Mother, Maiden, Matron: The Origin of Morgan le Fay, as it pertains to Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur.*

Y. A.

The origin of the Arthurian legend has engrossed historians, literati, and philologists for centuries with its multiple iterations and complex figures, who often have antithetical characterizations. One such figure, Morgan le Fay, stands out as a character with a motley and contradictory identity. In Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, she plays both the role of an antagonist and ally, helping and harming King Arthur throughout the text. Her inconsistent behaviour can be attributed to her multifaceted origins in Celtic mythology, in which she succeeded magical figures that were viewed and revered as both benevolent and malevolent. These many inspirations for Morgan le Fay come together to characterize her in Malory's text as a striking, dynamic version of her character.

While many scholars and critics have proposed a wide array of potential origins for Morgan le Fay, two hypotheses, one asserting her origin from Irish culture and the other Welsh, remain the most prominent amongst academics. Scholars such as Ana Rita Martins, argue that Morgan le Fay has roots in the Irish triple-goddess known as the Morrígan, who was the combined form of the goddesses Macha, Badb, and Nemain (Martins 157). Martins bases this assertion on similar traits and myths shared by both figures, such as how they both respond to rejection in a similar way (Martin 158). Martins also asserts that Morgan le Fay, who first appeared in the Arthurian mythos in the poem *Vita Merlini,* most likely replaced other Arthurian women, such as Anna, King Arthur's original sister (Martins 162) and Argante, the Queen of Avalon (Martins 160), absorbing their characteristics in the process. Due to her complex ancient Celtic origin, coupled with Christianity's negative view of pagan religions and magic (Martins 165), Martins contends that Morgan le Fay's status as both a helper and foe is not contradictory, but rather the result of a compilation of different inspirational sources.

While Arthurian scholar Roger S. Loomis discusses narratives used as evidence by Martins, such as Sir Lancelot rejecting Morgan le Fay's advances (Loomis 186), he does not view them as concrete evidence that Morgan le Fay is a continuation of the Morrígan.

Rather, Loomis also iterates that her origins lie in the Welsh goddess Modron (Loomis 190). For evidence of this connection, Loomis cites Morgan's genealogy in early texts as the daughter of Avalloc, as analogous to that of Modron, the daughter of Avallach (Loomis 190). Notwithstanding this assertion, Loomis further argues that the Morrígan could not have reached a Norman-French audience without an intercessor, and instead asserts that Modron was an intermediary figure between Macha, the most war-like aspect of the Morrígan, and Morgan le Fay (Loomis 195). Appealing to this hypothesis, Loomis states that Modron gave rise to the concept of the Fay, magical creatures in Welsh tradition (Loomis 201), which help further constitute Morgan le Fay's helpful nature, while the Morrígan inspired Morgan's more severe and malicious character (Loomis 202). Loomis ultimately states that two different branches of

the Celtic tradition, a Goidelic one and Brythonic one, unified to form the character of Morgan le Fay, which accounts for her differing behaviour (Loomis 202).

While it is widely agreed that Morgan le Fay is rooted in Celtic mythology and tradition, it is likely that her dichotomous characterization in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is due in part to Morgan le Fay's Goidelic and Brythonic origin, as Loomis argues. Through a close examination of Malory's text, as guided by Loomis' hypothesis, I will demonstrate that the seemingly protean characterization of Morgan le Fay as both an ally and adversary is not an oversight on the author's part, but rather the fruition of two distinct traditions merging together to form the figure of Morgan le Fay. Furthering the multicultural impact on her characterization, Malory also used multiple different volumes of the King Arthur legend as inspiration for his text, ranging from English to French works (Cooper xix). In certain parts of Malory's text, Morgan undertakes malicious actions characteristic of the Morrígan. By contrast, in other parts of the narrative, she shows a remarkable resemblance to the Welsh Modron. As Loomis argues, Modron would have been the intermediary between the Irish tradition and the French cycle. Malory routinely references French iterations of the King Arthur legend for his text, including the *Suite de Merlin,* a sequel to the vulgate poem *Merlin* (Cooper xix), which accounts for Modron's influence. Furthermore, it is in the French *Merlin* that Morgan le Fay is first recognized with the epithet "la Fee" (Sommer xv), denoting her knowledge of magic (Sommer xv) and directly linking her to the Fay, Welsh entities derived from Modron. Ultimately, Malory uses multiple texts as sources for his *Le Morte Darthur,* which in themselves, as Loomis argues, are building upon differing Goidelic and Brythonic traditions that account for Morgan le Fay's esoteric and perplexing behaviour throughout the text.

Morgan's duality is evidenced throughout Malory's text. Early on, she steals King Arthur's legendary sword, Excalibur, and its magical scabbard and gives it to her lover Accolon (Malory 64). Morgan intends to have Accolon duel her half-brother and defeat him using his own weaponry. However, King Arthur is ultimately successful, and his sword and scabbard are returned to him (Malory 70). This subsequently leads to Morgan stealing the scabbard once more. King Arthur pursues his sister, who retaliates by throwing the scabbard into a lake, robbing Arthur of his immortality indefinitely (Malory 72). Afterward, Morgan attempts to kill Arthur again by sending him a cursed mantle as part of a fake apology (Malory 73). This narrative is one of the earliest that centres around Morgan le Fay in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and positions Morgan as one of King Arthur's chief antagonists. This episode mirrors a myth involving the Morrígan. Cuchulainn, an Irish hero, often argued to be the origin of Arthurian figures such as King Arthur (Paton 24), serves as King Arthur's counterpart in this legend. Here, the Morrígan steals Cuchulainn's cow, and he pursues her, only for her to cause the cow to vanish (Paton 24). This narrative directly mirrors Morgan stealing the scabbard and subsequently tossing it into the lake when pursued (Paton 24). Finally, both the Morrígan (Paton 24) and Morgan le Fay (Malory 72) warn their respective pursuers that they are capable of transforming. This episode in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* seems to draw directly from Irish mythology, constructing Morgan's behaviour after the Morrígan's. As has been established, the Morrígan, as a war goddess, is likely the source of Morgan le Fay's vicious behaviour, which explains why she is presented as an antagonist in this part of Malory's text.

Likewise, Malory includes the narrative between Morgan le Fay and Sir Lancelot. In this episode, Morgan le Fay and three other Queens come across a resting Sir Lancelot. Morgan le Fay places Sir Lancelot under a sleeping enchantment, and the Queens kidnap him (Malory 98). Upon his awakening, they attempt to bully him into declaring which one of them he would take as a paramour upon pain of death. Sir Lancelot, loyal to Queen Guenivere, chooses death and is only saved from this fate due to the aid of King Bagdemagus' daughter (Malory 99). This episode is similar to another myth featuring the Morrígan and Cuchulainn, in which Cuchulainn meets the Morrígan by a ford. The Morrígan declares her love for Cuchulainn, but he rejects her, and in retaliation, the Morrígan threatens his life (Loomis 193). Furthermore, the Morrígan, being the combination of three goddesses, echoes Morgan appearing to Sir Lancelot alongside other women (Loomis 193). Much like the previously mentioned confrontation between King Arthur and Morgan le Fay, this hostile interaction between Sir Lancelot and Morgan has been cited by various scholars as evidence of a connection between the Morrígan and Morgan le Fay (Martins 158). Its overall negative tone and the way it characterizes Morgan as an adversary to the Knights of the Round Table are characteristic of the Morrígan's legacy in the Arthurian mythos.

However, by the end of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur,* Morgan le Fay is presented from a very different perspective. After the Battle of Camlann, in which King Arthur is mortally wounded, Morgan le Fay welcomes him onto the barge destined for the Isle of Avilion, also known as Avalon (Malory 516). King Arthur describes Avalon as a magical island on which his wounds will be healed (Malory 516). Despite the multiple confrontations King Arthur and other members of his court have with Morgan le Fay, she is the one who ultimately guides him into the rejuvenating realm of Avalon, cementing her Celtic origin further as "Celtic mythology held that the gods and goddesses lived on islands in the sea to the west" (Crater 15). Furthermore, upon first witnessing the wounded King Arthur, Morgan wails loudly and asks him why he did not come to her sooner (Malory 515), clearly exhibiting sorrow at the state of her brother that is seemingly inconsistent with her earlier actions against him. However, this final act is consistent with the Welsh influence on the mythos, and when analyzing this facet of Morgan le Fay's character arc as part of the Brythonic legacy, rather than the Goidelic one, it becomes clear that her final act is pursuant with Modron's impact on the character; As Modron, Morgan le Fay "has taken [King Arthur] to the Isle of Avalon, and there he waits, safe within her womb," (Crater 20) until a time comes where he can return to avenge his people. In early writings dealing with King Arthur's death, Avalon is already seen as connected to or inhabited by the Fay (Loomis 191). Also, as previously noted, early genealogies called Morgan the daughter of Avalloc, the King of Avalon (Loomis 190), forgoing a relationship with King Arthur in favour of a direct Avalonian, fay-like one. This parallels the Welsh goddess Modron, who is called the daughter of Avallach (Loomis 190) and is also the inspiration for the Fay (Loomis 195).

Further genealogical similarities between Welsh traditions of Modron and early iterations of Morgan are present, such as how Modron is the mother of Owein whereas Morgan is the mother of Sir Uwain (Malory 6), his Arthurian counterpart (Loomis 190), both of whose fathers are named Urien (Loomis 190; Malory 6). Her connection to Modron, based on early kinship and her relationship to Avalon and the Fay, clarifies that Morgan le Fay is as related to Modron as

she is to the Morrígan. Yet, whereas the Morrígan's legacy in Morgan is realized in her vindictive nature, Modron is characterized in Welsh mythology not as a war goddess but as a motherly figure. Etymologically, Modron's name also builds upon the Proto-Indo-European term for "Mother" (Vaclav 28). This motherly connection is furthered by the fact that the Welsh word for Fays is 'Y Mamau,' which means 'the Mothers' (Loomis 194). These maternal characteristics, coupled with Modron's relationship to Fays and Avalon, explain why Morgan is the figure who appears as King Arthur's final aid. The bequest of Modron in Morgan le Fay's characterization is seen at the end of *Le Morte Darthur,* where Morgan's motherly instinct reveals itself as she sails King Arthur to Avalon in an attempt to heal him.

While Morgan le Fay, like many literary characters who have persisted for centuries, has passed through the hands of many different cultures and regions, her defining characteristics as both a healer and an assailant can read as contradictory and even as irreconcilable with one another. Nevertheless, Morgan's helpful and harmful behaviour in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is the result of two ancient cultures that inspired the character of Morgan le Fay, a vengeful Goidelic source and a protective Brythonic one, at odds with one another and yet working together with modern French and English ideas to create a complex and fascinating version of the character. To fully understand and appreciate the complexity of Malory's iteration of Morgan le Fay is also to understand the multiple traditions from which Malory directly, and indirectly, sourced her characterization. While her malign acts often make her helpful tactics seem rudimentary or unsatisfactory, in actuality, her dichotomous delineation is a celebratory facet of the Arthurian legend that highlights the many cultures and traditions responsible for its rich textual history.

References

Blazek, Vaclav. "Indo-European kinship terms in *-ə̱2TER." *Grammaticvs: Studies Linguistica,*
     2001, pp. 24-33, https://linkshort.co/eot.

Crater, Theresa. "The Resurrection of Morgan Le Fey: Fallen Woman to Triple Goddess."
     Femspec, vol. 3, no. 1, Sept. 2001, pp. 12–21. shorturl.at/qswAS.

Loomis, Roger S. "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses." *Speculum: A Journal of
     Medieval Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, Apr. 1945, pp. 183–203. shorturl.at/ghjJO.

Malory, Thomas, Sir, and Helen Cooper. *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript.* Oxford
     University Press, 2008.

Martins, Ana Rita. "Morgan Le Fay: The Inheritance of the Goddess." *Brathair*, vol. 15, no. 1,
     Jan. 2015, pp. 153–168. shorturl.at/cktKP.

Paton, Lucy Allen. *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*. Ginn & Co, 1903,
     https://redirect.is/5trhes5.

Sommer, H. Oskar. *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances.* Carnegie Institution, 1908-
     1916, https://redirect.is/2u520np.