MORGAIN THE FAY AND THE LADY OF THE LAKE IN A BROADER MYTHOLOGICAL CONTEXT

A great affective chasm separates Morgain as she appears in the beginning of English Arthurian literature, in Geoffrey of Monmouth and Layamon, and her nature in the later medieval tradition, as seen in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* In the former she appears as the leading lady in one of the best known scenes of medieval English literature, a beautiful young fairy, all sweetness, coming on stage after Arthur has been fatally wounded in battle to take him to the Edenlike island of Avalon. There she will heal him to live on after death in a heavenly existence from which it is hoped he will one day return again to bring his heroic help to the problem-beset world his once and future subjects still inhabit. In the latter she is Arthur's wily, old rival and secret ennemy, the force of wildness and evil that opposes the Christian morality and civilization that Arthur's court stands for. It is not the Green Knight himself who wants to cut off Sir Gawain's head, we learn in the surprise ending, but the ominous Morgain, a figure whose name alone seems to conjure up the realm of evil.

Laura Hibbard Loomis observes that "the might of Morgan le Fay (vs. 2446) was, for Gawain himself, a sufficient explanation and exculpation for all that he had endured and made him able to part from the Green Knight "on most friendly terms."[1] How can such a radical change be explained? Where did such a sweet, young goddess go

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[1].- See Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Gawain and the Green Knight," in R.S. Loomis, *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History* (London: Oxford University Press, l959), p. 535.

wrong? In France, of course, and not long ago Alexandre Micha wondered in print about why before the French prose romances she was a "feé et guérisseuse" while in them and thereafter she is a "magicienne et une ensorceleuse".[1] The present study addresses the same question.

Prof. Micha proposes that Morgain's thorough schooling, a later addition to the fairy's traditional character, offended the medieval sense of women's proper role. The idea is similar to the explanation offerred for the creation of the archetypal *femme fatale* in the character of Vivianne/Niviane, destroyer of Merlin, by reference to the Medieval topos of the scholar made a fool of by a comparatively ignorant yet clever young woman of whom he is enamoured, as was commonly believed to have happened to Virgil and Aristotle.[2]

Still, this explanation for the change in Morgain is not entirely satisfying, as one is left with the question of how and why such a totally attractive figure, at least to a male hero like Arthur and, one supposes, to a male audience in general, could have been a candidate for such a switch to a woman who not only uses her power to accomplish the hero's destruction but is also a rival to Arthur's kingship. Something must be, one feels, behind the topos, something that triggers the topos, something derived from traditional attitudes toward women, some image rooted in the forest primeval - oh, perilous hunt - of myth and psychology. Dame Prudence urges us to stop here, rather than plunge into the murky depths of mythologically oriented criticism.

1.- Alexandre Micha, *Étude sur le "Merlin" de Robert de Boron: Roman du XIII siècle* (Geneva: Droz, l980), p. 55.

2.- See Carlos García Gual's introduction to Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vida de Merlín* (Madrid: Siruela, l984).

And yet, somewhat like the irresistibly tempting Ring of Power guarded by the Rhine Maidens, the suggestive possibilities of myth call to us. If one could only use it judiciously, not letting it destroy us by leading us to jump to conclusions or to select out from the bewildering cornucopia of fables it offers what will fit our pre-conceived ideas, if we only knew better what it meant and how much of it survives in some signicant way in the hard texts we have in our hand, we might better understand the amazingly persistent appeal of Arthurian literature -which even its Renaissance aficionados berated for being "far from reason and sense",[1]- and more specifically, why its delicious maidens often turn into loathly ladies and viceversa.[2]

The case against the mythological approach has been summed up by Carlos García Gual. While "romanistas" stick to written texts, which provide something resembling a secure base, "celtistas" make extensive use of oral tradition, which is difficult to date and "no siempre bien comprendida de los escritores, doctos clérigos que toman sus noticias de un trasfondo mítico celta y que transforman los «cuentos de aventura» en relatos corteses para ofrecerlos así a su público refinado."[3] The most intrepid reply, albeit undeniably quixotic, to the objections raised by this school of criticism has been succinctly expressed in this inaugural issue of the *SELIM* journal by Prof. María Luisa Dañobeitia: "Some events hardly make sense unless an

1.- The phrase was used by Elis Gruffydd in commenting on the birth of Taliesin. See Patrick Ford, *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, l977), p. 165.

2.- See Patricia Shaw, "Loathly Ladies, Lither Ladies and Leading Ladies: The Older Woman in Middle English Literature," *Actas del Primer Congreso Internacional de la Sociedad Española de Lengua y Literatura Inglesa Medieval (S.E.L.I.M.)* (Universidad de Oviedo, l988), pp. 209-243.

3.- See García Gual, pp. xvii-xviii.

exhaustive analysis is done of the underlying philosophy of life and religion of the ancient Celtic races..."[1]

Audeamus igitur, calling for strength on our Lady Condwiramurs, or Dulcinea, and ask the question: could the topos of the scholar outsmarted and pushed onto the next boat to humiliation and death by the woman he lusts for, as well as the remarkable change in Morgain that occurs in the evolution of Arthurian literature, have grown out of a tradition familiar to author and reader alike because derived from pagan mythology and surviving in folklore? Might the sort of problematic relationship between a hero and a powerful woman that emerges have been suggested, or reinforced, or shaped, by a pre-existing pattern that, when recognized, would put it in a new light?

It has been a long time since another lady, Lucy Paton, published in 1903 her study that became this century's standard reference on the subject of Morgain's and the Lady of the Lake's Celtic mythological origins. R.S. Loomis, as part of his monumental contribution to Arthurian studies, continued and enriched her research, but followed, as he always did, a norm of focusing on the Breton tradition, complemented by the Welsh and Irish mythologies closely tied to it.[2]

However, just two years ago Hilda Ellis Davidson has finally given us a more comprehensive study of the myths and symbols of all of pagan Europe.[3] It is a solidly-grounded book that, at last, puts aside a fear of taking a broader view of European mythology, a fear provoked by the earlier overgeneralizations made by the dazzled pioneers in the

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1.- María Luisa Dañobeitia, "Two Sides of a Triangle: The Beginning of Gawain's Pentangle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,"* elsewhere in this volume, note 3.

2.- See the references in R.S. Loomis, "The Legend of Arthur's Survival," in Loomis, pp. 64-71.

3.- H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, l988).

field, and makes wide-ranging comparisons that establish connections among Scandinavian, Germanic and Celtic religion and folklore. It was the Norman French, after all, who transformed Morgain and created Vivianne.

On digesting the information Prof. Ellis Davidson has gathered and organized, one comes to the conclusion that the early Morgain, in the form with which she enters the Arthurian world created by Geoffrey of Monmouth and Layamon , while still thoroughly Celtic and undeniably present in the Irish and Welsh tales, offers a dimension that is more prominent in Germanic and Scandinavian traditions. The difference in the lady's character is simple, apparently unimportant, but it points in a different direction. In Ellis Davidson's words, Morgain is an Otherworldly Being, and when heros are with her or with similar ladies they are not subject to the frustrations of this world, including that of not getting along with one's woman. Still, to be blunt about it, although in happy circumstances and with charming ladies, they are dead (the fact that the Celts were fond of the idea of the dead returning for visits notwithstanding). I would stress, though, that Morgain did not kill them, that her primary function is to "heal", not of course for a continuing life in this world but for a new life in the other, and in general to make them feel better there.

In Scandinavian and Germanic myths, too, these fair maidens exist, and we are familiar with them under the name of valkyries. Ellis Davidson's description is similar to the Wagnerian conception: "battle-goddesses ... attendant on the god Odin ... sent to carry out the will of the god in apportioning victory in battle and deciding which warriors must fall.... Her duty was to conduct dead kings and heroes to Odin. In the *Edda* poems we find another aspect portrayed. She appears here as the spirit wife of the hero, appearing to announce his future greatness as a leader, to urge him to heroic deeds, perhaps to present him with his sword, and finally to receive him as husband and lover

after he dies in battle."[1] They often are encountered in groups, having been compared to bees by the Anglo-Saxons, and there are several lists of their names.[2]

I would like to underscore three of these maidens' traits. First, they escort heros, that is warriors, to a heavenly home after death in battle and personally administer the pleasurable rewards for their valor and strength; the men stay on there forever in a sort of unending bachelor party where worrying about anything is unthinkable. Secondly, valkyries are attendants on the god of battle, and although they themselves as goddesses wear armor and provide weapons, they are part of the world of men and warfare.

A third quality of valkyries that seems particularly relevant to the Arthurian tradition is that they, like Tinkerbell and the boys who haven't grown up whom she takes to Never-Never Land, get around by flying. As Ellis Davidson points out, valkyries are related (in some way I wish we could define more thoroughly) to ravens, who eat the dead on the battle field, and to the wise spirit wives of the shamans[3] who in pre-historic Gaul, as to this day in Siberia, went into trances and sent out their spirits to roam the world beyond the normal human limits of time and space in order to bring back powerful knowledge to set things right in the here and now. The shape-shifting druids, as has often been recognized of late, believed they gained knowledge in a very similar way, as "The Song of Taliesen" makes clear. The valkyries, too, have hidden knowledge, though it is limited to foretelling the hero's life and then bringing him to healing once and for all when he enters Valhalla. Their supernatural powers, like the early Morgain's, are beneficient.

1.- Ellis Davidson, p. 92.

2.- See Ellis Davidson, p. 96.

3.- See Ellis Davidson, p. 96.

A comparison with the description of Morgan as drawn by Geofrey of Monmouth in his *Vita Merlini* in the scene of Arthur's death reveals that for him her shamanistic and healing nature was paramount: "Morgana es su nombre, y conoce la utilidad de todas las hierbas para la curación de los cuerpos enfermos. También conoce el arte de mudar su figura, y como Dédalo sabe cortar los aires con plumas nuevas. Cuando quiere, en Bristo, Carnoto o Papias se deja caer del cielo en nuestras playas, y esta ciencia dicen que han aprendido sus hermanas: Morónoe, Mázoe, Gliten, Glitonea, Gliton, Tirónoe, Titen y Titon, famosísima por su cítara."[1] A similar concept of Morgain is visible in the *Bataille Loquifer* (c. 1180), in which Morgain and two of her sisters, also fairies, take the hero through the air to a luxurious Avalon, where he encounters the greatest Arthurian knights: Arthur, Gawain, and Yvain.[2]

The Morrígan, whose name immediately recalls the Arthurian character, presents several similarities to vallkyries. "In Irish tradition also we find female spirits associated with battle and death. They appear in the tales under the collective name of *Morrígan,* which may be used either of a single goddess or of a group of three. There is a strong erotic element in the Morrígan, as in the Scandinavian valkyries who offer themselves to warriors. The name has been interpreted as Great Queen, or Demon Queen; other names given to the battle goddesses are *Nemain* (Frenzy), *Badb* and *Macha* (both probably meaning Crow)."[3] The grouping of Geoffrey's nine heavenly hostesses in three groups of three, each of which begins with a distinctive letter, seems to recall this goddess's triple nature. One

1.- Geoffrey of Mommouth, *Vida de Merlín,* ed. García Gual, p. 33.

2.- See R.S. Loomis, "The Legend of Arthur's Survival," in Loomis, p. 65.

3.- Ellis Davidson, p. 97.

notable difference is that she does not always fly, but then one of her alter egos, Badb, is associated with birds.[1]

In Layamon's account of Arthur's death the name for the Morgainlike goddess is Argante. Jean Markale informs us that Budicca, the British woman warrior who leads a revolt against the Romans, was Breton and offerred sacrifices and thanks to a war goddess called Andrasta or Andarta. He goes on to say, "Pues bien, hay una diosa Andarte cuyo culto está atestiguado entre los voconces de la Drôme."[2] I find the comparatively short phonetic distance from Andarte to Argante suggestive.

In the *Mabinogian* the name of the god Bran, whose head presides over an otherworldly feast after the battle in which he is killed, means "crow," the same valkyrie-related bird in whose shape Arthur was popularly believed to live on.[3] In establishing connections that point toward the goddesses who in several versions accompany Morgain when she comes to heal Arthur, Idris Llewelyn Foster calls attention to the link between Morrígan and crows. In the *Didot Perceval* ravens are revealed to be Urbain's mistress and her maidens, while in other contexts they are his mother: "If, therefore, the correspondence of Morrigan, Modron, and Morgain la Feé is established, then Owain's (= Urbain's) ravens in *Rhonabwy's Dream* can be recognized as the helpful forms of his mother Modron and her sisters (or companions)."[4]

1.- Since a conflation of Badb and Macha would yield Mab, Shakespeare's inheritance of this tradition seems a reasonable hypothesis.

2.- See Jean Markale, *Druidas (Tradiciones y Dioses de los Celtas)* (Madrid: Taurus, l989), p.126.

3.- On Arthur's survival as a crow see the references in R.S. Loomis, "The Legend of Arthur's Survival," in Loomis, p. 65, n. 6.

4.- Idris Llewelyn Foster, *"Culhwch and Olwen* and *Rhonabwy's Dream,"* in Loomis, p. 43.

A final observation on valkyries, by way of a possible objection, might be that they were not sisters, but helpers and eventually lovers, of the men they nurtured, while Morgain came to be considered Arthur's sister or half-sister. Still, in myth divine syblings sometimes mate. In any case, as Owain's story shows, help from an affectionate sister or mother, even if she is not a lover, could still be a comforting, valkyrielike prospect. Geoffrey, in his *Historia,* does not mention Morgain in his account of Arthur's death, saying merely that he was "carried off to the Isle of Avalon, so that his wounds might be attended to."[1] In the *Vita Merlini,* as we have seen, Morgain appears, but she is not presented as a relative of Arthur's: "Allí nueve hermanas gobiernan según ley que no está escrita a los que a ellas de nuestras partes llegan. La mayor de ellas es sabia ...."[2] Layamon's Arthur does not refer to Argante as a relative: "And I will fare to Avalun, to the fairest of all maidens, to Argante the queen, an elf most fair, and she shall make my wounds all sound, make me all whole with healing draughts."[3]

If we hypothesize, then, that there is a healthy dose of valkyrie in the initial Arthurian Morgain, do we encounter an anti-valkyrie, an alternative image of woman, that might explain Morgain's later aberration? Ellis rejects Dumézil's often cited three-part division of Indo-European divinities, a scheme that assumes that myth reflected a social structure of warriors, priests and producers, and maintains that, while its social orientation does reflect what we now know about

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1.- Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain,* transl. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, l986), p. 261.

2.- Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vida de Merlín,* p. 32.

3.- *Wace and Layamon: Arthurian Chronicles,* trans. Eugene Mason (London: Everyman's Library, l962), p. 264.

European mythology, a two-part one fits the data better. "The difficulty in applying Dumézil's theories to Scandinavian evidence, however, is that the Norse deities refuse to fit satisfactorily into the niches which he has provided for them, and the same is true of the Celtic gods.... On the other hand, the dichotomy between the ruling and war gods on one hand and those associated with fertility and the land on the other appears to be an essential part of the structure, and helps to explain the distinction between the two groups of Scandinavian deities, Aesir and Vanir."[1]

From this perspective it seems logical, as we pursue the broader question of Morgain in Arthurian tradition, to ask whether, then, there are two basic sorts of Western European goddesses that become sexually involved with men. Ellis Davidson seems to say as much when she affirms that Irish heroes marry either battle goddesses or rivers.[2] The Vanir, earth spirits and fertility goddesses, were associated more with women, who were active in their cult, while the much more commonly male gods responsible for imposing order on the world and war-making, the Aesir, reflect predominantly male social roles. The Vanir were concerned with bringing forth life and not surprisingly had a particular dislike for violence.

As far as the availability of this worldview to storytellers in the Middle Ages, the evidence is clear that the male gods faded sooner and more completely than the Vanir, while the later were transformed and long remained alive in popular culture. And it is not beside the point to add parenthetically that the Vanir included both a male god, Freyr, as well as a goddess, Frejya, and it has been the latter that survived more strongly.

1.- Ellis Davidson, pp. 200-201.

2.- See Ellis Davidson, p. 203.

The fertility goddesses, let me hasten to add, are not unrelated to the battle goddesses, and in attempting to differentate them I find that, especially in surviving literary works, the two categories overlap in some important regards. For example, both sometimes appear at a man's birth or entrance into puberty, predicting his future and making him gifts.[1] One is reminded of the *alven* that appear in Layamon at Arthur's birth. Similarly, even if we return to myth, there are fair maidens , again particurly well known in the Scandinavian tradition and seemingly corroborated by archeological remains of ship graves, who recall valkyries in that they take the dead to heaven, but whom Ellis Davison identifies with fertility goddesses and who come for the dead in ships.[2] The circumstance that it is by ship that Morgain arrives at the sea shore and then departs with the expiring Arthur would seem clearly derived from Celtic myths, identified by Lucy Paton, derived, in turn, from this broader tradition.

Ultimately the two probably come, one can dare to suggest in 1991, from the same pre-historic goddess that is currently the subject of so much study and discussion, i.e., from one centrally important earth mother, now thought to have split into more than one personality to produce several goddesses. In a study related to the more general discussion of the theme of the creation of patriarchy, in which this figure has been traced back to the ancient Near East, María Luisa Dañobeitia has argued that the pentangle in SGGK, and so the sinister Morgain whose power it ostensibly combats, is related to ancient rites in honor of a goddess who combined fertility, Eros and Thanatos.[3]

1.- See Ellis Davidson, pp. 92 and 123.

2.- See Ellis Davidson, p. 118.

3.- See María Luisa Dañobeitia, "A Triple Progression in the Pentangle: A Study of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,"* in Actas del primer congreso internacional de la *Sociedad Española de Lengua y Literatura Inglesa Medieval (S.E.L.I.M.),* (Universidad de Oviedo, 1988).

Jean Markale has pursued the idea of such an ur-divinity with real *élan:* "Rodeada de terribles y eficaces dioses auxiliares, revestida de múltiples nombres, partícipe de las tres funciones indoeuropeas, maestra de poesía, de magia y de profecía, sabia en técnicas diversas, madre de todos los dioses, un poco ninfómana y animada de furor guerrero, triple diosa pero siempre mujer única, probablemente heredera de la Gran Diosa de los tiempos prehistóricos, así se presenta la Minerva céltica. Su complejidad es tan grande como la del Dagda."[1]

Closer in time and space to Arthur, descriptions of the Irish Other World show Lug, the god of war, sitting in state accompanied by the goddess who represents the sovereignty of Ireland, just as Odin is attended by the valkyries. But as Patrick Ford and likeminded critics have sought to demonstrate, this goddess is essentially the same as Rhiannon of the *Mabinogian,* the Continental Epona, the horse goddess of fertility.[2]

If we follow this line of thought, supposing that fertility goddesses were not originally separate from battle goddesses, it becomes apparent that, at least in their role as escorts for the dead, they may be thought of as the non-warrior's version of the valkyrie. In a period when the gods and goddesses had split into distinct and even opposed personalities and functions, at the hour of death they would have provided the protection of maternal divinities who were especially comforting in that they formed part of the woman's or the farmer's world.

But the subject at hand is not caste differences between these two, essentially similar and nurturing imges of women, but rather more

1.- See Markale, p. 130.

2.- See Ford, p. 9.

fundamental distinctions that bring us closer to the threatening Morgain of SGGK. Many myths and tales from folklore involving fertility goddesses, particularly prominent in Gaul and Britain, do not stress the escorting of the dead to the next world and the joys of existence there. On the contrary, such figures are very much part of the vexations of living in this world, attracting men with the alluring possiblities of sexual pleasure and the wealth of fertility but at the same time taking away control over their own fates and often destroying them. While they may at the end take them to the Other World, the focus is on the shock experienced when pleasure is followed by the anxieties and horror of being done in by the desired woman herself, not on the comfort of being carried off to be healed afterwards.

The *Lai of Graelent,* whose widespread basis in folklore has been thoroughly documented,[1] can serve as a good example. The lady, who turns up in a pool and says she loves the surrounding land, obviously has immense, supernatural powers, which include both the attraction of her face and body and her cornucopialike wealth, with which she outfits and supports her man until he fails to honor the one requirement she lays upon him. Thereupon she lets him, like a lovesick fool, drown himself while trying to recover her, only resuscitating him and taking him off to fairyland at the insistent request of her horrified servants. Connections to fertility goddesses are not hard to find in such a story.

Just as valkyries move through the air, these goddesses, known in Roman Europe as "mother earth," or "the mothers," inhabited water and were worshiped at shrines near it.[2] There, sacrifices of gold, as well as fruits of the earth, were thrown into the water in the hope of receiving in return the multiplied wealth and fruitfulness magically

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1.- See the references in Ernest Hoepffner, "The Breton Lais," in Loomis, pp. 112-21.

2.- On the earth mothers and their cult see Ellis Davidson, pp. 110-111.

brought about by the combination of earth and water. This is the source of Graelent's rent money. But the sexual pleasure and wealth are dependent on the goodwill of the lady and so part of the nerve-wrackingly perishable while maddeningly desirable good things of this world, not the perfect and enduring ones provided by one's valkyrie in Valhalla.

Examples of this sort of powerful water goddess can be adduced from many European cultures, but let us consider another one, less widely known but still Celtic. In northwestern Spain there is a robust folklore surrounding, in Galicia, *donas,* and in Asturias, *xanas,* whose similarities to nymphs in other western European myths were pointed out early in this century.[1] These attractive young women live outdoors, usually in water or caves, where they can be spotted on the summer solstice or at other magical moments combing their red hair with a golden comb or hanging out their washing. They can be recognized as preternatural by both the fact that they are said to be enchanted and their magical powers. Like Irish fairies, they steal human babies and raise them out of society, substituting their own infants to be raised by women. Like Rhine maidens, they guard golden treasures. These they offer, along with their fair hand, to men of their choosing who have come across them and are willing to try to disenchant them, though they come with strings attached. The man must pass a test - the answer to a riddle or the faithful observance of a single prohibition - and if he fails, as he almost invariably does, the girl either is not freed from or returns to her enchanted, i.e., magical, state. At the same time all the gold she has given the man turns into something worthless or repulsive.

1.- See Eliseo Marías Pinto, *Correspondencies entre les lleendes gallegues y asturianes. El so estudiu comparativu so los motivos del folclor celta* (Oviedo: Lliga Celta d'Asturies, l987), pp. 29-32; and Aurelio de Llano Roza de Ampudia, *Del Folklore Asturiano: Mitos, Supersticiones, Costumbres* (Oviedo: Instituto de Estudios Asturianos, l983), pp. 29-50.

Some tales stress that the couple was living happily together until the man could no longer avoid breaking the one rule, whereupon the fairy mercilessly abandoned him.[1] Donas have the additional trait of setting a date for the disenchantment, but then turning into a frightening, dragonlike snake which on the appointed day the man must dare not only to approach but even to kiss three times in order to return the lady to her more beautiful, alternative form.[2] The men are usually not up to it and so lose everything the woman so tantalisingly offers. Similarly, Chrétien de Troyes's Yvain fights for and wins the lady of a fountain, who comes with the wealth of a kingdom, but she breaks with him when he proves himself unable to meet the one condition she sets upon him.

The word 'xana,' often pronounced 'xiana,' was shown by Menéndez Pidal to derive from the Latin 'Diana.'[3] It appears that the pre-Roman xanas were assimilated to that classical goddess. The similarity, I would argue, is both real and germane to our larger subject.

The story of Diana, Artemis in Greek, and Actaeon, has long been one of the better known plots of classical mythology. A hunter, Actaeon comes across Artemis in the woods, where she is bathing in a pool. Avoiding being seen himself, he watches her and becomes filled with desire. She, virgin goddess of the hunt who does not submit to men, becomes angry when she discovers the presence of her unwanted admirer. Turning him into a stag, she watches with satisfaction as his own hounds tear him to pieces.

1.- For example, "El viudo y la Xana," "El pastor y la Xana," and "La Xania del Castiellu de Aguilar," Llano Roza de Ampudia, pp. 42-47.

2.- On such goddesses' dual aspects see Ellis Davidson, p. 111. On fairy ladies in Irish popular tradition who both seduce and resist see p. 112.

3.- Cited in Llano Roza de Ampudia, p. 30.

While it might be objected that Artemis does not manifest any interest in a sexual realationship with the man who encounters her, it should be remembered, first, that she was also the goddess of childbirth and at a school consecrated to her in Athens adolescent girls learned how to become wives and mothers. While Artemis seems to represent the attitude of young girls fearful of men, society assumed that those fears should and would be overcome. Secondly, even though she may actively reject the man's desire for her, she has provoked it. From the male perspective, illustrated by Renaissance love poetry in which men accuse women of cruelty because they refuse to quench the passion their beauty has kindled, she has created the man's need and then fails to meet it. The implied attitude is explicit in *Graelent,* where we learn later that the lady has intentionally bathed naked near where the hero would pass in order to attract him.

I began by joking that Morgain went wrong in France. Laura Hibbard Loomis has pointed out the time and place more specifically. Just as in SGGK Morgain is an old witch who seeks to have the hero's head cut off and to that end sends a young woman to try to seduce him, similarly in the prose *Lancelot* she uses her magic charms with the purpose of destroying the hero and, once again, sends a young woman to seduce him. Morgain is the lurking power of wild and deadly impulses that always threaten to, and eventually do, devour the measured joys of Camelot, and her portrait is already drawn in the much earlier French work.[1]

The parallels, indeed are close and numerous. Just as the Green Knight goes hunting to arrange for Gawain and his seductive wife to be alone in the mornings prior to the grisly appointment at the Green Chapel, in the French model Morgain sends her most beautiful maiden to travel cross-country alone with Lancelot as his guide to the

[1].- See Laura Hibbard Loomis, in Loomis, p. 535.

Dolerose Tor. Both young women are provoctive dressers and skillful, non-stop talkers; Morgain's maid even sings lays to him: " beles paroles et rit et gabe et joe en chevalchant. De totes les choses le semont de quoi ele le cuide eschaufer, si se deslie sovent por moster son vis et son chief qui de tres grant bialté estoit et chante lais bretons et autres notes plaisans et envoisies, et ele avoit la vois et haute et clere et la langue bien parlant et breton et francois et mains autres langages."[1]

In both cases there are three assaults on the hero's chastity, mainly set in bed, and for reasons of duty he can neither accept the offer nor refuse it with blunt discourtesy. We sympathize with these two famous lovers at the same time we laugh at their predicament. And if the proposition by the Green Knight's wife is notoriously brazen, her French counterpart is even more self-assured and direct: "Et por ce que vos estes buens chevaliers et je suis bele damoisele, por ce vos requier je et pri que vos gisés a moi orendroit..."[2]

The negative version of Morgain had been sketched out in some detail a few years earlier than even the prose *Lancelot,* about 1190 in Hartmann von Aue's *Erek,* and he clearly did not invent it. Paton's and Roger Loomis's studies on Morgain show what contradictory figures she could represent, and one comes to the time-honored conclusion that fairies and witches are two sides of a coin that is women's power. But the question a study directed toward her origin as she appears in SGGK calls for us to ask is whether or not the specific image of the dangerous water fairy was an essential element in the prose *Lancelot,* whether a sinister lady of a stream, or a fountain, or a lake was part of the author's picture of women and

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1.- *Lancelot: roman en prose du XIIIe siécle,* ed. Alexandre Micha, 4 vols. (Paris, Droz, 1978), I: 317.

2.- *Lancelot,* I: 318.

contributed to his decision to opt for and develop the frightening instead of the comforting version of Morgain, both of which traditions he knew. It now turns out, as everyone knows, that Lancelot *is* associated with a certain Lady of the Lake. He did not appear in the *Historia Regum Britanniae* along with Gawain and Keu and the rest of the boys; instead, as Jean Frappier has shown, he had separate roots in folklore: "the most primitive feature of his biography was his childhood in the palace of a fay, who stole him from his mother and reared him on an island of the sea or at the bottom of a lake."[1] In Chrétien de Troye's *Lancelot of the Lake,* written ten years before Hartmann von Aue's *Erek,* the fay adheres to the traditional xanalike pattern, steals him from his mother when he is a baby and raises him outside of society. This unconventional upbringing in a woman's world makes him what he is, the devoted servant of ladies. Chrétien insisted that the story was not his, that its form and content were dictated by the Countess of Champagne,[2] and certainly it represents much more of a woman's love fantasy than a man's. Charles Foulon also suggests a move away from inherited attitudes when he observes that, "Chrétien lighted his torch at the flame of Wace, ... but that, beginning with *Lancelot,* his indebtedness steadily waned."[3]

The Lady of the Lake, however, is not herself the *femme fatale,* that role being turned over to Guenevere. In fact, she is a strangely benevolent and socialized water goddess, in her actions more a valkyrie than a dragon lady, for after selflessly raising her adopted son she herself takes him away to court, the world of warriors, and there asks that he be made a knight to serve his lord. We know there was a

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1.- Jean Frappier, "The Vulgate Cycle," in Loomis, p. 296.

2.- Jean Frappier remarks that, "It is the current opinion that Chretien followed the countess's instructions with reluctance: after all, the *Lancelot* is a sort of palinode, a recantation of *Cligés."* See "Chrétien de Troyes," in Loomis, p. 175.

3.- Charles Foulon, "Wace," in Loomis, p. 102.

reaction against the book's over-all tone of exaggerated deference to women, but was there also a reaction against its defanged portrayal of a water goddess?

Before looking in more detail at the magical ladies in the prose *Lancelot* let us turn to another romance written not long after *Lancelot of the Lake* and which is closely tied to the prose *Lancelot* in plot, characters and the presence of similar anti-feminine sentiments. I am referring to the *Suite du Merlin,* in which Morgain, as in the prose *Lancelot,* is a wicked sorceress who directs her powerful arts toward Arthur's destruction. Micha's focus on her extensive education, somehow tied up with her evil nature, is easy to justify in the text. She is Arthur's sister, and when she was young, "on the recommendation of the whole family, the king sent the daughter named Morgan to school at a convent. She was so gifted that she learned the seven arts and quite early acquired remarkable knowledge of an art called astronomy, which she used all the time. She also studied nature and medicine, and it was through that study that she came to be called Morgan the Fay."[1] Merlin shows his susceptibility to dangerous women by falling in love with first her and then, as the amorous side of his character evolves, with a woman who unmistakably recalls a water fairy, Vivianne. Jean Markale proposes that the latter's name derives from Boinn-Bé Finn, a Gaulish water goddess.[2]

In the *Suite* the name is Niviane, and her ties to Artemis are explicit. Merlin tells her the story of a young woman from Roman times named Diana, an independent spirit who likes to hunt. An ardent admirer named Faunus convinces her to live with him by a lake she

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1.- *The Prose Merlin and Suite du Merlin,* trans. Samuel N. Rosenberg, in *Romance of Arthur II,* ed. James J. Wilhelm (New York: Garland, l986), p. 248.

2.- See Markale, p. 129.

likes, but she is fickle and after two years she tires of him, cruelly liquidating him to make way for another lover by pouring molten lead on his body while he is beneath the waters of her lake. That she is the lady of the lake is stressed by Merlin's paternalistic ending to the story, in which she is killed in punishment and the lake, into which her body is thrown, given her name. Niviane is not deterred and proceeds to imitate Merlin's metafictional heroine, with the important difference that she succeeds where her role model failed, cleverly doing in Merlin and getting away with it, too. Now that, one can imagine the anonymous author wishing Chrétien were still around to be told, is a *real* Lady of the Lake. As Niviane, using magical spells symbolic of the power her sexual attractiveness gives her, seals up Merlin to be buried alive she gloats in the best *fabliau* style: "Look how the enchanter is enchanted."[1] Merlin cries out from his tomb: "His cry came from the sharp pain he felt when he realized that he was being killed by a woman's cunning and that a woman's craft had defeated his own."[2]

The prose *Lancelot* echoes the myth of the water fairy just as explicity and, in relation to Morgain, more insistently. The narrator introduces her with the information that she was Arthur's sister and the woman who knew the most about enchantments, so much, in fact, that many foolish people said she was not a woman at all, but a goddess.[3] We learn later that it is not learning that corrupted her, but rather lust, for as soon as she came of age she was "si chaude et luxuriose que plus chaude feme ne convint a querre."[4] While serving as one of Guenevere's ladies in waiting she has an affair with a

1.- *Suite du Merlin,* p. 265.

2.- *Suite du Merlin,* p. 265.

3.- See *Lancelot,* I: 275.

4.- *Lancelot,* I: 300.

nephew of the queen, who royally threatens and cajols the young man to break off what is really just a lark. Finding herself pregnant and abandoned, Morgain misguidedly - if, indeed, showing real pluck - searches the whole country until she finds Merlin, whom she seduces - as though she were Rhiannon - with not only her fair person but also "molt grant avoir et molt bele chevalcheure."[1] In return he teaches her powerful magic, which she uses vindictively against Guenevere whenever possible. Learning, then, is only a means in this view of Morgain, there being other base origins and ignoble ends to her actions.

A woman badly wounded in love, reminiscent of Orgelleuse in Wolfram's *Parzival,* she creates a magical Valley of No Return, also known as the Valley of the False Lovers. In it become trapped all knights who undertake the adventure, since any who has ever been unfaithful to his lady in thought, word, or deed faces the prospect of living out his days and dying there, unless someday, of course, some perfect lover should choose to enter the valley and release all the captives. It is rather like Valhalla, with walls of air, plenty of food, drink and men's sports, a celestial prison where fallen knights, killed by Morgain for their perverse male falseness, are living on in the afterlife. The knights' sweethearts, however, are at liberty to come and go as they like, acting the role of mobile valkyries, but with no Odin to obey or any mandatory attentions to their lovers. It is a woman's remodeling of Valhalla, with women in charge, when they choose to be, of men who cannot leave or misbehave, a fantasy very much along the lines of the feminist *fin amour* that characterizes Chrétien's *Lancelot.*

Yet in the palace at the center of the valley lies on her luxurious bed a Morgain who is unquestionably as much a water fairy as a

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[1].- *Lancelot,* I: 301.

valkyrie. At the entrance to the enchanted region there are two dragons, as well as a deadly, cliff-lined pool to be crossed; the latter's frightening nature is stressed. In going across it on a plank Lancelot is preceded by some days by the duke and by Yvain. The former overcomes the two dragons but, reeling with fear, is knocked into the dark and roiled waters by his three opponents. He feels himself drowning and on being pulled out and opening his eyes cannot tell if he is alive or dead. He fails, as it were, to kiss the snake three times, but like Graelent is brought out to a post-drowning land of love. Yvain, too, falls in, and the sergeant-at-arms escorts him to the enchanted jail.

Lancelot slays the two dragons, then, like Yvain in Chrétien's romance bearing his name, defeats the guardian - in this case the three guardians - who protect the pool and keep anyone else from gaining access to the lady of the land. This test of bravery and prowess passed, the pool and its defenders vanish, and the purely symbolic nature of the episode is revealed. Then it is a wall of fire with two guardians that block his way. He kills one, while the other flees, throws himself from its high banks into a pool, and miraculously emerges on the other side, taunting him to follow. Begged by an accompanying damsel to desist so as not to drown, he replies that he was raised in the water and so has an advantage over other men, an aside that calls the reader's attention to his feminine upbringing and consequent skill in matters of love. He plunges in fully armed, pursues his enemy to a pavillion, turns over Morgain's bed to get at him, and finally presents her with the severed head, a feat emblematic of how it is Gawain finds himself in bed with the Green Knight's wife, Yvain with Escalados the Red's, and of wooing in general in many Celtic tales.

Several pages later, after leaving the valley and having successfully just said no to Morgain's beautiful substitute, he comes to another pool in a steep ravine, in which lie the bodies of two courtly lovers, he

dispatched by her husband and she by dispair. No one has been able to retrieve them, but Lancelot is such a perfect lover that he can and does, thus making it possible for them to have a decent burial. The Valley of the False Lovers, it is apparent, is tied up in an essential way with pools that the sorceress uses to kill practically anyone who plunges into love.

In sum, the Morgain of the prose *Lancelot,* who represents a very closely followed model for her counterpart in SGGK, takes the heavenly, essentially valkyrielike qualities of Geoffrey and Layamon's Morgains and gives them a different value, equating them with the characteristics of a water goddess, desirable and desirous but dangerously powerful, smart, devious, and vengeful. The sweetly mothering, or sistering, virgin has become the man-eating siren.

If I have successfully made the case that this image of women is in part responsible for the late Morgain, then the question arises of why this tradition was less important in the early period of Arthurian literature. Two plausible explanations come to mind. First, the Vanir were associated not with the nobles, about and for whom most narrators wrote, but with non-warriors, whose fears and fantasies were less commonly recorded in "high" literature. Secondly, tales of *femmes fatales* let a nightmarish version of unpleasant realities, i.e., that women have always had real power in the realm of love and children, intrude on a heroic male fantasy in which, inspite of an unfaithful wife and a treacherous son-surrogate, the fallen hero gets a golden parachute and a more tender woman than his ex-wife ever was. This rosy view of how a man's life may well turn out strikes me as appropriate in the context of the twelfth-century creation of the ideal of chivalry. By the different time of SGGK, and in the different place of the French prose romances, a more tragic sense of chivalry rang truer.

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