

UAB

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

The Arthurian Sorceress: The Demythologisation of Morgan le Fay in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*

Treball Fi de Màster / MA Dissertation

Author: Ștefan-Grațian Cîrstea

Supervisor: Dr. Joan Curbet Soler

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística

MA in English Studies: Linguistic, Literary and Sociocultural Perspectives

July 2026

Statement of Intellectual Honesty

Your name: Ștefan-Grațian Cîrstea

Title of Assignment: “The Arthurian Sorceress: The Demythologisation of Morgan le Fay in Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*”

I declare that this is a totally original piece of work, written by me; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practice which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Ștefan-Grațian Cîrstea', written in a cursive style.

Table of Contents

0. Introduction.....	1
1. Le Fay: Natural Philosopher vs. Necromancer.....	6
2. The Courtly vs. The Enchanted.....	19
3. The Death of Arthur: Morgan's Return as Archetype.....	33
4. Conclusion.....	41
5. Works cited.....	44

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Joan Curbet for his guidance, help and trust.

I would also like to thank Dr. Cristina Pividori for inspiring thoughtful reflection and encouraging me to develop and refine the structure of my dissertation.

My appreciation also goes to Dr. Antoni Rossell for introducing me to the Arthurian world and its magic and also to Dr. Carme Font and Dr. Francesca Blanch-Serrat for their helpful feedback throughout the initial process of my work.

Finally, I am grateful to my sisters Ioana and Dalia, my best friend Antonia and all of my dearest friends for their love and support—and of course, to magic itself. Throughout the writing of this dissertation, magic has remained a source of fascination and imagination regarding Morgan and the world.



ABSTRACT:

This dissertation investigates the demythologisation of Morgan le Fay in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* arguing that Malory deliberately flattens her character from a multilayered sovereign into a late-medieval villain. To demonstrate this ideological shift, this study compares Malory's work with earlier French sources, specifically the works of Chrétien de Troyes and the thirteenth-century episodes of the *Vulgate* Cycle, tracing Morgan's reduction across three analytical frameworks. First, a lexical analysis reveals how her natural magic is recontextualised as negromancy to reflect the sociopolitical anxieties. Second, a spatial examination highlights how Malory alters the dynamic between the courtly and enchanted realms in order to pervert her magical spheres. Finally, the dissertation examines the narrative of King Arthur's death, arguing that Malory's attempt to demythologise Morgan had to fail because the cultural memory supersedes Malory's ideology. Morgan had to be restored as the mythical archetype, proving that her power is a structural necessity for the Arthurian ecosystem.

Keywords: Morgan le Fay, Thomas Malory, Demythologisation, Arthurian Romance, Medieval Literature.

0. Introduction

Morgan, Morgen, Morgana, Morgue, Morgaine, Morrigan, Morrigna, Morven, Morgannwg, Morwenna, Mohr Rigan. Queen. Fairy. Healer. Teacher. Priestess. Witch. Sorceress. Queen of the Otherworld. Enchantress. Destroyer. Trickster. Seducer. Sister. Scientist. Mother. Lover. Daughter. Shapeshifter.

Rooted in the power of the Celtic goddess Morrigan, Morgan le Fay remains one of medieval literature's most enigmatic and enduring figures. Her literary identity is built upon an archetypal foundation shared with classical enchantresses like Circe and Medea, embodying a liminality that shifts between healing and causing havoc.

She first enters the written record in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* (c. 1150) as the eldest of the nine sisters of Avalon—a "Morgen" whose name and mythic potency likely reached the Welsh-born author through the oral traditions. Morgan's influence, however, quickly transcended the British Isles, evolving into a pan-European phenomenon. She appears as an important presence in the twelfth-century French romances of Chrétien de Troyes, the thirteenth-century *Vulgate Cycle*, the adventures of *Jaufré*, the only surviving Arthurian novel written in Occitan, and the fourteenth-century Majorcan work *La Faula* by Guillem de Torroella, where she serves as the immortal guardian of Arthur in an enchanted Mediterranean sanctuary. This geographical reach is perhaps best immortalised in the "Fata Morgana" effect, a complex mirage frequently observed in the Strait of Messina. To medieval sailors, these shimmering, distorted castles appearing above the horizon were more than just optical illusions caused by thermal inversions; they were tangible evidence of Morgan's magic: fairy castles in the air or false lands conjured to lead travelers astray. From the ink of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* to the atmospheric anomalies of the Italian coast, Morgan le Fay exists as a figure of continuous transformation, a mirage that remains visible yet impossible to fully capture.

The figure of Morgan le Fay belongs to a shifting spiritual landscape. While much of the existing scholarship such as Kristina Pérez's or Maureen Fries's work focuses on her role as a proto-feminist icon or a villainous foil to King Arthur, she has also been analysed as a counter-hero and a *femme fatale*. However, there is still room for exploring the specific literary mechanics of her transformation across traditions. Because Malory's version is often treated as the "definitive Morgan", the depth of her original essence is often overlooked. By challenging the British tradition as the pinnacle of Arthurian storytelling and identifying what Malory omitted, we can gain a clearer understanding of the kind of shapeshifter Morgan is.

This paper examines Morgan le Fay as a multifaceted character who has shifted through traditions, crossed borders, and provoked fascination as one of the most complex figures in medieval literature. Specifically, this study seeks to understand how the versatility and complexity present in early French texts were recast in the later tradition consolidated by Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. Before she was confined by Malory's narrative, Morgan le Fay was the sovereign of Avalon—an immortal figure whose power required no justification. Under Malory's pen, however, her magic is reduced from a natural right to a learned malice, signaling a shift from a round, complex character to a flat, binary one.

The aim of this dissertation is to explore how this oversimplification took place, giving particular attention to Morgan's earliest appearances, where her characterisation is far from binary. This dissertation is compatible with the feminist approach, but it is not the main emphasis; rather, my attempt is to analyse the characters in their narrative frame and meaning in a global structure. Famous texts such as *Érec et Énide* and *Yvain* by Chrétien de Troyes, as well as episodes from the Vulgate romances such as *Lancelot du Lac's Le Val des Amants infidèles*, will be compared to Malory's work in order to analyse the actions of the character in their specific moment. This analysis will be conducted in three parts:

First, a lexical and narrative analysis will examine the semantic connotations of the terms used in both traditions. By looking at the original Middle French and Middle English through a lexical lens, this paper will track Morgan's trajectory from the first sources to Malory in order to have a broader understanding of how the words represent a contextualised ideology that may change from a century to another. In this part, particular attention will be given to magic and its significant shift from a healing service to the chivalry to a dark practice used to destabilise the Round Table.

Second, this dissertation will examine the two distinct spaces Morgan inhabits: the courtly versus the enchanted, with a close look at the details Malory omits or rewrites from his sources. These omissions change Morgan's narrative function and discard the complexity of her actions. While the Vulgate Cycle explains her schemes with details and sophistication, maintaining Morgan as a main figure, Malory strips away her power and reduces her to an almost invisible character in his *Le Morte Darthur*.

Third, this dissertation will analyse her relationship with her brother King Arthur and compare how sources handle the narrative of his death and its aftermath. In the end, Malory is obliged to betray his ideology and restore her power, as the deep-seated cultural memory of Morgan le Fay's mythic origins is too powerful to be fully erased.

By employing these critical frameworks, such as Jill M. Hebert's *Shapeshifter* (2013), which provides the theoretical foundation for understanding Morgan's original narrative or moral fluidity, or Maureen Fries's analysis of her decline, this dissertation claims that Malory deliberately reduced Morgan to a binary character, effectively trying to demythologise one of the most compelling figures in European literature. The approaches, especially the lexical one, seek not only a conversation with the main critical work, but also to be innovative in regard to analysing Morgan.

While Morgan le Fay is frequently examined through a gendered lens (an analysis that is both inevitable and essential) limiting her to a sociopolitical archetype overlooks the structural necessity of her presence. Many critics have failed to recognise that without her enigmatic and multifaceted nature, the very architecture of Arthurian literature would lose its depth. Morgan is not only a character within the myth; she is the mystery that makes the myth possible. She exists as a force that deliberately resists categorisation, standing as the essential shadow that defines the light of the Round Table. Indeed, the central significance of her character lies in the fact that she cannot and perhaps should not be defined. This refusal to be pinned down to a singular role is her most significant contribution in literary terms. Her fluidity ensures that the Arthurian world remains vibrant and dangerous; by remaining indefinable, she remains immortal.

For this reason, this dissertation will analyse various primary sources, different scholarship both Anglophone and Francophone from different decades, because an analysis of Morgan through a limited lens or scope would be simply incomplete. Treating Morgan as a mere healer, witch, a female hero or even a counter-hero would continue to misunderstand the logic of her literary function: she is the one element of the legend that refuses to be conquered.

A brief comparison of Malory with his sources reveals that Malory was labouring “almost everywhere to eliminate the marvellous and introduce the humdrum” (Lewis qtd. in Passaro 1) and these changes and omissions were especially inflicted on Morgan, as Johnathan Passaro notes: “Malory continuously takes small passages from his source and repositions them to facilitate his pacing. Many of these small alterations deal with Morgan” (71), as this dissertation will further exemplify. By isolating and diminishing Morgan’s

appearances and stripping them of the courtly “entrelacement”¹ found in the French *Vulgate*, where her actions were often described across many pages, Malory forces her to become a more linear villain. Consequently, an analysis of her appearances will show that her magic is no longer an inherent part of the landscape she created, but is rather portrayed in decontextualised episodes where she acts out of spite. Where the French sources might spend chapters justifying her plots against Guinevere or Lancelot, Malory opts for repositioned snippets in order to contain and tame the grandeur of the Arthurian sorceress.

To fully grasp the magnitude of Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, one must situate it within the social and political climate of late fifteenth-century England, specifically around the ninth year of Edward IV’s reign (c. 1469–1470), the year Malory himself mentions he was writing the text. This was a period defined by the brutal instability of the Wars of the Roses, a dynastic struggle that shattered the traditional feudal framework and replaced chivalric idealism with pragmatic survivalism. Writing from the confines of a prison cell, Malory sought to anglicise the well-known French Arthurian texts, participating in the rising fashion of vernacular literature, which would soon become a national standard thanks to William Caxton. The arrival of the printing press in 1485 transformed Malory’s work into an immediate bestseller, but this transition turned the French romances into a more morally digestible epic for the emerging middle class. Crucially, this sociopolitical shift occurred alongside a broader European theological hardening; as the Inquisition and their institutions began to formalise the demonisation of the supernatural, the “marvelous” elements of Arthurian legend were increasingly scrutinised through a lens of heresy. This directly influenced Malory’s reinterpretation of Morgan le Fay. Malory aligned the text with the fifteenth-century suspicion of female agency and occult knowledge. In this light, Morgan’s transformation from a sovereign healer to a conventional villain is more than a literary

¹ “Entrelacement” is a medieval narrative technique that weaves multiple, simultaneous plot lines together by frequently interrupting one story to pick up another instead of a linear timeline.

choice: it is a reflection of a world in which she had to be criminalised to suit the anxieties of the pre-Reformation English state. Having stated the aim and context, let us dive into the main body of the dissertation.

1. Le Fay: Natural Philosopher vs. Necromancer

Taking a first look at the terms used for Morgan in the French romances and Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* will enlighten the difference between being a wise healer and a practitioner of *maleficium*². A lexical approach can situate the multifaceted Morgan we know along the traditions. Words change contextually, and the contexts are themselves shaped by broader historical shifts. Understanding the terms in their context can make us understand the origins of Morgan as more than just a French or English Arthurian character.

Looking at Morgan's first appearance in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, we can already trace the very essence of a supernatural benevolence—a supernatural dynamic present in the character with no malefic undertones:

She who is first of them is more skilled in the healing art, and excels her sisters in the beauty of her person. Morgen is her name, and she has learned what useful properties all the herbs contain, so that she can cure sick bodies. She also knows an art by which to change her shape, and to cleave the air on new wings like Daedalus; when she wishes she is at Brest, Chartres, or Pavia, and when she will she slips down from the air onto your shores. And men say that she has taught mathematics to her sisters (13).

Here, Morgan is not only benevolent, but a true scientist, praised for her intellectuality and abilities, and connected to the nature that gifted her these powers. Her flight is compared to that of Daedalus: a symbol of human craft and engineering, rather than anything dark or forbidden.

² An umbrella term for harmful magic

The scientist figure of Morgan remains alive and powerful in the French tradition, where it does not present any demonisation. Corinne Saunders highlights that “the French does not include these references to the demonic in its commendations to women” (248).

The “founding father” of the greatest French Arthurian traditions, the twelfth-century poet Chrétien de Troyes, presents Morgan as a doctor-like figure in *Érec et Enide*.

Puis fet aporter .i.³ antret
 que Morgue sa suer avoit
 fet. Li antrez ert de tel vertu,
 que Morganz ot doné Artu,
 que la plaie qui an est ointe,
 ou soit sor nerf ou soit sor jointe,
 ne faussist qu’an une semainne
 ne fust tote senee et saine,
 mes que le jor une foiee
 fust de l’antret apareilliee.
 L’antret ont Erec aporté,
 qui mout a le roi conforté.
 Quant ses plaies orent bandees,
 l’antret mis sus, et relavees,
 li rois lui et Enyde an mainne
 en la soe chanbre demainne,
 et dist que por la soe amor vialt an la forest a sejour

(vv. 4193 –4210)

Then a plaster has been ⁴brought, which Morgan, his sister, had made. The plaster which Morgan gave Arthur was of such virtue, that whether on a nerve or a joint, the plaster could not fail, within a single week, to be completely healed, provided that it was applied once a day. They brought the plaster to Erec, which greatly comforted the king. When they had bandaged his wounds, applied the plaster, and washed them again, the king led him and Enide into his own private chamber, and said that for love of him [Erec], he wished to stay in the forest” (My translation).

The term “antret”—often found as “*entret*” given the identical pronunciation of “en/an”—is described to represent strips of cloth coated with balm, used to bring the edges of wounds together to promote healing; balm, plaster, ointment (verified by the *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*). The healing property of the plaster has no supernatural connotation, but an entirely

³ In Old French manuscripts, “.i.” (or sometimes just i) represents number one and often functions like the indefinite article “a” or “an.”

⁴ I have translated the passages myself to ensure the original terminology is preserved, a nuance often lost in published editions.

medicinal one. This knowledge is not just celebrated, it is deeply treasured, valued, and given thanks for. Along the same lines and meaning, the inherent gifts of Morgan continue to save lives in Chrétien's narrative, such as *Yvain, ou Le Chevalier du Lion*:

Mais tost aler vous y couvient,
Car d'un onguement me souvient
Que me donna Margue la sage ;
Et si me dist que nule rage
N'est en le teste qu'il n'en ost
(vv. 2953-2957).

"I remember an ointment which Morgan the Wise showed me, saying that there was no delirium of the head which it would not cure" (My translation).

Despite Morgan not being physically part of the story here, the audience of the Arthurian world knew that she was presented as the ultimate authority on medicine and alchemy. By attributing the ointment to her, Chrétien tells the audience that this is not just medicine—it is the highest form of science available.

By categorising Morgan as "la sage", Chrétien recognises the talent and craftiness of the Fay. Again, the "onguement" is a balm that is applied to wounds to heal them (verified by the *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*). It is an act of physical restoration, targeting a biological ailment.

Nonetheless, Morgan's reputation as the greatest connoisseur of plants is discarded by later traditions, to be replaced with the darkness of necromancy by Thomas Malory's ink. This degradation did not happen overnight, but followed a distinct historical and theological shift. As Maureen Fries notes: "Morgan does not as yet in the twelfth century evince the evil which is to besmirch her character from thirteen on" (Fries 3). To understand why the protective *antret* and *onguement* of the Chrétienesque tradition transform into dangerous tools of deception in later centuries, we have to look at how the medieval understanding of magic itself evolved. MaryLynn Saul explains that:

“there were at least two systems of magical practices recognized during the medieval period, the first being necromancy, defined as “divination by conjuring the spirits of the dead” and which was practiced by “clerics above all others” and the second being “a widespread and diffuse system of common spells, charms, blessings, potions, powers and talismans” Early on the medieval period, the Church was mainly concerned with restricting necromancy; however, gradually, throughout the fourteenth century and early in the fifteenth century (just before Malory wrote *La Morte Darthur*), the theory of witchcraft began to conflate them” (87).

Let us observe closely the key terms here: “*ongument*” and “*antret*”. In the twelfth century, Morgan’s salves and plasters fit safely into that second, non-threatening category: a system of potions, natural herbs, and physical blessings. It was secular, practical, and helpful. However, by the time Malory took up his pen in the fifteenth century, the cultural safety net for female healing had collapsed. The historical conflation Saul describes meant that a woman compounding a potent *onguement* was no longer viewed as *la sage* practicing natural science. Instead, her pharmaceutical expertise was viewed with suspicion, swallowed up by the terrifying concepts of witchcraft and demonic alliance. The linguistic journey from Chrétien’s medical plaster to Malory’s “negromanyce” perfectly mirrors a society growing increasingly hostile to female authority and supernatural agency.

Of course, this shift was not as immediate as one might think. Malory did not demonise Morgan out of pure imagination or personal willingness; long before *Le Morte Darthur*, the thirteenth-century *Vulgate* was already looking at Morgan through a very different lens than Chrétien de Troyes. The *Lancelot du Lac* section of the *Vulgate* Cycle serves as the crucial transitional bridge between the Chrétienesque tradition and Malory’s late medieval adaptation. It allows us to track the precise lineage of these characters, highlighting the deliberate shortenings, omissions, and restructurings that Malory made when recreating these adventures for a fifteenth-century audience. An interesting aspect the reader must keep in mind is that, in reality, these early authors had little idea how these characters would eventually evolve; it was the shifting cultural context itself that shaped them in ways that a twelfth-century writer would no longer recognise.

Before examining the most emblematic episodes of Morgan's trajectory, a brief lexical examination of her introduction in *Lancelot du Lac* provides initial clarity:

Il fu voirs ke Morge la serour le roi Artu sot d'encantemens et de carins sour toutes femmes et pour la grant entente ke elle i mist en laissa elle et guerpi tout le couvine des gens et conviersoit et jour et nuit es grans foriés parfondes et lointaines, si que maintes gens dont a cel tens avoissés de foles par tout le pais ne disoient mie ke ce fust femme, anchois l'apieloient Morgain la deesse (*Le Val des Amants infidèles* 245).

"It is true that Morgan, King Arthur's sister, knew more of enchantments and charms than any other woman; and because of the great devotion she gave to them, she abandoned and renounced all human company, and wandered day and night through the great deep and distant forests, so that many people who traveled through the land at that time did not say that she was a woman at all, but instead called her Morgan the goddess."
(My translation)

Here, Morgan is explicitly tied to the forest: a liminal, untamed space that serves as a vital element in understanding her character, and an environment this dissertation will further analyse, but even as she withdraws from human society, her early thirteenth-century presentation remains powerfully charged by a non-evil mysticism.

To understand how the *Vulgate* situates Morgan between Chrétien's physical medicine and Malory's dark arts, we must look at the specific linguistic definitions of her power at this time. The attempt to do this lexicography systematically could help us better analyse Morgan. In the thirteenth century, the French word *encantement* literally denoted an act of magic or a spell. Derived from the Latin *incantare* (to chant magic formulas), it represented the act of subjecting a person, place, or object to an occult power (verified by the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*). Crucially, at this stage, the word carried no inherently malefic connotation; it simply implied an operation existing outside the ordinary natural order. It is, however, a word that would become heavily associated with demonic trickery and illusion by the time Malory read his French sources. *Carins* as well, most likely a Picard spelling for *charmin*, descends from the Latin *carmen*. While *carmen* can mean a piece in verse, a lyric poem, or even a religious or legal formula, it also denotes a magic word or vocal enchantment (as defined by Anne-Marie Robert & Willy Bakeroot). Once again, these charms are not tied

to a supernatural evil, but are rooted in the power of the spoken word—an ancient, pre-Christian tradition of vocal authority rather than a pact with the devil.

It is also important to take into account that in the medieval vernacular, designating a figure as a *deesse* was an act of profound respect (verified by the *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*). It elevated her completely above the standard patriarchal structures of courtly society. Furthermore, during this period, such highly exalted feminine language was heavily restricted, often reserved for expressions of ultimate reverence like those directed toward the Virgin Mary. Therefore, she is not yet the bitter antagonist of Camelot, but a transcendent, revered force of nature who is situated between humanity and the divine. This vision changes when Morgan catches her lover being unfaithful. It is said:

Endementiers k'il estoient illeuc, si furent encusé a Morgain qui mout s'en faisoit prendre garde, si fist tant ke elle meisme les prist ensamble tous prouvés, si en fu si angousseuse ke pour .I. poi k'elle ne diervoit. Lors espandi par tout le val son encantement en tel maniere ke ja mais chevaliers n'i entrast qui puis en issist, puis k'il eust viers s'amie faussé de nulle cose, nes de volenté ; et tout cil ki d'aucune cose i aroient faussé i remanroient jusc'a celle eure ke .I. chevaliers i enterroit ki de nulle cose n'aroit onkes mespris enviers s'amie ne d'oeuvre ne de penssé ne de talent; et fist encore plus del chevalier ki ses amis estoit, car elle li destina ke il ja mais hors del val ne se mouvroit nient plus ke li autre ki apriés lui i enterroit. (*Le Val des Amants infidèles* 297).

“Meanwhile, while they were there, they were accused by Morgan, who took great care over such matters, and she did so much that she herself caught them all together as proven guilty. And she was so heartbroken by it that she nearly went mad. Then she spread her enchantment throughout the valley in such a way that no knight would ever enter there who could afterwards leave, if he had ever been false in any way to his lady love, even in intention. And all those who had been false in any matter would remain there until the time when a knight would enter who had never wronged his lady in deed, thought, or desire. And regarding the knight who was her lover: she decided that he would never leave the valley any more than the others who would enter after him.” (My translation).

Here, “*angousseuse*” means being hurt, heartbroken, or in pain, (verified by the *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*), showing that she almost went mad, “pour .I. poi k'elle ne diervoit”. The word “*diervoit*” is a conjugation of the Old French *desver*, which means to lose one’s senses, to lose one’s reason, to go mad or rage, as verified by the *Dictionnaire Électronique de Chrétien de Troyes*. Here the narrative changes. The *Val Sans Retour* is built and known to

trap knights forever. Now, Morgan becomes a woman who went mad because of love and decides to take revenge on men. These enchantments were now malefic and known to be like that as the text continues later: “Tant avoit esté renomée ceste male costume par maintes tieres”, meaning this malefic habit became famous in many countries. These events reinforce Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ash’s argument that in “the French verse romances, Morgan remains a powerful and generally benevolent fay, but in the prose romances her reputation declines. Morgan degenerates into a mortal: the famed healer now schemes to destroy others” (qtd. in Hebert 22).

Not only has she now become a schemer, but her revenge completely transforms her narrative trajectory. We are told later in the same text that she was “mout laide” (300)—meaning very ugly. Not only have her charms become detestable, but her physical appearance has altered to match her inward turn. The terms used in reference to her no longer carry any positive connotation. When she imprisons Lancelot in the valley, he directly calls her “la plus traître et la plus desloiaus feme ki onkes fust” (436), meaning “the most treacherous and the most disloyal woman that has ever existed.” Morgan is now actively using her magic to inflict suffering:

Morge ne fait se penser non comment elle le peut dechevoir; mais pour chou K'elle ne li puet faire riens mangier, si li a mis poisons en son boire, ki estoient confites a conjuremens et a carins (*Le Val des Amants infidèles* 436).

“Morgan thinks of nothing except how she might deceive him; but because she cannot make him eat anything, she has put poisons into his drink, which had been prepared with conjurations and incantations.” (My translation).

The incantations which were once benign are now weaponised to hurt Lancelot. We are also told she uses herbs to force Lancelot into an unnatural slumber:

Lors prist (une hierbe) ke li contes apiele sapite, si n'est nus hom, s'il en avoit gousté, ki ja mais finast de dormir tant ke on l'esvelleroit a force. Celle hierbe donna Morge une nuit a boire a Lancelot, si le destempra en trop fort vin et pour samblant ke elle le valsist aaisier li mist desous le chief l'orellier ke elle i mist quant il partirent (524)

“Then she took an herb that the tale calls sapite; and there is no man who, if he had tasted it, would ever stop sleeping until he was awakened by force. One night Morgan gave this

herb to Lancelot to drink, mixing it into very strong wine, and under the pretense of helping him rest, she placed beneath his head the pillow that she had prepared there when they departed.” (My translation).

One would think the word “sapite” is almost certainly an imaginary botanical plant name, a literary or corrupted learned term used to denote a sleep-inducing practice. Yet, the interesting detail here is that the core essence of Morgan’s original character, her mastery over the natural world and pharmacology is preserved, despite being used to cause damage. While her reputation might have declined and her transformation toward evil has clearly begun, the *Vulgate* is far from black-and-white or binary. Morgan maintains her fundamental identity; she is still recognised as a powerful figure capable of turning her supernatural gifts against those who cross her. Her final appearances in the *Lancelot du Lac* prose solidify this shift, sealing her fate under the definitive epithet “Morgan la desloiaus (205)” meaning “Morgan the disloyal”.

Now, let us turn our attention to the lexical landscape of *Le Morte Darthur* to examine how this transition culminates. When Thomas Malory adapted these French sources, the narrative context had undergone a profound cultural translation, and the terms used to categorise Morgan had become explicitly wrapped in late-medieval anxieties over heresy and gender.

The first appearance of Morgan in *Le Morte Darthur* starts like that: “And the thyrd syster, Morgan le Fey, was put to scole in a nonnery, and ther she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye”(I:5.2). While one can appreciate Malory praising Morgan for having learnt much, the lexical description of her education is bare and empty. The Merriam-Webster dictionary explains to us that Middle English *nycromancie* meant “sorcery, conjuration of spirits” and it was borrowed from Late Latin *necromantīa*—divination from an exhumed corpse, which itself was borrowed from Late Greek *nekromanteia*—divination by conjuration of the dead. While we might think his

introduction to the character is not explicitly demonising at first glance, he already recognises her capacity for working with black magic right from her youth; however, he still balances this by stating she was “a fayre lady as ony myght be” (I:32.34). This physical beauty, which once complemented her natural wisdom in the earlier traditions, now acts as a deceptive layer for her dark education.

We are told later that Morgan worked with a dwarf with a flat nose who informed the knight Accolon about the battle he shall have with Arthur. While a dwarf might seem innocent to a modern reader, the contemporary public had knowledge of the significance of a dwarf in the story: there were two types of dwarves in medieval lore: the good ones and the bad ones. Having a flat-nosed dwarf servant already introduces Morgan as a sinister, witch-like character who commands compromised or unnatural creatures. The dwarf tells Accolon, “she hath made all this crauftis and enchauntemente for this batalye” (IV:86.35). The term “enchaunement” here, unlike the French tradition where it denoted a neutral act outside the natural order, is explicitly defined as an act of magic or witchcraft, as verified by the *Middle English Compendium*. Her crafts are no longer physical balms or spoken poems; they are deceptive mechanisms designed to subvert the rightful king.

Once Arthur discovers Morgan’s intention to have him killed by using Accolon, the king’s reaction solidifies this moral condemnation:

for my sistir Morgan le Fay by hir false crauftis made the to agré to hir fals lustes. But I shall be sore avenged uppon hir, and I lyve, that all Crystendom shall speke of hit. 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 kyn aftir (IV:90.33-36).

The repeated use of “fals” does not merely mean counterfeit or fake, but rather dishonest, untruthful, and morally treacherous (verified by the *Middle English Compendium*). Maureen Fries argues that this episode represents Malory’s “most extended treatment of Morgan’s malevolence (...) which combines several of these motifs, and which he has reworked from

his French original to emphasise more thoroughly than ever the wickedness of Morgan's role as well as the rather feeble scope of her magic powers" (Fries 11). The lexical choices to describe Morgan's powers as "fals" and dishonest resonate strongly with MaryLynn Saul's argument that "it seems Malory was writing his text during a time of increased fear and targeting of witches, a time when the various elements of the later witch hunts were coalescing" (86).

Her malevolence continues advancing throughout the narrative, culminating in a domestic betrayal when she plans to kill her sleeping husband, King Uriens, only to be caught in the act by her own son, Uwayne⁵. Finding her with a sword raised over his father, Uwayne calls her an "erthtly fende" (IV:40.92)—an earthly devil—to which she responds by claiming she was "tempted with a fende"—tempted by the Devil himself. The word "fende," which in this context explicitly means Satan, the devil, or the devil's kin, was initially used in Old English to describe a literal enemy or adversary, sharing the same linguistic root as the word "foe." The radical semantic shift of this word by Malory's time tells us something crucial about the shifting English landscape: it showcases a new religious lexicology and a growing social paranoia against dark magic. Morgan is no longer *la sage* or a revered *deesse* operating in the liminal spaces of the forest; under Malory's pen, she has been entirely recontextualised as a criminal, an unfaithful wife, and an earthly demon whose power is derived not from natural science, but from a diabolical temptation that threatens the spiritual and political fabric of all Christendom.

Not only has Morgan become diabolical in her domestic and political betrayals, but her "inchauntments" are now weaponised to sexually trap knights for her own carnal pleasures. We see this predatory shift when she plots against Lancelot:

⁵ Uwayne, Ewaine, Yvain represent the same character in different spellings. He is also known as The Knight of the Lion. This dissertation will maintain the spelling used in each narrative.

I shall put an inchauntement uppon hym that he shall nat awake of all this seven owres,
and than I woll lede hym away unto my castell. And whan he is surely within my holde, I
shall take the inchauntement frome hym, and than lette hym chose whych of us he woll
have unto paramour (VI:151.30-33).

The very enchantments that created the systemic, punitive space of the *Val Sans Retour* in the *Vulgate* are here reduced by Malory to a tool for capturing Lancelot to satisfy herself and her friends. This marks a profound departure from the French tradition. While the *Vulgate's Val Sans Retour* clearly frames Lancelot's imprisonment around Morgan's genuine admiration for him and her deep spite toward her rival (Queen Guinevere), it never explicitly states that Morgan lusts after Lancelot for base physical pleasure. In Malory, however, the emotional nuances of her heartbreak are entirely stripped away. When Lancelot awakens and rejects her, calling her and her companions "false enchaunters," his accusation resounds with the growing negativity of the *Vulgate*, but Malory pushes this linguistic condemnation through the word "enchaunters" to its absolute limit. This culmination of hostility yields the most hurtful and antagonistic description of Morgan found anywhere in *Le Morte Darthur*, where she is branded as the "false sorseres and wyche moste that is now lyvyng" (VIII:269.11).

While some of the previous lexical terms discussed by this point could be interpreted with a degree of fluidity, or even balanced without an explicitly evil intention—just as the *Vulgate* allows the reader to understand a multifaceted Morgan who is capable of both good and bad—Thomas Malory leaves absolutely no room for a benevolent interpretation. Unlike other terms, the word "wyche" leaves no open door for neutrality. In the late-medieval English consciousness, a witch was explicitly defined as a woman who performed harmful, unnatural acts of dark magic and sorcery in order to destabilise others. This was a figure completely divorced from the natural philosophy of *la sage* or the reverence of a *deesse*; a witch was a criminal who deserved to be executed under human and divine law. Malory reflects this cultural shift directly in the reactions of the court, noting that "they had all

mervayle of the falshede of Morgan le Fay. Many knyghtes wysshed hir brente” (IV:95.15). The desire to see her “brente”(burned at the stake) solidifies the fact that her natural gifts and healing crafts have been fully recontextualised as capital crimes against Christian society.

Corinne Saunders further explains that the term “wycche” carries deep suspicion, and Morgan’s magic repeatedly threatens the order of the Arthurian world (247). No longer a wandering mystic of the deep forests, she is now integrated into a rigid political hierarchy as Arthur’s primary antagonist. Through Malory’s ink, the lexical journey of Morgan le Fay is complete. Her power is no longer valued as a treasured medicine, it is entirely swallowed by the vocabulary of *maleficium*, transforming her from a revered goddess of the natural world into a localised emblem of political treason and diabolical witchcraft.

Finally, the last moment worth taking into account from a lexical perspective is the episode regarding Sir Alysaunder fighting Sir Malegryne, where he loses too much blood because of the “sixteen grete woundis” (X:384.28). We are told Morgan came immediately and she “bade hym be of good comforte” (X:384.28). Here, Morgan connected to her inherent gifts appears again, almost back to Chrétien de Troyes’ narrative, where it is said “Quene Morgan le Fay serched his woundis and gaff hym such an oynement that he sholde have dyed” (X:384.33). However, the most disturbing fact about this oynement is that the very term that had been glorified by Chrétien de Troyes is now manipulated. This “oynement” is used to poison the hero for her own pleasure and control. The term *oynement* had not undergone the semantic shift that terms such as *enchantment* may have experienced by Malory’s period. Nevertheless, Malory chose to characterise even the residual “green” or natural dimensions of magic as forms of dark sorcery.

Let us see how the text continues: “he complained hym sore: and than she put another onyemente uppon hym and he than was oute of his payne” (X:384.33). In this episode,

Morgan uses her medical knowledge as a deceptive game. She intentionally makes the knight suffer with the first ointment just to make herself necessary when she applies the second one, ensuring he remains weak and dependent on her. Morgan is portrayed as someone who wants total ownership of a knight through her magical schemes, forcing him to stay as her prisoner. Kristina Pérez argues this case as “Malory [having] perverted Morgan’s abilities for her erotic agenda of fals lustes” (143). This perversion is not only hurtful, but completely demonising the very gifts of the ultimate Arthurian healer, whose ointments could originally restore life. This instance is a case of literary *veneficium* related directly to *maleficium*. Christa Agnes Tuczay argues that “Literary sources refer to another related sphere of female activity: herb-lore and healing, but also knowledge of poisons. Therefore the attributions of *veneficium*⁶ and *maleficium* were connected at a rather early stage. It was acknowledged that those who could heal could also harm” (1788).

This first chapter has situated the character of Morgan le Fay through different perspectives and contexts. As the analysis shows, the words used to describe her directly reflected these changing contexts, from Chrétien de Troyes to Thomas Malory. In the early French tradition, the lexical choices presented a multifaceted Morgan. She was a respected woman and a wise healer whose *onguements* and *encantemens* represented natural science, deep wisdom, and a powerful connection to nature. Even when her magic became harmful in the *Vulgate*, the words used showed that her actions were rooted in real human heartbreak and emotions, rather than innate wickedness. However, as the cultural landscape shifted, Malory decided to binarise the character into pure evil and perversion. By manipulating her once-glorified healing ointments into tools of torture and sexual control, Malory stripped away all of her original complexity. He removed the nuanced, multifaceted fairy and replaced

⁶ Latin term which is interpreted as poisoning through sorcery.

her with a one-dimensional, archetypal villain. Ultimately, this lexical shift proves that Malory did not just adapt Morgan's story; he actively demythologised her.

2. The Courtly vs. The Enchanted.

While the preceding lexical approach provides a basic foundation for understanding the terminology that defines Morgan le Fay, analysing the physical and conceptual spaces she inhabits is crucial to fully grasping her role. Morgan is not confined strictly to the court, nor is she relegated entirely to the realm of the supernatural: she is defined by her constant, fluid and even back-and-forth movement between these two worlds. She acts as a living bridge where these domains coexist and collide: her magic routinely infiltrates the court, just as the chivalric world inevitably seems to end up in her magical terrains.

In this section of the dissertation, my focus will shift to these spatial dynamics, examining the courtly, the enchanted, and, crucially, the liminal "in-between" spaces. We will explore specific transitional terrains such as the *Val Sans Retour* (a significant space that Thomas Malory notably omits from his narrative) and her enchanted castles, which Malory explicitly frames as a site of inherent malevolence. I will now proceed to investigate the magnetic pull between these opposing realms. We will examine how Arthur's knights are perpetually drawn out of their familiar domains and into enchanted territories, and how, in turn, the seemingly secure, structured space of the court is constantly punctured by Morgan's magical influence.

To fully understand Morgan's movement between worlds, we must first establish her inherent connection to the courtly sphere. Her epithet of "le Fay" often obscures her aristocratic, mortal origins, but the source texts firmly situate her within royalty. She is King Arthur's half-sister, the daughter of Lady Igraine and her first husband, Gorlois, the Duke of Cornwall; Consequently, Morgan is born into the structured, political environment of the

court. The *Vulgate* illustrates this early integration, while also providing the crucial catalyst for her eventual rebellion against it:

Il fu voirs ke Morgue fu fille de Tintajeul et a Egerne sa femme, ki puis fu royne de Bretaingne et femme Uterpandragon, et de lui fu nés li rois Artus ki en li fu engenrés au vivant le duc par la traïson ke Mierlins fist. Quant Egerne s'en vint a Uterpandragon ki l'espousa, si amena avec lui Morgain, sa fille, et uns varlés remest en la duchee de Tintajeul, ki estoit fiex le duc d'une autre femme k'il avoit euee devant Egerne. Li dus estoit mout lais chevaliers et Morge retraioit a lui, car mout fu laide ; etquant elle vint en aage, si fu si caude et luxurieuse ke plus caude femme ne couvenist querre. Lors avoit li rois Artus nouvellement prise la royne, si avoit en la maison le roi .I. chevalier ki estoit niés a la royne, si avoit non Guiamors de Carmelide et estoit mout biaux chevaliers et preus assés. En cel tiermine estoit Morge pucielle la royne, si commencha a amer Guiamor jour de lui vedera pannes se poelle consi entr'aus deus ensamble cochié et la royne en avoit ja esté garnie, si s'en faisoit mout prendre garde, car elle destournast volentiers Morgain de folie faire pour amour del roi et Guiamor, d'autre part pour son damage eskiever, car li rois l'en haïst, s'il le seust. Tant fist la royne que elle les prist ensamble tous prouvés et ke celle ne le pot plus celer ; et elle dist a Guiamor son neveu ke mors estoit, se li rois le savoit, et si fist tant par prieres et par manaces k'il le fourjura ; et il le fist legierement, car il ne l'amoit mie de telle amour ke bien ne s'en consirast. Quant Morge vit ke cil l'avoit ensi guerpie pour la royne, si en ot trop grant deul, et elle estoit de lui enchainte, si en ot encore deul gregnour ; et quant elle vit ke del tout avoit a lui falli, si penssa ke elle s'en fueroit et querroit tant Mierlin ke elle l'aroit trouvé, car elle ne cuidoit pas trouver conseil de sa douleur par nul autre homme. Tant le quist ke elle le trouva et elle en avoit mené mout grant avoir et mout biele chevauchure, si s'acointa tant de Mierlin k'il l'ama plus ke nulle rien, si li aprist tant de carnins et d'encantemens comme elle sot puis et demoura tant avoec lui k'il fu pierdus en la foriest de Godeudagne (*Le Val des Amants infidèles* 302-303).

“It is told that Morgan was the daughter of the Duke of Tintagel and his wife Igraine, who afterwards became queen of Britain and the wife of Uther Pendragon. She gave birth to King Arthur, who was conceived in her during the lifetime of the duke through the deception wrought by Merlin. When Igraine came to Uther Pendragon, who married her, she brought with her Morgan, her daughter, while a young boy remained in the duchy of Tintagel; he was the duke's son by another woman he had had before Igraine. The duke had been a very ugly knight, and Morgan resembled him greatly, for she too was very ugly. And when she came of age, she became so passionate and lustful that one could hardly find a woman more ardent. At that time King Arthur had newly taken a queen, and there was at the king's court a knight who was the queen's nephew, named Guiamor of Carmelide, a very handsome and worthy knight. During this period Morgan was a maiden in the queen's household, and she began to love Guiamor. One day the queen saw plainly that the two of them were lying together, and she had already been warned of it, so she watched them carefully, for she wished to prevent Morgan from committing folly, partly for love of the king and of Guiamor, and partly to avoid disaster, since the king would hate them if he knew of it. The queen managed at last to catch them together in undeniable proof, so that Morgan could no longer conceal it. She told her nephew Guiamor that he would be a dead man if the king learned of it, and through prayers and threats she persuaded him to renounce Morgan. He did so very easily, for he did not love her

so deeply that he greatly grieved over leaving her. When Morgan saw that he had abandoned her in this way because of the queen, she felt great sorrow; and she was pregnant by him, which caused her even greater grief. And when she saw that she had completely lost him, she decided that she would flee and seek Merlin until she had found him, for she did not believe that any other man could offer counsel for her sorrow. She searched for him until she found him, bringing with her great wealth and a splendid retinue. She became so close to Merlin that he loved her more than anything else, and he taught her so many charms and enchantments that she afterwards knew them all; and she remained with him so long that he was lost in the forest of Godeudagne. (My translation).

This passage is foundational to understanding Morgan's spatial trajectory and the genesis of her deep-seated antagonism toward the court, and Queen Guinevere in particular. In this early courtly environment, Morgan's role is noticeably secondary and restrictive: she is subjected to the rigid, often hypocritical moral policing of a court where Guinevere wields the social authority. When Morgan's affair is discovered, she is punished and shamed for her desires. Furthermore, the knight Guiamor—ostensibly a representative of chivalric virtue—easily discards her to protect his own standing. His betrayal reveals to Morgan the hollow and performative reality of courtly love, which she will try to expose. Disillusioned, grieving, and marginalised, Morgan refuses to remain a secondary figure in a space designed to control her, so that her subsequent flight from the court represents an ideological fracture. By departing into the untamed forest, she rejects the confines of Camelot to seek out the subversive potential of the enchanted realm. This excerpt marks the precise moment of her transformation. She does not depart merely as an exile, but with a willingness to move into the wild in order to master her own magic and, ultimately, to construct alternative courtly spheres on her own terms.

It is important to highlight that Morgan's withdrawal in the forest is not mentioned in previous texts. In Chrétien de Troyes, the forest was a mere background, whereas this episode of *Lancelot du Lac* clearly explains what brought Morgan to the woods and why she wandered day and night through the great deep and distant forests⁷. This first departure from

⁷ Passage that has been mentioned in the previous argument.

the courtly to the enchanted world of the forest gives place to a confrontation between each one's different values: the Christian, rational, masculine vs. the pagan, mystical and feminine. Morgan's belonging to the very forest charged by the magic of the plants and surrounded by the nature which gave her powers turns her into a foreigner in the social schema of the Arthurian court. Jill Hebert argues that "she is often relegated to the forest, which is beyond the control of social and religious order. An ambiguous place, the forest like Woman-exhibits a wildness that invites investigation and destruction of boundaries and rules (41)." By escaping the court, Morgan eludes the expectations of the court. Robert Pogue Harrison understands the forest as an "outlying realm of opacity which has allowed that civilization to estrange itself, enchant, short, to project into the forest's shadows its secret and innermost anxieties" (qtd. in Hebert 41). Perhaps the most interesting part of Morgan's belonging to the forest is not only the magic, but how the courtly and the enchanted intertwined. As a figure moving between these worlds all the time, she is not simply royal or magical, but both. Let us see how these two worlds blend in the creation of la *Val Sans Retour*

Lors espari par tout le val son encantement en tel maniere ke ja mais chevaliers n'i entrast qui puis en issist, puis k'il eust viers s'amic faussé de nulle cose, nes de volenté ; et tout cil ki d'aucune cose i aroient faussé i remanroient jusc'a celle eure ke .I. chevaliers i enterroit ki de nulle cose n'aroit onkes mespris enviers s'amie ne d'oeuvre ne de penssé ne de talent; et fist encore plus del chevalier ki ses amis estoit, car elle li destina ke il ja mais hors del val ne se mouvroit nient plus ke li autre ki apriés lui enterroient. Mais de la damoisiele ke il amoit fist ell trop grant cruauté, car elle le mist en une si felene cartre ke il li estoit avis et jour et nuit ke elle fust en glace tres les piés juske en la chainture, et tres la chamture en amont li sambloit ke elle fust en fu ardant. Telle estoit la force del encantement del val (...) Tant avoit esté renomee ceste male costume par maintes tieres ke cil vaus estoit tant redoutés ke nus, tant fust bons chevaliers, n'i osoit metre le pié, anchois l'eskievoient et .I. et autre.

Li vaus estoit grans et parfons et estoit avirounés de toutes pars de grandimes tertres hauz, si estoit 300 plains d'ierbe verde et espesse et delie, et el mi lieu a droiture sourgoit une fontaine biele et clere, si estoit li grans chemins fierés par mi le chief del val tout contremont jusc'a l'autre chief u l'oissue estoit. Celui jour ke li dus descendi el val avoit ja tant de chevaliers laiens em prison ke il estoient par conte deus cens et chieunquante et trois. Et li vaus estoit clos et fremés de miervelleuse fremeure, car li murs i estoit fais si soutieus comme de l'air ; et si tost com chevaliers i venoit, sans destense i pooit entrer, mais si tost comme il estoit ens, ja mais pooir n'eust del retorner, ne ne pooit trouver le lieu par u il iert entrés. De maintes tierres estoient laiens li chevalier, si i avoit de mout bieles maisons ou il convierroient; et dehors, tres a l'entree de la closture, avoit une

capiele ou il ooient tous les jors messe si k'il estoient dedens et li priestres dehors, car ensi l'avoit establi Morge meismes. (*La Val des Amants infidèles* 255-256)

Then she spread her enchantment throughout the entire valley in such a way that never again would any knight enter it and later leave it, once he had been unfaithful to his beloved in any matter, not even in intention. And all those who had failed in any way would remain there until the day when a knight should enter who had never sinned against his lady in deed, thought, or desire. And she did even more concerning the knight who was her lover, for she decreed that he would never leave the valley, any more than the others who entered after him. But toward the maiden whom he loved she showed even greater cruelty, since she was put in such a dreadful prison that she could not differentiate the day and night and that she was frozen in ice from her feet up to her waist, while from the waist upward she appeared to be burning in a raging fire. Such was the power of the valley's enchantment. (...) This evil custom had become so famous throughout many lands that the valley was greatly feared. No one, despite how much of a good knight he might be, dared to set foot there, but avoided it as much as he could.

The valley was large and deep, surrounded on all sides by very high hills. It was covered with green, thick, and delicate grass, and in the very middle there sprang up a beautiful, clear fountain. A great road ran through the head of the valley and straight across it to the other end where the exit lay. On the day when the duke descended into the valley, there were already so many knights imprisoned there that their number was two hundred and fifty-three. The valley was enclosed and sealed by an enchanted barrier, and its wall was made as subtly as the air itself. As soon as a knight arrived, he could enter it without hindrance; but once he was inside, he no longer had the power to return, nor could he find the place through which he had entered. The knights imprisoned there came from many lands, and there were many fine houses in which they dwelt. Outside, near the entrance to the enclosure, there stood a chapel where they heard Mass every day: the knights remained inside while the priest stayed outside, for thus had Morgan herself ordained it. (My translation)

The creation of the *Val Sans Retour* demonstrates that Morgan does not simply retreat from the courtly world into an entirely separate magical realm. Instead, she recreates the courtly world on her own terms. The valley, which one might think supernatural beings live in, is populated by knights drawn from “many lands” who continue to live in fine houses and even hear Mass⁸ daily. Courtly society therefore survives within the enchanted space, yet it is transformed by Morgan's authority. The values that govern the valley are derived from courtly ideals of love and fidelity, but they are enforced through magic rather than social convention. Knights who have betrayed their ladies are imprisoned, while only a perfectly faithful lover can break the enchantment, as Lancelot will do.

⁸ The Mass is also an anti-Mass, one could imagine of the kind of Mass that would be heard in an enchanted world.

In this sense, Morgan appropriates the code of courtly love and turns it into an absolute law. The valley becomes a liminal space where the boundaries between the courtly and the enchanted dissolve. Her magical power does not stand outside aristocratic culture—instead, it reshapes that culture according to her own experience of betrayal. The courtly world continues to exist within the forest, but it does so under values which are not permitted in the court, and as we will see they are not permitted in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* either. My reading is that, while this adventure was very prominent in his sources, Malory purposefully omits the episode of *Val Sans Retour*; as a result: the valley reveals Morgan's unique position between two worlds.

Throughout the Arthurian narratives, there is a tendency of knights searching for adventure in the forest. The dynamic of the courtly and the enchanted seems to not only oppose each other, but to constantly attract and intertwine with one another. Albrecht Classen notes that:

For many romance heroes, however, that same dark unknown space promises unlimited adventures. The Knights of the Round Table are probably best known for riding off into the forest to seek quests to prove the virtues of chivalrous knighthood and to reaffirm their places within the hierarchy. Both Lancelot and Gawain, Arthur's top two knights, believe the forest offers them the best opportunity for adventure, and they ride off into the woods whenever they have the chance. Just as often in medieval works, the experience in the forest results in an initiation, transformation, or growth for that person whether it be in spiritual, ethical, or social term (544).

This can be observed not only in the knights' adventures and wish for the *queste*, but also in their constantly entering into Morgan's magical terrain. By analysing Lancelot's imprisonment in the episode of *Le Val des Amants infidèles* and *Le Morte Darthur*, we can better understand how the courtly and the enchanted can perfectly mix in *Vulgate*, where the two can coexist in Morgan's persona and land; but how, on the contrary, Malory treats this mix with suspicion, by favouring the courtly over the enchanted and even demonising the latter.

When Lancelot finally enters the Valley, the magic attempts to assess his heart and trap him, just as it did the others; but Lancelot manages to shatter the spell, precisely because he represents a paradox in courtly love. In the political reality of the courtly scene, Lancelot himself is committing treason by sleeping with the King's wife. However, in the strict, emotional logic of *fin'amors* (which governs Morgan's spell), Lancelot is the only pure knight: since the day he met Guinevere, he has never looked at, desired, or loved another woman. His fidelity is absolute. Because he has no infidelity in his heart, Morgan's spatial trap simply cannot hold him. In this case, the enchanted has the effect of exposing the court: Morgan's magical space reveals the hypocrisy of Arthur's knights. The supposedly noble men of Camelot are easily trapped because they are morally flawed in love; but on the other hand, the courtly breaks the enchanted: Lancelot, the ultimate representative of the courtly love ideal, penetrates Morgan's magical terrain and destroys it. When Morgan *does* successfully imprison Lancelot later in the narratives, she abandons this kind of moral magic. The complexity of this imprisonment is highly relevant, as Morgan does not wish for Lancelot's love, but she wishes revenge on Guinevere, as the text mentions:

Lors pense bien Morge ke la royne li douna, si li poise mout ke elle ne l'a bien avisé savoir mon se elle 431 le couneust, et si fesist elle sans faille, se elle s'en fust prise garde, car la royne li avoit douné le jor qu'ele li douna s'amour, si estoit li aniaus petis a une plate pierre bise ki estoit de si grant force ke elle descouvroit tous encantemens viers celui ki le portoit (*Le Val des Amants infidèles* 332).

"From then on Morgan was convinced that this ring was a gift from the queen; she was very unhappy not to have examined it enough, perhaps she would have recognised it, and she would have done it without a doubt, if she had paid attention to it. The queen had indeed given it to her lover the day she granted him her love: the ring was small, with a dark flat stone that had the virtue of revealing all the enchantments of which the one who wore it was victim" (My translation).

While Morgan's physical imprisonment of Lancelot seems to alienate the audience by entrapping Camelot's most celebrated and loyal knight, the thematic brilliance of this captivity lies in the forced submission of chivalric might to her magical authority. By subjugating the ultimate representative of the court, Morgan stages an ideological

collision: a direct battle between the structured values of the courtly world and the sovereign power of the enchanted realm.

This battle between the court and the enchanted is rooted in the very nature of the enchanter in medieval romance. Morgan's ability to challenge Arthurian authority stems directly from her liminal status. As Dalicia K. Raymond observes, this magical capability permanently alters a character's relationship with the structured world:

Because this power puts them in a unique position within society, the magicians are seen as transgressive characters who occupy a particularly distinctive space within society—they are members of the courtly society yet they are simultaneously outsiders to that society. This peculiar insider-and-outsider position of magicians allows them both to reflect the society while exposing the restrictive aspects of society by violating them through their practice of magic (548).

Morgan embodies this dual citizenship perfectly. Being of royal origins and half-sister to King Arthur, she is undeniably an insider who is familiar with the codes, politics, and hypocrisies of the court. Yet, through her flight to the forest, she intentionally positions herself as an outsider. Here, we can see that Morgan does not torture or imprison knights like Lancelot out of mere villainy; instead, she acts on her specific and unique “insider-and-outsider position”. Her magical spaces, such as her enchanted castles, act as dark mirrors that reflect the court. When she subjugates the courtly knight to her magical authority, she is actively using transgressive magic to violate the restrictive laws of the courtly space.

Malory not only eliminates *La Val Sans Retour* in his text, but also alters Lancelot's imprisonment and Morgan's intentions, craftily described in hundreds of pages of *Vulgate*. Let us turn our attention to the moment in which Morgan traps him in *Le Morte Darthur*:

Than they lokyd and were ware of a slepyng knyght lay all armed undir an appil tre. And anone as they lokyd on his face they knew well hit was Sir Launcelot, and began to stryve for that knyght, and every of hem seyde they wolde have hym to hir love. “We shall nat stryve,” seyde Morgan le Fay, that was Kyng Arthurs sister. “I shall put an inchauntement uppon hym that he shall nat awake of all this seven owres, and than I wollede hym away unto my castell: And whan he is surely within my holde, I shall take the inchauntement frome hym and than lette hym chose whych of us he wolle have unto paramour” So this enchauntement was caste uppon Sir Launcelot, and than they leyde

hym uppon his shylde and bare hym so on horsebak betwyxte two knyghtes, and brought hym unto the Castell Charyot; and there they leyde hym in a chambir colde, and at nyght they sente unto hym a fayre dameselle with his souper redy idyght (be that time the enchauntement was paste). (...) And on the morne erly com thes foure quenys passyngly well besene, and all they byddyng hym good morne, and he them agayne.

“Sir knyght,” the foure quenys seyde, “thou muste undirstonde thou art oure presonere, and we know the? well, that thou art Sir Launcelot du Lake, Kynge Banis sonne. And because that we undistonde voure worthynesse, that thou art the noblest knyght lyvyng. and also we know well there can no lady have thy love but one, and that is Quene Gwenyvere!-and now thou shalt hir love lose for ever, and she thyne. For hit behovyth the now to chose one of us foure: for I am Quene Morgan le Fay, Quene of the londe of Gore: and here is the Quene of North Galys, and the Quene of Estlonde. and the Quene of the Oute Iles. Now chose one of us, whyche that thou wolte have to thy paramour, other ellys to dye in this preson.”

“This is an harde case,” seyde Sir Launcelot, “that other I muste dye other to chose one of you”

Yet had I lever dye in this preson with worshyp than to have one of you to my paramoure, maugré myne hede.? And therefore ye be answeyd: I woll none of you, for ye be false enchaunters. And as for my lady, Dame Gwenbere, were I at my lyberté as I was, I wolde prove hit on youres that she is the treweste lady unto hir lorde lyvyng.

“Well” seyde the quenys, “ys this your answey, that ye woll refuse us?”

“Ye, on my lyff,” seyde Sir launcelot, “refused ye bene of me.”

So they departed and leffte hym there alone that made grete sorow. (VI:155.21-29)

As we can see in this passage, the nature of captivity is fundamentally modified; it is altered into a lustful imprisonment. What makes this imprisonment particularly complex is that the courtly still exists within the meters of this perverse magic. Morgan and her fellow queens appropriate the language and rituals of *fin’amors* and courtly hospitality—sending a “fayre dameselle” with supper, dressing themselves “passyngly well” and bidding him a polite good morning. Yet, at the same time, they strip these conventions of their consensual, noble nature. The space of the castle becomes a dark and distorted space, where the queens act as predatory sovereigns who offer an ultimatum: either forced sexual submission as a paramour or death in a dungeon.

The enchanted here is undeniably heinous. Morgan uses her outsider magic to drag the insider knight into a space where he has no power at all. Here, Lancelot is no longer a collateral victim to Morgan’s revenge on Guinevere, but he is the victim of the very “negromancye” and “inchaunements” which Morgan uses in order to harm, destabilise and pervert.

Malory does not grant Morgan the nuanced role she possessed in the *Vulgate*. Instead, he flattens her motivations, elevating her sexual desires and vindictive spite above all other narrative drivers. In Malory's text, Morgan's magic ceases to be a tool for exposing the moral failures of chivalry and becomes, instead, a clear instrument for predatory consumption. By reducing her to a figure driven primarily by lust, Malory manipulates the fundamental function of her enchanted spaces. Interestingly, although Malory omits the morally complex *Val Sans Retour*, he specifically mentions her enchanted castles: *Chariot* and *La Beale Regarde*. While these names might seem innocent at first glance, the chariot (*charrette*) was historically the cart used to transport criminals. The adventures of Lancelot—who is forced to ride in a cart to save Guinevere in Chrétien de Troyes's *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*—enlighten us to the fact that the chariot is associated with social disgrace; therefore Castle *Chariot* indirectly tells us that Morgan's space is shameful and sinful. We can look at *La Beale Regarde* similarly. Its translation to “beautiful view” suggests a voyeuristic, lustful gaze, once again reinforcing the idea that Morgan constructs and rules her spaces out of sexual desire.

Here, we can see her castles ceased to be anti-courts built by a marginalised insider to challenge Arthurian law; they were reduced to evil places of carnal entrapment. In Malory's hands, the battle between the court and the enchanted is less about competing moral codes and more about defending chivalric purity against dark magic-driven lust. Molly Martin also argues that:

The prison space thus mediates gender relations specifically. Being held and controlled by women might upset inscribed gender hierarchies on its own – especially because of their use of sorcery in imposing captivity on Launcelot – but it is particularly notable that these women depart from the text's normative pattern of requiring and thus motivating men's work. (205)

The very gender hierarchies that Martin identifies as being unsettled are disrupted precisely through the women's use of sorcery. Their magical power gives them the power to imprison

and control male knights, reversing conventional gender roles. However, since this authority is rooted in enchantment, it is presented as unnatural and contrary to the legitimacy of the chivalric, male-dominated order once the enchantment is overcome.

Another relevant point regarding the courtly and the enchanted are the magical objects sent by Morgan. Her magic too, always seeks to penetrate the courtly realms. By shifting our attention to the mantle sent to Arthur and the shield she gives Tristram, we may gain even a broader understanding of this dynamic.

On the morne there cam a damesell on message frome Morgan le fay to the Kynge, and she brought with hir the rycheeste mantell that ever was sene in the courte, for hit was sette all fullof precious stonys as one myght stonde by another,' and thereinwere the rycheeste stonys that ever the Kynge saw. And the damesellseyde, "Your sister sendyth you this mantell and desyryth that ye sholde take this gyfte of hir—and what thyng she hath offended, she wol amende hit at your owne plesure."

Whan the Kyng behelde this mantell hit pleased hym much; he seyde but lytyll.

With that come the Damesell of the Lake unto the Kynge, and seyde, "Sir, I muste speke with you in prevyté." "Sey on," seyde the Kynge, "what ye woll." "Sir," seyde this damesell, "putt nat uppon you this mantell tylle ye have sene more—and in no wyse lat hit nat com on you, nother on no knyght of youres, tyll ye commaunde the brynger thereof to putt hit uppon hir." "Well," seyde the Kynge, "hit shall be as you counseyle me." And than he seyde unto the damesell that com frome his sister, "Damesell, this mantell that ye have brought me, I woll se hit uppon you." "Sir," she seyde, "hit woll nat beseme' me to were a

kynges garmente." "Be my hede," seyde Arthure, "ye shall were hit or hit com on my bak, other on ony mannys bak that here is."

And so the Kynge made to putt hit uppon hir. And forthwithall she fell downe deede, and never spoke worde after, and brente to colys. (IV:95.20-40)

Here, magic needs to be embellished in order to penetrate the rigidity of the court. Morgan understands that the court she left is a society invested in materialism, visual splendour, and performative rituals. Therefore, she disguises her lethal magic as a symbol of aristocratic prestige—the richest mantle ever seen. By dressing her magic in "precious stonys" Morgan uses the court's own values against it. The mantle acts as a Trojan horse. It relies on Arthur's aristocratic desire for luxury and the expected feudal protocol of accepting a peace offering to facilitate his assassination. Furthermore, the grotesque conclusion of the scene—where the messenger is reduced to coals—contrasts the refined, rich and jeweled exterior of the garment

with the raw violence of Morgan's magic. The courtly illusion is instantly incinerated; therefore, revealing the destructive reality of the enchanted world.

Now let us have a look at the second object she sends consciousness to the court with: the enchanted horn. The text says:

So he departed frome hym with Sir Bryaunte, and by the way they mette with a knyght that was sente fro Dame Morgan le fay unto Kynge Arthure; and this knyght had a fayre horne harneyste with golde. And the horne had suche a vertu that there myght no lady nothir jantyllwoman drynke of that horne but yf she were trew to her husbande; and if she were false, she sholde spylle all the drynke, and if she were trew to her lorde she myght drynke thereof pesibl . And because of the Quene Gwenyvere and in the dyspyte of Sir Launcelot, this horne was sente unto Kynge Arthure. (...) So this knyght wente his way unto Kynge Marke and brought hym that ryche horne, and seyde that Sir Lamerok sente hit hym; and so he tolde hym the vertu of that horne. Than the kynge made his quene to drynke thereof, and an hondred ladyes with her; and there were but foure ladyes of all tho that dranke clene. 'Alas!' seyde Kynge Marke, 'this is a grete dyspyte,' and swore a grete othe that she sholde be brente, and the other ladyes also. Than the barowns gadred them togedyrs and seyde playnly they wolde nat have tho ladyes brente for an horne made by sorcery that cam 'frome the false sorseres and wycche moste that is now lyvyng'—for that horne dud never good, but caused stryff and bate, and allway in her dayes she was an enemy to all trew lovers.(VIII:269.45)

⁹The enchanted drinking horn, much like the poisoned mantle, is a material object of aristocratic life which Morgan uses to penetrate the rigid walls of the royal space. Beautifully described as "harneyste with golde," it serves as a magical lie detector designed to target Queen Guinevere and expose her infidelity once she drank from it. Interestingly, as the text shows, the horn never reaches Camelot. It is intercepted on the road by Sir Lamerok, who redirects it to King Mark of Cornwall to expose Queen Isolde. Yet, even in a different court, Morgan's magic functions exactly as intended. Once the queen and her ladies drink from it, it proves that the courtly hypocrisy Morgan seeks to expose is not an isolated phenomenon alone, but is widespread all along the courtly environments. The enchanted realm successfully infiltrates the courtly realm, forcing it to publicly confront its own moral corruption.

⁹ An interesting element to be taken into account is Malory's interest in including and appropriating the Tristan en Prose into his storytelling.

Nevertheless, the most revealing aspect of this episode is how the patriarchal space of the court reacts to the truth exposed by the horn. When King Mark threatens to have his queen and the ladies burnt, the barons immediately unite to protect them. Crucially, they do not save the women by proving their innocence, but by completely scapegoating the magic itself. They refuse the punishment because the horn was “made by sorcery” and came “frome the false sorseres and wycche moste that is now lyvyng.” Here, Malory’s ideological suppression of the enchanted realm reaches its peak. The barons dismiss the uncomfortable truth by claiming that the horn did damage and they declare Morgan “an enemy to all trew lovers”. Rather than acknowledging the collapse of courtly fidelity, it is more convenient to dismiss the truth by demonising the female magic that brought it to light. We can easily see whenever the enchanted realm exposes the hypocrisies of the court, the court weaponises the vocabulary of sorcery to protect its own fragile foundations.

Finally, let us see the last enchanted object penetrating the court: the shield she gives Sir Tristram. Once again, Morgan infiltrates the court by co-opting its own material culture; in this case, the heraldic shield, which serves as the visual canvas of chivalric identity. Instead of killing Arthur directly, she seeks to destroy the court from within by using the public space of a royal tournament to unmask Lancelot and Guinevere’s affair.

(Morgan said): thou wolte promyse me to beare upon the a shylde I shall delyver the, at the Castell of the Harde Roche, where Kynge Arthure hath cryed a grete turnemente. And there I pray you that ye woll be, and to do as much of dedys of armys for me as ye may do; for at the Castell of Maydyns, Sir Tristram, ye ded mervaylous dedis of armys as ever I harde knyght do.” (...) “Madame,” seyde Sir Tristram, “let me se the shylde that I shall beare.” Than the shylde was brought forthe, and the fylde was gouldes with a kynge and a quene therein paynted, and a knyght stondynge aboven them with hys one foote standynge uppon the kynges hede and the othir uppon the quenys hede. “Madame,” seyde Sir Tristram, “thys ys a fayre shylde and a myghty, but what signyfyeth this kynge and this quene, and that knyght stondynge uppon bothe their hedis?” “I shall telle you,” seyde Morgan le Fay. “Hit signyfieth Kynge Arthure and Quene Gwenyver, and a knyght that holdith them bothe in bondage and in servage.” (...) And bycause that she demed that Sir Launcelot loved Quene Gwenyver paramour, and she hym agayne, therefore Dame Morgan ordayned that shylde to put Sir Launcelot to a rebuke, to that entente that Kynge Arthure myght undirstonde the love betwene them.(IX:333.45)

In this episode, Morgan's magic manipulates the codes of heraldry and speaks in a visual language the court cannot ignore. The imagery on the shield—a knight standing triumphantly on the heads of the king and queen—is a complete inversion of the feudal hierarchy, visually demonstrating its hypocrisy. Crucially, Morgan uses an innocent outsider, Sir Tristram, who does not yet understand the shield's true meaning. By using the chivalric spectacle of the tournament, Morgan ensures that her magical, outsider knowledge penetrates the public consciousness of the court.

This scene directly illustrates Jill Hebert's argument that "Morgan is exposing the limited nature of knighthood, particularly how it is dependent on physical prowess" (88). As Hebert further notes, while Malory's text clearly depends on Morgan to criticise courtly sphere, it is still immediately compromised by Malory's simultaneous sympathy for Arthur and Lancelot (88). For this reason, the knights and the king are favoured nonetheless because of their writer's ideology.

In the end, while Morgan's magical interventions actively expose the fragility, hypocrisy, and secrets of Arthur's court, Malory's narrative never frames her actions as a righteous pursuit of justice. Because her enchantments are consistently portrayed as harmful and lethal, the public (Malory's contemporary readers) in the threshold of the sixteenth century continue to view the enchanted realm as a fundamentally destabilising force rather than a moral corrective.

What we can conclude from this spatial and material analysis, therefore, is a profound paradox. While this chapter talks about the courtly vs. the enchanted, these two realms do not just oppose each other all the time, but they are closely intertwined, unable to exist without one another. The Arthurian court would lack narrative and ideological meaning without the external, transgressive threat of magic to define its boundaries, test its virtues, and provide a

space for chivalric action. Conversely, the concept of the enchanted in the fifteenth-century imagination cannot be understood in isolation; it requires the feudalism of Camelot as a structure to subvert. Malory, driven by his own contextual and ideological imperatives, undeniably privileged the values of the court.

Yet, as Morgan's presence demonstrates, it is impossible to fully discard the enchanted. The magic and the courtly are locked in a symbiotic struggle, mutually sustaining the very Arthurian world they battle to control; and this dissertation will further explore this idea in the third and last chapter about Morgan's return as an archetype.

3. The Death of Arthur: Morgan's Return as Archetype.

Before talking about Arthur's death, it is important to have a better understanding of Morgan's relationship with her brother. While a modern reader might categorise their relationship as hero vs. anti-hero and certainly think the two oppose each other, early sources might enlighten us to the fact that the hatred between the two is actually newer than one might think. Early sources mention her as Arthur's sister, but there is no mention of direct spite for him in the *Vulgate*. Of course, one might argue that her hatred for the court and its laws, alongside her deep grudges with Queen Guinevere, might affect Arthur as well, but in fact, it is the *Post-Vulgate* tradition which truly initiates this hatred Malory retakes, most specifically *La Suite de Merlin*.

This text tells us plainly about her plan to have Arthur killed. When she gives Arthur's protective, magical scabbard to her lover, Sir Accolon of Gaul, the text exposes the depths of her betrayal: "Ore sachez, fait il, que la roine Morgue la me dona pour ceo que j'en ocis le roi Artur son frere, car bien sachiez qu'il n'est riens el monde qu'ele hiet tant com ele fait le roi Artur" (16). This translates as: "Now know, said he [Accolon], that Queen Morgan gave it to me so that I might kill King Arthur, her brother, for you should well know that

there is nothing in the world that she hates as much as she does King Arthur.” Through the manipulation of Accolon, Morgan orchestrates a battle where Arthur is forced to fight his own knight without his magical sword, Excalibur, or its life-preserving scabbard, both of which Morgan had stolen and replaced with counterfeits.

Let us observe how this episode marks the definitive transition from a personal feud with Guinevere to an explicit assault on Arthur’s life. It is this specific *Post-Vulgate* layer of absolute political and personal hatred that Malory directly inherits, using it as the foundation to strip away her remaining complexity and position her role as Arthur’s opponent. Having a look at Malory’s version, we can see it is almost identical:

Now, Sir,” seyde Accolon, “I woll tell you. This swerde hath bene in my kepynge the moste party of this twelvemonth, and Morgan le Fay, Kyng Uryence wyff, sente hit me yestirday by a dwarfe to the entente to sle Kynge Arthure, hir brothir—for ye shall undirstonde that Kynge Arthur ys the man in the worlde that she hatyth moste, because he is moste of worship and of prouesse of ony of hir bloode.” (IV:90.10)

One might argue that Malory should not be blamed for the maliciousness of Morgan in his text, since his early source is almost identical; even more, one might think he should be praised for his fidelity to the original. Paul V. Rovang presents Malory’s storytelling as a “concretization and simplification”(290). However, throughout the text, we have seen multiple instances of how what Malory wishes to tell is purely ideological, and also what he wishes to silence, such as the complex episodes coming from the French tradition of *Vulgate*. Indeed, he recognises that Arthur’s love for Morgan once existed, but it is mentioned only to further highlight the treachery of Morgan and to emphasise the evil act she committed against her brother. Once Arthur discovers his sister plotted to have him slain, his response acknowledges a previous loving relationship, he says: “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 kyn aftir” (IV:95.35). The worship and trust the king mentions grieving regarding his sister are not depicted anywhere in Malory’s storytelling.

In fact, those very feelings have truly existed and the last part of the *Vulgate, Mort Artu*, is key to understanding that before this hatred took place, there was a profound familial love which existed between the siblings. The following passage explicitly shows this tender, forgotten dynamic:

Dame, fait li rois, 'ki estes vos dont ki tant mames, ai comme vos dites ? le ne sai se nos me gages Sire', faitele, ie sui uostre plus carneus ange et ai a non Morgue, et sui vostre suer, fille de la roine Yguerne, et? fui fille au duc de Tintajoel Nos me deussies par droit miens connoistre que vos ne me connessies, et il le regurde si le connoist tantost. Si saut maintenant sus tos nus, fors de soi braien et de sa chemise, se li giete ses bras au col et li fait la grignor joie del monde et li dist kil est trop lies de cestes aventure et de ce que Dex li a donne troner, carie cos di, fait il, ,biele suer, sor quanque ie tieng de Diu, que te quidoie bien que nos fussies piecha morte et trespassee de cest siecle; et puis ku plaist a Dit que te dos at troues, sainne et haitie, le mos en menrai nucec moi a Camaalot. quant le me partiral de chaiens, Si que nos demorres a cort des oremais et feres compaignie a la roine Genieure; et le sai bien quele sera molt lie et molt ioleuse, quant ele sara la uerite de vos et kele amera molt nostre compaignie "Biats frere. fait ele de cerne menrequeres in, car ie vos creanc loianment que jamais jor que le niue niroi a cort, mais, sans faille, quant le me partirai, girai en lille d'Aualon, la v les dames sont ki sement toutes les forces des encantemens del siecle! Li rois se niest et upereille, et puis sasiet en son lit et puis si fait sa sereur seoir de louste lui et li commence a demander de son estre (*Mort Artu* 48).

“Lady,” said the king, “who are you then who loves me so much, as you say? I do not know if you are mocking me.” “Sire,” said she, “I am your closest relative by blood, and my name is Morgan, and I am your sister, daughter of Queen Igraine. You should know me better than you do.” And he looks at her and recognises her at once. He jumps up immediately, completely naked except for his breeches and his shirt, throws his arms around her neck, and shows her the greatest joy in the world. He tells her that he is overjoyed by this chance meeting and that God has allowed him to find her. “For I tell you, fair sister,” he said, “by everything I hold from God, that I truly believed you had been dead and departed from this world long ago. And since it pleases God that I have found you healthy and in good spirits, I will take you back with me to Camelot when I leave here, so that you will stay at court from now on and keep Queen Guinevere company. And I know well that she will be very glad and very joyful when she knows the truth about you, and that she will love your company very much.” “Fair brother,” said she, “you will ask me for this in vain, for I pledge to you loyally that I will never go to court as long as I live. Instead, without fail, when I leave here, I will go to the Isle of Avalon, where the ladies are who know all the powers of the enchantments of the world!” The king gets up and dresses himself, and then sits on his bed and makes his sister sit beside him, and begins to ask her about her life. (My translation).

This scene completely refutes the idea that Morgan and Arthur were always destined to be mortal enemies. The lexicon here is entirely filled with warmth, family intimacy, and genuine affection. Arthur shows her “la grignor joie del monde” (the greatest joy in the world) and repeatedly calls her “biele suer” (fair sister), while Morgan also addresses him as “biats frere”

(fair brother). Even more striking is that Morgan explicitly states she loves him, and Arthur eagerly invites her back to Camelot to live at his court and keep Guinevere company.

What explains this radical change? In my opinion, by choosing to entirely silence this baseline of sibling love and mutual respect in favour of the *Post Vulgate*'s blood-feud, Malory makes a deliberate ideological choice. He hides the moments where Morgan was a loving sister, ensuring his English audience only sees the unprovoked wickedness of a flat villain.

Yet, by examining their dynamic beyond Malory's binary, we can see that Arthur and Morgan actually function as psychological counterforces—opposing halves of a shared whole, rather than simple enemies. Danielle Gurevitch perfectly captures this complex relationship:

The circumstances in Arthur's and Morgan's lives are different, but the end result is the same. In both cases, the anima and the animus have taken over the protagonist's and the antagonist's personality respectively, and become autonomous – thereby creating a radical, pathological imbalance between the male and the female elements. Both Arthur and Morgan possess a heightened sense of self-esteem resulting from their social-collective positions, and the 'part' they have adopted for themselves that has now become synonymous with their personality (11).

Through this psychoanalytic lens, their conflict is not just a battle of good versus evil, but the result of a radical imbalance. Malory forces both characters to be entirely consumed by their respective social roles: the righteous patriarch and the wicked sorceress, and therefore making these rigid roles shadow the human sibling relationship found in the French tradition. This rigidity represents a deeply charged ideological work.

To understand Morgan's representation in *Le Morte Darthur*, therefore, Malory must be read not only as a storyteller but also as an ideologue. As Raluca Radulescu argues, he consistently constructs a moral binary through his language, describing Arthur's knights in terms that reinforce virtue while characterising Arthur's opponents through a vocabulary of

disorder and evil (43). Morgan's portrayal exemplifies this strategy throughout the whole text. Although many of her magical interventions expose genuine moral failings within Arthurian society, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Malory rarely allows these acts to function as legitimate critiques. Instead, her magic is associated with witchcraft, deceit, and hostility, encouraging readers to perceive her as an enemy of Arthur and his court rather than as a figure who reveals their contradictions.

Kevin T. Grimm likewise argues that Malory's narrator is not a neutral transmitter of inherited material but an active shaper of meaning. He notes that "the narrator knows the certainty of the moment being described in source, but chooses for his own reasons to leave his readers uncertain" (5). This narrative authority is particularly significant in Morgan's case. As Grimm further notes, Caxton's preface presents *Le Morte Darthur* as the celebration of a national hero, reinforcing Arthur's exemplary status for an English readership (8). Within this ideological framework, Morgan is built as a threat to the political and moral order that Arthur embodies and Malory celebrates. Malory's portrayal of Morgan should therefore be understood not simply as an inheritance from earlier Arthurian traditions, but as the product of a fifteenth century-narrative that privileges Arthurian authority while restricting the interpretative possibilities of a character who had a huge power in the very sources Malory rewrote.

Despite Morgan being an ideological product in Malory's text, by having a look at King Arthur's death, we can understand that the love once shown in the French texts needs to be there for his last moments. In the last part of the final battle of Camelot's civil war, Morgan comes and reclaims her brother and takes him on a "shyp wherein were three quenys: that one was Kyng Arthur syster, Quene Morgan le Fay, the tother was the Quene of North Galis and the thirde was the Quene of the Waste Londis" (XXII:698.19). The most interesting paradox

at this point is that these queens who usher Arthur into eternity are the same queens who wished to seduce Lancelot. One might ask how a coven of “false enchaunters” and lustful witches suddenly transform into a triad of holy beings. In reality, Malory needed healers for the expected ending. He had to introduce them despite having to recycle previous villains. His cultural conscience obliged him to respect his earlier sources, as we can see in the following passage of the *Mort Artu*, the very moment of the dying king is depicted similarly.

Si uit venir parmi la mer vne nef toute plaine de dames, et ariua la nes deuant le roi Artu, ki encore estoit a la riue. Les dames vinrent al bort de la nef et cele ki estoit dame deles estoit Morghe, la suer le roi Artu, si proia le roi ke il entrast en la nef Et il li otroia. Si tost comme il counut Morgain, si se leua tantost de la tiere v il seoit et entra en la nef et mist son cheual aueuc lui et ses armes. Et quant Girfles, ki estoit el tierdre, ot veu ke il sen torna, si retorna arriere quanquil pot del cheual traire et faitant ke a la riue vient. Et quant il i est venus, il voit le roi Artu entre les dames et counoist bien Morgain la Fee, car maintes fois lauait veue. Et la nef sen fu eslongie de la rive en poi deure plus ke vns arbalaistres ne peust traire a trois fois.(250)

“He saw coming across the sea a ship quite full of ladies, and the ship arrived in front of King Arthur, who was still on the shore. The ladies came to the edge of the ship as the lady over them was Morgan, the sister of King Arthur, and she prayed king that he enter into the ship. And he granted it to her. As soon as he recognised Morgan, he rose immediately from the earth where he was sitting and entered into the ship, and brought his horse with him and his arms. And when Girflet, who was on the hill, had seen that he was turning away, he returned back as fast as his horse could pull him, and managed to reach the shore. And when he arrived there, he saw King Arthur among the ladies and well recognised Morgan the Fay, for he had seen her many times. And the ship was distanced from the shore in a short time, further than a crossbow could shoot three times.” (My translation).

This concluding scene forces a dramatic yet unavoidable rupture in Malory’s framework, because, as Danielle Gurevitch argues:

True love which is really “as strong as death” is part of the post-conscious, all-embracing essence of mental wholeness, creating an inevitable link between life and death. The King’s dying day is ultimately also a day of joy, since through death he is able to realize the promise of defeating mortality and ensuring eternity. This is the reason the name of the tale focuses on the scene of Arthur’s death, as the fairy is attracted to the dying King and derives force and life from him. This climax enhances the paradox: turning to the dead for reinforcement in life; life leads to death, and death is the guarantee for the eternity of love (17).

Gurevitch’s insight can make us understand better why Malory’s binary reduction of Morgan ultimately fails. The political hatred and the *maleficium* which defined her as a dangerous witch throughout *Le Morte Darthur* are temporary constructs. When Arthur crosses the

threshold of mortality, the narrative demands a return to eternal love. Let us examine this aspect deeply.

Morgan cannot be a one-dimensional schemer at this point; she must reclaim her original, multifaceted identity as the ultimate Arthurian healer. The paradox Gurevitch highlights is that the fairy and the dying king are inextricably linked to ensure each other's eternity, thus requiring Morgan to be a loving figure. In the end, Malory's ideological attempt to silence their sibling bond is completely overpowered by the mythological necessity of Morgan le Fay. By keeping this final scene, Malory is forced to betray his own ideology in a surprising way. After dedicating his entire text to reducing Morgan to a dangerous witch, he places Arthur's ultimate salvation directly into her hands. The text proves that her fundamental essence as a protective sister and a figure of supernatural benevolence was always too deeply woven into the Arthurian legend to be permanently erased. No matter how much Malory tried to demythologise her, the ancient foundation of her character was simply stronger than his fifteenth-century moral framework.

One might ask: why then, has this demythologising process finished? Because Malory fundamentally understands that cultural memory cannot be erased. It is absolutely necessary that the archetypal figure of the benevolent Morgan comes back at the end, because the cultural memory of a society is infinitely more powerful than the individual storytelling of an author. Renate Lachmann's theory of cultural memory helps explain this apparent contradiction. She argues that "literature is culture's memory, not as a simple recording device but as a body of commemorative actions. Literature inscribes itself in a memory space into which earlier texts have inscribed themselves. It does not leave these earlier texts as it finds them but transforms them in absorbing them"(173). Malory's Morgan exemplifies this process. Although he absorbs the hostile Morgan of the French prose cycles and amplifies her

antagonism toward Arthur, he cannot entirely efface the benevolent enchantress inherited from earlier Celtic and Latin traditions. As Lachmann further observes, “a forgotten past is encountered again in fantastic literature. The recounting of that past heals an occluded memory” (174). Morgan’s return for her brother’s last moments functions precisely in this way: it reactivates an older textual memory, momentarily recovering her natural role which had been overshadowed throughout the narrative by the figure of the witch.

When we apply this concept to *Le Morte Darthur*, we can see exactly *why* and *how* Morgan’s original identity survives Malory’s efforts to suppress her. For centuries, the pieces of information that the European public remembered about Arthur’s departure were completely consistent: the king falls in battle, and he is taken across the water to Avalon to be healed by Morgan. This is more than a plot point; it is a cultural cornerstone that dates all the way back to the version of Morgan found in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlini* and even further back: to the very myth which inspired her creation in the collective mind: the Celtic goddess Morrigan.

In this final sequence, Morgan assumes the role of a psychopomp—an entity whose sacred duty is to guide the souls of the deceased from the earthly realm into the Otherworld; its existence is dated from antiquity in recognisable figures such as Charon in Greco-Roman mythology or the Slavic goddess Morana, whose roots may share a lineage with Morgan le Fay, or at the very least with the Morrígan, the ancient goddess whose power Morgan embodies during her brother’s final moments. As the Celtic deity of war and fate, Morrígan was known to guide the souls of fallen soldiers from the battlefield, a mythological function that perfectly mirrors Morgan’s intervention at the death of Arthur. To briefly return to the lexical framework established in the first chapter of this dissertation, Morgan’s departure with her dying brother across the water instantly reconnects her to the etymology of her Celtic

name: *mor*, meaning sea (verified by the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* provided by the Royal Irish Academy).

Indeed, this cultural reconnection could represent the mythical resolution that the late medieval audience expected. If Malory had decided to let Arthur die in a different manner, or if he had replaced Morgan with another random character to fit his narrative, the story would have probably been rejected by the audience. Whether Malory liked it or not, the collective memory of the society dictated the boundaries of the narrative. Malory could rewrite her middle, but he could not rewrite her end and clearly could not alter a myth older than the Christian framework he sought to impose upon it.

Paradoxically, Malory's hands are tied by the very tradition he is trying to adapt. By keeping the scene where Morgan guides the barge to Avalon, he is forced to let her original nature resurface simply because the public expects it. He has to surrender his narrative control to collective memory. In that final moment, the political hatred, the *maleficium*, and the accusations of treason seem to vanish. Cultural memory demands the return of *Margue la sage* and *Morgain la deesse*—the healer who can cure him, the sister who weeps for her brother and cradles his head as the text says, “Ah, dere brothir, why have ye taryed so longe frome me? Alas, thys wounde on youre hede hath caught over much coulde” (XXI:688.7). This quote is the climax of their relationship: it illustrates the possibility that the enchanted and healing realm of Morgan was always meant to be his sanctuary from the rigid courtly environment.

This passage also illustrates that despite Malory's ideology, Morgan and Arthur *did not* have to be enemies. Her question suggests that her healing presence was always available to him in the same manner magic was always available to the courtly space and the mix of the two elements together is stronger than being in competition against each other. Malory's clear

preference for the courtly ideology is defeated by the very myth he tried to change, proving that a society's shared memory continues to recognise the enchanted as an ultimately valid solution to its fears and anxiety.

Indeed, this shared memory cannot be entirely presentist. It may be reshaped and reinterpreted, but it can never be fully absorbed into the social and ideological context of the present. At the same time, cultural memory itself is transformed through transmission, and Caxton's printing of *Le Morte Darthur* further altered the way Morgan would be remembered by later generations. Highlighting Morgan le Fay's demythologisation in *Le Morte Darthur* therefore also means recognising the impact that this transformation produced. Yet cultural memory is not substitutive but accumulative: new representations do not erase older ones but are layered upon them. It is precisely this principle that Malory's narrative ultimately demonstrates.

The return of Morgan le Fay at the conclusion of the Arthurian epic is far from a literary convenience: it is a real organic restoration of order. While this dissertation has extensively demonstrated Morgan's profound complexity and her resistance to being reduced to a flat stereotype, it is important to distinguish between a plain literary stereotype and a deep, mythic archetype. Malory chose to compress her multifaceted nature into the binary wicked witch persona. Nevertheless, we must understand that the underlying architecture of the Arthurian world is completely sustained by these grand archetypes: the Sovereign King represented by Arthur, the Pure Knight represented by Lancelot, the Wise Counselor represented by Merlin, and the Healing Fairy represented by Morgan.

These figures do not and perhaps cannot live in isolation. They form an interconnected psychological ecosystem. Each archetype is designed to perform a specific function that keeps the mythological structure intact. When an author attempts to suppress or

distort one of these figures—as Malory did by attempting to demythologise Morgan—he disrupts the natural equilibrium of the entire symbolic system. Therefore, allowing these figures to execute their ancient functions is the ultimate sign of yielding to the collective memory that created them. An author may hold the pen, but the foundational architecture of the myth belongs to the collective unconscious, if we still can adhere to such a concept.

4. Conclusion

This dissertation has sought to track Morgan le Fay’s trajectory across the medieval tradition in the narrative framework of her actions. It has not sought to look at her character through a feminist or materialist lens, nor through an Anglophone or Francophone point of view alone. The point and interest of this research was examining how the versatility and complexity of the early French texts were recast and ultimately flattened in the later tradition consolidated by Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*. As this study has demonstrated, Malory’s attempt to demythologise Morgan by reducing her to a binary villain was not an accident of translation; it was a deliberate and ideological choice. Yet, it was a choice that ultimately collapsed against the undeniable force of cultural memory.

As the first part of this analysis has established, the demonisation of Morgan le Fay was never an inherent flaw in her original design. Rather, it was the result of a profound lexical and cultural suffocation. By tracking the terminology used to describe her, we can see exactly how her reality was rewritten to absorb the misogyny and theological anxieties of different centuries and even to different writers. In her earliest appearances, she was a natural philosopher whose magic was a source of life, carrying absolutely no demonic connotation. Even more, as her character darkened into a figure of vengeance in the thirteenth-century *Vulgate*, the Middle French lexicon permitted her to retain her human complexity. However, as the cultural safety net for female agency was collapsing by the late fifteenth century,

Malory used this lexicon to suit the ideology of his time. By perverting even her life-saving healing ointments into perverted tools of torture and sexual control, Malory purposefully stripped away her multifaceted identity—an action which completed a distorted lexical journey: he dragged a goddess of natural philosophy down into an earthly emblem of diabolical treason.

This linguistic erasure was directly mirrored by a spatial imprisonment. The second chapter of this dissertation has demonstrated that Morgan's true power has always been defined by her movement between the courtly and the enchanted worlds. Her enchanted spaces were originally designed to ruthlessly expose the hypocrisy of Arthur's knights, proving that the courtly culture and the enchanted spaces live in a constant interconnection, both equally sustaining the Arthurian world. Malory, however, could not tolerate an enchanted feminine realm that possessed such moral superiority and complexity. By omitting the *Val Sans Retour* entirely and repositioning her actions as isolated, decontextualised episodes of spite, he sought to destroy the architecture of her enchanted spaces. In Malory's hands, Morgan's castles are dark dungeons filled with sin and perversion.

Nevertheless, despite Malory's efforts to simplify her character through both language and space, the final chapter of this dissertation proves that he failed to destroy her essence. At the very climax of the Arthurian legend, Malory's ideology had to break down, and he was forced to betray his own narrative. Morgan reclaimed her power precisely because the narrative itself demanded that she became the ultimate Arthurian healer for one last time. Malory's ink could not dictate the ending of the Arthurian sorceress. Finally, it was culturally assumed that Morgan belonged to cultural memory which created her in the first place.

Indeed, the very cultural memory that Malory was forced to preserve did not die with the Middle Ages; it continues to resound through literary epochs. Because her archetype is so

deeply and coherently rooted in the European consciousness, writers across centuries have been forced to continually renegotiate her identity. Further research could analyse how the undertones of her duality echo through the Renaissance in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, where female characters embody layers and traits from Morgan. A deep analysis could exemplify to which point Gloriana or Britomart are manifestations of the Arthurian sorceress herself. Moreover, while the untamed magic of the forest is revived in Romanticism, a possible research could examine how the Arthurian myth, and more specifically Morgan appears in different shapes through poems such as John Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. Also, we could even analyse how and why Mark Twain uses her legacy to write an American political satire such as *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.

Finally, it is in contemporary literature and media where Morgan still exists as the mythical figure that she is. Modern audiences and authors have rejected the flat villain that Malory attempted to solidify, reaching back through time to resurrect the wise healer of the early texts. Scholars could, and should, continue this trajectory, exploring how this phenomenon operates in our current cultural sphere such as in *League of Legends* or TV shows such as *Merlin* (2008) where Morgan continues to breathe, adapt, and resound in countless new shapes and forms. If nothing else, tracing her literary timeline proves one enduring truth: she continues to reign as that immortal mirage, shimmering over the horizons of tradition and literature, eternally visible, yet forever impossible to capture, as the sorceress continues to evolve and defy those who try to contain her even today.

Works cited

Main Sources

Bruce, J. Douglas, editor. *Mort Artu: An Old French Prose Romance of the XIIIth Century, Being the Last Division of "Lancelot du Lac."* AMS Press, 1974.

Chrétien de Troyes. *Erec et Énide*. Translated and edited by Michel Rousse, GF-Flammarion, 1994.

Chrétien de Troyes. *Le Chevalier au Lion ou Yvain*. Edited by Pierre Kunstmann, Université d'Ottawa / ATILF, 2009.

Geoffrey of Monmouth. *The Vita Merlini*. Translated by John Jay Parry, Global Grey Ebooks, 2018.

Lepage, Yvan G., editor. *Le Val des Amants Infidèles: Lancelot du Lac IV*. Translated by Marie-Louise Ollier, Le Livre de Poche, 2002.

Lepage, Yvan G., editor. *L'enlèvement de Guenièvre : Lancelot du Lac, Tome V*. Translated by Marie-Louise Ollier, Librairie Générale Française / Le Livre de Poche, 1999.

Malory, Thomas. *Le Morte Darthur*. Edited by Stephen H. A. Shepherd, Norton Critical Edition, W. W. Norton, 2004.

Smith, Patrick Coogan, editor. *Les Enchantementz de Bretaigne: An Extract from a Thirteenth Century Prose Romance "La Suite du Merlin"*. Department of Romance Languages, U of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1977.

Secondary sources

Classen, Albrecht. *The Forest in Medieval German Literature: Ecocritical Readings from a Historical Perspective*. Lexington Books, 2015.

Fries, Maureen. "From the Lady to the Tramp: The Decline of Morgan le Fay in Medieval Romance" *Arthuriana*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1994, pp. 1–18.

Grimm, Kevin T. "THE RECEPTION OF MALORY'S 'MORTE D'ARTHUR' MEDIEVAL AND MODERN." *Quondam et Futurus*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1992, pp. 1–14

Gurevitch, Danielle. "Analytical Psychology Approach to the Love-Hate Relationship between King Arthur and Morgan le Fay in Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur." *Mirator*, vol. 6, no. 1, Oct. 2005, pp. 1-15.

Hebert, Jill M. *Morgan le Fay, Shapeshifter*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Lachmann, Renate "Cultural Memory and the Role of Literature." *European Review* 12.2, 2004, pp.165–178.

Larrington, Carolyne. *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, I.B. Tauris, 2006.

Larrington, Carolyne. "Morgan and Chivalry." *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, I.B. Tauris, 2006.

Larrington, Carolyne. "Morgan, Other Knights, and Enchantress." *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, I.B. Tauris, 2006.

Martin, Molly. "Castles as Prisons." *Castles and Space in Malory's Morte Darthur*. Boydell & Brewer, 2019. Print. Arthurian Studies. pp. 189–226

- Passaro, Jonathan. "Malory's Text of the Suite du Merlin." *Arthurian Literature XXVI*, edited by Elizabeth Archibald and David F. Johnson, Boydell & Brewer, 2009, pp. 39–76.
- Pérez, Kristina. "Fals Lustes: Malory's Mistresses." *The Myth of Morgan La Fey*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 137–57.
- Radulescu, Raluca. "Malory and Fifteenth-Century Political Ideas." *Arthuriana*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2003, pp. 36–51.
- Raymond, D. K. "Motives, Means, and a Malevolent Mantel: The Case of Morgan le Fay's Transgressions in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*." *Magic and Magicians in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Time*, edited by Albrecht Classen, vol. 20, De Gruyter, 2017, pp. 547–64.
- Rovang, Paul R. "Malory's Treatment of the Marvelous: A Comparison with His Sources." *Fifteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 21, 1994, p. 279. *ProQuest*.
- Saul, MaryLynn. "Malory's Morgan le Fay: The Danger of Unrestrained Feminine Power." *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2010, pp. 85–99.
- Saunders, Corinne. "Malory's Morte Darthur." *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, Boydell & Brewer, 2010, pp. 234–60.
- Tuczay, Christa Agnes. "Witchcraft and Superstition." *A Companion to the Middle Ages*, edited by Albrecht Classen, De Gruyter, 2015, pp. 1786–1812.

Dictionaries

Dictionary of the Irish Language (eDIL). Royal Irish Academy, www.dil.ie/.

Dictionnaire Électronique de Chrétien de Troyes. www.atilf.fr/dect/.

DMF: Dictionnaire du Moyen Français, version 2023. ATILF – CNRS & Université de Lorraine, www.atilf.fr/dmf.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/.

Middle English Compendium. University of Michigan, quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/.

Robert, Anne-Marie, and Willy Bakeroot. *Carmina*. carmina-carmina.com/.