

5-2015

Magic and Femininity as Power in Medieval Literature

Anna McGill

East Tennessee State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.etsu.edu/honors>

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Medieval Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McGill, Anna, "Magic and Femininity as Power in Medieval Literature" (2015). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 293.
<http://dc.etsu.edu/honors/293>

This Honors Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact digilib@etsu.edu.

Magic and Femininity as Power in Medieval Literature

Literature often reflects the views of the society which created it—consider, for instance, the disillusionment with the 1920s American dream portrayed in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* or the harsh and nearly hopeless reality of Steinbeck’s Depression-era novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. In the case of these works and many others, they cannot be fully understood until they are considered within their social and historical context. Simultaneously, the work is dependent on its context: Gatsby’s disillusionment would not be nearly so poignant if it was a product of the Great Depression, nor would the Joads’ harsh story have ended hopefully in the boom society of the 1920s.

This give-and-take relationship between a society and its literature is especially interesting when one considers medieval texts. Due to the fact that most medieval plots and characters are variants of existing stories, the ways in which portrayals change has the potential to reveal much about the differences between European societies within the Middle Ages, separated by distance and time. In the words of April Harper, “literature has long been a medium through which a society articulates its values... a vehicle for the transmission of ideas and ideals” (108). Changes to the treatment of these recurring characters and their stories can reveal how the attitudes of medieval society changed over time. One of the most marked characteristics of medieval society was the continually strengthening power of the Catholic Church, which had huge impacts on many other aspects of medieval life. The perception of women was greatly altered, in particular: as the power of the Church grew throughout the Middle Ages, women’s power in almost all areas of life experienced a proportional decrease. Therefore, it follows that this decrease of power should be reflected in the literature of the time. One way that this robbing

of power is demonstrated is in the portrayal of magic and femininity in medieval literature. Due to the fact that in medieval literature “ideal femininity” focused on “the static body of the white, upper-class woman” (Breuer 18), typically, only magical women exhibited any agency (independent motivation) or potency (ability to effect change within a narrative).

By necessity, my review of the relevant literature includes literature from both historical and literary backgrounds, encompassing much of the commentary surrounding medieval magic and the lives of medieval witches and healers. Also included is commentary regarding the featuring of agency and potency in some of female characters of medieval literature.

History of Magic 101: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Middle Ages

The medieval period was a time of drastic social change in Europe. As the power of the Catholic Church increased, opportunities for women became scarce, as they were barred from most, if not all, institutions of formal learning (Minkowski 228). Traditionally, women had been able to maintain positions in their communities as healers and wise-women, and the distinction between scientific healing and magic had not yet been fully determined. However, clerical perceptions of magic and its relationship to women evolved dramatically, eventually leading to Europe’s famous “witch-craze” (Jones and Zell 63). In the tenth and eleventh centuries respectively, the canon *Episcopi* and Burchard of Worms’ *Decretum* address the clerical beliefs regarding magic at the time, also listing many concepts that would later become a part of the witch-stereotype. For example, in the 19th book of his *Decretum*, Burchard claims, “in the night hours they ride on certain animals with the pagan goddess Diana and a countless multitude of women, and they cross a great span of the world in the stillness of the dead of night” (Burchard

444). At this time, it was thought that magic was, for the most part, mere superstition and that any tangible results were indicative of demonic trickery (Bailey 124).

In the twelfth century, as a result of European rediscovery of classical, Hebrew, and Arabic texts, a renaissance occurred, bringing with it a new clerical attitude toward magic (Bailey 125). As a result, the “explicitly demonic magic of the necromancers” was made a part of the medieval conceptualization of magic (Kieckhefer 372). Specifically, necromancy refers to the art of communing with the dead, but the term is commonly generalized to include much of this medieval ritual magic. This new magic required extensive knowledge of languages and quasi-Christian ritual, meaning that it was almost exclusively a masculine magic, often performed by members of the clergy themselves. Necromancy involved subjugation to demonic forces through extremely complex rituals (Bailey 127); however, this subjugation was considered a “gentlemen’s agreement” of sorts, allowing the necromancer the power to make requests of these demonic forces.

In his article describing the subjective experience of practitioners of medieval ritual magic, or necromancy, Frank Klaassen describes the arduous nature of the rituals required in detail. For instance, the *Ars notoria*, the “single most common work of ritual magic in the later Middle Ages,” describes rituals which were purported to confer “complete knowledge of the arts and sciences and other spiritual and intellectual gifts through infusion by the angels” (Klaassen 26). It is suggested that completing the entire program of rituals would take several years of intense isolation, fasting, and study (Klaassen 27). Other ritual texts, such as the *Liber juratus Honorii*, which describes the process of producing the “sigil of God,” an item used to command spirits or to attain a “beatific vision,” or vision of God, include equally long and involved rituals (Klaassen 27-28). Often, texts would rely on each other as well, requiring practitioners to

perform other rituals (sometimes months long) before they could continue in their practice (Klaassen 29).

Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, clergymen and necromancers struggled to align their doctrine regarding common magic and the results that it achieved, which were often comparable to those achieved by the necromancers' long and complex rituals. In contrast to the necromancers' gentlemanly subjection to demons, it was determined that witches were "explicitly submitting" to the devil himself, with all the sexual implications associated with total submission (Bailey 127). The sexualization of the witch's relationship with demons lead directly to the overwhelming stereotype of witches as female because of the heteronormative thought process that was dominant during the medieval period, precluding the idea of a male witch submitting sexually to the devil. Throughout Judeo-Christian history, women's sexuality was continually suspect, described succinctly by Julia Long: "[Eve's] body is the object of Adam's temptation just as much as the apple" (97).

Then, in 1487 Heinrich Kramer published *Malleus maleficarum* (Jones and Zell 48). This famous witch-hunting manual associated witchcraft with carnal lust, a sin to which women were considered especially vulnerable (Bailey 120). Several chapters of *Malleus* focus specifically on the sexual potential of witchcraft (e.g. Part 1, Question IV; Part 2, Question I, Chapters I and IV), warning how magic could be used to cause lust or impotence at will and specifically implicating women in these spells (Rider 190). These women were described as "those who are more inflamed with the purpose of satisfying their base lustings, like adulteresses, female fornicators and the concubines of powerful men" (Mackay 171). These shifts in the perceptions of magic, particularly the feminization of magic, led directly to the "witch-craze" of the sixteenth century (Jones and Zell 63).

Magical Women in the Middle Ages

By far the most common portrayal of magical women in the literature of the Middle Ages cast them in the role of healers. However, as perceptions changed regarding female healers, the roles of these characters shifted from a representation of intrinsic female power to little more than literary devices. History demonstrates the relevance of this literary casting, as female healers and midwives, who were almost always forced to operate outside the male-dominated realm of medical science, were often believed to possess “skills of sorcery” (Minkowski 294). According to Minkowski, in the early Middle Ages the most readily available medical care was administered by local “wise women” whose methods often combined superstitious, ritual, and herbal elements. Then, in 1140, Roger II of Sicily implemented the first medical licensure requirement in Europe, and local or regional regulations enforced by universities or the Church followed throughout the late Middle Ages (Minkowski 293). Regardless of regulation, however, wise women continued to practice, passing their knowledge orally as they were not permitted formal training. Midwifery in particular remained a feminine monopoly as “men believed their dignity and self-esteem were diminished by the manual nature of care for the pregnant patient” (Minkowski 292). This exposed midwives to much potential for controversy, as not only could they be held responsible for any harm that came to mother and child during labor, but often some midwives provided additional reproductive care (Minkowski 292). Because magic was so closely associated with healing, Minkowski states that “many women who had been called physicians in the late 13th century were branded as charlatans and witches in the late 14th and 15th centuries” (293).

Medieval women’s roles as healers were often reflected in the literature of the time. April Harper chronicles the literary tradition of female healers from classical literature to the sixteenth

century. She states that a bulk of the literature describing feminine healing magic was produced in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Harper 110). Some of these literary healers occasionally use “amulets and curing stones,” commonly referred to as “stones of life” to supplement their healing (Harper 110). Due to the distinction between magic and medicine being unclear at that time, the use of healing magic appears to have not been commonly considered unusual in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Harper 111). However, female healers presented a challenge to both the university systems and the Catholic Church’s mission to abolish paganism. As they became less visible in society, Harper indicates that they also became less prevalent in literature (111). Harper chronicles female literary healers, including Queen Iseult of Ireland of the Tristram narratives, Enide of *Erec et Enide*, Nicolette of *Aucassin et Nicolette*, and Morgan le Fay of Arthurian narratives; she describes how, as time progresses, the source of these characters’ healing knowledge and power becomes more and more explicitly medical, or alternately, how the role of the female healer simply decreased altogether, particularly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Harper 118). As exemplified by Morgan le Fay, “by the sixteenth century, the image of the female healer in literature was relegated almost entirely to fairy figures...she was a fantastical creature with mysterious abilities, not a physician” (Harper 121). As societal views of female healers changed, their presence in medieval literature simply positioned them as literary devices rather than as an accurate representation of the female healer.

Another role that was sometimes ascribed to female witches was actually that of the saint (and vice versa). Richard Kieckhefer expounds on the perceived similarities between sainthood and witchcraft, reporting that all cases of “empirical confusion” of the two occurred in the case of women because “women’s spirituality was more often suspect” (Kieckhefer 379). Kieckhefer attributes any conflation to the charged emotions surrounding devotion to a saint or an accusation

of witchcraft, stating that any mirroring was not systematic enough to be conclusively deliberate and that any combination of the two was simply “a literary fiction” (Kieckhefer 371-372).

However, very similar instances were reported as either saintly or magical depending on the context. Kieckhefer contrasts this juxtaposition of the holy and the unholy with the precarious position of the medieval necromancer, who “radically departed” from traditional Christianity while still relying on much of its mythology and ritual (384). He explains this dichotomy by describing sainthood and witchcraft as “ascribed roles” with different observers potentially ascribing different statuses, while the role of the necromancer was “self-defined” as a sacred alliance between the holy and the unholy (Kieckhefer 385).

The occasional conflation of witch and saint during the medieval period is especially interesting considering the divine origins of some of the most powerful magical women of medieval literature. In some medieval Christian writings, mystical women were deified to such an extreme that some, such as the female archetype Wisdom, were considered a member of the Holy Trinity (Ruether 187). However, it was considerably more common for a shift in the opposite direction to occur in medieval literature: pagan, especially Celtic goddesses featured in early narratives lost their deification and much of their magical power to the point of unrecognizability.

The most notable formerly divine character of the Middle Ages is Morgan le Fey, or literally, Morgan the Wise. As will be addressed below, she is a powerful witch in Arthurian narratives, but Morgan was originally a Celtic “divinity,” or goddess (Hughes 16). Throughout her iterations in medieval literature, she is continually referred to as a “*dea, déesse, gotinne, or goddes*” as well as a queen (Hughes 16). Muriel Joy Hughes describes her memorably as “more of an enchantress than a physician,” saying “if she resorted to plasters and salves, it was only as a

concession to the tastes of generations growing skeptical of sheer magic” (16). However, over 60 years after Hughes’ writing, it now seems more likely that the later generations of the medieval period were not simply skeptical of the efficacy of so-called magic, especially considering the wide-spread concern and hysteria surrounding the witch-hunts of the sixteenth century. I propose that rather than simply falling out of favor with the reading society of Europe, the motivation and power of magical women to make change within medieval narratives experienced a decline inversely proportional to the increase of social control experienced by the Church and Europe’s university system.

Methodology

To demonstrate a relationship between the historical perspectives on magic in the Middle Ages and the portrayal of magical women in medieval literature, I performed a content analysis of medieval historical and literary texts. By using the inductive spiral method of content analysis, interpreting and adapting to my findings throughout the process, I could systematically consider the relationships between historical perspectives and literary portrayals of magical women on many levels, using memo writing to reflect on the information I acquire as I go. I was able to code for themes within different texts.

I acquired background knowledge reading experts in medieval literature, considering their selections of texts and specific characters to inform my own choice. As a result of choosing prominent female characters from medieval literature, I am highlighting the ways that social change generally and the increase in power of the Catholic Church specifically reduced the power and agency of these magical women in literature. I chose characters within a narrative that is repeated throughout different times and/or societies, in order to demonstrate a clear change in

the perceptions of feminine magic. I consider the way these characters' traits have changed over time, reflecting contemporary societal changes.

Specifically, through the variances of agency, or self-motivation, of repeated female characters or types of characters, I hope to be able to determine a characters' power to make change within a narrative. In terms of this paper, individual agency implies that the character has discernable individual motivations for her actions, typically characterized by free will. This, along with the character's ability to effect change within the story, or their potency, indicates the character's power within the narrative. Because in medieval narratives magical women or healers are often the only women who exhibit agency, I focus my content analysis on two specific magical female characters, Morgan le Fay and Isolde.

Morgan le Fay

Morgan le Fay, undeniably the most popularly known magical woman in medieval literature, first appeared in literature in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* (c. 1150). In his earlier *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Geoffrey tells of how a mortally wounded King Arthur is taken to Avalon, the Island of Apples, to be saved. He expands on this in *Vita*, describing Avalon as a land of magic and abundance, ruled by nine magical sisters, led, of course, by Morgan. He describes her:

The one who is first among them has greater skill in healing, as her beauty surpasses that of her sisters. Her name is Morgen, and she has learned the uses of all plants in curing the ills of the body. She knows, too, the art of changing her shape, of flying through the air, like Daedalus, on strange wings. At will, she is now at Brest, now at Chartres, now at Pavia; and at will she glides down from the sky on to your shores. They say she taught astrology to her sisters... (Geoffrey 101)

Geoffrey's Morgan is a terrifically powerful sorceress, in addition to being a gifted healer. However, as Jill Hebert pointed out, he associates her with the word *medicāmen*, or medication which has both positive and negative connotations, signifying both antidote and poison (29). This duality, the potential for evil as well as good, is characteristic of Morgan's many iterations, and is reflective of her origins in Celtic tradition.

Celtic societies are known for what, in discussing Irish culture, Donald E. Morse refers to as "Irish culture's double-mindedness," which embraces the complexities of the world through *both/and* thinking, as opposed to the more popular western dichotomy of *either/or* (4). Leslie Rabine refers to this as "multiple logic," which she defines as "the mutual existence of contradictory and equally true visions of a same reality" (35). Regardless of the term used, as Jill Hebert succinctly puts it: "The Celtic refusal to reduce complex concepts to a narrow definition enables their goddesses to be multifaceted, a characteristic that stubbornly lives on in Morgan le Fay" (29). It is possible that Morgan's inconsistency between and within works is, in itself, a character trait held over from her Celtic origins.

Roger Loomis suggests that Morgan is an etymological decedent of the Celtic Mother-Goddess, Modron (192). This fits with Geoffrey's depiction of her as sole ruler of the supernaturally fertile island of Avalon. Morgan is also often characteristically related to the Morrígan, an Irish war goddess associated with strife and sovereignty who could transform herself into a bird, though there is no clear etymological connection between the two. Regardless, Celtic double-mindedness embraces goddesses who are complex and volatile. In Hebert's words: "Associating her with multifaceted Celtic deities would allow us to do for Morgan what we do not seem able to do for women in real life: take her out of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy inspired by the Christian denigration of 'pagan' mythology and

allow her to be contradictory, inconsistent, and unclassifiable” (18). This holds true in most of her iterations: when Morgan le Fay shows up in a narrative, one can never be certain what exactly she is going to do.

In Geoffrey’s *Vita Merlini*, Morgan le Fay is still very closely related to her deific Celtic counterparts, and as such she retains much of her divine power in the narrative. Morgan rules her domain in her own right, ensuring the health and wellbeing of her people without even needing men to plow the fields. In Chrétien de Troye’s *Erec and Enide* (c. 1170), Morgan is again mentioned as a renowned healer, Morgan the Wise, her power so great that even in her absence, a plaster she made “was so wonderfully effective that the wound to which it was applied, whether on nerve or joint, could not fail to be completely cured and healed within a week, provided it was treated with the ointment once a day” (Chrétien 89). However, Chrétien is also the first to mention a lord of Avalon: Morgan’s first lover, Guigomar. Maureen Fries posits that with Chrétien’s addition Morgan has already been “scaled down from the goddess-like personage of the *Vita Merlini* into a this-worldly rather than Otherworldly figure” (3). Despite her growing separation from divinity, Morgan’s later iterations continue her tradition of power.

For instance, in the German *Erec* (c. 1191-1192), Hartmann von Aue describes Morgan le Fay’s “powerful sorcery and strange arts” as once again her powerful healing plasters are called upon, this time after her death (121). He attributes fantastic powers to her and describes them glowingly, including the power of flight, imperviousness to the dangers of the elements, and the power to transfigure men into beasts and back again; Hartmann even calls her a goddess. However, he also calls into question who taught Morgan (Famurgan in *Erec*, the components of her name, “Morgan” and “Fay,” having been switched), implying that the source of her power is demonic:

Famurgan lived very much at cross purposes with God, for the birds along with the wild animals heeded her command in forest and in meadow; and what seems most extraordinary to me is that all the evil spirits which are called demons were under her control... Furthermore, she had kinsmen deep down in hell. The devil was her comrade, and he sent her as much aid as she wanted from out of the hell-fires. And whatever Famurgan needed from the earthly realm she took herself without trepidation and in ample measure. (Hartmann 122)

Despite her status as a goddess, Morgan's learning (and her power) are no longer *sui generis*. As Fries points out, "Now she must be taught (rather than herself teach), and taught by a male at that, so that she can practice what is to become an ever-diminishing magic" (4). Because of her magic, Morgan is already in league with the devil at the very beginning of the twelfth century renaissance, which brought with it the "explicitly demonic magic of the necromancers" (Kickhefer 372). Despite this, Hartmann immediately goes back to praising Morgan's power to heal, reflecting again the multiple logic of her Celtic origins.

Morgan's ability to shift between old and young, beautiful and ugly, is fairly consistent among her iterations. As Fries points out,

In the *Prose Lancelot*, while her loveliness is praised, she is also seen as ugly, hot (the bodily quality medieval associated with sexuality) and lecherous. To this portrait the Vulgate *Merlin* adds that she was very brown of face... In the *Suite de Merlin*, she is said to have acquired permanent loathliness after yielding to lechery and the devil. (5)

According to Hebert, key characteristics of the medieval loathly lady, as exemplified in Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and others, are her capacity to change her appearance, usually from ugly to beautiful, her self-controlled sexuality that was often viewed as aggressive or inappropriate in courtly society, and her role as mentor to knights (56). As Lucy Allen Paton further adds, "Morgain, too, can change her shape at pleasure, and the difference of opinion in regard to her beauty evidently existed among the narrators who described her appearance looks

as if there had been some story that is lost to us, which represented her as assuming the form of a loathly lady” (150-151). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Morgan is certainly unappealing, described in contrast to the beautiful young woman in the Green Knight’s hall as “far more aged—an ancient one,” whose “black brows of that beldame were bared, with her nose, her naked lips, and her two eyes—And those two, sour to see, were sorrowfully bleared... Her body was squat and thick, her buttocks bulging and broad” (Wilhelm, ll. 948, 961-66). Hebert suggests that the Gawain poet’s use of the Middle English word “auncian,” in addition to indicating maturity and worthiness of respect, implies Morgan’s “ungoverned position outside the strictures placed on women of marriageable, and thus controllable, age” (57). In her role as a loathly lady in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Morgan is essentially the driving force of the plot, inciting the Green Knight’s challenge in an attempt to frighten Guinevere to death and to teach her nephew, Gawain, a lesson. Her position outside the typical roles of the court allows her to possess more agency and power within the narrative than almost any other character.

In the writings of Sir Thomas Malory (1471, 1485), Morgan continues to evade the increasingly static feminine ideal, maintaining both her potency and her agency throughout. She frequently acts as a proctor of knightly tests, and Hebert suggests that her ability to teach and to test Arthur and his knights stems, in her words,

directly from her ability to evade decisive categorization by authors and critics alike. She moves both within and beyond the dichotomies of male/female, good/evil... She may act like a man but she is not bound to rigid knightly codes that restrict her choices and behavior, nor is she bound to feminine rules of conduct implicit in those codes. (70)

Morgan’s position as the so-called “consummate crosser of boundaries,” a trait held over from her origins in the tradition of Celtic double-mindedness, enables her to critique failures of knightly honor and to demonstrate the weaknesses of chivalry (Hebert 74).

For example, in “Arthur and Accolon,” Morgan breaks all the rules. She attempts to assassinate Arthur by giving him a false Excalibur and sending Accolon, one of his knights, out with the true Excalibur to fight him. Arthur is saved, of course, and he commiserates with Accolon about Morgan, saying: “but I wyte the the lesse for my sistir Morgan le Fay by hir false crauftis made the to agré to hir fals lustes” (Malory Bk IV, p. 88, 29-30). In this condemnation, Morgan’s power is sexualized, and this sexualization further emphasizes Morgan’s place outside of the courtly system (with its demure and powerless feminine ideal) which allows her to critique the system. In the words of Hebert: “She is simultaneously ‘just a woman’ and a dangerous enemy precisely because she can inhabit any role she wishes... all the more dangerous for her unconventional and unrestricted approach to social and political critique” (87). Even Arthur’s criticism and short-lived wrath cannot rob Morgan of her intrinsic power; for instance, when, while she is escaping, it becomes clear that Arthur’s party is going to overtake her, she stops and turns herself, her men, and their horses into stone to hide in plain sight (Malory Bk IV, p. 92, 11-15). Even when she loses, Morgan still wins.

Isolde of Ireland

In contrast to Morgan le Fay in her many iterations, Isolde of the Tristan narratives transitioned fully from an older Celtic tradition of feminine power and mysticism into the European courtly love tradition. By the fifteenth century, Isolde has become, like most noble women in courtly romances, a static object of adoration. The changes in Isolde’s character, from a powerful Irish princess to the powerless wife of a Cornish king are demonstrative of the shift from the double-mindedness of Celtic legend and society to the more uniform and patriarchal ideals of the Catholic Church.

The Tristan Stone in Cornwall bears the first documented mention of Tristan, with an inscription dating to the sixth or seventh century, the now-lost third line of which was described in the sixteenth century as bearing the Latinisation of the name Eselt, or Isolde (Weatherhill 89). The character of Isolde comes from the same older tradition as Morgan: she is a part of the Celtic tradition of Other-Worldly women with power and sexual freedom. As Leslie Rabine points out, “In the mythological cycle of Irish legend, women are not passive incarnations of the ‘Feminine Principle,’ but warriors, founders of capital cities, physicians, and Druids” (30). In literature, Ireland has traditionally been a land of inherent magic and mysticism, associated with the mythical Other World, “where women continue to have the power of enchantment and the sexual freedom they now lack in This World” (Rabine 30). Considering her origins, Irish princess Isolde’s initial power, both narrative and magical, comes as no surprise.

By the time of her first literary appearance in Béroul’s *The Romance of Tristan* (c. 1150-1190), Isolde had very likely already been an established character in oral narratives and possibly earlier writings which are now lost. The Béroul manuscript is incomplete and missing the beginning of the narrative, including a scene in which, according to Norris J. Lacy, Isolde healed Tristan of a wound infected with lethal dragon poison, displaying her power (Lacy 238). April Harper describes Béroul’s work as drawing “heavily on Celtic themes and narratives styles, exhibiting a world in which monsters, fairies, magic and Christian figures intertwine without conflict... transgressing borders between the holy and unholy, as well as between supernatural power and educated skill” (112-113). As Harper points out, all the female characters in Béroul’s text practice some form of healing, though, unusually, no mention is made of their methods or the source of their knowledge. Even if Isolde’s magical prowess is not on display in what remains of the Béroul text, her agency and her power are. For example, to save herself at her

adultery trial, she makes Tristran dress up as a leper and carry her on his back across a bridge, allowing her to swear truthfully that the only men who have been between her thighs were the leper and her husband (Bérout 278).

Isolde again appears powerful in Thomas of Britain's fragmented *Romance of Tristran* (c. 1173). Most of Thomas's fragments address the latter part of the story, after the lovers have been separated and Tristran has been forced into exile. However, he summons Isolde because, again, she is the only person capable of healing his poisoned wound as "without her his wound would never heal" (Thomas 289). When Isolde fails to reach him in time and Tristran dies, she takes the initiative, lying down on top of him and killing herself by the sheer force of her will and despair:

"...But since I was unable to arrive in time and knew nothing of your fate and came only to find you dead, I will take comfort in the same cup. Because of me you have lost your life, and I will act as a true lover: for you I wish to die as well." She bent down and embraced him, and kissed his mouth and his face. Holding him closely, she stretched out over him, body to body and lips to lips, and gave up the ghost, dying next to her lover for the love she felt for him. (Britain 293).

Not only is the manner of her death explicitly sexual, demonstrating again Isolde's self-possession and agency outside of the feminine courtly ideal, but by taking her life into her own hands, Isolde demonstrates her potency in the story in the greatest way a character can: she ends it.

Rabine suggests that Celtic women experienced more equality and freedom than their European counterparts because Celtic double-mindedness, which she refers to as multiple logic, allows for, as she says, "a multiplicity and ambiguity of relationships which work against the establishment of a hierarchy" (35). The shift away from the multilogical feminine framework is gradual; however, it could be argued that it has a specific turning point. In Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* (c. 1210), when Isolde discovers that Tristan, the man she has been hailing

as a hero for slaying a dragon, is also the man who killed her maternal uncle, she has the opportunity to kill him, but her “sweet womanhood” wins out (Gottfried, qtd. in Rabine 42). This phrasing implies that womanhood now excludes anger and vengeance, dissociating Isolde from the women of Irish legend who, according to Rabine, shared the “clanic duty of vengeance” with men (42). This is a significant moment in the “domestication” of Isolde—she stops being “untamed” and independent, being slowly forced into the new mold for women in the changing society of the twelfth century. Harper also suggests that Strassburg’s emphasis on the source of Isolde and her mother’s healing skills (medical, rather than magical) indicates that “the division is no longer just between sources of power, but between learned and unlearned practice” (115).

In the mid-thirteenth century, the *Prose Tristan* was the first Tristan and Isolde narrative to explicitly name Tristan as a knight of the Round Table and link him to the Grail Quest. In the beginning of this narrative, Tristan goes to Ireland with a putrefying poisoned wound, which Isolde deftly heals. However, the author continually reinforces that the source of Isolde’s power is divine, i.e., masculine, rather than based on her own intrinsic knowledge:

She was sure she would soon have him hale and hearty with God’s help... All those who tried to heal you were deceived, since they failed to notice the poison. Now that by the grace of God I’ve seen it, rest assured that I’ll help you with His help.’ Tristan was extremely pleased to hear this, and said that he hoped God would grant her the power. (Curtis (ed.) 43-45, qtd. in Harper 114)

Harper points out that “the account of Iseult’s treatment of Tristan illustrates her skilled use of observation, diagnosis, treatment and dressing, but perhaps even more importantly, constantly reinforces that the source of her power and success is holy” (115). A major step in the naturalization of Isolde into the static feminine ideal of the courtly tradition of medieval literature is the transition of the source of her power, from the feminine power of her Celtic origins to the role of devout nurse.

Additionally, at the end of the *Prose Tristan* narrative, Isolde fails to heal Tristan of his final poisoned wound, not because she does not arrive on time to save him, but because he is beyond her help. This calls attention to new limitations being placed on Isolde's power, specifically her potency, which were not mentioned in her earlier iterations. Then, after it becomes clear that Tristan is going to die, rather than directly kill herself by force of will, as she had done in her previous iterations, she requests that Tristan crush her to death in his arms on his deathbed (*The Romance of Tristan* 324).

By the time Malory writes in the fifteenth century, Isolde has been completely naturalized into the courtly format of the story as more of a "type" than an actual individual. Her narrative importance is almost entirely based on her womanhood and on her status as King Mark's wife, and her function is primarily to just exist to be fought over. In Malory's version of the tale, Isolde still heals Tristram's wound, but Malory treats this perfunctorily: "Than the kynge for grete favour made Tramtryste [Tristan] to be put in his doughtyrs awarde and keyping, because she was a noble surgeon. And whan she had searched hym she founde in the bottom of his wounde that therein was poyson, and so she healed him in a whyle" (Malory Bk. VIII, p. 238, 39-42). Even her supernatural power of healing has been reduced to little more than a function of the plot.

Discussion

By focusing on agency and potency within a narrative as power, I hope to have effectively demonstrated a loss of power experienced by magical female characters in medieval literature. One of the main limits of my content analysis was finding characters who fit the criteria and who are also repeated throughout several iterations of a story or throughout several

different narratives. However, this was overcome by looking at particular characters as well as types, or characters that are so similar that their primary distinguishing feature is their name. Another limit of my analysis is my inability to read many of the texts in their original language; however, it is common practice to utilize reputable translations when performing analyses.

It is hardly controversial that often the literature of a time reflects the attitudes of that time. Though Harper is careful to point out that literature is “not a mirror, perfectly reflecting the society from which it emanates,” she and many others have set a precedent for using literature to better understand the atmosphere of a time or place (108). By establishing a connection between shifting clerical thought about women and magic in the Middle Ages and the portrayal of female characters in medieval literature, I contend that much can be learned about the relationship between the perspectives of the powerful minority and the lives of average individuals, as this is still an issue with relevance today.

In conclusion, though Morgan le Fay and Isolde of Ireland were both born of the tradition of Celtic double-mindedness, they did not share the same fate. Isolde was almost completely naturalized into the courtly medieval ideal of static femininity; whereas, Morgan’s deific capriciousness and the power it gives her became an aspect of her character that survives throughout her different iterations. While Isolde’s primary role and function is always as a lover, and therefore all of her actions are in reference to Tristan until she is completely overshadowed, Morgan, in all her iterations, is a sorceress first, looking acting independently after her own interests. As the Church’s perception of magic changed and the freedoms of female healers were diminished, so too were these changes reflected in the powers of their magical literary counterparts, a phenomena for which, because their agency and potency reflects these changing perceptions of magic and femininity, Morgan la Fey and Isolde of Ireland stand as examples.

Works Cited

- Aue, Hartmann von. *Erec*. Trans. Micheal Resler. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987. Print.
- Bailey, Michael David. "The Feminization of Magic and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch In the Late Middle Ages." *Essays in Medieval Studies* 19 (2002): 120-34. Web. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ems/summary/v019/19.1bailey.html>
- Beroul. "The Romance of Tristan." Trans. Norris J. Lacy. *The Romance of Arthur*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2013. 236-281. Print.
- Breuer, Heidi. *Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Ebook.
- Burchard of Worms. "Burchard of Worms's *Corrector*." *Medieval Popular Religion, 1000-1500: A Reader*. 2nd ed. Ed. John R. Shinnars. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. 441-456. Web. http://digiHum.mcgill.ca/~matthew.milner/teaching/resources/docs/burchard_worms-corrector.pdf
- Clarke, Basil. *Life of Merlin: Geoffrey of Monmouth, Vita Merlini*. Ed. & trans. Basil Clarke. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973. Print.
- Fries, Maureen. "From The Lady to The Tramp: The Decline of Morgan le Fay in Medieval Romance." *Arthuriana* 4.1 (1994): 1-18. Web. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869041>
- Harper, April. "The Image of the Female Healer in Western Vernacular Literature of the Middle Ages." *Social History of Medicine* 24.1 (2011): 108-24. Print. <https://etsu.illiad.oclc.org/illiad/pdf/317062.pdf>
- Hughes, Muriel Joy. *Women Healers in Medieval Life and Literature*. Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1943. Print.

- Jones, Karen, and Michael Zell. "'The Divels Speciall Instruments': Women and Witchcraft before the 'Great Witch-Hunt.'" *Social History* 30.1 (2005): 45-63. Web.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4287161>
- Kieckhefer, Richard. "The Holy and the Unholy: Sainthood, Witchcraft, and Magic in Late Medieval Europe." *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*. 23:4 (1994): 356-385. Print.
- Klaassen, Frank. "Subjective Experience and the Practice of Medieval Ritual Magic." *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*. 7:1 (2012): 19-51. Print.
- Kramer, Henrich. *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of Malleus Maleficarum*. Trans. Christopher S. Mackay. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Print.
- Lacy, Norris J. Introduction. "The Romance of Tristran." By Bérroul. *The Romance of Arthur*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2013. 236-238. Print.
- Long, Julia. "Mysticism and Hysteria: The Histories of Margery Kempe and Anna O." *Feminist Readings in Medieval English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*. Ed. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson. London: Routledge, 1994. 88-111. Print.
- Loomis, Roger. *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1926: 192. Print.
- Minkowski, William L., MD, MPH. "Women Healers of the Middle Ages: Selected Aspects of Their History." *American Journal of Public Health* 82.2 (1992): 288-95. Web.
<https://login.ezproxy.etsu.edu:3443/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eih&AN=9206221441&site=eds-live&scope=site>

Morse, Donald E. "The Irish Fantastic." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 8.1 (1997): 2-14.

Print.

Paton, Lucy Allen. *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*. Boston: Ginn & Company Publishers, 1903. Web.

https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=_81kAAAAMAAJ&rdid=book-_81kAAAAMAAJ&rdot=1

Rabine, Leslie. "Love and the New Patriarchy." *Reading of the Romantic Heroine: Text, History, and Ideology*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1985. 20-49. Print.

Rider, Catherine. "Women, Men, and Love Magic in Late Medieval Pastoral Manuals." *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*. (2012): 190-211. Web.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2005. Print.

The Romance of Tristan. Ed. Renée L. Curtis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. 324-325. Print.

Thomas of Britain, . "Romance of Tristran." Trans. Peter Jorgensen. *The Romance of Arthur*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2013. 282-293. Print.

Weatherhill, Craig. *Cornovia: Ancient Sites Of Cornwall And Scilly, 4000 BC-1000 AD*. Somerset: Halsgrove, 1989. Print.

Wilhelm, James J. "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." *The Romance of Arthur: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation*. 3rd ed. Ed. Norris J. Lacy and James J. Wilhelm. New York: Routledge, 2013. 495. Print.