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English 467

How Feminism has Transformed the Character of Morgan le Fay: A Literary and Media Analysis

Over eight hundred years have passed since Geoffrey of Monmouth first made famous the legends of King Arthur, and yet the legends still flourish in literature and media. Yet, the legend's fame does not always extend to the character of Morgan le Fay. Surprising amounts of people have no idea who she is, and yet she crops up in so many different forms. In *The Sword in the Stone* she is represented in the character of Mad Madam Mim; in *The Mists of Avalon* she is Morgaine, and in the new television show *Merlin* she is the Lady Morgana. Her character is one of the most transformed pieces of the legend. In some stories she is a loving half-sister who takes her brother to Avalon, in others she becomes the jealous and bitter witch, and in some, such as T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, she is lost from the story altogether. Her character has become ambiguous, and after reading Malory many would wonder why, with no explanation, Morgan suddenly forgot her hatred of Arthur and brought him to Avalon to be healed. Many have struggled with this, but more recent adaptations have attempted to make a whole person out of these very opposing characteristics, showing how this opposition works together and makes her human.

A close analysis of the texts *Le Morte d'Arthur*, *The Mists of Avalon*, and *Merlin*, along with Bressler's *Literary Criticism* and several other scholarly articles and texts will begin to show the effects of feminism on character development. As feminism, or the lack thereof, has

evolved, the character of Morgan has changed with it. Her long history did have a beginning, and she has become many different things since her debut in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*.

Elaine Showalter was a prominent voice of the 1980s. Her 1977 text, *A Literature of Their Own*, defines the three phases that every literary subculture goes through: imitation, protest, and self-discovery. She then termed them for feminism in her opening chapter. The feminine phase, where feminism saw "the appearance of the male pseudonym," began in 1840 and ended in 1880 (Showalter 19). The next phase was the feminist phase, from 1880 until the winning of the vote (1920), and here women openly "rebelled against the dictatorship of male establishment" (31). Last, the current phase is the female phase, which began in 1920. Women writers in this phase are "trying to unify the fragments of female experience through artistic vision" (35). In the female phase, many Arthurian texts were and are being written by and about women: *The Mists of Avalon*, *The Girl's King Arthur*, and *Arthurian Literature by Women*. The British television series *Merlin*, in its fifth season, attempts to create a Morgan who has a feel of female empowerment. The directors attempt to bring to life a Morgana who audience members can empathize with.

"I don't understand anything anymore. I need to understand what's happening [to me]" ("Nightmare"). Morgana says this after accidentally beginning a fire in her room just by looking at a candle. Until the second season of *Merlin*, Morgana is a ward in King Uther's protection and an overall good character. The creators of the show took an approach similar to *Smallville*, where they focus on the life before the legend. In this loose adaptation, the wizard Merlin is young and naïve, and Morgana a ward who begins innocent and afraid of what she believes to be magic. Then, Morgana starts having prophetic dreams, sets her curtains on fire, and smashes a vase of flowers. Merlin wants to help, telling his guardian Gaius, "She isn't sure what's happening to her

and it's tearing her apart" ("Nightmare"). Merlin is forbidden to help, though, because he must keep his magic a secret in order to fulfill his destiny and avoid the noose. From this episode on, the audience sees how Morgana is slowly led on the track to evil, becoming the 'witch' of the legends because of her alienation and loneliness.

Enter Morgause. Morgause is kind to Morgana, and unlike any other character, is able to explain and understand the pain Morgana is in. Morgause slowly wins over Morgana, until finally the two leave Camelot together. After a year of fruitless searching, prince Arthur and Merlin happen upon Morgana stumbling in the woods. "I was so naïve, Merlin. I don't think I really understood what I was doing ... You don't know how much I regret everything I've done" ("The Tears"). Morgana wins over the entire castle, but she is only acting, in order to get revenge. By season five she has done everything in her power to kill Arthur and Uther and exact her revenge, including everything from enchanting Merlin to kill Arthur, using an army of skeletons, and letting loose the spirits of the dead in a terrifying two-episode attack on Camelot. With every season she grows more vengeful, jealous, and powerful.

The television show is popular in Britain and the character of Morgana draws in viewers who are startled by their empathy for the character even as she attacks the characters they love. Here, Morgana is a very human character drawn to evil by her past and lonely misunderstanding. The feeling of being alone and "Other" eats away at her, until Morgause finds her. Morgause fuels the rage and need for revenge, until Morgana is lost to the evil side of sorcery. Clearly a product of the female phase, *Merlin* gives Morgana a voice that allows for a "feminine analysis of literary" form (Bressler 184). The female phase has allowed for women to be human and uniquely female, not just the "Other," as Virginia Woolf describes the male definition of a woman (Bressler 181).

Another recent adaptation is the series about Morgan le Fay from five different points of view. The last book, *Herself*, written by Fay Sampson, is from the point of view of Morgan. The book begins with a prologue:

“I am the half-sister of good King Arthur, and his arch-enemy, am I not? The wicked witch, the embodiment of evil.

And yet ...

I am the queen who takes Arthur in my arms for healing.” (Sampson 7)

Morgan is given a voice yet again, adding to the lengthening list of those Arthurian texts with the female perspective. Sampson refers to Geoffrey of Monmouth’s text, Malory’s text, and the character Morgan sneers at their unreliability. Morgan here is someone so misunderstood that she stands “with the water between [her and Arthur]. So small a pool. So great an ocean of misunderstanding” (Sampson 10). Until recently, however, women were refused a voice in Arthurian legend. One of the first books to change that was *The Mists of Avalon*.

After *Le Morte d’Arthur* all the way up until the early twentieth century, Arthurian literature was mostly written towards an audience of boys in order to teach them about chivalry. They allowed “readers—*boy* readers—to identify with Sir Lancelot and the other Champions of the Round Table” but left no room for women (Lupack 60). In 2010, Barbara Lupack wrote *The Girl’s King Arthur*. The story, written in the first-person perspective of the Arthurian women, challenged the belief that the legends only spoke to men (Lupack 61). By giving women full control of the narrative, she demonstrated “how their innate strength and resilience allowed them to triumph over custom and adversity,” in effect empowering young women (Lupack 62).

Marion Zimmer Bradley’s 1983 *The Mists of Avalon* is written in a similar fashion. In the early

stages of the female phase, Bradley's book is a sort of transition from the feminist phase to the female; Morgain passes through these phases to reach maturity and understanding.

Morgaine, as Bradley names her, first speaks directly to the audience near the beginning, about her time with Uther and Igraine. The young girl remembers that once her mother marries Uther she was more alone. Morgaine felt more neglected than abused, she tells the audience that it was "[n]ot that Uther was ever unkind to me; it was simply that he had no particular interest in a girl child. My mother was always at the center of his heart, and he at hers, and so I resented that—that I had lost my mother to this great fair-haired, boorish man" (Bradley 108). So then, she asks, "is it any wonder I hated him" (Bradley 108). As she continues to grow, her resentment of men grows. She loves and cares for her brother, Arthur, but resents her parents for thrusting the responsibility on her. During the feminist phase, remember, women were rebelling "against the dictatorship of male establishment" (Showalter 31). Bradley puts Morgaine at the mercy of Uther, and Morgaine, possibly worse than being abused, is completely neglected. She must raise herself and her brother, who she also begins to resent for his part in forcing her to grow up.

At age eleven she is taken to Avalon to be a priestess of the Goddess with her aunt Viviane and grows close to her. Avalon is an island consisting of almost entirely women, and Morgaine relishes in her newfound power, especially in how that power affects those men who affected her so in her earlier life. However, Viviane betrays her trust by doing the unthinkable. She tells Morgaine about a tribal ritual, one where:

"The Tribes of the fairy folk, and all the Tribes of the North, have been given a great leader, and the chosen one will be tested by the ancient rite. And if he survives the testing ... then he will become the Horned One ... [Morgaine's] maidenhood belongs to the Goddess. Now she calls for it in sacrifice to the

Horned God. You are to be the Virgin Huntress, and the bride of the Horned One”
(Bradley 171).

Once there, she watches the ritual of the Horned God, a young blond man, hunt a deer. When he comes back he must lie with the Virgin Huntress, or Morgaine. In the dark they make love and only in the morning do they realize who the other is. Arthur is horrified, and Morgaine, on her way back to Avalon, is in shock but knows rage will follow. She knows Viviane set her up, that she knew this would happen. Once Viviane deems it allowable to see Morgaine, Morgaine says, “She has played upon me as I would play upon the harp” in bitterness (Bradley 183). This phrase is so bitter and, unfortunately, true, that the audience feels empathy at a point in the legends where earlier authors have only created mistrust and anger towards Morgaine.

Morgaine’s anger simmers, until she finds that she is with child. She tries to rid herself of it, but is stopped and she realizes she must have the baby. She visits Viviane in a rage. Crumbling to the floor, she yells at Viviane, “for here and now, I tell you that you have worked upon me and played with me like a puppet for the last time! Never again—never” (Bradley 228). Morgaine realizes she can’t let anyone take charge. She leaves Avalon, promising never to return. Bradley uses artistic vision to unify the fragments of a Morgan, creating the character Morgaine who can speak for herself. Morgaine sets out from Avalon on what Showalter terms “courageous self-exploration” (33). She transitions from the feminist phase with her understanding and knowledge of who she is and who she must be.

Before the feminist phase the feminine phase housed many of the books geared towards boys. Ironically, Sampson’s Morgan sneers at *Idylls of the King*, for its play on Victorian era and Tennyson’s Arthur, who has a beloved sister Bellicent. “I, Morgan, do not exist for Tennyson,” Sampson’s Morgan sneers (28). Tennyson wrote his book of poems and gave it his own tweaks

in order to give it a nineteenth century feel (Gilbert 863). His “turn on the issues of domestic relations and specifically on the willingness or unwillingness of men and women to play their traditional social and sexual roles in these relations” was speaking to the audience of the Victorian era, a social commentary of sorts (Gilbert 864). However, he focused on the chivalry of the men, keeping Arthur a “stainless king,” as Morgan says (Sampson 28). This sort of approach was similar for many authors: Lupack’s *A Girl’s King Arthur* was named in conjunction with the earlier written *A Boy’s King Arthur* and she names other examples including *Book of Romance* (1902), *Twentieth Century Knighthood: A series of Addresses to Young Men* (1900), and, written in 1901, *The Boy Problem* (Lupack 60). Many of the authors of books like these named *Le Morte d’Arthur* as a deeply influential source.

Sir Thomas Malory’s novel was first published in 1485. Said to have meticulously gathered and translated the legends of the king into his book, he named it *The hoole booke of kyng Arthur & of his noble knyghtes of the rounde table*” but his publisher chose the title of the last chapter, “Le Morte d’Arthur,” instead. There have been hundreds of reprints and new editions, and many have taken on the challenge of translation.

Although sources before Malory mention Morgan le Fey, it is his text that has made her evil sorcery infamous. The first mention of her is after King Uther married Igraine, who’s daughter, “Morgan le Fey, was put to scole in a nunnery, and ther she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye” (Malory 5). For the rest of this section, Morgan le Fey’s name will be shortened to Morgan. The next mention Malory makes leaves her unnamed. Merlin tells Arthur to “kepe well his swerde and the scawberde, for he told hym how the swerde and the scawberde scholde be stolyn by a woman from hym that he moste trusted” (Malory 76). Later on he reveals that Morgan is the woman Arthur trusts most, but Malory never does explain a reason

for Morgan's desire of the sword or, as is apparent later on, why Morgan hates Arthur so much. Morgan attempts to kill him by taking his sword and, giving him a fake, gives the real Excalibur to his opponent. She fails when Arthur regains the sword in battle, and attempts several other times to kill him, or at least embarrass him. She sends him a poisoned mantle, sends Gwynevere an enchanted goblet that will spill on those unfaithful to their spouse, and many times tries to uncover the romance of Sir Launcelot and Gwynevere, unsuccessfully. When Sir Tristram accidentally asks for shelter at her castle, she keeps him as her slave, forbidding him to leave. One day she allows him to leave if he will take a shield bearing an image of "a kyng and a queene therein paynted, and a knyght stondyng aboven them with hys one foote standyng upon the kynges hede and the othir upon the quenys hede" (Malory 340). This shield was intended to embarrass the King, Queen and Sir Lancelot, because "queene Morgan loved sir Launcelot beste, and ever she desired hym, and he wolde never love her nor do nothyng at her rekeyste ... therefore dame Morgan ordayned that shyld to put sir Launcelot to a rebuke, to that entente, that kyng Arthure myght undirstonde the love betwene them" (Malory 340). Even as she attempts to disgrace Gwynevere for her lewd behavior, Morgan advances upon many of the noble knights, such as Sir Tristram, who refuse. When Morgan and three other queens stumble across Sir Launcelot, they decide to hold him prisoner until he chooses one of them as his paramour. "This is a hard case," he told the four ladies, "that other I muste dye other to chose one of you ... for ye be false enchauntes" (Malory 152). Morgan is angry, and because he doesn't love or desire her, she adds this to her reasoning for attempting to ruin the court of Camelot.

When Malory wrote *Le Morte*, there were still approximately 400 years before feminism would become a concept. Women had little stature and importance in the medieval ages, and sometimes even less in medieval literature. "Feminism's goal is to change this degrading view of

women so that all women will realize that they are not a ‘nonsignificant Other,’ but that each woman is a valuable person possessing the same privileges and rights as every man” (Bressler 180). M. Wendy Hennequin from the University of Connecticut wrote about her difficulty being a feminist and a medievalist, because though culture has accepted the simple idea that females are people as well, “most medieval literature does not accept this simple feminist idea, and the few medieval texts that do accept that women are people do not accept that women are equal people or good people” (49). Malory’s text is only one of many that belittle women in this time period.

The first mention of Morgan did not come from Malory, however. And, her debut was not actually tainted with any evil doings. Geoffrey of Monmouth first writes about Morgan in his *Vita Merlini*, published around AD 1150. The text is about Merlin, a prophet who often loses his mind and lives in the woods. At one point he speaks to Taliesin, who tells him about Morgen. Taliesin describes the Island of Apples (i.e. Avalon) and the nine sisters who “exercise a kindly rule” (Geoffrey 14). Of these nine, one sister is first among them:

“Her name is Morgen, and she has learned the use of all plants in curing the ills of the body. She knows, too, the art of changing her shape, of flying through the air, like Daedalus, on strange wings ... It was there we took Arthur after the battle of Camlan, where he had been wounded. Barinthus was the steersman because of his knowledge of the seas and the stars of heaven. With him at the tiller of the ship, we arrived there with the prince; and Morgen received us with due honor”

(Geoffrey 14).

It is also said that Morgen taught mathematicam, or mathematics, to her sisters. Although she is only given two paragraphs in the text, she is given a definite role and, if not personality, then

sense of honor. This Morgen is, according to Taliesin, kind and honorable, with powerful gifts that seem only to be used for good. She and her realm are given a “positive and even androgynous [portrait], combining quintessentially feminine values” with those surprisingly male values such as a teacher of math (“From The Lady” 2). Fries suggests that the gradual change of Morgen’s character stems from “the increasing inability of male Arthurian authors to cope with the image of a woman of power in positive terms” (“From the Lady” 2). “The decline in [Morgan’s] moral nature, her magic powers and even her beauty coincides with the virulent growth of woman-hatred in both religious and lay society and in all kinds of literature documented by historians as a feature of the later Middle Ages” (Fries 4). Fries and Hennequin understand how medieval times, and the lack of feminist criticism, wrought changes upon Morgan’s character.

On the other hand, Edith Williams focuses on the beginnings of Morgan as a goddess of water. Pairing Morgan’s long history with close examination of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, she dissects the possibility of Morgan as a Trickster. Reaching far back, Morgan’s roots stem from two mythological creatures: the Irish Morrígan and the Welsh Modron, who are generally believed to have descended from an ancient Celtic goddess of water (Williams 41). Both myths have strong connections with water, but their commonalities stop there. In one incident, Morrígan is a sexual creature, and vindictive if rejected (Williams 41). She is also associated with mischief, shape shifting, and with what Williams calls the “hint of the savior” (Williams 41). On the other hand, Modron is not vengeful, and from her is the first mention of using plants to heal. She is linked to the nurture of children as well.

Morgan’s tendency to “move in and out of the stories of other persons, conducting her machinations, and almost always carrying with her that aura of ‘shadow’” is common in

Arthurian legend (Williams 42). In her library of appearances readers begin to see that ambiguity, those values of opposition, when Morgan tries to trick King Arthur's court in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. "She guided me in this guise to your glorious hall, / To assay, if such it were, the surfeit of pride / That is rumored of the retinue of the Round Table" (*Sir Gawain* 2456-58). However, her trick fails and she easily forgives Gawain for not failing, which Bercilak notes by inviting him to "come feast with [Gawain's] aunt; / Make merry in my house" without any word on her being upset (*Sir Gawain* 2467-68). Williams urges the audience to remember when reading works like *Sir Gawain* that ambiguities are part of human nature, and that Morgan has become more human than she was to begin with.

It begins to make sense why the present-day writings of Morgan have created such a different style of character. Rather than ignore the texts that have created a Morgan full of hate and evil, modern authors have embraced both halves of this character. *Merlin's Morgana* becomes very much human, someone hurt by circumstance, forced by circumstance, and yet, in a very *human* way, in control of her choices. When Morgana kidnaps Gwen, she is suspiciously kind to her at some points. She sets a banquet and tries to have Gwen eat. "I would have sold my soul for someone to show me kindness such as this" ("The Dark Tower"). Although she is only trying to win over an ally to help her destroy Arthur, Morgana betrays a secret weakness. She is lonely and longs for company and kindness. Morgana is evil, always up to no good, and yet the audience empathizes her. They can do this because Morgana feels pain, feels love, and most of all, has a backstory. The show is doing exactly what the female phase is about: "trying to unify the fragments" (Showalter 35).

Though she is in darkness for a while, the Morgana of the television show has a chance for redemption. Katie McGrath, who plays Morgana, spoke about this at the last Comic Con.

Season five shows a woman full of hatred, hurt by the actions of her father and brother. When asked about what Morgana would do if she finds out Merlin has magic, “because somebody has to find out,” McGrath gives two options (GamerLiveTV). Either she goes “even further over the edge to find out this person was the same as her the whole time and never helped her,” or she realizes what she’s done, and understands that she can be good if this person with magic can be good (GamerLiveTV). And in the present, with the benefits of female empowerment and feminist criticism, she has that possibility. McGrath voiced what everyone wants from Morgan: “I want her redeemed.”

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