Morgan le Fay: The Inheritance of the Goddess

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Resumo:

"Morgan le Fay: A Herança da Deusa" faz uma breve análise da figura de Morgan le Fay nas narrativas arturianas na Idade Média.

Começando por uma reflexão sobre os Celtas e a sua cultura, este estudo tem por objectivo demonstrar como a origem de Morgan le Fay poderá remontar às deusas célticas. Com efeito, Morgan possui características que a aproximam de A Morrígan e Modron. Todavia, é de salientar que esta personagem apenas surge pela primeira vez, em 1150, na obra *Vita Merlini*, de Geoffrey of Monmouth sob o nome Morgen. Suprema regente da ilha maravilhosa de Avalon, ela possui características exclusivamente benéficas. Assim, pretendemos também explicar as razões pelas quais esta se transformou numa das principais vilãs dos textos arturianos. Adicionalmente, serão considerados algumas das obras literárias medievais inglesas, bem como factores de ordem sociocultural.

Palavras-chave: Morgan le Fay; Narrativas Arturianas; Mitos Célticos.

Abstract:

"Morgan le Fay: The Inheritance of the Goddess" will analyze Morgan le Fay's character in Arthurian narrative during the Middle Ages.

Starting from a research on the Celts and their culture, this article aims to prove that Morgan le Fay's origin might be traced back to Celtic goddesses due to the characteristics she shares with the Celtic goddesses The Morrígan and Modron. However, Morgan is only mentioned for the first time, in 1150, in the work *Vita Merlini* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, where she is named Morgen. Queen of the Otherworldly island Avalon she possesses solely positive traits. Therefore, this study's goal is also to explain why Morgan le Fay was transformed into one of the greatest villains of Arthurian texts. To reach this goal, some of the main English medieval literary will be analyzed as well as other social and cultural factors.

Keywords: Morgan le Fay; Arthurian Narrative; Celtic Myths.

I. Celtic Myth: Peoples and Gods

The known historical data about the Celtic people is today still wrapped in controversy. Much recent academic writing has focused on Celtic identity, questioning whether ancient Celts really existed or if they are a product of modern construction. Most likely the peoples whom the Greeks and Romans knew as Celts had various ethnic origins, so how can one identify whom the Celts were or if they were truly a separate people? Those who defend the existence of Celts claim their unity did not rest so much on race, but rather on culture, having sufficient features, like religious beliefs, art styles, social structures and values, to mark them off as a distinct group. According to John Haywood: "This accumulation of shared characteristics does make it meaningful to use a common name to describe these peoples (…)" (Haywood 2004: 6). Therefore, unlike the Romans, for instance, the Celts did not have a centralized social structure; they lived in tribes that, by the 4th century BC, had started moving into the eastern and western limits of the European continent, which further added to their apparent disintegration. In addition, language is also an accepted definition for identifying this seemingly diverse group. For this paper's purpose, we will accept that the Celts were indeed a people that shared cultural traits, but whose specific religious beliefs, social structures and characteristics varied depending on the area where they settled. Furthermore, since our goal is to focus on the Celtic origins of King Arthur's half-sister Morgan le Fay, particular attention is given to the Celts who established themselves in Britain and remained there during (and after) the Roman invasion, which started in the early spring of 43 AC and lasted (more or less successfully) until the early 5th century.

The first testimonies of the presence of the Celtic people in the British Isles and Ireland date from 700 BC, but direct contact between Celts and Greeks may have started about a century before. In the 1st century, when the Roman troops' started landing in Britain, several Celtic communities were forced to seek shelter in far off domains, such as Cornwall, Wales, Scotland and the Isle of Man. By the third century, the Celts influence on the continent had also significantly reduced and when the Roman presence came to an end in Britain in the 5th century, followed by that of the Anglo-Saxons, from then onwards the Celtic speech and sovereignty had steadily decreased. Since Celtic culture and traditions lay mostly on oral transmission, most of the information now available about the Celts comes from three main sources: 1) the classical sources that describe Celtic

society from the perspective of Greek or Roman authors, like the Greek geographer Posidonius and Julius Caesar, but reveal little about the Celts' social organization; 2) insular Celtic laws and legends, which according to Bettina Arnold "are compromised by time, distance, and the transformative effects of Christianity" (Arnold 1995: 153); and 3) archaeological records, as for instance graves, especially those of high-status males or females that could include neck rings, daggers, etc. Furthermore, there are two important written sources about the Celts in Britain and Ireland; they are: the Irish manuscripts, constituted by ancient texts, and the Welsh sources, among them *The Mabinogion[1]*. However, as Miranda Green points out, in the article "The Gods and the Supernatural", these documents "have to be treated with extreme caution as sources for pagan Celtic religion" since they are "the work of Christian redactors writing in medieval times" (Green 1995: 465). Moreover, this vernacular tradition relates to Ireland and Wales, but it is far from the early Celts in the European continent.

Through these texts and archeological findings, though, it is nowadays possible to discern that in Celtic communities (of which there are evidence) the cultivation of learning and religion rested upon a well-structured system of professional classes. These included the druids, the bards and between them an order that is mostly known by the Gaulish term *vātis* (or *vatis* in Latin). The druids had the highest social status. In *Celtic Mythology*, Thierry Bordas claims druids were the "protectors of the traditions, educators of the young and guardians of the sacred word, the druids presided over religious life and dispensed justice. They were soothsayers and magicians. And they performed human and animal sacrifices" (Bordas 2001: 20). The bards were a class primarily concerned with literature while the *vātis* "are generally represented as experts in divination, but it is not possible to make any rigid distinction between their functions and those of the druids, and some would argue they do not constitute a separate class but rather a subordinate division of the druidic order" (MacCana 1970: 14). As already mentioned, the Celtic world did not have a standardized social structure, but there is sufficient evidence of the presence of a druidic class throughout the Celtic tribes. Besides these classes, Celtic tribes are often identified as having a chief, who acted as the leader of the community.

During the La Tène period (c. 450 BC) chiefdoms seem to be the main form of social organization. These hierarchical societies appear to have been tribally based and the chief was often the one with the highest status. Below the chief there was a warrior

class, a small class of specialist craftsmen and the peasantry, which according to John Haywood in *The Celts. Bronze Age to New Age* was "the largest class of Celtic society" (Haywood 2004: 35). Responsible for upholding the law, the chief offered his hospitality and distributed gifts of jewelry, weapons or cattle to his loyal warriors, thus reinforcing their status within the community and attracting new followers. As a result, a chieftain's residence was an important place, often a hill fort, where feasts were held, but which could also serve as a refuge for the tribe in times of war. Although in Gaul kingship was already in process of dissolution in Caesar's time, in Ireland and Scotland it was more enduring. The belief in a sacral kingship that mystically connected the person of the chief to the land itself was present, especially in Ireland where:

> The qualities of a rightful king (which in Irish are comprised under the term *fír flaithemhan*, literally 'truth of the ruler') are reflected in the condition of his kingdom. They ensure peace and equity, security of the kingdom's borders, and material prosperity: the trees bend low with the weight of their fruit, the rivers and sea teem with abundance of fish, and the earth brings forth rich harvests. (MacCana 1970: 119-120)

The belief in a symbolic union between a ruler and the land he presides over is an old one and when the territory was conceived anthropomorphically as a woman or a goddess, it served to reinforce the leader's power. This somewhat divine image of sovereignty remained especially evocative in Ireland.

As we have seen, even though the Celtic peoples shared religious beliefs, like the cult of the severed head and the worship of mother-goddesses, they did not have an ordered pantheon of gods. Evidence suggests there was "a rich and varied religious tradition" (Green 1995: 465), but it does seem clear that the supernatural was perceived to be present in nature so "every part of the natural world, every feature of the landscape, was numinous, possessed by a spirit" (Green 1995: 465). Over 400 names of Celtic deities are known, most of which are associated to a specific place and/or tribe, like Sequana, Goddess of the river[2] Seine. In all likelihood, each tribe had its own pantheon that might have overlapped with the one(s) of neighboring tribes. However, there were gods whose worship was more widely spread; the cult of mother-goddesses, often portrayed as a triple[3] entity, is attested throughout Gaul, for instance. The same happens in Wales with its great mother Modron or in Ireland where mythical tales claim that the peoples who inhabit there are descendants of the *Tuatha Dé Dannan*, the people of the goddess Ana, Dana or Danu. There were, of course, other gods like the god with horns or antlers, who

was the lord of the beasts and was worshiped under the name Cernunnos in Gaul or the goddesses Brigit and Epona who had a key role in Celtic legends and the first stands today as the Christian Saint Brigit.

Brigit, the goddess of greatest importance in Irish myths, is The Dagda's[4] daughter. Patron of poets, blacksmiths, and all artisans, she is also regarded as the mother of the gods. Like other divinities, Brigit can morph, taking on the role of other goddesses. She is The Dagda's daughter, wife and mother for she possesses the forms of The Morrígan and Boand, The Dagda's consorts, and of Ana or Dana, mother of the *Tuatha Dé Dannan*[5]. Epona, whose name means "great horse", usually appears riding a pony or a steed and is, sometimes, referred to as Eponabus, a plural form that indicates this goddess might have taken a triple form. Epona can be connected to two other divinities associated to the horse, Macha and Rhiannon. The three goddesses bear prosperity to those whom they favor or bring forth destruction and death to their opponents. Macha is especially relevant to this study because she is part of the Great Queens, Morrígna.

The three forms of Morrígna embody the land and may appear beautiful or deformed. As one entity, a war goddess, Morrígna encouraged warriors and influenced events on battlegrounds. She also had the power to transform herself into animals, namely the crow[6]. In the last decades, some critics have claimed the Morrígna – Macha, Badb or Nemain, and The Morrígan – are but different incarnations of The Morrígan. The Morrígan is the most important of the Morrígna because her union with The Dagda brings forth order and balance in nature. In the Irish Celtic tale *The Battle of Moytura* (*Cath Maighe Tuireadh*), the tribal god sees The Morrígan, by the river Unius, washing the heads and members of dead warriors. A sexual encounter ensues and the war goddess promises The Dagda aid in battle. The connection between these two divinities is crucial for they epitomize opposite forces: reason, good and safety, represented by The Dagda, and evil, horror and irrationality, personified in The Morrígan. Furthermore, The Morrígan has healing and regenerative powers, characteristics associated to Morgan le Fay of the Arthurian legends to whom this goddess has been linked. How can they, then, be connected? Firstly, as abovementioned, both goddess and fay have uncanny abilities to restore health to the sick and dying, after all it is Morgan who takes Arthur to Avalon to recover from Mordred's lethal blow. Secondly, they become vicious when provoked or rejected, causing destruction and demise. Morgan wants revenge on Lancelot when he

rejects her amorous propositions and The Morrígan punishes the hero Cuchulain for the same reason.

More recently, though, some critics have claimed the connection between The Morrígan and Morgan le Fay is no longer convincing. With this study we do not aim at questioning the strength of these opposing views, but to remind and underscore how most Arthurian texts and characters have originated in Celtic myths and gods. Therefore, just as Merlin, created by Geoffrey of Monmouth in *Prophetiae Merlini* (*The Prophesies of Merlin*)[7], is believed to be based on the Welsh bard Myrdin, Morgan, who appears for the first time in *Vita Merlini* (*The Life of Merlin*) by the same author, can be traced back to some Celtic goddesses, namely The Morrígan and the Welsh Modron, who also seem to be connected to one another.

In *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*, R.S. Loomis clarifies the similarities between the two divinities and draws the reader's attention to a 16th century narrative in which Urien finds a woman washing clothes by a riverbank. The girl, Modron, daughter of Avallach[8], immediately tells him she awaited Urien for fate foretold she would bear a child of a Christian man. From this union, Owain and Murfudd are born. As Loomis pointed out, this encounter clearly resembles the one of The Dagda and The Morrígan. What is more, both goddesses display the ability to mutate into birds, namely the crow. Most specialists in Celtic mythology also believe that Modron has originated from Matrona, a water goddess connected to rivers and worshiped all across continental Europe, "Matrona's character as a water-divinity seems to have descended to Modron and even to Morgain (…)" (Loomis 1977: 99). Thus, Modron and Morgan apparently descend from a very similar source since Morgan is also connected to the waters, a trait shown through her link to the isle of Avalon. Finally, one should also consider that Modron and Morgan have a son with Urien: Owain or Yvain. R.S. Loomis suggests Modron could be an intermediate figure between Morgan and The Morrígan, which would make the Arthurian fay a character in whom several Celtic traditions are merged[9]. A question remains: does this somewhat puzzling origin justify Morgan's ambiguous behavior throughout medieval Arthurian texts? Could this character's pagan's origins justify her treacherous actions? It is to these questions we now turn.

II. From Ana and Morgen to Morgan le Fay

The Arthurian Cycle is, without a doubt, part of Europe's cultural inheritance. With the possible exception of Robin Hood, what other medieval character is better known than King Arthur? For centuries audiences have made the Knights of the Round Table and their adventures a point of interest. The texts written about these (male) champions have been analyzed, debated over, and rewritten more times than one can recall. Nevertheless, while for centuries the knights and their feats remained appealing, over the past decades female characters' importance has grown beyond any earlier possibility. If one can state Arthur, Gawain, Lancelot, Percival and Galahad linger on in our collective imagination, may the same not be said about Morgan le Fay and Guinevere? One of the most popular characters of Arthurian romance today, Arthur's wicked half-sister has seduced readers and spectators all over the world. Healer or witch, good or evil, this character's allure seems to be greater than ever before, but can her ambiguous features be clarified? How does one understand her dual role as Arthur's nemesis and deliverer?

One of the first authors to write extensively about King Arthur was Geoffrey of Monmouth whose work in *Historia Regum Brittaniae* (*History of the Kings of England*), 1136, combines a crucial number of elements that have become a part of Arthurian narratives. Interestingly at no point in this text is Morgan mentioned. However, Monmouth does refer for the very first time to Arthur's sister, Anne or Anna: "After this they [Uther and Igraine] continued to live together with much affection for each other, and had a son and daughter, whose names were Arthur and Anne" (Monmouth, 1136: 145)[10]. Daughter of Uther Pendragon and his wife Lady Igraine, Anna is married to Lot of Londonesia. So far, her descent seems crystal clear, but on the following pages some questions arise. Notice the following paragraph:

> "Being willing therefore to bestow on these, as he [Arthur] did on others, the rights of their ancestors, he restores to (…) Lot, who in the time of Aurelius Ambrosius had married his sister, by whom he had two sons, Walgan and Mordred (…)". (Monmouth 1136: 157)

Two crucial points are made. First, Lot fathered Gawain (Walgan) and Mordred, so no incestuous relationship is hinted at between Arthur and his sibling. Second, who is this sister married to Lot in the time of Aurelious Ambrosious? According to Monmouth, Anna is Arthur's sister, which would make it impossible for her to have married Lot while Aurelious, Uther's older brother, lived. Three possible solutions might be offered. One, perhaps the author made a mistake when referring to Lot's wife and Gawain and

Modred's mother. Two, Uther and Aurelious had a sister married to Lot, who is not mentioned anywhere else in the narrative. Three, Igraine has an elder daughter, possibly begot by the Duke of Cornwall, her late husband.

In *Roman de Brut* by Robert Wace, written around 1155, and based on *Historia Regum Brittaniae*, Anna wedded Lot of Lyones and had one son, Gawain. Layamon, author of *Brut*, 1204, also identifies Anna as Lot of Leoneis's wife and Gawain's mother. Thus, despite some uncertainty, the academia has accepted Anna as Lot's only spouse and mother of his children. Having reached this conclusion, one is nowhere closer to finding out why Morgan remains absent from Monmouth's massive narrative. Indeed, one can only arrive at some sort of an answer when looking at *Vita Merlini*, by the same author.

Dated from 1150, *Vita Merlini* makes the first allusion to Morgen, the chief of nine wondrous sisters. Capable of shape shifting and a master-healer, Morgen rules over the magical island Avalon:

> 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; (…) Thither after the battle of Camlan we took the wounded Arthur (…)we arrived there with the prince, and Morgen received is with fitting honour, and in her chamber she placed the king on a golden bed and with her own hand she uncovered his honourable wound and gazed at it for a long time. At length she said that health could be restored to him if he stayed with her for a long time and made use of her healing art. Rejoicing, therefore, we entrusted the king to her and returning spread our sails to the favouring winds. (Monmouth 1150: 27-28)

Noticeably, Morgen neither possesses the negative traits highlighted in later texts nor are the sisters' otherworldly powers credited to a devilish source. In *Brut*, Layamon introduces new elements as the author not only wrote the famous scene in which an Otherworldly barge comes to bare Arthur to Avalon, but also named Argante the queen of Avalon:

> I [Arthur] well fare to Avalun, to the fairest of all maidens, to Argante the queen, an elf most fair, and she shall make my wounds all sound; make me whole with healing draughts. And afterwards I will come again to my kingdom, and dwell with the Britons with mickle joy. (Layamon 1190: 264)

How can this name change be justified? When reading Layamon's text is the reader faced with a different character or simply another version of Morgen?

By doing a careful analysis of the narrative, one understands that Morgen and Argante share the same defining features: they are the most beautiful of women; they rule a supernatural island and have exceptional healing powers. Most researchers agree that Argante is a corruption of Morgant, another name associated to Morgan le Fay. In *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*, R.S. Loomis claims that most manuscripts lack the first letter of a name so Morgain, Morgan, Morguein or Morganz turned into Orain, Ornain, Oruein, Oruain. Therefore, Morgant might as well have become Argante without any real change to the character itself. Alternatively, Lucy Paton, author of *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, suggests Argante is a corrupted form of *Argant* (brilliant), a male name quite common at the time Layamon wrote *Brut*. According to Paton, on the one hand, Argante may have been selected because it was a much more popular name than Morgen and the change would be a mere adaptation to the readers' tastes. On the other hand, the scholar reminds us that Morgan, in the 13th century, was a male name, a detail that could have contributed to this alteration.

Layamon's description is also relevant because Arthur seems to already know Argante/Morgen. It is he who describes her and not, like in *Vita Merlini*, the wizard Merlin. If Arthur and Morgen already knew each other, Layamon probably recovered a well-known storyline in Celtic tradition: a powerful Otherworldly Lady falls in love with a knight, making him her champion either in the lover's realm or in her supernatural one, where he becomes its king and/or defender. Bearing this in mind, let us then take another look at *Vita Merlini*. When the King is taken to Morgen's island, Merlin places him in the sorceress' chambers, on her bed, and leaves, which begs the questions: would a king (or any other noble guest) not be entitled to a room of his own? Why would Arthur be left on the Lady's bed? By considering only Monmouth's account, it is unreasonable to hope to prove the existence of a romantic relationship between Morgen and Arthur, but it seems acceptable to state such a connection is implied. At the same time, there are several allusions to Arthur becoming the monarch of a wondrous realm after his death. Recalling once again R.S. Loomis' work, the scholar suggests that a mix of cultural references have associated King Arthur to Welsh legends about an enchanted ruler:

> (…) the Welsh and Bretons adapted their concept of the immortal Arthur to already familiar concepts of a supernatural king. He assumed the part of the Maimed King, the faery lord of Avalon, the leader of the Wild Hunt, the sleeping king in the hollow mountain. (Loomis 1977: 72)

If Arthur takes on the role of Lord of Avalon, inevitably his relationship to Morgen, Queen of the same island, must be revised. However, how can this possible love connection co-exist with Morgan le Fay's role as Arthur's half-sister in later texts? The answer to this question might just lay in Anna, Uther and Igraine's daughter.

As previously mentioned, the mother of the *Tuatha Dé Dannan* is called Dana, Danu or Ana. The resemblance of the names Ana, the goddess, and Anna, Arthur's sister, indicates there might be a connection between them. In fact, in *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves states that Anna, meaning "queen" or "mother-goddess", belongs to Irish myths, appearing under the guise of Celtic divinity Ana or Anan. Moreover, this goddess could take two shapes: on the one hand, Danu or Ana, the beneficent and, on the other hand, Ana, who, along with Babd and Macha, was a part of the Morrígna. If the Morrígna, as one entity, is connected to the battlefield, then Ana can surely be regarded as a war goddess too. What about The Morrígan? In his elaborate explanation, Graves does not mention The Morrígan, a crucial aspect of the powerful trio. Indeed, Ana seems to take The Morrígan's place. Adding to this theory, Lucy Paton maintains that, due to the similarity of roles played by each divinity (as goddesses of war), there was some confusion concerning the two. In view of a possible identity switch between Ana and The Morrígan, is it not liable to assume that the Arthurian characters Anna and Morgan might have been influenced?

The Morrígan, as shown, has a link to Morgan le Fay. Subsequently, one may assume Anna, Arthur's sister, could have been confused with the goddess Ana, Dana or Danu. Interestingly, while Anna disappears from Arthurian romance, Morgan le Fay is never mentioned in the older chronicles by Wace and Layamon. Thus, the exchange involving Ana and The Morrígan probably led to a progressive replacement of Ana for Morgan. This alteration would explain why in Morgan le Fay's first appearance as Morgen, in *Vita Merlini*, she has no connection to Arthur's family. Lucy Paton supports this theory, stating:

> (…) a consequent confusion in name between Anna and Morgain accounts for Anna's disappearance from the romances and Morgain's appearance there as Arthur's sister. To Anna as the mother of Gawain, Arthur's nephew, this position belonged by the time when Geoffrey wrote his *Historia*, whatever her origin may have been; but there is excellent reason to believe that it had not been Morgain's from the time when tradition first associated her with Arthur. (Paton 1960: 140)

Thus, when Arthurian narratives spread across Europe, Anna, King Arthur's sibling according to Geoffrey of Monmouth, was erased and substituted by Morgan le Fay who, torn apart from her place in Avalon, took on the role of the monarch's sister. Morgan's move from the Isle of the Apples did not come easy on the character, especially in view of how magic and women were perceived at the time.

A key element in romance, magic remained an ordinary part of life during the Middle Ages. It could be learnt through books or with a great wizard, like Merlin. In *Etymologiae sive Originum*, Isidore of Seville argued there were three kinds of magic: divination, which included knowledge about the past, present and future; enchantments, controlled by means of words; and, the use of magical objects. More often, though, these three forms were reduced to two: white and black magic.

White magic, also called natural magic, involved manipulating the hidden laws of nature and was, in fact, closer to science. On the opposite corner was black magic, or necromancy. Most regarded this kind of wizardry as a corruption of the divine order; a religion gone astray, dedicated to manipulating people, objects and generally associated to demon incantation. In the famous work *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Thomas Malory declares Morgan le Fay was put into a nunnery where she learnt necromancy – a fact that from the very beginning seems to set her as one of the villains. Curiously, although magic could be performed by men or women, the later became much more concomitant to dark magical forces, which was probably related to how women were viewed at the time.

During the Middle Ages, Christian religion introduced a significant change in Europe, especially regarding women who were viewed as lesser beings whose role ought to be limited to the service of men. In fact, the Catholic Church introduced only one exceptional and truly pure woman, the Virgin Mary. She is the one who gives birth to the messiah and allows redemption to be achieved, but she is only mortal and, thus, inferior. Furthermore, the moment an all-powerful and all-knowing male God created Eve from Adam's rib (in the Genesis) was turned into a key event to what medieval Catholics called the natural order: women were divinely ordered to be subservient to men for they were shaped after them. Additionally, womankind also became the rot of Evil for it was because of a woman (Eve) that God expelled Mankind from the Garden of Eden and sin entered the world. Consequently, women could only achieve redemption by leading a devoted life to Christ, their husbands or male relatives; by being silent and passive; and,

preferably, by remaining virgins. Nevertheless, this does not mean the Catholic Church was the sole responsible for the misogyny felt in medieval Europe.

In Classic texts like, for instance, Aristotle's *Generation of Animals* the active and creative role of men is highlighted against the passive and receptive role performed by women. Man is the one who transmits movement, energy and action whereas the Woman, albeit the place where the embryo develops, is incapable of truly generating life. In *Women Defamed and Women Defended*, Alcuin Blamires reminds the reader that a woman "as 'deformed' or 'defective' male (...) could not reach the male standard of perfection because her menstruation signalled that her body was physiologically inferior" (Blamires 1992: 2). Thus, women were regarded as both spiritually inferior, since their weaker nature made them more vulnerable to being seduced by Satan and his wicked minions, and physically incomplete, as they lacked Man's strength and active energy. In addition, the female body, for its voluptuousness and sexuality, was something to be feared as it provoked lust and greed (mortal sins) in the hearts of Men, because "not only did women excite men to sinful thoughts; women were actually held to be more lustful creatures by nature" (Blamires 1992: 5). Such characteristic will be particularly linked to sorceresses whose sexuality is intensified. Morgan le Fay is many times portrayed as a promiscuous character; she has different lovers and punishes those who, like Sir Lancelot, dare to reject her. The bond between women and magic is, thus, usually a negative one and it was commonly believed that wives, daughters and/or sisters could use spells against their own family. Most sorceresses belonged to a high social class: they had a formal education; they could read, write and often belonged to important families, which gives them some equality to the male heroes. This similarity of status, though, was not well regarded for it represented a threat to traditional male power.

In romance, magic became a mean women could use to intervene in a male-dominated action and would often prompt events or set off a knight's adventure(s). In the article "Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory", Geraldine Heng declares magic has a power greater than that of weapons:

> Magic (…) is an independent force, and requires little concession from the human counters with which it transacts. Its dispositions therefore lodge formidable sources of power in the text, to far exceed the mechanism of arms. And, because its operations are secret or indecipherable, and may press even the unwilling into service, it is a thing to be feared, particularly by a warrior ethic, for its mysterious compulsion. (Heng 2004: 844)

In addition, during the Middle Ages, people believed enchanters had to pay a high price for performing magic: they would lose their youth. This idea is without a doubt linked to the conviction that physical attractiveness was a result of inner beauty so the good were always beautiful and young whereas the bad were hideous and old. Consequently, by the end of the 13th century, Morgan le Fay had lost any beauty traits, but grew ever more promiscuous. Witches' magic abilities would allow them to select whomever they wished for a lover, and perhaps even an unwilling knight. As a result, magic soon became a symbol of women's power over men: it could indicate their erotic desire or maternal protectiveness[11]. Of course, female authority was something to be feared in medieval Christian society – a world-view that one must bear in mind when looking at Morgan's portrayal in medieval Arthurian texts.

Summing-up, there are two plausible main reasons as to why Morgan was turned into a witch and Arthur's nemesis. First, one must consider the already mentioned alliance designed between women and magic. While charms are a key part of romance as a genre, the display of supernatural abilities in society was not a positive trait. Second, one must bear in mind the progressive Christening of Arthurian narratives. The oldest sources about Arthur and his knights are found in Irish and Welsh Celtic legends, but these were later altered to fit Christian moral and spiritual ideals. The Catholic Church, concerned with controlling all cultural forms, helped build a new ideal of hero: pure, virgin and devoted to Christ (like Galahad). At the same time, all characters whose actions somehow contradicted the Christian behavior model or whose past was linked to pagan gods slowly went through a deterioration process. Among these is Gawain, a brilliant and courteous knight in works like *The Mabinogion* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, later became known as treacherous. If one considers that a) Morgan le Fay can be connected to some Celtic goddesses, namely Modron and The Morrígan; and b) all pagan gods were viewed as fake idols and allies of Satan; then, it is clear Morgan could hardly be depicted as something other than wicked. Furthermore, if according to Christian religion, a woman (Eve) was the source of all Evil (as Pandora in Greek mythology), why would a woman not be the causer of destruction in the Arthurian cycle?

Initially described as a master-healer, it seems only natural that, in view of the misogynist beliefs held during the Middle Ages, Morgan should progressively embody uncontrollable and dangerous magical forces. Notwithstanding, the fantasy-like elements

of romance and its continuous use of the marvelous have helped maintain some of Morgan's positive traits: she is still the one responsible for taking Arthur to Avalon, therefore, enabling his return.

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[1] *The Mabinogion* is a set of ancient narratives, which originated in Celtic oral tradition. Although, critics have so far failed to reach an agreement as to the exact dates, it is believed that *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* were written in the second half of the 12th century whereas the remaining texts were probably recorded later on. First translated to English by Lady Charlotte Guest, responsible for introducing *Taliesin* to the collection, *The Mabinogion* only became known in the 19th century.

[2] The Celts were fascinated by hills and rivers usually presided over by a female divinity that would ensure the quality of the water's healing proprieties. On the importance of water, in "Os Celtas e os Cultos das Águas: Crenças e Rituais", Filippo L. Olivieri states that "A forte ligação entre os meios aquaticos e a mulher dá a conotação de que a água é incontestavelmente um meio associado às origens do mundo. O fato dos rios franceses terem nomes femininos evoca essa antiga ligação entre a água e a mulher. (…) Os meios aquáticos eram condutores até ao mundo invisível, o Outro Mundo, que na verdade está interligado ao mundo 'real'" (Oliveri 2006: 85).

[3] As in other religions, the number three seems to be a highly symbolic one in Celtic religion. According to Miranda Green "the triplistic character of many mother-goddess images expresses the power of 'three' in Celtic religion, a significance which transcends mere intensity of expression by means of repetition. Triplism is an important characteristic of Celtic religious iconography (…)" (Green 1995: 477).

[4] The tribal god, The Dagda, was one of the leaders of the *Tuatha Dé Dannan* and played such an important role that his name (like The Morrígan's) is generally preceded by an article. The Dagda was considered the patron of druids, doctors and the god of friendship. In addition, although this divinity had a darker side in Ogma, he also presided over the seasons and the harvest. The Dagda is Óengus or Mac Óc's (or Mabon's) father. When first described by Julius Cesar, The Dagda was identified as Jupiter, king of the Roman gods and emperor of the skies.

[5] According to the *Book of Invasions* (12th century), this tribe was the fifth to reach Ireland and was responsible for defeating the *Fir Bolg*. Nonetheless, their rule came to an end with the arrival of the *Milesians* who forced Ana's people to take refuge in isolated and secluded places. As years went by, the *Tuatha Dé Dannan* became the *Sidhe* or fairies.

[6] The crow would often appear at the end of a battle to devour the warriors' lifeless corpses. This animal is also associated to Modron, the Welsh mother goddess, and to the Nordic valkyries.

[7] *Prophetiae Merlini* (*The Prophesies of Merlin*), 1135, is the first work by Geoffrey of Monmouth in which the author refers to the famous wizard. Nonetheless, it was only in *Historia Regum Brittaniae* (*History of the Kings of England*), 1136, and *Vita Merlini* (*The Life of Merlin*), 1150, that Monmouth described Merlin's life in greater detail.

[8] The mysterious character Avallach or Avaloc has been associated to the Lord of Avalon. In *Gawain: Knight of the Goddess*, author John Matthews identifies Avallach/Avaloc as a king of the Celtic Otherworld. Additionally, in ancient family trees, he is Igraine's father and, therefore, Arthur and Morgan's grandfather.

[9] In the Welsh text, *Culhwch and Olwen*, Modron is identified as Mabon's mother who, as a baby, was kidnapped and lived a prisoner at the walls of *Caer Loyw* until Arthur's warriors released him. The story of the lost son and the tearful mother is a recurrent motif in *The Mabinogion*, which has led some critics to claim that Modron and Mabon are archetypes of an ancestral myth.

[10] The love story between Uther and Igraine, the Duke of Cornwall's wife, is one of the most popular and enduring tales in Arthurian legend. In Monmouth's *Historia Regum Brittaniae*, after a battle with the Duke, during which he dies, Uther takes his lands and marries Igraine.

[11] Not all sorceresses were considered evil. There were, of course, women who used their knowledge of the supernatural to guide and protect knights, usually their protégés, lovers or both. The idea of the fairy godmother is popular throughout Arthurian romance (see the Lady of the Lake and Lancelot) and in children's literature.