelot/GMAvalon.htm> translation by Emily Rebekah Huber (15.07.2007)

⁴⁴ In this point Geoffrey contradicts his writing in the *History of the Kings of Britain*, where he says that Merlin was already born with this gift.

⁴⁵ <http://arthurian-legend.com/more-about/more-about-arthur-10.php> (15.08.2007)

⁴⁶ “Taliesin, [or also Thelgesinus or Taliessin] literally, “the „Radiant Brow,“ was an early bard who may have lived a little later than the traditional Arthurian period but was nonetheless drawn into the Arthurian saga.” (<http://www.celtic-twilight.com> 18.07.2007) In Geoffrey’s *Vita Merlini*, Taliesin teaches Merlin in geography and cosmography. The *Encyclopedia of Gods and Legends from Ancient Greece and Rome, the Celts and the Norselands: Mythology*, (2001) states the

The island of apples, which is called the Fortunate island has its name because it produces all things for itself. There is no work for the farmers in plowing the fields, all cultivation is absent except for what nature manages by herself. On its own the island fertile crops and grapes and native apples by means of its own trees in the cropped pastures. On its own the overflowing soil puts forth all things in addition to the grass, and in that place one lives for one hundred years or more. There nine sisters give pleasant laws to those who come from our parts to them. And of those sisters, she who is higher becomes a doctor in the art of healing and exceeds her sisters in excellent form. Morgen is her name, and she has learned what usefulness all the herbs bear so that she may cure sick bodies. Also that art is known to her by which she can change shape and cut the air on new wings in the manner of Dedalus. When she wishes, she is in Brist, Carnot, or Papie; when she wishes she glides out of the air onto your lands. They say that this lady has taught mathematics to her sisters Moronoe, Mazoe, Gliten, Glitonea, Gliton, Tyronoe, and Thiten the most noteworthy on the cither. To that place after the battle of Camblan we brought Arthur, hurt by wounds, with Barinthus leading us, to whom the waters and the stars of the sky were known. With this guide for our raft we came to that place with our leader, and with what was fitting Morgen did honor to us, and in her rooms she placed the king upon a golden couch and with her own honorable hand she uncovered his wound and inspected it for a long time, and at last she said that health could return to him, if he were with her for a long time and wished to undergo her treatment. Therefore rejoicing we committed the king to her and returning gave sails to the assisting wind.⁴⁷

Geoffrey of Monmouth here creates a picture of “Morgen” as a woman who incorporates virtues such as benevolence, compassion and generosity. She totally lacks any malice that she bears against Arthur in later versions. Instead, she cures his battle wounds, gives him shelter ‘in her rooms’ and in so far secures his recovery. Furthermore, she embodies a highly talented and sophisticated woman that holds sway over a whole island and even over a whole sisterhood that ‘thrives under the reign of Morgan herself [...]’.⁴⁸ In addition to that, she achieved great proficiency in her magical skills that include ‘such reconide studies as [mathematics and] astrology’⁴⁹, the art of shape-shifting, the art of healing by

following about him: “[...] a prophetic poet and shamanistic seer, was gifted with all-seeing wisdom after consuming a “greal” of inspiration from Ceridwen’s [a Welsh goddess of fertility] cauldron. Wales’s greatest bard, he foretold the coming of the Saxons and the oppression of the Cymry as well as his own death.”

⁴⁷ <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/Camelot/GMAvalon.htm> translation by Emily Rebekah Huber (18.07.2007)

⁴⁸ Fenster, 69.

⁴⁹ Fenster,.

means of using herbs that ‘may cure sick bodies’ and on top of that, she is able to fly.

The fact that ‘Morgen’ places Arthur on a ‘golden couch’ could be interpreted relating to the colour of the couch, Arthur’s bed, which is nothing other than gold. *The Oxford Dictionary of Symbols* states the following about Celts, the symbolism of gold and the colour of gold:

The Celts regarded golden hair not simply as a sign of male or female beauty, but as a mark of royalty. [...] Gold is to be found beneath ELEVEN layers of earth and other different minerals. If it is well used, that is to say in the search for knowledge, it brings happiness, otherwise it causes its owner disaster. It is an ambivalent metal, possessing [...] [a] primeval dualism. It is the key to many doors, but also the weight or burden which can crush limbs or break necks.⁵⁰

That ‘Morgen’ beds Arthur on a golden couch, which can be understood in a figurative sense that she most probably places him upon sheets that are made out of gold or maybe upon a golden fleece, may be a hint towards her high status – her royalty. As gold is perceived as the most precious metal of all, she is certainly in a position that grants her to have opulences at her disposal. If Geoffrey of Monmouth deliberately wanted that the colour of gold should be associated with Morgan le Fay and if he was aware of its primeval dualism, we cannot be sure. On the other hand, to understand Morgan’s and Arthur’s relationship through history in a way that gold pictures ‘a key to many doors’ or just ‘a burden which can crush limbs or break necks’ does make sense. Many authors wrote about the legend of Arthur and Avalon. As they had the possibility to alter the characters and the action according to their wishes and according to the times they lived in, they were free to choose between different doors (or a different continuation of the story) and if they wished they could open a new one (thus, they had the possibility to alter the continuation of the story). As Morgan le Fay becomes more and more sinister in the course of ‘her’ history, she certainly develops into some kind of ‘burden’ for Arthur. The attempts she undertakes in later narratives to kill Arthur, to usurp power, and also her liaison with Accolon do not make life easy for Arthur. All of this, and how later authors of the story would spun their tales,

⁵⁰*The Oxford Dictionary of Symbols*, 441-444.

Geoffrey could certainly not foretell. He was of course not able to anticipate that his ‘Morgen’ would undergo a transformation from healer or Druidess to evil sorceress.

Geoffrey of Monmouth did not establish a relationship between Morgan and Arthur in his *Vita Merlini*. He just shortly mentions that Arthur’s sword was forged in the ‘Fortunate island’, but he never gives us a hint that they might ever have met before. ‘What Geoffrey does give us, however, is a brief yet clear reference to ancient Celtic traditions regarding magical islands, fairy women and Celtic goddesses.’⁵¹ For example, the account of the Island Geoffrey gives, resembles the magical islands that one knows from Celtic myth like, the Irish Tír na nÓg (Land of Youth) or the Tir na mBan (Land of Women), to mention only a few.⁵²

What is also conspicuous and relates to Celtic tradition is Geoffrey’s usage of the number ‘nine’ for the sisters. As multiples of three were considered to be holy, and gods and goddesses appeared in triads throughout Western pagan religion, Geoffrey deliberately established here a connection to Celtic insular sisterhoods:

Wir wissen aus einer Vielzahl antiker Quellen von Vorstellungen solcher Schwesternschaften im keltischen Küstenlands Westeuropas, die einerseits mit heiligen Aufgaben betruet waren andererseits auch über magische Fähigkeiten verfügten. [...] Anhand der schriftlichen Nachweise unterscheiden wir zwei unterschiedliche Arten von magischen Frauen: zum einen einzelne, alleinstehende Frauen, die Seherinnen, orakelhafte Dichterinnen oder Prophetinnen sind [,] [...] [und zum] anderen gibt es Gruppen von Frauen , die an entlegenen Plätzen, häufiger auf Inseln, zusammenleben.⁵³

According to Caitlin Matthews, such sisterhoods had to fulfill the following tasks: they had to prophesy, provide protection against enemies, offer instruction in martial arts; they were expected to be able to shift shape, cure people from diseases, influence the weather, conjure life-sustaining fire, and bestow gifts upon the people.⁵⁴ Matthews goes on by stating that these nine tasks represent the

⁵¹ Carver, 26.

⁵² Cf. Killop in Carver, 28.

⁵³ Caitlin Matthews in Müller und Wunderlich, 482.

⁵⁴ Caitlin Matthews in Müller und Wunderlich, 484. (my translation)

central columns of female magic and can be seen as the most important elements that underlie the women's attraction.⁵⁵

That Geoffrey depicts an Otherworld with laws of its own, distant from Arthur's world which is ruled by war, destruction and imperiousness, becomes clear when he writes that if people go there, they have to submit to the sisters' rules that govern the island. That he perceives the island as distinct from Arthur's world can be deduced from the fact that he differentiates between 'our parts' (Arthur's world) and 'them' (their world – the Otherworld).

Celts have always depicted the Otherworld and the Beyond of the Irish wonder-voyagers in the shape of islands lying to the west (or north) of the world. [...] Islands were thus miniature worlds, complete and perfect images of the cosmos, because they represented a concentration of sacral qualities. [...] Symbolically, islands are dwellings of the elect of knowledge and of peace in the midst of the sea of ignorance and disorder of the profane world.⁵⁶

By making Morgan le Fay the ruler of such a sacred land, Geoffrey bestows great power on her. Such power in the hands of a woman was certainly not the normal picture in medieval times.

The next section of this thesis shall deal with the so-called "Dark Ages". A short account about how life looked like for women of those times will be given. The question as to whether Morgan le Fay could be seen as a representation of the ideal of a 'woman' in the mid-twelfth century, or if she possibly contradicts that image at Geoffrey's time, shall be dealt with.

2.2 Morgan le Fay as a representation of the 'ideal woman' in the mid-twelfth century?

Casual readers of medieval Arthurian texts are likely to see the Arthurian world as a predominantly masculine domain. Camelot and the Round Table are a kind of "men's club," where the knights enjoy fellowship,

⁵⁵ Caitlin Matthews in Müller und Wunderlich, 484. (my translation)

⁵⁶ Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 545.

celebrate their martial victories and sometimes confess their defeats, and accept new challenges such as the Grail quest. The Round Table is thus the locus of conventional Arthurian male bonding.⁵⁷

During the Middle Ages, men dominated and ruled over women's lives. On the other hand, men were dominated by war. Their lives were mostly governed by war and warfare. Therefore, Geoffrey dedicated his *Historia* almost exclusively to Christianity and warfare – both domains established a male-dominated, rigid structure of a medieval society. This, of course, implies that there was little space left for women.

When we take a closer look at Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and especially at the women we encounter there, we will realise that their appearance in the book is quite limited. Explicitly named women are hard to find in Geoffrey's work. There is Ygerna, Arthur's mother, Guinever, his wife and Arthur's sister. As I have already mentioned before, Morgan le Fay does not appear in Geoffrey's *Historia* although Geoffrey created a character, called Anna, who, however, is not Arthur's half-sister but actually his real sister. Ygerna, Arthur's mother, was married to Gorlois, but when Utherpendragon fell in love with her, Merlin helped him to devise a plan to enable him to make love to her, i.e. '[h]e [...] deceived her by the disguise which he had taken.'⁵⁸

By my drugs I know how to give you the precise appearance of Gorlois, so that you will resemble him in every respect. If you do what I say, I will make you exactly like him, [said Merlin.] [...] The King agreed and listened carefully to what he had to do. [...] The King spent that night with Ygerna and satisfied his desire by making love with her. [...] That night she conceived Arthur, the most famous of men [...] [.]⁵⁹

Meanwhile, Geoffrey tells us, that Gorlois is killed by Utherpendragon's men and by that, 'Ygerna was freed from her marital obligations. [...] From that day on, [Ygerna and Utherpendragon] lived together as equals, united by their great love

⁵⁷ Lacy, Norris J. in Schaus, 41.

⁵⁸ *Historia*, 207.

⁵⁹ *Historia*, 206-207.

for each other; and they had a son and a daughter. The boy was called Arthur and the girl Anna.’⁶⁰

If Anna can really be seen as a predecessor for Mogan le Fay, we do not know. Nevertheless, at least Geoffrey granted her a name and therefore an identity. As far as women are concerned in Geoffrey’s *Historia*, this is not the rule. Other women can only be identified because they are married to a man, share some kinship with a certain character, just as the act of giving life is the only thing substantial enough to grant her existence. Being a mother of a child, or motherhood in general, seems to be sufficient as a woman’s description. To portray her character, or refer to her by name would certainly be too much to ask for.

In order to demonstrate that women had their place only on the periphery of society and that there existed a strict division between men and women in medieval society in general, and in particular the society described in Geoffrey’s *Historia*, the following passage is quite valuable:

When the feast of Whitsuntide drew near, Arthur, who was quite overjoyed by his success, made up his mind to hold a plenary court [...] and place the crown of the kingdom on his head. [After the divine services,] [t]he King and the Queen then took off their crowns and put on lighter regalia. The King went off with the men to feast in his own palace and the Queen retired with the married women to feast in hers; for the Britons still observed the ancient custom of Troy, the men celebrating festive occasions with their fellow-men and the women eating separately with the other women.⁶¹

This passage demonstrates in a persuasively way that women were not intended to be on equal terms with their husbands. Moreover, they find themselves in a difficult position: almost rendered to immobility, in neither case are they allowed to make decisions of their own or to develop their own personality. What counts for them and what they are valued for is being attractive and making a suitable match. Although the women described in Geoffrey’s *Historia* do not speak, they are nevertheless vital for Geoffrey’s story as they constitute ‘an indispensable

⁶⁰ *Historia*, 207-208.

⁶¹ *Historia*, 225-229.

complement of the men's fate'.⁶² Nevertheless, 'Geoffrey's work displays a patriarchal world where women are marginalised and subordinate [...].⁶³

Norris J. Lacy clearly states that

[i]t is hazardous to generalize about the function of women in Arthurian (or, more generally, medieval) literature: dealing with numerous texts from different cultures and centuries, we confront a full range of human motivations, behaviors, and emotions. The conventional view, of active men and passive but commanding females, is seriously oversimplified [...].⁶⁴

Turning to Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini* on the other hand, and taking a closer look at Morgan le Fay, we get acquainted with a character that is neither nameless, nor powerless, nor speechless. Geoffrey equipped her with virtues in abundance and above all, she is able to rule over an island, in a position to decide for herself and to make rules for others. In doing so, she certainly does not represent the contemporary idea of a woman in the mid-twelfth century but rather a notion of womanhood consonant with that of the Celts.

Aristotle[...], [t]he fourth-century BCE philosopher constantly emphasizes the inferiority of women in relation to men, and his views proved immensely influential from the thirteenth century onward in scholastic thought. [...] His views, and those of his adherents in the central and later Middle Ages have as many modern critics [...] as they had medieval adherents. Central to both his political and biological observations of women are their subordination and inferiority to men. [...] [Aristotle] note[s] emphatically that "the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the one rules and the other is ruled"⁶⁵ [...]. [...] Aristotelian views of women predominated from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries in western European thought [...].⁶⁶

Considering how women were seen during the High Middle Ages, one might assume that Geoffrey's depiction of Morgan le Fay was certainly unconventional. Did he simply aim at inflaming medieval society by presenting them with a powerful woman or did he try to present a quasi-historical example of what was certainly not accepted by contemporary society? How could Morgan le Fay as

⁶² Koprřivová, 21.

⁶³ Hildebrand, 50.

⁶⁴ Lacy in Schaus, 42.

⁶⁵ Aristotele, *Politics*, 1254b10, tr. by B. Jowett, quoted by MacLehose in Schaus, 35.

⁶⁶ MacLehose in Schaus, 35.

such a potent woman manage to survive in Geoffrey's story, when in reality, a woman like her would never have been tolerated? What was/were the actual medieval idea/s about the role of a high-ranking woman?

In considering the characteristic medieval ideas about woman it is important to know not only what the ideas themselves were but also what were the sources from which they sprang. [...] In the early Middle Ages what passed for contemporary opinion came from two sources – the Church and the aristocracy. In other words, the ideas about women were formed on the one hand by the clerical order, usually celibate, and on the other hand by a narrow caste, who could afford to regard its women as an ornamental asset, while strictly subordinating them to the interests to its primary asset, the land. Indeed, it might with truth be said that the accepted theory about the nature and sphere of women was the work of the classes least familiar with the great mass of womankind. It was these classes who determined the concept of marriage which prevailed far into the nineteenth century and who established the status of women under the law. Since they were in agreement in placing woman in subjection to man, neither the concept of marriage nor the law took note of her as a complete individual [...]. The fact which governed her position was not her personality but her sex, and by her sex she was inferior to man. On the other hand, it was these very classes who developed, with no apparent sense of incongruity, the counter-doctrine of superiority and the adoration which gathered round [...] the Virgin in heaven [...].⁶⁷

Mary, the Blessed Virgin, was extremely popular during the Middle Ages. She evolved and appeared not only in theological and historical, but also in literary and visual-arts interpretations. '[M]edieval people understood the Virgin Mary as a highly exalted woman above all other women [...] and above the entire human race [...].⁶⁸ From a Catholic point of view the Virgin Mary with her virtues of purity and faithfulness certainly acted as the role model for all women.

In medieval estates theory, women were classified by their virginity, chastity, or biological motherhood; good women [were either] nuns, wives, or widows [...]. [...] The extreme examples of Eve and the Virgin Mary served to remind men and women that beyond their own personal salvation, women had special power to destroy or save others.⁶⁹

During the harsh realities of such a crude age, people needed to believe in something and what found innumerable followers came later to be known as the

⁶⁷ Power, 9-10.

⁶⁸ Pigg, 111.

⁶⁹ Caviness, 2.

cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Eileen Powers in her book about *Medieval Women* states that '[i]t spread with great rapidity and [...] [that] [i]t was already supreme by the eleventh century and remained supreme until the end of the Middle Ages' (19).

The Blessed Virgin Mary in some way embodied a missing link between two worlds: she bridged and joined the divine and spiritual world with the human and physical one. As the Queen of Heaven, 'she was elevated to an extremely powerful position, and [...] further, despite the fact that she is a woman, her authority and her right to exercise it are simply never questioned'.⁷⁰

In relation to this context, it seems to be logical to make a connection between Geoffrey's 'Morgen' and the Virgin Mary. Like Mary rules over her realm as the Queen of Heaven, so reigns Morgen over her island. Both worlds are removed from reality and only accessible for those who proved worthy enough to enter the mystical "Otherworld". To compare Morgen's island with the Christian notion of heaven might therefore be not so far-fetched. Even Thelma S. Fenster in her book about *Arthurian Women* describes the isle of Apples '[as] a typical Celtic Otherworld, [which] is free from death [...] [and] full of earthly delights [...] [in short,] a second Eden' (69). Her description of the island resembles closely to what people generally associate with when they talk about the notion of heaven. A place where pain, tears and death simply do not exist anymore and will be gone forever. A place where mortal wounds can be healed. Just as Geoffrey of Monmouth praises Morgan for her virtues - her benevolence and her healing power, so the Gospels praise Mary's Evangelical Virtues which should inspire and guide us on our earthly pilgrimage. In our battle against evil, Mary watches over us as a model of perfection and at the end of our journey she will be waiting for us with open arms. Arthur is, of course, worthy enough to enter Morgen's beautiful Otherworld, and after fighting against all evil on earth, is finally taken into

⁷⁰ Cf. Wilson and Margolis, 617-620.

Morgen's arms and 'with her own honorable hand she uncovered his wound [...] and at last she said that health could return to him'.⁷¹

Our world found salvation through Mary, and thus Arthur can only find salvation in Morgan's arms.

To connect Geoffrey's Morgen with the Virgin Mary makes it easier to understand why she was granted such a powerful position in Geoffrey's account of the Arthurian saga. So if Morgan le Fay is seen as an equivalent to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who served as the model for all women in medieval times, Morgen could also be seen in a wider sense as a representation of the ideal woman in the mid-twelfth century. Beautiful, pure, free of sin and devout 'she alleviate[d] anxieties about female sex that abound in Western discourses, whether theological or psychoanalytic'.⁷²

From Geoffrey of Monmouth, attention will be drawn now to Malory and his romance *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Hardly any piece of Arthurian literature has had a greater influence on the modern conception of the Arthurian myth than *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

⁷¹ <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/Camelot/GMAvalon.htm> translation by Emily Rebekah Huber

⁷² Caviness, 2.

3 Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*

The romance tradition flourished throughout the Middle Ages and remained vital into the modern period. Though many of the medieval romances have influenced modern works and have been adapted to modern genres and media, no romance has been more influential or more often adapted and reworked, particularly in the English-speaking world, than *Le Morte d'Arthur* (completed 1469-70) by Sir Thomas Malory. [...] While there has been some debate about which of the several men named Thomas Malory who appear in medieval records wrote the *Morte*, it is now generally accepted that Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revell in Warwickshire was the author. One of the great literary achievements of the Middle Ages, Malory's book has remained a dominant force in literature and an important factor in the continuing interest in Arthur and his knights.⁷³

Sir Thomas Malory was born sometime between the years 1414 and 1418, the son of John and Philippa Malory. The first records in history can be dated back to 1439, where he emerges 'as witness to a legal settlement made by his cousin.'⁷⁴ He was knighted in about 1441, but we do not know the exact date.⁷⁵ In order to be able to take up knighthood in late medieval England, a considerable amount of money had to be paid and this is the reason why scholars admit political and social ambition to Malory.⁷⁶ During the years 1440 – 1451 he was the elected member for Warwickshire in parliament. He also worked for the military service where he was stationed overseas in a town, which is now part of France, called Gascony. He was involved in some criminal charges which included: 'wounding, theft, burglary, rape, extortion, and [he] was even accused of laying an ambush for the Duke of Buckingham and breaking into the Duke's deer park.'⁷⁷ Though he spent most of his time in prison during the years 1452-1460, he never came to trial. The fact that he finished *Le Morte d'Arthur* in prison gives us a hint that he must have been imprisoned a second time. He was married to a woman called

⁷³ Lupack, 133.

⁷⁴ Moore, *Introduction to Le Morte d'Arthur*, V.

⁷⁵ Moore, *Introduction to Le Morte d'Arthur*, V.

⁷⁶ Cf. Brewer, 115.

⁷⁷ Moore, *Introduction to Le Morte d'Arthur*, VI.

Elizabeth Walsh of Wanlip and they had (at least) two children: they called their heir Robert. Their other son, who died around 1457, was named Thomas.⁷⁸

One important name that is inevitably connected with Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* is that of William Caxton. He was the first to set up a printing press in England and therefore exerted an important influence upon Malory's text. Caxton's version of the book remained the only one until the year 1934. In that year, a so called 'Winchester Manuscript' appeared which was edited by a man called Eugène Vinaver, and it differed in many respects from what was thought to be the 'original' version. Suddenly two different versions of the same text existed.⁷⁹

Caxton's edition had added chapter headings and divisions and had thus altered the structure of the text as it appeared in the manuscript. [Caxton] also changed some of the wording, especially in the story of Arthur's continental wars, which had its source in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*⁸⁰ and had reproduced a good deal of the alliteration of the original. This section had been changed in the Caxton edition to make the style and diction less dependent on the source. The structural changes were, however, the ones that attracted the most attention and controversy. Vinaver believed that by deleting colophons and dividing the material of the romance into twenty-one books, which were in turn divided into chapters, Caxton had taken what were essentially eight separate romances on Arthurian themes and made of them one book. And so when Vinaver edited the first edition based on the Winchester manuscript (which was first published in 1947), he did not use the standard title of *Le Morte d'Arthur* but called it simply the *Works of Malory*.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Cf. Moore, *Introduction to Le Morte d'Arthur*, V-VI and Archibald, 113.

⁷⁹ Cf. Moore, *Introduction to Le Morte d'Arthur*, VI – VII.

⁸⁰ Lupack, 31-33: "The middle English romance known as the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, written in alliterative verse in the late fourteenth century, is among the greatest Arthurian romances of the Middle Ages and one of the few firmly in the chronicle tradition. [...] [The unknown author] recounts the Roman wars and the end of Arthur's reign. It begins, after some preliminaries which tell of Arthur's conquests, when the Roman Emperor Lucius sends envoys to demand tribute from Britain and Arthur assembles his allies for an expedition to the continent to meet and defeat his adversary. There are two movements in the poem, the first detailing with the war between the two emperors and the second depicting Arthur's return to Britain to take vengeance on his traitorous nephew Mordred, who has usurped the king's throne and taken his wife. Each of the movements is foreshadowed by a dream. [...] [The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* is a] masterful romance in the chronicle tradition [...] [and] distinctive in that it has Arthur as its hero. There are only a few other romances in which Arthur is the central figure, the knight errand fulfilling quests himself, and not merely the symbolic force and moral centre who sends other knights to right wrongs and have adventures."

⁸¹ Lupack, 133 – 134.

Because of the fact that Malory was a man who had experienced war himself and had also lived a politically active life, the book reveals that those experiences certainly must have had a great influence on *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Combined with an 'extensive knowledge of, and enthusiasm for, the ideology, rhetoric and practice of chivalry as depicted in the lengthy French prose romances of the thirteenth century'[,]⁸² Malory created a chivalric romance based on French prose works such as the '*Suite du Merlin*,⁸³ the *Tristan*⁸⁴ and *Lancelot*⁸⁵, and two English poems – the alliterative *Morte Arthure* [mentioned and explained above] and the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*⁸⁶,⁸⁷

According to Moore, 'Malory's approach to his sources combines the techniques of translation, abridgement and re-writing' (*Introduction*, VII). In specific instances, it often remains unclear from which source he draws his material. Instead, he uses formulaic phrases such as for example, 'as the French book

⁸² Moore, *Introduction*, VII.

⁸³ Lupack, 336: "The *Suite du Merlin* (*The Merlin Continuation*), the Post-Vulgate account of Merlin's history, was the source for Malory's 'The Tale of King Arthur'; and therefore many of its incidents are familiar to those whose primary knowledge of the Arthurian story comes from Malory. The *Suite* recounts Arthur's receiving Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake; the tragic history of Balin ['Balin and Balan are the tragic brothers who, despite their nobility, unwittingly kill each other.' (Lupack, 434)] and his use of Longinus' spear ['Longinus is the Roman soldier said to have pierced the side of the crucified Christ with his spear.' (Lupack, 457)] to strike the Dolorous Stroke [to wound king Pellam]; Arthur's marriage to Guinevere; the triple quest undertaken by Gawain [Arthur's nephew and often presented as the best of his knights], Tor and Pellinor ['[A]ccording to Malory the father of an illegitimate son named Torre [...] In Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, the sword Arthur drew from the stone breaks as he fights Pellinore. To save the king, Merlin casts a spell on Pellinore and then takes Arthur to receive a new sword, Excalibur, from the Lady of the Lake.' (Lupack, 465)]; and Morgan's treachery in giving Excalibur to her lover Accolon to use in combat against Arthur."

⁸⁴ Lupack, 471: "Tristan is one of the great tragic lovers of medieval romance. He is given the name Tristan, which incorporates the French word '*triste*' ('sorrowful'), because of his sorrowful birth, which causes the death of his mother."

⁸⁵ Lupack, 455: "In Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Lancelot is the central figure. (John Steinbeck called him Malory's 'self-character', the one who reflected the author's highest aspirations as well as his failings.) Malory's Lancelot also fails in the Grail quest – though he comes closer to success than any but the three who actually achieve it, one of whom is his own son Galahad. Lancelot strives for the highest achievement not only in this religious quest but also as a lover and as a knight."

⁸⁶ Lupack, 111: "The *Stanzaic Morte* has its ultimate source in the Vulgate *Mort Artu*, though it is much changed from the French work and is possibly, as some have suggested, based on an intermediary source that has not survived. The poem offers an interesting contrast to the other English verse account of Arthur's death, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. Whereas the latter is composed in alliterative verse, the former is written in a lively eight-line stanza; and, while the poet makes much use of alliteration, there is a fairly regular abababab rhyme scheme. The alliterative poem reflects the chronicle tradition in which Mordred's treachery is the prime cause of the downfall of Arthur's kingdom, whereas the stanzaic poem is in the romance tradition in which the love of Lancelot and Guinevere gives Mordred the opportunity to betray Arthur."

⁸⁷ Cf. Moore, *Introduction to Le Morte d'Arthur*, VII.

marketh mention' or 'the book saith' (Introduction, VII). For Malory they serve as narrative techniques when he intends to introduce a change from one topic to the next for example, or to express regrets, just to mention a few.

As already mentioned before, *Le Morte d'Arthur* represents a chivalric romance and became immensely popular during the Middle Ages, and its success even lasted right up to the Renaissance. Moore explains the core features of a chivalric romance in the following way:

A chivalric romance is essentially a story detailing the adventures and loves of a single knight or a group of knights. It usually has a foreign setting, and may include magical events. Love is an important theme in romance, so women often play a central role in the story and exercise considerable influence over the course of events. [...] The themes of love and war, two essential elements of chivalric romance, are skilfully woven together by Malory in his depiction of family ties. Marriage alliances are often described as though they were the private equivalent of public combat and conciliation. [...] [T]he public world of war and the private world of love are [often] united in marriage. [...] [However,] *Le Morte d'Arthur* is concerned not only with the practicalities of warfare, tournaments and love affairs, but also with the interpretation of those events in the wider context of existence. The romance abounds in acts of interpretation, decoding and prophecy. [Malory wants his readers to] discover [...] not only *what* is going to happen, but *how* and *why*. Malory [...] [successfully] combines the narrative excitement of an adventure story with the relative sophistication of allegorical romance.⁸⁸

To summarise Malory's romance in detail would simply go beyond the scope of this thesis because *Le Morte d'Arthur* comprises more than 1000 pages: numerous Arthurian stories are woven into and intertwine in Malory's literary creation. Nevertheless, due to the fact that so many writers, attempting to tackle the Arthurian legends, based their writings on Malory's version of the story, an account of the plot outline seems to be prudent and shall be given here.⁸⁹

As already stated above, the work is divided into twenty-one books, which are in turn divided into subchapters. Generally speaking, Malory tried to tell the story of King Arthur and all the knights that gathered around his Round Table. He started

⁸⁸ Cf. Moore, *Introduction to Le Morte d'Arthur*, VII-XII.

⁸⁹ The edition used for this thesis is that prepared by A.W. Pollard and published by Macmillan in 1900. It is based upon H. Oskar Sommer's 1890 edition of Caxton's Malory.

with the famous tale of how King Uther Pendragon falls in love with the Duke of Tintagel's wife, Igraine, and how Merlin, the magician, and Uther deceive Igraine by transforming Uther into the shape of the duke. Arthur is conceived on the same night that the real Duke dies in battle and Uther is therefore allowed to marry Igraine. Due to the pact, the child, named Arthur, is taken away by Merlin and raised by another family. Uther continues to fight bravely against his enemies but after two years he becomes severely sick and in his very hour of death Merlin visits him and Uther proclaims his son Arthur the future king of England. After Uther's death, England finds itself in great jeopardy. Every baron and every lord in possession of men makes himself strong, struggling to take control over the country. Therefore, Merlin advises the Archbishop of Canterbury to summon all the lords of the kingdom to come to London by Christmas as only a miracle will help to reveal the rightful king of England. When the lords arrive, they find a sword lodged in a stone and on it the inscription: 'Whoso pulleth out this sword from this stone and anvil is duly born King of all England.'⁹⁰ A tournament is proclaimed on New Year's Day so that the one man who is able to stir or move the sword shall be crowned. Sir Ector, to whom Merlin had committed the care of Arthur, and his son Kay also appear at the tournament. When Kay loses his sword, he sends Arthur back in order to bring him another one. Arthur rides to the churchyard where he sees the sword in the stone. He pulls it out effortlessly and delivers it to his brother Kay. When the barons find out how Kay got the sword they are outraged, as they are not amused by the thought of being ruled by a little boy. But finally they accept Arthur as their king and the coronation in Wales can take place. This is also the place where Arthur has to fight his first battle; he is aided by Merlin and later he receives his trusted companion - the sword Excalibur – a gift from the Lady of the Lake.

Then Sir Arthur looked on the sword, and liked it passing well. Whether liketh you better, said Merlin, the sword or the scabbard? Me liketh better the sword, said Arthur. Ye are more unwise, said Merlin, for the scabbard upon you, ye shall never lose no blood, be ye never so sore wounded;

⁹⁰ Malory, 6.

therefore keep well the scabbard always with you. So they rode unto Carlion [...] [⁹¹]

When Arthur arrives at Carlion he meets the wife of one of his enemies: King Lot's Queen of Orkney. Unaware of the fact that she is his half sister, on his mother's side, Arthur begets her with a child who shall later become his inevitable fate - Mordred. Queen of Orkney.

When Arthur ascends the throne, there is one prince who feels nothing else but scorn for Arthur. His name is King Rience of North Wales. Arthur calls all the knights from his land to gather for a general council at Camelot. This is also where Malory starts to unfold the story of Balyn who is selected as the only one to pull out a sword which is fixed in its scabbard and delivered by a damsel who is sent by the great lady Lile of Avelion.

As the barons become more restless, Arthur decides to take Guenevere, daughter of King Leodegrance of Camelard, as his wife. Despite Merlin's warnings that her heart will always belong to someone else, Arthur marries her.

Then Malory introduces Nimue, also called the Lady of the Lake. Merlin falls in love with her but fails to realise that Nimue presumes on his good nature in order to learn all his magic secrets. In the end, she kills him by making him go into a cave which she magically seals. She departs and leaves Merlin there.

Another tale Malory incorporates, and which is extremely important for a better understanding of Morgan Le Fay as a mythical character that has undergone an evolution, and which shall be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter of this thesis, is that of Morgan Le Fay's love for Accolon and her attempt to murder her brother, King Arthur. Morgan devises a wicked plan by using her lover Accolon as 'her bemused dupe in a complex intrigue for power.'⁹² As her first attempt fails, Morgan instigates a second murder attempt. She sends one of her damsels to Arthur's court in order to deliver a precious mantel that she might hand over to the king. The Lady of the Lake advises the King not to put on the

⁹¹ Malory, 39.

⁹² Larrington, 34.

cloak himself, but let the messenger do it. No sooner said than done, the mantel bursts into flames and with it the damsel underneath the cloak.

Malory goes on to tell his story about Lancelot, the quest of the Holy Grail, and the many adventures and battles they fight. When Arthur's son Mordred finally challenges the King to his last battle, all the knights, scattered throughout the empire, reunite to stand against the common foe.

When Arthur faces death after his final battle, he commands his right-hand man Bedivere, to throw his sword Excalibur into the lake nearby. Bedivere hides the sword three times because he thinks it is far too precious to be thrown into a lake. The third time he finally gives in, throws it into the lake and witnesses a hand suddenly appear from out of the depths of the water, catch the sword, brandish it thrice and then draw it back underneath the surface. The king is carried to the same lake where some fair ladies are awaiting to take him aboard a mysterious barge in order that his wounds may be healed in 'the vale of Avilion.'⁹³ When it comes to King Arthur's famous death scene, Malory writes:

Thus of Arthur I find never more written in books that be authorised, nor more of the very certainty of his death heard I never read, but thus was he led away in a ship wherein were three queens; the one was king Arthur's sister, Morgan le Fay; the other was the Queen of Northgalis; the third was the Queen of the Waste Lands. Also there was Nimue, the chief lady of the lake, [...] and this lady had done much for King Arthur [...]. More of the death of King Arthur could I never find, but that ladies brought him to his burials; and such one was buried there, that the hermit bare witness that sometime was Bishop of Canterbury⁹⁴, but yet the hermit knew not in certain that he was verily the body of King Arthur: for this tale Sir Bedivere, knight of the Round Table, made it to be written.^{95 96}

In this summary, attention was drawn only to those events relevant for this thesis. As already mentioned before, a plot outline of a story with such an enormous complexity like *Le Morte d'Arthur*, can certainly not include much detail, though

⁹³ Malory, 792.

⁹⁴ Malory, 792: 'When the hermit saw Sir Bedivere he knew him well, for he was but little to-fore Bishop of Canterbury, that Sir Mordred flemed.'

⁹⁵ Malory, 793.

⁹⁶ Lupack, 46: 'The myth of Arthur's survival (usually on the Isle of Avalon but occasionally in Sicily or inside a mountain or a cave in Britain) and his return at a time of need for his people has been adapted in numerous works in various genres.'

the intention was to present the reader with an overview of events involving Morgan Le Fay and her fellow women.

3.1 Malory's portrayal of Morgan le Fay

*'Every mythical character is the result of a complex and sometimes unfathomable creative process.'*⁹⁷

Mythical characters often go through some sort of evolution and Morgan le Fay is no exception. The picture that has survived of her until today, and has become most popular, is surely the one that depicts Morgan le Fay as an evil enchantress.

Without doubt, Malory contributed immensely to the transformation of Morgan's character. From a benevolent healer in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* to an inherently evil enchantress in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Morgan Le Fay had no other chance than to grow towards her fate.

When Morgan becomes Arthur's sister, or half-sister, the course of literary history changes. [...] The brother-sister bond is one of the most significant in women's lives; a relationship which lasts as long as life itself, it places Morgan in an unparalleled position of intimacy with her brother. Becoming Arthur's sister will eventually entail a move away from Avalon and the Fortunate Isles into the heart of the Arthurian court.⁹⁸

That Morgan Le Fay evolved over time is certain, but why could such a dramatic transformation be set in motion? Morgan Le Fay is neither described as sinister in Chrétien de Troyes' earliest extant Arthurian romances in the twelfth century, nor in Geoffrey of Monmouth's works that predominantly focused on Morgan's healing powers, which were discussed earlier. What happened after Chrétien de Troyes' story was written, was that Arthurian sagas began to spread all over the European continent and in accordance with the various adaptations, Morgan's character became ever darker.⁹⁹ As David Day states in his book *The Search for King Arthur*: 'Within a century, the clergy took these popular tales and edited

⁹⁷ Markale, 135.

⁹⁸ Larrington, 29.

⁹⁹ Cf. Carver, 33-34.

them to suit their own didactic purposes.’¹⁰⁰ Especially in the Vulgate Cycle and the Launcelot-Grail Cycle, ‘prose romances written in France between about 1215 and 1235’¹⁰¹, Morgan is depicted as utterly evil and lustful. Who the exact authors of the Vulgate Cycle were is still unknown to us today. However, it is assumed that the authorship can be attributed to a rather new group in the Christian church at that time; a sect that came to be known as the Cistercian order. If we aim towards an understanding of Morgan’s transformation from a benevolent healer into a dark character, it also seems to be of particular importance to comprehend Cistercian practices and beliefs. Whereas Benedictine monks had become entangled in worldly affairs, the Cistercians chastised themselves on the outskirts of society and withdrew themselves from worldly comforts, desires and goods. They perceived sexual desire as one of the most dangerous temptations. Therefore, they avoided any object that could possibly unleash such an allurement since they always lived in fear of being led astray. The only female accepted in their halls was ultimately the Virgin Mary.¹⁰² ‘Furthermore, the Cistercians were the monastic power most associated with the Knights Templar and, therefore, [with] the Crusades.’¹⁰³ The Cistercians, followed the *Rule of the Templars* and believed that it ‘[was] a dangerous thing for any religion to look too much upon the face of a woman.’¹⁰⁴ Hence, it is not difficult to understand that such anti-gynocratic beliefs could not bode well for the powerful woman that Morgan le Fay represented at the time and whose origins were evidently connected with pagan concepts and credence.¹⁰⁵ In the orthodox mind, paganism was not accepted as a true religion; in fact it was on equal terms with mere demon-worship. In such a context, it is no wonder that magic was inevitably linked with this “demonic cult.” Morgan’s traditional gods were perceived as demons within the eyes of Christians, and thus ‘all magic that called on the services of these gods’ was by all means considered as demonic magic.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ Day, 116.

¹⁰¹ Lupack, 104.

¹⁰² Cf. Carver, 34-38.

¹⁰³ Carver, 38.

¹⁰⁴ Upton-Ward, 36.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Carver, 39.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Kieckhefer cited in Carver, 39.

[...] the Cistercians believed that it was blasphemous to attribute healing or prophetic powers to a female who was not a member of a religious order and, furthermore, that such powers undermined the authority of the priesthood and the church.¹⁰⁷

A powerful woman like Morgan Le Fay, who was on top of everything else also benign, could hence not be tolerated by Cistercians nor any of the Arthurian romance writers who also followed their path. As a consequence, Morgan's character had to be changed. From a benevolent healer as presented by Geoffrey of Monmouth to an evil sorceress in *Le Morte d'Arthur* and later traditions.¹⁰⁸

The first thing we learn about Morgan Le Fay in *Le Morte d'Arthur* is that she is King Arthur's 'third sister [...] [and that she] 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 [...].'¹⁰⁹

'Morgan's significant appearances in Malory's work occur mainly in book four, where she is a cyclone of possible devastation.'¹¹⁰ Grudging her brother his status as the country's King and as a consequence thereof his well-deserved admiration and prosperity, Morgan is after Arthur's blood. '[...] King Arthur is the man in the world that she most hateth, because he is most of worship and of prowess of any of her blood [...] [.]¹¹¹ Morgan, who is married to King Uriens and mother to Sir Uwaine, falls in love with a knight called Accolon. Seeking to kill Arthur, Morgan has to devise a wicked plan as Arthur is well protected by his sword's scabbard. In Malory, Merlin once promised to Arthur: '[...] for whiles ye have the scabbard upon you, ye shall never lose no blood, be ye never so sore wounded; therefore keepwell the scabbard always with you.'¹¹² Morgan, however, manages to counterfeit another scabbard by abusing Arthur's absolute trust in her:

So after, for great trust, Arthur betook the scabbard to Morgan le Fay his sister, and she loved another knight better than her husband Uriens or King Arthur, and she would have had Arthur her brother slain, and therefore she

¹⁰⁷ Day, 65.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Carver, 39-40.

¹⁰⁹ Malory, 4.

¹¹⁰ Choronyz, 15.

¹¹¹ Malory, Book IV, 102.

¹¹² Malory, Book I, 39.

let make another scabbard 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.¹¹³

Without knowing each other's identity, Morgan instigates a fight between King Arthur and Accolon. Morgan cherishes the hope that her brother Arthur would die, and after his death she would be able to seize the throne - with Accolon by her side, of course. With the help of the Lady of the Lake, Arthur is able to defeat Accolon and thus survives. Accolon, who in the face of death believes that he has been double-crossed, confesses Morgan's wicked plan to Arthur before he dies. Terribly upset by Morgan's breach of trust, Arthur arranges that Accolon's body should be sent back to his sister Morgan le Fay.

So when Accolon was dead he let send him on a horse-bier with six knights unto Camelot, and said: Bear him to my sister Morgan le Fay, and say that I send her him to a present, and tell her I have my sword Excalibur and the scabbard; so they departed with the body.¹¹⁴

The dead man not yet handed over to Morgan, who is still confident of her victory and believes in Arthur's death instead of Accolon's, tries to kill her husband Sir Uriens. 'Morgan's assumption that her plan has succeeded and Arthur is dead precipitates a crisis in her own immediate family. She attempts to murder her husband, [...] while he is sleeping and is only prevented by the intervention of her son [Uwaine].'¹¹⁵ When Morgan receives the bad news of Accolon's death, she is devastated. Malory writes the following: '[W]hen came tidings unto Morgan le Fay that Accolon was dead [...] she was so sorrowful that near her heart to-brast. But because she would not it were known, outward she kept her countenance, and made no semblant of sorrow.'¹¹⁶ In revenge for Accolon's death, Morgan steals the magic scabbard again from Arthur, who in return pursues her but unfortunately without any success. She throws the scabbard into a lake and escapes by using her magic skills again – 'undoubtedly the most dramatic shape-

¹¹³ Malory, Book II, 56.

¹¹⁴ Malory, Book IV, 104.

¹¹⁵ Larrington, 35.

¹¹⁶ Malory, Book IV, 105.

changing feat of her magical career'¹¹⁷ - and she changes her shape and that of her men into a great marble stone.

In a coda to the Accolon tale, Morgan sends a splendid cloak to the court as a gift for Arthur. It is brought by a young woman who is unaware of the cloak's true nature. [Nimue], Lady of the Lake, is present at court when the cloak is delivered, temporarily replacing Merlin as Arthur's magical adviser. [Nimue] warns Arthur against trying on the lavish garment, advising that he should get a bearer to put it on first [...] and the hapless girl puts on the cloak, only to fall to the ground dead, [...] [and Nimue's] suspicions are vindicated.¹¹⁸

The first impression of Morgan le Fay that Malory conveys in his epic *Le Morte d'Arthur* is a completely negative one. It is hard for the reader to develop any kind of sympathy for her as her character is portrayed as an utterly evil one. Even Arthur himself strengthens this image of his sister when he connects her with negative traits such as 'falsehood'¹¹⁹ and 'treason'¹²⁰, or when he declares her magical skills as 'false crafts'.¹²¹

Arthurian romances abound with magical objects, obscure in origin and marvellous in their effects. Swords which can only be drawn by the destined bearer, or given by mysterious figures, rings which function as detectors for traces of enchantment in a puzzling situation, or which confer invisibility, are not frequent in Arthurian narratives, but are very oft the gift or creation of women.¹²²

Morgan sends such a magical object, namely a magic horn, to Camelot with the intention to disgrace Guenevere. The horn allows no woman who is unfaithful to drink from it without spilling. Unfortunately, the horn fails its destination and is 'rerouted by Lamerok to Cornwall, where it causes outrage at the court of King Mark. The horn reveals the adultery not only of [...] [King Mark's] queen Iseult,

¹¹⁷ Larrington, 36.

¹¹⁸ Larrington, 36.

¹¹⁹ Malory, 108.

¹²⁰ Malory, 341.

¹²¹ Malory, 102.

¹²² Heng in Larrington, 19.

but the infidelity of almost every other lady present.’¹²³ King Mark is just about to burn the ladies but can be stopped by his barons who

[...] said plainly they would not have those ladies burnt for an horn made by sorcery, that came from as false a sorceress and witch as then was living. For that horn did never good, but caused strife and debate, and always in her days she had been an enemy to all true lovers. So there were many knights made their avow, and ever they met with Morgan le Fay, that they would show her short courtesy.¹²⁴

This passage once more emphasises how strongly Morgan le Fay is perceived as an evil sorceress by other protagonists or minor characters of Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*. Morgan lusts after Launcelot but knows that his heart will never truly belong to her but only to Guenevere. Knowing of their affair, Morgan is at enmity with Guenevere and whenever she is able to cause trouble in order to tear the lovers apart, she does. With the help of ‘four [other] queens of great estate’¹²⁵, Morgan captures Launcelot by putting an enchantment upon him.

We shall not strive, said Morgan le Fay, [...] I shall put an enchantment upon him that he shall not awake in six 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.¹²⁶

So Launcelot is forced to choose either one of the four queens or else die in prison. Due to his unshakable love for Guenevere he refuses them all without hesitation. ‘So they departed and left him there alone that made great sorrow.’¹²⁷

These examples show that Morgan le Fay is portrayed as a great mischief-maker in Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*. The book certainly yields more of such scenes but considering the limited space of this thesis and the scope of the material that lies ahead, these examples seem to be sufficient to show that whenever the name Morgan le Fay appears, it only spells trouble. An exception to the rule, however, is Arthur’s dying scene. Morgan here suddenly appears concealed among some

¹²³ Larrington, 20.

¹²⁴ Malory, 289.

¹²⁵ Malory, 154.

¹²⁶ Malory, 154.

¹²⁷ Malory, 155.

other ladies on the barge that comes to fetch the dying king in order to carry him to the Other World. But this shall be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

3.2 *Morgan le Fay as the representation of the idea of the 'fallen woman' in the late Middle Ages*

The Middle Ages was a period of extremes in many ways, and the literary characters invented at this time are no exception. This invention often followed a pattern, with the result that the personality, traits of character, and physical appearance of a subject were apt to become somewhat stereotyped in the hands of medieval writers. The fact that these characters tended to be conventionally described and stereotyped did not at all interfere with their being portrayed in an extreme form. On the contrary, it helped; there was no conflict for the character, no possibility of being good and bad at the same time [...].¹²⁸ In the Middle Ages the Virgin Mary and the sinner, Mary Magdalene, were two central figures, giving Christians paradoxical icons of sanctity of the two extremes of womanhood.¹²⁹

‘The predominant image we have of [Mary Magdalene] is of a beautiful woman with long golden hair, weeping for her sins, the very incarnation of the age-old equation between feminine beauty, sexuality and sin.’¹³⁰ She makes her first appearance in the four gospels and the picture of her that predominantly prevailed for the last two thousand years is that of a sinner and prostitute, who after hearing Jesus’ words, repents, becomes one of his followers and devotes her life to him. She is present at his crucifixion and even witnesses his resurrection, according to the gospel of St. John. Furthermore, she is the one who proclaims and offers the Christian message to all who believed.¹³¹

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, Morgan Le Fay appears as an utterly dark and malicious character in Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*. That she is bad is beyond debate, but does Malory really attribute to her character no other position than the one on the dark side? From a benevolent woman who yields healing powers, to a deceitful and bloodthirsty enchantress who would do almost

¹²⁸ Garth, 60.

¹²⁹ <http://www.umilta.net/equal5.html#magdalen> (29.12.2007)

¹³⁰ Haskins, 1.

¹³¹ Haskins, 1-2.

anything, including fratricide, just to ascend the throne of England, Morgan le Fay might as well stand for the prototypical 'fallen woman'. According to the medieval idea of 'a woman' of being chaste and subordinate to the male, Morgan le Fay certainly depicts a threat to the medieval norm and the medieval male. She goes to extremes and even tries to surpass them as far as possible. To draw some parallels between Morgan le Fay and Mary Magdalene, who gained extreme popularity during the Middle Ages, seems to be justifiable and logical.

[Mary Magdalene's] character, which was one of the extremes between wickedness and sanctity, grief and ecstasy, made her a favourite in the Middle Ages, which was a period of extremes itself. Her position as patron saint of all sinners and penitents added to her great popularity.¹³²

As we have already heard before, the Middle Ages was a time in which female oppression was the rule. It was at this time that a woman like Mary Magdalene functioned as a 'counter-heroine' amidst this patriarchal, oppressive society and culture. She preached at a time when women were actually forbidden to preach, she always expressed her own view and on top of this, she defied male opposition.¹³³ This type of behaviour is reminiscent of Morgan le Fay, a woman who definitely clarified her position. She makes decisions on her own and even occupies a castle that she calls her own. Certainly displaying an unusual demeanour considering the male-dominated society that surrounded her.

As Mary Magdalene is closely connected with Jesus Christ, Morgan le Fay is closely connected with her brother Arthur. When Accolon confesses Morgan le Fay's treason to Arthur, he states the following about their relationship: '[...] God knoweth I have honoured her and worshipped her more than all my kin, and more have I trusted her than mine own wife and all my kin after.'¹³⁴ Trust shamefully misused by Morgan.

Besides their brother-sister bond, which is of great significance to their relationship, Morgan in a way does depend on Arthur and vice versa. Without Morgan, Arthur could never excel in his function as the leader of England and the

¹³² Garth, 11.

¹³³ Cf. http://www.womenpriests.org/magdala/magd_ovr.asp (30.12.2007)

¹³⁴ Malory, 102.

Round Table: it is because of her presence that Arthur appears so pure to the reader. With every evil deed Morgan contrives he becomes even purer. On the other hand, the same applies to Morgan. If she had not such a sublime brother, she would not be driven by her envy and so brought to commit all those mischievous actions. She would certainly not be ‘the most extreme villain’ of all¹³⁵ if Arthur were not the best of kings and men.

Mary Magdalene’s ambiguous position of being a sinful prostitute and a repentant sinner shows many parallels with Malory’s Morgan le Fay. Throughout the entire book, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, Morgan has no other role than to be bad. She is motivated by her envy, which turns her into an unscrupulous killer and a corrupt adulteress. Many evil deeds follow until she surprisingly appears at the end as one of the fairy ladies on the barge that carries the dying Arthur to Avilion (Avalon); here she suddenly assumes the function of a saviour figure.

In spite of [her] murderous and adulterous career, Morgan retains her nurturing function as Arthur’s conductress to Avalon after his wounding. But this “good” Morgan is overshadowed by the ubiquitous “bad” woman. She is the most extreme villain of Arthurian romance [...].¹³⁶

Malory confronts us here with a very ambiguous picture of Morgan le Fay and he leaves us without an answer to the question of why she turns from thoroughly evil to nurturing and good at the end of his story. He allows the explanation to evaporate in the mists – in the true sense of the word. We can only speculate over the real reasons for Morgan’s sudden change of mind.

As sister and brother, Morgan and Arthur are strongly bound to one another - like two sides of the same coin. Each side needs the other in order to exist. One possible explanation is that Morgan finally accepts that she is a part of Arthur and although she is Arthur’s dark counterpart, she is not inherently evil. By embodying one part of a whole, she is also able to include aspects from the other side of the coin: she is able to incorporate some of Arthur’s good facets as well. In comparison, the same can be applied to Mary Magdalene and Jesus. Mary was perceived as sinner but with Jesus by her side she repents and is eventually made

¹³⁵ Fries in Fenster, *Arthurian Women*, 70.

¹³⁶ Fries in Fenster, *Arthurian Women*, 70.

a saint. As Morgan le Fay is part of Arthur, Mary Magdalene is a part of Jesus. And in the broader sense, being a part of Jesus means being a part of God and therefore containing salvation within oneself. Morgan Le Fay and King Arthur are partners of each other in a similar way.

‘In the fourteenth-century Italian Life of St. Mary Magdalene, [Mary] [...] shows a physical and yet mystical love for the Lord, in thus addressing the Cross.’¹³⁷

“Oh, most blessed Cross! Would I had been in Thy stead, and that my Lord had been crucified in mine arms, my hands nailed against His and that the lance which pierced His heart had passed even unto mine, so that I had died with Him, and thus neither in life nor death ever departed from Him.”¹³⁸

Like Mary Magdalene suffers with Jesus, Morgan le Fay bears the same misery as Arthur. He is the cross she has to bear. His suffering is also hers. In the end, Mary Magdalene watches over Jesus in his darkest hour, and so does Morgan le Fay stand by her brother when Arthur is carried to the Other World. It is her very lap in which Arthur rests his head in peace. In this dark hour, their close relationship is once again highlighted when Morgan asks: ‘Ah, dear brother, why have ye tarried so long from me?’¹³⁹ Without an explanation of how Morgan’s metamorphosis came about, things seem to be the way they should have always been. A brother and his sister lovingly united in each other’s arms. A love that was shaken between glorification and humiliation finally finds its fulfilment in a transcendent world apart from ‘worldly complexities [such as] [...] kingship, power [...] and jealousy. [...] Passion, hostility and envy are laid to rest: Morgan has largely sublimated her [...] desires into wisdom and nurturing, while Arthur has put aside politics and dynastic anxieties [...].’¹⁴⁰ All tensions that constantly surfaced between the sibling bond and boisterously tugged at their kinship are finally resolved.

After Malory, the public’s interest in Arthurian legend declined more and more. Of course, there were still some authors who tried their hands on the material, but

¹³⁷ Garth, 70.

¹³⁸ Hawtrej quoted in Garth, 71.

¹³⁹ Malory, 792.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Larrington, 50.

they did not manage to make a great stir. With a few exceptions, like Edmund Spenser's (1552-99) *The Faerie Queen*, Malory's story remained unchallenged in popularity. According to Alan Lupack, he 'carrie[d] the spirit of medieval romance into the English Renaissance [and by doing so, he] glorif[ied] Elizabeth and her Tudor heritage. [...] Spenser's poem is an allegory, with each of the main characters representing a virtue or a vice or some abstract quality.'¹⁴¹

Despite its' relatively small Arthurian content, *The Faerie Queen* is important in the Arthurian tradition. At a time when the traditional medieval romances were considered old-fashioned and therefore no longer a viable form, Spenser revitalized the Arthurian material by structuring it around the largely Aristotelian concepts of virtue and thus appealing to the classical interests of his age and adapting it to the political concerns of his day. Though the period between the Renaissance and the nineteenth century is usually thought of as a time when Arthurian literature was in decline and while it is true that Malory was not printed or frequently adapted between 1634 and 1816, much interesting Arthurian material was in fact produced. Renaissance plays, ballads, topographical poems, chronicles, satires, popular almanacs, antiquarian explorations – all kept the Arthurian legends alive and paved the way for the burst of creative activity in the Victorian age.¹⁴²

This 'burst of creative activity' finally culminated when Lord Alfred Tennyson, often regarded as the chief representative of Victorian poetry, published his *Idylls of the King*, an epic poem Tennyson began to write in 1833. It was based on the notebook version of *Morte d'Arthur*. Tennyson worked on it for most of his career and created a sequence of poems, 'an episode drawn from a heroic subject – in other words, an epyllion or epic idyll'¹⁴³ constitutes a perfect reflection of the Victorian age.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Lupack, 145.

¹⁴² Lupack, 145-146.

¹⁴³ Ryals, 18.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Lupack, 146.

4 Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*

The *Idylls of the King* have been described in many ways – as episodes, tableaux, an epic, a medley, a drama, romances, a novel, heroic poems, and romantic narratives. Yet Tennyson himself called them idylls.¹⁴⁵

Alfred Lord Tennyson was born in 1809 in Lincolnshire as the third son of a clergyman, Dr. George Clayton Tennyson, who had eleven children. His father always believed in his son's creativity and it was also due to his father's extensive library and home teaching that Alfred was finally able to enter Trinity College at Cambridge when he was seventeen. It was also there that Alfred met Arthur Hallam with whom he formed a friendship that can well be seen as 'the major emotional relation of his life.'¹⁴⁶ Throughout his whole life Tennyson worked exclusively as a poet and was granted the privilege to succeed Wordsworth as Poet Laureate in 1850. Forty-two years of domesticity and extraordinarily sustained work followed.¹⁴⁷

Tennyson worked on the *Idylls of the King* throughout most of his career. The poems he is famous for or his poetry in general is characterized by an 'idyllic treatment'.¹⁴⁸ Before Tennyson wrote the *Idylls*, he worked on a poem called *Sir Launcelot and Guinevere* (1830). Unfortunately, only fragments of it remained and his first published Arthurian text was called *The Lady of Shalott* (1832). In both works, Tennyson deals with the subject of awakening love and its inextricably linked power. In the year 1834 Tennyson wrote two Arthurian poems: *Sir Galahad* which deals with Galahad's love of God and his chastity, and with *Morte d'Arthur*, Tennyson devoted himself to King Arthur's downfall and thereby he closely follows Malory's recounting of the happening. When Tennyson started to work on the poems *Vivien* and *Enid*, 'he began what was to become the *Idylls*, although they were not all composed in the order in which they stand now.'¹⁴⁹ Destructive and ennobling aspects of love are illustrated in the two poems. The

¹⁴⁵ de L. Ryals, 3.

¹⁴⁶ Jordan, 2.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Jordan, 2-5.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. de L. Ryals, 3.

¹⁴⁹ Lacy and Ashe, 159.

first one, *Vivien*, leads to Merlin's downfall and the second one, *Enid*, can be traced back to the Welsh story of Geraint, and deals with the perfect and ideal order being created by Arthur but also with the fact that there might be an eventual failure of this system. These poems were published together in 1857 with Vivien renamed Nimue and its definite title therefore was to be made out in the name of: *Enid and Nimue: The True and the False*. 'The next poem, "Guinevere," presents the Queen as a complex individual torn between her ideals and duty on the one hand and her passion on the other.'¹⁵⁰ What destructive consequence Guinevere's infidelity has on others is effectively demonstrated in the poem which follows. The story is based on Malory's character of the Lady of Shalott and the poem bears the name *Elaine*.¹⁵¹

Tennyson did certainly not forget to include the story of the quest for the Holy Grail. In *The Holy Grail*, he introduces six Grail questers but

[...] concentrates on Percivale, to depict his failure and to suggest, not that the quest has the power to ennoble and perfect, but that the absence of the Grail and thus the very necessity for a quest were related to the sin now gnawing at the heart of Arthur's realm. Tennyson introduced a new generation of knights in "Pelleas and Ettarre," after which he provided a beginning for his series ("The Coming of Arthur," recounting his birth) and an ending ("The passing of Arthur," a slightly rewritten version of "Morte d'Arthur"). Later additions to the series were the melancholy "The Last Tournament" and the happier "Gareth and Lynette" (added to the Idylls in 1873), and "Balin and Balan" (incorporated into the series in 1885). These poems, with "Enid" divided into two works, constitute the twelve books of Tennyson's epic.¹⁵²

Tennyson was definitely absorbed with two Arthurs for much of his life. One was of course the King; an the other one was his best and closest friend Hallam who unfortunately died in the year 1833 when he was only twenty-two years old. He later became the subject of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and it soon turned out that the two Arthurs were very closely linked to each other. Not only in Tennyson's mind but also in his poetry.¹⁵³ 'His grief for his friend surely contributed to the

¹⁵⁰ Lacy and Ashe, 159.

¹⁵¹ Cf. Lacy and Ashe, 159.

¹⁵² Lacy and Ashe, 159-160.

¹⁵³ Cf. Lacy and Ashe, 159.

intensity of his Arthurian vision, while King Arthur remained to an extent a metaphor that helped to immortalize Hallam.’¹⁵⁴

Tennyson, who was born in 1809 at Somersby, Lincolnshire, was interested in Arthurian themes and subject during his whole life. This can be successfully demonstrated by the fact that he composed his final crypto-autobiographical Arthurian poem called *Merlin and the Gleam* (1889) quite late in his life. He also planned on writing a drama about Tristram but unfortunately he was not able to put this project into practice before his time was up. He died in 1892 after a short illness and was buried in Westminster Abbey. A lifetime’s interest in the legend can therefore be taken for granted.¹⁵⁵

Idylls of the King is certainly Tennyson’s longest and most ambitious work. He composed it in two creative spells that comprised the years from 1856 to 1859 and the time period from 1868 to 1874. The first set of four *Idylls* was not published before 1859. Of the first series that were already entitled *Idylls of the King*, 40.000 copies were sold within only a few weeks. Despite the works’ popularity, it took Tennyson almost a decade to supplement the series. He still felt uncertain about ‘how the crucial central episode of the Grail should be treated.’¹⁵⁶ It was not before 1868 that these difficulties were to be solved. Four more *Idylls* including the *Morte d’Arthur* were published in December 1869 (dated 1870) and within the next few years three remaining poems were completed. The last written poem *Balin and Balan* had to undergo some small but significant supplementation and was therefore withheld by Tennyson until 1885.¹⁵⁷

Tennyson was drawn to the past in an attempt to illuminate and perhaps to repudiate the present; much of his poetry reacts against the prevailing mechanistic view of nature and the ugliness of an increasingly industrialized society. His concern was thus less with medieval ideals than with Victorian moral condition, and the best mirror for that condition was King Arthur [...].¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Lacy and Ashe, 159.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Tennyson, *Introduction*, 9.

¹⁵⁶ Tennyson, *Introduction*, 9.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Tennyson, *Introduction*, 9.

¹⁵⁸ Lacy and Ashe, 158-159.

At the beginning of the poem, Arthur finds a devastated land overrun with beasts and beast-like men. His first task shall be to bring order to his shattered realm. Animal imagery is used repeatedly in the *Idylls* in order to demonstrate that if men aspire to advance morally, they have no other chance than to outgrow and overcome their beastly nature.

Certainly one of the main causes of man's fall in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* is his surrender to the Passions. Idyll by idyll, Tennyson exposes and delineates the inherent characteristics in man and the external conditions of a degenerating society that conspire to lure and tempt man to the sensual and sensuous and thus help to quicken his fall from the high ideals of Arthur to the lowest level of a brute existence. To strengthen the moral effects of recording man's demise and to focus more sharply on the grim implications of a humanity in bondage to the Passions, Tennyson fills the *Idylls* with a consistent image – the image of the beast. Throughout the poem the beast image appears, most often metaphorically, to point up to the old medieval and Renaissance view of man divided against himself by divine strivings and a bestial predisposition. [...] [Besides the didactic message, the leitmotif gives] the poem [...] a measure of unity and dramatic intensity [...] [...] [Furthermore,] the beast image serves to picture graphically [a] circular progression.¹⁵⁹

A progress which can definitely be found within Arthur as well.¹⁶⁰ Although his actual presence is prominent primarily in *The Coming of Arthur* and in the *Passing of Arthur* – two idylls that constitute the frame of the whole work – ‘his symbolic presence hovers all over the idylls.’¹⁶¹ The two poems can be seen as twin pillars who establish Arthur's authority as a spiritual absolute whereas in the rest of the *Idylls* Arthur acts as a shadowy and remote figure while other characters perform the central dramatic actions.¹⁶²

Tennyson thought his Arthur so perfect, that he even invented a different, almost mystical account of Arthur's coming. Besides the story that Arthur was conceived out of wedlock, that Uther married Ygerne after he had killed her husband Gorlois, and that the infant Arthur was immediately after his birth delivered to the magician Merlin and then reared up by an elderly couple, Tennyson offers an alternative yet more appealing story of Arthur's birth. According to his alternative

¹⁵⁹ Engelberg, 287.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Lupack, 147.

¹⁶¹ Lupack, 147.

¹⁶² Culler, 217.

version of the story, the baby King appeared from the sea. On the night that Uther died, Merlin's master named Bleyss and Merlin himself saw a ship approaching the shore. As the waves increased, Arthur's half-sister, Tennyson called her Bellicent in the *Idylls*, recounts the following:¹⁶³

Wave after wave, each mightier than the last,
Till last, a ninth one, gathering half the deep
And full of voices, slowly rose and plunged
Roaring, and all the wave was in a flame:
And down the wave and in the flame was borne
A naked babe, and rode to Merlin's feet,
Who stooped and caught the babe, and cried "The King!
Here is an heir for Uther!"¹⁶⁴

'Tennyson's Arthur is the 'stainless King' and the 'blameless King'.¹⁶⁵ It is hard for average men and women to live up to his standards. Arthur derives his symbolic power from his impossible idealism and although Camelot's downfall is already hinted at towards the beginning of the *Idylls* his idealism remains steady. In such lines as 'A doubtful throne is ice on summer seas'¹⁶⁶ it becomes clear that royalty has to face its transitoriness. Knights who lack purity and devotion undertake the Grail Quest and that is why they are doomed to fail. Illicit love ruins people's lives and exposes the Arthurian world in general. Sinners have to suffer but others are condemned to suffer with them.¹⁶⁷ 'In "The Passing of Arthur," the sad cycle is complete, and the world has reverted to its pre-Arthurian state.'¹⁶⁸ The King's accession and his passing seem to intermingle - leaving the country once again - barren and wintry.

And slowly answer'd Arthur from the barge:
'The old order changeth, yielding place to new, [...]'¹⁶⁹

Arthur uses these words twice. The first time at the end of *The Coming of Arthur* and in *The Passing* as contrasted to *The Coming*. What Arthur suggests is the need for change. Change seems to be the driving force behind the process that

¹⁶³ Cf. Lupack, 149-150.

¹⁶⁴ Tennyson, 31.

¹⁶⁵ Lupack, 147.

¹⁶⁶ Tennyson, 27.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Lacy and Ashe, 160-161.

¹⁶⁸ Lacy and Ashe, 161.

¹⁶⁹ Tennyson, 299.

accelerates the human spirit to escape stagnation and evolve from the level of the beasts towards the level of the angels.¹⁷⁰ ‘[...] [T]his ending suggests not only the end of the old order, but [also] the beginning of something new.’¹⁷¹

[...] Tennyson consistently balances appearance and reality [...], and he presents characters who must cope with the fact, that things are sometimes better and often worse than they initially seem. The resulting tensions thus have a universal significance at the same time that they are a metaphor for an age that was itself torn between faith and doubt, hope and despair. The Victorian age saw in the very scientific, technological, and intellectual advances that brought hope and of bettering the human condition a darker side, an undermining of faith [...], and a possibility of exploitation that called into question the notion of progress. This duality, which Tennyson represents in a form well suited to it, lasts even to the present day and helps to explain the popularity of Arthurian material among modern poets. The Arthurian world, like the modern world, has great potential for improving the human condition; but it seems that such an ideal is always frustrated by the failings and imperfections that are inherent in the world and in those who inhabit it.¹⁷²

4.1 Lord Tennyson’s portrayal of Morgan le Fay as a ‘splitting-off’ from her original role

‘Both alluring and beauty and loathsome haghood appear in the most influential Arthurian female counter-hero, Morgan le Fay. More beneficent splittings-off from her original role emerge in the several Ladies of the Lake who later develop from her archetype: literally watered-down from Morgan (whose name indicates her origins in the greater body of water, the sea), they exhibit that tenet of medieval misogyny which held that no woman should be as strong as a man, or could be without some supernatural power. In Morgan’s movement as a character in Arthurian tradition emerges such misogyny at work, as she develops from an entirely wholesome into a mainly maleficent presence.’¹⁷³

Surprisingly, the reader does not encounter a character called Morgan le Fay in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. According to Larrington, ‘[...] [she] scarcely

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Lupack, 152.

¹⁷¹ Lupack, 152.

¹⁷² Lupack, 146-147.

¹⁷³ Fenster, 68-69.

figures in early Victorian literature [...] [.],'¹⁷⁴ Morgan le Fay in fact 'splits off from her original role' and reappears in the woman who is best known as the woman who magically seals Merlin in a cave or a tree: Vivien. While Malory makes her the chief Lady of the lake, she uses her enchantments not only for the mere purpose of serving Arthur but also for bringing disaster on others. Therefore, she represents a quite ambiguous character in *Le Morte d'Arthur* and as Polhemus states, it is '[c]hiefly because of our perennial fascination with the dynamic between old man and the young woman, [that] Vivien is the enchantress who colonizes the Victorian literary imagination.'¹⁷⁵

Tennyson [unless Malory,] turns Vivien into the epitome of evil with none of the ambiguity of Malory's character. She lies and slanders good knights and is compared to a serpent. Using the charm that she tricks Merlin into revealing, she seals him forever in an oak tree, and thereafter does no service to Arthur or his kingdom.¹⁷⁶

The role of Arthur's half-sister in the *Idylls* is taken by a woman that Tennyson named Bellicent. Lupack in his *Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend* assumes that he gave her a different name in order to avoid any suggestion of incest associated with the names of Morgause and Morgan le Fay. Their names often conflated in history. Tennyson tried to avoid any connection to Malory's version of the story in which Morgause and Arthur beget Mordred.¹⁷⁷ By depicting Arthur as the perfect and sinless man, Tennyson created his king as a model of human perfection - the blameless and stainless king that bears not even a single flaw.

The same does certainly not apply to Vivien. Unlike Arthur, she does not care for moral order and ethical values. With her unleashed forces of evil and unrestrained passion she tries to undermine everything that Arthur cherishes. Thereby she plays an active part in Camelot's downfall. Vivien is first introduced in 'Balin and Balan' where she 'immediately [displays a] disruptive presence.'¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Larrington, 148.

¹⁷⁵ Polhemus quoted in Larrington, 149.

¹⁷⁶ Lupack, 474.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Lupack, 463.

¹⁷⁸ Larrington, 155.

The 'wholesome music of the wood' is 'dumb'd by her 'warbling'. She is already a contradictory figure on her first appearance; her song, which has silenced the birds, seems to celebrate the beauty of the natural world: 'The wayside blossoms open to the blaze/ The whole wood-world is one full peal of praise'. Vivien reveals herself as an unregenerate pagan, in opposition to the militantly Christian values of Arthur's court before she arrives there, but the main role in 'Balin and Balan' is, as in 'Merlin and Vivien', principally to spread slander [...] [.]¹⁷⁹

In the idyll 'Merlin and Vivien', Vivien follows the magician to the forest where she pretends to love him dearly in order to learn the charm of enclosure. Merlin is the only person who knows the secret charm but if Vivien managed to draw the secret knowledge from him she would be able to destroy Merlin for good. Rosenberg points out in his book *The Fall of Camelot: A Study of Tennyson's "Idylls of the King"* that 'Vivien's lust for Merlin is feigned only in its carnality, not its intensity, for it is his mind and not his body that she is driven to possess.'¹⁸⁰

For Merlin once had told her of a charm,
The which if any wrought on anyone
With woven paces and with waving arms,
The man so wrought on ever seem'd to lie
Closed in four walls of a hollow tower,
From which was no escape for evermore;
And none could find that man for evermore,
Nor could he see but him who wrought the charm
Coming and going, and he lay as dead
And lost to life and use and name and fame.
And Vivien ever sought to work the charm
Upon the great Enchanter of the Time,
As fancying that her glory would be great
According to his greatness whom she quench'd.¹⁸¹

Once the reader finds out that Vivien was born on a battlefield 'among the dead'¹⁸², one soon realises where her affinity with death stems from. Raised and influenced by the treacherous villain King Mark, Vivien had to face a tragic infancy at his court. She appears to have been Mark's mistress and also seems to

¹⁷⁹ Larrington, 155.

¹⁸⁰ Rosenberg, 112.

¹⁸¹ Tennyson, 147.

¹⁸² Tennyson, 143.

be ‘clear-sighted about her own corruption.’¹⁸³ When Mark of Cornwall hears rumours about a potential affair between the knight Lancelot and the Queen, he sends Vivien to Camelot with the errand to stir up additional trouble. Camouflaged as an innocent orphan maiden, Vivien sneaks in the lower echelons of the Round Table where she is made one of Guenevere’s ladies in waiting. Her contrived plan includes ferreting information in order to spread scandalous stories and making efforts to gain Arthur’s confidence. An endeavour that entirely fails. Ironically Vivien makes herself the object of mockery when the rumour of her failure spreads through the court. ‘[...] [Her] half-formed plan of blackmail to gain social advancement [...]’¹⁸⁴ fails miserably. Despite all her efforts to seduce Arthur, the king scarcely registers her being and remains uninterested and indifferent towards Vivien.

Although Vivien appears to be utterly malicious, Larrington states that:

[She] is no straightforward personification of Vice, she has a cosmopolitan charm, and is adept at deploying the clichés of romantic love, even if she does not love herself. Her motivation remains shadowy. She is little concerned with virginity; she is nor particularly interested in magic except as a means to destroy Merlin.¹⁸⁵

In Tennyson’s epic Vivien is definitely and solely responsible for the loss of Merlin. In the opening scene of the poem *Merlin and Vivien* the air is still but a storm is about to raise. Merlin and Vivien are lying beneath an oak tree in the forest of Broceliande. Vivien caresses the magician, kisses his feet and tries to convince the ageing master of magic that her love for him is nothing else but true and genuine.

There lay she all her length and kiss’d his feet,
As if in deepest reverence and in love.
A twist of gold was round her hair; a robe
Of samite without price, that more exprest
Than hid her, clung about her lissome limbs,
In colour like the satin-shining palm
On sallows in the windy gleams of March:
And while she kiss’d them, crying, ‘Trample me,

¹⁸³ Larrington, 154.

¹⁸⁴ Larrington, 154.

¹⁸⁵ Larrington, 154.

Dear feet, that I have follow'd thro' the world,
 And I will pay you worship; tread me down
 And I will kiss you for it; he was mute:
 So dark a forethought roll'd about his brain,
 As on a dull day in an Ocean cave
 The blind wave feeling round his long sea-hall
 In silence: wherefore, when she lifted up
 A face of sad appeal, and spake and said,
 'O Merlin, do ye love me?' and again,
 'O merlin, do ye love me?' and once more,
 'Great Master, do ye love me?' he was mute.¹⁸⁶

Merlin is delighted by Vivien's talk because her words '[break] up [his general state of] melancholy.'¹⁸⁷ On the other hand, he also seems to be suspicious which becomes very clear when he asks her: 'Are these your pretty tricks and fooleries, O Vivien, the preamble?'¹⁸⁸ Vivien displays all her feminine wiles in order to achieve her aim: she wants to be taught the secret charm that only Merlin knows of and this is her sole desire. She vehemently tries to lure Merlin into her trap by weeping, singing and acting coy. Merlin almost starts to believe her when she sings:

' "In Love, if Love be Love, if Love be ours,
 Faith and unfaith can ne'er be equal powers:
 Unfaith in aught is want of faith in all. [...]
 "It is not worth the keeping: let it go:
 But shall it? Answer darling, answer, no.
 And trust me not at all or all in all."
 [...] And Merlin look'd and half believed her true, [...]'¹⁸⁹

Merlin, on the other hand, tries to distract Vivien by telling her stories about his youth but Vivien is not willing to change the subject. She wants him to tell her the secret charm as an expression of his trust in her and equal love for her. Merlin refuses to reveal his secret because he fears that she would misuse the charm. Because of Merlin's unwillingness to pass on his knowledge, Vivien, now in wrath, starts to defile the reputation of the brave and generous knights of the Round Table:

¹⁸⁶ Tennyson, 148.

¹⁸⁷ Tennyson, 149.

¹⁸⁸ Tennyson, 149.

¹⁸⁹ Tennyson 152.

But Vivien, [...]
By instance, recommenced, and let her tongue
Rage like a fire among the noblest names,
Polluting, and imputing her whole self,
Defaming and defacing, till she left
Not even Lancelot brave, nor Galahad clean.¹⁹⁰

At that point Merlin realises how vicious and evil Vivien actually is. He even calls her ‘a harlot’¹⁹¹ in the following verse when he once more discerns that her feelings for him cannot be true:

I know the Table Round, my friends of old;
All brave, and many generous, and some chaste.
She cloaks the scar of some repulse with lies;
I well believe she tempted them and fail’d,
Being so bitter: for fine plots may fail,
Tho’ harlots paint their talk as well as face
With colours of the heart that are not theirs.¹⁹²

When Vivien hears that Merlin calls her ‘a harlot’ she is infuriated. At this point in the storyline Tennyson successfully demonstrates one more time Vivien’s true descent. Her birth among corpses suddenly reappears in the reader’s mind when she leaps from Merlin’s lap and stands ‘stiff as a viper frozen’¹⁹³ and her face suddenly reveals ‘the bare-grinning skeleton of death!’¹⁹⁴ ‘An incarnate symbol, Vivien revitalizes the [...] literary convention from which she derives.’¹⁹⁵

‘Vivien’ , [...] [James Rosenberg suggests,] is the ‘psychologically subtlest’ and ‘narratively simplest’. Central to the psychological realism of the encounter is the virtuoso range of emotions that Vivien displays; her gestures and speech veer between a feigned cheerfulness and her true but concealed feelings. ‘Smiling saucily’, ‘smiling mournfully’ ‘smiling as in wrath’, she argues with Merlin.¹⁹⁶

Meanwhile, the impending storm is about to unleash its natural force. Vivien, who reaffirms being innocent of evil intentions, seeks shelter and throws herself upon the old and tired magician. She calls him ‘her seer’, ‘her bard’, ‘her silver star of

¹⁹⁰ Tennyson, 163.

¹⁹¹ Tennyson, 163 and 164.

¹⁹² Tennyson, 163.

¹⁹³ Tennyson, 164.

¹⁹⁴ Tennyson 164.

¹⁹⁵ Rosenberg, 114.

¹⁹⁶ Rosenberg, James cited in Larrington, 152.

eve', 'her God', 'her Merlin' and 'her one passionate love'.¹⁹⁷ Merlin's resistance is at its lowest. He is not able to resist anymore and before he falls into an exhausted sleep he finally gives in and tells her the charm. An awful mistake which enables Vivien to take advantage of the situation.

Then in one moment, she put forth the charm
Of woven paces and of waving hands,
And in the hollow oak he lay as dead,
And lost to life and use and name and fame.

Then crying 'I have made this glory mine,'
And shrieking out 'O fool!' the harlot leapt
Adown the forest, and the thicket closed
Behind her, and the forest echo'd 'fool.'¹⁹⁸

'The idyll ends with Vivien's exultant cry over Merlin, "O fool!" – which the forest closing about her echoes as she rides away. [...] Merlin, once all mind – Arthur's wizard, counsellor, architect, and bard – is now a mute and impotent fool.'¹⁹⁹ According to Rosenberg, Tennyson created with his Vivien whom he calls 'a great figure of the harlot-enchantress, a worthy adversary of the Merlin who knows the range of all the arts [...].'²⁰⁰ It is also Merlin's fall that can be seen 'central to the fall of the Round Table'²⁰¹ and is dealt with in greater detail in *the Idylls*. Malory on the other hand, depicted his magician as doting whose fall is nothing more than a peripheral episode in *Le Morte d'Arthur*.²⁰²

Despite the fact that Tennyson's Merlin knows how malicious Vivien can be, he appears to be totally submissive to her demands. Elaine Jordan in her book about *Alfred Tennyson* blames Merlin's submissiveness, his being a prey to melancholy and 'his failure of commitment to Arthur'²⁰³ as the determining factors that finally contribute to Camelot's downfall.

After [Vivien's] enclosure of Merlin, she returns to court, still
'lissome...the wiliest and the worst' of Guenevere's ladies. She conspires

¹⁹⁷ Tennyson, 167.

¹⁹⁸ Tennyson, 167.

¹⁹⁹ Rosenberg, 115.

²⁰⁰ Rosenberg, 111.

²⁰¹ Rosenberg, 112.

²⁰² Cf. Rosenberg, 111-112.

²⁰³ Jordan, 160.

with Mordred; discovering Lancelot and Guenevere's last tryst she alerts Arthur's nephew so that he and his 'creatures' can catch the lovers.²⁰⁴

According to Lacy and Ashe, 'Tennyson [...] makes [Vivien] a mere cynical seductress, whose ruin of Merlin is part of a general spite against the court.'²⁰⁵ Larrington adds, that Vivien's 'casual malignity stands in sharp relief to Arthur's high-mindedness' and that her depiction 'is a striking re-imagining of her character, amoral, eloquent and ingenious.'²⁰⁶

The question why such an eloquent but also amoral woman like Vivien is portrayed in the *Idylls* bothered Victorian society, and the question of why she seemed to personate a threat for Victorian order and beliefs shall be dealt with in the following chapter. A closer look at Victorian times and especially at women's living conditions during that time period - an era which perceived men as superior to women and the latter ones as mere male appendages – shall also be given.

4.2 Tennyson's portrayal of "Morgan le Fay" camouflaged as Vivien: an antithesis to Victorian ideas of ideal womanhood?

'Tennyson's work was enormously influential, not only for further literary treatments – [...] but also for visual realizations of the Arthurian characters.'²⁰⁷ Alfred Lord Tennyson's poetry became particularly popular among Pre-Raphaelite artists of his time. 'The Lady of Shalott', a poem that Tennyson wrote in 1833 and which was reprinted in a revised version in 1842, captured the Victorian artists' inspiration and imagination and was often illustrated. The poem tells a story of the Lady Elaine (sometimes also called the Lily Mail of Astolat) who is cursed and therefore, she has to remain inside a tower, situated on an island called Shalott, surrounded by the river which flows to Camelot. Due to the curse she is not allowed to leave the tower or to even look outside the windows.

²⁰⁴ Larrington, 155.

²⁰⁵ Lacy and Ashe, 340.

²⁰⁶ Larrington, 155.

²⁰⁷ Larrington, 155.

As a consequence, no one knows of her existence. ‘The Lady spends her life weaving and viewing ‘shadows’ of the real world through a mirror; but after seeing in the mirror Sir Lancelot riding by, she is drawn from her loom and her world is drawn into chaos [...]’²⁰⁸ By watching Sir Lancelot passing by she forgets about the curse. Her newly raised awareness of the love she misses while living her lonely existence in her tower, she finally dares to look down on him. This behaviour immediately fulfils the curse. Her mirror starts to crack and all the tapestry begins to unravel. She flees from her tower and finds a boat in the river which she marks with her name. She dies before the boat arrives at Camelot. The place where she probably would have found love and life. Inhabitants detect her dead body and among them is also Lancelot who muses over the beauty of the dead but unknown woman.²⁰⁹

Indeed, the image of the Lady of Shalott or the Lily Maid of Astolat in the boat is one of the most commonly depicted scenes in all Arthurian art. A number of artists also drew or painted the Lady of Shalott in her tower. Pre-Raphaelite artist William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) first drew the Lady ensnared by threads from the unravelling tapestry in *The Lady of Shalott* in 1850. Another version of the drawing appeared in 1857 in the collection of Tennyson’s Poems known as the Moxon Tennyson (because it was published by Edward Moxon), the same collection for which Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82) illustrated the arrival of the lady in her barge at Camelot.²¹⁰

Those artists mentioned above were of course not the only ones who were inspired by Tennyson’s poem. ‘Numerous other artists found inspiration in the plight of the Lady [...]’²¹¹ When Pre-Raphaelite artists²¹² depicted the Lady of

²⁰⁸ Lupack, 152.

²⁰⁹ Cf. <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/prb/mariotti12.html> (11.05.2008)

²¹⁰ Lupack, 153.

²¹¹ Lupack, 153.

²¹² According to George P. Landow, Professor of English and the History of Art at Brown University, ‘The term *Pre-Raphaelite* [...] refers to both art and literature [and] is confusing because there were two different and almost opposed movements, the second of which grew out of the first. The term itself originated in relation to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, an influential group of mid-nineteenth-century avante garde painters [...] who had great effect upon British, American, and European art. Those poets who had some connection with these artists and whose work presumably shares the characteristics of their art include Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, George Meredith, William Morris, and Algernon Charles Swinburne. [...] The second form of Pre-Raphaelitism [Landow states, grew] out of the first under the direction of D.G. Rossetti, [and] is [called] Aesthetic Pre-Raphaelitism, and in turn produced the Arts and Crafts Movement, modern functional design, and the Aesthetes and Decadents. Rossetti and his follower Edward Burne-Jones [...] emphasized themes of eroticized medievalism [...] and pictorial

Shalott they certainly attached their own meanings to their illustrations and thereby stated the role and conditions of women in their contemporary culture. Their depiction of specific narrative moments within the poem reflects their differing interpretations of the status of women in society. The domestic realm became increasingly important during Victorian times and the angel of this realm was, of course, the woman. Paintings such as the Lady of Shalott perfectly showed how women were torn between their social responsibilities and their private desires as well as the artists' opinion on the matter.²¹³

The domestic interior belonged to women, while the active exterior world belonged solely to men. The poem "replicates in a medieval setting the Victorian ideology of separate spheres ... woman's work is inside the home, while active work in the outside world remains a male preserve" (Barringer, 142). The principles in the poem apply to Victorian society, although the medieval setting separates the story from the contemporary day. The Lady of Shalott preserves her safety by staying within the confines of her tower and not participating in any sort of active pursuit. This fits perfect with the concept of the actual Victorian woman, whom society expected to accept her role as protectress of the home. The Lady of Shalott "perfectly embodies the Victorian image of the ideal woman: virginal, [...] spiritual and mysterious, [and] dedicated to her womanly tasks" (Nelson, 7). She exists as unthreatening and proper, and therefore unable to harm herself or disrupt the realm of men, as long as she remains within her tower [...] [or in other words: within her domestic sphere] [...]

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This was the only place that Victorian society granted to women. In this context, it is easy to understand that when Vivien unleashes her acquired and exercised verbal as well as physical powers against the weary sage, she becomes an embodiment of a threat to the Victorian order as she questions male power in general. Constantly playing with her alluring feminine charms, Tennyson's Merlin even compares her behaviour with that of 'harlots'. In return, she speaks ill of his friends: the Round Table Knights.

For men at most differ as Heaven and earth,

techniques that produced moody atmosphere. This form of Pre-Raphaelitism has most relevance to poetry; [...]. All the poets associated with Pre-Raphaelitism draw upon the poetic continuum that descends from Spenser through Keats and Tennyson [...].'

<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/prb/1.html> (12.05.2008)

²¹³ Cf. Mariotti: <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/prb/mariotti12.html> (12.05. 2008)

²¹⁴ <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/prb/mariotti12.html> (12.05.2008)

But women, worst and best, as Heaven and Hell.
I know the Table Round, my friends of old;
All brave, and many generous, and some chaste.
She cloaks the scar of some repulse with lies;
I well believe she tempted them and fail'd,
Being so bitter: for fine plots may fail,
Tho' harlots paint their talk as well as face
With colours of the heart that are not theirs.²¹⁵

According to Larrington, 'Vivien indeed becomes the 'harlot' which Merlin [...] had called her. The name clings to her in both early and later reception of the *Idyll*; she is constantly interpreted in terms of that threat to the sanctity of the Victorian home and family: the prostitute.'²¹⁶

'Of all the women who did not fit the bourgeois ideal of a domestic angel, prostitutes were the most visible and the most upsetting to respectable Victorians'²¹⁷ who held quite a sentimental view about prostitutes. They looked at wanton women as 'fallen women'. With their act of renouncing purity which was perceived as 'the essence of respectable womanhood', they made themselves unable to rejoin respectable society. A prostitute's life was seen as 'ruined' and destroyed by sexual experience. The prostitute herself depicted a 'passive victim of male lust' and an early death seemed to be inevitably bound to occur.²¹⁸

The Victorians assumed that woman was biologically inferior to man. The reproductive cycle was seen as such a massive tax on her energies that she had little surplus for other activities or exertions. [...] Puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause were seen as so debilitating that woman was left barely fit for 'normal life'. Whilst all women were seen as inherently weak and prone to illness, prostitutes were perceived as fundamentally diseased. They were seen as the very physical (as well as moral) refuse of society.²¹⁹

By depicting Merlin as the desiring man lying under a tree and Vivien as a serpent-temptress who caresses him, Tennyson also 'alludes to the archetypical disposition of man, woman, snake and tree.'²²⁰ 'Eve, not Adam, had been tempted

²¹⁵ Tennyson, 163.

²¹⁶ Umland cited in Larrington, 153.

²¹⁷ Perkin, 219.

²¹⁸ Cf. Perkin, 229-230.

²¹⁹ Zedner, 77.

²²⁰ Larrington, 152.

by the serpent, and this showed that women were innately sinful.’²²¹ Often compared to a serpent in Tennyson’s animal imagery, Merlin notices about Vivien: ‘[...] this vice in you which ruin’d man/Thro’ woman the first hour; [...]’²²²

Finally the storm, threatened from the first line of the poem, which symbolizes not only the coming sexual encounter, but the entire psychological battle, breaks. In the tempest the wizard yields to the woman, both sexually and intellectually; by the time ‘the storm, its burst of passion spent,/ Moaning and calling out of other lands,/ Had left the ravaged woodland... what should not have been had been.’²²³

According to Rebecca Umland, Vivien embodies the archetypical woman of the streets: abandoned, seduced and finally she turns to prostitution.²²⁴ Furthermore, she states that Vivien perfectly impersonates and reflects the ‘dramatization of the Victorian fear of female sexuality [...] [and] the vulnerability of the desiring man to the deceptive [...] [and] rapacious woman [...] [.]’²²⁵

Another fear that Vivien initiates within Victorians is certainly the one of the educated woman. Over the course of Vivien’s strife for equal knowledge she exhausts the weary sage until he teaches her his secret knowledge of the charm with which she is finally able to destroy him and moreover: she is able to replace him.

For most of the nineteenth century, the majority of English girls had little or no formal schooling, and what they managed to get was not of an intellectual kind. Girls at all levels of society were educationally deprived, as compared with boys of their own class.²²⁶

Victorian men feared that if women received an higher education, they would cease to fulfil their traditional roles in the home and the family that was to be ‘the angel in the house’. Because of the fact that women were regarded as possessions of their husbands and their family, education was seen as redundant and as a threat to the family. The qualities that a young Victorian gentlewoman needed in

²²¹ Perkin, 229.

²²² Tennyson, 151.

²²³ Larrington, 152.

²²⁴ Cf. Larrington, 154.

²²⁵ Larrington, 152.

²²⁶ Perkin, 27.

order to achieve the goal of the only career acknowledged to her, namely marriage, included being able to sing or play an instrument, the ability of speaking French or Italian to some extent but above all, a gentlewoman had to be innocent, virtuous and ignorant of intellectual opinion. Qualities that Vivien certainly does not display. Instead of being innocent and virtuous she plays with her sexuality and seduces Merlin. Her desire for knowledge shows that she is certainly not incapable of intellectual reasoning. In fact, her quickness of intellect and her seductiveness allow her to overwhelm Merlin, or more specifically: men in general. An ability which definitely frightened Victorian males. Larrington once more points out that:

Vivien embodies the danger of the educated woman, distracted from the duties of home and family and seeking to possess equal knowledge with men. Merlin treats her intelligence condescendingly, but in the end Vivien's endless talking, her rhetorical claims to love and respect him, interspersed with threats of disobedience and of suicidal despair, exhaust the sage.²²⁷ The poem thus juxtaposes 'two attributes that popular discourse represented as naturally incompatible and therefore doubly threatening in combination: the power of female sexual allure and the power of women's booklearning' [...] [²²⁸]

'Woman's participation in public life – whether at the economic, political, or social level – was believed to reduce her capabilities as a mother and was used as a forcible argument for resisting her movement out of the home.'²²⁹ In the course of the Victorian era, women were entering more and more sectors of the public sphere. Unfortunately, they encountered an uneven path littered with men's resistance who did not welcome their presence on the public floor and rather tried to force them back into their homes where they, according to the Victorian mind, allegedly belonged to.²³⁰

For many Victorians, Tennyson's – and others' – medievalism looked like romantic escapism. Nevertheless, medievalism could offer a distanced forum for investigating current social concerns. [...] Vivien has, allowing for the difference in setting, some of the traits of a prostitute [...] [b]ut beyond this precise socio-historical reading, Vivien embodies more

²²⁷ Larrington, 153-154.

²²⁸ Taylor cited in Larrington, 154.

²²⁹ Zedner, 70.

²³⁰ Cf. Zedner, 71.

general Victorian fears about the unmarried and uncontrolled woman: educated, ambitious, sexual, gossiping and dangerous. Although Tennyson foregrounds her archetypal associations with [...] Eve, her contemporary resonances were inescapable for the Laureate's readers and critics, providing a scandalous frisson to their contemplation of the Arthurian past.²³¹

Tennyson's poetry became very popular and had an enormous influence. Not only Pre-Raphaelite painters found their inspiration because of Tennyson's popularization of the Arthurian saga but also Malory's works attracted some renewed attention and were even republished in 1816-17. Many writers tried to imitate Tennyson but generally could not manage to make a great stir. Compositions like Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *King Arthur* (1848), George du Maurier's *A Legend of Camelot* (1866), Thomas Westwood's *The Quest of the Sangreall* (1868), Ernest Rhys's *The Tale of Balin and Balan* (1897), and many more are proof enough of Tennyson's huge impact. Plenty of poetry even developed as a reaction against Tennyson - his concepts and his methods. Among those writers was William Morris who wrote *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (1858). He 'rejected Tennyson's concern for the poetic reflection of contemporary moral issues and developed a "purer" if artistically less successful Arthurianism.'²³² During the nineteenth century numerous other poets were also drawn to the Arthurian themes though Arthurian literature of the 1800s was predominantly dominated by poetry. During the last half of the century one can find occasional plays and novels but only Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) can be seen as outstanding. Whereas Tennyson dramatized a distinction between the nineteenth century and an earlier age, Twain represents the culmination of such an impulse when he sets his Arthurian story in A.D. 528. His main character who is a nineteenth-century Yankee and called Hank Morgan is transported there as a result of an accident. With his superior knowledge and technology he easily puts Merlin's magic to shame and establishes himself as a person of power. Twain teaches a cruel and pessimistic lesson. By the end of the novel Camelot lies in ruins, King Arthur is dead and Morgan's work is still undone. Nevertheless, the story itself is comedy as much as satire. King

²³¹ Larrington, 156.

²³² Lacy and Ashe, 163.

Arthur is portrayed as a good-hearted yet simple King and with that portrait the novel manages to relieve its criticism of the age of chivalry.²³³

Many of the twentieth-century authors drawn to the Arthurian legend have, with varying degrees of success, made fundamental changes in the “orthodox” story. Of course, some “facts” of the Arthurian story have varied from text to text since the very beginning – does Arthur commit incest with Morgawse or Anna? Is Mordred his nephew or his illegitimate son? – and many of the major writers [...] also introduced radical innovations or reinterpretations into the legend. [...] Retellings of Arthurian stories, most often based on the works of Malory, are among the most common of Arthurian fictional texts. They are modernized versions, often abridged or simplified. Most are intended for the general reading public or the young reader [...] [²³⁴] Among these retellings, one of the most important and certainly the most influential was T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King*.²³⁵

²³³ Cf. Lacy and Ashe, 162-165.

²³⁴ Lacy and Ashe, 172-173.

²³⁵ Lupack, 188.

5 T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*

The Englishman White (1905-64) is the author of the most famous and influential twentieth-century version of the Arthurian story. His main source was Malory, although, he gave free rein to his imagination and created themes and episodes that have now (partly through the adaptations of his work for the Lerner and Loewe musical *Camelot* and for Walt Disney's *The Sword in the Stone*) become a standard part of the story for many Arthurian enthusiasts.²³⁶

According to Elisabeth Brewer, *The Once and Future King* reflects White's own protean nature. The book is 'by turns comic and tragic, farcical and romantic, serious in its presentation of historical material and highly anachronistic. [...] [I]t is the work of a sad man who also saw the funny side of things.'²³⁷

Terence Hanbury White was born in Bombay on 29 May 1906. His father was a district Superintendent of Police and his mother Constance, was the daughter of an Indian Judge who was also English. He was their only child but most of the time he was looked after by native servants. Due to the fact that his parents' relationship appeared to be troubled right from the beginning, White's mother brought him to England in 1911 where he enjoyed a tolerant and loving environment in the presence of his mother's parents. His happy childhood ended however in September 1920 when he was sent away to Cheltenham College. A school which was best known for its strong Anglo-Indian connexion and which prepared boys for their careers in the army. White's unhappy experiences there included corporal punishment, a sadistic housemaster and masters who were allowed to cane younger boys. It was at Cheltenham where White was first introduced to Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. In the first edition of *The Sword in the Stone*²³⁸ he satirised Cheltenham College as the castle of the giant Galapas.²³⁹

²³⁶ Lacy and Ashe, 181.

²³⁷ Brewer, 1.

²³⁸ The first volume of *The Once and the Future King*.

²³⁹ Cf. Brewer, 1-3.

‘Every stage of White’s life seems to have contributed something to his later writing.’²⁴⁰

As a gifted teacher and in need of money, White accepted to read English at Cambridge in 1925 where he met his tutor and life-long friend L.J. Potts. Unfortunately, he had to interrupt his university studies in his second year when he was diagnosed with tuberculosis which was still often lethal at that time. With the help of his friend Potts and some other favourable and generous friends of him at Cambridge, who all contributed out of their own pockets to a fund, White became the opportunity to spend a year away from the English winter in a country with a more moderate climate: Italy. There he had enough time to think, to write and to recover his health. His first novel *They Winter Abroad* and a volume of poems called *Loved Helen* came into existence.²⁴¹

White wrote his dissertation, which unfortunately went astray, on Malory. At a time when the classics of English literature were very much more studied than today, it is surprising that Malory was not. White’s reading and retelling of Malory was quite innovative and, therefore, it had a mixed reception.²⁴² ‘It is reported that one of the examiners was not favourably impressed by it, apparently because like *The Once and Future King* it did not treat its subject entirely seriously.’²⁴³

During the years 1932-36, when White was teaching at Stowe School, Buckinghamshire, he published *Earth Stopped* (1934), *Gone to Ground* (1935) and the very successful *England Have My Bones* (1936). The latter one was chosen by the *Daily Mail* and the Book Guild as the book of the month which in return made White immensely successful as an author. By that time he was aged thirty and began to think to devote himself entirely to his writing and resigning from Stowe. The very same year he left the school and started to live in a gamekeeper’s cottage on the Stowe estate where he literally ‘revert[ed] to a feral

²⁴⁰ Brewer, 3.

²⁴¹ Cf. Brewer, 3-4.

²⁴² Cf. Brewer.4.

²⁴³ Brewer, 4.

state'²⁴⁴ and engaged in falconry, fishing and hunting. It was the same cottage where White began to write what later came to be known as *The Sword in the Stone* (1938).²⁴⁵ The book deals with King Arthur's boyhood and how he '[...] must learn to be king by learning about the world around him, the animals that live in that world, and from them and their political systems about man and his.'²⁴⁶

Terence Hanbury White [...] published *The Once and Future King* in parts. *The Sword in the Stone*, *The Witch in the Wood*, and *The Ill-Made Knight* were each published separately. White then added *The Candle in the Wind* as the final part when he published *The Once and Future King* in 1958. At one point in the writing he planned a five-part book that would conclude with *The Book of Merlyn*, which, though not published in the 1958 volume, is essential to understanding White's plan. White originally thought of his book as a classical tragedy and even wrote *The Candle in the Wind* first as a play; but his conception shifted as he 'suddenly discovered' that 'the central theme of Morte d'Arthur is to find an antidote' (letter of 6 Dec. 1940, in *Letters to a friend* 120) and, no doubt, as he got very negative reactions to the play.²⁴⁷

In February 1939 White went on a fishing holiday on the river Boyne in Ireland. White's stay at a nearby farm called Doolistown House, intended to last for only a few weeks, prolonged into six years and how it later turned out became crucial for his career as a writer. White finished *The Witch in the Wood*, in May 1939.²⁴⁸

As World War II was to be imminent and the threat of war ever-present, White became depressed and exasperated because his publisher wanted him to drastically modify *The Witch in the Wood*, which was later retitled *The Queen of Air and Darkness* in the 1958 edition. By that time, Poland had been invaded by Hitler and Great Britain had declared War on Germany. Ireland, however, remained neutral. Young men were called up for military service but due to White's age and his physical condition he remained exempt.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁴ Brewer, 8.

²⁴⁵ Cf. Brewer, 8-9.

²⁴⁶ Lupack, 189.

²⁴⁷ Lupack, 188.

²⁴⁸ Brewer, 9.

²⁴⁹ Cf. Brewer, 9.

‘By the summer of 1940 *The Ill-Made Knight*, the third volume of his Arthuriad, was finished and White [...] turned to what was to become the last volume of the tetralogy, *The Candle in the Wind*.’²⁵⁰ *The Book of Merlyn*, which would have been a fifth volume or epilogue and which should have been included in a new edition that White had in mind (the earlier ones in newly revised and final form together with the new ones: *The Candle in the Wind* and *The Book of Merlyn*); comprising five ‘Arthur’ books. As a matter of fact, William Collins, White’s publisher, had to deny White’s wish for the publication of a fifth edition as there were no resources available during war-time to undertake such a big project. As a result, the publication of *The Once and Future King* was held up until 1958 when it appeared as a one-volume work, published by Collins and later by the Reprint society, without the fifth and final *Book of Merlyn*. The latter one was published after White’s death by the University of Texas Press in 1977²⁵¹ but only because of the advice of Sylvia Townsend.²⁵²

When the war was almost at an end, White returned to England and settled at one of the smaller Channel Islands called Alderney, where he spent the rest of his life. His move to Alderney ‘gave White a new ease of life’.²⁵³ Back in Ireland, White had to struggle with an alcohol problem. After many years of intermitted labour he could finally finish *The Book of Beasts*, *The Age of Scandal* and its sequel, *The Scandalmonger*, and he started to do some rewriting of *The Sword in the Stone* which was finished on 17 April 1957.²⁵⁴

In spring 1949, White’s publisher, while on a visit to White, accidentally discovered a manuscript which was lying around the house. It was concerned with the training of hawks but was considered by White as far too amateurish to be published. Despite White’s reluctance, the manuscript which came to be known as

²⁵⁰ Brewer, 10.

²⁵¹ Cf. Brewer, 10-11.

²⁵² ‘Sylvia Townsend Warner was a highly individual writer of novels, short stories and poems. She contributed short stories to the *New Yorker* for more than forty years, translated Proust’s *Contre Saint-Beuve* into English [...] [and] wrote a biography of the novelist T.H.White [...]’ <http://townsendwarner.com/biography.htm> (29.6.2008)

²⁵³ Brewer, 13.

²⁵⁴ Cf. Brewer, 13.

The Goshawk was published, it is still in print today and known to be a classic among British and American austringers and falconers.²⁵⁵

‘[White’s] life was darkened by his sadistic and homosexual tendencies, which he believed had had their origins in his family relationships and his experiences at Cheltenham College.’²⁵⁶ According to Brewer, ‘he kept this side of his nature under total subjection, apparently throughout his life.’²⁵⁷ As a consequence, he spent a very lonely life with a high level of frustration.²⁵⁸

By 1959, *The Once and Future King* could be found among the United States’ Ten Bestsellers list and stayed there for three successive weeks. Lerner and Loewe even turned it into the musical *Camelot*. In the autumn of 1963 White was offered to visit the United States for a lecture tour which he pleasantly accepted. Unfortunately, he died aboard on a ship on 17 January 1964, when he was on his way back to Europe. He was buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Athens.²⁵⁹ The inscription on his tombstone, written by Sylvia Townsend Warner, reads:

‘T.H. WHITE/1906-1964/AUTHOR/WHO/FROM A TROUBLED
HEART/DELIGHTED OTHERS/LOVING AND PRAISING/THIS LIFE’²⁶⁰

[...] White’s setting for *TOAFK* [*The Once and Future King*] is an idealized England, a marvellously wrought Old England of fierce wolves, wild boars, threatening forests, snow at Christmas, and small dragons who hiss like kettles. White’s England is also Gramarye, the homeland of King Arthur and his knights, full of castles with bannerets and visored knights who ride overthwart and endlong and who hove brim at fords. Even so, it is a setting made more real to the reader for a general downplaying of the supernatural – Merlyn’s enchantments, as well as Morgan le Fay’s writhing on her bed of lard are episodes in the *Sword* [*The Sword in the Stone*], White’s first book, the book of childhood.²⁶¹

As already mentioned above, *The Sword in the Stone*, the first volume of *The Once and Future King* is a children’s book and begins in the Merry England of

²⁵⁵ Cf. Brewer, 13.

²⁵⁶ Brewer, 7.

²⁵⁷ Brewer, 7.

²⁵⁸ Cf. Brewer, 7.

²⁵⁹ Cf. Brewer, 15-16.

²⁶⁰ Brewer, 16.

²⁶¹ Sprague, 55-56.

the Middle Ages. It deals with Arthur's or the Wart's (Arthur's nickname) education. Arthur lives in the castle of his foster-father Sir Ector. The castle is surrounded by the Forest Sauvage, an immense wooded area, where Arthur and Sir Ector's son Kay are trained by the old magician Merlyn. Merlyn lives backward through time and therefore he possesses the ability to know the future. He transforms the Wart into the shape of all kinds of different animals – a perch, a hawk, an ant, a wild goose, an owl and even into a badger. Merlyn wants the Wart to experience what it is like to be in another one's skin so that it may reveal to the Wart a different way of life or a different political philosophy.²⁶² 'The turning of Arthur into various animals, the adventure with Robin Hood, the talking owl Archimedes, Merlin's botched spells – all are the stuff of a tale for young readers.'²⁶³ With all the lessons the Wart has to learn and experience, Merlyn wants him to become aware of what it means to become the chivalric King Arthur. Merlyn wants to make sure that the Wart understands what it means to be a leader who possesses supreme power and he wants to be sure that he once will be able to deal with that huge responsibility. The book ends with the Wart's coronation. It is attended by all the characters and the magician Merlyn reveals that the Wart's father was Uther Pendragon.

The second book is entitled *The Queen of Air and Darkness* and opens with the following epigraph:

When shall I be dead and rid
Of the wrong my father did?
How long, how long, till spade and hearse
Put to sleep my mother's curse?²⁶⁴

The Wart has now become King Arthur and he has to experience that whatever he does, he will not be able to escape from the 'sins of his fathers' – they affect the son like the past affects the present. Throughout the second volume of *The Once and Future King*, Arthur tries to reform and civilize the realm left to him by his father. Unfortunately, the country is torn by racial strife and Arthur has to accept the fact that he will only be able to set up his new order if he goes to war first. The

²⁶² Cf. Pearsall, 150-151.

²⁶³ Lupack, 189.

²⁶⁴ White, 212.

war's origins lie in the distant past – beyond Arthur's reach and influence. Like World War I, the war is dubbed 'The War to end all Wars' and although Arthur's intention is to prevent future conflict and to eradicate war completely from his nation, it inevitably leads to Arthur's own destruction. Seduced by and sleeping with his own sister Queen Morgause, their incestuous union engenders Mordred. At the end of the book, White concludes 'He did not know he was doing so, and perhaps it may have been due to her, but it seems, in tragedy, that innocence is not enough.'²⁶⁵ In her own secret way, Queen Morgause plants the seeds that later will destroy Arthur's reign and therefore the whole book is named after her. Like World War I was followed by an even more terrible and bloody war twenty-one years later, Arthur, after creating a 'new kind of warfare' with his own idea of order that is 'Might is only to be used for Right'²⁶⁶ which should prevent future conflict, he ultimately brings about his own downfall. According to Lupack, 'White was trying in this second part of his pentalogy to write a *Bildungsroman*²⁶⁷ in which Arthur comes of age and is no longer in need of his tutor but [he was also trying] to link [*The Queen of Air and Darkness*] [...] through both comic and disturbing elements to the part that came before.'²⁶⁸

White's third book is called *The Ill-Made Knight*. Its focus lies on Lancelot and on love – including, but not limited to, the forbidden love of Lancelot and Guenever. Besides their affair, however, there is also Arthur's blind love for his best knight, Melin's love for Nimue and Elaine's unrequited love for Lancelot, just to mention a few. The greatest love, nevertheless, is not like one might think the love between Lancelot and Guenever but the love that Lancelot shares with God. Thus, *The Ill-Made Knight* shows how one's character can be affected by different kinds of love and devotion and how Lancelot manages to cope with such a matter in his heart. Not until he leaves all worldly affection behind is he able to find peace in a love that is truly greater than anything he experienced before. *The Ill-Made Knight* tries to make clear that no man, no matter how good he may be,

²⁶⁵ White, 312.

²⁶⁶ White, 225.

²⁶⁷ 'The German word *Bildungsroman* means "a novel of formation": that is, a novel of someone's growth from childhood to maturity.'

<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Terms/bildungsroman.html> (02.07.2008)

²⁶⁸ Lupack, 189.

can always do the right thing all the time. This claim can only be taken by God and it is only God's love that offers the moral perfection that chivalry attempts to replicate but never achieves.

The last book of T.H.White's *The Once and Future King* is called *The Candle in the Wind* and it

brings Mordred to the forefront of the story, opening with a revealing passage about his distaste for the smell of hawks. His conversations with Agravain show a couple of Machiavellian politicians at work, while the handling of the scenes with the other brothers is magnificent, especially the plotting to take Lancelot and Guenevere in the bedroom. Mordred uses Arthur's new rule of law cunningly, establishing a kind of popular party called the Trashers who dress in black (presumably in allusion to the blackshirt fascists of pre-1939 Britain); he speaks anti-Arthurian propaganda, and the story moves to its great climax, following Malory now closely and gaining irresistible impetus from the wound-up spring of his narrative power.²⁶⁹

'In *The Candle in the Wind*, the sequence ages again with the characters as it moves from romance to tragedy.'²⁷⁰ White traces here a fourfold story. Before Arthur there was a country with no central administration or sense of nationhood and the land was devastated by war. The only law that existed was 'Might is Right'²⁷¹. Arthur will only be able to set up something new if he destroys that world by total war.

Next, the Round Table is fathered 'to channel the natural male tendency to violence into beneficial activities – Might in the service of Right.'²⁷² Things start to go wrong with The Round Table when knights start to do what they do only to improve their position in the league table of tilting averages. What follows is that murderous feuds turn up again. So Arthur has to think of something new and the idea of the quest for the Grail is born. Its ulterior motive is to direct male energy in a manner advantageous to the commonwealth.²⁷³ As Arthur says, 'I suppose that all endeavours which are directed to a purely worldly end, as my famous

²⁶⁹ Pearsall, 152.

²⁷⁰ Lupack, 190.

²⁷¹ White, 225.

²⁷² Pearsall, 155.

²⁷³ Cf. Pearsall, 155-156.

Civilization was, contain within themselves the germs of their own corruption.’²⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the knights return disillusioned and court in its last phase remembers of Tennyson’s depiction of the world in ‘The Last Tournament’: ‘modern’ but corrupt and degraded.²⁷⁵

Finally, the rule of Law – not Might is Right, nor Might for Right, nor Right is Might, but the abandonment of Might is established.²⁷⁶ Arthur’s idea of an all-inclusive Law is actually a fine one but Arthur’s civil law eventually ‘comes home to roost’²⁷⁷ and forces its very inventor to condemn the ones he loves most. Ironically, it is his own son Mordred who manipulates the law which ultimately leads to the destruction of the Round Table. However, Arthur’s meeting with Tom of Warwick (Malory was a ‘Warwick man’) who will eventually compose *Le Morte D’Arthur*, ensures that the candle will not be blown out but it will be relit and it will burn for future knights. Arthur may be taken to Avalon but his ideas are not. Malory’s reporting of the Round Table will continue and again young knights of the present may be inspired to fight the Trashers - or in whatever form evil may arrive. Thus Arthur remains both: the ‘once’ and ‘future’ King.

5.1 T.H.White’s portrayal of Morgan le Fay and her sister Morgause

White leaves out almost all of Malory’s episodes concerning Morgan Le Fay. He mentions her only briefly in *The Sword and the Stone* and the *Ill-Made Knight* when she plots against Arthur and Lancelot. For White, Morgan le Fay plays only a minor role in his story and in fact, her sister Queen Morgause overshadows her exceedingly. Whereas the latter is depicted almost in every little detail, Morgan le Fay remains rather vague. White mentions that ‘[it] is difficult to explain her.’²⁷⁸ This, however, becomes very clear in the following passage taken from *The*

²⁷⁴ White, 434.

²⁷⁵ Cf. Pearsall, 156.

²⁷⁶ Cf. Pearsall, 156.

²⁷⁷ White, 312.

²⁷⁸ White, 100.

Sword in the Stone when the Wart and Kay visit Robin Wood²⁷⁹ in Sherwood Forest:

The Wart thought it was time to ask a tactful question, so he made a polite cough and said: Please, who is Morgan le Fay?”
All three answered at once.
“She’ m a bad ‘un,” said Little John.
“She is a fairy,” said Robin.
“No, she is not,” said Marian. “She is an enchantress.”
“The fact of the matter is,” said Robin, “that nobody knows exactly what she is. In my opinion, she is a fairy.” [...] ²⁸⁰

While Robin ‘maintains that [...] [Morgan le Fay] is the Queen of Fairies, [...] Marian²⁸¹ asserts that Morgan is human, an enchantress, ‘a necromancer’ – White uses Malory’s term – who is allied with [...] ²⁸² a band of gluttonous fairies who are called The Oldest Ones of All. ‘[A] race [which White] identifies with the Sidhe of Irish legend, the oldest inhabitants of the land [...] [.]²⁸³ They are described as follows:

Some people say they are the Oldest of All, who lived in England before the Romans came here – before [the] Saxons – before the Old Ones themselves – and that they have been driven underground. Some say they look like humans, like dwarfs, and others that they look ordinary, and others that they don’t look like anything at all, but put on various shapes as the fancy takes them. Whatever they look like, they have the knowledge of the ancient Gaels. They know things down there in their burrows which the human race has forgotten about, and quite a lot of these things are not good to hear. [...] ²⁸⁴

The Oldest Ones of All, together with the help of Morgan le Fay, kidnap Friar Tuck (a friend of Robin) and the Dog Boy (Sir Ectors servant). Their rescue definitely depicts the core of Wart’s adventure with Robin Wood in *The Sword in the Stone*. A quality that White ascribes to the fairies and to Morgan le Fay is that of gluttony. Wart has to learn that no future leader should possess such a trait.

²⁷⁹ My comment: The real name of the legendary Robin Hood. He is a Saxon thief who takes care of the Forest Sauvage and he defends the poor. Furthermore, he is an excellent bowman and woodsman.

²⁸⁰ White, 100-101.

²⁸¹ Marian is Robin Wood’s wife. She excels in tracking and hunting.

²⁸² Larrington, 178.

²⁸³ Larrington, 178.

²⁸⁴ White, 101.

In the course of raiding Castle Chariot, which is Morgan le Fay's home and where she keeps the kidnapped boys as prisoners, the castle, which is made entirely of food, is described in detail:

The boys stood there in wonder and nausea, before just such a stronghold. It rose from its rose of milk in a mystic light of its own – in a greasy buttery, glow. It was the fairy aspect of Castle Chariot, which the Oldest Ones [...] had thought would be tempting to the children. It was to tempt them to eat.²⁸⁵

Even the castle's drawbridge is made out of butter mixed with cow hairs, the soldiers are made out of soft cheese and Morgan le Fay herself rests on a 'bed of glorious lard'²⁸⁶ and is guarded by a griffin. Whereas Morgause's beauty is stressed repeatedly, Morgan le Fay is described as a 'fat, dowdy, middle-aged woman with black hair and a moustache.'²⁸⁷ When she is attacked with an iron knife which causes her immediate agony, 'the whole fairy appearance of Castle Chariot melt[s] together in collapse [...] [.]'²⁸⁸ Friar Tuck and the Dog Boy are finally freed and the whole adventure has come to an end.

In the *Once and Future King*, White portrays Morgan le Fay as a wicked fairy tale character but in fact, she is only an artefact within another adventure that is part of Merlyn's training programme. According to Dieter Herms, who wrote a dissertation on *Die Humoristische Behandlung des Arthurstoffes in der Neueren Englisch-Amerikanischen Erzählliteratur*, it obviously was not White's intention to develop Arthur's half-sister Morgan le Fay in a comic way 'in its own right'.²⁸⁹

Morgause, on the other hand, takes on a sinister nature, which she lacks in earlier retellings of the story and becomes the central figure in *The Queen of Air and Darkness*. But what appears to be even more important is that she can be seen as a replica of an alternative version of Morgan le Fay. Sprague states that

Morgause is a petulant, beautiful, cruel, stupid woman; sensual, insensitive, selfish to the core. Out of boredom and idleness, she makes her

²⁸⁵ White, 111.

²⁸⁶ White, 111.

²⁸⁷ White, 111.

²⁸⁸ White, 112.

²⁸⁹ Cf. Herms, 114 (my translation).

sons fall in love with her. She seduces her half-brother Arthur, using witchcraft, and Mordred her fifth son, will be his mother's most notable success at psychological maiming.²⁹⁰

'In Malory, Morgause is a mysterious figure. White, however, had decided to update her, making her grotesque at the same time. She is the loveliest of the Cornwalls' and [almost] like Morgan le Fay.'²⁹¹

She was not a serious witch like her sister Morgan le Fay – for her head was too empty to take any great art seriously, even if it were the black one. She was doing it because the little magics ran in her blood – as they did with all the women of her race.²⁹²

Morgause is beautiful but also very cruel. White connects her with the image of the carrion crow throughout the whole book and by that image the reader may grasp Morgause's malevolence. Her viciousness is made even more revolting when Morgause is seen boiling a cat merely to amuse herself while passing her time in her castle in Lothian. The following passage is taken from the opening chapter of *The Queen of Air and Darkness* and the instance is vividly realised in all its horror:

An iron cauldron with three legs was boiling over the fire.[...] There were two living beings in the chamber, a Queen and a cat. Both of them had black hair and blue eyes. The black cat lay on its side in the firelight as if it were dead. This was because its legs were tied together, like the legs of a roe deer which is to be carried home from the hunt. It had given up struggling and now lay gazing into the fire with slit eyes and heaving sides, curiously resigned. Or else it was exhausted – for animals know when they have to come to the end. [...] Queen Morgause of Lothian and Orkney sat beside the cauldron and waited. Occasionally she stirred the cat with a wooden spoon. The stench of boiling fur began to fill the room. A watcher would have seen, in the flattering peat light, what an exquisite creature she was tonight: her deep, big eyes, her hair glinting with dark lustre, her full body[...] [...] The Queen knew that every pure black cat had a certain bone in it, which, if it were held in the mouth after boiling the cat alive, was able to make you invisible. But nobody knew precisely [...] which the bone was. This was why the magic had to be done in front of a mirror, so that the right one could be found by practice. It was not that Morgause courted invisibility – indeed, she would have detested it,

²⁹⁰ Sprague, 105.

²⁹¹ Brewer, 52.

²⁹² White, 217.

because she was beautiful. [...] It was something to do, an easy and well-known charm. Besides, it was an excuse for lingering with the mirror.²⁹³

According to Sprague, '[t]here is an unfeigned enthusiasm in the depiction of the wretched pet, a voluptuary's delight in the clinical recounting of the helpless creature's agony.'²⁹⁴ Furthermore, he points out that 'White's refined appreciation of cruelty [becomes] sadly apparent in this scene.'²⁹⁵ Unsurprisingly, it is not only a poor cat that has to suffer, but the reader also encounters other episodes in which animals are tormented. There is also a slaughtered unicorn, a tormented donkey as well as other scenes which are steeped in cruelty.

In order to make Morgause as repellent as possible, the effect of killing the cat in an abhorrent way, is intensified by the contrast between Morgause's activities in her room, which is located exactly below her children's room,²⁹⁶ and her four boys (Mordred excluded) talking in their chamber about their family history and about how much they love their mother. Gawaine, Gaheris, Agravaine and Gareth (the Orkney children) who adore their mother 'dumbly and uncritically',²⁹⁷ declare their unconditional devotion to her while their mother is cruelly killing a cat.

[...] the way in which she turned and turned, from mirror to bone-pile, always putting a bone in her mouth, and looking at herself to see if she had vanished, and throwing the bone away. [...] Finally, but before she had tested all the bones, she lost interest. She threw the last ones down impatiently and tipped the mess out of the window, not caring where it fell. Then she smooed the fire, stretched herself on the big bed with a strange motion, and lay there in the darkness for a long time without sleeping – her body moving discontentedly. [...]

"And this, my heroes," concluded Gawaine, "is the reason why we of Cornwall and Orkney must be against the Kings of England ever more, and most of all against the clan Mac Pendragon. [...]"²⁹⁸

²⁹³ White, 217-218.

²⁹⁴ Sprague, 107.

²⁹⁵ Sprague, 107.

²⁹⁶ Cf. Brewer, 58.

²⁹⁷ White, 217.

²⁹⁸ Due to the previous three thousand years of military conflict, there is a feud between the Pandragons (Arthur) and the Cornwalls (Morgause). A long time ago, the Gaels (the Old Ones who live in Brittany and Cornwall, Wales and Ireland etc.) were defeated by another clan of Gaels

“We must avenge our family.”
“Because our Mammy is the most beautiful woman in the high-ridged,
extensive, ponderous, pleasantly-turning world.”
“And because we love her.”²⁹⁹

By interweaving the most disgusting moments of the cat-boiling episode with the description of the boys’ declaration of love and devotion to their mother, White ironically achieved to write an introductory chapter to *The Queen of Air and Darkness* which is most disturbing and presents Morgause as extremely cruel and shallow.³⁰⁰

Morgause in return, treats her children indifferently and deprives them of any kind of mother-love. Her sons throw another sidelight on her character. According to Sprague, Morgause’s personality could even be constructed adding all of her son’s character traits together. Gawaine is bad tempered, amoral, clannish and fierce. Gaheris is just stupid. Agravaine appears to be very brutal, envious, cunning and bullying. Garath, on the other hand, is beautiful and dear. Mordred, who is conceived later when Morgause sleeps with her half-brother Arthur, bears the following personality traits: intelligent, crooked, bitter, ironic and pitiless.³⁰¹

White draws the characters of the children so well that it is almost impossible for readers not to feel sorry for them. An exception is the scenes in which they demonstrate their sheer brutality and insensitivity. One of these scenes for example is, when Agravaine kills a lovely unicorn that lays its head on the lap of a girl called Meg. Meg is the kitchen maid who is substituting for Morgause. Meg enticed the beautiful unicorn out of the forest and Agravaine, just out of his jealousy and because he craves for his mother’s attention and appreciation, ruthlessly slaughters the helpless animal.

who were then driven West by Teutons (people mainly called Saxon) who were themselves attacked by the Romans and, eventually, the Saxons. The latter ones were in return conquered by the Normans - leaving a situation in which the Gaels resent the Gauls (their Norman oppressors).

²⁹⁹ White, 219.

³⁰⁰ Cf. Brewer, 58.

³⁰¹ Cf. Sprague, 101.

Agravaine came to the unicorn, and began jabbing his spear into its quarters, into its slim belly, into its ribs. He squealed as he jabbed, and the unicorn looked [...] in anguish. [...] The blood, caused by Agravaine's spear, spurted out upon the blue-white coat of hair.³⁰²

According to Sprague, it is due to Queen Morgause's perversity, 'idleness [...] [,] vice and utter selfishness' which she demonstrates and with which 'she makes her children fall in love with her' that she 'hastens the process of [her children's] brutalization.'³⁰³ Larrington adds that 'Morgause's treatment of her children is perhaps hardest to read. Alternately smothering them with self-regarding Mother Love (as White calls it) or ignoring them, she shapes an emotionally confused brood of children [...] [.]'³⁰⁴

With the Orkneys, family affection and mother-love are absent, education and moral instruction are lacking, the opportunity for exchanging love is limited or denied; it is easy to see that their inevitable tendency is to decline into savagery. The great determining factor in precipitating this decline into amorality – [...] is the malign presence of Queen Morgause.³⁰⁵

With the help of a spancel³⁰⁶ (used for magical purposes) which Morgause uses, she is able to seduce her victorious half-brother Arthur, about whom she had already been told – 'about his strength, charm, innocence, and generosity.'³⁰⁷ White gives a very detailed description of how a spancel is used and how it is made. Arthur's seduction is just another incident which shows what an evil character Morgause actually is. Surprisingly, it is rather Morgause's maternal appearance (she shows up at Arthur's court with her four sons) than her beauty which attracts Arthur:

[Arthur, after falling asleep,] woke with a start, to find a black-haired, blue-eyed beauty in front of him, who was wearing a crown. The four wild children from the north were standing behind their mother, shy and defiant, and she was folding up a tape [the spancel]. Queen Morgause of the Out Isles had stayed away from the feasting [King Pellinore's

³⁰² White, 259.

³⁰³ Sprague, 106.

³⁰⁴ Larrington, 177.

³⁰⁵ Sprague, 106.

³⁰⁶ '[A] rope or fetter for hobbling cattle, horses etc., but here in the special sense of a long unbroken strip of skin taken from the body of a dead man.' Brewer, 58.

³⁰⁷ White, 305.

wedding] on purpose – had chosen her moment with the utmost care. This was the first time that the young King had seen her and she knew she was looking her best. It is impossible to explain how these things happen. Perhaps the Spancel had a strength in it. Perhaps it was because she was twice his age, so that she had twice the power of his weapons. [...] Perhaps it was because he had never known a mother of his own, so that the rôle of mother love, as she stood with her children behind her, took him between wind and water. Whatever the explanation would have been, the Queen of Air and Darkness had a baby by her half-brother nine months later. It was called Mordred.³⁰⁸

‘Morgause’s motives are not explored: the implication is that she is prompted by an inherently evil nature. At the same time the question of whether she knows of her true relationship with Arthur is avoided, and she is seen as a mother-figure rather than a sister.’³⁰⁹ On the other hand, however, White makes clear that Arthur is not aware of the fact that he is sleeping with his own half-sister. Sprague states that Mordred is ‘[t]he malign antagonist of his father’ and that he is also ‘the crooked figure whose malevolent genius [...] brings about the destruction of Arthur and his chivalry.’³¹⁰

Mordred, like his brothers, is reared by his wicked but beautiful mother Morgause. White mentions that ‘[h]e had been brought up alone with his mother, in the barbarous remoteness of the outer Isles. [...] Mordred had been left to be dominated by her, with her ancestral grudge against the King and her personal spite³¹¹.’³¹² Morgause bewilders Mordred by her capricious whims as she showers him at times with her affection or deprives him of her love or acts even in a contemptuous manner as she just pleases.

Morgause is killed at the age of seventy by her own son Agravaine who seems to have an abnormal relationship with his mother. ‘[T]he type of mothering Morgause gives her four eldest sons explains [their] perverse nature [...] [.]’³¹³ This is hinted at when Agravaine kills the innocent unicorn to attract his mother’s

³⁰⁸ White, 311-312.

³⁰⁹ Brewer, 67-68.

³¹⁰ Sprague, 111.

³¹¹ White explains that Arthur was able to escape Morgause and ‘settle[d] down with Guenevere as his wife’. White, 523.

³¹² White, 523.

³¹³ Larrington, 179.

attention and when he finally murders his mother and her lover Sir Lamorak out of jealousy when he discovers the lovers together in bed. Even after Morgause's death her presence still looms over her children and, therefore, she becomes a nightmarish mother-figure. In fact, '[w]hen Mordred is clearly on the verge of madness, White explains that Mordred has somehow become Morgause [...]']³¹⁴

Now that she was dead, he had become her grave. She existed in him like the vampire. When he moved, when he blew his nose, he did it with her movement. When he acted he became as unreal as she had been [...]. He dabbled in the same cruel magic. He had even become to keep lap dogs like her – although he had always hated hers with the same bitter jealousy as that with which he had hated her lovers.³¹⁵

Morgause's post mortem presence seems to affect not only Mordred's behaviour and movements but also his outward appearance. Mordred is described as 'a cold wisp of a man'³¹⁶, slightly hunchbacked and he is albino. His face is skeletal like and his eyes are one of those into which one cannot see. Behind all of these descriptions lies the suggestion that Mordred can be associated with death that lingers upon him (his mother's ghost) and this association is carried even further as he is always seen dressed entirely in black. Thus White suggests that he is death personified.³¹⁷

Mordred, who assumes some of the destructive functions of Morgause after her death, is a perfect example to undermine Morgause's power –she can even exert it beyond her earthly existence. Although Morgause has this influence upon others even after she is dead, Brewer states that White

[...] represented [her] without the savage animosity, personal bitterness and particularly the physical disgust that got in the way in the earlier version [*The Witch in the Wood*]: the change from the concept of the witch to the Queen of Air and Darkness marks [White's] progress from childish vituperation to a more sophisticated mode of characterisation. Even so, he still did not manage to make Morgause either a frighteningly evil or a 'widely seductive' figure [...] [...] [According to Brewer, Morgause]

³¹⁴ Larrington, 179.

³¹⁵ White, 612.

³¹⁶ White, 517.

³¹⁷ Cf. Brewer, 107.

remains essentially trivial [...] [and] does not seem to be adequately motivated as a character; [furthermore, she adds, that she does not] even command great magic, because she is too vain and idle to work at it.³¹⁸

The underlying notion of the fact that White revised *The Witch in the Wood*³¹⁹ (1938) numerous times could be that the story of Morgause cost White a great deal of effort and worry. Sprague, for example, suggests that White, due to his own unhappy childhood, was inevitably driven to write about his own mother Constance White when it came to envisioning Queen Morgause. It could be that it is actually Constance White who inhabits Morgause and who invalidates the book by being hated as an actual person.³²⁰

5.2 A distorted image of Morgan le Fay

After Ernest Jones³²¹ brought psychoanalysis back to Britain from Vienna in 1913, the year in which the first English translation of *The Interpretation of Dreams* appeared, Arthurian characters, like those in other novels, were increasingly conceived in psychoanalytic terms. Among those who underwent analysis in the 1930s was the young Terence Hanbury White [...]. White had had a difficult childhood; his parents' marriage was unhappy and, to the boy's chagrin, the details of their divorce case were widely reported in the newspapers. In October 1935 White wrote to his former Cambridge tutor L.J. Potts that he was being psychoanalysed; a later letter makes clear that he hoped to rid himself of sadistic and homosexual tendencies.³²² White was never to find sexual contentment; but his exposure to Freudian ideas powerfully affected his

³¹⁸ Brewer, 57.

³¹⁹ The book of T.H. White in which Morgause first appears.

³²⁰ Cf. Sprague, 95-96.

³²¹ 'Ernest Jones 1879-1958, British psychoanalyst, b. Wales. He taught (1910-13) at the Univ. of Toronto and was director (1908-13) of the Ontario Clinic for nervous Diseases. He founded the International Journal of Psychoanalysis and served as its editor from 1920-1939. In 1925, he founded the London Clinic for Psycho-analysis. A follower and colleague of Sigmund Freud, Jones was instrumental in introducing the study of psychoanalysis into England and the United States and coined the term rationalization as a corollary to the theory of defence mechanisms. Considered an authoritative biographer of Freud, his writings include *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (3 vol. , 1953-57) and *Free Associations: Memories of a Psychoanalyst* (1959).' <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1E1-JonesEr.html> (12.07.2008)

³²² Larrington refers here to Townsend Warner, Sylvia. *T.H. White: A Biography*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1967. (82-84).

treatment of the enchantresses in the successive versions of *The Once and Future King*.³²³

Sigmund Freud was a true pioneer in the recognition of the importance of unconscious mental activity. He was the first psychoanalyst and his theories on the inner workings of the human mind which are now widely accepted by schools of psychological thought seemed quite revolutionary at the turn of the century. The term 'psychoanalysis' was coined by him in 1896 and during the following forty years, Freud worked on developing its main principles, objectives, techniques and methodology.³²⁴

As a therapy, psychoanalysis is based on the concept that individuals are unaware of the many factors that cause their behavior and emotions. These unconscious factors have the potential to produce unhappiness, which in turn is expressed through a score of distinguishable symptoms, including disturbing personality traits, difficulty in relating to others, or disturbances in self-esteem or general disposition. [...] Psychoanalytic treatment is highly individualized and seeks to show how the unconscious factors affect behavior patterns, relationships, and overall mental health. Treatment traces the unconscious factors to their origins, shows how they have evolved and developed over the course of many years, and subsequently helps individuals to overcome the challenge they face in life (National Psychological Association of Psychoanalysis, 1998).³²⁵

The theories of Freud provide various means of investigating human culture, including literature. Due to some critics such as Norman Holland, Simon Lesser and Harold Bloom, just to mention a few, Freud's findings have led them to treat literary works from the vantage point of psychobiography which means to shed light upon a literary work by inquiring about possible personality traits or childhood traumas inherent within the author.³²⁶

Constance White was T.H. White's mother and the most important figure in her son's life. 'According to White himself, it was his mother's influence on him while he was a child that led him to regard women with deep distrust'³²⁷ and it

³²³ Larrington, 174-175.

³²⁴ Cf. Beystehner, Kirsten M. *Psychoanalysis: Freud's Revolutionary Approach to Human Personality*. <http://www.personalityresearch.org/papers/beystehner.html> (12.07.2008)

³²⁵ Beystehner, Kirsten M. *Psychoanalysis: Freud's Revolutionary Approach to Human Personality*. <http://www.personalityresearch.org/papers/beystehner.html> (12.07.2008)

³²⁶ Cf. <http://www.pauls.mistral.co.uk/emfoster.html>

³²⁷ Sprague, 3.

was also she who ‘[...] caused [White’s] [...] inability to come to grips with the demands of heterosexual love.’³²⁸ If one reads through his journals and diaries, one realises that women are only frequently considered condescendingly and almost perceived as individuals of a separate species. When it came to writing about women, White had to face some severe struggles and it was well-nigh impossible for him to write about them fairly. White’s tendencies towards sadism and homosexuality which sank deep into his character feelings of shame and self-blame, found their origins in the alternately lavish attention and the austere indifference that White’s mother, Constance, exhibited to her son. Furthermore, his experiences of corporal punishment at Cheltenham once more stoked and confirmed these tendencies.³²⁹

‘It is revealing of Constance White’s powerful and multifaceted personality that she was able to maim her son’s sexual character at the same time as she influenced the commencement of his art; in neither case did she act consciously, nor did the conflict in her roles arouse any sense of self-contradiction in her contradictory nature.’³³⁰

As already mentioned earlier, Constance White was the daughter of an Indian Judge. She was, according to her son, a beautiful woman of Scottish and French bloodlines, who in her youth attracted many admirers. With her mother, with whom she travelled a lot when she was growing up, she did not get on very well. Her family had a lot of servants in those days and her life mostly revolved around dinner parties in the company of military families. As an outlet from her boredom in such a regimented life, she read voraciously in several languages. Persuaded by her mother’s conviction of the dangers of sex, she started to regard her own emerging sexuality as wicked and immoral. At the age of thirty she was still a virgin. Due to her mother’s pressure she married the next man who asked her. The suitor happened to be Garrick White who was a District Supervisor of Indian Police. The marriage turned out to be a disaster right from the start. Garrick White was brutish and drunk and Constance was not prepared for the fact of physical mating. Nevertheless, Terence Hanbury White was born eighteen months after

³²⁸ Sprague, 33.

³²⁹ Sprague, 3-4.

³³⁰ Sprague, 33.

their wedding and remained the couple's only son. This was the time when Constance began to display her jealousy and selfishness which were so much part of her true nature. Aged five, T.H. White was taken to England where the family stayed with the Astons in Sussex. After a year of quarrelling, White's parents went back to India and left their son with his grandparents until he attended Cheltenham in 1920. In 1923, Garrick White filed suit against his wife at London's court. He sought the restitution of his conjugal rights as Constance had refused to have intercourse after their son's birth. The case was held in open court and was widely reported in the press. The judge dismissed Garrick White's petition, assessed him costs and imposed him with the obligation to pay alimony. Constance White became a celebrity for a few days. Afterwards, she took all her small savings and went with a cousin to Sussex where she lived out the remainder of her life in Burwash. Despite her apparent resentment of providing her son with a university education, she used her dwindling resources and sent her son to Cambridge – relishing her role as martyr.³³¹ Although 'White never broke with his mother [...],'³³² his dislike for her is best illustrated in one of his comments about her written in 1939:

My mother was (is) a woman for whom all love had to be dependent. She chased away from her husband, her lover, and her only son. All these fled from her possessive selfishness, and she was left to extract her meed of affection from more slavish minds. She became a lover of dogs. This meant that the dogs had to love her. I have inherited this vice.³³³

This autobiographical fragment clearly shows that White was quite aware of the impact his mother had had on him and what she had done to him. Constance White died in 1952 in a nursing home. A few years earlier in 1939, she wrote her reminiscences where she makes only a few remarks about her son. A sampling of the subjects treated in her journals include her fascination with death, innocence punished, sadism, and other concerns which are also prevalent in White's own writing. In short: her fascination for the morbid became obvious.³³⁴

³³¹ Cf. Sprague, 33-36.

³³² Warner, 89.

³³³ Warner, 123-124.

³³⁴ Cf. Sprague, 33-40.

Whatever Constance White's faults were, she had a bright, inquisitive mind [...] If, by transmitting her fears and faults to her son, she maimed his sexual character, [but] she also [...] [shaped] [h]is enthusiasms, his fascination with history, and his obsession with character, as well as his talent at envisioning the structure of a book [...] [...] [S]he gave her son the gift of depicting an awesome variety of characters [...].³³⁵

As already mentioned earlier, it is White's mother Constance who is portrayed in the original version of *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, which White called *The Witch in the Wood*. Morgause is a crude form of caricature which lacks the greater subtlety and more sinister power of its later version. Larrington states that '[White] paints a cruel portrait of Morgause, produced both by his misogyny to which his writing is always prone, and by the unresolved anguish of the young White as victim.'³³⁶

'In psychoanalysis, catharsis is the bringing to consciousness of repressed ideas, accompanied by the expression of emotions, thereby relieving tension.'³³⁷ White, so it seems, used the character of Morgause indeed as a means for catharsis. 'Had not White's own feelings toward his mother and the experiences of his own childhood been so passionately at rip-tide, the whole epic of [*The Once and Future King*] would have been much diminished. [...] It is due in significant measure to Constance White that the book has impact.'³³⁸

A lot of attention is drawn to the fact that Morgause is above all a bad mother who torments her children while herself, she thinks that she is sacrificing everything for them. White was well aware of the fact that his mother's domination and presence in *The Witch in the Wood* was indisputable. Morgause even shares the same love for lap dogs which White grotesquely names Sweetheart, Dovekins, Sweetie-Peetie or Ucky-Ducky.³³⁹

That White was writing out of his own unhappy personal experience becomes clear when he writes about the indifference, brutality and changing moods by which Morgause treats her sons – probably like Constance White treated her son:

³³⁵ Sprague, 45-46.

³³⁶ Larrington, 176.

³³⁷ <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O87-catharsis.html> (12.7.2008)

³³⁸ Sprague, 144.

³³⁹ Cf. White, 263.

The magic queen came punctually on her walk, conversing with Sir Grummore [...]. She didn't notice her four sons lined up [...]. They stood respectfully in a row, dirty, excited, their breast beating with hope.

"Now!" cried Gawaine, and they stood aside.

Queen Morgause did not see the unicorn. Her mind was busy with other things. With Sir Grummore she passed by.

"Mother!" cried Gareth in a strange voice, and he ran after her, plucking at her skirt.

"Yes, my white one? What do you want?"

"Oh, Mother. We have got you a unicorn."

"How amusing they are, Sir Grummore," she said. [...]

"But, Mammy...."

"Yes, yes," she said in a low voice. "Another time."

She had not noticed that her children's clothes were ruined: had not even scolded them about that. When she found out about the unicorn later in the evening she had them whipped for it, for she had spent an unsuccessful day with the English knights.³⁴⁰

As one can infer from the passage above, there seems to be no way for Morgause's sons to gain their mother's attention. The unicorn they killed for her in order to impress her represents a symbol of purity and goodness. In order to receive a little bit of their mother's affection which she spreads randomly and according to her varying moods, they are even willing to sacrifice an embodiment of sheer purity and beauty.

How easily Morgause's moods can change may be shown in the following passage. King Pellinore is very lovesick for Piggy, the Queen of Flanders' daughter, and in order to cheer him up, Sir Palomides and Sir Grummore decide to dress like the Questing Beast. After a lot of toing and froing and much trouble, they make a costume. Morgause realises that the knights are simply too silly to recognise that she just wants to seduce them and so she quickly draws her attention off the knights and suddenly becomes interested in her little boys:

It was useless to go on dramatizing her charms and talents for the benefit of these ridiculous knights – useless to go on hunting them with the tyrannous baits of what she thought was love. With a sudden turn of feeling she discovered that she hated them. [...] She was, she discovered with a change of posture, interested in nothing but her darling boys. She was the best mother to them in the world! Her heart ached for them, her maternal bosom swelled. When Gareth nervously brought white heather to

³⁴⁰ White, 263.

her bedroom as an apology for being whipped, she covered him with kisses, glancing in the mirror.

He escaped from her embrace and dried his tears – partly uncomfortable, partly in rapture. The heather which he had brought was set up dramatically in a cup with no water [...] and he was free to go.³⁴¹

T.H. White attributes to his mother a ‘possessive selfishness’ which can also be found in the character of Morgause. Her love for her little boys is dependent and she only kisses them because she thinks it makes her look more attractive in the mirror. The way she acts towards her children does not seem to be motivated by true and deep emotions but only by sheer selfishness. She seems to ignore or does not even care for other people’s feelings and in addition to that, she does not seem to be able to treat any other human being than herself with love and respect – not even a bunch of heather.

That Morgause is a portrait of White’s mother was admitted by himself several times.³⁴² Her presence looms largest in *The Queen of Air and Darkness* but she continues to haunt White even in the last book of *The Once and Future King*, which is called *The Candle in the Wind*. The reader soon becomes aware of the fact that behind Mordred’s twisted shape there hovers the shadow of his dead mother. ‘There is little question that White was at immense pains to cut out his personal feelings from *Queen*,³⁴³ he found it attractive, convenient, and artistically defensible to attribute much of Mordred’s infamy to his mother.’³⁴⁴ In the first chapter of *The Candle in the Wind*, White demonstrates once more his continued preoccupation with Morgause when he recalls the effect of Mordred’s upbringing and tells the reader that

Mordred had been left to be dominated by [...] [Queen Morgause], with her ancestral grudge against the King and her personal spite. For, although she had contrived to seduce young Arthur in his nonage, he had escaped her – to settle down with Guenevere as his wife. Morgause, brooding in the North with the one child [(Mordred)] who remained to her, had concentrated her maternal powers on the crooked boy. She had loved and

³⁴¹ White, 272.

³⁴² Cf. Warner, 129-130.

³⁴³ Abbreviation for *The Queen of Air and Darkness*.

³⁴⁴ Sprague, 110.

forgotten him by turns, an insatiable carnivore who lived on the affections of her dogs, her children and her lovers.³⁴⁵

There is no doubt that in the sentence which reads ‘she had loved and forgotten him by turns, an insatiable carnivore who lived on the affections of her dogs, her children and her lovers’³⁴⁶ White could obviously not prevent that Constance White’s image crept into the pages of *The Candle in the Wind* and into the character of Queen Morgause whom he makes entirely responsible for both, Arthur’s seduction and Mordred’s ‘despicable machinations.’³⁴⁷

When, in writing about the ‘Nemesis of Incest,’ White came to envision the wicked Queen Morgause, he found in his recollection of Constance White a model for her ready to his hand. But Constance White asserted herself even over the queen. White’s efforts to expunge from his novel the mingled hatred and fear he felt for his mother were not successful, and she would prove almost impossible for him to discard in later versions and later books no matter what form she took.³⁴⁸

‘White’s Freudian rewriting of Morgause influenced other treatments of the character.’³⁴⁹ Mary-Stewart, for example, wrote an important four-novel³⁵⁰ retelling of the stories of Merlin and Arthur in which she introduces Morgause and presents her in two modern versions which are definitely ‘shaped by a Freudian understanding of mother-son relations, and by a recognition that women’s limited access to power leads them to seek in other ways, through psychological manipulation, and, in the case of White’s queen, through a continual aggrieved recollection of ancient injustices done to the house of Cornwall which she parades before her sons.’³⁵¹

Through Stewart’s portrayal of Merlin and through the fact that she carves out minor female characters like Nimuë for example who takes over Merlin’s role as Arthur’s counsellor and continues her study of magic and herbs, she already points forward to the more explicitly feminist Arthurian texts of the 1980s and

³⁴⁵ White, 523.

³⁴⁶ White, 523.

³⁴⁷ Sprague, 115.

³⁴⁸ Sprague, 115.

³⁴⁹ Larrington, 179.

³⁵⁰ *The Crystal Cave, The Hollow Hills, The Last Enchantment and The Wicked Day.*

³⁵¹ Larrington, 181.

1990s. One of the first of these texts and an enormously influential retelling of the Arthurian legend is that of Marion Zimmer Bradley's: *The Mists of Avalon*.³⁵²

6 Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon*

Marion Zimmer Bradley was born in 1930 in Albany, New York. At quite an early stage in her life she already knew that she wanted to become a writer. Influenced by the science-fiction writing of her era, Marion Zimmer-Bradley even started her own science-fiction magazine before she turned eleven. After graduating from high school Bradley enrolled at New York State College. Her intention of becoming a teacher had to be put aside for a while when she married Robert Alden Bradley in 1949 and gave birth to their son. At a time when mothers were expected to stay at home, she tried to manage and juggle the demands of motherhood but nonetheless, she sold her first stories to the magazine *Vortex Science Fiction*. It was not until 1964 that she finally completed her education and graduated from Hardin-Simmons University, Texas, with a triple bachelor's degree in English, Spanish and psychology. After her divorce in the same year, she moved to California where she pursued her studies at the University of California, Berkley, between the years 1965 and 1967.³⁵³

'In the 1960s her career as a full-length novelist took off, and she was particularly noted for her science fiction novels set around the planet 'Darkover'.³⁵⁴ The series comprises twenty novels and they are among Bradley's most popular works of fiction. Among them one finds novels such as *Star of Danger* (1965), *The Shattered Chain* (1976) and *Heirs of Hammerfall* (1976). The Darkover novels occupied most of Bradley's time during the 1960s. and 1970s. During that time she also married her second husband Walter Henry Breen with whom she raised three children. Her son from her first marriage and a son and a daughter of their own. The marriage lasted until their divorce in the year 1990. Between the years 1965 and 1980, Marion Zimmer-Bradley published over thirty books and from

³⁵² Cf. Hildebrand, 92.

³⁵³ Cf. <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3404707122.html> (29.07.2008)

³⁵⁴ Zimmer-Bradley, *Mists of Avalon*, i.

1984 onwards she worked as an editor for the long-running *Sword and Sorceress* anthology series which encouraged submissions of fantasy stories. The series supported young and upcoming authors writing about original and non-traditional heroines. In the year 2000, Marion Zimmer-Bradley was awarded the World Fantasy Award for her lifetime achievement. Marion Zimmer-Bradley died in 1999 and her ashes were scattered at Glastonbury Tor, in Somerset, England.³⁵⁵

The Mists of Avalon, published in 1983, has been hailed by several critics as Bradley's most notable novel. The book remained on the New York Times best-seller list for sixteen weeks. Like many other of modern Arthurian fiction stories, *The Mists of Avalon* also show the prominence of women and to retell the legend of King Arthur and his knights through female eyes and perspectives.³⁵⁶ Most of the events are seen from the angle of the female characters: Igraine, Gwenhwyfar, Morgause, Morgaine, Viviane and Nimue.

Though *The Mists of Avalon* is usually read as a feminist tale, not all of the women are admirable. For most of the book, Gwenhwyfar is a nagging agoraphobe who tries to inflict her religious beliefs on everyone around her, including Arthur and therefore the people of his realm. [...] It is she who insists that Arthur abandon the Pandragon banner because of its ties to the ancient religion of Britain and has him carry instead a Christian banner. [...] This struggle between a matriarchal Avalon and a patriarchal Christianity becomes the central conflict of the novel. But the contrast between Avalon and Christianity is symbolic of something more integral to the book than the feminist theme. As Raymon Thompson has noted, 'The basic conflict is waged between tolerance and intolerance' [...], which is couched primarily in terms of the struggle between the natural and liberating Goddess worship of Avalon and the restrictive and constrictive rules of Christianity. Throughout the novel, those who practise the religion of Avalon are generally tolerant of Christianity and object mainly to its attempt to declare all other religions heresy. A basic principle of the religion of Avalon is that 'all the Gods are one' [...], a notion that echoes throughout the Mists.³⁵⁷

The Mists of Avalon was the first book of the Avalon cycle³⁵⁸ to be published and Marion Zimmer-Bradley draws her inspiration for the book from various sources.

³⁵⁵ Cf. <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3404707122.html> (29.07.2008)

³⁵⁶ Cf. Lupack, 202.

³⁵⁷ Lupack, 202.

³⁵⁸ The Avalon series comprise: *The Mists of Avalon* (1979), *The Forest House* (1993) with Diana L. Paxon, also known as *The Forests of Avalon*; *The Lady of Avalon* (1997) with Diana L. Paxon;

In fact, she once stated that she has used ‘sources far too many to be listed entirely.’³⁵⁹

As early inspiration she mentions *Tales of Prince Valiant*, by Harold Foster, and a work she calls *Tales of King Arthur*, by Sidney Lanier. This is probably Lanier’s *The Boy’s King Arthur* from 1880. In her essay “My Search for Morgan le Fay” (1987) Bradley also makes it clear that she is acquainted with the works of Nennius and Geoffrey of Monmouth, and, [...] she mentions Malory as “the main source for these legends retold.”³⁶⁰ Most of the novel’s plot clearly draws on Malory.³⁶¹

Although it is not possible to provide the reader here with a detailed summary of the whole novel which consists of four books³⁶², a broad overview nevertheless, shall be given in order to acquaint the reader with the most important events of the story. Furthermore, it shall convey to the reader a better understanding for the pages that follow.

The Mists of Avalon is set in a time of post-Roman England around 450. The country is divided by a conflict between societies and their corresponding religions that are either patriarchal or non-patriarchal. In the book, Patriarchy is related to a system, which, when it comes to power and value, is male-dominated and hierarchal.³⁶³ The novel starts with the story of the generation that preceded Arthur and his people. The population of the country constitutes on the one hand of the Old – or Dark - People which are descendents of the first settlers of Britain and of Britonic tribes. On the other hand, there are Romans and romanised people and the Saxons (new settlers from the continent). The latter ones were granted land by King Vortigern who needed their military forces to defend his realm against the raiding Norsemen.

After Rome has withdrawn all its troops from Britannia the county is left to fare on its own. The danger of invading Saxons and Norsemen is imminent and

Priestess of Avalon (2000) with Diana L. Paxon; *Ancestors of Avalon* (2004) written by Diana L. Paxon; *Ravens of Avalon* (2007) written by Diana L. Paxon and *Sword of Avalon* (forthcoming in 2009) also written by Diana L. Paxon.

³⁵⁹ Zimmer-Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, Acknowledgements, vii.

³⁶⁰ Zimmer-Bradley, Marion. *My Search for Morgaine le Fay*, 106-107.

³⁶¹ Hildebrand, 94.

³⁶² ‘Mistress of Magic’; ‘The High Queen’; ‘The King Stag’ and ‘The Prisoner in the Oak’.

³⁶³ Cf. Hildebrand, 94.

unpreventable. In those troubled times, Britain calls for a leader who incorporates the power, the skilfulness and the appeal to gather all the kings and leaders of the country in order to fight back the common enemy.

Unfortunately, the Old Religion cherished in its temple at Avalon is evermore pushed to the margins of its Island in the true sense of the word whereas Christianity more and more pushes itself to the fore. A tendency at which Viviane, Lady of the Lake and High Priestess of the Holy Island of Avalon, looks upon with frowning. While the romanised people are still looking for a suitable leader, it is Viviane to whom the people of the Old Religion and the tribes look up to.

The novel starts with a young girl's story. Her name is Igraine. She is sister to Viviane and therefore raised in Avalon. In a marriage to the war duke Gorlois, she gives birth to Morgaine who depicts the novel's central character. Upon the death of Gorlois, Igraine falls into Uther's arms who is successor to the High King Ambrosius. Together they father Arthur, thus half-brother to Morgaine and his destiny shall be to rule over the people of Britain.

After being educated in Avalon and accepted by the Goddess to her service, Morgaine becomes entrapped in Viviane's cunning plans of strategy. Viviane's endeavour is to prevent Avalon from being 'forced away from the mainstream course of time'³⁶⁴ and to make sure that it is not being pushed further into the mists. A leader is needed who will be accepted as such by all people, that is, the Old Ones, the Celtic tribes and the Romans. In order to unite them all, such a leader has to have the blood of both. Therefore, Viviane makes sure that Morgaine takes part as the Virgin Huntress in the ancient ritual of the Great Marriage. A ritual in which the future High King of the realm, in this case Arthur, has to prove himself worthy by taking part in it as the Horned One. As a consequence, Morgaine bears a son to her half-brother Arthur. Disappointed and disgusted of Viviane's ways, she abandons Avalon and leaves their son, Mordred, with her aunt Morgause who is sister to Viviane and wife of King Lot of Orkney.

³⁶⁴ *The Mists of Avalon*, 15.

Gwenhwyfar, who is married to Arthur, desperately tries to provide a male heir for the realm. In trying so, she adheres more and more to the restrictive and constrictive rules of Christianity and she even manages to bring Arthur over to her side. It is due to her influence that Arthur breaks his vow once given to Viviane and Avalon. Back then when Viviane presented him with the sword Excalibur and its scabbard³⁶⁵ he accepted the ancient religion and Christianity in the same way. Despite his vow, Arthur makes more and more concessions to the priests and thus, precipitates Avalon's alienation – Avalon, now represented by Mordred's lover Niniane who took over, after Vivian's murder, the place of the Lady of the Lake.

Morgaine, with the help of her lover Accolon, tries to recover the sword once given to Arthur, as she thinks that by renouncing Avalon, Arthur has forfeited his right to own the sword and its scabbard. In her endeavour to find a leader for Britain who would accept the Old Religion to the same extent as Christianity, she tries to cause Arthur's downfall and replace him. Unfortunately, Accolon fails miserably and hence does Morgaine in this matter. As a consequence, Morgaine retreats from court and can only watch from afar how Mordred's intrigues unfold.

Arthur, Gwenhwyfar and Morgaine are in so far affiliated with each other as they all share some love and affection for Lancelot. He is Morgaine's cousin and her object of lust, the King's best friend and bravest knight and Gwenhwyfar's secret love and lover. Guilt ridden for her feelings for Lancelot and her inability to bestow Arthur with an heir, Gwenhwyfar is finally caught committing adultery and as she is the King's wife also accused of committing high treason. Entangled in a trap that is set up by Mordred and his foster mother Morgause, she is not the only one who finds herself extradited to Mordred's evil ways.

Mordred is determined to seize the throne and he does not even shrink from carrying on a war against his own father. Arthur has no other chance than to engage in a combat with his son, in which he receives a mortal wound. In his dying hour Arthur finds himself again in his sister's arms. Arthur and Morgaine

³⁶⁵ Once crafted and enchanted by Morgaine so that whenever he wears the scabbard, it will prevent him from bleeding.

are ultimately reconciled and they both acknowledge the unity of God and Goddess.

Marion Zimmer Bradley skilfully weaves together the many different versions of the Arthurian legend and addresses such issues as religious intolerance, cultural differences, betrayal and human relations in general. She manages to portray a historically largely unknown religious faith as a spiritual and political system, and creates characters which appear convincing in their strengths and flaws.³⁶⁶

6.1 Marion Zimmer Bradley's portrayal of Morgaine

What is interesting in Bradley's depiction of Morgaine of the Fairies, as she calls her, is that for the first time in fictional history, she emerges as the main protagonist in a retelling of the Arthurian saga. Although she is not depicted as an exclusively positive character but rather as one full of complexity, her portrayal appears to be very human and real, not only in her imperfections but also in her decision making process. Bestowed with a gift of the Goddess which gave Morgaine "the Sight", she is torn between her loyalty to Avalon and her unfulfilled love to Lancelot.

Furthermore, for the first time, the reader is granted the opportunity to immerse in Morgaine's longevity. She incorporates the centre of the novel and until the very end of the book it is still Morgaine who holds the story together. The reader accompanies her through various stages in her life. She is born before Arthur and even outlives him. Like the Goddess carries her four different faces, so does Morgaine too. She is maiden, mother, wise-woman and crone.

As the daughter of Igraine and Gorlois, Morgaine is lawfully heir to the Duke of Cornwall and grows up at the Duke's home in Caerleon. She is first described as a four-year old child who already at this tender age, shows a very strong sense of independence:

³⁶⁶ Morgane, 168-169.

Morgaine was silent – a small, quiet, self-possessed little creature, her dark hair not long enough to plait into a little braid halfway down her shoulder blades, but so fine and straight that it slipped out into loose elf locks around her shoulders. Her eyes were dark and serious, and her eyebrows straight and level, so heavy already that they were the most definite feature of her face. A little fairy woman, Igraine thought, not human at all; a pixie. She was no larger than the shepherd girl's babe who was not yet quite two, though Morgaine was nearing four, and spoke as clearly and thoughtfully as a great girl of eight or nine. [...] Morgaine was not a demonstrative child, but soon she began to stir fretfully – she was not the kind of child who wished to be held for long; she would do everything for herself. She had even begun to dress herself and buckle her own shoes on her feet.³⁶⁷

At the age of eleven, Morgaine is brought to Avalon by her aunt Viviane, High Priestess of Avalon and Lady of the Lake. There, she is trained at the House of Maidens to become a High Priestess of Avalon. She becomes acquainted with the priestess arts, with the mysteries of Avalon and the Old Religion and at last she is accepted to serve the Goddess. Destined to follow Viviane in her position as the Lady of the Lake, Morgaine has to endure the hardships of a long training:

[...] after nine years of training in the priestess arts, she moved silently that no footfall or even a breath of air marked her passing. [...] [A]fter those years, [...] the ways of the priestesses were [...] well known to her [...]. [...] Her hair was plaited down the back of her neck and wrapped with a deerskin thong; she wore the dark-dyed blue dress and deerskin overtunic of any priestess, and the blue crescent³⁶⁸ shone darkly between her brows. [...] Viviane knew from experience that, small and delicately made as she was, when she wished she could throw a glamour over herself that made her appear tall and majestic. Already she appeared ageless, and she would, Viviane knew, look much the same even when white appeared in her dark hair.³⁶⁹

Morgaine falls in love with Viviane's son Galahad, later named Lancelot, quite early in the novel. A tender bond between the young people emerges but before they are able to explore their nascent feelings for one another, Gwenhwyfar, daughter to King Leodegranz, appears on the scene and thwarts Morgaine's plans. Lancelot is immediately attracted to Gwenhwyfar who is 'young and dazzlingly

³⁶⁷ Bradley, *Mists*, 89.

³⁶⁸ The blue crescent is a sign the priestesses get tattooed between their brows as a sign that they are vowed to the service of the Goddess. Cf. Bradley, *Mists*, 154.

³⁶⁹ Bradley, *Mists*, 159.

pretty'.³⁷⁰ From that moment on, '[a]ll the color had gone [...], into the mist and the mire and the dismal reeds, and [...] [Morgaine's] happiness had gone with it.'³⁷¹ Morgaine is very jealous of Gwenhwyfar and thereafter Morgaine's romance with Lancelet is frustrated for ever.

Due to Arthur's young age, he is brought to the Dragon Island before his coronation. There he is tested by the ancient rites that should prove him strong enough as a leader to defend Britain against the Saxon and the Northmen. With the combined forces of Avalon and Camelot, Arthur shall be able to keep the enemies at bay. By becoming a victim of Viviane's cruel plans, Morgaine takes part as the Virgin Huntress in the ritual of the Great Marriage and thus sleeps with her half-brother Arthur. Disguised as the Horned One and after many years apart, Arthur does not recognise Morgaine immediately. As the centre of this pagan ritual the half siblings conceive Gwydion, Arthur's bastard son, his mortal fate and later named Mordred. Finding herself pregnant and in an incestuous relationship with her half-brother, Morgaine is disgusted by Viviane's evil schemes. She leaves Avalon for Lothian and Mordred to be fostered there. After giving birth, Morgaine looks for shelter at Arthur's court and becomes one of Gwenhwyfar's, now married to Arthur and thus High Queen, ladies in waiting. At Carleon, Morgaine craves for Avalon and finds herself utterly homesick. She spends her time with spinning but is soon bored by the women around her.

Soon she would be a village witch indeed, peddling charms and prophesying boy- or girl-children and new lovers for the maidens, from her sheer boredom at the pettiness of life among the women. The gossip bored her to spinning, the spinning beguiled her into trance...[...] Yet she found Gwenhwyfar's company, and Elaine's, enduring; most of the other women had never had a single thought beyond the next meal or the next reel of thread spun. Gwenhwyfar and Elaine had had some learning, and occasionally, sitting at ease with them, she could almost imagine herself peacefully among the priestesses in the House of Maidens.³⁷²

Morgaine decides to leave the court for Avalon but never arrives there. She disappears for more than five years and when she returns, she finds herself

³⁷⁰ Bradley, *Mists*, 180.

³⁷¹ Bradley, *Mists*, 182.

³⁷² Bradley, *Mists*, 355-356.

entangled in a love affair with Kevin the bard, successor to the Merlin of Britain, deprived of her mother Igraine, who in the meantime, had died and due to the fact that Arthur had broken his vows once sworn to Avalon she has to watch how her country is once more threatened by the Saxons.

Morgaine reprimands Arthur for breaking his oath but soon realises that Gwenhwyfar has a hand in that matter. Being aware of Gwenhwyfar's and Lancelot's love for each other and the possible shame such a scandalous love would bring upon her brother Arthur if brought to light, jealous Morgaine desires nothing more than seeing 'Lancelot well wedded and away from [Camelot's] court and from the Queen.'³⁷³ [...] [I]f Lancelot were gone from court, then would the scandal be quieted. And she resolved that whatever she could do to accomplish that end would be done at once.'³⁷⁴ When Elaine, daughter of King Pellinore, asks Morgaine to give her Lancelot for a husband, Morgaine agrees to help Elaine in the matter but only on condition that Elaine consents her first daughter to be fostered and schooled in Avalon. After Elaine's and Lancelot's marriage, which naturally contributes much to the indignation of Gwenhwyfar, she decides to take revenge on Morgaine and traps her into marriage with Uriens. It is only until too late that Morgaine realizes that it is not Accolon, Uriens' attractive son, with whom Arthur is making a match but Accolon's father. Thus, Morgaine becomes step-mother to Accolon and Avalloch, Uriens' second son.

According to Larrington, 'Bradley is more interested in women's relationships: in the complex enmities and affections existing between Morgaine and her kinswomen, and, in particular, in the traditionally conflicted relationship for the sisters-in-law Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar.'³⁷⁵ That Morgaine's and Gwenhwyfar's fates are somehow inextricably entwined is very well expressed in the following passage:

And for a bizarre moment Morgaine saw herself as the Queen's shadow...*somehow her fate and mine have gotten all entangled*...she, Morgaine, had had Arthur and borne him a son, which Gwenhwyfar

³⁷³ Bradley, *Mists*, 604.

³⁷⁴ Bradley, *Mists*, 609.

³⁷⁵ Larrington, 191.

longed to do; Gwenhwyfar had had Lancelot's love for which Morgaine would willingly have given her soul...[...][.]³⁷⁶

Accolon, who is an initiate of Avalon himself, 'is keen to fall in with Morgaine's plan to recover the sacred sword and scabbard, as much for religious as for erotic reasons.'³⁷⁷ Unfortunately, Avalloch realises Morgaine's and Avalloch's adulterous affair and with his discovery he signs his own death warrant. Morgaine, who wants to see Accolon as Arthur's successor, feels that Avalloch may thwart her plan and thus, Avalloch has to die.

When Arthur misuses Excalibur as symbol for the cross, Morgaine feels betrayed and claims the sword back. Unfortunately, she must secretly steal it from Arthur to hand it over to her lover Accolon with whom she aims to rule over Britain. Accolon fails in his attempt to kill Arthur and when he loses his own life instead, Morgaine withdraws to Tintagel. After a while, Kevin is able to persuade Morgaine to leave the cloister and to return to Avalon where, meanwhile, Niniane administers the position of the Lady of the Lake.

Larrington states that 'Morgaine is a convincing, likeable if stubborn, character; she is usually well-meaning, though dogmatic when she is absolutely convinced in her rectitude.'³⁷⁸ When Kevin, for example, steals the Holy Grail from Avalon in order to bring it to Camelot, Morgaine is infuriated. Back in Avalon, Kevin is killed at Morgaine's demand who acts immensely ruthlessly:

[Nimue's thoughts:] *What has she done to him? Is he dead or enspelled?* Morgaine found herself wishing that indeed he was dead, that he had taken his life in despair or terror. Twice she had raged at this man and called him a traitor to Avalon, and the third time he had truly been traitor beyond question, taking the Holy Regalia forth from their hiding place. Oh, yes, he deserved death, even such a death as he should this morning die. She had spoken with the Druids, and they had agreed, one and all, that he should die in the oak grove, and that he should not die the swift death of mercy.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁶ Bradley, *Mists*, 614.

³⁷⁷ Larrington, 192.

³⁷⁸ Larrington, 192.

³⁷⁹ Bradley, *Mists*, 920.

Larrington points out that Morgaine ‘moves from tender-heartedness to ruthlessness in Avalon’s cause and only at an old age does she realize how much her fate was of her own making.’³⁸⁰

Aged and alone in Avalon, Morgaine suddenly discerns that everyone she ever loved has died.

I am growing old. Raven is dead and Nimue is dead, who should have been lady after me. And the Goddess has laid her hand upon no other to be her prophetess. Kevin lies entombed within the oak. What of Avalon now? [...] *I have called on the Goddess and found her within myself.* And Morgaine knew that never again would she have the ability to seek beyond herself for comfort or counsel; she could look only within. No priestess, no prophetess, no Druid or councillor, no Goddess now to turn to; none but her unguided self.³⁸¹

‘The novel ends with Morgaine finding her way to the convent at Glastonbury and realizing that, in the nuns’ veneration of the Virgin Mary, some of the values of Avalon have found a place in Christianity.’³⁸²

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 [...]. 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 mankind.*³⁸³

Morgaine finally discerns that the Goddess is eternal and whatever may happen, she will always find a way to guide and comfort those who call on her. The Goddess as well as the Holy Isle of Avalon will not vanish, if anything, they will always be there for those willing to discover them. Morgaine’s final step in her spiritual journey in which she ultimately acquires her spiritual maturity is expressed in the very last words of the novel:

She turned her back on the convent and walked down to the Lake, along the old path by the shore. Here was a place where the veil lying between

³⁸⁰ Larrington, 192.

³⁸¹ Bradley, *Mists*, 925.

³⁸² Larrington, 192.

³⁸³ Bradley, *Mists*, 1008.

the worlds was thin. She needed no longer to summon the barge – she need only step through the mists here, and be in Avalon. Her work was done.³⁸⁴

6.2 20th Century Feminism and Morgaine

The free-thinking movements of the 1960s, postmodernism and the second wave of feminism of the 1970s and 1980s offered new views of the world in the second half of the twentieth century. People were searching for some alternative spirituality freed from the classical pattern of the Western culture which had been dominated by Christianity over the last two-thousand years. Promoting the one and universal truth, as well as a male dominated society, people suddenly felt a desire to free themselves from churches and congregation that often formed an integral part of people's every day life.³⁸⁵ What followed was the emerging of New Age and Paganism, or as it is sometimes called, Neo-Paganism movements. Both movements seek inspiration in Eastern and pre-Christian religions. While New Age can be described as 'a broad movement characterised by alternative approaches to Western culture, with an interest in spirituality, mysticism, holism, and environmentalism'³⁸⁶, Paganism, or Neo-Paganism, can be understood as 'a recognised umbrella term denoting a group of religions and spiritualities which are usually animistic to some degree.'³⁸⁷ According to Guiley, 'it is a religion, a philosophy and a way of life'³⁸⁸ which offers

[...] sexually inclusive, ecological teaching and practice. For most Pagans there must be a spiritual equilibrium and equality between the male and the female if the given rituals are to produce the cosmic, social and natural harmony they intend. Paganism is without a doctrine of inherent human sinfulness and, therefore, without correlating doctrines of redemption through law, sacrifice or a male saviour or messiah. Consequently, Pagan women are both free of any dependence on a male salvific dispensation

³⁸⁴ Bradley, *Mists*, 1009.

³⁸⁵ Cf. Morgane, 15.

³⁸⁶ Soanes cited in Morgane, 15.

³⁸⁷ Schütz, 929.

³⁸⁸ Guiley, 401.

and no longer bear any of the moral responsibility for what is wrong with human existence.³⁸⁹

Harvey and Hardman add that Neo-Paganism can be perceived as ‘a response to an increased dissatisfaction with the way the world is going ecologically, spiritually and materially.’³⁹⁰

Among the many diverse movements that embraced the Neo-Pagan views on life one can find such influential ones as Wicca, Druidry, Shamanism, Goddess Spirituality and Heathenism. Although the movements differ in regard to practices and beliefs and are not entirely identical, the communities who practice them claim to continue either the native American religion or the Celtic tradition of worshipping the Tripple Goddess³⁹¹ and the corresponding rituals.

As Neo-Paganism flourishes especially on the British Isles and in North America, Marion Zimmer-Bradley, who called herself a practising witch, modelled her female heroines and their perspectives exactly according to Neo-Pagan beliefs and what she understood of Arthurian legend. With the writing of *The Mists of Avalon*, Kristina Hildebrand argues, Marion Zimmer-Bradley created a feminist Arthurian text ‘which attacks patriarchy by offering a feminist and Neo-Pagan rewriting of the Arthurian tradition.’³⁹²

The *Mists of Avalon* draws on contemporary Neo-Paganism, specifically Wicca³⁹³, and [...] explicitly formulates a religion which is feminist and women-oriented. This feminist religion is opposed to a patriarchal and oppressive Christianity, and the struggle between these two religions constitutes much of the plot.³⁹⁴

This chapter is intended to look at the text in closer detail and to explore how Marion Zimmer-Bradley uses empowered female characters, like Morgaine of the

³⁸⁹ Guiley, 43.

³⁹⁰ Harvey and Hardman, X.

³⁹¹ The three aspects are: Maiden, Mother and Crone.

³⁹² Hildebrand, 92.

³⁹³ ‘Wicca is a form of neo-pagan worship which incorporates the female aspect of life in its very core – the representation of the Devine as a Goddess.’ Morgane, 188.

³⁹⁴ Hildebrand, 93.

Fairies, and how she subverts patriarchal and phallogentric concepts in order to replace them with a non-patriarchal understanding of power.³⁹⁵

The story of *The Mists of Avalon* unfolds at a point in time where societies and their corresponding religions are divided because of their being patriarchal or non-patriarchal by nature. ‘Patriarchy is here defined as a system which is “hierarchical and male-dominated in terms of value and power.”³⁹⁶ In *The Mist of Avalon* the women do not only find themselves in a situation where patriarchy rules but also where women are perceived to be subordinate to men. Patriarchy is depicted as a way of perceiving and wielding power and it shapes a phallogentric society with a power structure where access to power is limited and based on violence, domination and control. The women of Avalon, on the other hand, who depict the female power structure attempt to share their power and wield it without domination.³⁹⁷

Due to the Neo-Paganism and feminist content of *The Mists of Avalon* and because of its popularity, the appeal of Marion Zimmer-Bradley’s work has been commented by her sister-in-law and long-time friend Diana Paxson. She might not be an unbiased witness but her statement has further been supported by the anthology named *Return to Avalon: A Celebration of Marion Zimmer Bradley* and her statement goes as follows:

[T]his sense of the importance of the female perspective, especially of its spiritual side, was expressed most powerfully in *The Mists of Avalon*, a stunning example of a book that said what a large group of people most needed to hear, at the time they needed to hear it, in a form which they could understand.³⁹⁸

‘By combining the Arthurian plot and themes with a feminist and Neo-Pagan viewpoint, Bradley creat[ed] a very different retelling of the Arthurian story [...]’³⁹⁹ which brought her a large community of readers and admirers.

³⁹⁵ Cf. Hildebrand, 93.

³⁹⁶ Cooley, William and Daniel cited in Hildebrand, 94.

³⁹⁷ Cf. Hildebrand, 94.

³⁹⁸ Paxson, 15.

³⁹⁹ Hildebrand, 96.

According to Kristina Hildebrand, Marion Zimmer-Bradley's text 'depicts a feminist form of Goddess worship based on modern-day Wicca [...].'⁴⁰⁰ Margot Adler who is a novelist, journalist, lecturer and herself a Neo-Pagan and a Wiccan refers to Bradley's *Mists of Avalon* as 'bestseller with thoroughly Wiccan themes and [she calls Bradley] a Wiccan priestess'⁴⁰¹.⁴⁰²

First of all, the perspectives and the focalisers with which the reader is presented in the text are female and the whole story unfolds through female eyes and experiences. Whereas the male characters – Arthur, Lancelot, Kevin and Accolon, are focalised by women mostly from without, the female characters – Igraine, Viviane, Morgaine, Niniane and Gwenhywfar – all appear as focalisers.⁴⁰³ The whole book in general has a very strong focus on women whereas men's thoughts and voices are rarely heard.

The same applies to the rituals which are depicted in the book. They are a quite important issue in both traditional and Neo-Pagan religions. 'Drawing on modern Wicca, the rituals described are almost exclusively for and by women.'⁴⁰⁴ The first mentioning of a ritual in the book is when Viviane, the Lady of the Lake, arrives at Gorlois's and Igraine's home and performs the blessing of the guest cup:

Viviane took it between her hands, and Igraine blinked at her; with the gesture with which she took the cup, she was suddenly tall and imposing; it might have been the sacred chalice of the Holy Regalia. She set it between her hands and brought it slowly to her lips, murmuring a blessing. She tasted it, turned, and laid it in the hands of the Merlin. He took it with a grave bow and put it to his lips. Igraine, who had barely entered the Mysteries, somehow felt that she too was part of this beautiful ritual solemnity as in turn she took the cup from her guests, tasted it, and spoke formal words of welcome.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁰ Hildebrand, 13.

⁴⁰¹ The statement that Bradley was a Wiccan priestess has been confirmed by an article written by Bradley herself for the Neo-Pagan periodical *Green Egg*. According to Hildebrand, who interviewed some close friends of Bradley's, Bradley is said to have converted to Episcopalianism, however, later in life. Cf. Hildebrand, 29.

⁴⁰² Adler, 418.

⁴⁰³ Cf. Hildebrand, 101.

⁴⁰⁴ Hildebrand, 102.

⁴⁰⁵ Bradley, *Mists*, 10-11.

Vivien, the priestess, blesses the cup of wine which is then passed around to the people present. That this ritual is to remind the reader of the Eucharist and that the sacred chalice referred to is the Grail would seem to be. This first instance of a ritual, even though it is very short, is carried out by a woman and it thus creates a picture of a society where women were admitted to the rank of priestesses.⁴⁰⁶

Besides the ritual of the Great Marriage⁴⁰⁷ which involves both genders, man and woman, it clearly privileges the female perspective as ‘children so born are children to no mortal man, but to the Goddess.’⁴⁰⁸ Furthermore, Hildebrand argues that ‘[s]ince maternity is so much more obvious than paternity, the priestess remains more intimately connected with the ritual, if it results in a child. The child may be the offspring of no mortal man, but the mortal mother is still present.’⁴⁰⁹

Another powerful depiction of a ritual that emphasises the role of women is Bradley’s depiction of the kingmaking. The king’s power is based on a ritual enacted by women. Before Arthur is made king he has to take part in a pre-coronation ritual in which he is dressed in deer skins and he has to run with the deer through the woods in order to kill the king stag. The killing confers kingship on him. Morgaine, on the other hand, represents the Goddess in her function as Maiden Huntress – as part of the Great Marriage. Arthur, the sacred king, is seen as the Goddess’s lover and son. Through the king’s and the priestess’s sexual intercourse, kingship is bestowed on Arthur. Thus, it is a choice of the women who participate in the rituals to give or withhold the power of the sacred kingship. Male participation in the rituals is limited and moreover, it is perceived as subordinate.

⁴⁰⁶ Cf. Hildebrand, 102.

⁴⁰⁷ □Heilige Hochzeit (griech. Hieròs Gámos) nennt die Vergleichende Religionswissenschaft eine Reihe von Riten und Mythen, in deren Mittelpunkt jeweils die Vereinigung zweier Menschen, eines Gottes und einer Göttin oder aber eines göttlichen und eines menschlichen Partners steht. Im Bereich der keltischen Religion begegnet der Begriff [...] meist zur Bezeichnung der Vorstellung, dass der König [...] der Gemahl einer Göttin oder des weiblich personifizierten Landes sei.’ Maier, s.v. Heilige Hochzeit.

⁴⁰⁸ Bradley, *Mists*, 155.

⁴⁰⁹ Cf. Hildebrand, 102.

She [Morgaine] lay there, feeling the life of the earth around her; she seemed to expand, to fill all the cave, the little scribbled drawings were painted on her breasts and her belly, and above her the great chalk figure, man or deer, strode with erect phallus... the invisible moon outside the cave flooding her body with light as the Goddess surged inside her, body and soul. [...] Now he was in the door of the cave, the antlers gone from his brow, his hair streaked, his body smeared blue and stained with blood, white skin like the white chalk of the body of the huge figure above the cave...the Horned One, the consort. [...] [S]he could see the erect life surging in him like that of the chalk figure. [...] *Now it is the time for the Goddess to welcome the Horned One* [...].⁴¹⁰

The passage effectively demonstrates how Morgaine experiences the ritual of the Great Marriage. Morgaine's omniscient third-person narrator provides the reader with a detailed description of the rite and Morgaine's feelings. The whole scene is told from the female perspective. On the other hand, what the Horned One (Arthur) might feel or think, in the given situation, it remains in the dark.

As opposed to the Christianity portrayed in *The Mists of Avalon*, and its oppression of women, the Goddess religion offers women a path to self-discovery and spiritual fulfilment. Morgaine is depicted as strong-willed and passionate, with a good education as well as the severe training of a priestess. She escapes from Avalon to the royal court to find her freedom, only to realise that there is no freedom for her, or any woman, outside the Goddess's island.⁴¹¹

What Bradley demonstrates in her text is the social effects that occur when one system of symbols and beliefs replaces another. Britain more and more turns to Christianity and thus gradually changes into a land with a religion in which women are subjected. Whereas the Goddess religion cherishes fertility and sexuality, Christianity conceives of sexuality as something sinful and looks contemptuously upon women. In the course of the ongoing disappearance of the old religion and its replacement by Christianity, women are pushed aside and furthermore, they have to settle for their roles as submissive and powerless members of society. The two positions of being a religious woman living at a time when both patriarchal and non-patriarchal societies struggle for power, is best foregrounded throughout the book by the two female characters: Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar. Morgaine, represents the old position of women; empowered

⁴¹⁰ Bradley, *Mists*, 205-206.

⁴¹¹ Hildebrand, 107-108.

because she is a follower of the Goddess, educated, sexually active and self-determining. On the other hand, there is Gwenhwyfar representing the new type of woman; reduced to being Arthur's Christian Queen and thus powerless, unlearned, guilt-ridden and submissive and bound to the Christian faith. While Morgaine is able to make decisions on her own, to take a lover if she wishes and is even treated as her lover's equal, Gwenhwyfar finds herself in quite a different position. As the king's queen she is without any real power except when she is able to influence her husband in such a way as to base his decision making on her advice or in line with her concerns.⁴¹²

The vast difference between the two women is effectively demonstrated in the following passage:

Next to [Morgaine], Gwenhwyfar felt dull as a hen, a simple homekeeping woman, even though she was High Queen of Britain and Morgaine only a heathen dutchess. Morgaine knew so much, and she herself was so unlearned – she could do no more than write her name and read a little in her Gospel book. While Morgaine was skilled in all the clerkly arts, she could read and write, and yes, she knew the houswifely arts too – she could spin and weave and do fine embroideries, and dyeing and brewing, yes, and herb lore and magic as well.⁴¹³

Despite the fact that Gwenhwyfar is depicted as utterly pious and as a devoted and staunch follower of Christianity, she occasionally shows some fits of rebellion. The fact that Christianity promotes the oppression of women is beyond debate for Bradley. Her attitude becomes even more clear when suddenly Gwenhwyfar is the one who says: 'I think perhaps God cares nothing for women – all his priests are men, and again and again, the Scriptures tell us that women are the temptresses and evil [...].'⁴¹⁴

Hildebrand states that 'Gwenhwyfar, [who, according to her, has already internalised her religion's tenets] becomes a willing victim of patriarchy, [and thus] believes that her position is determined by God [.] [Despite her occasional

⁴¹² Cf. Hildebrand, 107-109.

⁴¹³ Bradley, *Mists*, 508.

⁴¹⁴ Bradley, *Mists*, 510.

rebellion], [she] feels no desire for power or independence.⁴¹⁵ When Arthur suggests to her that she could rule by his side like Morgause does when King Lot of Orkney is absent in war or counsel, she reacts quite blankly and with contempt:

Panic clutched again at Gwenhwyfar's stomach. How could he expect that of her? How could it be a woman's place to rule? What did she care what the wild barbarians, these northern Tribesmen, did, or their barbarian women? She said, in a shaky little voice, 'I could never presume so far, my lord and my king.'⁴¹⁶

The passage perfectly mirrors how firmly Gwenhwyfar adheres to her place that Christianity grants her. Seeing herself in a position to wield power is definitely out of her imagination and thus she actively supports a system that removes her rights and deprives women of their power.⁴¹⁷

Avalon, on the other hand, is depicted as a place that allows women to wield their power. However, with a constant increase of male supremacy in the Christian world where women experience evermore to be powerless, the island of Avalon becomes more and more estranged and is farther drawn into the mists. 'The separation of the female religious community from most of the male world corresponds to Avalon's gradual physical withdrawal from the outer world.'⁴¹⁸

As the physical removal progresses it becomes impossible, except for a few chosen ones, to travel back and forth. By drifting further and further away into the mists, Avalon can at least maintain its status as being the centre for Goddess worship and therefore being untouchable and free from persecution. At the end of the novel, it is hinted at that the religion will nevertheless live in its adherents: '*And within Avalon they live forever.*'⁴¹⁹

Christianity, it appears, does not allow any pagan religion to coexist with it. By persecuting the pagan religion and keeping it outside the British Isle, the priests and bishops also make sure to keep out women's power – or more specifically, deprive them of it. Nevertheless, Bradley suggests that the worship of the Goddess

⁴¹⁵ Hildebrand, 109.

⁴¹⁶ Bradley, *Mists*, 315.

⁴¹⁷ Cf. Hildebrand, 109.

⁴¹⁸ Hildebrand, 110.

⁴¹⁹ Bradley, *Mists*, 938.

will live on in secret and maybe one day it will be revived. In fact, Bradley indicates that the Goddess will appear again if only in the form of the Virgin Mary, Brigid, Morgaine or any other woman who holds the key to feminine power. 'Exile her as they may, she will prevail. The Goddess will never withdraw.'⁴²⁰ According to Hildebrand, '*The Mists of Avalon* is not only concerned with the disappearance of an old religion, but with the presentation of an alternative tradition which is relevant to, and can be practised by, modern readers.'⁴²¹

While the text questions the patriarchal understanding of power and attacks power that is wielded in patriarchal ways, there are, however, according to some critics, some examples which seem to be confusing in this respect. First of all, the text is also an attack on hierarchies, whereas it condones, on the other hand, a hierarchy inherent at Avalon.

Despite its attack on a patriarchal understanding of power, *The Mists of Avalon* condones certain hierarchical structures. As Townsend notes, the Goddess movement carries its own inequalities: it "perpetuates the male/female dichotomy and merely replaces one sexist hierarchical model (the dominance of males and a male God) with another (the dominance of females and a female Goddess)."⁴²²

James Noble, for example, hints at the fact that male children born in Avalon have to take up an inferior position and that the Lady of the Lake rules with absolute power. One example might be that Viviane arranges the lives of her priestesses in a traditional patriarchal way. Noble hints at a female hierarchy, yet predominantly sexist.⁴²³ Men, besides those who remain true to a non patriarchal view of the world⁴²⁴, have no access to the Goddess and are even perceived as being 'small in the sight of the Goddess.'⁴²⁵

⁴²⁰ Bradley, *Mists*, 940.

⁴²¹ Hildebrand, 111-112.

⁴²² Townsend, Joan B cited by Hildebrand, 117.

Townsend, Joan B. "The Goddess: Fact, Fallacy, and Revitalization Movement." Hurtado 179-203.

⁴²³ Noble, 148-149.

⁴²⁴ Taliesin, the Merlin of Britain and his successor Kevin for example. There is a possibility of men speaking for the Goddess. Cf. Hildebrand, 117.

⁴²⁵ Bradley, *Mists*, 376.

Even in the portrayal of evil women, Hildebrand argues, *The Mists of Avalon* sometimes succumbs to patriarchal views. According to her, Bradley ‘feminises and sexualises evil [...] and the main representative of evil [appears in the character of] Morgause.’⁴²⁶ Her attempts at gaining power are unscrupulous and she hungers for power inside the patriarchal structure. She is not granted empowerment through the Goddess religion and therefore, the only way for her to gain power is through her husband, her sons and her lovers. As a girl she is presented as flirtatious and promiscuous⁴²⁷. Her sexuality is emphasised throughout the book and after her husband’s death she makes her appearances repeatedly in the company of one of her many lovers. Gwenhwyfar also bears this sexuality characteristic. She tries to be a faithful wife to Arthur but she struggles with her persistent feelings of desire for Lancelot, to which Bradley refers so frequently, that it is hard for the reader not to define her by her sexual relationships.⁴²⁸

James Noble claims that Bradley, even if she did so without recognising, ‘ultimately acquiesces in and valorises the very belief-system she thinks she is condemning.’⁴²⁹ Hildebrand, on the other hand, does not espouse Noble’s claim and mentions that ‘Bradley’s unconscious valorisation of patriarchy is accompanied by a conscious rejection.’ She goes on by stating that Bradley certainly attacks patriarchy, especially when it comes to a phallogocentric wielding of power, but she also adds that ‘the shortcomings of the text should not overshadow its strength.’⁴³⁰

To sum up, Bradley’s text uses the Arthurian tradition’s potential for presenting religious issues to create a story which includes a contemporary religion and portrays it in a way that may be relevant for the reader’s personal life [...]. [...] Despite the attempt to depict the Goddess tradition as empowering and liberating women, traces remain of the patriarchal view of women and of the patriarchal condemnation of female sexuality. Bradley attempts to ascribe evil to religious fanaticism and the patriarchal power structure, but still portrays women who are evil, or likely to cause

⁴²⁶ Hildebrand, 120.

⁴²⁷ Cf. Bradley, *Mists*, 83-84.

⁴²⁸ Cf. Hildebrand, 121-122.

⁴²⁹ Noble, 145.

⁴³⁰ Hildebrand, 122.

evil, as more strongly sexual than other women, thereby subscribing to a patriarchal view of female sexuality. [...] The overall importance of *The Mists of Avalon*, [so Bradley states,] [...] most likely rests in its position as a work that promotes a religious alternative. It offers a character for modern readers to identify with their attempts to structure a religious experience or desire.⁴³¹

⁴³¹ Hildebrand, 122-126.

Conclusion

Much has been written about what is now called Arthurian literature and much has been written about Morgan le Fay. Nevertheless, the topic still preserves its unrelenting popularity.

A legend with its origins in the Middle Ages and its focus on a king and the nobles of his court might seem to have little relevance to the modern world [...]. Yet just the opposite is true. The stories surrounding King Arthur and the knights and ladies of Camelot enjoy a tremendous vitality and are retold with increasing frequency and variety. Almost universally recognized, the major characters and symbols of the legend appear in novels, plays, poems, films, music, art, and popular forms, including comic books, toys and games, and advertisements. [...] Among the Arthurian legends, [...] [t]here is also the magic of Morgan le Fay, who over the years changes from benign healer to a wicked enemy of Arthur and then to a woman whose own values and concerns become central in some retellings of the story.⁴³²

As stated above by Alan Lupack, Morgan le Fay changes her faces and names in the course of time and with each appearance. The major Arthurian literature representatives chosen, provided a basis for an analysis in how far societies and writers were influenced by issues and beliefs of the times they lived in and in how far Morgan le Fay can be perceived as a mirror of each society and/or writer under consideration.

She was first introduced by Geoffrey of Monmouth's fundamental pieces of Arthurian literature, *The Historia Regum Britanniae* and *The Vita Merlini*, which were both composed approximately in the mid-twelfth century. Not yet Arthur's sister in *The Vita Merlini*, "Morgen", as Geoffrey of Monmouth calls her, is portrayed as a lovely, learned and potent woman. In this very first portrait of her, she is a thoroughly benevolent figure, a healer and a white magician and there is no trace of any malice, nor enmity has against Arthur in later narratives of Arthurian literature.

⁴³² Lupack, 1.

In Christian medieval society, women were not intended to be on equal terms with their husbands. Their granted place was one on the periphery of society where a strict division between men and women existed. In fact, women found themselves in a very difficult position: almost rendered to immobility and in neither case they were allowed to make decisions of their own or to develop their own personality. During the harsh realities of such a crude age, people needed to believe in something and what found innumerable followers came later to be known as the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary was understood as a highly exalted woman. She was placed above all other women on earth and above the human race in general. The Virgin Mary embodied in some way a missing link between two worlds: she bridged and joined the divine and spiritual world with the human and physical one. Her purity and faithfulness was therefore set as a role model for all women. In relation to this context, it just seemed to be inevitable to draw a connection between Geoffrey's 'Morgen' and the Virgin Mary in the first chapter of this thesis.

In later narratives, not only Morgan le Fay's healing powers were transformed but also her original beauty was negatively drawn. The Middle Ages are known as an epoch full of misogyny deriving from the 'unknowability' of women who 'were comprised of two opposing halves, good and evil. In the cases of Nimue and Morgan, both sorceresses harbour these contradictions, for they equally destroy and save. [...] [Thus,] the contradictions that appear with the female magical characters are naturally manifestations of historical medieval sentiments.'⁴³³

Medieval society was marked by a shift towards patriarchy, which began to germinate under Roman influence, and flourished even more so by the arrival of Christianity. In Celtic tradition, '[...] women [were] powerful, competent, respectable forces in society, yet after centuries of patriarchy and developing misogyny, their Celtic powers in the areas of state and religion [had] been vilified and reduced to either good or evil.'⁴³⁴

⁴³³ Choronzky, 60-70.

⁴³⁴ Choronzky, 71.

Morgan le Fay, until then known as powerful and intelligent from Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*, suddenly was depicted in terms of an exceptional threat to the medieval male – that is why she had to be sent away to a nunnery where she became a necromancer. It was Sir Thomas Malory that turned Morgan into Arthur's half-sister and an evil enchantress in his fifteenth-century *Le Morte Darthur*. This work somehow became the source for many writers who adapted the Arthurian legend in the centuries to come. In Malory's text Morgan le Fay is depicted as an utterly dark and malicious character. She stands for the prototypical notion of the 'fallen woman'. At a time when Mary Magdalene functioned as a 'counter-heroine' amidst a patriarchal, oppressive society and culture, Mary Magdalene's ambiguous position of being a sinful prostitute and a repentant sinner has many parallels with Malory's portrayal of Morgan le Fay. Therefore, it seemed to be imperative to establish a connection between Morgan le Fay and Mary Magdalene.

A split image of Morgan le Fay, however, emerges in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (published between 1856 and 1885) where she appears in the guise of the enchantress called Vivien. Whereas Malory, whose work was the main source for Tennyson's retelling, preserved at least some kind of ambiguity in Morgan le Fay's character, Tennyson did not and he turned her into an epitome of wickedness. With her forces of evil unleashed and passion unrestrained she undermined everything that Victorian males cherished. Representing a woman who acquires and exercises verbal as well as physical control over men, Vivien alias Morgane became an embodiment of threat to male Victorian order. She questioned male power in general and with her lack of purity, which was perceived as 'the essence of respectable womanhood', Vivien embodied the archetypical woman of the streets: the prostitute. Instead of being innocent and virtuous Vivien plays with her sexuality and seduces Merlin. Furthermore, she deprives him of his secret knowledge and thus triggers off another fear of Victorian men: the educated woman. The *Idylls of the King's* setting is a distant Victorianized past that helped Tennyson to preserve an aesthetic distance while he discussed contemporary issues and problems of the nineteenth century.

As the centuries progressed and Freudian ideas found more and more their echoes in society, for the first time in history, writers were able to step out into the public and could now express their own views properly.

In the early 20th century, *The Once and Future King* by T.H.White figures one of the most complete and unique portrayals of the immortal legend of King Arthur. White recreated the epic saga from King Arthur's childhood education and experiences until his death in a truly insightful and new way. He was yet another author who relied on Malory, but his rendering of the Arthurian legend differed from traditional versions in so far that he included contemporary knowledge and concepts. He added new stories and characters to the legend and provided new perspectives by probing more deeply into the existing tales. By adding humour to the story he gave his narrative versatility. Another split image of Morgan le Fay emerges in White's character of Queen Morgause. She even becomes the central figure of one of the four books that constitute *The Once and Future King*. As a close remodelling of White's own mother Constance White, Morgause/Morgan le Fay emerges as both a product of her history and as a psychological reflection of White's own past. Like the other women in *The Once and Future King* who become their male counterparts' mirrors of their true nature and feelings, Morgause acts as White's mirror of his childhood past. Thus, for White, Morgan le Fay constituted a perfect means for catharsis. Larrington states that 'White's Freudian rewriting of Morgause [/Morgan le Fay] influenced [further] treatments of [her] character.'⁴³⁵

The final primary text of this thesis was chosen with the intention to carry the reader into the second half of the 20th century, when Marion Zimmer-Bradley published her Arthurian novel *The Mists of Avalon* (1982). The book is written from an unprecedented female perspective. Morgan le Fay, for the first time in her history, emerges as the protagonist and narrator of a retelling of the Arthurian legends. Morgaine of the Fairies, as she is called in the book, is seen fighting for her matriarchal Celtic culture in a country where patriarchal Christianity threatens to destroy the ancient pagan way of life. Bradley portrays her as an empowered

⁴³⁵ Larrington, 179.

female character next to weak women and tortured male leads. The book has often been criticized especially for that cause and for being nothing but feminist propaganda. Marion Zimmer-Bradley, however, was a woman who lived in the 1960s and 1970s and experienced the 'Zeitgeist' of the neopagan 'New Age'. She experienced the changing image of womanhood herself. Influenced by the feminist movement of her time, she thus created a unique piece of Arthurian literature and, moreover, another unique version of the character of Morgan le Fay.

As demonstrated in the previous chapters of this thesis, Morgan le Fay is presented in very different masks and names in the course of literary history. The primary works chosen are representative of the centuries and societies under consideration and thus provide a persuasive basis for closer analysis of the Arthurian character and of Morgan le Fay's development throughout history. One representation could and would not exist without its precedent and every single one appeared to be vital for Morgan's further development. It is especially this process which is illuminating and has made it possible for Morgan le Fay to re-emerge in the 20th century as the female leading character in *The Mists of Avalon*.

Authors tend to adjust to the time they live in. Any time they have decided to write about King Arthur and the tales linked with him, writers re-fashion the narratives in order to make them more accessible for contemporary readers and for different generations. Marion Zimmer-Bradley once stated that it would be 'unthinkable to tell tales of Arthur without also telling tales of the women involved.'⁴³⁶ Especially without Morgan le Fay.

A new hero is emerging in Arthur's realm, a queen truly worthy, at last, not only of the Once and Future King, but also of a new generation of women who are seizing responsibility for their own lives.
[This] is Morgan le Fay [...]⁴³⁷

⁴³⁶ Zimmer Bradley, M. Thoughts About Avalon. [Http://mzbworks.home.att.net/thoughts.htm](http://mzbworks.home.att.net/thoughts.htm) (6.8.2008)

⁴³⁷ Thompson, Raymond H. in Fenster, 342.

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German Abstract

Der Artus-Mythos ist wahrscheinlich der am häufigsten nach-, neu- und umerzählte Stoff der europäischen Literaturgeschichte. Hunderte wenn nicht sogar Tausende Schriftsteller, Dichter, Sänger und Historiker haben sich mit ihm seit seiner ersten schriftlichen Niederlegung befasst und ihn in zahlreiche Sprachen übertragen. Dabei ist es jedoch bis zum heutigen Zeitpunkt keinem Rezipienten gelungen, ihm auch nur annähernd eine allgemein gültige Gestalt zu geben. Es ist eher Gegenteiliges der Fall: der Artus-Mythos scheint Weiterdichtungen, Modernisierungen, Erweiterungen und vor allem Veränderungen sowie Ergänzungen geradezu magisch anzuziehen. Dies gilt im Besonderen auch für einen der wichtigsten weiblichen Charaktere in der Mythologie rund um König Artus: die Figur der Morgan le Fay.

Die hier vorgelegte Diplomarbeit untersuchte Morgan le Fays Darstellung und ihre Weiterentwicklung in ausgewählten Werken der Standardliteratur rund um den Artusstoff. Da Schriftsteller in ihren Arbeiten oft die Lebensumstände, den gelebten Zeitgeist und die soziale Rollenverteilung ihrer Gesellschaft reflektieren, wurden diese zwischen dem 12. und 20. Jahrhundert verfassten Werke hinsichtlich ihrer Funktion als Spiegelbild der jeweiligen Gesellschaft analysiert. Besonderes Augenmerk wurde dabei auch auf die Rolle der Frau im jeweiligen Jahrhundert gelegt.

Davon ausgehend versuchte diese Diplomarbeit festzustellen, inwieweit der Charakter der Morgan le Fay also die Auffassung vom Frauenbild der jeweiligen Epoche beziehungsweise Gesellschaft nun widerspiegelt oder eher davon abweicht. Als Einführung in die Materie wird im ersten Kapitel auch noch auf die Ursprünge und Vorläufer der Figur der Morgan le Fay, die sich in der keltischen Kultur finden lassen, näher eingegangen.

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1999- dato	2 Jahre Unterrichtserfahrung im Fach Englisch (1-8. Klasse Gymnasium Nachilfe)
September 2000 - 2002	Übersetzungen und Korrekturen von universitären Seminararbeiten

• **Besondere Interessen/Tätigkeiten**

seit Jänner 2006 - dato	Sängerin der Band „Transceiver“ www.transceiver.cc www.myspace.com/transceiverband
seit Mai 1999 - 2003	Organisation & Management von „Fubar“ (Musik Band)
SS 1998-WS 1998/1999	Studienfach Gesang (Ausbildung: Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst)
WS 1997/1998-SS1998	Sprachtechniken und Gesangsausbildung; Konservatorium, Klagenfurt
1988-1996	Gitarrenunterricht; Musikschule, Villach
Hobbies	Beachvolleyball, Laufen Marathon, Schwimmen Reisen

• **Ehrenamtliche Tätigkeiten:**

September 2005-Juni 2006	Unterricht im Fach „Englisch“ in der 2., 3. und 4. Schulstufe an der Volksschule Grubergasse im 16. Wiener Gemeindebezirk
Mai 1999-2004	Organisation und Gestaltung von Konzerten für den Kulturverein des Studentenheimes „Haus Döbling“
Oktober-November 2001	Durchführung Englischer Unterrichtseinheiten mit Schwerpunkt Atemtechniken und Rethorik für internationale StudentInnen

