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The Female Figure as the Antagonist in the Arthurian World: the Role of Morgan le Fay in Thomas Malory´s *Morte Darthur*

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June 2015

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Abstract

The Late Medieval Ages was a convulsive time; Europe was facing changes which would later lead to the period known as the Modern Age. These social, political and economical changes were represented in the literature of the time, which tried to suit the interests of society by rewriting previous traditions. One example of such rewritings is Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Malory took previous Arthurian myths and compiled them in one volume, adapting them so as to satisfy the values of the time. These changes and values can be seen in the case of the female figures, and specifically in the figure of Morgan le Fay.

Morgan le Fay is one of the pivotal characters in Arthurian literature. Introduced by Geoffrey of Monmouth in *Vita Merlini* as a healer of Avalon, she progressively gained more importance in the Arthurian myth, but it was not until Étienne de Rouen presented her as Arthur's sister in his *Draco Normannicus* that she became a main character in Arthurian literature. The brother-sister bond she had with Arthur moved her away from Avalon and put her in the middle of Arthur's court; however, this relationship was fractured in later texts which consequently made her retreat away. This difficult relationship between brother and sister is well defined in texts such as the *Vulgate Cycle* or the *Post-Vulgate Cycle*, by which Malory was directly influenced. What makes Morgan interesting in Malory's version of the myth is that even though she works from outside Arthur's court, her actions have a relevant role in what happens inside. She is in the margins of the chivalric society that Arthur emblematizes, and yet she has an active role in attacking and questioning it.

The purpose of this paper is to study the relationship of the female characters in the dramatic development of the Arthurian myth in Malory, focusing specifically on Morgan le Fay and how she becomes an active character from the marginality of her position; I will also study whether her position as an active woman is, precisely, what puts her in the margins. As a whole, I will investigate Morgan's antagonistic role in the Arthurian world focusing on le *Morte Darthur*, especially in the initial and concluding books of the romance.

Introduction

Le Morte Darthur, written by Sir Thomas Malory, is considered to be one of the major Arthurian texts of the English language. Written between 1469 and 1470, while Malory was imprisoned, *Le Morte* is a compilation of previous French and English Arthurian tradition that places Arthur and his court inside British history. First published by Caxton in 1485, *Le Morte* is considered to be the last great Arthurian text of the Middle Ages, practically entering the Modern Age. This period of change in which Thomas Malory wrote is reflected in his work; it was a convulsive period in which Europe was experimenting great changes within its territory and a transformation of its mentality. Malory interlinked several tales from the so called *Matter of Britain*[1] and developed a prose that reflected the values and anxieties of his time. By rewriting previous tradition Malory left a prose of historical, social and cultural significance that aids the readers understanding of the Late Middle Ages and beginning of the Modern Age in Great Britain. An example of how the rewriting and reinterpretation of Arthurian tradition was used to suit the mentality of the time lays on the case of the female figures, specifically in the case of Morgan le Fay.

Morgan le Fay is one of the pivotal characters in Arthurian literature. Probably the best known of Arthur's half-sisters and one of the most important enchantresses of the tradition, Morgan has passed to literary history as an evil treacherous woman whose only purpose was to kill the king and destroy Camelot. However, there is much more than that to read in Morgan's character. Just as the majority of Arthurian characters, she evolved and changed throughout the years. Morgan's first appearance was in Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* as Arthur's healer. Known as Morgen in the text, she is described as a skilled healer and enchantress who uses her powers for good and rules

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[1] Body of Medieval literature and legendary material associated with Great Britain and the great heroes of its past.

over the Island of Avalon above her sisters. She takes care of Arthur when he is sent there to be cured after his final battle. From this moment on, Morgan starts to appear in further Arthurian texts. Most of the time she is portrayed as the healer who receives Arthur into Avalon, but her role begins to change when Étienne de Rouen makes her Arthur's sister in his *Draco Normannicus*. By making Morgan Arthur's sister, he creates a brother-sister bond that will be the focus of their relationship through the rest of the tradition. This bond brings Morgan into Arthur's court and makes her a part of the chivalric world that her brother has created. Moreover, this tie between Morgan and Arthur will also be a focal point of Morgan's later development as a dangerous character in Arthurian texts: she will retreat from the court but only to be a constant threat to it. Following Rouen's decision, Chrétien de Troyes also tied Morgan to Arthur in his *Erec et Enide*, which would later be recomposed by the German Poet Hartmann von Aue. Hartmann's Morgan is named Feimurgân -Fairy Morgan- and identified her powers as demonic, furthering her healing abilities. However, Hartmann's Feimurgân is saved of being demonised because in the story she saved Erec using her healing abilities and not her demonic powers. Feimurgân is admired more than could be abhorred, her abilities even compared to those of ancient enchantresses (Larrington 2006: 11-12).

From this point onwards, however, Morgan will be demonised in Arthurian tradition. In works such as the *Lancelot*, the *Suite de Merlin* or the *Vulgate* and the *Post Vulgate Cycle*, among others, Morgan uses her knowledge and power for villainous purposes, using them for her own benefit. There are changes in the origin of Morgan's powers, some authors still claiming her as a born enchantress and others claiming that she learned magic from Merlin. Morgan's demonic nature does not change from this moment. However, it is not until Morgan leaves the court that she is presented as an enemy of the realm. The first reason for Morgan to become evil and betray her brother

in Arthurian literature was Guinevere. While in court, Morgan fell in love with Guinevere's nephew Guiomar. The queen did not approve of the affair, wanting to secure Guiomar's future and Morgan's virtue, and the matter ended with Guiomar leaving Morgan. The *Lancelot*, the *Prose Merlin* and the *Livre d'Artus* illustrate this event as the root of the hatred of the sisters-in-law, and in the *Lancelot* and the *Livre d'Artus* it is revealed that this is the reason why Morgan decides to study with Merlin. Morgan's hatred for Guinevere will be explored in the subsequent Arthurian texts, making Morgan want to get vengeance and destroy her sister-in-law multiple times, trying to disgrace her by exposing her affair with Lancelot and even attempting to kill her. Morgan's betrayal goes further and she develops a hatred for Arthur himself. She breaks the sister-brother bond, very important in the society of the Middle Ages, and tries to kill her own brother and end with his perfect chivalric world. Morgan retreats from the court and starts living in the margins of the realm, where she holds many castles and land. She becomes a queen herself and continuously tries to destroy Arthur and his knights from outside the court.

This is Malory's background of Morgan when he writes his *Morte*. He explores the role of Morgan in the margins of the court and how her actions affect what happens inside of it. One of the most interesting characteristics of Malory's Morgan is that she presents a paradox, in words of Cynthia. A. Scott:

> While she [Morgan] is a member of what is perceived as the more passive and vulnerable sex during Malory's time, demonstrated by the nameless women in need of rescuing that litter the text, Morgan instead exhibits an active presence that rivals even the most masculine of characters in *Morte Darthur.*(Scott 2014:1)

Not only Morgan accomplishes a relevant role in what happens in court while being in the margins of it, but she also challenges the roles imposed on her sex. She becomes a danger to Arthur's court in both ways: by threatening it with her actions and by defying

the misogynistic grounds of its social structure. She is in the margins of the chivalric society that Arthur emblematizes, and yet she has an active role in attacking and questioning it.

The purpose of this paper is to study the relationship of the female characters in the dramatic development of the Arthurian myth in Malory, focusing specifically on Morgan le Fay and how she becomes an active character from the marginality of her position; I will also focus on whether her position as an active woman is, precisely, what puts her in the margins. I will analyze the sister-brother bond between Morgan and Arthur and Malory's ambiguity regarding her betrayal. Subsequently I will study Morgan's actions and how they might lead to Arthur's final destruction, and finally the ambiguous late role of Morgan as Arthur's companion in Avalon. As a whole, I will investigate Morgan's antagonistic role in the Arthurian world focusing on *Le Morte Darthur*, especially in the initial and concluding books of the romance. For the study of the text I will use the Winchester Manuscript -edited by Stephen H. A. Shepherd-, which is considered to be closer to what Malory wrote, instead of Caxton's more edited and revised edition.

Context

To understand *Le Morte Darthur* it is important to understand the context in which it was written, especially those matters that affect Morgan le Fay and the perception the reader is expected to have of her. There are two particular topics that affect female characters during the convulsive 15th century: the *Querelle des Femmes* and Witchcraft.

To begin with, the *Querelle des Femmes*, or the Woman Question, was a discussion which started during the Late Middle Ages after the crisis of Feudalism and that took place until the French Revolution. The *Querelle* discussed the relationship between the sexes and the role of women in society. It has been considered especially a symbolic literary debate, but the discussion also addressed all those areas in which women were being excluded from: politics, economy and religion. It began in France as a debate of *Le Roman de la Rose*, started by Guillaume de Lorris and finished by Jean de Meun. The dispute focused on Meun's misogynistic part of the roman; the literary world was divided between those who supported Meun's views on women and those who questioned and rejected them. The debate soon expanded around Europe, some authors published works advocating for female's importance in society, praising them for remarkable merits, others, published misogynistic works, degrading women and blaming them for wicked faults (Campbell 2006, 1). One of the most famous authors participating in the *Querelle* was Christine de Pizan, whose objections to Meun's representation of women in *Le Roman* have been established as the beginning of the debate. Her works on the advocacy of women influenced other authors to write about the subject, some of them praising women and others questioning Pizan's work and female value.

Magic is a focal issue in Arthurian legend, some of its most important characters being able to use it: Morgan le Fay, the Lady of the Lake, Merlin, etc. The belief of magic dates back to the earliest memory of humanity, but it was not until monotheist religions, especially Christianity, that it was persecuted. The practice of magic has always been more connected to women, particularly because of the female association with the healing of the body and the bringing of life (Vinyoles 2007: 12). Just as in the first texts where Morgan appears in the twelfth century, women using magic was positively associated with the healing of the body and the use of magic for good. During the Middle Ages, the belief of magic coexisted with Christianity, which is perfectly reflected in Arthurian literature: "Medieval Arthurian legend […] reflects a Christian world view in which the supernatural is assumed to play a part, and in which religion does not negate the possibility of magic." (Saunders 2010, 201). Even if considered heretic, until the 14th century the Church forbade the persecution of witches. It was when Pope John XXII authorised the Inquisition to hunt witches in 1320 that things began to change. The demonization of magic added in favour of Medieval misogynistic discourses, and witches were seen more than ever as the embodiment of the anti-paradigm of the virtuous woman. In the late Middle Ages and with the beginning of the Modern Age, witchcraft began to be seen more as a threat, although it was not until the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* in 1487 that witch trials began to be frequent. The dichotomy between the magic and the religious was one of the central tensions in Arthurian tradition, and especially in the fifteenth century the tensions increased. Malory's attitude towards the supernatural, particularly regarding female power, is only reconciled by a dichotomy of good or evil power: The Lady of the Lake being an example of good and Morgan le Fay of evil.

For readers in the fifteenth century, and probably until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the aforementioned topics regarding women affected their way of seeing Morgan. The misogynistic discourses of the *Querelle des Femmes* and the beginning of a harsh persecution of witchcraft meet in Morgan's character. She is an independent woman who uses magic as a tool to threat the status quo of the chivalric society and that embodies the decadence of the late Middle Ages. She is meant to be perceived as the embodiment of the evil woman, whose actions are not intended to be seen as an example. Morgan personifies the independence which women were not supposed to have, she lacks virtue and morality. Her position as a woman and as an enchantress makes her the personification of evil and treachery.

Chapter 1: Morgan's Betrayal and Marginalization

"*So aftir, for grete truste, Arthure betoke the scawberde unto Morgan le Fay, hys sister.*" (Malory: 52). With this statement Malory presents the importance of the brother-sister bond that characterized kin relationships in the Middle Ages, particularly in aristocratic families. Furthermore, in the following lines the reader learns that Morgan is ready to betray Arthur, and therefore betray this sacred bond. Morgan is the person Arthur trusts the most, even though they have never really had a relationship before. Malory does not describe any past that Arthur and Morgan have had in common; their trust relies on the grounds of this unbreakable bond. In traditional narrative, brother and sister relationships tend to be based on extreme loyalty, which goes even further than the loyalty expected in marriages. Sisters, especially if older, are usually nurturing to their brothers, while brothers tend to be protective of their sister's honour. And even though their relationship could be very close, siblings were usually separated, especially when sisters were married. However, as it has been remarked before, this bond trespasses marital bonds and sisters remained loyal to their brothers. Marriages were strategically used as a way to forge political alliances and brothers would marry their sisters to possible opponents to win their loyalties and those of their future children, for sisters would redirect their sons' devotions to their uncles, such as Arthur's sisters accomplish with their sons in the *Estorie Merlin*. (Larrington 2006: 30-1). From this traditional established bond, Larrington points out that with Arthur and his sisters, authors explore two of the most frequent motifs of sibling bond when taken to the extreme: with one sister, Morgause, he commits incest –which consequently will lead him to his own death-, while his other sister, Morgan, attempts to murder him (Larrington 2006: 30). Hence, the fact that Morgan is made Arthur's sister in the tradition is notably relevant.

Before Morgan was made Arthur's sibling, her function in the stories was very different. She was a healer, her role was that of the good enchantress who helps Arthur and heals him for his foretold return to Britain. However, when Étienne de Rouen decides to change Morgan's relationship to Arthur and makes her his sister in his *Draco Normannicus*, he transforms her role in the whole of the tradition. From here, other authors decide to follow his example and "they begin to explore socially accepted sisterly behaviour such as loyalty and nurturing" however, when Morgan starts being demonized, rather more dramatic options are explored such as "political jealousy and murderous hatred" (Larrington 2006:31). This dramatic turn of her character is, however, one of the things that make Morgan so interesting, and the fact that she is Arthur's sister makes her betrayal to him more relevant. As her sister in court Morgan is Arthur's most trusted person and previous tradition to her betrayal show a good relationship between the siblings. Morgan is married to Uriens, a strategic marriage that helps Arthur maintain his domain in Britain. Morgan's first disloyalty in the tradition is towards Queen Guinevere, not her brother, and even though it is a serious conflict, it is not as grave as betraying Arthur. When she does betray Arthur she breaks one of the most sacred bonds in chivalric society and, furthermore, this treason is already the first step of her dangerous path as enemy of the realm. Moreover, one of the consequences of this treason is the marginalization of Morgan in the tradition; she goes from being in the centre of Arthur's court to be expelled from it. Morgan is already shaking the grounds in which Arthur's chivalric society is based on, by destroying one of the most intimate connections a man has: the fraternal bond. It is possible that this marginalization is the consequence of the misogynistic discourses that began to take over Medieval literature, especially from the XIII century onwards and that were discussed during the *Querelle des Femmes*; marginalization could be considered the appropriate punishment for a

woman who betrays her kin and who defies the status quo. When analysing Morgan's bond with Arthur in *Le Morte Darthur*, it is interesting to observe how her relationship with the king is greater considered than Arthur's bond with Guinevere, and even though it is Guinevere's betrayal the one which eventually leads to the destruction of Arthur's realm, Morgan's is more present throughout the narrative. Furthermore, even though Morgan's betrayal is very grave, when Arthur is sent to Avalon, Morgan is one of the ladies who accompanies him -an ambiguous event that will be analysed in the next chapter-; on the other hand, Guinevere is not present in it, for she has retired to a nunnery to redeem herself. Morgan's character, in a way, is more important to Arthur than his own wife: Arthur is unfaithful to Guinevere and she is unfaithful to him, their bond is not intended to be that of love, but rather a political strategy. However, with Morgan, the bond is more profound, and her betrayal leaves Arthur so astonished he even believes she is repentant when she sends the magic cloak as a present, a cloak that would have killed him had not been for the Lady of the Lake's warning.

In her betrayal, Morgan not only tries to kill her brother but she does so by using Arthur's own chivalric rules. She takes a lover, Accolon, and uses him as champion to fight for her, and he is willing to follow her plan to kill Arthur and rule together. Therefore, since she cannot fight herself, she uses the same male power his brother embodies to kill him; she uses his own system against him. When Arthur is given Excalibur by the Lady of the Lake –the one he removed from the rock was shattered by a knight-, he is told by Merlin that he should not lose the scabbard that comes with it, for it is even more powerful than the sword itself and it will secure his protection against any harm. Arthur decides that for Excalibur and the scabbard to be secure he will give them to the person he trusts the most: his sister Morgan. He is unaware of his sister's hatred for him, which makes it easier for her to plan his downfall. She first

forges a sword identical to Excalibur and substitutes the scabbard for a non-magic one. She then plans to put Arthur in the middle of a sibling dispute and makes him fight by the side of the treacherous sibling, therefore making Accolon the champion of the rightful one. Afterward she sends Accolon the real Excalibur and she sends Arthur the false Excalibur and scabbard, sending a false message of fraternal love. Arthur and Accolon fight, not knowing who the other is. The king seems to be in the losing party, for he does not have the protection of the scabbard and the strength of his sword. He is gravely wounded –Malory, however, emphasises that "he was so full of knyghthode that he endured the payne" (Malory: 88) – and he realises someone has deceived him and that the real Excalibur is in Accolon's hand. However the king tries to overthrow his enemy it is not until the Lady of the Lake enchants Accolon and makes him lose his sword that Arthur finally defeats him. Arthur makes the knight reveal his identity and when he learns that he is Accolon he starts to suspect. Finally Accolon confesses to be Morgan's lover and reveals Morgan's hatred for her brother, and his plan to kill him:

> For ye shall undirstonde that kynge Arthure ys the man in the worlde that she hatyth moste, because he is moste of worship and of prouesse of ony of hir bloode […] if she might bring hiy aboute to sle Arthure by hir crauftis […] and than had she devised to have me kynge in this lorde, and so to reigne, and she to be my queene. (Malory: 90)

After learning that the battle was plotted by his sister Morgan, the king is enraged and swears to take revenge: "I shall be sore avenged upon hir, that all Crystendom shall speke of hir" (Malory: 90). He also confesses that Morgan was the person he loved the most: "God knowyth I have honoured hir and worshipped hir more than all my kyn, and more have I trusted hir than my wyff and all my hyn aftir" (Malory: 90). Morgan was the most important person to him, his bond with her was his most valuable bond and her treason is extremely grave. When Accolon dies due to his wounds Arthur sends his body to Morgan, who thinking that her brother is dead has tried to kill her husband, and

has been stopped by her son, who has let her go (an event that will be discussed in the upcoming chapter).

When Morgan learns that Arthur is alive and Accolon dead, she "was so sorowfull that nye hir herte to-braste" (Malory: 93). Here Malory gives a hint of Morgan's character, she is not completely evil, and she sincerely grieves Accolon's death. To classify Morgan just inside a stereotype based on her treachery would be a mistake. She then asks Guinevere for permission to leave court and she grants it –not knowing that her sister-in-law tried to kill Arthur, - then Morgan goes to the nunnery Arthur is resting, steals Arthur's scabbard and escapes. Arthur follows her after learning what has happened and Morgan, knowing she cannot flee decides to throw the scabbard into a lake, then she transforms herself and her knights into marble to trick Arthur into thinking they are dead, which works. Arthur believes that her sister has been punished by a greater authority and decides to return home. Morgan, having cheated her brother finally escapes and hides in her castle, where Arthur cannot do anything to her. On her way she rescues a knight, who turns out to be Accolon's cousin, and gives him a message for Arthur: "Tell hym I feare hymn at whyle I can make me and myne in lyknesse of stonys and lette hym wete I can do much more whan I se my tyme" (Malory: 95). When he hears this, Arthur swears revenge as long as he is alive.

As for Morgan's motives to betray her brother, Malory never specifies them. It is implied several times that she hates him, but never explained the reasons why, there is never a backstory that clarifies her behaviour. MaryLynn Saul contemplates the idea that this hatred could be the consequence of sibling jealousy about rightful inheritance (Saul 1994: 94). Arthur, even though he is younger and the result of a tragic encounter that concluded with the dead of Morgan's father, has become the rightful king of Britain. Morgan was sent to a nunnery and married to someone she didn't love, when

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her little brother received a whole kingdom. This theory is reflected in the siblings' dispute that Morgan put Arthur and Accolon into, which could be interpreted as a message from Morgan to her brother before killing him. She decides to put Arthur in the party of the treacherous brother and makes him fight as his champion, and even though Arthur knows he is fighting for someone vile, he has to do so to save some imprisoned knights. On the other side there are Accolon and the rightful brother, who would represent Morgan and her rights as older sister to have more authority and power. She has been denied what she believes is hers, and she will not hesitate to take it back. In any case, this is just a speculative analysis and Morgan's reasons to betray her brother remain an ambiguous issue in Malory's *Morte*.

As a consequence of these events, Morgan disappears from court and she is always remembered with hatred. From this moment Morgan is marginalized from society, and this marginalization has not happened solely because of her betrayal to Arthur, but because she has dared to defy the status quo, she no longer belongs in court. She not only has tried to kill the king but she has also defied the ethics of chivalric love, she has taken a lover and has tried to kill her husband. She is to be excluded from Camelot, and even worse, as will be studied in the following chapter, she does fine outside of it. This marginalization, however, was not something that Malory alone decided to do; in works such as the *Vulgate Cycle* with Morgan already being excluded from court, this increasing isolation of her character could be related to the social changes happening in the Middle Ages. Playing with her dramatic betrayal, Morgan is used as a tool to exemplify wrong feminine behaviours. Morgan, therefore, is not a role model; she is not an example to follow but an example of everything that is wrong with a woman who tries to break the status quo: she is banished from society. Morgan is a warning.

Chapter 2: Morgan and the Final Apocalypse

Morgan's role notably changes throughout Arthurian tradition, and once she becomes an enemy of the realm she is a constant danger to Arthur and his knights. Some authors decide to use her as main enemy in their stories, some as secondary enemy, and some simply decide not to use her in their work. In *Le Morte Darthur* Malory uses Morgan as one of the main villains, and since his work narrates the whole story of Arthur, it is easier to recognize Morgan's true role in the final apocalypse of the Arthurian tradition. It is clear throughout the narrative that until Mordred's rebellion Morgan is the only serious threat to the realm (Saul 1994: 23), she works from the margins and therefore it is more difficult to subdue her. In fact, Morgan is never subdued, although she does not always accomplish her plans. Even though she attempts to kill her brother and to destroy his court by uncovering its flaws she never succeeds, and it is not until Mordred rebels that finally Arthur dies and his chivalric world perishes. However, that does not discredit Morgan's power over the court; her actions still have a great impact on the realm and will help lead to the final apocalypse. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Morgan's betrayal to Arthur is very relevant to the narrative; her treason is the beginning of a series of offences to Arthur's perfect chivalric society. Some of these offenses are direct acts against Arthur or his court, such as Morgan's first attempt to kill her brother; but other attacks are more indirect, they are insubordination towards social norms. The sole fact that Morgan rebels is already a serious defiance against the status quo. More importantly, when Morgan throws the scabbard to the lake she is sentencing her brother to die, even if it is not by her direct hand. She deprives him from the defence the Lady of the Lake granted him, without the scabbard Arthur is unprotected.

One of the things that make Morgan dangerous is that she takes direct action. Even though she might not fight with a sword, she uses all her means to present battle: magic and political power. She knows all the rules and plays with them in her favour. Regarding direct actions, there are three moments that exemplify Morgan's ability for strategy to reach her goals –apart from her attempt to kill Arthur through Accolon-, all of them involving magical objects that she creates to cause death or pain: first the cloak she sends Arthur, then the magical horn she sends to Camelot –but that ends up in Mark's court instead-, and finally the shield she sends to court with Tristan to uncover Lancelot and Guinevere's affair.

The episode of the cloak happens right after Morgan's first attempt to murder her brother. When she retreats to her castle she creates a magic cloak and sends it to Arthur with one of her damsels as a token of peace: "your sister sendyth you this mantel and desyryth that ye sholde take this gyfte og hir-and what thynhe she hath offended, she wol amende hit at your owne pleasure" (Malory: 95), and when Arthur "beheld this mantel hit pleased hym much" (Malory: 95), he believes, for one moment, that his sister is repentant and accepts the gift. However, Nymue –a second Lady of the Lake- comes to warn Arthur about its possible danger and they oblige the damsel who brought it to put it on herself. When she does, she drops dead to the ground and burns into ashes. This second attempt to kill Arthur right after the first is a warning from Morgan; she is not going to abandon her ambition to destroy him. However, her actions not only affect Arthur but also her own son, Uwain, who is expelled from Camelot accused of being an accomplice of his mother's actions, and with him leaves Gawain, Morgause's son, who refuses to let his cousin go alone. Here, the court loses two of its best knights. It is important to highlight that in Morgan's attempts to kill her brother it is always the Lady of the Lake who prevents it from happening. Only the power of one woman can

counteract Morgan's actions; if it was not for the Lady of the Lake, Morgan would have succeeded (Saul 1994: 12). In Malory, Nymue represents the only good model of powerful woman according to the medieval male mind, she uses magic but unlike Morgan, she uses it to aid men. It is interesting, however, to remark that when the first Lady of the Lake requests Arthur's help against another man, he fails to help her and she is killed as a result. In this episode, Arthur's honour is put to doubt, and already his perfect chivalric code does not seem to reach the expectations.

The second magical object is a "fayre horne harneyste with golde" (Malory: 268) that Morgan sends to Camelot for the queen to drink from. The horn is designed to make spill any unfaithful woman who drinks from it, and Morgan's purpose is to discover Guinevere's adultery in front of the court. She no longer tries to kill her brother but instead decides to reveal to the world how flawed the rules of chivalry are. However, the horn is rerouted to Cornwall, "where it causes outrage at the court of King Mark" for "the horn reveals the adultery not only of his queen Iseult, but the infidelity of almost every other lady present" (Larrington 2006: 20). Morgan's magic is again proved to be very powerful, although the intended target does not receive the present and her plan fails again. Finally, the third object Morgan sends to Arthur is a shield, and she sends it in the hands of Tristan. When Tristan is in the middle of an adventure he comes across Morgan's castle and decides to ask for shelter. The queen grants it but refuses to let him go unless he reveals his name, when he does so she asks another thing in exchange of his freedom, she wants him to carry a shield with an image painted: "a kynge and a queen therein paynted, and a knight stondygne aboven them with hys one foote standynge upon the kynges hede and the othir upon the quenys hede" (Malory: 334). When Tristan asks who the knight is, Morgan refuses to tell him, but the reader is immediately informed –although for a medieval audience it was clear- that the knight is

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Lancelot. The narrative informs the reader, mentioning "the Freynshe booke" (334) as its source – the French book being the *Tristan en Prose*, which is the first romance to connect the story of Tristan into Arthurian legends -, that Morgan is still in love with Lancelot –something that will be discussed further into this chapter- and that she is angry for not being the object of his love. Therefore, she decides to send the shield to reveal the truth to Arthur and shame not only the lovers but also the king. This is Morgan's second attempt to reveal Guinevere's infidelity, but it fails to deliver its message to Arthur, because even though he is told that it has something to do with his wife, he never grasps that the knight is in fact Lancelot. Guinevere, on the other hand, understands the message, and suffers thinking that it will be her end. However Morgan's attempts to reveal the truth to Arthur, it is not until Mordred takes action and discovers the lovers that Arthur learns the truth. The nephew achieves what the aunt could not accomplish. Interestingly, Arthur's destruction remains a family affair. However, throughout tradition this is not the only way that Morgan has tried to use to question the reputation and values of Arthurian chivalry, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Morgan accomplishes to expose Sir Gawain's un-chivalric actions. In the romance Morgan is revealed to be the main enemy, who has plotted all the tests from her marginalization just to exhibit the flaws in Arthur's chivalry.

However, what probably make Morgan so dangerous are not her direct attacks but rather the indirect ones. With her actions, Morgan points out the flaws of Arthur's chivalric system. In the beginning of the story, Morgan seems to be just like any other aristocratic woman; she is educated in a nunnery and then married to Uriens as political strategy. The first thing that distinguishes her is that in the nunnery she has studied necromancy. Unlike previous tradition, Morgan does not learn her magic from Merlin but in a nunnery, which makes her powers already independent of men. This

information already alerts the reader of Morgan's future actions, and furthermore, exemplifies the changes that the medieval mind was undergoing regarding witchcraft. In the Early Medieval period Necromancy was differentiated from common magic, which dealt with potions and charms. However, throughout the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, both branches began to be assimilated with each other and to be more harshly punished (Saul 2010: 87), something that probably affected the authors' decisions regarding Morgana's magic: they gave them the darker type. Necromancy is the magic that conjures and controls the dead and as MaryLynn Saul remarks: "Morgan seeks power over others to do her bidding […] just as a necromancer would seek power over a demon to do his bidding" (Saul 2010: 88). And that is precisely what Morgan does throughout the narrative; she leaves her feminine role and decides to take upon a more "masculine" one. Leaving the expected passive role to become an active part of the story is a transgression that already defies Arthur's chivalric society. Morgan uses all her resources to reach her goals; she not only manipulates with magic but by using the rules of chivalric love. Morgan uses courtly love and brings it to its extreme, she takes lovers –Accolon being the first one the reader knows about – and not only does she use them to fight the battles she cannot physically fight but she also has sexual intercourse with them. Furthermore, in words of Saul: "Morgan exposes the boundaries of courtly love, […] instead of passively waiting for the man to approach her, she pursues Lancelot" (Saul 1994: 19). She not only decides not to wait, but she approaches any man that she feels attracted to. The case of Lancelot is pivotal to the story, for Morgan's hatred for him after his refusal has an effect on her decision to reveal his affair with Guinevere to Arthur. There is a moment in the narrative in which Lancelot is kidnaped by Morgan and three more queens, who demand of him to reveal his love and to neglect it to love one of them. Lancelot refuses to acknowledge that he has a lover and also

refuses to be the lover of any of them because he knows they are evil enchantresses. Lancelot's rejection wounds Morgan's pride, and although she never ceases to love him, she hates him for it. However, Morgan truly loves her lovers and she shows it by grieving their deaths -Accolon's when he is killed by Arthur and Hemyson's when he is killed by Tristan-, which shows that Morgan is not heartless, she is not a demonic creature, she is human.

Morgan le Fay also defies the rules of marriage not only by taking lovers but also by trying to kill her husband. In a way, this action embodies the medieval male fear of female power and the consequences it could have. Independent women like Morgan are not to be trusted, and as a consequence to her action she is dismissed by her own son. Morgan tries to kill her husband to untie herself from marital bonds and be able to marry Accolon, and probably to benefit from the advantages of becoming a widow: more political power. Even though she does not need it, her ambition urges her to take advantage of the moment. And even if she does not succeed, Morgan still holds her own political and economic power, she is the queen of her own castle –given to her by Arthur- and she can defend it, she has sworn men, her own court and her own servants. She has gained their loyalty and from her fortress Morgan is a constant threat with her defying eyes looking at Camelot. Again, it is important to highlight that Morgan's actions are never presented as positive female empowerment -like it has been interpreted by modern feminism – but as the archetype of the evil woman. Morgan uses magic against men, and everything she does is to her own benefit, she embodies the ultimate danger to Arthur's chivalric society: insubordination.

However, all those acts of hatred that Morgan displays seem to be suddenly forgotten by the end of the narrative. Another ambiguity in Malory's *Morte* is the unexplained presence of Morgan in the boat that will carry Arthur to Avalon. Larrington

points out that "from the early thirteenth century onwards, Morgan is always a comforting presence on the barge that bears Arthur away from his last battle" (Larrington 2006:30). Therefore, this is another aspect of tradition that Malory decides to keep, Morgan's presence in Arthur's last moments of life. Yet her reasons to do so remain unclear, for brother and sister never make peace with each other in the story. A possibility could be that since Arthur is already dying, Morgan no longer has the necessity to be his enemy nor to keep hating him, as he will disappear, and with him all the system he proudly created. Or perhaps Morgan is truly repentant of her actions and decides to accompany her brother in his last moments as a way of redemption, regretting the enmity that she and her brother had. In any case, her presence in the boat appears to change once again Morgan's role in the narrative, she goes back to her nurturing role as older sister; the brother-sister bonds seems to be mended.

Conclusions

In the present dissertation the main focus has been the analysis of Morgan le Fay's role as antagonist in Arthurian tradition, focusing on Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. My purpose was to study the active role that Morgan acquires once she is marginalized from society, physically and symbolically. As it has been seen throughout the dissertation, Malory's *Morte Darthur* is a compilation of previous Arthurian tradition that embodies the discourses of the author's time, such as the *Querelle des Femmes* or the negative views on Witchcraft. The study of Morgan's changing role in the tradition –from healer to sister and from righteous to evil- has been important to understand how Malory interpreted his own Morgan.

Malory decided to maintain Morgan as Arthur's half sister and her story is focused on her betrayal to Arthur and her actions against the kingdom. As a consequence of this betrayal, Morgan is marginalized from society, not only physically –she leaves to live in her own castle outside Camelot- but also symbolically, for she challenges the flawed chivalric system that her brother has created and attempts to destroy it, and therefore she no longer has a place inside it. However, as it has been discussed in this dissertation, even though Morgan is marginalized, that does not stop her from being the main danger of the narrative until Mordred finally destroys Arthur. She not only actively strives to murder her brother but she also goes against all his rules. She uses Arthur's own rules against him and, furthermore, she also uses magic to her own benefit. Magic is demonized in Morgan's character precisely because it is used to go against Arthur's patriarchal structure, unlike the Lady of the Lake's well-considered magic, which is used in favour of the male characters.

Even though nowadays Morgan is read as a character of empowerment, it is important to understand that Malory's intention was not to make her a counteracting

character in a positive way; she was understood to be the embodiment of the evil woman whose actions endanger the patriarchal structure and personify the decadence of society. Morgan is the result of a tradition fed with misogynistic views on empowered women and the progressive prosecution of witchcraft as a danger to the established social structure.

It is also remarkable, however, Morgan's ambiguous final act in the story as Arthur's companion in his final breath. Malory's ambiguity in Morgan's reasons not only to betray her brother but also to go back to him in the end has been hinted in the dissertation, but it is a point that would be interesting to study further. It would also be interesting to study the different roles that female characters have in *Morte Darthur* and how they balance each other, such as Morgan's role against the Lady of the Lake's or the differences between Guinevere's offences towards the kingdom compared to Morgan's. Arthurian tradition is a vast field that can still be researched from different perspectives and that can be reinterpreted, just like Malory himself did, to suit the views of one's context.

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