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Morgan le Fay in Contemporary Fantasy Media.



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Abstract

Although the world of fantasy media has become more and more popular over the years, the representation of female characters with interesting personalities and depth of character and morality has sometimes failed to meet expectations. This thesis looks at the character of Morgan le Fay from Arthurian legend- specifically in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*- to see how modern creators adapt this enchantress. The modern works analysed are Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* and BBC's series *Merlin*. Looking at these adaptations may give us insight into how women overall are represented in contemporary fantasy works.

Keywords: Morgan le Fay, Arthurian literature, Adaptation, Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, *Merlin*.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Introducing Morgan le Fay

Morgan le Fay is, at a first glance, a powerful magician in Arthurian legend. Early sources simply state that she is a goddess or a fairy, who protects king Arthur with her magic from those who would harm him. Her role in the stories revolving around the legendary king became more prominent with time, and so did the ambivalence of her character. In some of the later medieval texts, she changes from a protector to an antagonist, out to destroy Camelot herself.¹ One of the earliest appearances of Morgan is in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*; in this poem, and in works by Chrétien de Troyes, too, she is a great healer. Only in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, likely the most renowned and influential Arthurian text², is she first portrayed as an antagonist, scheming to take over Camelot; however, in the end it is she again who takes the fatally wounded Arthur on his last journey to the magical island of Avalon. According to other medieval tales that followed, she then became the immortal queen of this island hidden in mists. In these medieval and also in later texts, it is the unpredictability of her personality and morality that make her special. She does not fit into one stereotype, and cannot be simply put into one category or the other.

After a surge in the popularity of Arthurian legends in Victorian times, Morgan has made a comeback into popular culture again recently, in the 20th and 21st century. She now appears as a character (or influences other characters) in many different works of fantasy. Her stereotypical image has become that of a sly, seductive and scheming witch, whose goal is to overthrow Arthur and his knights. She represents the dark side of magic, while Merlin is the

¹ Jill M. Hebert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.

² Carolyne Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006,) 6.

epitome of benevolent magic. With only some knowledge of the original medieval legends and works, it can easily be said that it is not all that simple.

Most modern adaptations of Arthurian legends do however still put her in the role of the villainous witch. She wants to oppose everything that Arthur stands for, or take over his throne, or simply just be evil for no good reason at all. Writers often merge her character with that of her sister Morgause (traditionally Morgan's sister and the mother of Mordred, who kills Arthur) and make her the enemy of Merlin too. This Morgan that is purely evil for evil's sake has lost all her traditional nuance and the various layers of character she previously had. Elizabeth Sklar, author of *King Arthur in Popular Culture*, has stated about this superficial version of Morgan that she is "the very embodiment of evil dedicated to the subversion of all forms of governance, expressing the fears that inevitably accompany the sort of radical cultural change represented by the social realities and ideological imperatives of escalating female empowerment during this (20th) century. A composite of all the patriarchal nightmare-women of literary tradition: Eve, Circe, Medea and Lady Macbeth compressed into a single, infinitely menacing package."³ Morgan is, in modern fiction, all too often reduced to just the evil witch, because a female character with a complex, layered personality and a conflicted morality seems to be more than some creators can handle.

Some other contemporary Arthurian works however do try to find a way past this stereotype, and make her character more morally ambiguous, and her personality a bit more unpredictable- a bit less of the superficial "sexy sly evil witch" stereotype. This reminds us more of some of the medieval texts in which this was also the case. The unpredictable nature of her character and morality should be what makes Morgan interesting; for writers or

³ Sally K. Slocum and Elizabeth S. Sklar, "Thoroughly Modern Morgan: Morgan Le Fey in Twentieth-Century Popular Arthuriana," in *Popular Arthurian Traditions* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2007), 28.

directors looking to adapt the legends of King Arthur, there are plenty of traits, personalities, and character arcs to choose from. To leave her personality superficial and her morality merely that of an evil witch is troublesome, however, and not something we should want to see in modern day fiction, film, or any other form of media.

This thesis will explore the representation of Morgan le Fay in two of the medieval works she appears in, namely Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, and to see how Morgan has changed over the years, it will study two modern adaptations as well. I will attempt to answer the following question in my research: How is the personality of the enchantress Morgan le Fay represented in contemporary fantasy works that adapt Arthurian legends, such as Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon* and the BBC series *Merlin*, compared to the original medieval works (such as Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*) in which she appears? The answer to this question can help explain how the portrayal of Morgan le Fay has changed over time.

This thesis will be structured as follows; the first two chapters will analyse the portrayals of the two Morgans from the medieval sources, by looking at descriptions of her in these works, the abilities she has, and what her role and actions in these stories are. The next chapter will do the same for the first modern reinterpretation of Morgan; *The Mists of Avalon*'s Morgaine. The last chapter will analyse Morgana, BBC's *Merlin*'s version of the enchantress. By then comparing and contrasting these results, this thesis will attempt to answer the research question.

1.2 Feminist Criticism and Morgan

Research on the character of Morgan le Fay falls under the studies of feminist criticism and that of adaptation theory, but because the focus of this thesis lies on the representation and portrayal of Morgan as a woman in these works, feminist criticism will be more applicable. Feminist literary criticism emerged in the aftermath of the ‘second wave’ feminism, around the 1960s. It looked at women’s writing and the portrayal of women by both male and female writers. The Woman, as Virginia Woolf describes in her *A Room of One’s Own*, “is the most discussed animal in the universe.”⁴ Whether it be misogynist or emancipatory, the concept of women in text, let alone female authors, created a large field for feminist literary criticism to investigate.

One of the most important tasks of Feminist literary criticism has always been to question the representations of women in texts. In the earlier stages of feminist literary criticism, this was done in two ways; firstly, by condemning male authors for their inadequate representations of women, and secondly, by creating better and more accurate female characters.⁵ Feminist critics denounced the early modern stereotypes of women in texts; the inconstant lover, the nagging wife, the shrewish spinster, the disdainful mistress or the seducing whore. Accurate representations are actually very important; in the *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Mary Wollstonecraft suggests the power of textual representations of women,⁶ and in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, she also states that “women have been corrupted and stunted by their reading, which has enfeebled their minds with notions of

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, (Penguin Modern Classics, 481, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books), 1967.

⁵ Gill Plain and Susan Sellers, *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 34.

⁶ Mary Wollstonecraft, Janet Todd, and Marilyn Butler, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft. Vol. 5, a Vindication of the Rights of Men. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Hints*, (The Pickering Masters, London: Pickering, 1989), 47.

false refinement- a consequence not confined to those who read frivolous novels, but also communicated through ‘books of instruction, written by men of genius.’”⁷ The importance of the way women are represented in novels is also explained in *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*; “In the space of text woman can be both defamed and defended, and it is here that the most persuasive possibilities can be found for imagining the future of the female subject.”⁸ Just as feminist critics did then, we too can look at how women are portrayed in our media to see how women are perceived in society as a whole.

This research on Morgan le Fay is built upon that part of feminist criticism that questions the representation of women in text- in this case, not only in text, but other media too. Whereas Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlini* and Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* are medieval texts, and must be looked at considering that period of time, Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *Mists of Avalon* and BBC’s *Merlin* are quite recent works, and must be criticised and held to the standards of our time. As described in *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, over time, new representations of women emerged; “No longer ‘silent’ or ‘hidden’, women characters and authors take on life and energy and are conceived of as heroic, passionate, subversive.”⁹ We can see this trend when looking at contemporary media; creators have increasingly focused on giving us female characters that are not only realistic, but also exemplary. We do however also still see a lot of that same old misrepresentation; female characters that are either flat and boring, or over-the-top stereotypes. By looking

⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, Janet Todd, and Marilyn Butler, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft. Vol. 5, a Vindication of the Rights of Men. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Hints*, (the Pickering Masters, London: Pickering, 1989), 74.

⁸ Gill Plain and Susan Sellers, *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.

⁹ Gill Plain and Susan Sellers, *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 110.

critically at Morgan through the lens of feminist literary criticism, we can decide whether the contemporary works have done her enchanting personality and story justice.

1.3 Debate on Morgan

The current debate on this topic looks at the character of Morgan le Fay in various contemporary works, and discusses the ways in which she is adapted. This fits into the broader subject of how women overall are portrayed in contemporary media. Research that has already been done looks at her in written¹⁰¹¹¹² and televised¹³¹⁴¹⁵¹⁶ adaptations. Important sources by experts in this field include Jill M. Hebert's *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*,¹⁷ in which Hebert extensively discusses some original sources and three adaptations (including Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon*), Carolyne Larrington's *King Arthur's Enchantresses*¹⁸, which discusses the roles Morgan and multiple other women play in the original texts and in contemporary versions, and Elizabeth Sklar's *King Arthur in Popular Culture*¹⁹, which contains 19 essays on Arthurian adaptations. Many of these sources are

¹⁰ Roberta Davidson, "When King Arthur Is PG 13," *Arthuriana* 22, no. 3 (2012): 5-20, accessed February 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/43485970.

¹¹ Diana L. Paxson, "Marion Zimmer Bradley and The Mists of 'Avalon'," *Arthuriana* 9, no. 1 (1999): 110-26, accessed February 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/27869424.

¹² Fiona Tolhurst, "Helping Girls to Be Heroic?: Some Recent Arthurian Fiction for Young Adults," *Arthuriana* 22, no. 3 (2012): 69-90, accessed February 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/43485974.

¹³ Jennifer C. Edwards, "Casting, Plotting, and Enchanting: Arthurian Women in Starz's 'Camelot' and the BBC's 'Merlin'," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 1 (2015): 57-81, accessed February 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/24643429.

¹⁴ Ann F. Howey, "Arthur and Adaptation," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 4 (2015): 36-50, accessed February 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/44697438.

¹⁵ Cindy Mediavilla, "From 'Unthinking Stereotype' to Fearless Antagonist: The Evolution of Morgan Le Fay on Television," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 1 (2015): 44-56, accessed February 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/24643428.

¹⁶ Jon Sherman, "Source, Authority, and Audience in the BBC's 'Merlin'," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 1 (2015): 82-100, accessed February 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/24643430.

¹⁷ Jill M. Hebert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan), 2013.

¹⁸ Carolyne Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

¹⁹ Elizabeth S. Sklar and Donald L. Hoffman, *King Arthur in Popular Culture*, (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2002.)

critical of Marion Zimmer Bradley's book *Mists of Avalon*, even though it was very revolutionary at the time it was first published (1982). The sources that discuss BBC's show *Merlin*, which ran from 2008 to 2012, seem to think that although its Morgana starts off as very interesting, she becomes a more superficial character later in the series. Most of the current debate on this subject revolves around *Merlin* though, as some sources don't agree and actually find that this show represented her accurately, with an interesting personality and with enough motive for her to become an antagonist. There is still a lot of room to look at the Morgans from both adaptations, to study their personality and morality more and to see whether their representations suit contemporary times.

1.4 Relevance

Hopefully, this research will give us some insights into how Morgan le Fay, and by extent women overall, are adapted and represented in works of fantasy. In our contemporary times, young girls all over the world are growing up with books like *Harry Potter*, *The Ranger's Apprentice*, and *Percy Jackson* (all books with interesting female characters with depth of character- however, all with boys as protagonists). It is therefore particularly important that we look at the female characters that are presented to us, whether they are new or adapted from a myth.

Looking at this field specifically, we can see that there is already a lot on Morgan le Fay- there is however not a lot of recent work on her, and little to none is written about her version in BBC's *Merlin*. By looking at *Merlin*, we could get an even better picture of how modern creators represent women in their adaptations.

2. The Medieval Morgan le Fay

2.1 *The Vita Merlini's Morgan*

The *Vita Merlini* is a Latin poem written somewhere around the year 1150. It is assumed it was written by Geoffrey of Monmouth, who is also the author of *The History of the Kings of Britain*, which also helped popularise the legends of King Arthur. The *Vita Merlini* is about Merlin, and tells the story of his madness, his prophecies, his sister and the poet Taliesin. It also includes a passage of King Arthur's final crossing to Avalon, the island where Morgan rules with her eight sister queens. Morgan only appears in two short passages, but we can learn a lot about her from just those. We can look at the following aspects of Morgan's appearance in this poem to investigate her character: the terms that are used to describe her, her abilities, and her actions.

By looking at the terms used to describe Morgan, we can see how the author wants to portray her. "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[.]"²⁰ This is the first time Morgan ever appeared in text, and her initial debut seems very positive. She is more beautiful than any of the other queens, and she is very skilled. Maureen Fries writes on this: "This initial portrait of Morgan and her realm is a positive and even an androgynous one, combining quintessentially feminine values [...] with surprisingly male-linked ones."²¹ Morgan's feminine values include the Earth Motherly fertility, the abundance of nature on the island that she rules, and her healing powers. Her more male values include the fact that she is a teacher to her sisters, and a ruler, with no male figure to tell her how to do so. The next passage in which Morgan appears tells of Arthur's arrival in Avalon: "[...] We arrived there with the prince, and

²⁰ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The Life of Merlin, Vita Merlini*, (United States: ReadAClassic.com, 2011), 30.

²¹ Maureen Fries, "From the Lady to The Tramp: The Decline of Morgan Le Fay in Medieval Romance," *Arthuriana* 4, no. 1 (1994): 2, accessed May 28, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/27869041.

Morgen received [u]s with fitting honour[.]”²² Here too, Morgan is described to be very virtuous and kind. Even though she only appears for a moment in the *Vita*, she seems to be the polar opposite of the evil witch she is in later literature.

In addition to the descriptions of Morgan, we can also investigate the exact abilities Morgan has in the *Vita*; what kind of magic she can use and how she does so can tell us a great deal about her character. We already saw from the passage quoted previously that Morgan is skilled in the art of healing. The continuation of that passage is as follows:

“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 wings like Daedalus.”²³ So not only does Morgan have healing abilities, she can also change herself into a bird. The ability to shapeshift into a bird suggest a connection to the Celtic goddess Morrigan, who could also transform into a black bird. Fries writes on her skills: “Her ability to fly and to shapeshift was, even in the Middle Ages, not necessarily gender-linked, although already in classical figures such as Medea potentially implicative of harmful magic in a woman.”²⁴ So even though her power to heal is a skill with a positive connotation, her ability to shapeshift actually hints at a more ominous nature- an ability that would perhaps better fit a witch, not a healer.

Finally, we can investigate her actions. Morgan welcomes Arthur and his men graciously and lays him down on a golden bed, and after looking at his wound, she decides that she will heal him. Her actions in the *Vita* seem very virtuous; however, some doubt can be cast upon them when looking at the original Latin poem. When Morgan says that she will

²² Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The Life of Merlin, Vita Merlini*, (United States: ReadClassic.com, 2011), 30.

²³ Ibid, 30.

²⁴ Maureen Fries, "From the Lady to The Tramp: The Decline of Morgan Le Fay in Medieval Romance," *Arthuriana* 4, no. 1 (1994): 2, accessed May 28, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/27869041.

heal Arthur, the original Latin states: “Si secum tempore longo esset et ipsius uellet medicamine fungi.”²⁵ (*If he stayed with her a long time and made use of her healing art*). Jill Hebert writes in her book *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*: “Geoffrey’s use of the word ‘medicamine’ is significant. Most often, it means a medication with both positive and negative repercussions—antidote and poison.”²⁶ The use of this particular word suggests that Morgan could have both the ability to heal or hurt Arthur. The motif of an enchantress keeping a knight on her island to heal him is not an entirely new one either, as it is found in both Greco-Roman and Celtic mythology too. The most well-known example would be Circe, who kept Odysseus on her island for a year, preventing him from going home. Although critics generally agree that Morgan’s actions in the *Vita* are benevolent, the original Latin and the echo of the trope of keeping a knight on your island already foreshadow the ambiguity Morgan’s character would have in later literature.

In conclusion, it is safe to say that critics generally accept the *Vita Merlini*’s Morgan as a benevolent character, who wants to heal the mortally wounded king Arthur on Avalon. However, as Jill Hebert states; “A closer look reveals that the *Vita* in particular plants the seeds of indeterminacy- Morgan’s potential to cause injury and death as well as to ensure health and life- that foreshadows the widespread critical acceptance of this important character’s supposed malevolence in later literature.”²⁷ We have seen that although Morgan is described in positive terms, as the most beautiful of her sisters, and skilled in the healing arts, her ability to shapeshift casts a shadow over her otherwise favourable nature. The ambiguity in the Latin that suggests that she could harm just as well as heal also lays the groundwork for her change of character in later Arthurian literature. This is why the *Vita Merlini* is so

²⁵ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The Life of Merlin, Vita Merlini*, (United States: ReadaClassic.com, 2011), 86.

²⁶ Jill M. Hebert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 29.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 16.

important: containing Morgan's first appearance, it can be used to contrast and compare later writers' representations of her.

2.2 *Le Morte d'Arthur's Morgan*

The second medieval source that is relevant to investigate is Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Malory was allegedly a knight first, but then went on to attempt murder, rape, steal, and extort until he was finally arrested and sent to prison. The events of the life of this writer influenced his treatment of the legend of King Arthur, which we can see mostly in the reflection of both his love and his aversion to the teachings of chivalry.²⁸ The code of knighthood that valued bravery, honour, prowess and loyalty to one's lord had become outdated and to an extent, problematic, as Malory saw that in his time, loyalty to a weak and ineffective king- in this case Henry VI- only brought about more troubles. The War of the Roses began because of the dispute between the houses of York and Lancaster, and Jill Hebert explains: "This battle between royals blossomed into a civil war that created great social upheaval. It also generated confusion for the nobles as they tried to judge shifts in power and decide who might best deserve- or reward- their allegiance."²⁹ Staying loyal to a single, and more importantly, worthy lord had become a very difficult task. Malory was aware of this, and with his *Le Morte d'Arthur* he critiques the limitations of the knights' chivalry and of Arthur's rule, with the character of Morgan le Fay. However, while doing so, he also puts her in a more stereotypical and an evil role, and uses the Lady of the Lake as a "good" counterpart to this "evil" Morgan. To be able to see more closely how exactly Malory

²⁸ Jill M. Hebert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 66.

²⁹ Ibid, 67.

portrays Morgan, we can again look at her descriptions, her abilities, and her actions, just like with *Vita Merlini*.

We can start by examining the way Morgan is described in Malory's *Morte*. Her role in this work is very different from that in the *Vita Merlini*. As Maureen Fries states: "The decline in her moral nature, her magic powers and even her beauty coincides with the virulent growth of woman hatred in both religious and lay society and in all kinds of literature documented by historians as a feature of the later Middle Ages."³⁰ There are no descriptions as there were in the *Vita* of Morgan's beauty and of her skill, and her healing abilities seem to have been forgotten- they are, in any case, rarely ever used. *Morgan* has become more evidently evil in *Le Morte* too, but much of a reason why is not really given at all, except for: "For ye shall understand that King Arthur is the man in the world that she hateth most, because he is most of worship and of prowess of any of her blood."³¹ No trace of any of these emotions was found in the *Vita Merlini*, but they are what motivates her here. Arthur, too, hates his sister with a burning passion; after she tricks him and one of his knights, he says; "For my sister Morgan le Fay by her false crafts made thee to agree and consent to her false lusts, but I shall be sore avenged upon her, that all Christendom shall speak of it; God knoweth I have honoured her and worshipped her more than all my kin, and more have I trusted her than mine own wife and all my kin after."³² Arthur sounds like he used to trust Morgan, even more than his own wife- however, he has stopped doing so. There are not many additional clear descriptions of Morgan in *Le Morte*; her character mostly becomes clear through her skills and her actions.

³⁰ Maureen Fries, "From the Lady to The Tramp: The Decline of Morgan Le Fay in Medieval Romance," *Arthuriana* 4, no. 1 (1994): 4, accessed June 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/27869041.

³¹ Sir Thomas Malory and Helen Cooper, *Le Morte D'Arthur - the Winchester Manuscript* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 68.

³² *Ibid*, 73.

So, we can also study the abilities Morgan has in Malory's *Morte*. As stated before, little of Morgan's healing powers remain in this work, as her more malevolent powers take a more central role. However, even those more harmful magical skills seem to have received a downgrade, as Maureen Fries explains: "Even sorcery is eventually reduced to more mundane means such as drugged wine or magic potion or powder instead of irresistible spell, and iron bars instead of magic curtain of air."³³ Morgan is still able to perform magic and shapeshift, as becomes very clear from this passage: "When she saw she must be overtaken, she shaped herself, horse and man, by enchantment unto great marble stones."³⁴ However, for most of her ploys and schemes in *Le Morte*, she does not use these abilities, but instead makes use of her resourcefulness, her adaptability, and her quick tongue. As Angelique Gulermovich points out: "Morgan le Fay's words are more often used to trick or to stir up contention. Nine of her twenty-three treacherous acts documented here are carried out through her words; in four other cases, message-bearers act as her agents and speak for her in order to trick the people of Arthur's court."³⁵ Her most important weapon might however be her knowledge of the fact that she is not bound to chivalric codes of honour like Arthur and his knights, nor to the feminine rules of the court; an example of Morgan being able to manipulate these social rules appears in the episode of the work where Morgan tries to murder her husband, Uriens. Morgan attempts to murder him with a sword as he sleeps, but before she can do so, she is interrupted by her son Uwayne. He says to her: "Ah, fiend, what wilt thou do? And thou were not my mother, with this sword I should smite of thy head."³⁶

³³ Maureen Fries, "From the Lady to The Tramp: The Decline of Morgan Le Fay in Medieval Romance," *Arthuriana* 4, no. 1 (1994): 4-5, accessed June 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/27869041.

³⁴ Sir Thomas Malory and Helen Cooper, *Le Morte D'Arthur - the Winchester Manuscript* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 72.

³⁵ Angelique Gulermovich, "Woman's Word: Threats and Prophecies, Lies and Revelations in Arthurian Romance and Medieval Irish Literature," *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 12 (1992): 189, accessed June 18, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/20557245.

³⁶ Sir Thomas Malory and Helen Cooper, *Le Morte D'Arthur - the Winchester Manuscript* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 71.

Jill Hebert explains about this passage that “he assumes that Morgan would only attack her husband if she was a ‘fiend’ that is, possessed by a demon and out of her right mind. Morgan turns this to her advantage immediately, using his assumptions about gender to her benefit.”³⁷ She uses Uwayne’s implication of her being out of her right mind to her advantage, presenting herself as a weak and confused woman, instead of a calculating and cold one. She also uses his hesitation to beg for forgiveness, and appeals to him as a mother to her son, which convinces him to spare her life. Morgan makes him believe that she is harmless by putting herself in the position of a woman in the chivalric world, and tells him that he should spare her by reminding him of his role as a knight at the same time. Morgan is able to cross the rules and boundaries of her world, and uses this to manipulate the stereotype of the adaptable woman and that of the resolute man.

Lastly, we can look at Morgan’s actions in *Le Morte* to define her. Of course, what has been previously discussed, namely the attempted murder of Uriens, does not make her seem like a benevolent character at all. Most of her other actions in Malory’s *Morte* do not really help her case either. Most of them involve endangering Arthur and his knights, sometimes even pitting them against each other. The general consensus is that Malory’s Morgan is evil; however, as Jill Hebert states: “One of the problems with simply calling Morgan ‘evil’ in an inherently binary system is that Arthur becomes, necessarily, ‘good.’”³⁸ And according to her, that is not really the case. Arthur is imperfect, and so are his knights. Hebert explains that the reason for Morgan’s tests, captures and schemes is to try and prove this fact to Arthur and to the reader. For Arthur, it is a lot easier to dismiss her as evil than to realize that Camelot might not be as perfect as he wants it to be. Hebert explains further that Morgan often tries to expose the disloyalty of Arthur’s knights, with the main example being Lancelot and

³⁷ Jill M. Hebert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 71.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 72.

Guinevere's affair- but because Arthur does not trust her, she instead becomes the scapegoat and Arthur can remain blissfully ignorant. We can see this when Arthur receives a letter from king Mark, warning him of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair- but because it resembles a warning Morgan gave him, he chooses to ignore it. "When King Arthur understood the letter, he mused of many things, and thought on his sister's words, Queen Morgan le Fay, that she had said betwixt Queen Guinevere and Sir Lancelot; and in his thought he studies a great while. Then he bethought him again how his own sister was his enemy, and that she hated the Queen and Sir Lancelot to the death, and so he put all of that out of his thought."³⁹ However, when Morgan later sends him the deadly mantle, he seems to forget his mistrust, and is quick to accept a beautiful gift; "the damosel said, Your sister sendeth you this mantle, and desireth that ye should take this gift of her; and in what thing she hath offended you, she will amend it at your own pleasure. When the king beheld this mantle it pleased him much, but he said but little."⁴⁰ Morgan tests again, according to Hebert, "Arthur's ability to see beneath, to be distrustful when he should be, as a wise king should."⁴¹ And he fails that test, as the Lady of the Lake has to warn him not to put on the mantle. Not all scholars agree on Hebert's reading of Malory's *Morte*, and her idea that Morgan's role is to highlight Camelot's shortcomings. Maureen Fries states that "The Lady [of the Lake], like Morgan, has been retailored, but in her case to become the (mostly) nurturing side of the female counter-hero archetype rather than the (mostly) devouring side Morgan now permanently occupies."⁴² According to Fries, Morgan has received all negative traits and has become the negative stereotype, while the Lady of the Lake becomes her pro-Arthurian, anti-Morgan foil. Fries writes, that with

³⁹ Sir Thomas Malory and Helen Cooper, *Le Morte D'Arthur - the Winchester Manuscript* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 245.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 73.

⁴¹ Jill M. Hebert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 78.

⁴² Maureen Fries, "From the Lady to The Tramp: The Decline of Morgan Le Fay in Medieval Romance," *Arthuriana* 4, no. 1 (1994): 8, accessed May 28, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/27869041.

Morgan's actions, Malory "emphasize[s] more thoroughly than ever the wickedness of Morgan's role as well as the rather feeble scope of her magic."⁴³

The last important action to discuss is Morgan receiving the mortally wounded Arthur to bring to Avalon. As his knights bring him to her, she says: "Ah, my dear brother, why have ye tarried so long from me? Alas, this wound on your head hath caught over-much cold."⁴⁴ She asks him why he stayed away from her for so long, and she is saddened at the fact that he is mortally wounded. This is strange, as Morgan's goal throughout *Le Morte* seemed to be to murder Arthur- but now that he's dying, she sounds as if she regrets that the reunion between the two of them took until Arthur's final moments. It's a contrast with her character in the rest of the work, and it more closely resembles the same scene in the *Vita Merlini*. However, Malory, too, does not write any more after this of their last journey together to Avalon.

So, Morgan has changed a lot since the *Vita Merlini*. Gone are the descriptions of a beautiful enchantress with healing powers; Malory's Morgan is filled with hatred for her brother Arthur, and he hates her just as much; her powerful skills in sorcery, too, have been reduced and changed to better fit the "evil witch" character. Instead, Morgan has become calculating and manipulative. Lastly, her plots, schemes and captures involving Arthur and his knights testify of her changed nature- however, the last scene of her accepting the mortally wounded Arthur to take to Avalon seems to echo the more caring nature she had in the *Vita Merlini*. Jill Hebert's view on Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* is that Morgan was used to critique Arthur, his knights, and the imperfection of Camelot, and that through this Malory critiqued the notion of chivalry as a whole. Morgan is therefore not necessarily evil, just as Arthur is not necessarily good. Maureen Fries, on the other hand, argues that Morgan has

⁴³ Maureen Fries, "From the Lady to The Tramp: The Decline of Morgan Le Fay in Medieval Romance," *Arthuriana* 4, no. 1 (1994): 11, accessed May 28, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/27869041.

⁴⁴ Sir Thomas Malory and Helen Cooper, *Le Morte D'Arthur - the Winchester Manuscript* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 515.

received a negative connotation and simplified evil stereotype in all works, from Malory's *Morte* and onward. In any case, comparing the *Vita Merlini* and *Le Morte d'Arthur*, her change of nature towards the malevolent certainly cannot be denied.

3. *The Mists of Avalon's Morgaine*

From the medieval works, we turn to look at a modern adaptation of the legends of King Arthur; Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon*. It was published in 1982, has been translated in almost every country, and has never gone out of print. Diana L. Paxson writes: "In addition to its compelling literary qualities, the appeal of *The Mists of Avalon* lies in its romantic mysticism and its feminine spirituality."⁴⁵ This is the first Arthurian work discussed in this thesis that has been written by a woman, and the first with Morgaine, as she is called in the novel, as the protagonist instead of a side character or the antagonist. This chapter contains an extensive analysis of the character Morgaine, and will look at various aspects of her portrayal. At the end of the chapter, comparisons will also be made with the medieval Morgan to get an even clearer picture of this change.

We can first study Bradley's portrayal of Morgaine overall. The most important factor of *Mists of Avalon* is the fact that the legends of Arthur are told from the perspective of the women. This makes a big change in how we perceive Morgaine; some parts, she narrates, allowing us to see her point of view in the Arthurian world. Paxson writes on this: "By telling the Arthurian legend from the perspective of its women, Bradley 'reclaims' a story which had always been driven by the actions of the male characters [...]. In that regard, the book is a product of the same school of thought that in recent years has led to a re-examination of women's roles throughout history."⁴⁶ The Arthurian legends had always been very male-centred; their actions and adventures were the most important. Now, however, the journeys of the women in these stories take the central role. Morgaine is not the sole narrator either; we also have chapters with Igraine, Morgan's mother, or Guinevere as narrator. By having

⁴⁵ Diana L. Paxson, "Marion Zimmer Bradley and The Mists of 'Avalon'," *Arthuriana* 9, no. 1 (1999): 110, accessed February 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/27869424.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 118.

Morgaine as the narrator, we can also see her insecurities and doubts; it makes her more layered, as we can more clearly see the negative as well as the positive qualities of her personality, and her reasons for taking certain actions. The uncertainties she has often come up in the parts of her narration, and Jill Hebert speculates: “Sometimes they are countered by the wisdom of the Merlin and thus potentially reflect the journey that Morgaine travels toward her own wisdom, not yet attained.”⁴⁷ This statement seems to reflect Morgaine’s portrayal in *Mists of Avalon* well; she is imperfect, as Arthur and all other characters are, but she is a woman that is growing towards wisdom and independence.

Additionally, Morgaine’s abilities in this novel can tell us something about her portrayal too. Morgaine is trained in Avalon by Viviane, her aunt. It was, in fact, Malory’s lines “And the third sister, Morgan le Fay, was put to school in a nunnery, and there she learned so much that she was a great clerk of necromancy”⁴⁸, that inspired Marion Zimmer Bradley to write Morgan’s interpretation of the story. Paxson writes that Bradley has commented that if Morgan learned magic there, it must have been a very unusual nunnery.⁴⁹ Morgaine herself summarizes the magic she learned in *Mists*: “To call the fire, and raise it at command, to call the mists, to bring rain; all these were simple, but to know when to bring rain or mist and when to leave it in the hands of the Gods, that was not so simple. Other lessons there were... The herb lore, and the lore of healing, the long songs of which not a single word might ever be committed to writing...”⁵⁰ Aside from this magic, Morgaine can also use the Sight; an ability to see into the future, although it does not come as easy to her as her other magical abilities. This Sight provides useful and sometimes even dreadful insights

⁴⁷ Jill M. Hebert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 133.

⁴⁸ Sir Thomas Malory and Helen Cooper, *Le Morte D’Arthur - the Winchester Manuscript* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

⁴⁹ Diana L. Paxson, "Marion Zimmer Bradley and The Mists of "Avalon"," *Arthuriana* 9, no. 1 (1999): 121, accessed February 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/27869424.

⁵⁰ Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 157.

to Morgaine and allows her to see upcoming conflicts; at one point in the *Mists*, she even predicts the death of the at that point five-year-old Gareth, her sister Morgause's youngest son: ""That one, he talks only of war and fighting," said Morgause impatiently, "[...] I hope that when Gareth is old enough, there will be peace in the land!" "There will be peace," Morgaine said absently, "but it will not matter, for he will die at the hands of his dearest friend."""⁵¹ She does however, not even realize what she has just predicted, and Morgause tries to dismiss the prediction as delirious rambling. Her magical abilities have, in any case, regained some of their former status and prowess: Morgaine develops skills in this novel that Geoffrey of Monmouth's Morgan also had; the knowledge of herbs, and the ability to heal. They also do not have a negative connotation like they had in *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

Finally, we investigate Morgaine's role in this novel, and what her actions contribute to the progress of the storyline. Because Morgaine is the narrator and our main protagonist, she gives us explanations and reasons for her actions- unlike in Malory's *Morte*, where most of Morgan's actions did not have any clear reasoning behind them. Her reasoning, however, often starts to sound a lot like justification. She has been trained by Viviane to use her own judgement, but when she does so, she mostly just doubts her own choices. Jill Hebert writes on this: "This tendency contributes to her portrait as a woman at the mercy of forces outside herself, weakening her portrayal as a powerful woman in control of her own destiny."⁵² Aside from undermining her portrayal as a strong woman, her self-doubt also leads her to actually make the wrong choices. At one point in the novel, Morgaine doubts her own judgement: "I know that in another moment he would have obeyed. And then, I know not what happened – perhaps it crossed my mind, No, I am not worthy, I have no right ... I have forsaken Avalon, I

⁵¹ Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 274.

⁵² Jill M. Hebert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 134.

cast it away, by what right then do I command the Merlin of Britain?”⁵³ Kevin, the new Merlin of Britain, tells her in her moment of self-doubt that she cannot control him. This causes her to lash out, and use extreme means instead: she has him tortured and killed, as a traitor to Avalon. Her doubt in her own right to power leads her to put herself in the position of Kevin’s, and eventually also Arthur’s enemy. This destructive behaviour occurs again when Morgaine starts to feel like the Goddess cannot make the ‘right’ thing happen, and that she has to make sure the correct outcome of events occurs. Pagan religion is being overthrown by Christianity, and Morgaine wants to prevent this by setting Accolon up against Arthur, after first arranging for Avalloch, Accolon’s older brother, to die. She hopes that Accolon will overthrow Arthur, become king and reinstate Pagan religion. Instead, Accolon is killed in battle, and Morgaine has caused two deaths in vain before realizing that the Goddess’ will is not for her to decide. Hebert writes on this part of the novel: “All of these misgivings prompt Morgaine to overreact and cause destruction where, ironically, submission to another’s will—the goddess’s—would have been more productive.”⁵⁴ Morgaine’s own insecurity is what makes her react in a destructive manner, when things do not go as she wants them to go. Only when the mortally wounded Arthur is brought to Avalon, Morgaine acts with certainty and care for her brother again; she narrates, already in the prologue of the novel: “But the strife is over; I could greet Arthur at last, when he lay dying, not as my enemy and the enemy of my Goddess, but only as my brother, and as a dying man in need of the Mother's aid, where all men come at last.”⁵⁵ She has Lancelot throw Excalibur in the lake of Avalon, and says: “None after you must pretend or claim to bear the sword of Arthur.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 582.

⁵⁴ Jill M. Hebert, *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 135.

⁵⁵ Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), prologue page 10.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 999.

Her strife with Arthur has ended, and she now realizes his worth and regrets the enmity that came between them.

Now having analysed the portrayal of Morgaine in Bradley's *Mists of Avalon*, we can compare the adaptation to the original works. Bradley has taken most of the inspiration for her novel from Malory, but Morgaine differs from that work in the sense that Bradley focuses a lot more on Morgaine's reasons and thoughts behind her actions, and her view of the things that happen in this story. Reading her perspective changes her portrayal; in Malory, Morgan seemed like a cold, calculating evil enchantress that was evil for evil's sake, and no explanation other than her hatred for Arthur was given for her actions. Bradley's Morgaine, however, struggles with uncertainty and indecisiveness, which is what causes most of her wrong choices and missteps. It is difficult to compare Morgaine to the *Vita Merlini*'s Morgan on the topic of written descriptions, as Morgan only appears for a very short passage there; however, on the topic of her abilities, Bradley's Morgaine actually comes much closer to Geoffrey of Monmouth's version of her. Morgaine's magical abilities are much more significant and powerful, whereas Malory's Morgan usually resorted to tricks, traps, and poisons. Morgaine's role in the story does seem to echo Malory's role for Morgan in *Le Morte d'Arthur*; even though this Morgaine tries to justify her actions, she still takes the role of Arthur's enemy, and throughout the last half of the novel, does more harm than good. However, there is a difference between these works, which is explained by Diana Paxson: "*Mists of Avalon* is not the kind of fantasy novel where the forces of Good struggle against an immediate and obvious Evil. Bradley's characters display a very realistic mix of positive and negative characteristics. No one is entirely a villain; all are struggling to find meaning in life and achieve something."⁵⁷ Morgaine is, by Bradley, not reduced to the evil half of the Good

⁵⁷ Diana L. Paxson, "Marion Zimmer Bradley and The Mists of 'Avalon'," *Arthuriana* 9, no. 1 (1999): 120, accessed June 25, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/27869424.

and Evil dichotomy. So, when the novel ends, Morgaine overcomes her hostility towards her brother and takes her place again as Arthur's sister and companion on his last journey to Avalon.

4. *Merlin's Morgana*

The second modern adaptation and last work we will be investigating is BBC's *Merlin*; it ran from September of 2008 until December of 2012, with a total of 65 episodes. The show has changed the original character of Merlin and made him the young protagonist of the show instead of Arthur's old advisor. Although the first season of the show mostly focuses on the adventures of Merlin and Arthur, Morgana, as she is called here, slowly takes her place as another key character to the series. In *Merlin*, Uther, Arthur's father, has a hatred for magic and has had it outlawed in the entire country. This is a major problem for the protagonist, Merlin, but for Morgana as well, and she becomes increasingly frustrated and bitter towards the king; so much even, that she attempts to take the king's life. This transformation towards her role as the antagonist is slow, however; in the first season, Morgana is still best friends with Gwen, and has an affectionate rivalry with Arthur, often helping to protect him from harm. By season four, however, Morgana has turned fully into a villain, plotting to murder Arthur and take her place on the throne of Camelot. Whether Morgana's character in this show has been turned into too much of an evil caricature can be seen after her character and portrayal have been investigated, which is what this chapter will do. Because *Merlin* is such a large work to look at, only the episodes in which Morgana actually appears and also plays a major part have been investigated. These include some episodes from the first season, in which she assists Merlin and Arthur with their quests, but most important are the episodes in the following seasons, in which we can see Morgana's character change.

It would be difficult study descriptions of Morgana, as this work is not a novel, but we can look at how she was portrayed in the show by investigating her conversations with other characters, and her relationships with them as well. Most important in the first two seasons of the show is the relationship between Morgana and Gwen. In the beginning, Morgana and Gwen are almost always together. Gwen works as a servant for Morgana, but they are very

close, and Morgana does not care that Gwen is just a servant. When Gwen is kidnapped, Morgana even insists that Uther sends out knights to rescue her, even though she is just a servant.⁵⁸ It is, in any case, very clear that Morgana cares about Gwen. This caring nature disappears, however, in season three, when Morgana is reunited with her long-lost sister Morgause. Morgana immediately replaces her friendship with Gwen with her newfound admiration for her older sister, under whose influence, Morgana quickly becomes cruel and malevolent. In season four, Morgana has become so hostile towards her old friends, that she says: ““I have dreamt the future and in it that servant sits upon my throne. I would rather drown in my own blood than see that day...We must make sure she never sees another dawn.””⁵⁹ Morgana is jealous of Gwen, and even wants her out of the way – this signifies how much her character has changed, as they used to be inseparable. Jessica Edwards writes on this: “Morgana's jealousy of Gwen is out of character when compared to her generosity and openness toward Camelot’s poor in the first season. The deeper Morgana connects to her magical power and ancient practices, the less open she is to social mobility and the less sympathetic to the feelings of others.”⁶⁰ Morgana does not only become more hostile towards Gwen, but also towards Uther. Initially, she only wants to remove Uther from power because he was an unjust king, and executed anyone who possessed magical abilities – which caused Morgana to fear for her own life, as well. However, she then finds out she is actually Uther’s eldest biological child. She tests him, and gives him an opportunity to come clean about this to her; he hesitates for a moment, but then does not tell her the truth. Uther wants to keep it a

⁵⁸ *Merlin*, season 2, episode 4, “Lancelot and Guinevere,” directed by David Moore, written by Johnny Capps, Julian Jones, Jake Michie, and Julian Murphy, featuring Katie McGrath, Colin Morgan, and Bradley James, aired October 10, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70166295>.

⁵⁹ *Merlin*, season 4, episode 2, “The Darkest Hour: Part 2,” directed by Alice Troughton, written by Johnny Capps, Julian Jones, Jake Michie, and Julian Murphy, featuring Katie McGrath, Colin Morgan, and Bradley James, aired October 8, 2011, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70262326>.

⁶⁰ Jennifer C. Edwards, "Casting, Plotting, and Enchanting: Arthurian Women in Starz's "Camelot" and the BBC's "Merlin"," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 1 (2015): 64, accessed February 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/24643429.

secret, for Arthur's sake, but in this moment, Morgana's feelings of abandonment and rejection are what finally convinces her to try and take the throne for herself. Morgause naturally actively encourages this ambition, and fuels the flame of Morgana's destructive side. Although her hatred for Uther seems justified, the increasing enmity between her and her friends sometimes feels out of character for Morgana, who had been so loyal in the first two seasons.

Morgana's abilities in *Merlin* can also show us how her skillset has changed over time, and what her current abilities mean for her portrayal. What stands out immediately is that this show does not place its women on the side-lines; they are just as strong and brave as their male counterparts, which shows when, for example, both Morgana and Gwen take up arms to help defend Merlin's hometown from bandits.⁶¹ Morgana and Gwen are both skilled fighters, and Morgana even teases Arthur, reminding him of how she used to beat him when they practised swordplay when they were children. More than once, Morgana puts on armour and shows that she knows how to use a sword well. Gwen, too, is a blacksmith's daughter, and knows her way around weaponry. Edwards writes on this: "*Merlin* thus empowers its women to protect themselves and their male colleagues, and the show presents them as potentially equal or superior in strength and ability to at least some men."⁶² So, both Morgana and Gwen, the two most important female characters of the show, can fight just as well if not better than a lot of the male characters. Turning to Morgana's magic, we can see that it definitely is a darker kind of magic. Like in Malory, there is no trace of healing powers, and the magic Morgana has is less of a learned skill and more of a part of her nature that she is

⁶¹ *Merlin*, season 1, episode 10, "The Moment of Truth," directed by David Moore, written by Johnny Capps, Julian Jones, Jake Michie, and Julian Murphy, featuring Katie McGrath, Colin Morgan, and Bradley James, aired May 30, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70135595>.

⁶² Jennifer C. Edwards, "Casting, Plotting, and Enchanting: Arthurian Women in Starz's 'Camelot' and the BBC's 'Merlin'," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 1 (2015): 66, accessed February 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/24643429.

just finding out about. At the beginning, she does not understand it and is barely able to control it, and her magical powers are not something she wants. She does in any case feel that it is a part of her that she cannot deny. She turns to Merlin for help, unaware of the fact that he has magical abilities as well: “‘I’m scared, Merlin. I don’t understand anything anymore. I need to know what is happening. Please... It’s magic. I’m your friend, you know I wouldn’t make this up... You think it’s magic too! Please, Merlin, I just need to hear someone say it so I don’t have to keep feeling like I’m imagining it.’”⁶³ But Merlin does not tell her that it is, in fact, magic, nor does he tell her that she will be alright – he cannot tell her he knows exactly how she feels, because he needs to keep his own powers a secret to protect himself. So, he leaves her alone with her struggle. This leads her to feel like there is no other option than turning against Uther. For the rest of the show, Morgana only uses her powers to hurt others, and the show creates a very stark contrast between her and Merlin. Katie McGrath, the actress portraying Morgana, observes: “Morgana’s magic has taken her somewhere that [Merlin’s] magic never would... they’ve gone in completely opposite directions.”⁶⁴ Ann Howey also explains this binary: “In the last season Morgana wears dark clothing, rides black horses, and sits in shadowy, ruined castles which contrast to Camelot’s golden throne room. The only resolution to such a binary, the show suggests, is death.”⁶⁵ Morgana’s dark magic has become the proof of her dark character.

Lastly, we can investigate Morgana’s role and actions in the story. Her role is interesting because it changes so drastically; in the first two seasons, she is part of the group

⁶³ *Merlin*, season 2, episode 3, “The Nightmare Begins,” directed by Jeremy Webb, written by Johnny Capps, Julian Jones, Jake Michie, and Julian Murphy, featuring Katie McGrath, Colin Morgan, and Bradley James, aired October 3, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70166294>.

⁶⁴ *Merlin: Secrets and Magic*, episode 12, “The Dragon’s Den,” directed by Jeremy Webb, written by Johnny Capps, Julian Jones, Jake Michie, and Julian Murphy, featuring Katie McGrath, Colin Morgan, and Bradley James, aired December 13, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70166294>.

⁶⁵ Ann F. Howey, “Arthur and Adaptation,” *Arthuriana* 25, no. 4 (2015): 45, accessed February 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/44697438.

of friends that consists of Arthur, Merlin and Gwen; in season three, she struggles with her magical powers and her identity after finding out she is Uther's eldest daughter, and starts feeling increasingly alienated from her former friends. All the while, the hatred for Uther grows, and is finally outed when Morgana helps along his death. Edwards writes on this: "Because it is a family show, *Merlin* stops short of allowing Morgana to assassinate Uther directly[.] As her ultimate vengeance, Morgana prevents healing magic from saving Uther, only indirectly causing his death."⁶⁶ After Uther's death, Morgana focuses her hatred on Arthur; in order to drive a wedge between him and Gwen, she raises Lancelot from the dead on their wedding day, and arranges that Arthur sees a bewitched Gwen kiss him. Morgana's goal is to prevent Gwen from becoming queen, which she feels is her own rightful destiny. These actions are all a little strange and out of character when remembering how Morgana acted in the first two seasons. Morgana's last conversation with Arthur especially shows how the show changed her; "Don't worry, dear brother. I won't let you die alone. I will stay and watch over you, until the wolves gorge on your carcass and bathe in your blood."⁶⁷ Howey writes on this quote: "This speech subverts expectations that Morgana will take Arthur to Avalon, but that subversion actually reproduces a Morgan familiar from the legend, by erasing previous inconsistencies of texts such as Malory's."⁶⁸ In Malory's *Morte*, Morgan is evil without a clear reason – and at the end of the work, she also reunites with Arthur for no clear reason. *Merlin* decided to make Morgana's wickedness last until the very end.

Now having the full picture of the portrayal of Morgana, we can compare *Merlin* to the original medieval works, and to *The Mists of Avalon*, too. Morgana's portrayal starts out

⁶⁶ Jennifer C. Edwards, "Casting, Plotting, and Enchanting: Arthurian Women in Starz's 'Camelot' and the BBC's 'Merlin'," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 1 (2015): 60, accessed February 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/24643429.

⁶⁷ *Merlin*, season 5, episode 12, "The Diamond of the Day: Part 1," directed by Justin Molotnikov, written by Johnny Capps, Julian Jones, Jake Michie, and Julian Murphy, featuring Katie McGrath, Colin Morgan, and Bradley James, aired December 22, 2012, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70266407>.

⁶⁸ Ann F. Howey, "Arthur and Adaptation," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 4 (2015): 45, accessed February 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/44697438.

comparable to that of *Vita Merlini* and *Mists*; Morgan is strong, independent, skilled; she is loyal to her friends, and brave. However, after the second season, Morgan's portrayal changes to be more like that of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, in the sense that she starts to feel hatred for her brother and what were previously her friends. Morgana's magic is also, very much like in *Le Morte*, an indicator of her dark side, and creates a clear binary between her and Merlin, whose magic signifies 'Good,' while hers signifies 'Evil.' Her role in this story is to be the villain; from season three until the end, Morgana is determined to kill Arthur, and all her actions serve to further her goal to overthrow him and become Queen of Camelot. This is where *Merlin* sets itself apart from all the other works; even in *Le Morte*, Morgan takes Arthur to Avalon, in the end.

So, Morgana's portrayal in *Merlin* is most like that of Morgan in Malory; but where *the Mists'* Morgaine had a lot of redeeming qualities which resembled the *Vita Merlini's* Morgan, *Merlin* "assumes that narrative roles for powerful women cannot be changed, and even exaggerates Morgana as counter-hero: evil is her destiny."⁶⁹ Marion Zimmer Bradley went against this stereotype with her Morgaine, and from the first two seasons of *Merlin*, it would seem that Morgana was not going to meet her 'evil witch' expectations either; the following seasons, however, prove the opposite.

⁶⁹ Ann F. Howey, "Arthur and Adaptation," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 4 (2015): 45, accessed February 10, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/44697438.

5. Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to analyse the representation of Morgan le Fay, in two medieval sources, namely Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, as well as in two modern sources: Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* and BBC's *Merlin*. It has done so in order to draw a comparison between the medieval and modern version of this enchantress from ancient legend, which can show us how her representation overall has changed over time. This thesis first determined that the Morgan from the *Vita Merlini* was in fact not at all much like the Morgan we know today: she is a beautiful, skilled enchantress, well known for her healing powers. She is the queen of Avalon, and although we have seen that her magical powers might already slightly hint at a more ominous nature, her overall character and actions make that she is presented to us as a benevolent healer, not as a scheming witch.

In addition to the study of the *Vita Merlini*, this thesis also examined the portrayal of Morgan le Fay in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. We've seen that Malory's Morgan is quite different: from a healer, she has turned into a "great clerk of necromancy"⁷⁰ instead. Malory used his *Morte* as a critique on the concepts of knighthood and chivalry, illuminates the limitations of the loyalty of knights, and questions how strong the rule of king Arthur really was. He has changed Morgan, so she can test Arthur and his knights, but as the chapter on *Le Morte* concludes, he has made her considerably more malevolent in the process. From the analysis can be seen that his Morgan has a very different role; she is no longer described as skilled and beautiful, but rather as hateful of her brother, jealous of Arthur's power. Her magical powers also have been reduced to poisons and traps instead, and Morgan uses manipulation, plots, and schemes to get her way. The only thing that stands out in Malory's

⁷⁰ Sir Thomas Malory and Helen Cooper, *Le Morte D'Arthur - the Winchester Manuscript* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

portrayal of Morgan is when she takes him to Avalon; unlike all her other actions, which serve either hurt or murder Arthur or his knights, she actually seems sorrowful that her brother is dying. In any case, the analysis of this work has shown that Morgan's path towards a malevolent representation is evident.

This thesis then turned to the investigation of modern adaptations of Morgan le Fay, starting with the version 'Morgaine,' from Bradley's *Mists of Avalon*. *Mists*' plotline mostly mirrors the events of Malory's *Morte*, but because Morgaine was one of the main narrators of this novel, an emphasis was put on her thoughts and the reasons behind her actions. This creates a contrast with Malory's Morgan; because we read Morgaine's doubts and insecurities, she immediately sheds the cold, scheming, and manipulative witch stereotype. Morgaine's magical abilities echo those of Morgan in the *Vita Merlini*; she has powerful abilities, including the skill to heal. The chapter on the *Mists of Avalon*'s Morgaine concluded that, although Morgaine tries to justify her actions, she does put herself in the position of Arthur's enemy. The difference between this modern version and Malory's *Morte* is that Morgaine is presented more as a human being, with doubts and insecurities, who makes mistakes. None of Bradley's characters are without flaw, which makes that Morgaine is neither evil nor good. This representation of her is more layered, and neither chooses to follow the picture of the compassionate Morgan of the *Vita Merlini*, nor that of the evil witch of *Le Morte*.

Finally, BBC's adaptation *Merlin* was studied, and specifically the character Morgana, another modern reincarnation of Morgan le Fay. The analysis of the series shows that this Morgana starts off as very different from the other works; she is part of the circle of friends that consists of Merlin, Arthur and Gwen, and assists them on their adventures. She is loyal and brave, and unlike any of the other Morgans, Morgana knows how to use a sword. However, after the second season, Morgana's dark side emerges, and she becomes the 'Evil'

counterpart to the ‘Good’ that is the protagonist of the series, namely Merlin. This lasts until the very end of the show. In all other works up until now, Morgan has always taken the mortally wounded Arthur to Avalon. Morgana, however, takes her hatred for her brother to the grave. This results in the conclusion that this adaptation did not change the stereotyping narrative role for Morgana, and instead made it her destiny to be evil until the end.

In conclusion, this thesis has investigated the representation of Morgan le Fay in the medieval works *The Vita Merlini* and *Le Morte d’Arthur*, and in the modern works *The Mists of Avalon* and *Merlin*, and has determined that the two medieval sources differ in the sense that the *Vita Merlini* creates a very benevolent portrayal of Morgan, as a healer and a queen, while *Le Morte* lays the groundwork for a stereotyped Morgan, who is a cold-blooded witch. This thesis has also established that although we would expect modern adaptations to include interesting portrayals of female characters with depth of personality, this is not always the case. *The Mists of Avalon* succeeds in showing a Morgaine that is layered, has feelings, doubts herself; and therefore, also makes mistakes. On the other hand, even though it seems to start out with a strong and trustworthy Morgana, *Merlin* creates a very cold and evil version of what could have been a very interesting character. *Merlin* could have gone for a Morgana that struggled with her own morality, with influences from both the *Vita Merlini* or *Le Morte d’Arthur*; a powerful enchantress and healer, and also the female counterpart that can contrast the manly knights of Camelot. Instead, Morgana is simply used as the ‘Evil’ that contrasts the ‘Good’ of the male protagonists, Merlin and Arthur.

These results suggest that representations of women in modern adaptations, specifically fantasy adaptations, are not without flaw. The picture of the *Vita Merlini*’s Morgan, who is a beautiful healer, rarely returns in modern works. Women with power in fantasy works are rarely ever also layered characters, and simply being strong and independent does not add up to a complete personality. In future studies done on the

representation of Morgan, different modern adaptations could be investigated; *The Mists of Avalon* is a novel that has already been discussed a lot, as it was one of the first works to actually use the women as narrators. There are however a lot of new young-adult novels emerging focused on Arthurian legends, and Morgan's portrayal there could help us see how even more modern authors interpret her. The way we portray women is something that we should always keep investigating; after all, all over the world, there are young girls picking up books, looking for guidance and examples in female characters ranging from princesses and queens, to warriors and enchantresses.

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