Three Medieval Witches: A Study of the Female Antagonist

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Introduction

This essay unravels some of the narrative and existential dimensions of three medieval antagonists, all of whom are female. An antagonist is person, institution, or force that opposes the protagonist, or main character, of the story. In most narratives, antagonists are necessary for the development of the plot because all plot and character-driven stories must have conflict, which insinuates that these oppositional characters are typically deviant, evil or corrupt. Without a force to contend against, the protagonist will face no challenges from which the plot might progress. However, the concept of an antagonist is broader and more complex than a stereotypical villain. Just as there are numerous representations of protagonists, so there are just as many types of antagonists. These antagonists include the villain, who acts purely on selfish desires; or the hero antagonist, whose intentions are noble but thwart the protagonist; the group antagonist, an institution such as a court or family, or in some circumstances a cult or governing body; and, perhaps most complex, the internal antagonist, which embodies the inner turmoil of the protagonist and the psychological barriers that obstruct their growth or progress.

A common assumption is that there is only one description of an antagonist, that implies that the focus in every story is solely reserved for the narrative centered on the main character, who is typically a male figure in medieval literature. Yet, in medieval story-telling, dating back to the seventh century, oppositional literary characters have always been more complex than the belief that they exist only to oppose the hero. In fact, the hero of the tale is often considered as such because the hero is the voice of the narrative, wherein the antagonist is only depicted through the lens of the protagonist.

I focus here specifically on the female antagonist. The female medieval antagonist is as terrifying as she is inspirational. The mystical and otherworldly presence of female literary figures written during a time of rigid social and ideological structures illustrates the respect and fear that potentially empowered women might inflict upon the patriarchy. Historically, the treatment of women who opposed the societal normative was harsh and often implied that otherworldly forces were at work, such as witchcraft. The suspicion of magic and the hostility to seemingly rebellious women could easily combine so that any woman who held a certain amount of power to rival a man was all too easy considered to be aided by a force outside of human nature. The idea of empowered women was so troubling that it contributed to the creation of the literary female antagonist.

In this essay, three characters in particular, Grendel's Mother from *Beowulf*, Morgan le Fay from the Arthurian myths, and Mary Magdalene, who, although a quasi-historical figure, occurs in a number of literary works, are considered: although very different in some ways, all are intrinsically antagonists. For example, Grendel's Mother takes the shape of an inhuman creature, and therefore she appears as a villain because of her otherness and her violent nature. Yet, her own tale encompasses the tragic loss of her child and her plight for revenge. Related to this vendetta, Morgan le Fay is depicted as a constantly changing variation of antagonists, but her goal is always to remain in power because it is her birthright. Vengeance and power imbalance do not contribute to my third example, Mary Magdalene; however, much like Morgan le Fay, she appears as a variety of antagonists. For instance, she provides us with an example of an internal antagonist because of the temptations she must defeat before she is able to ascend as a saint, and

she embodies what I have termed the group antagonist because she represents the sins of all women as seen in orthodox Christianity.

Each of these female characters shares a common factor that distinguishes them from a male antagonist, and that is their power or agency as a domineering force which upsets the patriarchy. They are all considered antagonists not for their malevolence, but in light of their powers as they are able to rival the typical male hero of the story. To have the same might as the masculine hero, these women had to be attributed with rebellious or sinful origins for the tale to make sense. Women during the medieval era were required to be pure and obedient, two characteristics that do not fit the stereotypes of these three literary figures. Their physical descriptions were morphed into that of a swamp creature, witch, and a saint because a human woman would not have been considered to have the same abilities as a male character.

In each case, as I analyze these female antagonists, I will provide a contemporary perspective derived from the studies of feminist theorists Laura Mulvey and Julia Kristeva. In particular, Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* and Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* will be two texts which help analyze the nature of the broader cultural animosity associated with estranged and sexualized perceptions of the female figure. Using their texts to examine the origins and misconceptions of Grendel's Mother, Morgan le Fay, and Mary Magdalene, this essay will explore the roots of the misrepresentation of the female medieval antagonist.

Chapter One: Grendel's Mother

The legend of *Beowulf* is heavily derived from Norse folklore. There have, in fact, been speculations about Grendel's Mother originating from the Norse myth of the Valkyries, but to understand this we must note the tension between Christianity and Paganism in this poem. Outwardly, the tale appears to be a typical Christian retelling of a tragedy; however, there are underlying underlying suggestions of Paganism that still remain prominent within the work. Religion as it relates to warfare can explain the desire for battle, but religion as it relates to women can exemplify the codes and values through which society is built upon. In medieval Christianity, women are often shamed for their sexuality and forced to bear the shame of men's sins. Yet in Norse mythology, there are tales about giantess women, particularly the goddess Skadi, and female warriors who were worshiped by all and prayed to through forms of sacrifice and devotion.

The poem therefore grows out of the cusp of religious transformation in seventh-century Scandinavia, when Paganism began to dwindle under the impact of Christianity. Denmark became the first Scandinavian country to be entirely Christianized, which is why the prominent network of characters in *Beowulf* are appropriately described as Danes. Throughout this period of heightened theological discord, the Germanic warrior code remained prominent—promising wealth and social prestige for all of those whom follow it. A key element to the warrior code was the idea of honor. Vast fixation was placed upon the theme of honor in *Beowulf*, and often this concept was derived especially from military ethics and devotion to the gods in Pagan religion.

In Old Norse literature, female figures tend to emulate Pagan female icons such as the Valkyries. The word valkyrie is derived from the Norse *valkyrja*, meaning “chooser of the slain” or “battle-determiner.” Valkyries function as intermediates between men and deities, often acting as arrangers of destinies and guides for Germanic representations such as communal responsibilities, individual will, and glory. Such female characters in *Beowulf*, particularly Grendel’s Mother, are emblematic of valkyrie imagery. By virtue of her ancestral ties to the first murderer in the Christian religion, Grendel’s Mother is a “misbegotten spirit” (89) who sprung up as a descendant of Cain. She is isolated from the other women of the tale who are revered for their modesty and virtue which is derived from their Christianity, whereas Grendel’s Mother’s corruption is derived from her Paganism. As a story which emphasized religious tensions from the perspective of the Christians, the implication is that Cain incarnates Paganism. Hence, Grendel’s Mother is the only feminine figure in the poem who can address entirely the characteristics of the valkyries by reason of their roles as Odin’s battle maidens who are responsible for selecting the deceased off of battle fields and fighting alongside the dead in the afterworld known as *Valhalla*. Leslie A. Donovan’s *The Valkyrie Reflex* describes the components of valkyrie stereotypes within a heroic setting. She states that a character must abide by the following to be considered a valkyrie:

> 1) exhibit an otherworldly radiance, sometimes associated with the glittering shine of armor or with the fractured illumination linked to battle fires; 2) possess physical prowess equaling or exceeding that of male heroes; 3) serve ceremonial functions within the hall such as ritual cup-bearing at official occasions, gift-giving to heroes, and sewing or preserving special heroic garments, which challenge heroes to fulfill their destinies; 4)

> perform prophetic acts or engage in other speech acts that determine some future fate; 5) choose actions based on the operation of their own strong wills; and 6) undergo the loss of something central and precious to their lives. (p. 228)

Every female character in *Beowulf* possesses most of these attributes, but Grendel's Mother encompasses them all. Donovan details the qualifications of what it means to be a Valkyrie as derived from Old Norse folktales. As arguably one such piece of literature, *Beowulf* reflects these characteristics with Grendel's Mother. Her otherness ensnares men to desire battle with her, her strength is equally aligned with the hero's, she hosts an alternate court beneath the mere, her meaning within the story is to further the development of the hero: each course she takes is of her own free will, her son is murdered, and her plight for vengeance spurs the second half of the tale. In addition, although Valkyries are equivalent to Odin's pagan missionaries, they are likewise calculating women who can become antagonistic according to circumstances such as when they kill mortals who they deem worthy of their immortal army. Grendel's Mother works similarly as a prophet of death in that she influences the progression of events before she appears in the story. The story began with her son Grendel feasting on the Danes, which called for Beowulf and his men to intervene and bring the Geates into the fray. From that moment onward, all of the hero's actions have been signified by Grendel's Mother's impact.

Although her role in the story is crucial, she remains enigmatic. For a character to appear illusive, she would have to posses a trait that differentiates her from everyone else. Within any text, first impressions of characters are often brought about with the introduction of a name. The absence of this identifier immediately exposes the otherness of this person, such is the case with Grendel's Mother. She appears enigmatic and archaic without a defining name—a fragment of a

human woman rather than a creature. Such ambiguity implies her extreme otherness and displaces her from the mortal women or *idesa* of the tale. Another pronoun would cause her to be a grim parallel to either Hildeburh or Wealhtheow, similar to how Grendel can be compared with Beowulf. It would appear that the emphasis on her title takes precedence over her status as a woman, particularly as a mother. Her story is symbolic of motherhood and the female power rather than the demonization of the female villain.

Grendel's Mother's home, known as the Mere, is a stagnant lake of bloodstained water where "the overhanging bank is a maze of tree-roots mirrored in its surface" (*Beowulf*, 966). The reflection of the trees emulate life beneath the water as an anti-landscape that juxtaposes life on land. The Mere symbolizes an alternative world occurring in the same instance as the one above. It reflects the courtly functioning of Hrothgar's mead-hall, Heorot, with Grendel's Mother's own hall. While Grendel's Mother cannot be paralleled to another character by virtue of her otherness, she mirrors Hrothgars position through Heorot paralleling the mere. Much like Hrothgar's kingship, the word *Ides* is frequently used in Old English to reference woman of a noble status, indicating that Grendel's Mother is a lady of high political stature. The word 'queen' would suggest her femininity is mortal, but the title 'woman king' is another analogous term for an otherworldly entity such as herself. It simply seems to not exist, but its presence cannot be denied; such is the nature of the Mere and the woman king who rules it.

Moreover, Grendel's Mother is given various epithets. The most perplexing is "*ides, aglæcwif*" (*Beowulf*, 1259) which has been a term many translators have struggled to decode, for it has an indecisive and ambiguous meaning. While predominantly coming to be defined by traditional scholars as "monstrous hell-bride", in recent texts such as the Seamus Heaney edition

the term can also imply "warrior woman." The transformation of the phrase occurred predominantly in the nineteenth century, which experienced a surge in popular interest in the Anglo-Saxon era. In 1833, the Anglo-Saxon scholar and philologist John Mitchell Kemble translated the first English copy of *Beowulf*, including an extensive glossary of Old English terms. Several other *Beowulf* translations arose after Kemble's publication, eight of which were completed in English during Queen Victoria's reign.

Outside of the philological content, other nineteenth-century trends marked the revival of Anglo-Saxon literature. Charles Dickens, in his 1850s weekly journal *Household Words*, found that the Anglo-Saxon ideologies brought about an enthusiastic sense of English nationalism. Dickens notably admires King Alfred the Great, the ninth century Anglo-Saxon King, and claims in one of his entries that he was "the best and wisest king that ever lived in England" (*Household Words*, II 562). Gender relations during the time of *Beowulf* are mirrored in Dickens'S work, particularly in *A Child's History of England*, which endorses the ideal female virtues as wisdom and peacekeeping. This reflects the behavioral archetypes in *Beowulf* by demonstrating the female power is not for battle, but for intellect and decision making. As the only female antagonist in the epic poem, Grendel's Mother does not embody the ideals of a peacekeeper until modern scholars, such as Seamus Heaney, begin to analyze her character outside of the habitual Victorian lens. This can be deciphered when Heaney redefines the term "ides, aglæcwif" to mean "warrior woman." This redefinition implies that the original term does not carry the antagonistic connotations that it once seemed to have.

The use of language within the text has a pivotal function in deciphering its significance. Various archaic terms share dual meanings as they pertain to their placement in the story. There

are numerous examples of linguistic parallels throughout the text—moments where the language blurs together and creates dual meanings depending on the gender of the character. The definitions of certain terms are subject to change when being used to convey either a male or female character. In relation to *ides aglæcwif*—the masculine version of *aglæcwif* being *aglzeca* —the term alters depending upon its application in the text. Phrases often coalesce in their meanings, with the defining factor being their function towards mortal or monstrous characters. For example, the phrase *aglzeca* is only heroic when describing a mortal figure. The ambiguity can be seen at the line 2595 in *Beowulf* where the word means both "monster" and "hero" at once, similar to how the plural for *aglæcean* later refers to both the dragon and Beowulf: "'Næs tha long to thon, thæt tha aglæcean hy eft gemetton' (It was not long before the *aglæcean* again clashed)."

This blurring of the language evokes more depth in the poem for it uses ambiguity to suggest that all of the characters are realistic and that no one character appears inherently virtuous or corrupt. When battling Grendel, Beowulf's men warily observe the fight between the duo and find it troubling to differentiate the two warriors. The pair had been wrestling tightly, close enough that it become impossible to distinguish who was the man and who was the monster. The lack of manmade weapons highlights the savagery with which they fought, showcasing a raw display of brutality that suggests Beowulf's own monstrous side. As they dueled, a trail of destruction was left in their wake, where "before then, no Shielding elder would believe there was any power or person upon earth capable of wrecking their horn-rigged hall unless the burning embrace of fire engulf it in flame" (*Beowulf*, 53). Beowulf's dismantling of the sacred mead hall, a symbol of Dane nationality, signifies his volatile nature and greed, two

characters which befit Grendel. The hero is unaware of his similarities to Grendel; rather his ferocity is celebrated by his men whereas Grendel's might is deemed inhuman. Both, however, display arrogance and believe they are justifiable in their actions. This uncertainty of morals is a notable element throughout the story. It causes the reader to understand parallels between certain characters.

Yet, Grendel's Mother cannot be compared to another character for she is steadfast in her own disparate nature and her otherworldly presence in the text establishes her as a godlike figure. Although the convolution of language goes on throughout the text, it is different with Grendel's Mother because she is the only character who is both a major influence in the story and a minor figure when it comes to her own tale. We know little of her personal life outside of the sequence of events leading to her demise, but her control over the plot, even as a mysterious figure, alludes to the need to study her character in order to understand the entire story. The changing of certain phrases such as "ides, agclæcwif" over time suggests that the story itself has also been reshaped to fit the notions of modern scholars. It is through this new lens where we are able to understand the motivation behind her actions and the key elements that differentiate her character from others. Specifically, her reign over the Mere places her in a position of power vast enough to rival the protagonist.

One attribute that distinguishes Grendel's Mother's powers from that of Beowulf is her symbolic connection to water. Water is the dominant element in *Beowulf*. Aside from the Mere, water is represented by the sea and the landscape surrounding Heorot. It is a constant presence throughout the tale, leading to its overall significance as a means to emphasize parallel worlds and moral ambiguity. During the time of the epic poem, water held an immense significance to

the Anglo-Saxon people for it symbolized the circulation of life. An example of this can be that the sea provides passage between lands, which allows for the hero and his men to venture to Denmark where most of the story takes place. The Mere, however, is the only body of water in the story that is claimed by a character as their own territory. The sea, the cliffs, and even the outcropping where the dragon lives are all regions unclaimed by a single figure. However, the Mere is Grendel's Mother's own hall. This alone suggests that the Mere is a fixture of alternate space—it exists in reality but is subject to the demands of an unearthly being.

The Mere is linked to the mortal world above through an anti-perspective of the hero. The in itself reflects what theorist Laura Mulvey would suggest are male anxieties because Grendel's Mother is unlike anyone else in that she has no name, but here she is the parallel to its power—not a reference to a particular character, but a female equivalent to a king or male warrior.

The custom of *comitatus*, the Germanic mutual relationship between lord and thane, ensured obedience within the warring clans and preserved the ideal of reciprocal relations. There were certain 'correct' methods of warfare and death that were embedded into the culture as a means of achieving honor. Such an emphasis on violence provoked a heightened sense of patriarchy amongst the tribes—through which honor was measured by fortitude and family ties. While there is evidence of existing female warriors known as shield-maidens during this period, most notable warriors were men.

Grendel's Mother in the anonymously authored *Beowulf* is the solitary female character who exemplifies the honorable way of upholding the warrior code. As revenge for the gruesome demise of her son Grendel at the hands of the Geatish hero Beowulf, she plans an attack on The Danes' Hall. A bizarre combination of events occurs, for she does not destroy the Danes who had

proven to be her weaker opponents, but rather she leaves them and takes only a single warrior in retaliation for the one son that was taken from her. By not destroying to the mead hall, as she very well could have, Grendel's Mother expresses the code of honor by achieving a measured vengeance without displaying her whole strength. Whereas when Grendel was slaughtered, his death that was brought about in a brutal and outnumbered one-sided match, was mocked by the Danes, who strung up his severed arm in their hall as a token of victory. When Beowulf later invades Grendel's Mother's domain, he is armed with Hrunting, a sword never known to fail in combat, and chainmail forged by a legendary smith. His armor acknowledges two things: that Grendel had been a weaker opponent in that Beowulf had challenged him wearing regular garb, his lack of armor indicating his arrogance; and that Beowulf, perhaps subconsciously, is aware of the rank of whom he is preparing to battle. By revealing his intentions by his apparel and through trespassing into her home, Beowulf invites the full force of the frightening female warrior.

Without the presence of an antagonist, the hero of the poem would ever evolve. Grendel's Mother modifies the typical hero in this tale by diverging from the expectations placed on her. She enters the story exhibiting behaviors of a male warrior—avenging the death of her kinsman. This conflation of the masculine and the feminine figures does not discredit her source of power as an *ides* or mother. She performs her solitary warfare by taking only what she must, one life in payment for the life of her son. She answers death with more death, but does not exceed the boundaries that would persuade a warrior in a state of rage to do otherwise. Her honor becomes a prolific extension of womanhood, because her plight is justifiable according to the Germanic law. Similar to the notion of honor, in his essay *Horror and the Maternal*, Paul Acker argues that "Grendel's mother projects Anglo-Saxon cultural anxieties about weaknesses in the system of

feuding and revenge. Killing off one opponent (Grendel) will only trigger the appearance of another (Grendel's mother) as long as the system of revenge by kin is in place" (64). Grendel's Mother is then legitimized in her actions, unlike her son Grendel, whose overindulgent carnage justifies him as a monstrous figure. The Danes viewed both antagonists to be inherently evil by association. Her enemies suspected that she would act in accordance with her son's excessive violence, an expectation reflected on in Acker's suggestion of a weakened feudal system. These male characters rely on the notion that an antagonist will deviate from the honorable warrior code, which in turn makes their heroic actions particularly gallant.

Feminist theorists Laura Mulvey and Julia Kristeva both offer us important perspectives on the female protagonist as represented by Grendel's mother. Laura Mulvey, in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, proposes that the female figure is only presented to the audience to be objectified, not to have agency. She is the "bearer of meaning and not the maker of meaning" (*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 58) which leads to her overall deferral as a passive voice within the text. Her singular contribution is to spur the hero and aid his progression so that he is continuously developing, meanwhile she remains stationary in her role as an antagonist. It is what she provokes and represents that matters, not her agency as a character. The protagonist is only concerned with how the female incites emotional motivations in the male hero. Grendel's Mother is the prophet, or valkyrie, with which Beowulf's story consolidates from. Beowulf's first decree as a fledgling hero is to solidify his divine right when he claims "We [the Geates] have arrived here [Denmark] on a great errand to the lord of the Danes, and I believe therefore there should be nothing hidden or withheld between us" (*Beowulf*, 270). The antagonist's progeny allows for Beowulf to demand entrance into Denmark, thus offering the

hero a starting point in his journey to becoming a legacy. After the fall of Grendel, the hero must strive to match his prior achievements by constantly transcending himself. The female antagonist's voice is eclipsed by the ambitions of the hero, seeing as she is only relevant for the benefit of the male protagonist. Her story does not exist outside of the realm of the hero.

The physical appearance of a woman, according to Mulvey, becomes the fundamental element of her subjugation, but it can also be her power. Her "to-be-looked-at-ness" (*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 62) works alongside the male gaze by exhibiting the unconscious role women display for the controlling male viewer in that they function as signifiers for the male to project his fantasies onto the female. Often this will work, but for Grendel's Mother the effect of her "to-be-looked-at-ness" (62) comes from her physical presence, not her physical appearance. Whereas the other females of the poem are mortal, Grendel's Mother is an isolated female figure. She cannot evoke the same desire that the mortal women can because her sensuality is derived from a separate source—an otherworldly appeal. She is the physical manifestation of an anomaly for Beowulf and his men, as a result of her womanhood coexisting with her inhuman temperament. The hero refers to her as a "swamp-thing from hell" (*Beowulf*, 1518) with savage talons, showing how her "to-be-looked-at-ness" (62) is derived from her metaphysical being alone. Beowulf remains attracted to her supernatural presence because he is unable to decode her. By acknowledging the fear she incites, Grendel's Mother wields her "to-be-looked-at-ness" (62) into a weapon against the male gaze—shattering the connotation that she is a passive entity.

Matching Beowulf's prowess, Grendel's Mother represents the paranoia of the highly masculinized warriors of the time for she is able to hold her own against them and even best

them in battle. With a moral code that adheres to a law of life or death, honor is above all supreme. Yet the main protagonist struggles with this concept throughout the poem while the supposed antagonist seems to define the terminology through her own perspectives. The horror of having a woman, and a villainous one at that, who can maintain a code of conduct more fully than the infamous warriors who claim to live by the ideology, is a fear found by the male characters throughout the poem.

It is through this misconception that Grendel's Mother, who is presented abstractly as a monster, is then portrayed as a spiritual guide for the hero. Paganism would suggest that every action the hero makes is predestined by a supernatural force, and through this fate the antagonist is transformed into the guide by simply existing for the purpose of progressing the hero's quest. While she remains to be the "bearer of the meaning and not the maker" (*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 58), Grendel's Mother appears to have more agency when viewed under these guidelines in behalf of her importance to the main character. It is, however, the threat she represents that causes her to be a character with agency. This can be examined through Mulvey's use of the freudian concept of castration anxiety, which encompasses the male's self-directed fear of a female's absence of masculine genitalia. This void becomes symbolic for the otherness that women embody and reestablish through their children, salvaging the cycle of anxiety through a hereditary configuration. It is because of this stigma that Grendel's Mother remains the bearer, not the maker, for "she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it" (*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 58). The hero is terrified of the female antagonist because he is unable to demystify or fetishizes her, therefore he is unable to escape castration anxiety. Her macabre traits qualify her as the perfect manifestation of this despair, for she does not exist

outside of her monstrous symbolism. Mortal women are more accessibly demystified because they do not posses the nature of the Other, which likewise allows for them to be easily fetishized. To such a degree, Grendel's Mother is an extension of the hero's anxieties about masculinity, honor, and the unknown. Beowulf is unable to acknowledge his internalizations because his subconsciously distraught and repulsed by them, just as he is by Grendel's Mother. This expulsion of loathsome entities is called abjection.

When we turn to Kristeva, her remarks on abjection, mentioned above, are also helpful. In her essay *Powers of Horror*, she describes abjection that which does not follow a specific order or law and "disturbs identity, system, and order" (4). The subject of abjection ejects the unfathomable and unwanted—a revolt against the revolting. As a source of horror, it works by separating humanity from the factitious—such as we experience when viewing a corpse—acknowledging that it was once alive, but is now a subject of otherness. This example of otherness cannot be understood, for the concept of death is inexplicable. Many of the antagonists in *Beowulf* signify the abjection of the hero, but none so intimately as Grendel's Mother. Paul Acker notes "That she [Grendel's Mother] is an avenging mother that may have seemed particularly monstrous, in ways that resonate with Julia Kristeva's comments on abjection and the maternal" (*Horror and the Maternal*, 56). Instead of being objectified, Grendel's Mother becomes an abject of the text. The antagonist's fundamental position as both a monster and a definitive female provides her with equal status to Beowulf, which unites both characters as two separate but evenly substantial powers. Their estranged connection through abjection, as Kristeva notes, "lies there, quite close, but cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced" (*Powers of Horror*, 1). Beowulf's

inability to fracture the mystification of Grendel's Mother affirms his castration anxiety just as it proceeds to elucidate his abjection of all that she represents.

Similar to her home in the Mere, the place of abjection is "where meaning collapses" (*Beowulf*, 2). A fire burns at the bottom of the lake and birds halt their flight as they approach the water's edge. Hrunting, the legendary sword that has never failed in battle, loses all traces of power beneath the surface as "his [Beowulf's] battle-torch extinguished: the shinning blade Refused to bite" (*Beowulf*, 1523). A horn is blown before the warriors enter the Mere, likely signifying the onset of a hunt, yet perhaps its effect is to awaken the water creatures that lurk below the lake. Kristeva notes that "abject things are those which highlight the 'fragility of the law' and which exist on the other side of the border which separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction" (*Powers of Horror*, 48) much like how all creatures residing in the Mere are threats against the mortal world. However, the Mere is not only a physical border between worlds; it is a metaphysical separation under the impression that "abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (*Powers of Horror*, 9). Abjection preserves the existence of the subject, but does not relieve the subject because it acknowledges the horror that is ever present. The unfathomable occurs in the Mere, however the mortal men remain transfixed by it, for they are repelled by their fascination with the things they are programmed to label as grotesque. This fascination stems from the reflection of abjections that appear in the mirror of the lake, as they also appear in Grendel's Mother, for she is the queen of the Mere.

A crucial extract of abjection is the maternal presence, as represented by the image of the

bleeding womb. The body of the mother becomes, as Barbara Creed suggests in her essay *Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection*, a site of conflicting desires. Grendel's Mother is dictated by her status as a mother, as can be assumed through her lack of a more determined name, that is to say, she represents the matriarchy throughout Beowulf. Creed suggests that

> If we posit a more archaic dimension to the mother—the mother as originating womb—we can at least begin to talk about the maternal figure as outside the patriarchal family constellation. In this context, the mother-goddess narratives can be read as primal-scene narratives in which the mother is the sole parent. She is also the subject, not the object, of narrativity. (*Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine*, 60)

Creed suggests that the mother holds the occupation of childbirth and therefore becomes a focal part of the narrative. This representation of the mother figure as the sole parent coincides with the authority of the matriarchy. The mother as a goddess narrative offers more agency to the female character than that of the bleeding womb imagery, which complements Grendel's Mother's relation in the story as the sovereign matron. Her son Grendel shares many symbolic references with the hero, creating a parallel between two ambitious and overzealous young men, both of whom desire to be immortalized. Hence, Beowulf is a figurative son to Grendel's Mother through the various resemblances both male characters share.

It can therefore be seen that Grendel's Mother functions as an antagonist in *Beowulf* but one who does not abide by the stereotypical conventions of a literary villain. Through the theories of Julia Kristeva and Laura Mulvey, it is clear that Grendel's Mother is an abstraction of masculine fear disguised by objectification.

Chapter Two: Morgan le Fay

The female antagonist is a frequently occurring figure in medieval literature.The typical male hero will always need a villain to produce conflict and a female antagonist produces the reflection of male fear. As I have shown, Grendel's Mother in *Beowulf* is merely one example of an empowered female character who is traditionally seen as an antagonist. In later tales, Morgan le Fay emerges as another example of the demonization of mythical women in the role of the antagonist.

While *Le Morte D'Arthur* is one of the most celebrated literary works of the Middle Ages, it is also the first to distinctly put forth modern concerns such as the nature of identity, both personal and national, as suggested by T.J Lustig's. The characters in *Le Morte D'Arthur* reflect the uncertainty of the fifteenth-century while creating an imagined past that Malory believed would be worthy of an ideal future.

During the Middle Ages, the Arthurian tales from Celtic folklore and Christian legend were romanticized to fit the values derived from Christianity, resulting in both the addition of specifically Christian events and also the evolution of several focal characters. The character of Morgan le Fay in particular was drastically changed from her Welsh origin as the goddess Modron to the character of Morgana. The effect was to erase any sympathy that medieval Christians might have experienced for her character by vilifying her as an enchantress. Morgan's transformation shows how the demonization of old pagan deities was a profound ongoing means of enforcing strict Christian principles. Modron symbolized the Great Mother Goddess of the old

religion, which made her a prominent female figure as well as a signifier of Paganism. The many narratives and plots of the legend is perhaps why it is nearly impossible to grasp a definite reading of Morgan le Fay. She is constantly being shifted to fit various anecdotes. The single attribute that accompanies her throughout these stories without change is her authority, much like Arthur. Whether she is deemed villainous or benevolent for having such power is entirely based upon the context of the tale. However, her fall from grace can be traced over time as she declines from the Mother Goddess to an incestuous witch.

The context of the original myth of Arthurian legend has been transformed to emphasize Christian beliefs rather than pagan ones, which is how the Cauldron of Plenty became the Holy Grail. Such a transformation can be seen in Carver's essays when he notes that "The right of a queen (Guinevere) to take any lover that she pleases was replaced with a stern judgement upon her adultery, despite her husband's similar sin." It is, as Margaret Murray asserts, "The God of the Old Religion becomes the Devil of the New" (The God of the Witches, 1). Through this method, the original Arthurian tales have been morphed several times over as history reshapes the stories.

As Dax Donald Carver notes in his essay *Goddess Dethroned: The Evolution of Morgan le Fay*, "the mother goddess of the ancient Celts was transformed, slowly and deliberately, into a vile and evil enchantress, bent on destruction" (Carver, 7). Despite Morgan le Fay's notoriety, she remains an elusive character to this day. There is a common misconception that her origin resulted from Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth century text, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, where she appears as the wicked enchantress and half-sister of King Arthur. Yet Malory's writing was a translation of archaic Arthurian tales which he updated. As Carver noted, very limited fragments of the

original story were preserved. The first written account of Arthur—consequently the beginning of Arthurian legend—is in the medieval Welsh series of elegies known as the *Y Gododdin*. This collection of poems was written in about 600 AD, and survives only in the manuscript the *Book of Aneirin*, which was compiled in the late thirteenth-century. However, all versions of the earliest Arthurian saga recall a different tale of Morgan, in some of which she is not related to Arthur and others where she is not entirely human, but a divine and otherworldly being.

Morgan is believed to have been first mentioned in written form by the Anglo-Welsh bishop Gaufridus Monemutensis, generally called Geoffrey of Monmouth, as the character *Morgen* (without the *le Fay* suffix) in his poem *Vita Merlini* (Life of Merlin). In this tale, she is not a relative of Arthur but a benevolent physician and the sovereign of an island where Arthur is taken to heal after his final battle. The island, *Insula Pomorum* (Island of Fruit and Apples), is also called the 'Blessed Isle' for its plentiful vegetation and the magical elements it encompasses. On this island Morgen teaches how to cure ailments and how to tend plants. Nothing more is written in the *Vita Merlini* about her, although the brief depiction of her being "more skilled in the healing art (*Vita Merlini,* 26)" than her siblings, and that she "excels her sisters in the beauty of her person" alludes to Celtic traditions of fairies and goddesses.

The way in which Geoffrey of Monmouth describes Morgan resembles the same embodiment of worship one would devote to Celtic gods, as can be seen through the roots of her original name. Modron, which means divine mother, appears as a supernatural female figure in Welsh tradition known as the Mother Goddess. She is presumably derived from the Celtic goddess Matrona, who was known to have been worshiped in Gaul during the Iron Age. It is widely speculated that Morgan le Fay is a prototype of Modron, whose name first appears in the

preliminary Arthurian tale of *Cullhwch and Olwen*. Only two manuscripts of this tale were recovered, one of which was included in the collection of early English literature, *The Mabinogion.* This shows how the Arthurian legends take on autonomous narratives, as they do not always concern the principal characters. The story follows Cullhwch, the nephew of Arthur, as he seeks the aid of his uncle's knights after his stepmother curses him to wed the daughter of the giant Ysbaddaden Pencawr, Olwen. Arthur agrees to help and sends six of his finest warriors, including Gwalchmai, who is later known as Sir Gawain in the fable *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The majority of the story is dedicated to King Arthur's knights, even though it seems to mainly account for Cullhwch and Olwen.

Although a prominent character throughout Arthurian legend, the legend of Morgan le Fay has never been written into something as vast as stories concerning Arthur. It is through this parallel to her half-brother that Morgan's role in literature begins to degenerate, as caused by the Catholic ideology of how women should act and therefore be portrayed in popular texts. By the time Malory writes his account of the Arthurian legends, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, in the late fifteenth-century, Morgan's notoriety is no longer one of admiration, but one of warning.

As noted above, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* is the first text to mention Morgan le Fay. She is the Lady of Avalon, which is referred to as the Isle of Apples—symbolic for the prosperity of this particular Morgan. The inhabitants of the island live to be a hundred years old and the fields do not need to be tended for crops to grow. Everything is left untouched by humans, which alludes to the notion that everything on the Fortunate Isle, as it is often called, is as otherworldly as the woman who oversees it. Morgan's dominion is reminiscent of paradise, which is a drastic juxtaposition from her later appearances in literature. Her involvement

throughout the story is quite minimal in comparison to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or *Le Morte d'Arthur*, which emphasizes her role as a goddess figure. Her minimal exposure in the *Vita Merlini* would suggest a lack of character importance had it not been for her significant role in underlying the story. It is because of the minimal written account of Morgan's presence in the tale that she creates a mystical appeal both unsettling and endearing.

There are no accusations of witchcraft written in the *Vita Merlini* that would suggest Morgan practices dark arts, and all of her actions are for the benefit of others. In fact, this Morgan is only present in the *Vita Merlini* for one paragraph. Carolyne Larrington notes that Morgan is "a fully developed and yet mysterious figure" (King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition, 24). in regards to the unwritten fascination surrounding her character. The lack of her presence throughout the story is used to further her image as a charismatic figure, for she can do no wrong if she is only present in a single scene.

> There nine sisters rule by a pleasing set of laws those who come to them from our country. She who is first of them is more skilled in the healing art, and excels her sisters in the beauty of her person. Morgen is her name, and she has learned what useful properties all the herbs contain, so that she can cure sick bodies. She also knows an art by which to change her shape, and to cleave the air on new wings like Daedalus; when she wishes she is at Brest, Chartres, or Pavia, and when she will she slips down from the air onto your shores.

However, her role in this tale also emphasizes her as a supernatural healer and a woman of great authority. Further evidence of her nature in the *Vita Merlini* can be found in a piece of the brief paragraph where she is mentioned. Morgan had originally been the eldest of nine sisters,

all of whom resided on the Fortunate Isle and abided by her law. In accordance to the patterns of these tales, Morgan's sisters are parallels to Arthur's knights. It is because we do not know much about them that they share a similar elusiveness with their ruling sister, yet her story is the only one we are drawn to. During the Middle Ages, physical beauty in literature was a sign of virtue, which prompts Geoffrey of Monmouth to write that Morgan "excels her sisters in the beauty of her person." The nine sisters are symbolic of the nine ancient Greek Muses. These muses were deities that inspired many ancient philosophers, artists, and writers to create pieces of art that would be preserved for centuries. Often ancient writers would appeal to the Muses in the openings of their tales, hoping to cultivate that creative energy which inspired so many. Homer, for example, calls for the Muses in the beginning of both the Iliad and the Odyssey to help him tell the tales. In *The Odyssey* translated by Robert Fitzgerald, Homer invokes in the opening line "Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story" (The Odyssey, 1).

The intellect and beauty through which the enchantress is described all adhere to certain medieval stereotypes that concern the makings of a heroine. It is her "art by which to change her shape" (Vita Merlini, 26) that removes her from the usual stereotypes and places her in a separate category altogether, one where she is unmatched and immortalized. The phrasing to "cleave the air on new wings like Daedalus *(Vita Merlini,* 26)" coincides with various other comparisons of ancient Greek narrative, all of which support a benevolent image of Morgan while connecting her tale to that of the classics. Her boundless knowledge may seem dangerous to a medieval audience, as portrayed in later texts, but the supernatural abilities she possesses in the *Vita Merlini* render saint-like impressions rather than reminiscing a witch. Because she does not

outwardly inspire immoral behavior or challenge any male authority, this Morgan is safe from suspicion.

Given his background as a bishop and a historian, Geoffrey of Monmouth was well attuned to early depictions of witches and could have easily transfigured Morgan into a malevolent character with terrifying female authority. Instead his texts are a window into ancient pre-Christian folklore that surrounds Paganism and the concept of magic. This Morgan offers a glance into the ambivalent views of magic during the early twelfth-century. Her involvement in literary texts steadily continue to evolve with the influx of fascination she receives over the centuries, and with it awakens her devolution.

I turn now to the mysterious Green Knight appears in two texts, first in the ballad *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, under the name Sir Bredbeddle, and later in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as Bertilak de Hautdesert. The name Bertilak may have been derived from the Celtic word "bachlach" meaning churl or contentious. This minor detail further connects the Green Knight to Morgan le Fay—referred to as Morgana in this tale. As a traditional adversary of King Arthur, Morgana created the Green Knight to challenge her enemy kin while also terrorizing Queen Guinevere for spite after the queen ended Morgana's affair with her cousin, Sir Guiomar.

The Green Knight is titled because of his green skin and hair color, although the subject of his green-ness has puzzled numerous scholars since his introduction in literature. However, one common belief is that he is derived from Celtic mythology as the Green Man or Cernunnos —a figure predominately represented as a forest deity. Medieval audiences would likely be adverse to Cernunnos for he was a symbolic pagan figure and was connected to the more

dangerous aspects of nature, such that Sir Gawain faces when he nearly freezes to death on his journey. The Green Knight's otherworldly presence and pagan origins are procured from Morgana, who appears even more wicked than her knight all the while remaining as mysterious as her true intentions for sending him to Arthur's court.

The fourteenth-century tale *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* preserves Morgan's status as an otherworldly entity while evoking a stronger sense of her physical character. In this tale she is depicted as a mischievous enchantress whose magic is the cause of much mischief, most of which occur to King Arthur's knights, particularly Sir Gawain. During the eve of the New Year, the Green Knight appears at Arthur's court to challenge the boldest of his men. Who accepts the Green Knight's challenge will be granted the opportunity to cleave off his head with an axe on the condition that the victor will receive a similar death blow in one year's time. Sir Gawain bravely steps forward and severs the Green Knight's head but is utterly disturbed when the knight picks up his head and places it back on his neck before reminding Gawain of their agreement.

In due time, Gawain sets off to face the unforgiving conditions of extreme weather as the seasons pass, all while encountering giants, dragons, and other foes. As winter nears, he locates a castle upon where his host's wife attempts to seduce him each night, much to the supposed unawareness of her husband. Gawain fends off her advances and it is later revealed that his host, Sir Bertilak, was in fact the Green Knight he had so wished to avoid. The bargain they struck a year prior was finally dissolved after the Green Knight merely cuts the side of Gawain's neck on the third blow of his axe for not telling him of the green girdle gifted to Gawain by Bertilak's wife.

In this tale, Morgan is no longer the whimsical healer in the *Vita Merlini*, but an unpredictable force determined to conjure tests for Arthur's knights with the intention of watching them tragically fail. In the limited mentions of her name in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, she is called "Morgaine, the Goddess" (81), which reflects the theory that she a surviving figure of a Celtic goddess. She is not yet as vindictive as she is portrayed to be in later texts such as Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, yet her trickster spirit and cunning behavior is brought to life all the while she remains ambiguously neutral. Had the Green Knight performed the proffered task of beheading Sir Gawain, Morgana would have been presented under a harsher analyzation and deemed entirely evil. Instead, her characteristics become less supernatural. She desires to do harm, a detail missing from prior Morgan stories, although her parallel to the nature presence of the Green Knight suggests that she is like the forest as well—yielding to the needs for survival while also acquiring the ability to take lives. Morgana's essence has declined in grace, but her authority grows as she transforms into an exceedingly complex force.

Most fifteenth-century pre-Arthurian tales are considered to have been folkloric pieces which embodied elements of typical medieval storytelling. I turn next to *Le Morte D'Arthur*, written by Sir Thomas Malory, completed around the year 1469 one year before his death. The sole surviving manuscript was published after his death by William Caxton in 1485; thus we are entirely dependent on Caxton's version of the story. The identity of Thomas Malory has never been fully affirmed, although according to historians he is believed to have been Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire, who was starkly rebellious, resulting in numerous imprisonments occurring around the same time when *Le Morte D'Arthur* was written. In the preliminary section of his introduction, Malory writes, "This was drawyn by a knyght presoner,

sir Thomas Malleoré, that God sende hym good recover." The term "knight prisoner" was used to implore readers to pray for Malory's soul while he remained in prison, yet it also entails a cynical juxtaposition to the reverence of King Arthur and his knights (Knight Prisoner: Thomas Malory Then and Now, 1).

The book was originally intended to be comprised of eight volumes and had been titled *The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table,* but it instead took the title of the last written piece—*Le Morte D'Arthur*, or The Death of Arthur. Malory's story has been traditionally viewed as the ultimate accomplishment of Arthurian tales, the means by which each character has become fixed into modern culture. The central preoccupations of the text seem to revolve around desire, violence, and English nationalism—all elements of chivalric narrative that drastically contrasts with the rebellious lifestyle of Malory.

Morgan le Fay has appeared in earlier stories as a secondary figure, and as such her character had never been developed into one with complete agency over her actions. Authors had written her into stories as a peacekeeper, one who only surfaces to aid other figures or cause playful mischief. Malory's Morgan le Fay is unlike any earlier rendition. She appears frequently in the text and delivers significant speeches where previous authors barely granted her a single line. Not only is her physical presence noted throughout, but she becomes a primary figure for the first time in literature.

The first mention of Morgan le Fay in *Le Morte D'Arthur* describes her as a "great clerk of necromancy" (Malory, 35). Only a few pages later she is mentioned to be "as fair a lady as any might be" (60), which, combined with her former portrayals, insinuates that her beauty is unnatural and acts as a false shield to dismiss her presence as a threat. This veil of innocence

compelled everyone to believe she was compliant, especially her half-brother King Arthur, who trusted her so earnestly that he gave her Excalibur for safekeeping. Shortly after she takes the sword, Malory's writes that "she would have had Arthur her brother slain, and therefore she let make another scabbard like it by enchantment" (80) and grants Excalibur to her paramour, Sir Accolon, with the intention of defeating Arthur using his own blade. She then sends one of her ladies to Arthur with a forged replica of Excalibur and tells him that Morgan "sendeth here your sword for great love" (116). While Sir Accolon initially has the advantage as he duels with Arthur, the false sword breaks and the deceit of Morgan becomes known. The Lady of the Lake then magically flings the true Excalibur from Accolon's hands and Arthur retrieves the sword, leading shortly after to Accolon's fall.

As he bleeds out, Accolon confesses his understanding of Morgan, that 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" (119). It is known that while Morgan and Arthur are both children of Lady Igraine, they were fathered by different men. In his essay, Carver writes a biography of Morgan's earlier life as mentioned in prior texts, which accounts for the origin of her antagonism. He mentions that Uther Pendragon, the High King of Britain, was infatuated by Igraine and bid Merlin to disguise him with the visage of her husband, Duke Gorlois, while the Duke was away in battle. Igraine is unaware of the switch, and as a result becomes pregnant after sleeping with the king. Gorlois is quickly defeated that same night, and Uther takes Lady Igraine as his wife before declaring that all of her daughters are to be wed so to dissolve any traces of her prior relationship. All but Morgan are sent away, and as time goes on, she grows to despise both the king and his son Arthur, for she is aware of the deception that took place.

The events which occur prior to Morgan's childhood are seldom mentioned in the larger context of Arthurian legend, which leads to the misconception that her anger is inherently the cause of her sins as a scorned woman. Yet it is precisely the type of usurping that would cause an honorable person of this era, particularly a man, to seek justifiable vengeance. For instance, after Arthur is informed by Merlin that a newborn will be the eventual cause of his demise, Arthur orders the slaughter of all children born in May, similar to the biblical Massacre of the Innocents by King Herod. It is why Morgan harbors a single task in life—to rid Arthur of everything just as he had taken everything from her with his birth alone.

All the while in Malory's tale, Morgan still believes her half-brother is deceased as she plots to murder her husband, Sir Uriens. Before she can strike, her son, Sir Uwaine, proclaims that if she were not his mother, he would have beheaded her for such a betrayal, even claiming that "men saith that Merlin was begotten of a devil, but I may say an earthly devil bare me" (121). Morgan lies to her son and tells him that she had been compelled to murder her husband by malicious forces; Uwaine believes her and warns that she should never try to harm his father again.

The ambiguous virtue of the characters, the portrayed contents between magic as opposed to faith, and the context of which the story was written all support the impression that *Le Morte D'Arthur* is a fantasized recollection of the past meant to inspire a flourishing future. On the basis that Thomas Malory wrote this tale during a critical time in fifteenth-century England, it reflects the yearning for self-identity and national identity as it was being threatened by real historical events. Similar to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* or *The History of the Kings of Britain* written in 1136, Malory pieced together a fictionalized history based upon

true events so to immortalize the nostalgia for the past, leading the way, he hoped, for a golden-age.

I turn now, as I did with Grendel's Mother, to the feminist theories of Laura Mulvey, whose studies can help us understand that Morgan le Fay is an exemplary figure with which we can study the sexual imbalance in medieval texts. Mulvey mentions that "analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it" (60), a concept that pertains to Morgan le Fay because of her always changing image. Morgan is a shape-shifter, both in a literal sense due to her magic, and in a metaphorical manner due to her long index of names over the course of centuries such as Modron, Morigan, and Morgana. The eventual inclusion of the suffix "le Fey" surfacing around the fifteenth-century touches upon an unearthly likeness to faeries, particularly mischievous spirits who tricked mortals and relished in causing pandemonium.

Morgan's altering appearances seem to all share a common thread, a macabre illusiveness and a power grand enough to rival her male counterparts, Arthur and Merlin. As a prototypical antagonist, Morgan is a female figure who challenges the dominance of the male protagonist. In the *Vita Merlini*, her sole purpose is to heal Arthur, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, her presence is meant to test Arthur's court, and in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, she acts as the villain needed to benefit Arthur's heroic adventures. Her actions are meant to be in correspondence to her half-brother, as seen throughout every Morgan narrative in literature.

We should therefore consider the relationship as phallocentric. Phallocentrism dictates that the male sexual organ is is "the central element in the organization of the social world" (Mulvey, 57). It relies on castration anxiety to enact order and meaning. This fear stems from the lack of a phallic symbol, particularly when we consider Morgan's presence as an

empowered female figure, but one lacking the centralized icon of power in the existence of Excalibur—Arthur's legendary sword. Arthur is at his most powerful when wielding the weapon, as displayed by his battle with Sir Accolon. It is ironic, then, that Morgan was the one to grant this emblem of strength to either male figure. Her brother initially gave her Excalibur for safekeeping, which further suggests that the power of the Mother Goddess. Arthur left his emblem, thus the throne, in Morgan's hands.

The implied undermining of phallocentrism is also why Morgan chose to toss the scabbard into the lake after discovering Sir Accolon's death. The scabbard is made of gold and emblazoned with gems, thus allowing for its quick submergence beneath the water. This tossing of the phallic symbol into the mirrored surface represents Morgan's breaking of the patriarchy and reversing the gender roles, as seen when she pardons one knight who is sentenced to drown by drowning his captor instead. Similar to the Mere in *Beowulf*, the antagonistic female figure is drawn to water as a token of the matriarchy—reflecting the known world flipped upside down.

In feminist theory, the male castration anxiety can only be eradicated by voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia, which either dehumanizes the female figure to erase her agency or fetishizes her so to create an image of false reassurance other than a threat. In this history of representation of Morgan, as her powers grow she becomes more physically grotesque. This is akin to Grendel's Mother in *Beowulf* in the notion that her hideous appearance is attributed to her innumerable powers. Her appearance is then sadistic to imply that she is a sinner for having such abilities and knowledge, and that her strength challenges the masculine identity of figures like Arthur, resulting in her downfall. This anxiety did not exist in the *Vita Merlini* although she is

said to have vast powers because there she was depicted as a sweet heroine with the intention of saving the main male character.

In the later developments, the female figure is put on display for the audience to sexualize because she typically appears isolated, and as the story progresses she is changed into the property of the main male protagonist, losing her "outward characteristics and general sexuality" (Mulvey, 64) to the male audience. Often the diminution of the female applies to the female character falling in love with the male character, yet when applied to Morgan le Fay it speaks to the sibling relationship between her and Arthur as it pertains to the lingering connotations of incest. The very implication that they have sexual relations is derived from the imbalance of power between the two, particularly with regards to the design of the plot. While the stories vary over time, the incest suspicion began around the same period wherein Morgan was denigrated for having the same potential as any masculine hero, typically around the late fifteenth century. Had Morgan been a man the story would seemingly be about two tragic male heroes struggling to reclaim their birthright. Instead, her feminine narrative is convoluted.

Julia Kristeva also offers some insight here. The matriarchal presence in Arthurian legend often alarmingly emphasizes the connection between motherhood and malevolence. Female characters such as Lady Igraine, Guinevere, and Morgause all reflect the submissive nature engraved upon women—that they should be wed young and produce several heirs all the while pleasing their husbands. Even though she has no literal children of her own, Morgan embodies the Mother Goddess. The idea of motherhood is one that disturbs the male psyche because it reflects a power imbalance between the genders, and creates a holiness about women that only they are able to maintain, just as it creates a grotesque eroticism surrounding the maternal body.

It is both alluring and repelling, just like the essence of mystery that shrouds Morgan le Fay. In a way, she is the mother of her own being, as Kristeva might imply that she gives birth to herself (3).

Morgan's maternal ubiquity is ethereal because she "rejoins, on the one hand, the archaic (mythical) memory and, on the other, the cyclical or monumental temporality of marginal movements" (Kristeva, 198). This cyclical time correlates to the turning of tides, the phases of the moon, and is in association with menstruation or the developmental period of pregnancies. This theme is mostly prominent in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* through the symbolism of women prevailing over cyclical time.

This mystical representation of the female body "transforms the abject into the site of the Other" (Kristeva, 54). While motherhood is a mystery all in itself, the lack of a parental presence can cause abjection, especially wherein the progeny is a result of incest or, in Arthur's case, born outside of marriage. Arthur's own anomalous birth is nearly identical to that of his son Mordred, bringing about Malory's prior objective concerning identity. The same self-inflicted paranoia that eats away at Arthur is mirrored in his son, quite literally making it impossible for him to disassociate with his upbringing. Mordred, on the other hand, is bred to be malicious for he was manipulated since his birth and trained to dissolve any affections towards his father. Mordred's narcissism is instilled within him because "what he has swallowed up instead of maternal love is an emptiness, or rather a maternal hatred without a word for the words of the father; that is what he tries to cleanse himself of, tirelessly" (Kristeva, 6). The downfall of the Mother Goddess figure was ultimately brought about by the demonization of empowered women during the medieval era.

Morgan le Fay, similar to Grendel's Mother from *Beowulf*, is an antagonistic female figure whose characteristics are derived from aspects of the stereotypes placed on empowered women during the medieval era.

Chapter Three: Mary Magdalene

In traditional storytelling, the female antagonist is typically a woman who threatens the placement of the protagonist. Although both Grendel's Mother and Morgan le Fay are obvious examples of such a character, the source of their power comes from the belief that they are corrupt and have sway over a large majority of people. Although on the surface very different, especially in that she is a saint of the Church, Mary Magdalene can be considered both a rebel and a corruptor as we read through the various tales that have grown out of her legend.

Mary Magdalene exists as one of the most revered female saints throughout centuries past, and has been brought back into popular Western culture in the late twentieth century. A prominent literary manifestation of the Mary Magdalene legends is The *Digby Mary Magdalene*, as it is often called after the Oxford University Bodleian Library manuscript (Digby 133) which preserves the first copy of the play. Theologians have reexamined the meaning of the *Digby Mary Magdalene* to be more than a typical morality play through comparison to other religious accounts of this era, especially the stories described in *The Golden Legend,* which was compiled around 1260 and depicts the lives of multiple saints.

In his *The Meaning of the Digby Mary Magdalen*, Jacob Bennet suggests that "understanding the play depends on recognizing the specific theological philosophy woven into it" (39). As one of the two enduring female saints to remain popular in Western Christianity, Mary Magdalene is second only to the Virgin Mary. The fundamentals of her story share corresponding elements with the mystical nature of the Virgin, but Magdalene's label as a penitent sinner exposes the demystified version of Marian storytelling. Both female saints express two sides of humanity, which are the immortalized mother and the mortal but pertinent

wrongdoer. Mary Magdalene symbolizes the imperfection of humanity while also proclaiming transcendence is possible through repentance. On the other hand, if the Virgin Mary were to bear the same titles as her mortal counterpart, it would be considered blasphemous because she represents purity while her conduit represents impurity striving to regain innocence.

We can however see that it is through this analogy that the two figures might be viewed as intrinsically parts of a multi-dimensional view of feminine piety. Bennet claims that they constitute both the "centuries-old credo of the Second Eve and the Bernardine doctrine of the 'mother' of God" (39). The concept of a Second Eve deviates from the belief that through condemning humanity with her sins, Eve's sins is only able to be compensated through the Virgin Mary, who remedies Eve's disobedience by successfully waging war with Satan. The Bernardine idea affirms that true worshipers will be absolved from any transgressions through repressing the devil and relying on Mary's powers. Considering Mary Magdalene as the Second Eve, however, could not possibly convey the same messages as the story of the Mother of God, the Second Eve. Rather, in this tale she utilizes her weakness as a strength to persevere and her her sins and repentance convert her into sainthood. Both Eve and Magdalene are alike in their notoriety, yet the connections born between Magdalene and the Virgin Mary keep her from becoming another exemplary tale of a fallen woman from whose temptations tragedies occurred.

Mary Magdalene is still often tied to figures or events that historically she had little or no connection. For instance, in Western tradition, dating from the fifth century, she is continuously combined with Mary of Bethany and the anonymous woman who anoints Jesus's feet in Luke 7:36-50, resulting in a widespread misconception that she was a prostitute or promiscuous woman. This misnomer became a popular belief after Pope Gregory in a homily in 591

proclaimed that Mary Magdalene was a repentant prostitute, which was later addressed by recent Popes, John Paul and Benedict, who also added to this false image of Magdalene.

Colleen E. Donnelly in her *The Marys of Medieval Drama: The Middle English Digby and N-town in Translation* notes that Magdalene's "reception also reflects how religious women were perceived by their own society in their day" (1). The patriarchal hierarchy of the Church which blamed the fall of humanity on Eve also denied women positions of influence or agency, yet women during the Middle Ages had been pivotal advocates for the conversion of Christianity during the first centuries. Religion was spread through household meetings instead of within institutions, and aristocratic women who married were often granted the freedom to practice their faith by bringing priests to their homes and inviting the community to observe. A monastic lifestyle was a respectable choice for any woman seeking to practice their piety, which then became an opportunity for women to inject themselves into the workings of the Church, dissolving the modern notion that medieval Christianity was entirely misogynistic. Donnelly notes that historically this period "is an apex of female religious life and veneration. In 1405, Christine de Pizan addressed the antifeminist tradition in part one of *The Book of the City of Ladies* writing that God only creates good, and, since God created woman, woman must be good (I.1.2)" (8). It is because of the rise in female presence of the Church that the Cult of the Virgin, the Cult of Tears, the veneration of Our Lady of Sorrows, and the rosary all stemmed from this era.

Unfortunately such elevated status was not reflected in the lives of ordinary women, the daughters of Eve, including female saints many have suffered gruesome deaths and martyrdom. Mary Magdalene herself displays a history of penitence and pain. Her legend suggests that after

converting thousands to Christianity, she retreated from the rest of the world to the wilderness where she vowed as part of her penance to give up worldly food. In answer to her vow, Jesus sends angels to feed her instead, until she finally transcends the natural world. Starvation was a common method of death for female saints because it was prolonged and it represented the thinning away of the human body into the ethereal spirit and provided a model for the isolation and silence forced upon pious women who were taught to pray daily and remain unheard save for matters of concerning their ties to Christianity. That Magdalene starved to death and did so while alone in the woods is both fuel for an indication of her own ethereal status and a direct image of the medieval obsession with the female body.

The anonymous *Digby Mary Magdalene* play was likely written to celebrate the saint's feast day, as per medieval tradition. It testifies to the efforts made by vernacular Christian culture to include women's religious experiences, and drew on an array of Biblical and related legends, including those from Mary's own legendary history. Particularly invoked was the biblical story of the seven devils, supposedly driven by Jesus from her soul. Typically this showcasing of female sin can only be purged through torture.

Mary is the central figure of the play, combining her suffering with the special knowledge granted to her on her journey to redemption. She is a target for the Devil early on in the play, which becomes a morality play where she must venture through a series of ordinary events to suppress temptation and achieve her eventual ascendance into heaven. In accordance with traditional morality plays, this play narrows the focus to an individual instead of all of the characters being charged with the sins of humanity. This focus is also signaled by a subtle manipulation of dialogue during a scene where the devil addresses the King of the World. The

Devil consistently uses a singular masculine pronoun when addressing the other characters, but upon the entrance of Wrath and Envy, the pronouns shift to the singular feminine as if to signify their female associations. With that shift, a plan is then devised to lead Magdalene into temptation.

Her downfall occurs in a tavern whereupon she is seduced and led astray to rest in an arbor where she awaits her lovers or “valentynys.” It is this particular scene, as she lies beneath the trees in a setting perhaps foreshadowing her death in the isolated woods, where the play reaches its most important point as it reveals Magdalene’s willingness to give herself over to a life of sensuality. As she sleeps, she hears the voice of an angel warning her “Ful byttyrly thys blysse it wol be bowth!” (Coletti, 590). The angel reminds her of the price for her sensual pleasure. Once she awakens, Magdalene is transformed into a pious woman who swears herself to her faith and begins the journey to her redemption.

The theme of revelations appearing through dream visions is a common element amongst medieval texts, specifically the *Digby Mary Magdalene,* as it occurs to the pagan king near the end of the play as well. Later on in the play, Magdalene’s sole purpose is driven by the need to convert a pagan kingdom though the conversion of its king and queen. To manifest the power needed to persuade the royals of Marcyll to Christianity, Magdalene performs a series of miracles so that her word went undoubted. Her first miracle was to bring about the pregnancy of the otherwise barren queen. The second transpires during a storm at sea as the ship is bound for the Holy Land. The queen dies in childbirth even as she prays to Mary Magdalene, after which the king is so grief stricken he leaves the body of his dead wife and living infant on a rock in the middle of the ocean. Two years pass and the king returns after his conversion at which point he

sees his miraculously resurrected wife and their child. Similar to a scene in the *Golden Legend*, Magdalene had been watching over the infant while the pagan queen was transitioning through the stages of conversion. This is another way in which she is tied to the Virgin Mary, by virtue of her metaphysical motherhood.

Furthering the dramatic return of the newly Christian royals, upon their arrival to their kingdom they are greeted by Mary Magdalene who had been residing over Marcyll in their absence. They fall to their knees before her and speak from the words of Luke: "Heyll be thou Mary, ower Lord is wyth thee" (Coletti, line 1940). Although they are indirectly evoking the Virgin Mary, they are kneeling in the presence of Magdalene and the assumption is that they are directing their worship to her, as she has now become more saintly than mortal. Her mission was completed in converting the foreign kingdom, so she reverted back to a life of solitude until death and ultimately her ascension as a saint.

Mary Magdalene's most prominent scenes all occur in nature, from her sensual fall under the arbor to her spiritual ascension in the woods. The arbor scene resonates with various other garden images from medieval romantic tales, casting Magdalene in a dreamy atmosphere ripe with seduction. That the trees provide a shady abyss and the garden is tastefully scented all add to the overtly sexualized scenery encompassing the otherwise unaware maiden. Her presence in this act illustrates Laura Mulvey's notion of "to-be-looked-at-ness" by reason of her displacement as a sexualized object. The romanticism that the arbor promotes also displays Magdalene as a secondary element under the male gaze. In this case, the Devil's is one gaze that continuously objectifies and follows her every move. However, it is the medieval audience who will embody the objectification of the female body to which Mulvey draws attention.

By virtue of the traditional role of a morality play, the *Digby Mary Magdalene* is meant to instill Magdalene as a role model for humility and piety. Her estranged behavior is not meant to entirely inspire the audiences, but to replicate the horrors of what could happen should anyone heed her sinful ways. Instead, there is a prominently voyeuristic temptation throughout this scene. Her status as a maiden waiting for her lovers in a garden solidifies the sexual appeal of this scenario, and the disapproving angel that speaks through Magdalene's dreams reminds the viewers of her depravity. The audience reaction may well take the shape of not just voyeurism but sadism as the audience finds her guilty and in need of punishing. Similarly, her death in the open wilderness exposes the temptation to the fetishization of her decaying body. Paradoxically or even perversely as a female saint, her demise plays a major role in her fame.

In a similar regard, Mary Magdalene is an antagonist like Grendel's Mother from *Beowulf* and Morgan le Fay from the Arthurian legends because she is a powerful female figure who is objectified and feared for her powers. Unlike the other two figures, Magdalene's antagonism is not as obviously displayed through text. Her antagonism is derived from internal conflict, such as the temptation in the arbor, which leads her actions to be seen as corrupt because she is a symbolic religious figure for women to idolize. This misconception also stems from the misrepresentation of Magdalene as a prostitute or immoral woman of the time.

If Mulvey's terms suggest the objectification of the saint, we can turn to Julia Kristeva for further insight into the image of her drawn out state of starvation. The image of her objectified body combined with the blissfulness of her evolution into sainthood may well have conjured a sort of perverted excitement from the audience. The worship and infatuation placed on the female body as it undergoes agony is part of Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection. The corpse

itself is revolting in its otherness, yet we are drawn to its presence with a dark fascination because we identify with what it once was. It "takes on the abjection of waste in the biblical text" (109) and signifies the most basic form of pollution, which is a body without a soul. In a similar manner, the body of a saint is like a corpse even before she dies. Magdalene was transformed into an unearthly being the moment she received word from the angels and was set out on her quest for conversion. Her grievances could only be repaid through suffering, which is ultimately how she assumed the essence of a saint before her death, but was never truly anointed until after her demise. However, all women who become religious figures are subjected to abjection through their status as an otherworldly character obtaining a once-mortal body that is both familiar in appearance but foreign in its mystical knowledge.

Mary Magdalene is no exception to this, yet like the Virgin Mary it is not likely there are many explicitly graphic pieces of art depicting her demise perhaps because she is paralleled to the Virgin and transcends the usual fundamentals of sainthood by martyrdom. To be more precise, she is known for more than just her downfall, and the various renditions of her story make her an illusive figure with differing beginnings and endings. Rather, her powers to resurrect the deceased and to promote mass conversions throughout kingdoms has placed her only a step beneath the holiest female figure in Christianity.

Through miracles and devout scenes of veneration occurring in the later half of the *Digby Mary Magdalene*, she is molded into the ideal exalted woman who, like all women before her, are to the belief of the Church, born with sins but reach forgiveness through penitence and devotion. Her corpse is the figurative trophy of her success, much to the pleasure of the "unconscious worshippers of a soulless body" (109).

Death is not the only form of abjection forced upon the female body, for the living presence of the motherly figure is also connected to a certain dissociation with the patriarchy. One a child is born, Kristeva notes that it typically rejects the mother for the representation of the symbol order, which would be the father. We get a suggestion of such action in the Digby Mary Magdalene when the queen died during childbirth and her corpse was abandoned alongside her living child. As a missionary of God, Magdalene raises the child while acting as both the matriarchal presence and the representative of the absent father figure. Similarly, Magdalene had been overseeing the once-Pagan kingdom in the absence of the royals, typically a role reserved for a male leader. This distortion of gender politicking comes from the power granted to Magdalene through God. Although she performs these achievements, her ultimate success comes about through the links she shares with another being. Just as she is symbolic for the Second Eve and the closest saint to the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene is an emblem of pertinence who thrives only after her death.

Conclusion

The focus of this essay has been to explore the concept of the female antagonist as a literary figure in selected texts from medieval literature. As I explained in the introduction, an antagonist is typically a person, institution, or force that opposes the actions, morals, or decisions of the protagonist. While the role of a villain is a prominent characteristic throughout the medieval era, what distinguishes my essay is its focus specifically on different examples of the *female* antagonist. In the middle ages, women were near-universally objectified and demonized for their beliefs and even their very physical and particularly sexual characteristics. I have analyzed the origins of Grendel's Mother, Morgan le Fay, and Mary Magdalene in regards to their treatment during the times in which they were created as opposed to their treatment in present time as empowering female figures. Additionally to supplement my close readings of these figures, by using the feminist theories of Laura Mulvey and Julia Kristeva, I attempt to analyze something of the distinctive 'female' aspects of theses antagonists in the light of modern feminist concerns.

The narrative of the antagonist, in most stories, is one driven by corrupt characters who appear very linear and cruel without any agency. This lack of agency is the pivotal factor which creates the notion that all antagonists, particularly antagonistic women, are without justification. Medieval literature focuses primarily on the masculine hero and the image of a benevolent maiden, which is why the female antagonist lacks the emphasis placed upon the protagonist. For a woman to have similar abilities as the male protagonist during this time, she had to have been portrayed as an antagonist. Powerful women in the middle ages were ostracized and feared because they were deemed unnatural or sinful. The three antagonists I have studied are no

exceptions to this animosity, yet it can be seen that their stories are ones of empowerment because of their resilience as women of this era who could balance the power of the male hero.

The misrepresentation of the female antagonist stems from the patriarchal belief that women are unable to match the leadership, wisdom, and strength of men, especially during the medieval era. Through the essays *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey and *Powers of Horror* by Julia Kristeva, we are able to unravel the true reasons behind these portrayals.

Although intrinsically different in some ways, each character in this essay is considered an antagonist because of their symbolic nature as the female outlier. There are various representations of antagonists, yet the stereotypical antagonist remains to be the villain who acts purely on selfish desires. It would seem all to easy to place this label on certain characters, such as Grendel's Mother from *Beowulf*, yet there is a layer of complexity within each female antagonist that separates her from this mundane conception. In particular, the hero antagonist, the group antagonist, and the internal antagonist are three prototypes of the term, all of which can be applied to the three characters I have studied.

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