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# Echoes of Legend: Magic as the Bridge Between a Pagan Past and a Christian Future in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*

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ECHOES OF LEGEND: MAGIC AS THE BRIDGE BETWEEN A PAGAN PAST  
AND A CHRISTIAN FUTURE IN SIR THOMAS MALORY'S *LE MORTE DARTHUR*

A Thesis

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By

Josh Mangle

## Abstract

Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is a text that tells the story of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Malory wrote this tale by synthesizing various Arthurian sources, the most important of which being the *Post-Vulgate* cycle. Malory's work features a division between the Christian realm of Camelot and the pagan forces trying to destroy it.

Throughout the thesis, I use a variety of scholarship to examine magic and argue that magic is as essential to the plot of *Le Morte Darthur* as Christianity is. In chapter one, I review the existing literature that is available on Medieval magic and I show where the gaps in the literature are. In chapter two, I examine men and magic and how masculine magic is beneficial while female magic is antagonistic. I focus on Launcelot, Galahad, and Merlin. In chapter three, I examine how female magic users fit into the paradigm of masculine-female magic; I use the characters of Morgan Le Fey and Nynive. Chapter four focuses primarily on magical creatures and objects and how they represent paganism and Christianity. It the goal of this thesis to show how magic and Christianity form a symbiotic relationship in which both are reliant on each other in order to be successful in the medieval romance.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*“Hit Befel in the dayes of Uther Pendragon, when he was kynge of all Englonde and so regned, that there was a mighty duke in Cornewaill that helde warre ageynst hum long tyme, and the duke was called the Duke of Tyntagil”* (Malory 4).

So begins Sir Thomas Malory’s famous work, *Le Morte Darthur*, a story that would become its own myth – a legend to be passed down in the collective conscious of British Literature. Malory’s work is one of Christian thought, adventure, courage, loyalty, romance, and, most importantly, magic. These elements presented in Malory’s work serve to lead his audience through the tale of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Malory calls his audience to question their sense of courage and faith, to be reminded of oaths and loyalty. Through *Le Morte Darthur*’s pages, Malory crafts his epic romance with a sense of dutiful purpose. While rooted in echoes of past legends, *Le Morte Darthur* is a tale that heralds the future of medieval romance.

In *Le Morte Darthur* Malory’s use of magic is the bridge between the paganism of the past and the future of Christianity. It provides the balance counter to the Christian thought present through the various stories found throughout the romance. Without magic present, the concept of Christianity would be less successful. These two opposing forces must both be present in medieval romance for either to work. A medieval romance with only magic and no Christian underlying principle would be considered blasphemous – dangerous and morally corrupt. Likewise, a romance with strong Christian anecdotes and no mention of magic would be ineffective. There would be no devil to fight – no pagan thought to overcome and triumph against. In this thesis, I will discuss magic in Sir

Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* as a bridge between a pagan past and a Christian future and how magic and Christian thought rely on each other in a symbiotic relationship in order to completely function and survive in the medieval romance.

The practice of magic is an essential part of this text. Whether for benefic or ill ends, magic appears in almost every book of *Le Morte Darthur*. Magic shapes the text and its characters. It whispers through the pages and allows the readers to find themselves at a crossroads of fantasy and spirituality, between the haunting mists of a pagan past and the outstretched beginning of a Christian future. As such, there must first be a discussion as to what magic is, where it comes from, and, ultimately, how does it come into play within the structure of the medieval romance, in specific, *Le Morte Darthur*.

Magic, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is "The use of ritual activities or observances which are intended to influence the course of events or to manipulate the natural world, usually involving the use of an occult or secret body of knowledge; sorcery, witchcraft. Also: this practice as a subject of study" ("magic"). The earliest usage of this word appears to be in the late 1300's with Chaucer and the *Canterbury Tales*, with the passage being cited "He kepte his parcient ful greet deel In hours by his magik natureel" ("magic"). Therefore, it is this definition of the English word "magic" or "magik" that appears in the Middle Ages and the texts from the Middle Ages. While the English word for magic may have its origins in the fourteenth century, magic as a concept, theory, and practice is quite old, as there are renditions of magic across Europe.

The concept of magic is a complex one. Its functions and practices range from religious, practical, literary, to medical. For this thesis, it would not be prudent to analyze where magic as a whole originated from. Instead, I will focus on magic and its practices in Europe, particularly western and northern parts of Europe, which is the setting for much of *Le Morte Darthur*. To understand the structure of magic within Europe, in particular medieval England, it is imperative to acknowledge the evolution of magic within various European cultures and how they may have affected practices in England.

Perhaps the magical concepts with the strongest influence on Middle English magic are those from the Celtic and Norse regions. In his book *Magic in the Middle Ages*, literary critic Richard Kieckhefer discusses the survival and integration of Celtic and Norse paganism into Christian theology and how these two pagan religions contained descriptions of magic practices. Much of what scholars know of these European pagan magical practices are entwined with Christian theology. Kieckhefer argues that this is because much of the written work that survives of Celtic and Norse magical practices come from Christian written sources (46). Celtic magic seems to be the closest type of magic to what Malory was writing into the pages of *Le Morte Darthur*, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter and in subsequent chapters.

The conjunction with Christian overlay and pagan practice occurs in Celtic magic practices, or rather, what scholars know of Celtic magical practice. Corrine Saunders in her work *Magic and the Supernatural* writes, “Celtic belief survivals are even more difficult to trace” (13). She writes that much of what modern scholars know about Celtic magic is from Latin sources and are often “overlaid by Christian ritual” (13). Celtic



magic, or what scholars know of it, is pieced together from various, often Christian-based sources. Therefore, it cannot be said for certain as to what magical practices were like in pre-Christian Celtic lands. Similar is the case for medieval magical practice: most of what scholars know about Celtic magic comes from its renditions in literature and folklore (Kieckhefer 44). Saunders writes, “aspects of pagan ritual evidently survived in popular memory and culture, ingrained in folk belief and practice” (13). She does offer a concession to say that these folk practices were often interwoven with Christian beliefs. She writes, “the Middle Ages inherited a complex range of ideas of magic and the supernatural, popular and learned, classical, biblical and Germanic” (14). The key word that Saunders uses is “inherited” (14). In this sense, it would seem that Malory inherited pre-existing forms of magic rather than making up his own. This magical inheritance, then, would be present in how Malory constructed his magic using characters. Perhaps the most prominent example of the magical inheritance is the character of Merlin. Malory crafts Merlyn<sup>1</sup> to straddle the line between the supernatural and the biblical. In the chapter entitled, “King Uther and King Arthur,” Malory writes, “so the child was delyverd unto Merlyn, and so he bare it forth unto Syre Ector, and made an holy man to crysten hym, and named hym Arthur” (5). Merlyn’s connection with the kingship and his responsibility for Arthur place him in the Christian sphere, particularly in the above quote, which depicts Merlyn delivering Arthur to be christened. It is important to note, then, that even despite Merlyn’s connection with Christian practices here, he is not the one performing them, and his origins possibly lay in Celtic paganism. Roger Sherman

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<sup>1</sup> P.J.C. Field’s edition of *Le Morte Darthur* stylizes Merlin as ‘Merlyn’.

Loomis discusses Merlyn's origins in *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, citing connections to various characters from Celtic myth, such as Myrddin and Curoi<sup>2</sup> (125-134).

Merlyn's example shows that the magic that may have influenced *Le Morte Darthur* would have synthesized folk, pagan magic with Christian methods of magic. The evolution from Celtic magical belief to the one in medieval England becomes tricky. Celtic pagan magic, as well as magic in the Nordic regions, slowly became subsumed by Christianity, and any form of magic that relied on self and other gods fell into the realm of the Other and was considered dangerous (Kieckhefer 51-52). Here, the synthesizing from folk-belief to Church-approved miracles and white magic becomes apparent. All magic that somewhat resembled pagan forms of magic were quickly demonized. Kieckhefer writes, "intellectuals in medieval Europe recognized two forms of magic: natural and demonic" (9). The demonic magic here is the "inverse of religion" (Kieckhefer 9), which, in accordance to theories put forward of Christian subversion of pagan religions by both Saunders and Kieckhefer, would mean that it is the pagan religious practices that have become demonic. Celtic magical practice was no exception to this construct.

Celtic magic, it would seem, involved a great number of different practices, in particular a belief in fairies, shapeshifters, enchantments, and the power of the gods. Kieckhefer makes note that Celtic magical practices are similar to Norse magic in that

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<sup>2</sup> Merlin's origins will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

what scholars can piece together are more along the lines of how magic functions in religious and literary works rather than how magic was actually practiced as a tool (54). In his book *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, Roger Sherman Loomis discusses the influence that Celtic mythology had on various Arthurian legends, including *Le Morte Darthur*. Loomis draws parallels between various characters and events to the heroes, gods, and legends of Celtic myth. He, along with scholar Lucy Allen Paton, interject the importance of the Otherworld and the influence of fairy powers in Arthurian myth. Both scholars cite Morgan Le Fay as a figure that exists outside the Christian realm and is, instead, a pagan figure and, as Loomis states, a “daughter of Avallach” (192). In a sense, they argue that Celtic myth and magic culminate into the Morgan figure. Loomis portrays her as a figure reminiscent of Celtic goddesses (192-193), while Paton portrays her more as a fairy woman or an enchantress from another realm (145-146). Both authors, however, are equating Morgan as a figure with explicitly Celtic pagan influences. It is important to note that Morgan, along with other magical characters that the Paton and Loomis mention, are not solely pagan. Both Paton and Loomis do not discuss how Christianity relies on the construction of Morgan and other characters as magical beings, especially when it comes to *Le Morte Darthur*. There is then a gap in the literature regarding the Christian appropriation of Celtic magical beings. It is my theory that these characters operate in and around a Christian text, meaning their characterization as pagan beings is dependent on the Christian reinterpretation of the original Celtic myths and practices. Thus, the theme of Christian synchronization with pagan sources continues with this particular Arthurian legend.

Take, for example, Morgan's representation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. While not an original construction of Malory, her characterization in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* plays a role in the greater Arthurian mythos. She plays a central part in the narrative of the story, despite only physically appearing once and being mentioned one other time. Morgan is responsible for constructing the Green Knight's plot to harm Arthur's court and thus, is presented as an enemy of a Christian court. It is not until the final meeting with the Green Knight that Gawain discovers his true adversary is Morgan. The Green Knight says, "Morgne the goddess / therefore hit is hir name: / Weldez non so hyze hawtesse / that ho ne con make ful tame" (Benson 180). The Gawain Poet presents Morgan as a goddess, thus reinforcing Loomis's connection of Morgan with a Celtic Goddess. Indeed, it would seem that the Gawain Poet used inspiration from pre-Christian Celtic sources, especially when taking into account Morgan's powers of shape-changing and magic, all of which are powers prescribed to Celtic goddesses (Loomis 193). Morgan, while being pagan-influenced, is also centered in a very Christian text. Indeed, her role as the ultimate antagonist of the Christian realm of Camelot offers a further example of Christianity and paganism providing a symbiotic conflict in which the story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* would not be successful if Morgan's pagan realm was not attacking and invading the Christian realm of Camelot.

While Morgan's characterization in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* represents the symbiotic relationship between paganism and Christianity, there should also be a discussion about the synthesizing of pagan and Christian magic. Perhaps the clearest form of Christian synthesizing with Celtic magic within medieval romance comes in the

forms of saints. Kieckhefer writes, “Themes that appear in secular Celtic literature often show up in saints’ lives as well” (54). It would not be a stretch of the imagination to hypothesize that Christian writers would have conflated Celtic pagan figures with their own mythologies, in particular the lives of Saints, in order to place Christian roots down in a pagan country. Not only would this ease a conversion to Christianity for a pagan people, but it would also allow for both pagan and Christian themes to filter through literary works (Flint 254). Using the lives of saints in place of pagan imagery creates a sense of moral righteousness for magic in literature. It then becomes acceptable, holy, and ordained, rather than hidden, dangerous, and demonic (Flint 254-273). Despite this analysis, which is discussed by Valerie J. Flint in her work *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*, there is not a discussion of Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* and how the pagan imagery of the past gets reinterpreted as Christian imagery. It is important to recognize that Flint’s analysis of the Christian replacement of pagan imagery, along with Loomis and Paton’s arguments on Celtic myth, all serve to highlight how magic functions in the medieval romance and should also be employed towards the magic in *Le Morte Darthur*.

While much of the magic in Malory’s work is possibly influenced from Celtic sources, it would be remiss to not acknowledge the other prominent magic practice of the time: magic that came from Norse religion. Like Celtic magic, much of what is known on Nordic magic comes from Christian sources and is often inlaid with Christian theology as recorded by fifteenth century Icelanders (Kieckhefer 44-46). On Norse magical practices, Kieckhefer discusses and analyses the practices of pre and post-

Christian Scandinavia, detailing specifically the combination of Christian theology and Norse deities:

The traditional cultures of northern Europe, like those of the Roman Empire, linked religion and magic without distinction. In Germanic mythology, for example, the god Woden (or Odin) was himself a master of magic who had gained power over the magical runic alphabet and could use its characters to perform wondrous deeds. An Anglo-Saxon healing charm might invoke the power of this god; indeed, an English book of charms from long after the conversion to Christianity still contained a spell referring to Woden. (45)

The key point that Keickhefer is discussing is the synthesizing between Christian and Norse magical practices. It is evident, then, that magic evolved to create a unique blend of Christian and pagan. Thus, magic is intertwined with Christian thought and beliefs. Perhaps this is due to a slow conversion into Christianity by the pagan peoples of Iceland and other Scandinavian regions. If this conversion were indeed a blended one, then by Keickhefer's analysis of magic and pagan sources, it would have spread throughout much of Northern Europe and, by extent, Western Europe.

Keickhefer further explains that magic in Norse countries was intertwined with religion and literature. He cites a few different literary sources for this construction, including both the *Prose Edda* and the *Poetic Edda*, as well as the various Norse Sagas (48-49). This mirrors the construction of medieval magic in that both are found primarily in textual evidence and religion. Norse magic, however, is primarily "a means for confronting or evading one's enemies" (Keickhefer 50). Therefore, it can be concluded

that Norse magic is directed outward and towards others. This, however, is an oversimplification toward a very complex set of magical practices. While Keickhefer does make a concession to say that this type of magic is primarily in relation to the Norse sagas, he does imply that this is the case for the *Eddas*, as well (51).

Magic as directed outwards and towards a target does mirror some of the magic practiced by the more villainous characters of *Le Morte Darthur*, particularly Morgan le Fey. In the third book of *Le Morte Darthur*, entitled “Sir Launcelot Du Lake,” Morgan takes Launcelot prisoner and puts him in a deep sleep. She says, “I shall put an inchantment upon hym that he shall nat awake of all this seven owres, and then I woll lede hym away unto my castell” (Malory 193). This outward direction of magic is similar to the forms of Norse magic that Keickhefer discusses, particularly the sorcerer in the *Laxdaela Saga*, who places his targets into a deep slumber (51). Magic, while different for various peoples of different regions, does seem to have similarities echoed in how characters use them. As Keickhefer suggests, Anglo-Saxon magic often interbred with Norse magic and then has echoes of Christian magic (45). This would explain why Morgan’s method of magic in book three of *Le Morte Darthur* so closely resembles the magic in Norse Sagas.

Norse magic, however, does imply major consequences for the various characters of Norse literature. It both harms and protects. Magic allows for its practitioners, which Keickhefer translates as “sorcerers” (9, 51), to influence the world and characters around them. In a sense, it is primarily concerned with fate and the changing of course. Thus, the word sorcerer has a similar reading with magic of medieval western Europe. Both

employ magic for influencing and changing course. The primary difference, however, is that the magic of the Middle Ages is evolved to deal with demonic / infernal or even pagan ways of influencing fate; the correct, Christian way to go about bringing change is through prayer and the intervention of God and saints (Kieckhefer 9). As previously noted, however, the Nordic pagans did practice their magic with mention of the gods or the inspiration of such beings, particularly Odin or Freyja. It is important to note that while the gods played a part in Norse magic, they were not an integral part of it, unlike Christian-based forms of magic. Kieckhefer writes, "While the sorcerers' magic may sometimes refer to the gods, and may sometimes resemble magic practiced by the gods, it seldom involves appeal to the gods" (52). Magic in the Norse regions, then, could be done without explicit involvement from the gods or a divine being. This construction places the power to influence lives and nature squarely in the hands of human beings. This presents a problem when Christianity is introduced to the Nordic regions.

For magic to be remotely approved in Christianity, it has to be through the power of God, saints, or Mary (Flint 395). Therefore, it presents a problem when magic can be done without the aid of any divine power. It places too much power in the realm of man. Magic, in medieval society, cannot exist without God; if it does, it is blasphemous and demonic. Essentially, it is anti-God and thus is not something a good Christian should be doing. When magic becomes synchronized with Christian teachings, it evolves into something more acceptable. Valerie J. Flint in *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* writes, "Christian leaders actively invited non-Christian magic of certain sorts in the medieval Christian community, and they did this, in the main, for three reasons, all of



them positive ones” (397). The reasons she lists center on the integration of Christianity into pagan societies and include the established loyalty to previous religious and cultural-social leaders, to already established magical practices (397). Thus, the evolution of magic is central to the evolution and expansion of Christianity. As both grew, they entwined themselves in order to help each other survive. Christianity, then, creates an overlay with pagan magical practice and allows for those who practice magic to do so with allowance from God.

This construction can be seen in *Le Morte Darthur*. Perhaps the strongest example of Christian thought and practice overlaying pagan religious and magical practice in *Le Morte Darthur* comes in the form of Arthur’s death and the four enchantresses, Morgan le Fay among them, carrying Arthur to the Isle of Avalon (Malory 928). Avalon then functions as a sort of afterlife for the hero-king, a sort of Nordic Valhalla or Celtic Tir Na Nog<sup>3</sup>. However, Avalon is being presented as a Christian place, despite having magical, pagan connections. Malory describes the scene in which the ladies bear Arthur’s body away: “Now more of the deth of Kynge Arthur coude I never fynde, but that thes ladyes brought hym to hys grave and such one was entyred there, which the ermyte bare wytness that sometime was Bysshop of Caunturbyry; but yet the ermyte knew nat in sertayne that he was verily the body of Kynge Arthur” (928). The passage shows the connection of Arthur to the Christian realm after his death, despite being taken to a pagan-like afterlife. Thus, Malory is overlaying the pagan with the Christian. While I will offer a further

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<sup>3</sup> Kieckhefer, Saunders, and Loomis all discuss Avalon as an afterlife realm for the hero akin to the Celtic Tir Na Nog.

discussion of Avalon and other magical realms in chapter 4 of this thesis, I feel it is important to acknowledge how magic connects here. Furthermore, this opens up a conversation as to the various types of magic in medieval romance.

The literature surrounding magic in medieval romance is focused primarily on the different types of magic and how scholars differentiate between what is considered magic and what is science. Richard Kieckhefer, in *Magic in the Middle Ages*, asks the question, “How can we define the border between magic and science?” (8). The answer to Kieckhefer’s question is not clear – or even agreed upon by scholars. Kieckhefer presents the difference between science and magic in terms of healing capabilities. He brings discussion back to Ancient Greece with Pliny the Elder and Pliny’s theory of what animals and plants could be used for curative purposes; he writes, “[Pliny] does not refer to these powers as magical, but they are the sort that later writers would cite in discussing natural magic” (22). Here, Kieckhefer is using Pliny’s analysis of healing herbs and animals to provide a framework with which to divide magic and science. The problem, however, is that he then relates Pliny’s analysis back to magic and continues to do so throughout the rest of the chapter. Thus, the line between science and magic is further complicated and blurred. Natural magic, it would seem, is the link between science and technology, a concept that is further picked up by additional scholars, particularly by critics of medieval romance (Kieckhefer 9; Saunders 117). Indeed, the Oxford English Dictionary’s first example of magic in the English languages comes with the usage of Chaucer’s “magik natureel” (“magic”). Natural magic can heal and is often discussed doing so without the need for direct supernatural aid, relying instead of knowledge of

herbs and animals (Saunders 118). While magic can be cited as a sort of “primitive science” (Kieckhefer 8), it is imperative to recognize that this definition extends to neither the religious aspect of magic nor to science. Instead, magic is often secularized and discussed in terms of an opposition to Christian religion.

In the book, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, Corinne Saunders discusses natural magic as a sort of “marvelous technology” and provides further examples of how natural magical remedies were in conflict to many Christian teachings (134). Saunders appears to be in agreement with Kieckhefer’s analysis of science, natural magic, and healing methodology. She cites this as a type of “White Magic” (117), something that is echoed in Kieckhefer’s *Magic in the Middle Ages*. White magic, in the general sense, is the type of magic that involves healing, incantations, and more benefic powers (Saunders 117). It is still placed squarely into the pagan realm, however, with the benefic use of magic stones and herbal remedies. Saunders provides a further definition into the various types of white magic, including love magic and healing stones, both of which feature prominently in *Le Morte Darthur* (236). Saunders does mention love magic in “Sir Tristram and la Beall Isode” yet makes it clear that this is not the benefic white magic of most other medieval romance; rather, this is a nefarious sort of magic akin to black magic or “nigromancy” which Saunders cites as a type of magic that relies on demonic powers and shapeshifting (152).

It is important to note that both scholars directly reference characters as practitioners of black magic in relation to *Le Morte Darthur*. Saunders focuses on discussing the use of magic in relation to the figures of *Le Morte Darthur*, such as Merlin

and Morgan le Fay (234-260). She analyzes these characters as sorcerers who use their magic to shapeshift and provide enchantments. A similar sentiment is represented in Kieckhefer's *Magic in the Middle Ages*, as well as Lucy Allen Paton's *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*. All portray these characters with the specific term "sorcerer" or, for the female characters, "sorceress" or "enchantress" (Kieckhefer 9; Saunders 6; Paton 174). There are some differences between scholars in terms of the magical application of these terms. While Kieckhefer and Saunders use the term "sorcerer" to have negative context, Paton uses it to have a broader spectrum that encompasses many, if not all, magic users.

The concept of the "sorcerer" is strictly applied to practitioners of black magic in Kieckhefer, Saunders, and Loomis's works. Saunders discusses the concept of the term "physician" versus "sorcerer," in that a "physician" is the practitioner of natural magic or learned healing magics (Saunders 130). While this concept is further discussed in Kieckhefer (9), it is not fully present in other scholars' work, such as Valerie I. J. Flint's work. Furthermore, Saunders and Kieckhefer leave open the interpretation of Merlin. They do not call Merlin a "physician," despite him not being of the evil or nefarious nature they associate with the term "sorcerer." Instead, Saunders presents Merlin, as seen in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, as a being who straddles the line between demonic and holy, being the kingmaker to Arthur and a being who helps the Knights of the Round Table (236-238). Saunders, along with Kieckhefer, does touch on Merlin's nefarious origins, citing how he is the offspring of a human mother and a demonic father (Saunders 115; Kieckhefer 111). They do not, however, take into consideration the construction of

Merlin as son of a fairy. Paton cites two different tales in which Merlin appears as “magician” and part fay (16). Like Paton, however, many scholars – Saunders, Kieckhefer, and Flint among them – refer to him almost exclusively as “magician” or “sorcerer” and not “physician.” With Saunders’s construction of “physician” being good, the title of “physician” would fit more in line with how Merlin behaves in *Le Morte Darthur*. The question that these scholars fail to address is presented in this construction. How does Merlin fit into the religious paradigm of *Le Morte Darthur*, and how does this magician stand between the pagan world and the Christian world?

Perhaps the answer to this question relies upon the understanding of Merlin as the only male magic user in *Le Morte Darthur* who does not rely on Christian miracles. Saunders and Kieckhefer both place Merlyn as a central male figure standing between a pagan realm, which is distinctly feminine, and the Christian realm, which is chiefly masculine (Saunders 238; Kieckhefer 111). Roger Sherman Loomis, in *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Legend*, seeks to reconcile this by placing Merlin as having directly Celtic origins. He uses Merlyn as a possible cognate to the Welsh Myrddin and other Celtic magical male figures (Loomis 36). Merlin’s possible Celtic roots are further discussed in Kieckhefer’s *Magic in the Middle Ages*. Kieckhefer approaches Celtic influence on medieval romance, particularly *Le Morte Darthur*, with a degree of skepticism but nonetheless attempts to bridge the connection between pagan magic practices and the current practices of medieval romance. The Celtic / pagan roots of Merlin may offer an explanation as to why is he a male magic user, but it does not fully explain his acceptance in Arthur’s court – a Christian court. The pagan roots may also serve to explain why

Merlin is not titled “physician,” or even “sorcerer” in *Le Morte Darthur*. Furthermore, this does not explain the female magic users who are paramount to *Le Morte Darthur*. The question, then, becomes how does Merlin fit into their paradigm?

While Merlin is a sorcerer gendered as male and thus is presented in a positive way, the female magic users are portrayed in a very different light. Carolyn Larrington, in her work *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, discusses these sorceresses in detail. Larrington places Morgan as not a Celtic construction, as Loomis and Paton suggest, but as a Greek construction (8). She writes, “[Geoffrey’s] Morgan is derived from classical sources – from the two most influential enchantresses of Greek mythology, Medea and Circe – and other details are evidently borrowed from learned tradition” (8). Even though Larrington’s claim of an inheritance from Medea and Circe goes against what other scholars have written, her idea of a “learned tradition” of magic is very much in tune with what Kieckhefer and Saunders have discussed. Larrington’s work also places the enchantresses in opposition against King Arthur’s court, something that is seen throughout most of *Le Morte Darthur*. There is then an opposition between sorceresses and the knights of Camelot, presenting an interesting discussion between magic against Christianity. Larrington, along with Saunders and Kieckhefer, present Morgan Le Fay and her sister sorceresses as using “nigromancy” and black magic instead of white and benefic magic.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “nigromancy” as a predecessor to the word “necromancy,” dating at least back to the early 13<sup>th</sup> century (“nigromancy”). “Nigromancy” is defined as “the art of predicting the future by supposed communication

with the dead; (more generally) divination, sorcery, witchcraft, enchantment” (“nigromancy). The conclusion drawn by scholars such as Larrington, Saunders, and Kieckhefer is that much of the feminine magic shown in Arthurian romance is dangerous and cannot exist in tandem with Christian morality. Thus, it must be presented in conflict, such as the case with Morgan and Lady Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in addition to Morgan, Morgause, and even Nynive in *Le Morte Darthur*.

It is important to note that S. E. Holbrook, in her article, “Nymue, the Chief Lady of the Lake, in Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*,” argues that not all female magic users have nefarious plots. She uses the Lady of the Lake as an example, often citing her helping King Arthur’s court. While Larrington in part agrees with Holbrook on the Lady of the Lake, both scholars do make the concession that Nymue, one of the Ladies of the Lake, is responsible for Merlin’s downfall (761). In *Understanding Genre and the Medieval Romance*, K.S. Whetter writes, “At first glance this seems quite a negative instance of the role of women in romance, but in Malory, as in most tragic narratives, questions of right and wrong and morality are regularly more complex than they first appear” (113). Thus is the case of Nymue and Merlin, and by extent, the other sorceresses of *Le Morte Darthur*. Interestingly enough, Larrington and Holbrook both address the concept of Nymue, and the other sorceresses, being part of Fairy, or the Otherworld, making them separate from black and white magic but still squarely under the pagan realm (Larrington 98; Holbrook 773).

Lucy Allen Paton and Roger Sherman Loomis attempt to address the question of Nymue and other magic users as fairy in Arthurian romance. Both of them cite older,

pagan mythologies to further their analyses of the sorceresses as tied to the fairy realms. Both Loomis and Paton use Celtic lore as examples of fairy and the Otherworld in Arthurian legend. While Saunders does not explicitly state that fairy-lore played a large part in the construction of magic in *Le Morte Darthur*, she does provide an examination of fairy-lore and the Otherworld in medieval romance as a whole. She describes much of fairy magic with enchantments and “shape-changers” (180). All three scholars do describe magic with fairy as connected to the environment and the natural world. This magic seems to be a building off of the natural magic as discussed earlier.

A prime example of this comes again with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Much of the magic as presented in *Sir Gawain* is rooted in nature, and, thus, rooted in fairy magic. Take the imagery of the Green Knight. He is described with armor “that were embrauded abof, wyth bryddes and flyzes / with gay gaudi of grene” (Benson 12). His armor is inscribed with intense nature imagery and is in stark contrast to the realm of Camelot that he has invaded. This nature imagery links back to fairy as described by Saunders and Paton. The construction of pagan fairy space intruding onto Camelot’s Christian place serves to highlight how pagan magic and Christian theology are a part of the Arthurian mythos. As stated previously, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presents a secondary example to how the theme of pagan-Christian symbiosis is very much a part of the Arthurian legend. In particular, this example shows the concept of natural and environmental magic and how it links to fairy.

Both Kieckhefer and Saunders make it clear that natural, healing magic is different than the healing magic as performed by saints and other holy men and women,



which they refer to as miracles (Kieckhefer 33; Saunders 208). The miracles of the holy men are a form of magical application on mortals that is approved by the Christian church. Saunders first presents miracles as a physical and spiritual thing. She writes, “miracle and retribution may be written on the body, and the illness and healing of both body and soul are prominent motifs” (207). This form of physical and spiritual type of miracle is something that is seen in Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, especially in Lancelot’s episode of the healing of Sir Urry. The miracle construction here is important because it casts the power of God through Lancelot and thus establishes *Le Morte Darthur* as a primarily Christian text. Miracles in the medieval romance thus serve to craft the text into a more Christian sphere.

Ronald C. Finucane discusses miracles in his book *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England*. He writes on the various beliefs Christianity had in regards to miracles and pilgrims. Furthermore, he describes how these miracles are performed. Often, they came at the hands of saints who had the power to heal through God and the power of faith (Finucane 59). This leads to holy relics from saints’ lives to be used as objects of power. These objects had the ability to heal, banish evil, and protect the innocent (Finucane 29). Likewise, holy shrines held this type of power. It would seem, then, that the power of Christian magic was both spiritual and physical. It relied on faith but also the power of place and holy association of the place or object. Valerie I. J. Flint approaches the miracles and powers of Saints and holy men as a form of magic, specifically white and black versions of magic that have been “rehabilitated” by Christian sources (Flint 254). This idea puts Flint at odds with Saunders’s work, in that Saunders

cast miracles as a sort of pseudo-magic that does not rely on natural or demonic forces but rather the mercy and grace of God (Saunders 208). Flint, however, seeks to reconcile this idea with magical practices in medieval Europe. The problems that presents themselves, however, are how does this reconciliation plays into the miracles performed by the Knights of the Round Table, especially Sir Launcelot; how does this magic rely on pagan forms of magic to be successful? Can these be called magic when placed against the acts of Merlin or the Lady of the Lake? There is a large gap in the literature when it comes to this question. It is my hope that this thesis will answer the question of what happens when miracles are not only placed against the pagan magical acts but also when are they are compared to the pagan acts. Ultimately, how do Christian miracles and healing react and look when placed against the pagan magic within Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*?

The scholarship surrounding magic in medieval romance is focused on either the pagan aspect of magic or the Christian interpretation of magic and the use of Christian miracles and faith-healing. While scholars like Corinne Saunders and Richard Kieckhefer discuss the evolution of magic, including the change from paganism to natural magic to Christianity and the concept of "black" and "white" magics, neither discusses the conjecture of pagan magic with Christian magic. Thus, there is a gap in many scholarly works as to whether or not there is a symbiotic relationship between pagan magic and Christianity. Scholars of medieval romance tend to classify magic on an either / or scale. Either it is pagan or it falls into the Christian realm, and most, if not all, of the instances of magic in medieval romance has these two forces in direct conflict.

While most scholars discuss the opposition of magic against Christianity, it is imperative to recognize that in medieval romance, especially in *Le Morte Darthur*, the relationship between these two forces is not that clear cut. It is complex, with both relying on the other in order to make their points known. Furthermore, it is my theory that magic is represented in a purposely pagan context. This is done to highlight Christianity. Likewise, Christian forms of magic, despite having roots in pagan magic, are purposely written as the opposing, championing force against pagan magic. This is done with a purposeful construct in mind: to show that pagan religion and magic cannot stand against the miracles and power of God. Therefore, it is my goal to show how magic in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* functions as the bridge between the paganism of the past and the Christian future. I will further prove my hypothesis that magic and Christianity exist in an adversarial yet symbiotic relationship in order to fully function in the medieval romance. In the subsequent chapters, I will discuss magic as it relates to the male characters, magic as it relates to the female characters, and magical beings and the magical places in which they reside.

## Chapter 2: Men and Magic – Revitalization of a Gendered Paradigm

Magic is a gendered concept. Stephen A. Mitchell, literary and cultural theorist, writes in his book *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*, “Women were the original and remained the most powerful magicians, whereas men gained access only later and never attained parity with women” (175). While Mitchell’s discussion on magic is primarily concerned with Scandinavian into English forms of magic, his theory does prove true for much of Western Europe’s conception of medieval magic. Magic, particularly when discussing pagan magic, is the realm of women. Men are rarely welcome to practice direct pagan magic, and, if they do, they are often treated as outsiders. Medieval romance is no stranger to this societal construction, take, for example, the Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. When the Knight comes to Camelot, surrounded by his “gay gaudi of grene” (Benson 12), it signals to the Court that this creature is of pagan magic. This is only amplified when he does not die. The Green Knight is an agent of Morgan le Fey, who in turn is setting up these magical tasks as a way to bring harm to Camelot. She also enchanted the Green Knight so he does not die. Here, pagan magic is also associated with the feminine. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’s* resulting tale is a consequence of the knight becoming Othered for existing in the realm of pagan magic and going against Camelot.

In Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, magic is also presented in a gendered paradigm. This construction is tied between feminized paganism and masculinized Christianity. Both religious viewpoints have magic that is intrinsic to their religion. In *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory constructs feminized magic as often adversarial and

antagonistic, whereas male magic becomes beneficiary and used to heal or advise. The male characters who help to exemplify the male magical paradigm are Sir Launcelot and Sir Galahad. The character of Merlyn, however, provides an outlier in that he is a product of both paganism and Christianity. This chapter will discuss the masculine-gendered construction of magic that serves to illustrate the pagan versus Christianity dynamic that Malory creates in *Le Morte Darthur* that further allows for the two religious forces to exist and subvert the other in order to realize the coming of a socially Christian future.

While this chapter discusses male magical structure, it is important to note the difference in nature between male and female magics first. Female magic in *Le Morte Darthur* is antagonistic and active. It is also purposefully pagan. Characters like Morgan le Fey and Morgause may operate in and around Camelot, but their powers do not stem from God. Instead, Malory calls them “sorseres” (Malory 214, 861) and “wycche” (Malory 344). The connection between the titles of sorceress and witch provides a negative image. Kieckhefer writes, “the difference between positive and negative magic lay not in the basic conception but in the purposes they served” (81). In accordance with Kieckhefer’s framework, magic is constructed in relatively the same way. While this construction does not hold true for every character of *Le Morte Darthur*, it does hold true for the wizard Merlyn and the female magic users. Malory refers to Merlyn’s magic as “remedy” (Malory 2), meaning that his magic is beneficial. It is not intrinsically Christian, so it is constructed in much the same way as Morgan le Fey’s enchantments.

However, Morgan's magic is referred to as "sorcery" and she a "sorseres" (214), which are words both negative and harmful.

If negative magic is defined as sorcery, then the magical women in *Le Morte Darthur* are practicing negative magic. This is further seen as each female magical character is using magic in a direct way against someone, whether it be Morgan le Fey with Arthur and Accolon or Nynive with Merlyn. Female magic, then, becomes the opposite of masculine magic. It is the adversary, and, since it is pagan in origin, it is the adversary of the Christian Church and, by extent, Camelot. I will further discuss magic and women in *Le Morte Darthur* in chapter three. The focus of this chapter will primarily focus on the masculine magic paradigm.

Male magic, while not as common as female magic, tends to be of the healing sort, especially when its Christianized. This construction holds true for *Le Morte Darthur*, particularly in the episode "Sir Urry of Hungary," which will be discussed later in this chapter. Healing was primarily in the hands of the Christian church. Richard Kieckhefer writes, "[while] ordinary parish priests may have dabbled in medicine, they were more likely to practice other forms of magic" (58). The magic in question is generally taken to be songs, prayers, and sometimes rituals that were designed to heal the afflicted through the power of faith (Kieckhefer 58). Male Christian magic, then, falls into the realm of magic properly approved by the Christian church. It is the providence of holy men, saints (who, it should be noted, are not always men), and those who are high in virtue and strong in faith. In *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory takes the concept of masculine

magic in Christianity and ties it together in the forms of the knights of Camelot. They become the embodiment of Christian magic.

The Knights of the Round Table, at least some of them, have the ability to heal the sick, the destitute, and the poor. This magic that comes from them is not referred to as spells and enchantments but as “miracles” and “prayers.” In her book *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, Corinne Saunders writes, “miracles can function as God’s voice in the Bible does, to authorize those who enact his will on earth” (208). Miracles are always helpful in nature and are not adversarial. They are often singular actions that heal or provide assistance for God’s followers (Kieckhefer 35). Characters can obtain the power to do a miracle through proving themselves worthy of God’s grace, whether through intense prayer or an act of repentance. Kieckhefer writes, “miracles are thus closely tied to the fundamental purposes of the Gospel, the kindling of faith and the preaching of repentance” (35). The two things, then, that must be there in order for a miracle to happen are faith and repentance. Essentially, a character must repent in order to become a pure vessel for God, which is something seen when Launcelot heals Sir Urry in the later part of *Le Morte Darthur*. It is important to note that “miracles” are not innate power. They are, as Saunders points out, the will of God enacted through his followers (208). There then becomes an even further division among masculine magic: Magic that is innate, such as in Galahad and Merlyn, and magic that is received through divine providence from acts of faith, such as Launcelot. Malory divides the magic found in Galahad, Merlyn, and Launcelot even further. Merlyn’s magic, while

innate, is not divine – it is infernal. Launcelot’s and Galahad’s magic are divine, albeit Launcelot’s magic is given to him and Galahad’s are ingrained.

Malory writes the greatest Christian-based magic to be performed not by Launcelot but by his son, Galahad. Both bear the title of “Greatest Knight in the World,” a fact that is prophesized early within *Le Morte Darthur*. It is Merlyn who delivers this prophecy. He says, “There shall never man handyll thys swerde but the beste knyght of the world, and that shall be Sir Launcelot, other ellis Galahad hys sonne” (Malory 74). Merlyn, who prophesizes many major events of *Le Morte Darthur*, is setting up for the following books within the story that tells of the lives of both Launcelot and his son. Throughout *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory writes of the rise and fall of Launcelot as well as the rise and eventual death of Galahad. He presents both these men as the most holy of knights – and it is through them that the power of God is most prominent. Their individual holy magic, however, is very different in both construction and purpose. Launcelot’s magic is earned. He must go through the trials of his life in order to perform a miracle. Galahad’s, by contrast, is an inherent holiness. Malory does not give a redemption narrative for Galahad because he does not need one. He is the most holy of knights, born of the Greatest Knight in the World.

Galahad is the son of Launcelot by the Lady Eleyne. In the book, “The Begetting of Galahad,” Malory crafts the knight as a destined hero. Lady Eleyne’s father, King Pelles knows that Launcelot will get a son “uppon his doughtir, whyche shulde be called Sir Galahad” and that “by [Galahad] the Holy Grayle sholde be encheved” (623). It is not stated how King Pelles knew this, nor that the King had any other prophetic



proclamations. There is more to this prophecy, however, than just that Galahad will find the Holy Grail. In his article, “Malory’s Treatment of the Sankgreall,” Charles Moorman writes, “the prophecy is made that Galahad will succeed and that Launcelot will fail in the Grail quest” (497). Moorman is pointing out that Galahad succeeds where his father has failed. Essentially, this is a matter of both status and faith. While Launcelot is a powerful knight, his son is destined to become stronger and holier than his father will ever be. At the prophecy of Galahad’s birth, Malory begins to subvert the status between father and son. As Galahad rises, Launcelot falls.

Malory begins Launcelot’s fall by constructing him as the victim of madness. This madness occurs after Galahad is conceived by Eleyne, which results in Queen Guinevere banishing Launcelot from Camelot in anger. Malory relies on the literary construction of *fin amor* and its rules. J. D. Burnley in his article “Fin Amor: Its Meaning and Context,” writes “two aspects of *fin amor* are important and frequently stressed: that of the purity of intention of the lover, and that of love’s correspondences with reason” (142). When Launcelot sleeps with Eleyne, he is breaking one of the rules of *fin amor*; his devotion is no longer purely to Guinevere – the love is no longer pure. Thus, Malory constructs the Launcelot and Eleyne affair as a tragic occurrence – Launcelot was tricked into sleeping with Eleyne. Even so, Launcelot is responsible for breaking his *fin amor* relationship with Guinevere. The result of the affair is Galahad. Malory constructs Galahad’s begetting as manipulation by King Pelles and his daughter because Pelles is aware of the prophecy that the son of Launcelot and Eleyne will be the one who achieves the Holy Grail (Malory 623). Malory breaks Launcelot’s bond with Guinevere to have

him beget Galahad in order to start Launcelot's descent into madness and as a holy knight. In his place, Galahad becomes the holiest knight. It is not until Galahad's death and apotheosis that Launcelot can regain his status and perform his miracle. In terms of magic, however, Galahad's abilities are inborn. He is holy from the very beginning of his creation.

Due to Galahad's magic coming from within, he is able to perform holy feats that Launcelot and the other knights are not able to. For example, he pulls the sword from the stone before the Knights of the Round Table set off on the Holy Grail Quest. He is the only knights who can accomplish this feat. The sword he pulls out reads, "Never shall man take me hence but only he by whos syde I ought to honge, and he shall be the best knyght of the worlde" (Malory 668). Here, Galahad is reenacting the sword in the stone episode from early in *Le Morte Darthur*. Much like the first sword proclaimed Arthur as king, this sword proclaims Galahad as the best knight – the holiest and worthiest knight. It is important to note that the older generation of knights (i.e. Launcelot and Arthur) cannot pull the sword; in fact, Launcelot refuses to try. It is only Galahad, who is pure from the beginning and not tainted by pagan influence, who can pull the sword and begin the Quest for the Holy Grail.

Galahad's main plot points in *Le Morte Darthur* come during the Quest for the Holy Grail. This is where his magic shines and he becomes the portrait of a holy knight. Malory is pulling from various sources when writing the grail quest, and Sir Galahad is a character that appears first in the *Post-Vulgate* cycle, in which he too features heavily in the quest for the Holy Grail. The quest then embarks on often has him fighting the forces

of evil in the name of God. Saunders makes note of this when she writes, “Within the actively Christian world of the Quest, knights become caught up in a constantly re-enacted struggle of good and evil” (253). Galahad’s struggles are given to him by a voice, presumably God’s or a saint’s voice. Malory constructs Galahad as being holy enough to receive such blessings. Malory arranges the scene where Galahad receives his quest to clear the Castle of Maidens from sin as follows:

Then Sir Galahad com to a mowntayne where he founde a chapel passing olde, and founde therein nobody, for allwas desolate. And there he kneled before the awter and besought God of good counceyle, and so he prayed he harde a voyce that seyde, ‘Go thou now, thou adventurous knyght, to the Castell of Madyns, and there do thou away the wycked customes! (Malory 687).

The customs that Malory notes are not fully described. However, their meaning is clear. The people in the tower are living in sin and it is Galahad’s job, by the commandment of God, to purge them. Thus, Galahad’s ability to hear God and to communicate with the divine further mark him as holy.

His powers are first seen in the section of “The Departing of The Round Table.” In it, Galahad is able to exorcize an evil spirit from a tomb. In this scene, Galahad lifts the stone sealing the tomb. Out flies an evil spirit that Malory describes as “the flowlyst vygoure lepe thereoute that ever he saw in the lyknes of a man” (682). The spirit that takes the likeness of a man signals a sign of possession – particularly demonic possession. Malory has Galahad exorcize the spirit. The scene is described: “and than [Galahad] blyssed hym and wyst well hit was a fyende” (683). Galahad is able to call

upon the power of God himself, without having to go through the repentance process necessary for the use of miracles. The power to exorcize this evil entity already surrounds him from the start. As the spirit departs, it tells Galahad that “envyrowne aboute the so many angels” and that its “power may nat deare the” (Malory 683). The power of God then is entwined with Galahad’s being. His magic, even his very essence, is holier and more divine than the rest of the knights of Camelot. His magic, like the rest of the male magic in *Le Morte Darthur*, is beneficial for the court of Camelot and Christendom.

Galahad is essentially the analogue to Christ in *Le Morte Darthur*. Saunders points out, “From the late books of the Tristram section onwards, the ethos is informed by prophecy and the promise of spiritual enlightenment, focused especially in Galahad” (253). He was born from prophecy to the greatest knight in the all the land and then supplants his father and becomes the greatest knight himself. Like Christ, Galahad to becomes a martyr. He dies on the Quest for the Holy Grail, all the while remaining the virgin knight that he is and like Christ he is assumed into Heaven after his death. Essentially, he is the paragon of internal Christian power.

His father, on the other hand, does not have this intrinsic holy power. His power comes in the form of miracles. Launcelot cannot readily perform miracles at will, however. He must repent his worldly sins and pray to God to attain that ability – and he only does so once. Malory presents Launcelot as an important figure, one who figures into much of *Le Morte Darthur*. Launcelot rises, falls, and then gets redeemed, only to repeat that process once more in the final book.

In the early parts of *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory presents Launcelot as one of the chief knights of Camelot. He is the favorite of both Arthur and Guinevere, going so far as to be represented in a *fin amor* type relationship with Guinevere. His relationship with the Queen is one of the reasons that Launcelot falls. Malory writes that Launcelot's relationship with the Queen is problematic, and Guinevere often presents a jealous figure, driving Launcelot to madness after she discovers him in bed with Eleyne. It is in this madness that Launcelot's first brush with holy power comes into play. Moorman explains that "Ector and Perceval are cured of their wounds and Launcelot of his madness by the Grail" (496). This episode is one of the very few times that Launcelot is in the Grail's presence. Malory writes, "and there cam an holy man and unhyllid that vessell, and so by miracle and by vertu of that holy vessell Sir Launcelot was heled and recoverde" (650). Malory presents the magic as not coming from Launcelot; the magic is used upon him and cures him. He has not yet earned the right to wield such a power. The holy man is the one who brings the Grail, so in turn, the Grail's divine magic can perform the miracle and heal Launcelot. The presence of a holy man and not a nun, prioress, or female saint is important. The magic that is beneficial and healing is still very much male and very much Christian.

As Launcelot proceeds on the Grail Quest, he encounters a hermit in a small chapel, who tells Launcelot that he is destined to never see the Grail, as he was unconscious the first time he was brought before it. The hermit says to Launcelot, "seke ye [Sankgreall] ye may well, but thoughte hit were here ye shall have no power to se hit" (Malory 716). After this exchange, Launcelot weeps. He realizes his sins and seeks

confession. It would seem that, in remaining the highest knight that he was, Launcelot still fell from grace. Moorman writes, “Malory would thus seem to regard Launcelot as a tragic hero, as the man whose greatest strength, his devotion to the chivalric code, is at the same time his greatest weakness and his downfall” (501). However, Moorman does not mention Launcelot’s redemption. In this episode of *Le Morte Darthur*, Launcelot is getting a chance to repent and redeem. The hermit is playing the part of a holy man and not only takes Launcelot’s confession but gives Launcelot a series of tasks to do to repent. He tells him, “I requyre you take thys hayre that was thys holy mannes and put hit nexte thy skynne, and hit shall prevayle the gretly” (Malory 716). Launcelot agrees to do this, and, in doing so, begins the process of repentance that later in the story will allow him to perform a miracle.

Launcelot’s miracle comes in the book *Launcelot and Queen Guenivere*, in the section entitled “Sir Urry of Hungary.” This episode occurs just before the final book of *Le Morte Darthur* and signals a change for the character of Launcelot. In “Sir Urry of Hungary,” Launcelot is able to call upon the grace of God to heal Sir Urry. This episode is unique to *Le Morte Darthur*. Malory did not craft this episode out of the existing Arthurian sources, as he did with much of the work. The healing of Sir Urry is Malory’s own creation and is his way of presenting a moral lesson on God and faith. Essentially, Malory writes Launcelot as a catalyst for redemption. Catherine Batt in her article “‘Hand for Hand’ and ‘Body for Body’: Aspects of Malory’s Vocabulary of Identity and Integrity with Regards to Gareth and Lancelot” writes of the significance of Launcelot healing Sir Urry. She points out, “A link between wounds to the hand and a sense of Lancelot’s

selfhood makes all the more poignant the details of the healing of Sir Urry that takes place in the episode following Lancelot's defense of Guinivere's good name" (283). Batt's discussion of the details is important, for it is the details that show it is Launcelot's renewed faith that gives him the ability to perform the miracle. Malory places the power Launcelot receives from God into the hands of a knight who has been saved again. Malory's invention of this story serves to show the power of redemption. Before Launcelot lays his hands on Urry, he says "for I shame sore with myself that I shulde be thus requyred, for never was I able in worthynes to do so hyghe a thyng" (Malory 867). The focus here is on the term "worthynes." Launcelot has repented and realizes that he is not worthy to do this – essentially, he has humbled himself before this man, the gathered knights, and God.

It is through this humbling that Launcelot is able to heal Urry. Before he does so, he offers a secret prayer to God, begging him and Jesus for mercy. He calls on the "Blyssed Fadir and Son and Holy Goste" to give him the power to heal (867). Here, Launcelot subjugates himself before Christ in order to get the power. He acknowledges that the power does not come from him or his own worship, but rather the worship of God. Malory writes the healing of Sir Urry as follows:

And than Sir Launcelot prayde Sir Urré to lat hym se hys hede; and than, devoutly knelyng, he ransacked the thre woundis, that they bled a lytyll; and forthwithall the woundis fayre heled and semed as they had bene hole a seven yere. And in lyke wyse he sreched hys body of the other thre woundis, and they healed in lyke wyse (867).

Sir Urry emerges from this experience completely healed. Further, he is able to become a knight of the Round Table. Launcelot's healing then goes beyond the physical and extends to the spiritual. This healing between two men reinforces the masculine magical paradigm, in that the magic presented in this episode is purely Christian and relies on the subjugation before Christ, instead of coming from within the healer himself.

While both Launcelot and Galahad represent the masculine Christianity in its purity, another figure straddles the line between pagan magic and Christian thought. He is perhaps the most enigmatic male user of magic within *Le Morte Darthur* and indeed the entirety of the Arthurian milieu. His name is Merlin (or Merlyn<sup>4</sup> as utilized in *Le Morte Darthur*). He is a character who represents an older, more pagan form of magic that coincides with the Christian realm of Camelot. To say, however, that Merlyn is entirely pagan would be an oversimplification of the character. He is presented by Malory as a figure who practices pagan magic yet still obeys the Christian Church and supports the Christian court of Camelot. Arguably, then, he can be seen as a bridge from the pagan feminine to the Christian masculine. The pagan feminine, as will be discussed in chapter three, is represented by sorceresses such as Morgan le Fey, Morgause, and the various Ladies of the Lake, including Merlyn's own demise: Nynive<sup>5</sup>. The Christian masculine is primarily concentrated with the knights of Camelot and King Arthur.

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<sup>4</sup> Sir Thomas Malory writes Merlin's name numerous ways. These include Merlyn, Merlyon, Merlin, and Merlion. For the purposes of this chapter, I will be using the spelling of "Merlyn."

<sup>5</sup> Nynive is the stylized form of the name Nimue. As Malory primarily uses Nynive in *Le Morte Darthur*, I will be using the name Nynive.



Merlyn, as a pagan-Christian hybrid, may have had his original origins within a pagan confine. In his article “Odin and Merlin: Three Fold Death and the World Tree,” Lawrence Eson writes, “A number of remarkable parallels may be adduced between the Norse god Odin and the Welsh poet-prophet Merlin and his fellow Celtic wild men” (85). Eson discusses how Merlyn may have emerged from pagan influences before Geoffrey of Monmouth’s rendition of Merlin in *Historia Regum Britanniae*. He cites the Welsh source Myrddin Wyltt (85) as evidence of this. In the article “The Merlin Legend and the Welsh Tradition,” A. O. H. Jarman writes, “It was in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* completed c. 1138, that Geoffrey of Monmouth transformed the legendary Welsh seer Myrddin into the internationally famous wizard Merlin” (103). It is agreed upon, then, that Merlyn’s prophetic abilities lay in his origins, particularly in connection with pagan figures. In her article “‘Ain’t Gonna Study War No More’: Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* and *Vita Merlini*,” Christine Chism writes, “Merlin is Geoffrey’s own concoction, drawn from pseudo-Nennius’s character of Ambrosius and from early Welsh traditions surrounding two different Myrddins” (460). These two scholars seem to be of differing opinions. However, the Welsh tradition remains a constant in both arguments. The Myrddins that both scholars mention are madmen who live in the woods. They are drawing off the imagery of Celtic Druids, and, as such, are drawing on the powers of prophecy and the ability to change shape.

It is these same prophetic and shape-changing abilities that take a primary role in Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*. Merlyn frequently delivers prophecies, including ones that predict Arthur’s downfall and the fall of the Knights of the Round Table. This places

Merlyn in a different sphere than the Christian magic that Launcelot and Galahad exhibited. This difference is even further shown as Malory gives Merlyn another power: the ability to shapeshift. In his article, "Malory's Tragic Merlin," David L. Hoffman writes, "[Merlyn's] shape-shifting, a talent traditionally possessed by magicians and demons, which Malory devises from his sources, seems nearly aberrant in his revised context" (327). Merlyn's first exhibit of power is not prophecy, but, instead, is the power to shapeshift Uther Pendragon. Merlyn also uses this power to shapeshift himself into various forms, including his preferred form of a beggar. Saunders writes, "the special powers of magic, divination and shape-shifting, characteristic of the world of faery, also belong both to God and the devil" (207). Merlyn's power is exactly this. He is both devil and holy. His magic exists inside of Camelot, but it stems from demonic influence. For Malory, this duality, however, is as much a cohesion as it is a struggle. The two forces exist within Merlyn, but they cannot both exist in a Christian realm like Camelot.

The division between pagan magic and Christian theology as seen in Merlyn's identity is a central part of the theme of *Le Morte Darthur*. Merlyn is the connecting point between these two different schools of belief. Merlyn is the representative of the dual point from paganism to Christianity not other magical figures like Morgan le Fey or her fellow enchantresses. This duality is because Merlyn is a double figure, a characterization that not only comes in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* but in older variations of the Arthurian legend, as well. Peter Goodrich in his introduction to work, *Merlin: A Casebook*, writes that Merlyn exists as two figures, being both "the sage and the

madman” (6). Both of these figures appear within Merlyn’s characterization in *Le Morte Darthur*.

Merlyn’s first appearance in *Le Morte Darthur* is consistent with Goodrich’s analysis of Merlyn’s dual forms. King Uther Pendragon sends Sir Ulfus to go fetch the wizard. Malory writes, “So Ulfus departed and by adventure he mette Merlyn in a beggars aray” (2). Malory presents his rendition of Merlyn as a beggar first and foremost. Later, he will portray Merlin as a sage figure. The reason for this is somewhat muddled. Perhaps it is to show the difference in station between a Christian king and a pagan magician. Uther is described as “kyнге of all Englonde and so regned” (Malory 1), whereas Merlyn is described in a poor man’s garb. It would seem, at first, that King Uther has the power and control, but, in the following few lines, it is revealed that only Merlyn can give him what he wants: the Duke of Tyntagil’s wife, Igrayne (Malory 2).

The early pages of *Le Morte Darthur* make it clear that Merlyn holds a power that King Uther cannot touch. As the magician speaks to Uther, Malory writes, “I knowe al your hert every dele. So ye wil be sworn unto me as ye be a true kyнге enoynted to fulfille my desire, ye shal have your desyre” (3). The important word in Merlyn’s quote is “desire.” This word occurs frequently in this passage, particularly in connection with the phrase “my desire” (Malory 1-3). Uther’s desire is to have Igrayne in his bed, which, through Merlyn’s magic, he is able to obtain. Merlyn’s desire, it would seem, is to be advisor to the king – not Uther, but the child he would beget that would inherit rule of his kingdom - Arthur. Essentially, Merlyn’s desire is to influence and be privy to the future events of Britain. Merlyn states, “[Arthur] shall be delyvered to me for to nourishe

thereas I wille have it, for it shal be your worship and the childis availle as mykel as the child is worth” (3). Malory’s Merlyn creates a magical bargain with Uther: He wants Uther’s first-born child of royal blood in exchange for the woman who will bear that child. He is playing on Uther’s sense of “worship,” or his pride and acclaim, in order to get Uther to agree to this magical bargain.

The bargain that Merlyn proposes, and that Uther ultimately agrees to, is not of Christian origin. It involves magical power to achieve the end result. Essentially, it is reminiscent of a fairy bargain, a construction that will occur again when Arthur comes of age and power. This magical bargain brings to mind Merlyn’s own heritage. While it is not directly stated in Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, it is indirectly inferred by Nynive. Malory writes “[Nynive] was aferde of hym for cause he was a devyls son” (Malory 100). This, along with a few accusations of Merlyn being a “wytch” (13), are the only hints as to Merlyn’s parentage. Later, in “The Book of Adventures,” Sir Uwayne proclaims, “men seyde that Merlyon was begotyn of a fende” (118), which further adds to the infernal hints of Merlyn’s birth. Hoffman,” writes, “The untold tale of Merlin’s birth haunts the opening of Malory’s *Morte Darthur*; the ghostly presence of his demon-father infiltrates the works, provoking the insults of enemies and explaining his own sometimes erratic behavior” (324). Hoffman’s declaration of Merlyn having a “demon-father” is stemming from the various sources that Malory is pulling from. Both the *Historia Regum Britanniae* and the “Merlin Suite” of the *Post-Vulgate* cycle present Merlyn’s origins.

In Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, he portrays Merlyn, whom he Latinizes as Merlinus, as the son of a king’s daughter and an incubus (Goodrich

5). Merlyn's origins, then, become something that is both of the Christian realm and not. He stands on the boundary between the physical and the supernatural. As discussed earlier, Malory hints at Merlyn's origins; these hints seem to be in line with Geoffrey's description of Merlyn's parentage. Furthermore, it would then make sense that Malory was aware of the *Historia Regum Britanniae*. These two opposite forces that reside within Merlyn hold true with Goodrich's theory of the "polarities that apply to all of Merlin's roles" (Goodrich 3). Merlyn is both saint and devil, sage and beggar. He is both a part of the Christian construction of Camelot and yet holds power from a demonic parentage. It is this demonic power that not only gives Merlyn his abilities, but links him back to paganism. Flint writes, "demons, related to the old pagan daimones, persisted into early medieval Europe" (102). Flint's connection between the Christianized demons and the pagan daimones places Merlyn's own demonic heritage further away from the Christian theological sphere. Merlyn's consistent backstory of demonic-father, then, becomes his solidifier in terms of a pagan-Christian paradigm.

Malory's Merlyn is influenced in large part by Geoffrey's Merlinus. Nynive's hinting at Merlyn's demonic heritage says as much and solidifies Merlyn's place in the pagan realm in *Le Morte Darthur*, which causes a unique problem for King Arthur. On one hand, Merlyn works with members of the Christian Church to bless Arthur and often recites the name of Christ. Malory writes, "thenne Merlyn wente to the Archebisshop of Caunterbury and counceilled hym" and, later, has Merlyn refer to the power of "Oure Lorde Jesu Cryste" (Malory 6, 57). In a way, these actions legitimize Merlyn's place in Arthur's court. It allows Merlyn to be the advisor of King Arthur. As Hoffman points

out, “during Arthur’s reign, at least until the coming of Lancelot, it is Merlin who protects the kingdom” (325). Merlyn’s protection of Camelot comes mainly in the form of his powers of prophecy. He is able to see threats from afar and guide Arthur and the Knights of Camelot through their various adventures. However, as noted by Nynive’s fear of Merlyn, not every character in *Le Morte Darthur* holds Merlyn in high regard. Malory writes, “some of the kynges had merveyll of Merlyn’s words and demed well that it shold be as he said, and som of hem lough hym to scorne, as kyng Lot, and mo other called [Merlyn] a wytche” (13). This accusation of “wytche” is a serious one. It not only hints at an infernal nature but also hints that much of Arthur’s advice has come from a devil and not a wiseman.

The King of Christendom is supposed to be a true Christian and represent Christianity as a whole. However, his advisor and the one who makes him King is part of the pagan realm and the son of a demon. This question places Arthur’s reign and legitimacy as a Christian king in a precarious position. Is he allowed to remain a Christian king when his advice may have stemmed from demonic and pagan influence? Perhaps this is why Malory modifies the use of the Merlyn legend as written by his predecessors and has his Merlyn sufficiently taken out of the story by Nynive, Merlyn’s lover whom he trains in the magical arts. Malory describes her as one of the Ladies of the Lake and as a figure of great magical power (94; 101). Holbrook writes, “the account of Merlin’s disappearance from the world most often repeated is that he was imprisoned by the woman he loved after having taught her all the magic art that she desired to know”

(761). Essentially, Merlyn's magic, and Merlyn himself, are being taken out of the narrative of *Le Morte Darthur* by Nynive, a female magic user.

Female magic once again proves to be adversarial in nature. Nynive is an expressly pagan being and does not exist on the line between paganism and Christianity like Merlyn does. While her power may have been taught to her by Merlyn, she does manage to bewitch him under the stone. Malory writes, "So by hir subtile worchyng she made Merlyon to go undir that stone to latte hir wete of the mervayles there, but she wrought so there for hym that he come never oute for all the craufte he coude do, and so she departed and leffte Merlyon" (100). Here, Nynive is quite literally subverting Merlyn's own power with her own. In doing so, Nynive is removing the male pagan magic from the text. She is reinforcing her own power and, by extent, the power of the other female mages in the text. It is her power that traps Merlyn and he is powerless to stop it. Holbrook writes, "[Nynive] makes Merlin go under a great stone" and later, "[Merlyn] can only be helped by [Nynive] that put him there" (770). According to Holbrook, it is Nynive's power and cunning that traps Merlyn and then keeps him locked away. She is the power that ultimately destroys him.

It is important to note that Merlyn is powerless not only to stop Nynive but also to free himself. Malory writes, "so on a tyme he tolde to Kynge Arthure that he scholde nat endure longe, but for all his craftes he scholde be putte into the earthe quyk" (99). This passage is key to the tale of Merlyn and Nynive. It shows that Merlyn is aware of his impending doom. This scene also reveals something else: Merlyn is powerless to stop his own demise. Malory is implying here that female pagan magic is stronger than male

magic, and, for female magic to flourish, male pagan magic must be destroyed. This is the case of Merlyn and Nynive. Their roles parallel each other. Merlyn is Arthur's advisor, the magician who makes him king. Nynive is referred to as "Dame Nynive, the chyff lady of the laake" (Malory 928), implying that she has an authoritative role in regards to the other Ladies of the Lake. Thus, both of them are in positions of power.

However, Merlyn's authoritative role is subverted by Nynive's role. The subverting of a male power structure by a female one signals a switching in the gendered paradigm of magic. Female pagan magic is now at the forefront of magic in *Le Morte Darthur*. Given Nynive's role as Chief Lady of the Lake, she is subverting the masculine border between Christianity and paganism to replace it with a purely female, pagan structure. Nynive has significantly replaced Merlin's role not just in magic but in the story itself. She is a helpful figure and not as antagonistic as other female magic users, such as Morgan le Fey. Holbrook points out, "[Nynive] is by no means generally represented in medieval fiction as evil and that her place in Arthurian legend is not confined to being the cause of Merlin's disappearance" (761). Nynive has other parts to play throughout Malory's work and indeed through much of the Arthurian legend. As Holbrook discusses, Nynive is not evil – but her magic is adversarial, especially towards Merlyn, as she uses it to trap and bewitch him (761). It is the phrase "subtyle worchyng" that implies the enchantment of Merlyn (Malory 100). She is a much stronger character in terms of *Le Morte Darthur*, and the full extent of Nynive's role will be discussed later in chapter three.



Nynive's entrapment of Merlyn signifies another major shift in the course of *Le Morte Darthur*: it removes the prime pagan influence of King Arthur's court. Merlyn's pagan magic must exist but die if Arthur's Christianity is to be recognized and triumphant. Malory constructs a narrative of a Christian kingdom that must rely on pagan power to survive. Paganism is entwined with Camelot from the earliest pages of *Le Morte Darthur*. Essentially, it is pagan magic that allows Uther to have an heir to the throne of Camelot. He does this through Merlyn's magic when the magician transforms Uther into the likeness of Igrayne's husband. Before Uther assumes the Duke's form, Merlyn tells him, "This nyghte ye shalle lye with Igrayne in the castel of Tyntagyl. And ye shalle be lyke the duke her husband" (Malory 3). Here, Merlyn is providing Uther the thing he wants: the lady Igrayne. It is through his magic that Uther is able to sleep with Igrayne, which causes her to conceive with Arthur.

Thus, Arthur is a product of pagan magical exploitation. He only exists because of Merlyn's magic and Uther's violation of Igrayne. However, Arthur is baptized as a Christian as soon as Uther makes good on his part of the bargain and delivers Arthur, "bound in a cloth of gold," to Merlyn (Malory 5). In the next scene, Malory writes, "so the child was delyverd unto Merlyn, and so he bare it forth unto Syre Ector, and made an holy man to crysten hym, and named hym Arthur" (5). Immediately after his birth, Malory is portraying Arthur as a Christian child who was conceived by pagan magic. Malory has Arthur baptized to offset the paganism that helped create him. Essentially, it is so the character of Arthur is not completely consumed by pagan magic and thus can still remain within the confines of Christendom, albeit with Merlyn to guide him.

The construction of Merlyn as creator and advisor serves to parallel Arthur's ascension to Christendom. It begins with Uther and Igrayne, followed by Merlyn giving a newly baptized Arthur to Sir Ector to raise, and coming to a head with Arthur pulling the sword from the stone. It is key that the scene before Arthur reaches maturity and pulls the sword from the stone has Merlyn advising both a dying Uther and the Archbishop of Canterbury: "Thenne Merlyn wente to the Archebissshop of Caunterbury and counceilled hym for to sende for alle the lords of the reame and all the gentilmen of armies" (6). Merlyn here is commanding not just his own pagan magics but Christian elements, as well. He is filling the role that Arthur will later inherit. As previously stated, Hoffman views Merlyn as protecting the realm of Camelot before Arthur can (325). This is a job that will belong in full to Arthur and his knights once Merlyn is trapped in the stone and Lancelot makes his appearance.

Merlyn, however, must be subverted in order for Arthur to fully grow; paganism of Merlyn must be undermined for the Christianity of Arthur so that Arthur can reign as a Christian king without the pagan influence of Merlyn's advice. After Nynive traps Merlyn, the pagan male magic – the magic that helps – is no longer there. The knights are then left to solely rely on Christian theology and prayer in order to perform the Christian form of magic: miracles and healing. Camelot then becomes an entity that relies more on faith than prophecy and magic. However, some of Merlyn's prophecies still exist, even if he is noticeably absent. The most noticeable of these prophecies come at the end of book one of *Le Morte Darthur*. Malory writes, "Than Kynge Arthure lette sende for all the children that were borne in May Day, begotyn of lordis and borne of

ladyes, for Merlyon tolde Kynge Arthure that he that sholde destroy him and all the londe sholde be borne on May Day” (46). The child in question is Mordred, the son of Arthur and his sister, who is destined to kill his father.

Arthur does order all the children born on May Day to be killed. However, Mordred survives: “And so by fortune the shyppes drove unto a castell and was all to-ryven and destroyed the moste party, save that Mordred was cast up” (46). The end of the *Le Morte Darthur* sees Mordred and Arthur kill each other. At the point of the final battle, however, Merlyn was long since trapped beneath the stone. Hoffman points out that Merlyn “inserts the end at the beginning” (326). Merlyn’s end-time prophecy – his Arthurian-style Revelation – provides a frame narrative that signals the end of the pagan age of magic and the reinstitution of a Christian age. The Christian age is already prominent in the beginning pages of *Le Morte Darthur*, but when Merlyn is trapped, the masculine pagan influence is stripped from the story, leaving the female sorcerers to carry on the pagan mantle. They do so only to hinder Arthur and his Court, not as helpful allies.

The absence Merlyn’s pagan influence in the Court allows the knights and King Arthur to proceed with the Holy Grail Quest. They would not have been able to if Merlyn’s influence was still prominent in Camelot, as the Holy Grail is a strictly Christian object. Merlyn would have provided narrative and spiritual problems for the people of the Middle Ages if he were to have been directly involved in the Holy Grail quest. Even in the *Post-Vulgate* cycle, Merlyn is taken out of the narrative before the Grail Quest can begin. His role is of kingmaker, advisor, and magician of Arthur’s court.

He dispenses prophecies but is never directly a part of them. The *Post-Vulgate*, especially the “Merlin Suite,” is one of Malory’s major sources for *Le Morte Darthur*. The construction of Merlyn in the “Suite du Merlin” is similar to how Malory constructs his Merlyn. Thus, the demonic heritage and power of prophecy are carried over from the sources that Malory used to his own work. As a pagan figure and son of a demon, Merlyn would have no place in a purely Christian tale. Thus, the subversion of Merlyn not only serves to reinforce the female magic as adversarial construct but also allows Christianity to become the dominant force of Camelot.

As a Christian King born of paganism, Arthur then shares Merlin’s role as bridging paganism to Christianity. Malory constructs Arthur to straddle the line between paganism and Christianity. For Christianity to flourish in Camelot, Arthur was always fated to die. His *wyrd* is so that he dies in battle against his own son as predicted in Merlyn’s prophecy. When Arthur dies, he is taken, not up to heaven by angels, but to Avalon by four sorceress-queens in a scene that is reminiscent of Valkyries taking a Norse hero up to the hero’s hall of Valhalla. When Arthur dies and leaves for Avalon, so too do magic and Camelot – and by extension all of England – can become a true, purely Christian nation. Arthur’s role as the Christian king born from pagan magic has him linked to the fate of magic in the realm. While he is undeniably holy, Arthur, too, has a stain from paganism that he cannot get rid. When he dies, so does the paganism of Camelot. It is here that Malory makes the masculine magic play the biggest role in bridging the pagan past with the Christian future.

In the following chapter, I will discuss how pagan magic effects and influences the women of *Le Morte Darthur*. It is in the construction of sorceresses like Morgan le Fey that the masculine Christian magic finds its true adversary, and is able to flourish in a symbiotic construction.

### Chapter 3: Charmed – Women, Magic, and Antagonism

In *Le Morte Darthur*, women are just as varied in characterization as men. They love, weep, are ambitious, and plot. These women have their own identities that make them their own characters. While female characters like Gwenyvere are strictly part of the Christian sphere, some women – such as the case with Morgan le Fey, Nynive, and the Lady of the Lake – employ the use of magic. Much of the antagonistic magic in *Le Morte Darthur* is used by women towards men. However, it would be too simplistic to state that the female characters who employ magic are simply villains. They may be antagonistic, but these women are also fully fleshed-out characters with their own ambitions and desires. As I will discuss in this chapter, Malory often crafts female magic to be antagonistic and part of the pagan sphere; however, there are instances, particularly towards the end of *Le Morte Darthur*, in which female magic becomes helpful towards the Christian realm of Camelot. Female magic users, then, become the ultimate bridge between the pagan past and the Christian future in *Le Morte Darthur*. While there are female magic users such as [Isode], the pagan-Christian dyad is most prominently seen in the division between Morgan le Fey<sup>6</sup> and the Lady of the Lake – Nynive.

While male magic is separated between the pagan magic of Merlyn and the Christian magic of Galahad and Launcelot, female magic in *Le Morte Darthur* is not strictly divided between characters. Characters such as Morgan le Fey and Nynive practice both nefarious and beneficial forms of magic. Malory writes them in ways that

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<sup>6</sup> Malory spells Morgan's surname two ways: le Fay and le Fey. For the purposes of this chapter, I will be referring to Morgan throughout as Morgan le Fey.

give them the abilities to both kill and heal – to lead a knight to destruction or to heal him from his wounds. Kieckhefer writes, “If it is difficult at times to distinguish magic from science or from religion, it is all the more difficult to separate ‘white’ (helpful) magic from ‘black’ (harmful) magic, or medical and protective magic from sorcery” (80).

Kieckhefer argues that sorcery, especially defined within the Middle Ages, is “the misuse of medical and protective magic” (80). The women who practice magic in *Le Morte Darthur* fall into this definition of magic. Their magic is not as easily defined, hovering between “black” and “white,” though Morgan predominantly uses “black” magic. Nynive often heals knights, but it is also through her antagonistic magic that Merlyn meets his untimely demise. The magical women in the text employ the use of antagonistic magic through enchantments and potions.

These enchantments are different from the miracles that were performed by Launcelot and Galahad, as those miracles did not come from their own power of knowledge, but through devotion and the power of God, which then places this type of magic within the realm of paganism. While Malory does not explicitly call this type of magic pagan, the women’s magic does fall into the same type of magical practice that Merlyn uses: their magic is not calling upon the powers of God. Morgan’s magic, for example, is often written as done “by enchaumentement” (Malory 621), thus implying the power is coming from her own volition. Kieckhefer writes, “the techniques for sorcery were essentially the same as those for medical or protective magic: potions, charms, and amulets, often with accompanying rituals” (81). He further goes on to argue, “the difference between positive and negative magic lay not in their basic conception but in

the purposes they served” (81). In *Le Morte Darthur*, the enchantments and potions that women create are generally antagonistic in purpose.

By antagonistic, I am referring to an action taken against another person without his or her consent. An antagonistic enchantment, then, is one that is taken against another. To fully understand antagonistic magic, there must be a discussion on how feminine magic ultimately functions in *Le Morte Darthur*. Most of feminine magic is written by Malory in vaguely described terms. Therefore, it must be inferred and examined in conjunction with the historical basis for how magic in the medieval era functions. If Kieckhefer’s framework that sorcery is just medical and natural magic misused (80) is taken as fact, then the actions performed by female characters in the forms of poison and enchantments become magical actions. Take the first story in *Sir Tristram de Lyones: The First Book* entitled “Sir Tristram and La Beall Isode.” In this story, the daughter of King Howellys of Bretaynes is taken to wife by King Melyodas, the father of Tristram, after his first Queen and Tristram’s mother, Elyzabeth, died. The new queen “ordained for to poyson yonge Tristram” (291). While this may not immediately read as some sort of magical practice, it is important to note that poison was considered to be the realm of witches and sorcerers. Kieckhefer writes, “Sorcerers who gave people food and drink to do them harm might be accused of ‘poisoning’ them, the distinction between normal and occult powers being as difficult to define here as elsewhere” (81). Melyodas’s new queen thus falls into this realm. While it would be an overstatement to state that she practices dark arts the way Morgan le Fey or Nynive do, it is important not to overlook the minor instances in which antagonistic magic makes an



appearance. Saunders in *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance* writes, “Romance writers repeatedly exploit the idea of healing or medicinal stones, plants, balms and potions that draw their virtue from nature, to marvelous effect” (118). Saunders’s magical healing remedies are beneficial to the person on which it is cast; if these things are misused, as Kieckhefer suggests dark magic is, then the healing potion becomes a dreadful poison, which, is exactly what happens with the young queen attempting to poison Tristram.

Healing potions and poisons are the not the only magic female characters employ in *Le Morte Darthur*. Many times, magic presents itself through love magic and enchantments. Saunders writes, “the most problematic form of ‘magyk natureel’ is love magic” (130). She argues that love magic, while forbidden in early laws of the Christian Church, is more favorably viewed in medieval romance because romance is “emphasizing the relation between love-magic and medicine, but the dangers remain apparent, and can provide powerful narrative tensions” (130-131). Thus is the conundrum with love magic in *Le Morte Darthur*. There are moments in which love magic is used negatively, mainly with Morgan le Fey and her quest for Launcelot or Nynive’s meddling with Sir Pelleas; however, there are moments, such as with Tristram and Isode, that love magic comes out favorably.

In the story of Tristram and Isode, the two lovers become lovers through the use of an implied love potion. Saunders does point out that “Malory lessons the role of this binding love-magic, however, by portraying the love between Tristram and Isode as arising naturally” (243). This love potion comes in the form of a “noble wyne” (Malory

327). Once Tristram and Isode partake in drinking of the wine, “but by that drynke was in their bodies they loved aythir other so well that never hir love departed, for well norther for woo” (327-328). It is the line, “but by that drynke was in their bodies” (327) that signals love magic, for the effects are strong and immediate. However, it is also worth noting that Malory states who prepares the love potion – Isode’s mother, who tells Dame Brangwayne and Governayle that upon Kynge Marke’s wedding day to Isode, he “sholde drynke to La Beale Isode” (Malory 327). The intention of love magic is thus clear: it is specifically intended for King Mark and Isode to ensure a happy marriage. Malory, however, misdirects the love magic by having Tristram drink from the potion instead of Isode’s husband. Thus, the doomed love affair begins. Malory remains purposefully vague on the details of the exact specifics of the love magic – he only writes that it found in a drink. What is implied, however, is that Isode’s mother is a practitioner of magic.

If Isode’s mother practices the magical arts, then it is not too far an assumption to make the claim that Isode is too a practitioner of magic. Early in “Sir Tristram and La Beall Isode” Malory does imply that Isode practices healing magic. Isode heals Tristram of his poison long before they both drink her mother’s love potion (Malory 302, 327). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the fifteenth-century use of the word ‘poison’ as “a principle, doctrine, influence, etc. which is harmful to character, morality, or the well-being of society” (“poison”). Poison, then, is not necessarily only a physical illness, but also a spiritual one. Malory calls Isode a “noble surgeon,” and it is in that same passage that he writes, “[Isode] had serched [Trystram] she founde in the bottom of his wounde that therein was poyson, and so she healed hym in a whyle” (Malory 302). Isode

practices a healing type of magic – she is not referred to as “magician” as dark magic users are; instead, she is called “surgeon.” The careful construction of this language is to blend the use of magic and science. Kieckhefer does argue that science and beneficial, natural magic are often blended into medicine within the medieval era (56). Furthermore, Isode is not necessarily curing a physical ailment in Tristram but rather ministering to Tristram’s soul: she is curing a problem that is dangerous to his character. Thus, Isode is not falling into pagan magic; rather, she practices a beneficial kind of magic. In doing this, Malory takes away any unsavory ties with dark forces from Isode, so that she may romance the Christian knight Tristram.

Thus, Isode’s magic is characterized in a very different way than Morgan le Fey’s. Perhaps the most enigmatic female magic user in all of the Arthurian mythos is, a character that predates *Le Morte Darthur* and who has transcended well into the modern era, Morgan le Fey represents the prime practitioner of antagonistic magic within Malory’s text. She is associated with darkness from her very first mention in *Le Morte Darthur*. Malory writes of her, “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” (4). As previously discussed, ‘nygromancye’ or ‘necromancy’ represents dark magic, often associated with communing with the dead (“nigromancy”). Having Morgan immediately presented with this association presents her in a negative and dangerous light. Malory constructs Morgan this way to put her at odds with Arthur. Essentially, he is constructing the perfect enemy to exist outside the Christian paradigm that is Camelot: she is demonic, and powerful yet still ingrained within Camelot. Malory’s Morgan le Fey has

the power to take down Arthur and Camelot from the inside. Malory also takes pains to describe her as a Queen in her own right, having married King Urien. Saunders argues, “Morgan is also characterized as following the pattern of the otherworldly ruler who wishes both to destroy and to possess bodies” (249). Indeed, in *Le Morte Darthur*, Morgan is frequently presented as a being who wants to destroy – namely Arthur and his knights – and as someone who wishes to possess bodies, which she does through sex and manipulation.

Morgan’s multitude of lovers, along with her magical prowess, sets her apart from the other women in *Le Morte Darthur*. She is given a great deal of agency and is at once both sexed and unsexed. Essentially, Morgan is nothing like the other women of Camelot, being the polar opposite of both Nynive and Guenevere. Morgan’s position in the text is then problematic for Camelot. How can Morgan function in Camelot if she is so different from the other women in power; how can the character of Morgan function if she is at once both nobility and mighty sorceress? Larrington, “If [Morgan] is to exercise agency in her private affairs, she will also have to withdraw from normal courtly society. Thus she risks scandal and is often viewed as disruptive to the smooth running of the chivalric system” (31). Perhaps this an explanation is for Morgan’s constant assault on Arthur and his court. She values her nobility, as she is often referred to as “lady” or “quene,” but, at the same time, Morgan is dangerous, as she practices a dark magic a strange magic of that is of pagan and Christian origin.

Thus, the combination between pagan and Christianity is fully represented in Morgan. She is a nominally Christian figure who is very skilled in pagan magic. Malory

constructs her this way so that she may exist within Camelot. Morgan bridges the pagan past with Arthur's Christian future in a different way than Merlin does. Malory puts her in opposition to the Christian Camelot so that Christianity can be victorious. The Christian ideals of Arthur's court must overcome Morgan's magic. However, Morgan is not primarily a pagan figure – she does hold some place in the Christian sphere. She is, after all, Arthur's half-sister and still has noble blood. The noble blood of Camelot is what links her to Christianity. While this duality between infernal magic and good nobility certainly conflicts within Morgan, Malory purposefully writes her this way to give her an excuse as to why she is able to escort Arthur to Avalon at the end of *Le Morte Darthur*. It is in that scene that her good noble blood outweighs her dark magic potential.

Perhaps the first instance of Morgan's magic being shown comes in "The Book of Adventures" with her exploits against Arthur through her lover Accalon. Her first manipulation in this tale comes when she sends a dwarf to Accalon with a message, along with Excalibur, to kill King Arthur. The dwarf tells Accalon: "therefore [Morgan] hath sent you Excalebir, Arthurs swerde, and the scawberde, and she byddyth you as ye love her that ye do that batayle to the uttirmoste withoute ony mercy" (Malory 110). Morgan betrays Arthur by giving his sword to Accalon in order to vanquish the king.

Simultaneously, Morgan sends a lady to Arthur to deliver his sword to him; however, Malory makes it clear that the sword is counterfeit and false (111). Malory does this to highlight Morgan's own falseness and treachery when it comes to Arthur. It is important to note that Morgan has Arthur's sword and scabbard because Arthur gave it to her for keeping safe: "so aftir for grete truste Arthur betoke the scawberde unto Morgan le Fey,

hys sister” (62). Due to Arthur entrusting his life-saving sword to Morgan, her betrayal of him is that much worse. She is committing treason not just against a king, but also against her own blood. Morgan manipulates Arthur and Accalon against each other, all while being married to King Uryence. Morgan uses the fact that she is Accalon’s lover to further manipulate the situation into happening. As Accalon and Arthur fight, Accalon mightily wounds him and were it not for Nynive’s magical intervention, the king would have died, which further highlights the stark difference between Morgan and the Lady of the Lake.

After an exchange of words, however, Accalon tells Arthur that Morgan has put him up to it. Arthur is immediately dismayed by this, and interestingly enough, Arthur does not blame Accalon. Instead, he says, “I wyte the the lesse for my sistir Morgan le Fay by hir false crauftis made the to agre to hir fals lustes” (Malory 115). Arthur is stating here that while Accalon is still a traitor, it not entirely his fault: he was enchanted by a woman, not through her wiles, but by magic. Essentially, Morgan’s power was such that she possessed Accalon in order to do harm to Arthur. Her magic here, while roundabout, is responsible for an assassination attempt on the king. The female magic is certainly antagonistic in nature. A similar episode occurs in the “Suite du Merlin” of the *Post-Vulgate* cycle, but it is much more elaborate in its construction. Carolyn Larrington points out that “Malory’s account of the enchantment and the fight is tautly told, significantly abbreviating the *Suite*’s version” (35). Malory thus concentrates the episode into one of battle and sorcery, eliminating extraneous prose and explanation for the entire episode.

The episode continues with Morgan's flight from Arthur. This portion presents her in one of her most antagonistic roles. She absconds with Excalibur, and, instead of giving it back to Arthur, Morgan "let throwe the scawberde in the deppyst of the watir. So hit sanke, for hit was heavy of golde and precious stonys" (Malory 120). This is the ultimate betrayal of Arthur, for Excalibur's scabbard is enchanted to protect Arthur. Morgan is essentially stripping Arthur of his protection, which will have disastrous consequences at the end of the romance. Larrington writes, "The Accalon episode occasions Morgan's breach with Arthur and the court; henceforth Morgan will return neither to court nor apparently to her husband, but remains in her own castles" (37). It is here that Morgan becomes a clear enemy of Camelot. She forsakes her Christian realm for her own power. Her castle at Gore becomes her realm outside the Christian realm of her brother. She escapes to the castle by turning herself and her men to stone: "Than [Morgan] rode into a valey where many grete stonys were, and whan she sawe she muste be overtake, she shope hirself, horse and man, by enchauntemente unto grete marbyll stonys" (120). Here, her enchantment is similar to the shape-changing abilities that Merlyn possesses. Her magic then is extremely powerful, and she uses it to escape Arthur. This enchantment, however, is the only one she performs on herself.

Morgan's next magical working is the first one that she directly does in order to harm someone. The earlier episode with Accalon is done through proxy – she manipulates him. After Morgan successfully flees Arthur, she sends him an enchanted garment by way of one of her ladies. Nynive realizes that there is an enchantment on this robe and counsels Arthur to not put it on him. Arthur tells the messenger to put on the

garment, who argues against him but eventually obeys. Malory then writes, “and so the kynge made to putt hit uppon hir, and forthwithall she fell downe dede and never spoke worde after, and brente to colys” (122). Morgan’s plan was for Arthur to put on the garment and be killed by the charm she has placed upon it. Keickhefer writes, “Charms with evil intent are usually known as ‘curses’” (82). Thus, Morgan’s magic here can be referred to as a curse.

Morgan’s curses do not just stop at Arthur; they extend to all of Arthur’s court. Perhaps the most recognizable is Morgan’s enchantment of Launcelot. Saunders writes, “Apart from Arthur himself, Launcelot is the particular focus of Morgan’s magic, and the *Morte* emphasizes both his attractiveness to women and his invulnerability except to treason and magic” (249). Morgan’s primary attack on Launcelot comes in the form of enchanting him into sleep so that she and three other queens can seduce him. This episode comes during the book of *Sir Launcelot du Lake* in the episode entitled “Sir Launcelot du Lake.” In the part in which Morgan and her queens enchant Launcelot, Launcelot lies sleeping beneath an apple tree. Upon approaching him, Morgan says, “I shall put an inchauntement uppon hym that he shall nat awake of all this seven owres, and then I woll lede hym away unto my castell” (193). Morgan then compels Launcelot to sleep and brings the knight back to her castle, where she says that she will “lette hym chose whych of us he woll have unto paramour” (193). Morgan and her subject-queens are attempting to force Launcelot into a relationship that goes outside the realm of proper Christian love and marriage. Morgan’s magic is thus antagonistic to Launcelot.



The feminine antagonistic magic that Morgan exhibits is strictly against Camelot and its Christian people. Flint writes “Women, then, are seen as particularly prone, through magic, to disrupt the proper course of human love and Christian marriage” (233). She is writing of the Christian Church’s sanctions and attitudes against love magic. In Flint’s framework, Morgan would then be opposing the Church itself. That is to say, Camelot is a reflection of the Christian Church and its ideals. By constructing Morgan as an enemy of Camelot, Malory is also constructing her as an enemy of the Christian Church. Since Launcelot and the rest of the King Arthur’s court at Camelot represent the power of the Christian Church, then Morgan is going against God and religion by casting nefarious magic against Launcelot. Malory constructs Launcelot and Camelot as prevailing over the forces of Morgan le Fey’s enchantment and representing the forces of God triumphing over ungodly magic. Saunders writes, “enchantment lends power over bodies; it is envisaged as a means of inflicting physical harm” (250). Launcelot’s waking on his own gives him autonomy over this magic and thus presents him – and by extent God – as being stronger than the enchantments of Morgan. Saunders goes on to argue that “Morgan’s desire [for Launcelot] seems in part stimulated by Launcelot’s identity as [greatest] of Arthurian knights” (250). This desire manifests itself by jealousy that turns violent. This is something that is seen in Morgan’s attack on Arthur and is apparent in the scene in which Morgan, along with the Queen of North Wales tortures a lady for claiming she is the prettiest.

Of this scene, Malory writes, “by enchauntemente Quene Morgan le Fay and the Quene of Northe Galys had put her there in that paynes, because she was called the

fayryst lady of that contrey” (621). There are two important details to note here: this is the first time Morgan is actively attacking another woman, and, as before, there are multiple people who are casting this curse. Morgan and the Queen of North Wales, along with the other queens mentioned in the Launcelot episode, are presented as a group of magic practitioners. Saunders argues, “the passage creates an intriguing impression of a web of female practitioners of magic” (251). This “web” of female magic users could possibly represent the nefarious inverse of a convent. While this argument is a far claim, Morgan and her fellow queens do function as a group of women who meet and practice magic as well as be sexually promiscuous. They “worship” together by casting magic and are bonded in sisterhood under a leader: Morgan le Fey. This is furthered by the brief mention of Morgan learning her craft in a “nonnery” (4). Malory constructs Morgan and her sorceress-queens to represent a division between the Christian realm of Camelot, and those who are outside of it and act actively against it.

Perhaps the most curious female magic is Morgan’s opposite: the Lady of the Lake, Nynive. The dialectic that forms between Nynive’s protective magic and Morgan’s antagonistic magic forms the bridge between the pagan past and the Christian future. Malory writes both women as having access to magic and further writes them as ingrained in the struggles of Camelot. Whether for good or ill means, they are responsible for magic entering the realm of Camelot. Morgan seeks to dismantle Camelot, whereas Nynive seeks to save it. These two conflicting magical forces are offset by Christianity. Morgan is thwarted by Christian knights, whereas Nynive’s enchantments help them, but never so much as to overshadow the Christian elements.

Malory is purposefully crafting a blend of pagan magic and Christianity in *Le Morte Darthur*. Nynive's power is seen often throughout *Le Morte Darthur*, often helping the Christian knights against dark forces, including going against Morgan's power. Nynive's powers are so great that she is often the savior of King Arthur while also the doom of the kingmaker Merlyn. Saunders writes, "The practices themselves – natural magic of different kinds, shape-shifting, illusion, enchantment and foreknowledge – are shared by those who enact both healing and harmful magic" (249). Nynive certainly fulfills Saunders's argument. Her power is both healing and destructive, and she wields it both ways.

Her only truly antagonistic moment comes in her entombment of Merlyn. Malory writes, "so by hir subtyl worchyng she made Merlyon to go undir that stone to latte hir wete of the mervayles there, but she wrought so there for hym that he come never oute for all the craufte he coude do, and so she departed and leffte Merlyon" (100). Merlyn who is essentially a construction that represents male authority in magic, must be removed from the text in order for a Christian Camelot. When Nynive entraps him, and then replaces him as advisor, she subverts his masculine authority with her feminine one. Thus, the male paradigm of pagan magic is destroyed and replaced by a female dialectic of healing magic.

Malory casts Nynive in two different aspects: as chief Lady of the Lake (928), and as sympathetic victim of Merlyn's unwanted advances. In the episode in which Nynive entombs Merlyn, she does so out of desire to get away from Merlyn: "But Merlyon wolde nat lette her have no reste, but allwayes he wolde be wyth her" (99).

Nynive traps him because she wishes to get away from him, and, as his student and chief Lady of the Lake, she has more than enough power to do so. She is then not antagonistic for nefarious purposes, but only to protect herself. Holbrook writes, “Nymue is introduced into Malory’s narrative world as a woman who clamors when she needs when she needs help but is stoic when injured, acts with common sense, and gives worthy advice” (768). Thus, Nynive is a fully fleshed-out character. Furthermore, Malory is giving her agency in a way that the sources he draws from do not. He presents her as sympathetic in her unwanted advances from Merlyn, but also gives her agency and a power all her own. She has thoughts and feelings, makes decisions, and does not cower behind men. In fact, if not for her intervening at key moments during Arthur’s reign, he and many of the Knights of the Round Table would have died.

Her first act as a savior of Camelot, comes in “The Book of Adventures,” as she saves Arthur’s life not once, but twice. The first time comes when she intervenes in the battle between Accalon and Arthur. Malory writes,

Whan the Damsell of the Lake beheld Arthure, how full of prouesse his body was, and the false treson that was wrought for hym to have had hym slayne, she had prete that so good a knight and such a man of worship sholde so be destroyed. And at the nexte stroke, Sir Accalon stroke at hym suche a stroke that by the damesels inchauntemente the swerde Excalibur fell oute of Accalons honed to the earth.”

In this passage, Malory portrays Nynive as using her magic to save Arthur by knocking Excalibur out of Accalon’s hand. Furthermore, she recognizes that Arthur is worth

saving, indicated by the lines “such a man of worship” (113). It is here that Nynive makes the choice to serve Arthur – she subjects her power as a pagan entity to a Christian king. Furthermore, Nynive is acting directly against Morgan, who has set up the fight between king and knight in hopes of murdering the king.

The second time Nynive comes into action against Morgan in defense of Arthur is later in the episode. As discussed previously, Morgan sends Arthur a jeweled garment in hopes of killing him. If not for Nynive’s intervention, Morgan could have succeeded in her plans. When Morgan’s messenger comes bearing the robe to Arthur, Nynive says to him, “Putt nat upon you this mantel tylle ye have sene more” (Malory 122). Nynive advises Arthur against the garment for she knows that something is amiss. Once again, Nynive acts in direct conflict to Morgan’s desires. Saunders writes, “Again, the Lady of the Lake protects Arthur, so that practitioners of beneficent and maleficent magic seem pitted against one another” (249). This dichotomy of beneficent versus malefic magic serves to highlight the antagonism of Morgan le Fey and the helpfulness of Nynive. This helpfulness, however, is not without consequence.

Later in the “Book of Adventure,” comes the episode between Gawain, Ettard, Nynive and Sir Pelleas. Of this episode, Holbrook writes, “For the story of Gawain, Ettard, and Pelleas, Malory creates a role for Nymue that she has nowhere else in literature – the savior and beloved wife of Sir Pelleas” (771). Malory is constructing this role for Nynive because it gives her a sense of place within Camelot aside from pagan magical advisor. She is cemented in Camelot the way Merlyn never was: she has a spouse and a life there and is not just relegated to the role of travelling mystic the way

that Merlyn is. While Nynive saves Sir Pelleas's life, her actions have the unintended consequences of killing Ettard. In this episode, Sir Pelleas finds Gawain in bed with Ettard, the woman he loves. He is heartbroken and promises to stay in bed until he dies. Nynive, however, decides to intervene and "[throws] an enchaumentement upon [Pelleas]" so that he may sleep (Malory 135). She then rides to Ettard and admonishes her for her behavior towards Pelleas. Malory writes, "[Nynive] threw such an inchaumentement upon [Ettard] that she loved hym so sore that wellnyghe she was nere oute of hir mynde" (135-136). Thus, Nynive uses love magic to force Ettard to fall in love with Pelleas to right the wrong that she has shown him. Holbrook states, "[Nynive] acts, then, upon the axiom that the beloved should pity the suffering lover when that lover has all the qualities idealized in the concept of chivalry" (772). According to Holbrook, Pelleas is the hallmark of Christian chivalry. Indeed, he spares both Gawain's and Ettard's lives when he discovers their betrayal; he also puts down his sword and willingly gives up the fight (Malory 135). After Nynive brings Ettard to Pelleas, the knight wakes up and, instead of reciprocating Ettard's new feelings, Pelleas chooses to love Nynive. Ettard "died for sorow" (136). Therefore, Nynive's magical intervention here is helpful to Pelleas, but deadly for Ettard. The reason Ettard dies is also symbolic: she betrayed a knight of Camelot with adultery, and for this, her sin must be punished. Therefore, it can be seen that Nynive is further fulfilling her function as a defender of Camelot.

This function is seen again when Nynive helps Launcelot and Trystram fight the evil sorceress Aunowre, who is obsessed with seducing King Arthur. Once again, the sources associated with dark magic are concerned with possessing bodies. Saunders

writes, “This desire to possess the knight’s body is characteristic of enchantresses” (251). Aunowre is no exception. Malory writes that Nynive, Trystram, and Launcelot all come to Arthur’s aid because “that same day [Nynive] knew well that Kynge Arthure sholde be slayne onles that he had helpe of one of thes too knyghtes” (385). It is Nynive’s power of prophecy that helps save Arthur’s life. Once Arthur heeds Nynive and cuts off Aunowre’s head, Nynive takes the head and ties it to her saddle. Of this scene, Holbrook writes, “The detail of the head, reminiscent of her advice to Pellinor to carry his daughter's head, is a fitting sign of the benevolent sorceress's victory over the malevolent one who wanted the king's head” (775). Nynive is again battling against dark, pagan magic to protect the Christian realm of Camelot.

What is curious then, is that Nynive is not necessarily a Christian figure. She held the office of Lady of the Lake. The Ladies of the Lake are not inherently part of the Christian paradigm, as they all have magical powers and appear more like faeries than normal sorcerers. The key difference that separates them from magic users like Morgan le Fey and her queens is their magic is seemingly inherent, whereas Morgan’s magic is magic that is learned. Kieckhefer discusses the division like this as “natural and demonic” (9). Furthermore, he writes “Natural magic was not distinct from science, but rather a branch of science. It was the science that dealt with “occult virtues” (or hidden powers) within nature. Demonic magic was not distinct from religion, but rather a perversion of religion. It was religion that turned away from God and toward demons for their help in human affairs” (9). In this framework, the Ladies of the Lake, because they practice natural forms of magic, have their magic come from nature. In a sense, they are a

part of the natural world. Morgan, on the other hand, exemplifies the darker side of magic: she learned necromancy, an art that deals with the dead and dark forces, at a convent. Kieckhefer's framework connects with the portrayal of Morgan in *Le Morte Darthur*. Her magic is learned by turning away from God in a mirror of a Christian intuition and using her learned arts to attack Camelot, another Christian institution.

Thus, Nynive's and Morgan's magic are different in nature, with different purposes in mind. Morgan uses her magic to possess and harm to the point of violence. Nynive's magic, on the other hand, is used for helpful purposes – she heals and protects. Corrine Saunders, in “Violent Magic in Middle English Romance” writes, “magic is intrinsically bound up with ideas of violence, and is by no means restricted to the nonmimetic, fantastic aspect of romance” (209). The binding of magic and violence is no stranger to *Le Morte Darthur*. Magic, whether it be Morgan's violent magic or Nynive and Isode's helpful, natural magic, is essential to the plot line if Christianity is to function. Kieckhefer writes, “in many romances magic is central to the plot” (108). The centrality of magic in romance serves to highlight themes of morality and Christianity. Essentially, by installing a pagan figure as Arthur's advisor and putting a figure once a part of the Christian sphere as one of the main antagonists, Malory has successfully begun to bridge the pagan past with the Christian future.

Perhaps this bridging of the old religious past with the new religious future comes to its chief moment during the “Death of Arthur,” in which three sorcerer queens and Nynive lead his body away to the Isle of Avalon. The three queens and Nynive are named “Quene Morgan le Fay, the tother was the Quene of North Galis, and the thirde was the



Quene of the Waste Londis. Also there was Dame Nynyve” (Malory 928). Before they are named, these women are described wearing black hoods, wailing and shrieking for Arthur (927). The four women then take Arthur into the magical island of Avalon. Arthur states before he gets led away, “I wyll into the vale of Avylyon to hele me of my grevous wounde” (927). Thus, the women are here to escort the fallen king from the battlefield to a place where he can rest in preparation for one day returning. This image presents a twofold meaning: one Christian, and the other pagan. The Christian meaning is perhaps the most forward. The image of Arthur as a Christ figure here is apparent. He dies, only to be reborn. Malory writes a phrase in Latin, “Hic iacet Arthurus, Rex quondam Rexque futurus” (928), which translates to *here lies Arthur, the once and future king*. This is the implication that Arthur will return to lead England once again, for he is the leader of the Christian kingdom of Camelot and part of the quest for the Holy Grail. His legacy is tied to Christendom.

The pagan imagery of the four queens leading Arthur to Avalon is reminiscent of the Norse Valkyries and Valhalla. In *Norse Mythology: A Guide to Gods, Heroes, and Beliefs*, John Lindow writes that Valhalla, or Valholl, was the hall of the slain in which the Valkyries take the chosen dead to feast and fight in Odin’s hall (443-444). The Warriors there are referred to as *einharjarr*, who will fight in the final battle at Ragnarock (Lindow 177). Arthur thus falls into this motif of warrior taken to a glorious afterlife by women. In *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, Saunders touches on the pagan themes that are present in this representation: “Morgan’s presence perhaps looks back to the ancient tradition of Morgan as goddess” (259). This argument is also

referenced by Holbrook, who cites Morgan as a remnant of a “healing goddess” (776). This reminiscence of a goddess figure on the barge that takes the soul and body of the warrior-king away is nearly identical to the passing of the soul from the mortal realm to Vahalla, or, in the Celtic myths, Tir Na Nog. The scene of Arthur’s “death” thus represents the transition between mortal world and supernatural – the pagan Avalon connects with the Christian king. The two religious forces – the pagan past and the Christian future – are bridged by a Christian king with pagan organ being taken to a pagan afterlife and a potential Christian return.

The women of *Le Morte Darthur* who practice magic are part of this pagan-Christian dichotomy. They are the antagonists of Camelot, and, at the same time, the savior of the king. Female characters such as Morgan le Fey and Nynive practice magic on a grand scale: they change the course of Camelot’s history, either for ill or for good. Their magic in the text is complex, as are their characterizations. Without a doubt, however, Morgan le Fey and Nynive will remain powerful and intriguing figures for years to come.

#### Chapter 4: Fantastic Things and Where to Find Them – Magical Beasts, Demons, and Holy Objects

While male and female characters are extremely important to discuss when it comes to magic in *Le Morte Darthur*, it would be folly not to mention the other aspects of magic in Sir Thomas Malory's text, namely, magic creatures, places, and objects. These fantastical things are part of the construction of the medieval romance. They serve to highlight the narrative of the piece as well as provide a counterpoint for Christian theology. In *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory synthesizes fantastical creatures and objects from various sources to add an element of magic and mysticism in conjuncture with Christianity. Malory divides these fantastical constructs into what is pagan and what is Christian. Malory's use of the Questing Beast, dragons, and demons serve to highlight a dangerous paganism that must be defeated by Christian power. In connection with this, Malory adds the use of magical items to firmly establish the mystical power of Christianity and those favored by God, such as the cases of Excalibur and The Holy Grail.

The first magical construction that Malory uses is the Questing Beast. While only briefly shown, the Questing Beast is used by Malory to highlight Arthur's sin and cast it into a villainous light. Malory's construction of the quest begins after Arthur sleeps with his sister Morgause who, in turn, bears their son, Mordred. Arthur then has a dream in which Mordred destroys the land and mortally wounds Arthur before Arthur slays him (34). After waking from this troubling, foreshadowing dream, Arthur sets off after a hart, only to come across the Questing Beast. Malory writes, "as [Arthur] sate so hym thought

he herde a noyse of howundis to the som of thirty, and with that the kynge saw com towarde hym the straungeste beste that ever he saw or herde of” (34). Malory presents the beast as a mythical beast that makes a noise like the baying of hounds. The mythical quality of the beast is furthered enforced by Pellynor, who tells Arthur: “I have followed that beste longe tyme and kylde myne horse, so wolde God I had another to follow my queste” (35). Pellynor’s line implies that this beast is not native to Camelot. Thus, it is a pagan magical creature that is invading the Christian realm of Camelot. Essentially, Malory presents the beast as a dangerous Other. It is not of the Christian sphere so it must be hunted to its extinction. In his article, “Presents to Princes: A Bestiary of Strange and Wondrous Beasts, Once Known, For a Forgotten Time, and Rediscovered,” Helmut Nickels writes of the Questing Beast, “the exotic nature of the Questing Beast is indicated by the tradition that it was pursued as an adventurous quest, presumably to deliver it to King Arthur’s court at Camelot, by the Saracen knight Sir Palomydes, the son of the king of Babylon” (131). Nickels’ argument is that the Questing Beast is not of English origin but an exoticized creature introduced by Malory into the text. Malory’s construction of the Questing Beast as not being a native of Camelot but instead an exotic, foreign beast allows him to further craft an adventure that gives Arthur a sense of credibility as both king and hero.

Malory does not give the Questing Beast’s origins in *Le Morte Darthur*. However, the *Post-Vulgate* cycle does give its origins. As Malory drew upon multiple sources when composing the *Morte*, he would have been aware of the Beast’s origins. In volume V of the *Post-Vulgate* cycle, the Beast is shown as infernal in nature, stemming from the

sexual union of a young woman and the devil. The young woman sleeps with the devil and conceives as an act of vengeance against her brother, who rejected her initial affections. The *Post-Vulgate* cycle states that the brother was accused of raping her and sentenced to death by a pack of dogs. Before he died, he cursed her, and thus the woman gave birth to the questing beast, whose coming is heralding by dog barks (284).

While Malory does not give this origin story in *Le More Darthur*, he does appear to make use of the *Post-Vulgate's* construction of the beast by having the beast appear after Arthur commits an act of incest. When the Beast departs, Arthur is visited by Merlyn twice: once in the guise of a young child and the next time in the form of an old man (Malory 35-36). Merlyn proceeds to tell Arthur that he is the child of Uther and Igraine, and, furthermore, that he has committed an act of sin by sleeping with his sister, Morgause. Merlyn says, "God ys displesed with you, for ye have lyene by youre syster and on hir ye have gotyn a childe that shall destroy you and all the knyghts of youre realme" (36). In this speech, Malory employs the wizard Merlyn to deliver a foreshadowing prophecy of Arthur's death in the final sections of the *Le Morte Darthur*. Arthur seeing the infernal Questing Beast is akin to heralding his own doom. Malory shows Arthur's sin taking physical form and issuing a warning of what happens to those who commit the sin of incest. Thus, there is a connection between infernal magical beings, sin, and disaster. The Questing Beast is essentially a foreshadowing magical creature that Malory uses to deliver Arthur a warning. The Beast is not the only magical creature that Malory constructs this way.

Throughout *Le Morte*, Malory uses the image and creation of the dragon to allude to King Arthur. The first allusion comes from Arthur's surname and lineage: The line of Pendragon. The name Pendragon is translated by the *Oxford English Dictionary* to mean, in Welsh, "a chief leader" or "head dragon," with *Pen* meaning "head" or "chief" and *Dragon* meaning "dragon" ("pendragon"). From birth, then, Arthur is automatically associated with dragons. Arthur's connection with the mystical beasts mainly comes in prophetic dreams. In her article, "'God may well fordo destiny': Dealing with Fate, Destiny, and Fortune in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and Other Late Medieval Writing," Marilyn Corrie writes, "These allusions [to fate] have been read as signifying that the *Morte* (and implicitly its characters too) presents the fates of Arthur and his knights as determined, at least in part, by forces external to themselves" (701). Corrie's analysis of Malory's presentation of fate and its foreshadowing is mainly concerned with how fate acts upon the various characters. One of the primary methods of fate that Malory employs is foreshadowing through prophecy and dreams.

The dream of the dragon in Book 1 has Arthur sees a vision of a dragon fighting a bear. Malory writes, "[Arthur] felle in a slumberyng and dremed how a dredfull dragon dud drenche muche of his peple, and com fleying one wynges oute of the weste partyes" (153). The dragon is shown as a fearsome beast. It is an otherworldly construct, completely fantastical in nature. It is through this fantasy vision that Malory is able to provide Arthur with a vision of his future. During the dream, Arthur meets a sage who conveniently explains the symbolism behind the dragon as it fights the bear. He says, "the dragon thou dremyste of betokyns thyne owne persone that thus here sayles with thy

syker knyghts; and the coloure of his wyngys is thy kyngdomes that thou haste with thy knyghtes wonne, and his tyale that was all to-tatered sygnyfyed your noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table” (153). The dragon, much like the Questing Beast, is a fantastical creature that foreshadows the doom of Arthur. In this particular case, the dragon represents the fall of the Round Table, as seen by the “to-tatered” tail (153). Since the dragon is connected to Arthur, it would not be adverse to say that the Arthur is responsible for the fall of the Round Table, which is further shown in the later books of *Le Morte* when Arthur sanctions the Grail Quest. Thus, the dragon and Arthur are connected by the strands of fate that Malory weaves.

The second instance of the dragon does not involve Arthur; this dragon is involved in a battle against Launcelot du Lac. This episode happens after Launcelot rescues a lady from being boiled alive by the nefarious magic of Morgan le Fey. The dragon has been placed in a tomb. When Launcelot opens the tomb to fight the dragon, Malory describes the scene thus: “So when Sir Launcelot had lyffte up the tombe there cam oute an orryble and a fyendely dragon spyttynge wylde fyre oute of hyse mowthe” (622). This image of the dragon is nearly identical to the dragon in Arthur’s vision. Arthur’s dragon is also described with “an hydeouse flame of fyre there flowe oute of his mowthe” (153). As stated before, Arthur’s dragon is a direct manifestation and representation of himself. Since both dragons are described with near identical wording, it would then be prudent to conclude that the dragon that Launcelot fights is also a representation of Arthur.

Given Malory's penchant for using fantastical elements as a means of prophetic foreshadowing, the Launcelot-dragon fight construction foreshadows the fight between Launcelot and Arthur in the later part of *Le Morte*. While Malory does not directly state this, the parallels between the dragons and the foreshadowing are clear. Malory has Launcelot slay the dragon, particularly at the behest of a lady, as a way to prepare the story for his eventual betrayal of Arthur. Launcelot betrays Arthur, his king, by sleeping with Queen Guinevere. Essentially, this is the mirror of Launcelot slaying the dragon in the tomb. He kills the symbol of his king within a holy place. Likewise, Launcelot betrays his king by sleeping with his wife. It was this act that caused Launcelot to be banished from the land, an act that costs Arthur – the chief dragon – his life, for Launcelot was not there when the final battle against Mordred commences.

Beyond the foreshadowing, the dragon represents a more direct message that Malory conveys: the defeat of paganism at the hands of Christianity. In his article, "Reformed Dragons: *Bevis of Hampton*, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*," Kenneth Hodges writes, "Since Saint George was the patron saint of late medieval English knighthood and the type of the knightly dragonslayer, his reversals of fortune left their mark on romance, including ... *Le Morte Darthur*" (114). The dragon is placed in a Christian tomb, signifying the placement of an evil, pagan construct to be fought by a Christian figure. Launcelot here is the Saint George figure. He defeats the pagan entity and saves the Christian faith. However, it is Christianity being in peril that saves Christianity in the first place. As the dragon is in the Christian tomb, it represents a pagan entity that has successfully invaded a Christian space.



Christianity is then placed into peril and must be saved. Launcelot saves the Christian space from the pagan entity, securing the Christian place for God. Thus, dangerous magic is extremely important within the medieval romance in order for the Christian hero to be highlighted and seen as a savior.

The magical creature versus Christian hero is seen again in two battles in *Le Morte Darthur*: Arthur's and Launcelot's battles against giants. Corrine Saunders writes in *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, "monstrous creatures repeatedly serve as predators in romance, abductors especially of children, furthering tales of exile and return, separation and reunion" (214). In the case of Malory, the monstrous creatures that Saunders is examining are giants. The first case of a giant attacking Camelot comes in the episode of *King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius*. The story here is that a giant is attacking towns and killing children on the banks of Normandy as well as in the "contrey of Constantyne" (154). Malory's giant is following the medieval concept of giants that Saunders lays out. The giant here is an enemy of the realm – essentially, it is an enemy of Camelot and, by extent, an enemy of Christianity. Malory describes the giant: "[the giant] sate at his soupere alone, gnawing on a lymme of a large man, and there he beekys his brode lendys by the bright fyre" (156). Malory goes on to describe the bodies of three women and twelve children who lay dead at the giant's hands (156). This gruesome description was designed by Malory to purposely invoke feelings of disgust, fear, and dread. Malory also provides this description in order to set Arthur up as the Christian hero who defeats the pagan evil that has come to destroy the Christian land.

Giants are linked expressly to paganism. Saunders writes “the giants’ place is outside the civilized world” (214). The civilized world in this case is Camelot, which means, if the giants do not belong in the civilized world, then they are the opposite of it – i.e., part of the pagan sphere. The opposition that Malory is crafting is a necessary one; the pagan scare that the giants represent serve to ultimately enforce Christianity. As Valerie I. J. Flint discusses in *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*, giants appear in Christian mythology as well, particularly as adversaries of God (334). Thus, Malory’s construction of giants as an opposing force is something that links back to the pagan tales of Old English giants. Saunders writes that “the Anglo-Saxon *Maxims* (v. 41) refer to the ‘þyrs’ (cognate with Old Norse and usually translated as ‘giant’), which like Grendel-monsters dwells in the fens” (94). She further writes, “whatever individuals in Anglo-Saxon England believed about the origins of giants, they would have been acutely aware of a past in which Britain was inhabited by such [as] race” (95). Saunders argues that the concept of giants stems back to pre-Christian Britain, which includes Nordic and Celtic mythologies involving giants. The giants present in *Le Morte Darthur* are the product of a pagan literary heritage. Malory writes two Christian heroes – namely Arthur and Lancelot – to defeat the pagan entities. In *Le Morte Darthur*, the pagan dangers are purposely written so that they may be defeated by the Christian forces. Essentially, Christianity triumphs over paganism, and this can only be fully seen by paganism being present in the text.

In addition to the conflict between paganism and Christianity, Malory also constructs dangers from Christian myth, as well: demons. These demons present what is

perhaps the most harrowing challenges two of the knights of the Round Table particularly, Sir Galahad and Sir Percivale, will face. In *Magic in the Middle Ages*, Richard Kieckhefer writes, “Early Christian writers tended to see all forms of magic, even ostensibly harmless kinds, as relying on demons” (38). The demonic presence in both the Galahad and Percivale episodes is not demonic magic acting through an agent, as is the case of Merlyn and the various sorceresses, but, rather, it is a direct demonic force that corrupts and damages the Christian realm of Camelot.

In the Galahad episode, Galahad exorcizes a demon with his own Christian power. I have previously discussed this episode in chapter two, so I will not focus on the inherent Christian power of Galahad. Instead, I will discuss the construct of the demon. Malory describes the demon as “a fowle smoke” and the “fowlst vygoure lepe thereoute that ever [Galahad] saw in the lykness of a man” (682). The demon here appears in the likeness of a human, meaning that the demon is a corrupted form of mankind. This corruption cannot be allowed to continue to exist. The smoke is the signifier of demonic corruption. In *Demons and the Devil in Ancient and Medieval Christianity*, Vos Nienke quotes Hellmans: “The devil has the shape of an ever-changing shadow – a *spiritus multiformis*” (35). This shadow form is present not just in Galahad, but also in the story of Percivale.

Percivale’s demon appears in the form of a woman. As with Galahad, the demon takes the human form and corrupts it. She first appears in a “shippe covered with sylke more blacker than ony beare” and she is described as a “grete beauté” who is “clothed rychly” (Malory 709). Malory describes the woman as a person of worldly power and

pleasures. She is richly adorned and sexual in nature. The woman makes multiple advances to Percivale, to which he initially succumbs. She creates a pavilion and tent for them and promises to help him reach Sir Galahad. It is not until he sees his sword laying beside them after they “lay naked” (711) that he rebukes the lady. In response, “the pavylon turned up-so-downe and then hit changed unto a smooke and a blak clowde” (711). The black smoke – the shadow – is reminiscent of Galahad’s earlier adventure with the demon. The lady, then, is likened to something infernal. This is further because the pavilion only turns into smoke after Percivale makes the sign of the cross upon his forehead (711). The woman then leaves and Percivale admonishes himself for almost betraying his virtue (712). Afterwards, a man on a ship tells Percivale that the woman was “the mayster fyende of helle, which hath pousté over all other devyllis” (712). The lady therefore becomes a Lilith-like figure. She is a master of all demons and incredibly dangerous. If not for Percivale’s faith and virtue, he would have ultimately succumbed to her. It is interesting, then, that Malory crafts a woman as the strongest devil in hell, not a man. As with Morgan le Fey, Malory implies that a woman who practices anti-Christian magic is much more dangerous than a man, for it is not a man, or evil Lucifer, who leads the demons in hell, it is this mysterious woman. Thus, dark, adversarial magic is once again linked with a female figure. In this case, it is the corrupted version of womankind.

Magical creatures, whether corrupted or visionary, all share the theme of being negatively received in *Le Morte*; magical objects, on the other hand, tend to be favored by the characters of *Le Morte* and even provide them with protection and healing. The most obvious objects in question are the magical sword Excalibur and the Holy Grail.

Such objects like these are a staple in medieval romance, particularly within the Arthurian mythos. Some of these magical items within *Le Morte Darthur* are constructed by Malory to only play a small part in regards to plot-moving. Such is the case in the *Sir Lamerok de Galys* episode in which a magic drinking horn is used to reveal which wives have been unfaithful to their husbands (Malory 344). Isode does not pass the horn's test, and publicly reveals that she has fallen in love and had an affair with Sir Trystram (344-345). The drinking horn is simply a plot device. However, Malory constructs Excalibur and the Holy Grail very differently. They are central to the text – paramount to the lives of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Saunders writes, “the fascination with the marvelous in romance triggers an interest in the manufacture of marvel and the experience of wondrous objects. These are often shaped by the marvelous technology of the East or the otherworld in its various guises, and may also be specified as crafted through ‘enchantment’” (134). The marvelous, in Malory's case, is the obsession with the power of holy relics and magical objects. The Holy Grail and Excalibur both operate as items that come from “the otherworld” (Saunders 134), throughout different ones. The Otherworld for the Grail is the Holy Spirit and the power of Christ, and the Otherworld for the sword is the Lady of the Lake and her domain.

As Excalibur comes from the Lady of the Lake, the power of the sword comes into question, as the Lady of the Lake is a pagan entity. As Robert L. Kelly writes in “Malory's ‘Tale of Balin’ Reconsidered,” “the appearance between the gift of Excalibur and the Lady of the Lake's appearance is evident” (87). Kelly argues that the Lady of the Lake and Excalibur are tied together – one is not without the other. Indeed, the first

appearance of Excalibur is in a scene involving the Lady of the Lake. Arthur and Merlyn ride out to the middle of a lake, in which Malory writes there was “an arme clothed in whyght samyte, that helde a fayre swerde in that honde” (43). Merlyn tells Arthur that this woman is the Lady of the Lake, but before Arthur can have the sword, he must first promise her a gift – a favor to be collected at a later time (Malory 43-44). While the Lady is vague as to the nature of the gift, the Lady’s promised gift does come to fruition later during the tale of Balyn and his brother, in which they kill one of the other Ladies of the Lake. The importance of the Arthur getting the sword, however, is the power that Excalibur contains. Merlyn says “Ye ar the more unwise, for the scawberde ys worth ten of the swerde; for whyles ye have the scawberde uppon you ye shall lose no blood, be ye never so sore wounded. Therefore kepe well the scawberde allweyes with you” (44). Merlyn’s speech has two purposes the first is to detail the marvelous power of Excalibur, and the second is to issue a warning to Arthur to always keeps the magical sword and scabbard with him.

The sword, then, becomes something of a fairy-bargain. It is not given by a Christian entity, yet it is used by a Christian king. Kelly writes, “[Malory] also makes the disclosure of a realistic motive behind the Lady's actions more plausible by playing down the fairy-tale element in the episode at the lake” (88). Malory chooses to focus on the action instead of the magic and myth behind the action, meaning that Malory chooses to show Arthur getting the sword in exchange for a deal, rather than explaining the origin and conception of the magical blade, which is presumably by the enchantment method discussed by Saunders (134). Kelly further argues that Malory is “suppressing the

magical features of the place [and] focuses clearly on two human acts” (88) and because of that, “his version of the episode is consistent with a generally more realistic conception of character and plot throughout the sequence of events in question” (88). Among Malory’s sources, the *Post-Vulgate* also contains a more elaborate scene in which Arthur is given the sword by the Lady of the Lake. Malory repurposes this scene in order to not only streamline the story but also to make the obtaining of Excalibur more concise and realistic. Malory’s construction of a more realistic scene, suppressing the magical undertones, gives the narrative the separation from paganism it needs so that Arthur can accept the sword without a Christian moral quandary. The power of the sword can thus be received.

The warning Merlyn gives also serves as prophetic foreshadowing. In the subsequent books of *Le Morte*, Arthur’s half-sister, Morgan le Fey, manages to steal the sword and scabbard away. This betrayal ultimately puts Arthur’s life in danger, as Morgan not only steals the scabbard and sword, but flings it into a lake. Malory describes the scene: “and than [Morgan] lete throwe the scawberde in the deppyst of the watir. So hit sanke, for hit was hevvy of golde and precious stones” (120). With the scabbard gone, Arthur has no defense; his protection is gone. As stated in chapter three, this betrayal leads to a disaster when he fights his son Mordred on the battle field. The importance of Morgan’s phrasing, and in Merlyn’s phrasing, is the emphasis of the word “scawberde” (44, 120). Malory is purposefully placing the power of the enchantment in the scabbard and not in the sword. Therefore, the physical power to kill is not what is prized; instead, it is the power to defend that is the key. This places the power of Arthur

not in sheer weaponry, but in the holder of the blade – the thing that separates the blade from the outside world. Malory gives Arthur an association with defense instead of brutality.

Malory's emphasis on defense instead of war, of righteousness instead of sin, ultimately culminates into the Holy Grail and its associated quest. In the Quest for the Holy Grail, Malory makes his text become almost completely Christian. The instances of pagan magic fade. Saunders writes, "In the quest of the Sankgreall, by contrast, human and otherworldly magic are replaced by a supernatural that is explicitly divine or demonic" (253). Malory's emphasis on otherworldly magic against Christian magic is more evident prior to the Grail Quest. There is a struggle between the forces of evil sorceresses against the Christian knights of the Round Table. The Grail Quest is a spiritual quest. P. J. C. Fields in the critical introduction to *Le Morte Darthur* writes, "A spiritual quest, however, demands different standards from worldly quests" (xxix). The difference here is a primary shift from pagan to Christian, especially in terms of magic and adversary. When the Grail Quest officially begins, there is a shift from evil sorceresses and antagonistic magic to the holy magic of God and Grail and the knights of the Round Table who fight their own, internal battles as well as physical battles. Malory is presenting the struggle of Christian reconciliation of his or her faith against the dark forces of the material world.

The first mention of the Grail comes in a prophecy given by King Pellès. Malory describes the scene: "the kynge knew well that Sir Launcelot shoulde gete a pusyll uppon his doughtir, whyche shulde be called Sir Galahad.. and by hym the Holy Grayle sholde



be encheved” (Malory 622-623). Malory thus foreshadows Galahad as the archetypal holy figure of the text – only he can bring back the Grail. Even within the *Post-Vulgate* cycles, only Galahad, Percival, and Bors can achieve the Holy Grail. This construction is something that Malory heavily incorporates within *Le Morte Darthur*. He places the emphasis of obtaining the Grail specifically on Galahad, as I discussed in chapter 2. This emphasis allows Malory to craft Galahad as a Christ figure. Malory furthers this by making sure that achieving the Grail is something that neither Launcelot nor Arthur is capable of doing. Saunders points out, “from the late books of the Tristram section onwards, the ethos is informed by prophecy and the promise of spiritual enlightenment, focused especially in Galahad” (253). The Grail, then, is a focus of spiritual energy, spiritual Christian energy to be exact. It would only make sense, then, that this energy culminates in the Christ figure of *Le Morte Darthur*: Sir Galahad.

This is not to say that the Grail as a magical object is solely concerned with Galahad, and only appears to him; indeed, the Grail interacts with most of the Knights of the Round Table. However, it should be noted some of these interactions serve to further the connection between the Grail and Galahad. The Grail first physically manifests itself to Sir Bors. Malory describes the manifestation of the Grail three-fold: the Grail itself, a woman holding the Grail, and a white dove (Malory 626). The maiden with the Grail tells Sir Bors about Galahad and how “he shall be mucche bettir than ever was Sir Launcelot” (626). The image of the holy woman appearing with a white dove and sacred object to give proclamation is inherently Christian. Saunders writes, “Prophetic voices and physical manifestations of the divine intervene in the process of chivalry and

adventure” (254). The prophetic voice, in this case, is the maiden – specifically the Grail Maiden.

The “mayden [that] bare that Sankgreall” (Malory 626) appears more than once; take, for example, the maiden that declares that the Grail Quest has begun. She is first described as follows: “So therewith the kyng and all had aspyed com rydyng downe the ryver a lady on a whyght palfrey a grete paace towards them” (Malory 672). This image bears a resemblance to the first lady associated with the Holy Grail, as she is described: “and so there cam in a whyght dowve, and she bare a lytyll sensar of golde in her mowthe, and there was all maner of metys and drynkis, and a mayden bare that Sankgreall” (626). Both ladies are associated with white animals. There is, then, a focus on purity and pureness. Essentially, these women are magical constructions that Malory uses to further the Otherworldliness of the Grail. They are not the same kind of magical characters that the Ladies of the Lake are. Instead, they are something else, something inherently Christian. They take the natural magic associated with faerie realm of the Ladies of the Lake and parallel it in their construction as bearers of the Holy Grail.

Once the Quest starts, the world around Camelot changes. Saunders writes, “This is a world of prophetic dreams, allegorical meanings, visionary experiences, and miracles” (Saunders 253). The main miracle that the Grail produces is healing. The Holy Grail is responsible for a number of healings throughout *Le Morte*. These healings come at a price for the Grail – the people getting healed must undergo confessions of faith, or rather, they must demonstrate their faith. In the article “Lancelot’s Prayer and the Healing of Sir Urry,” J. Cameron Moore writes,

The Grail Quest dramatically contrasts the two different criteria for knighthood present within the text: the standards of Arthur's court, honor and worship through prowess and nobility, are superseded by the Quest's spiritual requirements of confession, holiness, and virginity (5).

Moore's analysis of the Quest links directly to the knights who get healed, the first instance involves the healing of Sir Percivale. This healing is only done after Percivale "kneled downe and made hys prayer devoutely unto Allmyghty Jesu" (643). The healing then occurs right afterward as Malory writes, "Ryghte so there cam by the holy vessell, the Sankegreall, wyth all maner of swetnesse and savoure" (643). It is Percivale's own holiness that allows him access to both the power and the sight of the Holy Grail. Malory goes to great pains to make it clear that Percivale is only healed because he is pure and virginal: "Sir Percyvale had a glemerynge of the vessell and of the mayden that bare it, for he was a perfyte mayden" (643). Malory calls Percivale a mayden to emphasize his connection to the maiden of the Grail: both are holy and have a connection with purity. Thus, Moore's framework of the spiritual requirements of holiness and virginity for the Grail Quest holds true.

In contrast to Percivale's, as well as Galahad's, inherent holiness and connection to the Grail, Launcelot, once dubbed the greatest knight on earth, has a more complicated history with the Grail. Launcelot's quest during the time of the Grail Quest is central to the plotline of *Le Morte Darthur* because it breaks him down to save him in the end. The Grail Quest casts the type of magic that builds Launcelot as the ultimate hero – though not the ultimate Christian hero, for that title falls to his son, Galahad. Launcelot's first

healing comes with the help of Elayne. Malory writes, “by miracle and by vertu of that holy vessell Sir Launcelot was heled and recoverde” (650). It is important to note that Launcelot never sees the Grail. He is unconscious at this point of the story. Malory constructs this episode in this way because it shows that Launcelot is not the most holy knight there is – his affair with Guinevere as well as his love of worldly possessions do not show the purity that is necessary for one to look upon the Grail.

Malory does allow Launcelot to look upon the Grail at least once – but even then, it is not the full vision of the Grail; it is covered by a shroud. Additionally, this is only after Launcelot has sufficiently repented and honored his faith. Moore writes, “Lancelot’s guides on the Grail Quest, the hermits as well as Galahad, teach him to pray, and when Lancelot puts their advice into practice he is rewarded with his vision of the Grail at Castle Corbenic” (3). Thus, Launcelot becomes just holy enough to approach the Grail, but he falls short because of his worldly desires. Despite this, however, Launcelot still feels a sort of religious ecstasy: “and then Sir Launcelot mervayled nat a litill, for hym thought the pryste was so gretly charged of the vygoure that hym semed that he sholde falle to the erth” (774). The sheer power of the Grail here is unmistakable. It fills Launcelot with such a power that he passes out, having had his newly found religious piety rewarded. Saunders writes, “[Malory’s] Launcelot is a visionary, experiencing the ineffable and seeing [pynly] God’s ‘grete mervayles of secretnesse’” (257). Saunders provides what is perhaps the best closing argument for the case of the Grail’s power: Launcelot and his son are both tied to the Grail but in very different ways.

The magic and power of the Holy Grail in *Le Morte Darthur* is used by Malory to finish establishing the chief role that Christianity plays in this medieval romance. Launcelot receives his vision from the Grail and goes on to finish his adventures back in the worldly realm of Camelot. Galahad, on the other hand, devotes his life to the Grail and dies on the Grail Quest. Thus, the Grail takes the ultimate price: complete and utter devotion to God in exchange for one's life. Galahad fulfills the purpose of his prophecy – he receives the Grail, and, as a result, Malory writes the character's death and apotheosis. Essentially, Malory uses the Grail Quest to further make the Christ comparison with Galahad. He is prophesied, he comes and is beloved by all, and then he is martyred at the end. The Grail, then, becomes the ultimate bridge into Christianity.

Sir Thomas Malory uses magical creatures and constructs as powerful ways to communicate the differences and to bridge the pagan past to the Christian future, which ultimately culminates in the Holy Grail and its related Quest. The Grail Quest itself is the prime example of Christianity in the text, but it ends with the death of Arthur. Malory's description of the death scene, as well as escort to Avalon bespeaks of pagan influence, primarily, Tir Na Nog and Valhalla. The culmination between Christian king and pagan burial then further cements the connection between pagan and Christian: one cannot exist without the other. For *Le Morte Darthur* to be successful as a Christian, medieval romance, there must be a balance to the pagan magic, and there must be a balance to the Holy Grail. In the end, Malory achieves ending the Grail Quest in triumph and ending *Le Morte* with the heroic, tragic, but not magic, death of the Once and Future King.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

To this day, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* remains one of the standard works of Arthurian literature. It permeates into modern renditions of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. *Le Morte Darthur* is cited as the inspiration of books such as T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* and Terry Brook's *The Sword of Shannara*, as well as contemporary television shows like BBC's *Merlin* and Showtime's *Camelot*. Malory's work has become an important and integral part of Arthurian literature. Malory did not just compose a manuscript; he combined previous Arthurian sources into a centralized mythology. He wrote a legend that contained echoes of a past as it reached for a new literary future.

Malory's use of magic in *Le Morte Darthur* is complex yet constructed with purpose. He drew from many sources, primarily the *Post-Vulgate* cycle, to compose his manuscript. From these sources he pulled many fantastical elements, including enchantresses, sorcery, demons, dragons, beasts, and the Holy Grail. These elements form the basis of the magic in *Le Morte*. Malory places many of these magic elements in juxtaposition with Christianity. In doing so, he limits the power of fantasy used in his work and therefore highlights the Christian ideals. In placing Christianity over magic, Malory is able to use these fantastical elements without fear of retribution from the Christian Church. In the Middle Ages, magic without Christianity is a fiction, which is both a lie and a sin.

Thus is the importance of magic in *Le Morte Darthur*. It serves to emphasize Christianity and bring Christian ideals to the forefront. Malory's England of 1485 was a

Christian place, as the Christian conversion of England had happened centuries before he first penned *Le Morte*. However, this is not to say that paganism simply died off in one fell swoop. As Lucy Allen Paton points out in her book *Studies in Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, pagan spirits and gods often got reinterpreted into medieval romance as fairies and devils (303-305). Likewise, Saunders writes that the pagan spirits and gods mentioned in medieval texts were often attributed to the “enemy” or Satan, the great deceiver (138). These figures, these pagan gods and spirits, are not inventions of the Middle Ages – they have histories and mythologies all their own. They are part of a cultural past that begs to be remembered and to be acknowledged.

Magic, and *Le Morte Darthur*, therefore bridge the pagan past to his Christian future. Through *Le Morte*, Malory ensures that the original stories of Merlyn, Morgan, and Ninyve – the stories that inspired him so much – remain, in some way, a part of a cultural and literary history. He manages to keep the *Post-Vulgate* cycle alive and add to it his own words and mythology. Furthermore, Malory shows a critical part of religious and literary history in the mixture of paganism and Christianity.

Malory creates his Christian kingdom of Camelot as constantly opposed by pagan, magical forces. Yet his ending has these same forces responsible for taking King Arthur away to Avalon, and, to complicate matters further, Malory has Arthur’s early chief advisors be magical beings: Merlyn and Ninyve. As I have discussed in this thesis, Malory does all of this with great purpose. He entangles paganism and Christianity to show that they are not mutually exclusive forces. In medieval romance, Christianity relies on paganism to be the antagonist and the foil. It can serve to harm and destroy, as

in the cases of Morgan and the Questing Beast, or it can provide the aid a Christian knight needs to succeed, as with Merlyn and Ninyve ministering to Arthur.

The importance of magic, specifically in *Le Morte Darthur*, is fueled by the division between male and female characters, in which masculine forms of magic are beneficial and female forms of magic are often antagonistic. Of the three male magic users I discussed, Galahad and Launcelot reside purely in the Christian realm and their magic is Christian. However, Merlyn and his pagan magic also exist within Camelot. He is responsible for the making of King Arthur and often interferes to save Arthur's life or deliver prophecies. Malory's emphasizes the importance of a masculine Christianity. He gives the direct action of holy power to male knights, while presenting most of the female magic users as antagonistic beings bent on the destruction of Camelot.

Therefore, women like Morgan, who cannot be controlled by Christian ideals, fall outside the realm of Camelot. Malory's emphasis on female antagonistic magic creates a discussion on women who go against the church. They are seen as dangerous and harmful. Furthermore, Malory presents them as morally bad and presents alternatives to their behaviors. This is fully seen when comparing Morgan to Ninyve, Isode, or Guinevere. All three of Morgan's opposites fully exist within the Christian sphere, even though Ninyve is a practitioner of pagan magic. Malory's emphasis on her marriage, a story that is not in the *Post-Vulgate* cycle, shows that Ninyve marries into Christianity. Essentially, it is an allusion to Christian conversion.



The importance of Christianity, as well as who and what are Christian, is a major part of *Le Morte*. Christianity is linked with nobility, with honor, with healing, and with worship. Malory places magic in connection to these traits in order to show just how important it is to be a Christian who exhibits these traits, which culminates with the Grail Quest. Malory asks the readers to examine whether or not they, too, are Christian enough to view the Holy Grail. Through Launcelot's Grail quest, Malory emphasizes the importance of repentance and the grace that awaits those who have repented. Through Galahad and Percival, Malory emphasizes purity and virginity. He shows the importance of remaining pure in faith in the face of spiritual and physical demons. With Galahad, Malory gives the medieval audience (and arguably a modern audience) a Christ-like figure to aspire to be.

Sir Thomas Malory wrote *Le Morte Darthur* to show the importance of Arthurian legend. More than that, Malory synthesized his sources to write the legend of a king and his knights who would become cultural ideals of honor, heroism, courage, and faith. The importance of *Le Morte* cannot be put into mere words – it must be read and experienced. It still influences the way contemporary authors construct and interpret Arthurian legend. Magic and Christianity in *Le Morte* are the defining principles of the work. It is through them that *Le Morte* continues to evolve and be defined beyond its original text. Magic and Christianity are the reasons that scholars are still discussing *Le Morte*. Magic and Christianity form one basis of scholarly evolution for *Le Morte Darthur*. It is thus important to acknowledge these powerful forces of literary and spiritual constructs, for

they transcend ink and page and speak to our imaginations to craft a narrative that is as fluid and interesting as the legend they are a part of.

It is my hope that this thesis will open a discussion on magic not just in *Le Morte Darthur* but in other Arthurian works, as well. Magic is a continuous concept. It has not died in the Middle Ages, nor should it have. Just as Christianity and how scholars approach Christian theology in texts has evolved, so too has magic and how we approach it. Works such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *King Arthur and Merlin*, *The Vulgate* and *Post-Vulgate Cycles*, as well as T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of a King* all have forms of magic within their texts. Furthermore, they all have Christianity as a primary focal point of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Magic in these works is connected with the Christian elements, and it is important to recognize that this theme found in Arthurian legend, if not medieval romance as a whole.

In future study, I plan on continuing this study of magic and Christianity into further graduate research by incorporating other Arthurian works from various European literary traditions besides English. While it was not in the scope of this thesis to discuss the history behind *Le Morte Darthur* and Sir Thomas Malory, it is worth considering, and it is something I will further develop at a later time. Through this thesis, however, I have put forward questions and a discussion that is relevant to where the field of Arthurian and medieval literary studies is heading. Pagan magic and Christian theology are not as separate as scholars have once thought. They do not exist in a vacuum, but, indeed, exist together in a symbiotic relationship in which both benefit from the other.

In conclusion, magic in *Le Morte Darthur* serves many functions, but primarily Malory uses it to highlight Christianity and Christian themes. Malory's careful construction of *Le Morte* and its use of magic and Christianity will echo in our literary history for decades, if not centuries more, for the Arthurian legend is not designed to die out – its magic is written to echo into legends beyond our own. It is here that the words on Arthur's tombstone become reality: "*Hic iacet Arthurus, Rex quondam Rexque futurus*" (928). The magic that echoes through the legends of Arthur is what makes him immortal; it is what makes him the once and future king.

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