

**Women and Magic**  
**in Medieval Literature**

by

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WOMEN AND MAGIC  
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One of the defining features of medieval literature is its relationship with a particular tradition of magic. Arthurian chivalric romance stands among some of the most well-known and enduring medieval literary pieces, appearing as a staple of Renaissance medievalism, Victorian medievalism, the work of pre-Raphaelites, and in modern pop culture, as in programs like *Merlin*. The tropes of Arthurian chivalric romance remain major identifiers of the Middle Ages. Even other major medieval texts still largely known and commonly studied in schools and universities today incorporate elements of the Arthurian tradition, as in *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, or the wider chivalric tradition, as in the *lais* of Marie de France. The fictional worlds encompassed by medieval literature contain many legendary creatures, prophesied events, and magical items which give color and memorable character to these many tales. Merlin the sorcerer acts as one figure tying together the many aspects of the magical world through his relationships with the divine and demonic realms, formal study and teaching, and kingly prophecy. Yet despite Merlin's ties to the rest of the magical world and his position as an icon in the realm of medieval literature, the role of the sorcerer as a tool in medieval narrative-building is limited. The female counterpart of the sorcerer, however, unlike Merlin, who largely upholds the status quo even when working from the boundaries of socially acceptable behavior, has the potential to be a vital force in the narrative, challenging protagonists and to disrupting accepted social norms. When the sorceress or magic woman first appeared in medieval literature, however, the figure was not solely antagonistic, but rather fit into a surprisingly varied tradition that begins with idealized healer-helpers. They defy dichotomized groupings of good and evil, opening up an increasingly ambiguous space in which medieval authors could morally improve their own imperfect protagonists and pose critical questions on courtly society. Some discussion

of the development of the role of magic women is thus essential to an understanding of the medieval tradition and its major works, which are heavily influenced and at times largely defined by the aid or meddling of sorceresses and magic within the narrative. Furthermore, these female characters offer an additional link to the real historical world of the Middle Ages and its sociopolitical developments. Close analysis of the shifting roles of sorceresses and the relationships between women and magic over the course of the Middle Ages reveals a striking connection with real-world issues of gender-based oppression centered around the practice of medicine. As ideas of magic women in literature developed, so also developed a real historical line of ideas regarding ethics in medicine and magic. The development of these ethical ideas would impact the word of the law as well as the vocabulary through which medieval authors worked.

Witch, sorceress: these words conjure up images of broom-riding, cauldron-brewing, Satan-bound crones with evil intentions, spooky Halloween decorations, or perhaps the victims of archaic witch-hunts, practitioners of superstitious pagan ritual, hysterics, or those accused simply on the grounds of being women as a result of mob mentality and witch panic. All these associations have their historical ties, stereotypes woven from clerical propaganda, threaded with the smallest bits of truth. However, the reality of those accused of witchcraft and sorcery in the Middle Ages is simultaneously less sinister and more threatening than we might imagine. While the early Middle Ages saw secular laws passed to dissuade citizens of England and other European countries from pagan practices dubbed “witchcraft” as the Christianization of Europe accelerated, the continued history of clergy and state working against so-called witches would become even more complex and centered around the axis of gendered social hierarchy and an accompanying forcible shift away from female-centered folk medicine. The maintenance and

promotion of patriarchal structures by the church and state working in tandem would grow to form the crux of witch-persecutions and influence the portrayals of magic in widespread culture.

Witches would be attacked both as peasants and, primarily, as women. It is no coincidence that Jacob Sprenger, an Inquisitor sometimes attributed with aiding in the creation of the infamous witch-hunting manual *Malleus Maleficarum*, would write, “We should speak of the heresy of the Sorceress, not of the Sorcerers; the latter are of small account” (Michelet viii).

Women were not the only carriers of pre-Christian beliefs in medieval Europe, but for hundreds of years they were the primary medical workers. They worked with herbs and other rare ingredients not to cast magic spells but to work tried, practical results upon patients. They dominated health care even without university degrees, mostly even without literacy, passing folk knowledge down to each other over the generations through community gatherings.

Witches’ medical knowledge was empirical and effective, and before their persecution, they were called wise women; they cured ailments, nursed the sick, and most threateningly, provided contraceptive aid and performed abortions (Ehrenreich and English 11). These last functions of women as health workers in the Middle Ages formed a key factor in their eventual suppression, as to provide family planning services to women not only contradicted Christian doctrine, but moreover directly challenged the oppression of women, the suppression of female freedom, and the imposition of a male-controlled family line. With her ability to cure illnesses and to provide life-changing medical care for women in particular, it is no wonder peasants sometimes referred to these wise women also as “the Good Lady ... the same name as that given to fairies” (Michelet x). Additionally, these family planning aspects of female medical practice offer an explanation for the escalation of the Church’s control of medicine and their anti-empirical stances on medical care.

Witch-hunting rose right alongside the rise of university medical schools developed strictly within Christian terms: both became highly popular around the 14th century, and where women were excluded from the new Church-sanctioned schools targeted towards serving the wealthy, they were pursued extensively and violently for any ongoing medical practices (Ehrenreich and English 15). The new upper-class, male-oriented medical profession would displace some effective aspects of traditional medical practice and lead to a loss of vital family planning services in favor of newer, Church-sanctioned medical practices and concepts such as the humors. Furthermore, it would coincide with the vehement denial of the long tradition of proven cures created by women as “magic cures ... accursed interference with the will of God” (14), making it illegal not just for women to practice demonized pagan religious rites but for them “to cure at all,” branding the lower-class female healer “forever as superstitious and possibly malevolent” (19). In effect this legally imposed shift in the medical profession formed a direct attack on the knowledge, status, and freedom of women as a class. The oppression of peasantry as a whole also allowed another avenue of oppression of women and folk medicine, as Church and state were able to exploit class-based hierarchy in order to target communities that supported practitioners of folk medicine.

Charges were raised against women practicing nearly any form of healing or medical care outside the new strictly-controlled male-only sphere of medicine, but death sentences for supposed witchcraft were also heaped upon peasants of both sexes in some cases when it aided in the dissolution of female-centered folk medicine or dissuaded peasantry from supporting an alternative to the Church-sanctioned, male-only medical establishment. As Michelet as well as Ehrenreich and English detail, peasants throughout Europe—for instance in England—may have lacked a formal education but worked together through community efforts to spread valuable and

detailed knowledge, including in the field of healthcare. Witch-hunting became in part a way to break down and prevent organization of the peasant class in response to large-scale practical meetings, which were primarily, though not exclusively, attended by women: "...these groups came together in crowds of hundreds or thousands on festival days ... the meetings were also occasions for trading herbal lore and passing on the news" (Ehrenreich and English 12). Such meetings posed an inherent threat to the dominant classes of medieval society, as "Any peasant organization ... would attract dissidents, increase community between villages, and build a spirit of collectivity and autonomy among peasants" (12). These gatherings have been theorized by some modern historians, like Ehrenreich and English, to contain elements of pagan worship, which would also disrupt the Church's desired societal order. This analysis has some grounds in the wider context of female peasant medical practice grounded in a preceding history of Anglo-Saxon folk medicine. As L. M. C. Weston explains, there is evidence that even in the early Middle Ages with the establishment of a pagan-Christian blend of folk medicine, the primary practitioners were female: "While such empirical remedies escape their original gendered social context once they are transcribed into a manuscript, the metrical childbirth charms—indeed any remedies incorporating ritual or otherwise requiring performance—retain more of their gendered speaking voice" (Weston 283). According to Weston, when a gendered speaking voice remains to be found in Old English charms, rituals, and treatments, the gender is female. Thus the precedent for pagan-influenced medicine practiced by peasant women can be traced back to Old English documents, lending some credence to the assertion that some peasants in the later Middle Ages accused of practicing or gathering to share information on "witchcraft" could indeed have been continuing long-held pagan traditions. Yet even without a pagan element, large peasant gatherings coordinated for informational exchange would have been construed as

politically charged and potentially dangerous and thus subject to deadly accusations of sorcery.

Michelet details how this trend rose in the 15th century during the Inquisition:

Every instant insurrections of the peasantry were breaking out ... The foreign [Spanish] Inquisition, far more dreaded than the native variety, came very opportunely on the spot to terrorise the country and break down rebellious spirits, burning as Sorcerers to-day the very men who likely enough to-morrow would have been insurgents. It formed an excellent popular weapon to overawe the people, an admirable device for drawing off dangerous humors. (132)

It is important to note here that France outright barred the Inquisition from within its borders as of 1460, expressing abhorrence towards the practice, and as a result no condemnations for sorcery were recorded from 1450-1550. This period outright barring witch-hunting is notable in its divergence from a powerful epidemic of violence against peasant women. However, the Spanish Inquisition was not a unique event, nor were its practices limited to named Inquisitions; it evolved out of witch-hunting beliefs common throughout several countries beforehand, including England, Germany, and in France where some women were said to use witchcraft to “transform into wolves” (145) and stalk roads at night to commit murder in their animal forms. The growth of the term “witch” and accompanying anti-witchcraft sentiment and actions in medieval Europe was gradual, spanning several nations and involving many parties at different legal levels. In some cases the Church pressured state officials, and/or state officials in turn pressured the local populace to report cases of witchcraft among the common folk under threat of punishment (Ehrenreich and English 9). Witch-hunting entered full swing in the 14th century and has, all things considered, been aptly characterized as a “ruling class campaign of terror directed against the female population” (7). As Michael D. Bailey notes, “Exact figures are understandably hard to come by” (960), but the best estimates all range at least in the tens of thousands, and by the fifteenth century trials were widespread, with witch-hunting “codified in a

number of learned treatises beginning in the 1430s,” spawning from “far older ideas of maleficent magic common in western European culture” (960). These ideas and practices linked folk medicine to “demonic agency” (960) and targeted women in particular.

The very concept of a witch thus developed with specific political motives in mind; while genuine fear of evil magic was present, witch-hunts would grow to serve the primary function of suppressing social unrest and facets of female peasant culture that threatened to upset a political system based around highly stratified classes with strict gender roles. The so-called witch was a symbol not only of all things fearful in the realm of magic and Satan-worship, but also of the very terror of women rising in communal education, support, and mutually offered freedom. These women were wise; they practiced specialized and previously respected work; they loosened the ties of imposed domesticity that held down others and shared knowledge and opinions in large gatherings. The witch was clerical stigma against women in a new form, Eve and her sin reborn, and to root out witchcraft was primarily to root out a particular female-oriented sin and to engrain further into society the proper place of women and the peasantry. One manifestation of medieval misogyny played out in the realm of medicine, legally displacing folk medical practices associated with peasant women and replacing them with male aristocratic medical practices. A long history of belief in magic, pagan worship and supernatural folklore, as well as strong clerical criticisms of female nature and a set social order in feudalism all play into the formation of the witch as both a real-world target and a literary theme. Witches were attacked “as *Women*” (Ehrenreich and English 4), for agency and for (accusations of) female sexuality as they related to popular clerical opinions on Eve and chastity; the lower-class healer was “branded ... as superstitious and possibly malevolent” (19). The witch, sorceress, or magic woman as she appears in medieval literature is largely in line with these sentiments. The alluring realm of

magic must contend with accusations of heresy, deflecting such accusations by working within the acceptable confines of behavior dictated legally and socially in the Middle Ages. Literature provided medieval authors a socially permissible arena in which to explore magic and the roles of women.

Through magic, fictional medieval women could take on central roles and orchestrate major events in chivalric narrative that would otherwise bind women to a limited number of roles and feasible actions. While magic is not strictly the realm of women in Arthurian romance as the infamous Merlin evidences, the presence of magical women and sorceresses allows for a complex arena of storytelling in which powerful women may choose to support chivalric practices or instead challenge the court and its values. The Lady of the Lake and Morgan in particular are instrumental in the shaping of the world of Arthurian legend, both aesthetically as a literary tradition, and in immediate effect as they aid or interfere with the actions of Arthur's court and other authoritative figures in their world. Their powers are not innately negative and in much of the early tradition have little to no demonic connotations, but they may become threatening and even malign when tied to the goals of women like Morgan who scorn aspects of the given social code, in particular its sexual mandates. The interpretation of phenomenal power in the hands of women in the universe of medieval fiction is heavily dependent on the particular point in time—as fear of witches did not culminate into large-scale witch-hunts until the later Middle Ages—and is subject to the caveat that even allowable magic must support the status quo. Over time we may track the progression of the figure of Morgan as a prime example of this attitude towards sorceresses in medieval fiction and her increasing association with aggressive, open sexuality and loss of youthful beauty as her actions become more geared towards antagonism.

The earliest author of surviving Arthurian legend, Geoffrey of Monmouth, introduces Morgan in a way that is wholly antithetical to her characterization as a villainous figure later in the Arthurian tradition. In his Latin text *Vita Merlini*, or *The Life of Merlin*, written in Wales in 1150, Morgan appears as a savior of Arthur, and the narrator states that “health could be restored to him if he stayed with her for a long time and made use of her healing arts” (*Vita Merlini* 30) on an Edenic isle called the island of apples or “The Fortunate Isle,” ruled by women of unusual longevity and skill. These women are Morgan and her eight sisters, of which she is both the most beautiful and the most skilled. She is even credited with having taught mathematics to her other sisters. Morgan’s magic is a positive force and an extension of studied medical practice in which the usage of healing herbs, knowledge of mathematics, shapeshifting, and flight are presented in an interdisciplinary array that links real-world knowledge to magic power. This form of magic is an imagined form of science working through specialized knowledge of the material universe; it lacks the Satanic associations of witchcraft and intentionally mirrors the morally neutral, intellectual method of her past teacher Merlin. This Morgan nearly seems a classic maiden of medieval romance, a young woman of mythical beauty, and her intellectual practices only a more fantastical version of the studies that many real noblewomen might pursue (chiefly literacy itself, which Larrington notes in *King Arthur’s Enchantresses* was practical for letter writing). Portrayals of magic used by women for noble ends and with positive results would continue further through the Arthurian tradition.

Chrétien de Troyes employs the sorceress in surprising ways in some of his work, but first continues Geoffrey of Monmouth’s positive characterization of Morgan. In Chrétien’s story *Erec and Enide*, completed around 1170, Morgan appears briefly by mention in two instances. Her first mention is at the wedding of Erec and Enide, during which countless nobles arrive as

guests; among them is Guigomar, brother of Graislemier of Fine Posterne. The narrator continues on to remark, “Of him we have heard tell that he was the friend of Morgan le Fay, and it was the proven truth” (61), which along with his title as “lord of the Isle of Avalon” leads Larrington to deduce that “friend” here politely indicates Guigomar is Morgan’s lover (11), alluding to her previously established status as the most esteemed and powerful sister among those who rule Avalon in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s version of the Isle. Yet her apparent extramarital romance aside, Morgan continues to appear as a positive, semi-mythical figure on the boundaries of the story. She steps in indirectly again, this time as a sort of heroine, becoming responsible for the healing of the protagonist Erec:

Right there on the spot they removed Erec’s armour, and when they saw his wounds their joy turned to anger. The king sighed deeply, then had an ointment brought which his sister Morgan had made. The ointment that Morgan had given Arthur was so wonderfully effective that the wound to which it was applied, whether on nerve or joint, could not fail to be completely cured and healed within a week, provided it was treated with the ointment once a day. They brought the ointment to the king and it brought great relief to Erec. (89)

Chrétien de Troyes therefore adopts some of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s initial positive characterization of Morgan while helping further establish her as a powerful figure strongly connected to Arthur, capable of massively impacting the lives of Arthur and his knights while avoiding the threatening implications of a total social renegade.

In Chrétien’s *Cligès*, written in 1176, a sorceress named Thessala uses surprisingly devious means to aid the namesake hero and his lover, Fenice. She is said to have come from a land in which all women learn magic: “... Thessaly, where diabolical enchantments flourish and are taught. The women of this land practice magic spells and bewitchments” (159). Like Morgan’s knowledge of magic, Thessala’s is innately linked to her background in medicine.

Again, to be a sorceress means also to be a doctor. Thessala clarifies to Fenice to ensure her trust that “If anyone is to heal you, you can count on me, for I know how to restore your health. I know how to cure the dropsy and can heal the gout, quinsy, and asthma. I am so skilled in reading urine and the pulse that you’d be wrong to seek another doctor,” and from here moves naturally into the same progression as the earlier Morgan, continuing, “and, if I dare say so, I am more familiar with true and proven spells than Medea ever was” (159). Her words here are shown to be true as she continues throughout the tale to display her extraordinary abilities in healing and complex forms of magic on which every following plot point rests. Although her magic powers are described as “diabolical” (159), this characterization does not negatively impact the moral quality of Thessala as a person throughout the story. She displays commendable loyalty to Fenice, who was nursed by her as a child. Furthermore, she uses her powers to ensure the success of *fin amor*, which bestows spiritual purity upon select extramarital affairs and which rose in importance in medieval courtly life and culture over time. Fenice is characterized as almost saintly, retaining her maidenhood in an unwilling marriage through the help of Thessala and enduring gruesome tortures including stigmatic wounds made through her palms and a mock death and resurrection that render her Christlike. Thus her trust in and continued praises of Thessala give further weight to Thessala’s good character: “so much did she love, believe, and trust in her” (200). This sorceress is a doctor, learned in magic that she uses in such a way that it subverts its diabolical label and gives rise to justice in protecting the lovers from the oath-breaker emperor Alis. Sorceresses and their powers at this point in the tradition continue to be linked primarily with education. Thessala and the early versions of Morgan mirror aspects of Michelet’s, Ehrenreich’s and English’s descriptions of medieval female health workers and their methods; Thessala’s magic is even community-based as many common

healers' knowledge would have been, while Morgan's additional power gained through literacy ties her to real-world cases of literate noblewomen using their knowledge to practice medicine as well. One such example is the case of Jacoba Felicie, brought to trial in Paris in 1322 for employing her studies and "special training" in medicine to "cure her patient[s] of internal illness and wounds or of external abscess ... examine the urine in the manner of physicians, feel the pulse, and touch the body and limbs" (Ehrenreich and English 18). Such charges strikingly resemble Thessala's own declaration of her abilities as a doctor and, by extension, a sorceress. At the time of Chrétien's writing of *Cligès*, however, such trials were not common: therefore, Thessala is safe, at least in the realm of fiction, to act as a commendable heroine, using her magic to keep safe Cligès and Fenice. In a further display of goodness, she "sought out, procured, and brought them all they desired" ("Cligès" 204), thus continuing to act in accordance with the courtly principles of loyalty and largesse.

The initial alignment of sorceresses, namely Morgan, with Merlin and his methods evidences the extremity in the shift of magical neutrality into the stark moral divide seen in theological interpretations of magical power that appear increasingly in later medieval Arthurian texts. The tradition would set sorceresses on a pathway of rising demonic associations by attributing their magic primarily to dealings with demons and even Satan himself, mirroring the historical process of female healers gradually suffering more and more association with Satan worship, nefarious intent, and other explicit anti-Christian values, chiefly sexual indulgence. However, Geoffrey's and Chrétien's sorceresses rise above any negative conceptions of magic, following in the path of Merlin and his story of turning demonic origins and control of spirits into something purified, sanctioned, and able to be used for good. As Larrington details, "Merlin's magic never entirely escapes from the demonic" due to his half-demonic origins;

however, he is able to transform his magic into a “foreknowledge endorsed by God” via baptism (Larrington 14). This magic is tempered by baptism but cannot be wholly separated from Merlin’s demonic paternal origin. Therefore, it follows that as Morgan and the Lady of the Lake, Viviane, become directly associated with Merlin beginning in French tales in the 13th century, their associations with the demonic increase along with the complexity of their ethical characterizations. Antagonistic and violent enchantresses begin to appear, such as the “enchantress variously known as Canile or Gamille” who “imprisons Arthur and many other knights” (15). The 13<sup>th</sup>-century Old French post-Vulgate *Suite du Merlin* includes among its various adventures a tale in which an already highly educated, married and pregnant Morgan meets Merlin, who falls in love with her and becomes her teacher in necromancy. Their relationship, however, is dubious; Merlin’s love for her is not the pure *fin amor*, but rather a type of uncourtly and unrestrained “*fel amor*” (16). Nonconformity to socially acceptable romantic and sexual behaviors goes hand-in-hand with the escalation of the dark aspects of magic, and we may tie the very usage of the term “necromancy” to the shift from magic as a wholly neutral academic pursuit to something inherently tied to mal intent, jealousy, confinement, violence, and other forms of sin. The sorceress is on her way to becoming a profoundly chaotic power within the Arthurian world.

By the time we reach Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* in the 15th century, the transformation of Morgan is complete, and even the Lady of the Lake, who in modern pop culture is most associated with aiding Arthur, appears also in some iterations as Vivien or Nynveve, who is more chaotic with the potential for shockingly violent behavior. It is necessary to clarify that the Lady of the Lake is not just a figure who changes over time like Morgan, but also one who may hold two or more forms within the same text or collection of texts, as with

Malory's Ladies of the Lake in *Le Morte D'Arthur*. S. E. Holbrok explains that in Malory's tales, "The Lady of the Lake is the woman whom Arthur sees 'goyng vpon the lake'" (Holbrok 763). She is the "chief lady of the lake" while other "damosels or ladies of the lake" (763) also exist either under her authority or inferior to her power. The many forms taken on by the Lady of the Lake add to the moral ambiguity of the characters which appear under this title, as it is often left up to the reader to decide what previous acts or pieces of the Arthurian tradition to link a particular Nynveve, Nymue, or Lady of the Lake to. In many forms, the Lady of the Lake has acted as a vital helper in Arthur's established history by providing him with his famous sword Excalibur, and gone on to frequently aid Lancelot, protecting him and rescuing his family members; yet despite her longer history of noble employment of magic, Vivien is ultimately rendered as being as uncontrollable as Morgan, in some versions of the tales later confining or even killing Merlin. In the 13<sup>th</sup>-century *Estoire de Merlin*, she magically confines Merlin in a tower to keep him for herself indefinitely; in *Suite du Merlin*, she enchants Merlin and seals him into a tomb, resulting in his death. Malory follows in the footsteps of these tales rendering the major sorceresses selfish, devious, and prone to competitive envy and resentment in contrast to their earlier appearances as mysterious and free yet willing and selfless helpers.

In "Balin, or the Knight with the Two Swords," the Lady of the Lake, who gives Arthur Excalibur, becomes known as the Lady of Avalon, and forms the center of the conflict between Balin and Arthur. The Lady of Avalon initiates a family feud between hers and Balin's, of which "few details are revealed" (Kelly 87) but for vital ones related to the mutual violence between their families. Arthur respects the Lady of Avalon for the gift she has given him—a sword—and calls her their "benefactress," while Balin protests, "But our benefactress not only caused my mother to be burned to death, in addition she enticed many an innocent knight to a shameful

death by means of her magic” (Malory 46). However, the Lady in turn has her own grievances with Balin and appears again later in the text, asking Arthur to kill Balin as vengeance for Balin’s killing of her brother. Even her seemingly beneficent gift of the sword is one given in expectation of personal returns. Similar to Merlin who acts more based on personal whim and holds himself above the standard rules of the court, confounding and smugly mocking Arthur at times using his magical tricks of disguise as well as slyly deceiving other figures like King Lot, the Lady of Avalon also uses her magical powers to enact whatever she desires even at the expense of chivalric values, from which she has departed. When her actions align with chivalry and the ideals of Arthur’s knights “only to fight in just causes, at all times to be merciful” (Malory 69), it is more by coincidence than intent. In Malory’s version of this tale which originates in the *Suite du Merlin*, Arthur turns against the Lady of Avalon in response to her demand that he kill Balin: “Arthur rejects her request as unseemly, ‘I maye not graunte neyther of her hedes with my worship’” while Balin in turn “cuts off her head” (Holbrok 763) in a final act of vengeance to culminate their family feud. Arthur honorably buries her body and reproaches Balin but takes no further action against him: Balin’s killing of the Lady of Avalon is uncourtly but seemingly justified. Other iterations of the Lady of the Lake become similarly intertwined with plots of murder and revenge. Nynave, sometimes called the Lady of the Lake, here “formerly served the Lady of the Lake” (Malory 69) and is additionally separate from the Lady of Avalon; however, she too is a sorceress, instructed by Merlin and disdainful of his constant sexual attempts upon her. She kills Merlin by magically trapping him in a cave, and her malice here is left up to consideration: is she justified in this as a defensive response to Merlin’s behavior, or could she have simply used her newfound powers to depart and cut contact with Merlin? Nynave had earlier stated “I do not fear Merlin” (68) even before her magical training. If

Merlin's magic has truly descended into the realm of "devil's craft" (68) as King Pellinore says, the murderous Nyneve becomes an apt successor by the un-Christian act of unnecessary killing. Even so, she almost paradoxically is later characterized by Malory as a "good sorceress" (439) for her loyalty to Launcelot and Arthur despite killing Arthur's valued advisor. Nyneve appears as one of the only characters capable of foiling the plots of other sorceresses, demonstrating on one hand the continued moral ambiguity of magic as a power in itself and the practical necessity of such a countering figure to the clear overwhelming power possessed by sorceresses like Morgan who can magically shapeshift, travel with incredible speed, entrap, enchant, and devise complex plots to harm their enemies. Nyneve thus comes to Arthur's aid against Morgan, who in *Le Morte D'Arthur* has become a true villainess with the intent to kill her brother. Her crime here, in contrast to Merlin's much-retold plot to ensure the rulership of Uther Pendragon and the conception of Arthur—in which he merely helps along Uther in his pre-existing war with the Duke of Tintagel—is to deceive all whom she appears to serve in favor of her own selfish gains. Her "paramour" Sir Accolon does not actually wish to kill Arthur, and even Arthur does not yet see her as an enemy at all until her plot to kill him is revealed. Arthur explains his previous goodwill towards his sister which is broken by her attempt on his life: "But my sister Morgan le Fay, whom I have honored more than any living person except for my queen, I shall never forgive; and on her I swear the most terrible vengeance" (77). Merlin's saving virtue is his ultimate loyalty to Arthur and his court, but the sorceresses, gaining further power through freeing themselves from family and social ties, become utterly unpredictable and therefore ignoble and dangerous. Morgan becomes one of the main capturers of knights, along with other sorceresses in *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Morgan captures Launcelot, who rejects her on the grounds of his oath of faithfulness to Guenevere and Morgan's status as a "lewd sorceress" (120) outside the

bounds of noble courtship. She does the same to Sir Tristram while revealing that she already has another lover, Sir Hemysen, with whom she is not in true love as evidenced by her frequently comparing Hemysen to Tristram and by her continued desire for Launcelot (247-248). Other sorceresses use similarly devious means to pursue illicit desire, including Hellawes who attempts to magically win over or kill Launcelot, and Lady Brusen, who uses magic to deceive Launcelot into breaking his oath to Guenevere. Their behavior is increasingly linked to sinful forms of sexuality that break courtly conventions, even within a world where those boundaries are already blurred as in Merlin and Arthur's extramarital escapades. The "evil ways" of Morgan le Fay are her magical actions taken to ensnare men for "pleasure" (284); the frequency with which this theme appears as a central goal of enchantress antagonists throughout *Le Morte D'Arthur* compared with the adamantly nonsexual behavior of Nyneve, who rejects Merlin, points towards the real-world demonization of witches as women who engaged in deviant sexuality. Even further, a clear distinction is now made with the rise of medical universities between the enchantress and the doctor. Morgan is still capable of healing others using herbal knowledge when she wishes, but the "woman physician" mentioned in one tale no longer implies magic, nor are the enchantresses anymore presented primarily as physicians or healers. Combined with her threatening form of sexuality, it is no surprise, then, that Morgan ceases to be a healer-sorceress and becomes identified with the devil-linked label of "witch" (23), a term that by Malory's time had skyrocketed in relevance. Witch-hunts had long since begun in earnest in several nations, including England, Germany, and Spain, with accompanying clerical and judicial texts detailing the Satanic and/or demonic dealings of witches. It is important to clarify as well that despite the title inspired by his French sources, Malory was English; in France at the time, the Inquisition was abhorred and no convictions of witches were had for a hundred years between 1450-1550

(Michelet 131, 143). Merlin's behavior certainly worsened over the centuries of Arthurian tradition, resulting in his excessive extramarital lust that oversteps the sanctioned boundaries of *fin amor* in chivalric romance. Even so, his total usurpation by Nyneve and the subsequent murderous actions of Morgan grow to completely overshadow the morally dubious associations of Merlin's magic, recalling the statement of Sprenger's in justification of female-focused witch-hunts: "We should speak of the heresy of the Sorceress, not of the Sorcerers; the latter are of small account" (Michelet viii). As Sir Uwayne remarks bitingly, "I thought it was Merlin who was the one supposed to be born of the devil!"—in contrast, it is Morgan who proves to have "fallen prey to the devil's command" (Malory 79). For this, Arthur's court is incensed and demands in suitable fashion "that she should be burnt for her evil sorcery" (81), a practice nigh unheard of when Geoffrey of Monmouth first conceived of the sorceress but rising in relevance by Malory's lifetime, though he still lived before the largest wave of executions for witchcraft in England which took place beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Malory's portrayals of sorceresses, in particular Morgan, thus mark the culmination of the trend towards demonizing and killing female practitioners of magic (and thus medical work) that developed throughout the Middle Ages.

While Malory presents Morgan and other sorceresses as instigators of chaos and conflict, warped from healers into malicious antagonists in tandem with their increasing associations with the aggressively sexual, he does not depict their outward appearance physically taking on negative attributes associated with their evil nature. On the other hand, the *Suite de Merlin* poses the devolvement of Morgan into evil as one which impacts her desirability not just in character—as Malory's Launcelot rejects Morgan and the other sorceress-queens based on their poor ethics—but in outward looks as well. Malory used the *Suite de Merlin* as a major source for his early sections of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, but altered its characterization of Morgan, skipping over its

description of her changed looks in order to portray her as a lustful witch of the sort warned against in clerical writings and concepts of witchcraft contemporary to Malory (*Malleus Maleficarum*, the most famous related text which depicted witches as more lustful than ordinary women, appeared just one year after *Le Morte D'Arthur* and its collection of sexually motivated sorceress antagonists). Witches had thus grown to be depicted as visually alluring young women who prompted repulsion in noble knights not through their appearance, but rather through their immoral magic linked to impure and socially unapproved acts of lust. These witches retained some of their powers of sexual influence by magically maintaining their beauty; thus it would be up to a morally righteous and discerning man to recognize them as sorceresses and repel their sexual advances, much as clerical texts came to stress the chastity of men in the face of sexual temptation by sinful women. Throughout the Arthurian tradition, both men and women are expected to obey particular norms of sexuality that largely restricted sexual activity and allowed for few exceptions, particularly in the case of women. In *Le Morte d'Arthur* we see Gawain punished but not outright demonized for acting upon his lust with a married woman, and Arthur even further skirts the boundaries of *fin amor* to engage in a number of affairs; however, in no case is a woman socially sanctioned in a similar manner for taking free initiative. Only the sorceresses take such sexual initiative and are, as a result, characterized as immoral, disruptive, and threatening; furthermore, they often turn to envy, rage, and attempted violence when their initial plans fail.

The *Suite de Merlin*, on the other hand, offers a transitional point between the early and late medieval characterizations of sorceresses, in particular Morgan. Malory portrays loss of sexual viability as a matter of religious and social abhorrence for unrestrained female lust; this earlier text, on the other hand, depicts this loss of female allure as one of degradation of physical

appearance. The ethical matter of the demonic destroying the character of the woman is made literal and visual. Morgan is reduced to an ugly old woman who must rely on spells cast directly on her targets, rather than on herself, if she wishes to be seen as beautiful, though she retains the potential to act upon her devilish “sensuality” and entrap men. This version pays homage to the earlier tradition of Morgan as a young woman of incredible beauty, going back to her first appearance in the *Vita Merlini* while offering an explanation for a radical change in her visual description:

Morgan took the prize for beauty over all who were there that day. Unquestionably she was a beautiful girl up to the time she began to learn enchantments and magic charms; but once the enemy entered her and she was inspired with sensuality and the devil, she lost her beauty so completely that she became very ugly, nor did anyone think her beautiful after that, unless he was under a spell. (Larrington 25-6)

Morgan is still potentially sexually appealing, but in a way that is set apart starkly from the innate physical beauty seen in noble maidens; their true, untampered-with beauty is a sign of their good moral character, while the devilish Morgan must use illusion to cover the ugliness manifested by her moral failings, and is unable to maintain the illusion to all who see her.

Instead, Morgan must pick specific victims to deceive with her illusions. By this passage in the *Vita Merlini*, her appearance in the later *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is also explained. The Gawain poet draws upon this depiction of an aged and ugly Morgan to emphasize her role as an antagonist while allowing her to divert sexual tests to a third party and remain instead as a largely unseen mastermind behind the story’s conflict. When she is introduced alongside the Lady Bertilak, it is as such:

Rugh ronkled chekez þat oþer on rolled; / ... /  
 þat oþer wyth a gorger wat3 gered ouer þe swyre,  
 Chymbled ouer hir blake chyn with chalkquyte vales,

Hir frount folden in sylk, enfoubled ayquere,  
 Toreted and treleted with tryfleȝ aboute,  
 Þat noȝt watȝ bare of þat burde bot þe blake broȝes,  
 Þe tweyne yȝen and þe nase, þe naked and lyppeȝ,  
 And þose were soure to se and sellyly blered; / ... /  
 Hir body watȝ schort and þik,  
 Hir buttokeȝ balȝ and brode;  
 More lykkerwys on to lyk  
 Watȝ þat scho hade on lode. (*Sir Gawain* lines 953, 957-963, 966-969)

(Rough, wrinkled cheeks hung sagging on the other; ... the other was clothed about the neck with a wimple, swathed over her swarthy chin with veils white as chalk, her forehead entirely muffled up, enfolded with silk, edged with embroidery and latticed about with ornaments, so that no part of the lady was uncovered save the black eyebrows, the two eyes and the nose, and the naked lips, and they were unpleasant to look at and the eyes very bleared ... Her body was short and stout, her hips bulging and broad; more pleasing to the taste was she whom she was leading.)

This description of Morgan could not be farther from her early characterization in the Arthurian tradition in which her good looks paralleled her good character. While the *Vita Merlini* offers a precedent for her new form and tracks the overall progression of Morgan's characterization from gentle helper into antagonist, her actions here are more capricious than outright demonic or nefarious; rather, they offer a genuine test for Sir Gawain, an opportunity for him to grow and claim honor in the case of his success. As Jill M. Herbert argues, Morgan's challenge potentially helps Gawain in ways that are "not allowed within the rigid structure of the court" (Herbert 42). Even posed as an antagonist, the sorceress who disrupts and lends a critical lens to courtly culture need not be to the disadvantage of the knight(s) she interacts with. Morgan's use of her powers of shapeshifting and trickery to devise an ethical challenge for Sir Gawain that results in his acknowledgement of the limits of his courtly dogmas is ultimately productive, with the Lady Bertilak's green garter coming to be seen as a new symbol of honor shared by Arthur's knights. Because of this, Herbert also asserts that Morgan "refuses to fit into artificially constructed

patterns of behavior” (3). She and other sorceresses may appear as malicious, envious, and lustful villains more often than not, but they do not lose their ability to offer valuable insights and even aid to Arthur’s knights. Larrington further evidences this duality of antagonism and insight with Morgan’s behavior in the *Val sans Retour*, in which Morgan magically traps knights in a namesake Valley of No Return, which “binds any knight who has been unfaithful in thought or deed ... while ladies may come and go as they please” (Larrington 53). The entrance to the Valley is filled with peril and pain, but once inside, knights are prompted, much like Gawain at Bertilak’s castle, to “keep company with women, accommodating themselves to what women want, rather than performing the feats of courage and exercising the freedom to roam which defines the knightly experience” (55). Most knights who enter this Valley are trapped indefinitely and rely on Launcelot to later free them from Morgan’s enchantment, yet they fall comfortably into a lifestyle of ease and merriment during their stay. With Launcelot’s victory, Morgan’s reversal of societal order is undone, but the knights therein have already learned a poignant lesson on their moral failures: they failed to stay true to chivalric values of love or *fin amor*, and as a result physically lost their chivalric attributes—“horse, weapons, and armor” (54)—and integrated themselves easily into Morgan’s female-centered world. The sorceress, though ultimately defeated, has successfully revealed the true limits of chivalric values within the minds and lives of the knighthood while posing an appealing alternative to knightly culture.

Part of Morgan’s motives in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are petty and ineffective, as she is unable to scare Guenevere to death with the appearance of the Green Knight—a result which seems unlikely at best. What is left is her desire to challenge the honor and reputation of King Arthur’s court, which acts as an opportunity for Sir Gawain to prove himself and, subsequently, to question his rigid ideals surrounding chivalry, in particular chastity, honesty,

and honor. The result is an ambiguous characterization of Sir Gawain and the morals of his world, revealing the potential contradictions that can or must be held within them. Similarly, chastity and beauty are powerful contributors to medieval conceptions of witchcraft and morality respectively, but the sorceresses reflecting these values or counter-values defy simple categorization. Only in the historical context of a witch-hunting epidemic from the 15th century onwards do we see a sharp rise in the sorceresses' outright villainy. Earlier medieval texts are more free to paint the sorceress as an ambiguous figure, a radical agent of conflict, change, and aid. Williams argues that Morgan became a trickster figure, answering "the question of why we so readily accept this complex and ambiguous figure in all her guises" (38), with the assertion of Morgan as a type of Jungian archetype. Morgan's extreme oppositions "concern ... two very vital problems of living: first, the refinement of sexual instincts, that is, wantonness transformed into fidelity; and second, the problem not of death but of survival, that is, destruction transformed into healing" (41). It is through her magical shape-shifting and defiance of clear categories along with accepted societal boundaries that Morgan "does, in fact, mediate in these areas" (41). This sorceress is not simply one to be feared, but one who offers compelling quandaries and the crux of critical action in Arthurian tales like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. She is not a simple enemy to be struck down; she and her plots are a catalyst for social criticism and complex storytelling. Denver E. Baughan even connects her early characterization with her upheaval of courtly values in this tale: as Morgan is initially a healer "who would make all [Arthur's] wounds sound, so here that same Morgan would send Bertilak to purge and heal the court of its moral corruptness" (251). Baughan's comparison is well-founded in the text itself, as even Bertilak himself proclaims of Morgan "Weldez non so hyze hawtesse / Pat ho ne con make ful tame—" (*Sir Gawain* 2444-5). Her aims are to "tame" the arrogant pride of

Gawain, entrenched as he is in his unchallenged courtly values. Therefore, she offers a test that comes from her own sexual knowledge, as she has “dalt drwry ful dere sumtyme / With þat conable klerk” (2449-50). Her past with Merlin appears here as one source both of her magical knowledge and of her sexual knowledge. That unique type of knowledge lends her the perspective outside the world of chastity and *fin amor* to prompt Gawain with more difficult questions of love and honor as he tries to remain true to all his values as a knight simultaneously in the face of his potentially contradictory obligations to the Green Knight, the Lord Bertilak, and the Lady. Despite Morgan’s negatively characterized appearance, petty and violent jealousy towards Guenevere, and role as an antagonist, her feelings towards Gawain are ultimately positive and sympathetic. Bertilak concludes his speech on Morgan by jovially welcoming Gawain back to his castle: “þerefore I eþe þe, haþel, to com to þyn aunt, / Make myry in my hous; my meny þe louies,” (2467-8). Morgan’s villainous distance is utterly dashed: Gawain is invited to make merry with her, his aunt, and assured that all in the household love him. It is no wonder Gawain refuses the offer despite ending on good terms with the Lord; Morgan’s contradictions are baffling. She can just as easily be a murderess and trickster as she can be a healer of body and mind.

Lady Bertilak deserves consideration as well as a magic-possessing figure working alongside Morgan and making possible Morgan’s plans for Sir Gawain. Where Morgan is introduced unrecognized but visually undesirable, the Lady Bertilak is described alongside her with all her attributes in contrast. She is a typical medieval beauty, her appearance conventionally ideal:

Ho watz þe fayrest in felle, of flesche and of lyre,  
 And of compas and colour and costes, of alle oþer,  
 And wener þen Wenore, as þe wyȝe þoȝt. ...

Bot vnlyke on to loke þe ladyes were,

For if þe zonge wat3 3ep, 3ol3e wat3 þat oþer. (943-945, 950-951)

(She was the fairest of all in her person, in body and face, and in figure, complexion and bearing, and lovelier than Guenevere, so the knight thought. ... But the ladies were very different in appearance, for if the young one was fresh, the other was withered.)

As Morgan cannot or does not enact her illusory tricks on herself here and must disguise herself by covering most of her face with clothing instead, the beautiful Lady Bertilak is employed in her stead as a sexual snare to test the character and virtues of Sir Gawain. The Lady plays this role extremely well, pursuing Gawain each night during his stay and pressuring him romantically with deft rapport matching her initial impressions of Gawain as a skilled and entertaining conversationalist:

Bot 3et I wot þat Wawen and þe wale burde

Such comfort of her compaynye ca3ten togeder

Pur3 her dere dalyaunce of her derne worde3 ...

þat hor play wat3 passande vche prynce gomen, in vayres. (1010-1012, 1014)

(But nevertheless, I do know that Gawain and the fair lady found such delight in each other's society, from the agreeable intimacy between them in their privacy talk ... that truly their recreation was better than any sport of princes.)

Lady Bertilak's power over words, which she uses to test Gawain, is significant as a form of agency and holds a vital spot on the tool-belt maintained by female characters desiring to influence their surroundings. She, too, takes on a type of sorceress-adjacent role despite lacking the title and full powers of a sorceress herself. Alongside Morgan she becomes a similar trickster figure, using her alluring beauty in a way that prompts reassessment of accepted chivalric values and calls into question the possibility of holding all such ideals in active practice at any given time. The magical garter that determines the outcome of the tale is also hers to give, and thus

while Gawain initially feels he has lost his honor to such a trick, his life is saved by his acceptance of the gift. Had Gawain completely shunned the Lady Bertilak and her green garter with its implications as a love token, though this would be more in line with his proposed chivalric ideals, his final meeting with the Green Knight would very likely have been deadly. In an alternating exchange of blows, the invincible Green Knight would live again, unbothered even by his own beheading as in their first encounter, while the first blow to the neck would kill Gawain. His life hangs on his ability to recognize his limits and accept the romantically or at least femininely charged aid of the Lady within a distinctly feminized space that echoes Morgan's Valley of No Return. Unlike the Valley, however, no foe is resolutely overcome here, and Morgan's upheaval of chivalric norms is never truly restored to its previous balance. Rather, Arthur's court must accept the fallibility Morgan has recognized in their overly meticulous chivalric ideals and move forward with an understanding of her insights as a part of their new definition of honor, which they demonstrate in their wearing of the garter: "For þat wat3 acorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table, / And he honoured þat hit hade, euermore after, / As hit is breued in þe best boke of romaunce" (2519-2521). We see this subversive form of moral healing as well in "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle," in which a magic woman—visually similar to Morgan in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—appears as a central figure, again putting Sir Gawain to a test of morality that could only be enacted by a powerful individual working outside the boundaries of the courtly world she criticizes.

"The Wedding of Sir Gawain," also known as "The Marriage of Sir Gawain," a poem composed in the 15th century, is just one instance of the popular loathly-lady tale that appears in various forms during the Middle Ages. It was written after what is now the most famous version, "The Wife of Bath's Tale" by Geoffrey Chaucer, and both versions share most key elements to

the story, its message, and its characterization of the loathly lady. The common plot points in both versions are a knight challenged with learning what women desire most, and a loathly lady who appears in order to bestow that information upon the knight while testing his moral character. Ultimately, the knight is posed with a dilemma when he is married to the loathly lady and prompted to make a decision. The question differs based on the text, but in both the solution is for the knight to give the freedom of choice over to the lady, which results in a happy ending for all, as in “The Marriage of Sir Gawain”: “Lady, that’s but a skill: / And because thou art my owne lady, / Thou shalt have all thy will.’ / Then she said, ‘Blessed by thou gentle Gawain, / This day that I thee see, / For as thou see me at this time, / From henceforth I will be.’” (“The Marriage” 168-174). One major difference exists in the plot, which may be attributed to Sir Gawain appearing as the main character of his namesake version: in Gawain’s tale, the question of what women want the most is posed as a challenge by a knight who claims his lands have been seized by Sir Gawain; in Chaucer’s earlier version, the question is posed as a learning opportunity and potential alternative to punishment for an unnamed knight charged with raping a woman. The concept of moral growth is thus present in both of these versions, but stronger in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” fittingly posed as it is in the context of a (fictional) female storyteller with a strong worldview related to sexual politics and unjust limits on female autonomy.

The Wife of Bath, Alisoun, is an ally in spirit to the magic woman, the sorceress. The very actions witches were condemned for, Alisoun embraces with comedic brazenness, openly defying conventions of chastity and marriage. She declares that virginity, like charity, is a worthy ideal, but meant to be practiced with discretion rather than with complete devotion by all: “Virginitee is greet perfeccioun / And continence eek with devocioun. / But Crist, that of perfeccioun is welle, / Bad nat every wight he shodle go selle / Al that he hadde, and yeve it to

the poore, / And in swich wise folwe him and his foore” (Chaucer 105-110). Furthermore, Alisoun challenges the hypocrisy of the Church in allowing King Solomon to have many wives—”I trowe he hadde wives mo than oon!” (36)—while chastising women for remarriage, even several as in her case. She is explicit about her sexual history and desires, completely opposing medieval ideals of modesty and proper love with comments like “How pitously a-night I made hem swinke” (202); by extension, she also demands other forms of personal autonomy, desiring authority over her husband and the ability to go where she will and gossip freely with her friend Alys. Alisoun’s mixed experiences with men—some romantic, some restraining and culminating in violence—paired with her willful pursuit of freedom and self-determination make her a perfect match in spirit for both the loathly lady and the larger tradition of medieval sorceresses who push the boundaries of society and its accepted conventions. Fittingly, then, her version of the loathly lady matches *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’s ugly, unpredictable, yet wise and partially well-intentioned Morgan le Fay.

The Wife of Bath and her loathly lady are blatantly counter-culture, contrasting most strongly with the idealism of members of the upper classes and the values presented in their tales. Most notably, Alisoun’s worldview and experiences in romance clash with those espoused by Chaucer’s knight, who is imperfect in his actions—acting like a mercenary in notorious monetarily motivated military campaigns—but nonetheless displays in “The Knight’s Tale” the type of clear-cut chivalric values that Gawain proudly espouses through much of *The Green Knight*. “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” calls into question the idealized fictional world of courtly culture and chivalric values just as the wife herself rebels against the repression of her sexual, social, and practical freedoms as a woman. The loathly lady of Alisoun’s tale is a deceptive trickster figure, and sexually forward much like Malory’s troublemaking sorceresses; however,

the unexpected behaviors she is able to engage in due to her magical powers allow her the same vital role as a teacher and reformer that Morgan offers Gawain through his confounding test with Lady Bertilak. The Wife of Bath's loathly lady is able to relate a necessary lesson on sex-based oppression to the knight and the readers as well. The tale acts as a fable, imparting a clear moral lesson—a form of reading which appealed to medieval readers who learned first from the Bible and in many cases marked margins of manuscripts they owned, pointing out instructive passages to find “the point” in larger narratives. Thus “The Wife of Bath's Tale” portrays both the entertaining story of a knight reformed in surprising magical manner as well as a potential opportunity for ideological reform or affirmation of egalitarian values in its aristocratic readers. Sorceresses may no longer at this point in medieval literature function primarily as doctors, but the “Wise Woman” is not lost from their ranks. Rather, the loathly lady functions as an additional type of healer, an alternative to the conventional beauty. She is antagonistic and unpredictable, but necessarily so. Her popular recurrence in other versions of the tale, such as in the Celtic *Fenian Cycle*, demonstrates the power of such a narrative trope in allowing authors and readers alike to question cultural values on beauty and morality, particularly as the two were commonly and unfairly linked.

Even where the Wife of Bath reasserts cultural norms, they are not ideals she upholds: rather, she boldly accepts characteristics of women in the satiric tradition, as Theodore Silverstein explains: “If by old satiric tradition women are chattering, conniving, wasteful, willful, quarrelsome, lecherous, and vain—well and good . . . Ever since she was twelve she has schemed and argued and fought to have her way” (Silverstein 153). The Wife is proud of her struggle, not ashamed by it; she has flat out refused to aspire to cultural ideas of feminine perfection like virginity and subservience. Rather, she engages in “combat” with men through

her “developed skill in debate ... her repartee swift and her dialectics deadly” (153-4). She even subverts the satiric tradition she echoes by defying a fall into total comedy. Her character is playful and full of humor, but her convictions are ultimately genuine and powerfully portrayed through her candid recollections of marital struggle and the defense of female autonomy in her Tale. As the character framing “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” she holds a linguistic power that Larrington describes as the greatest power held by women in the medieval tradition: “Women do have an important countervailing weapon to use against men: the power of words. Women use words to persuade or cajole, but they can also use verbal dexterity to extract promises from men, promises which, under the rules of honour culture, the men are bound to keep” (52). Furthermore, this power accessible to females resonates with a larger framework of the history and role of fictional sorceresses, as “Words charged with more-than-usual power are, of course, spells” (52). How much closer, then, is the Wife of Bath to her loathly lady, Morgan, and other sorceresses: they form an allied circle of characters whose particular and radical female powers hold the ability to linguistically transform narratives and lives.

Chaucer’s fictional Wife is thoroughly convincing, her plight realistic, and her convictions profoundly progressive. It is clear that sorceresses and women who share in the spirit of sorceress are extremely useful narrative devices through which thoughtful medieval authors could question the social world around them. However, still yet more may be revealed through an analysis of the roles of women and magic in literature by a female author. Marie de France, writing in England during the 12th century, is a phenomenal example of a writer whose works centered massively on women, romance, and magic.

Like the Wife of Bath, who works as an ally in spirit to the sorceress but does not herself practice any magic, the characters in Marie’s *lais* who encounter magic in one way or another are

transformed or aided by it, but are rarely sorceresses or direct wielders of magic themselves. With two exceptions, her magic women are simply women whose lives are touched by magic. However, these women are extremely resourceful and take initiative to reshape their lives according to their desires. As Burgess and Busby argue in the introduction to the Penguin Classics *The Lais of Marie de France*, “the sexual frustration of young women who had been married off to older men because of their child-rearing capabilities” plays a central role in many of the tales. In response to unwanted marriage and confinement, Marie’s female protagonists take action: “In general the heroines of the lays are likeable and resourceful creatures. In spite of the risks they are forced to run, they contrive to see their lovers at regular intervals” (10). Despite the fact that the type of courtly love seen in the poetic tradition preceding Marie largely centered around unrequited and often unconsummated love, Marie’s *lais* feature the sort of mutually shared—and generally consummated—*fin amor* that was generally reserved for later tales, primarily Arthurian romances. While themes of undesirable marriage and extramarital romance “formed part of a stock of themes and motifs that a medieval poet had at his disposition and could draw upon when appropriate” (25), the consistent drive of Marie’s female protagonists goes above and beyond the norm. The bold decision-making and risk-taking of these women in the name of love mirrors the strongest of those qualities seen only sporadically throughout the medieval tradition. While Marie’s *lais* promote general values of goodness, loyalty to one’s true love, and the importance of Christianity, her couples work apart from society: “The lovers ... are nearly always on their own ... It is in fact by virtue of their loving that the protagonists are set apart from the rest of society and privileged” (27). Where other medieval love stories ultimately “concern the (re-)integration of the lovers into society, in the (re-)establishing of a balance between love and chivalry and the reciprocal duties of individual and society,” Marie’s *lais* stand

starkly apart as she “concentrates on the individuality of her characters” rather than finding a way for them and their goals to integrate back into society and its preexisting values. These female protagonists are tempered, mostly morally upstanding, and disruptive only in their personal lives, not to overarching societal structures; however, the tenacity and individualism with which they pursue their goals makes magic their perfect ally. The sorceress fully realized as a witch is a force of utter chaos, capable of turning society on its head, creating enclosed towers and valleys in which men are feminized and women rule. In contrast, Marie’s women, whose mere wishes cause the world of magic to open to them, demonstrate magic as an independent force of narrative possibility and the realization of desire. Her women desire only the freedom to choose love for themselves. Again we see the midway point between the early magical doctor-healer who merely aids and upholds the lives of heroes and the late magical female antagonist: magic is morally neutral here, merely a doorway to potential change which protagonists must act upon, and through which they must *choose* goodness in order to attain ultimate success and happiness.

“Guigemar” is but one example of these elements in Marie de France’s storytelling. It is a tale dominated by the supernatural; the protagonists are pushed along its magical narrative stream, though where they steer impacts the final outcome of the story. Its namesake character, Guigemar, first encounters a prophecy-making white female deer with antlers of a stag. Notably, the white doe becomes a common symbol for the pursuit and object of one’s romantic affections in later troubadour poetry. Magic appears again in the form of a fantastical self-maneuvering ship which transports Guigemar and later his lover. However, it does not act at random but rather to fulfill the lady’s inner wishes. The unnamed lady of the story effectively summons the magic ship with her heartfelt wishes and love for Guigemar. Her steadfast determination to escape and

to kill herself if necessary to avoid a life of confinement and separation from the object of her desires prompts the appearance of magic: “Then she rose: distraught, she went to the door and found no key or bolt. Thus she had the chance to escape, and no one at all hindered her. She went to the harbor where she found the ship. It was attached to the rock where she intended to drown herself” (Marie 52). Not only does magic aid her in reuniting with her love, but it plays a part in the plan she conceives to ensure their fidelity to one another in the meanwhile, as she instructs Guigemar: “Beloved, give me assurance of this. Hand me your shirt and I shall tie a knot in the tailpiece. I give you leave, wherever you may be, to love the woman who can undo the knot and untie it” (50). While magic is not explicitly employed here, such a knot must be magical. In Marie de France’s fairytale-like world, the supernatural comes without further explanation to aid or test those who require it. This magic is not exclusively associated with a fairy realm like Avalon or intensive specialized learning as with Morgan and the Lady of the Lake; it is a natural extension of lovers, their freedom, and their shared destiny. However, much like the magic of Merlin and Morgan, it operates outside the rigid boundaries of society, and much like the magic of Wife of Bath and her loathly lady, the magic of “Guigemar” is tied with a lesson on female freedom. This undercurrent in “Guigemar” is even set by the initial presence in the lady’s chamber of symbolic paintings:

Venus, the goddess of love, was skillfully depicted together with the nature and obligations of love; how it should be observed with loyalty and good service. In the painting Venus was shown as casting into a blazing fire the book in which Ovid teaches the art of controlling love and as excommunicating all those who read this book or adopted its teachings. (46)

Burgess and Busby argue that “the *Lais* may be regarded as wish-fulfillment for a particular social class” (34). In that light, magic is the primary force through which wishes are fulfilled. Chaucer allows for women to tell of and wield magic as biting social commentary that promotes

egalitarian reform of marital norms; Morgan and other Arthurian sorceresses appear time and again to criticize and impede the actions of those who symbolize a flawed courtly culture. Marie, however, takes a moderate yet compelling stance, refusing to characterize her women as renegade sorceresses or social reformers while giving intense focus and care to depict the transformative and liberating powers magic may offer women in literature.

“Yonec” is another thematically similar tale of Marie’s which powerfully rebukes controlling love as tragedy and presents a female protagonist whose passionate, desperate wishes unknowingly summon the intervention of the magical realm. In her sorrow and desire for genuine companionship, a magical bird-knight appears, declaring, “I could not come to you, nor leave my country, unless you had wished for me; but now I can be your beloved!” (87). This lady’s initiative again leads her to the supernatural as her secret relationship is foiled and she boldly pursues the wounded bird-knight by jumping out her window, echoing the escape of the lady in “Guigemar” who no longer fears death: “She escaped through a window, but it was a wonder she did not kill herself, for she had to jump a good twenty feet. Naked but for her shift, she followed the trail of blood which flowed from the knight . . . until she emerged on the other side of the hill, in a beautiful meadow” (90). This lady literally enters the otherworld, a magical realm from whence her fated lover has come, and through her daring is able to obtain from him a magical ring to ensure her future safety and the potential for eventual revenge upon her cruel and violent husband. Again, she is no sorceress, but magic acts as a direct echo of her needs and desires and becomes an incredible tool in the imagining of a world in which women may find relief from confinement or suffering, idealized or otherwise impossible love, and in some cases, vengeance upon those who have wronged them. Burgess and Busby write in their introduction to the collection that “The adventures in the *Lais* are events which usually bring about a

fundamental change in the lives of the protagonists, whereas in romance they often serve to bring out potential or confirm and strengthen something already present” (32). Marie centers her stories around women and heightens the transformative nature of magic, bringing out its full potential to affect the lives of her main characters even if they are not characterized as direct practitioners of magic. Where the sorceress in romances has the potential to intervene and transform the main character but is at times defeated or recedes into the background after raising pressing social questions, Marie’s magic remains at the forefront with most of its spontaneously arisen effects remaining permanent welcomed changes to her characters’ lives.

Magic spontaneously arises in the world around Marie’s women again in her longest *lai*, “Eliduc,” which addresses the unique and morally complex issue of a man pursuing extramarital love despite his wife “loving [him] with great loyalty” (111). No standard justification is given to prompt his turn to another relationship, in contrast with most of the *lais*, which excuse extramarital *fin amor* as a response to oppressive, controlling marriages to older men. The result is a striking show of initiative, forgiveness, and mutual understanding, particularly between Eliduc’s wife Guildelüec and his lover Guilliadun. The success of the narrative rests first on the initiative of Guilliadun, who unknowing of Eliduc’s marriage and promise of fidelity, presses him to be with her. She first summons him: “Guilliadun . . . sent for him to come and talk to her. She took him by the hand and they sat down on the bed and spoke of many things” (114). Furthermore, she is the first of the lovers to confess her feelings, and follows her confession with a prompt for him to answer her: “She answered the knight that . . . she had sent him the ring, and the girdle as well, because she had granted him possession of herself. She loved him so much and wanted to make him her husband and, if she could not have him, he truly ought to know that she would have no man alive. Now, she said, he ought to tell her his wishes” (117). Her

forwardness here makes the following story progression possible while presenting some slight moral justification for the behavior of Eliduc, who eventually though hesitantly breaks his vow to his wife. What follows, however, forms the crux of the tale, its central moral quandary, and the justification for the appearance of Marie's wish-answering magic. Eventually, the truth of Eliduc's marital status is revealed, causing the good-hearted Guildelüec to fall "face down, quite pale and wan, in a swoon in which she remained, for she did not come round or breathe. He who was taking her away with him truly believed she was dead" (122). When Guilliadun discovers the resting place of the apparently dead Guildelüec, her compassion overwhelms her. She forgives her husband's betrayal, moved by sympathy for the lovers: "This is my husband's beloved for whom he laments so, and, in faith, it is no wonder when such a beautiful woman has perished. Either pity or love will prevent me from ever knowing joy again" (124). Her feelings expressed here, which she follows with weeping and further lamentations, cause the intervention of the magical world. As she begins to cry and mourn for Guildelüec and the sorrows of Eliduc, a weasel appears, which is killed by a servant; soon after, another weasel, imbued with knowledge, pitifully surveys the dead body of its companion and returns with a magic flower of resurrection. After the flower's successful demonstration on the first weasel, the same servant hits the second on the command of Guilliadun and they obtain the magical flower which revives Guildelüec. The strangely wise weasel who employs magic on behalf of its companion comes at just the right time, much like the bird-knight lover in "Yonec" or the otherworldly ship in "Guigemar."

The two exceptions to magic working in proximity and conversation with women and their desires rather than under their direct control are in "Lanval" and "Les Deus Amanz." In "Lanval," however, the fairy-mistress' magical status appears intrinsic and largely out of her hands rather than a mastered skill, despite her being from the Arthurian land of Avalon. Her

otherworldly state justifies the necessity of Lanval's oath to keep her and the source of the magical riches bestowed onto him a secret. Despite his promise to his otherworldly lover, he makes the mistake of defiantly bragging to Guenevere of the lady's beauty in comparison to hers. Much like the lesson on respect learned by the knight through the narrative aid of a magical woman in "The Wife of Bath's Tale." Lanval's punishment and redemption with the reappearance of the beautiful fairy-mistress offer a chance for personal improvement of the protagonist along with presentation of a central moral to the readers. This fairy-mistress is no sorceress, but she introduces a test on an important virtue—the oath—and asserts the importance of humility and politeness towards women. While the overarching trend of magic placed outside women in Marie de France's *lais* is possibility, in this case magic acts as an egalitarian lesson that recalls the lack of respect prompting female characters in the other *lais* to search for freedom and mutually affectionate relationships. A similar sort of moral test is seen in "Les Deus Amanz," the other aforementioned *lai* in which a woman herself is magical.

In "Les Deus Amanz," the king's daughter refers her lover to a sorceress, the only such studied magic-user in the entirety of Marie's *lais*, just as in Chrétien de Troyes' "Cligès," Fenice refers Cligès to a trusted sorceress who aids them through potions and spells in overcoming the unjust obstacles to their love. The magic of the sorceress in "Les Deus Amanz" is scholarly and non-threatening, as the maiden explains:

I have a relative in Salerno, a rich woman with a large income, who has been there for more than thirty years and who has practised the art of physic so much that she is well-versed in medicines. She knows so much about herbs and roots . . . She will give you such electuaries and such potions as will revive you and increase your strength. (83)

Keeping in mind the timeline of different major medieval authors, this portrayal of magic as a fantastical extension of medical studies is perfectly standard for the late 12th century. Not only

does it mirror the characterization of Chrétien de Troyes' sorceress Thessala, but it also reasserts other aforementioned descriptions of magical learning seen in the circa-1150 *Vita Merlini* and the first version of Morgan seen in Geoffrey of Monmouth's 1136 work *The History of Merlin & King Arthur*. All together, these texts form a group of sorceress descriptions that affirm an early tradition of magic as an academic skill with the potential to offer aid. However, Marie's sorceress in "Les Deus Amanz" acts as a significant transitional point between the early learned healer-helper and the later instigator of change and chaos: like the loathly lady seen in Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale," this sorceress from Salerno acts as part of a potentially deadly moral test for the male protagonist. It is up to him to learn humility and respect before women in order to ensure his own survival. All are ultimately brought to misery and death at the close of "Les Deus Amanz" due to his failure to do so: neither the controlling king nor the bullheaded lover heeds the maiden's wisdom or thoughtfully consider her desires. As the maiden's lover carries her up the mountain to complete the test demanded by the king, she implores him time and again to use the magic provided by the sorceress from Salerno: "'My love, please drink. I know you are tiring, so recover your strength.' ... The girl repeatedly begged him: 'My love, drink your potion'" (84). Success in humbling oneself and heeding female wisdom allows Chaucer's similar protagonist to escape the threat of death; however, in Marie's tale, the protagonist fails his moral test and is killed by his self-inflicted over-exhaustion, bringing his lover to die in turn of her grief. Even where magic opens possibility, it requires the righteous actions of the protagonists to use it to good ends. Marie thus marks the central point of overlap between all other major representations of female-influenced magic in the medieval tradition. Her portrayals of magic are varied, the otherworlds she represents numerous and ranging from reimagined versions of the infamous Avalon to wholly new unnamed worlds through fairy hill-portals where birds can

become knights; magic may come to aid lovers spontaneously as an unmanned ship, or through the hands of a studied scholar in medicine. Her female characters are not singular in their morality or actions, with, for instance, “Equitan” featuring a murderous woman and “Laustic” portraying a woman who resigns herself to suffering and the loss of her relationship with her true love rather than risking escape. Marie’s women encompass an incredible range that resonates with the rebellious-turned-resigned maiden of Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale” as much as with the enduring Fenice and skillful Thessala in Chrétien’s “Cligès” and even the menace of Malory’s sorceresses, displaying the enormous variations in medieval portrayals of women, their relationships with magic, and their responses to suffering and desire.

What we can make of these considerable variations in character and the moralization of magic ties heavily into the real-world cultural surroundings in which medieval authors lived and worked. Recalling the historical progression of society’s reliance on female healers into widespread persecution of such women branded as “witches,” we can understand the transformation in literature of the morally good magical scholar-healer into a figure who is socially disruptive and eventually malicious. Magic becomes more chaotic and potentially threatening over time, particularly when held directly in the hands of women, though as late as Malory it never loses its quality of being an independent force which may be employed for good within the world of fiction. The later increasing appearance of antagonistic magical female renegades does not equate to a unified chastisement of literary women employing magic: rather, these women with their astounding powers allowed authors a chance to realign moral values of their protagonists and to question the social norms of their own courtly cultures. The early wise woman healer is a non-disruptive aid, but even the terrifying witch of the late middle ages, hunted down and killed en masse in the real world, continued to hold value as a literary tool—

not just as a stock antagonist but as a doorway to thoughtful critique. These tales encourage discussion of restrictive societal norms and reflect more than just a mirror of ideology: they also reflect the authors' ability to look beyond, to point out hypocrisies—as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—to imagine worlds in which women could wield near-unmatched power and influence and even overturn basic functions of society, as in the Valley of No Return. Only in the late middle ages after the initiation of mass witch hunts does demonization of the sorceress become common, and even then, the great literature of the Middle Ages has far more to offer than a simple fictionalization of the fear-mongering ideas espoused in *Malleus Maleficarum*. The magic woman is the voice of the critic made into being; she is the wish of the fettered and shut-away. She is the impossible made possible for a moment in ink.

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