

Morgan le Fay & How We Changed Her



William Henry Margetson (1861-1940), 'She was known to have studied magic while he was being brought up in the nunnery (1914), illustration for 'Legends of King Arthur and His Knights', James Knowles, further details not known. Wikimedia Commons.

Morgan le Fay, and How We Changed Her.

My first real impression of Morgan came from the miniseries Merlin from 1998. By then, she had already gone through several incarnations, many of them casting her as a villain, temptress, and egotistical sorceress. She had seduced her brother multiple times, kidnapped several of his knights, all while hatching several different plots by which to expose the infidelities in Arthur's court and take his power for her own. In the miniseries I saw, she was no exception: for the offer of beauty, she quickly joins forces with Queen Mab and Frik, a gnome in Mab's employ, as they wind her into the fabric of their overarching plot to keep magic in the world. She takes on the role they give her, gleefully and with full dedication, until her last moments when she is suddenly deemed to be of no more use. She has no magic or influence of her own, save what her illusion of beauty gives her, and without that illusion, she becomes instantly meek and unimportant.

The modern impression of Morgan that we have now is quite far removed from her humble origins, when we first meet her in Monmouth's Vita Merlini, written around 1150 A.D. Here, she is described in a much less threatening fashion:

*There nine sisters give pleasant laws to those who come
From our parts to them, and of those sisters, she who
Is higher becomes a doctor in the art of healing and*

*Exceeds her sisters in excellent form. Morgen is her
Name, and she has learned what usefulness all the
Herbs bear so that she may cure sick bodies. Also
That art is known to her by which she can change
Shape and cut the air on new wings in the manner of
Dedalus. When she wishes, she is in Brist, Carnot,
Or Papie; when she wishes, she glides out of the air
Onto your lands. They say that this lady has taught
Mathematics to her sisters Moronoe, Mazoe, Gluten,
Glitonea, Gluten, Tyrone, and Thiten the most
Noteworthy on the cither...(“Vita Merlini”)*

Through this passage, we meet her when Arthur is brought to her for healing, and she proclaims she can do just this, if he stays with her in Avalon for a time. She is not presented as a relative, and is not part of any plots to harm Arthur or any of his knights. Instead, she is described as someone who would not be out of place in da Vinci’s workshop, is respected for her knowledge, and taken at her word. There is no reason for her to be seen as untrustworthy here, as the poem makes the point that her reputation that has led them there, is one of great ability and skill.

It is only roughly a decade after this, that Chretien de Troyes gives us his portrayal of Lady Morgan, and through his eyes, although she retains her healing abilities, she begins the transformation from a trusted healer, to a lady of the court, related to Arthur:

The King draws a deep sigh at the sight of them, and has a plaster brought which Morgan, his sister, had made. This plaster, which Morgan had given to Arthur, was of such sovereign virtue that no wound, whether on nerve or joint, provided it were treated with the plaster once a day, could fail to be completely cured and healed within a week. (de Troyes)

A few decades after this, a series of stories known as the Vulgate Cycle expands on her story, filling in the blanks with dramatic and scandalous details to turn her into a vain, vengeful lady of magic and intrigue.. Suddenly, she has become the bastard child of Igraine and Uther and we see her fostered off to a nunnery: *“And the third sister Morgan le Fay was put to school in a nunnery, and there she learned so much that she was a great clerk of necromancy.”* (Malory, Chapter II) She features as an antagonist in several plots to expose an affair between Lancelot and Guinevre, schemes to kill Arthur, and is portrayed as a sexually active woman who has taken many lovers, acting with rage when she tempts a knight and is henceforth denied:

So after, for great trust, Arthur betook the scabbard to Morgan le Fay his sister, and she loved another knight better than her husband King Uriens or King Arthur, and she would have had Arthur her brother slain, and therefore she let make another scabbard like it by enchantment, and gave the scabbard Excalibur to her love; and the knight’s name was called Accolon, that after had near slain King Arthur. (Malory, Chapter XI)

It is on this view of her that the majority of medieval writers have built a new mythology for Morgan la Fay, one convoluted with incest, trickery and dark magic. She is the force behind her son Mordred as he strikes down his father in the death of Arthur, she opposes Merlin, Nimue, and the Lady of the Lake, who are all presented as magical beings enlisted in the shared dream of Camelot and nobility of the Round Table. She is seen as jealous, petty, and scheming, quick to anger, always duplicitous in her actions, and yet, at the end of the tale, after all her apparent villainy, she still remains the one who escorts Arthur to Avalon for healing and rest.

This change of her character makes more sense when we look at the culture and attitudes of those for whom these poems and stories were written. Medieval literature was in general not very kind to the feminine archetype, giving her only one real option: the pure, kind, and chaste lady from whom the grace of heaven exudes:

*For husbands' hands may touch what they choose,
Since, for their pleasure, they may use
Their ladies as they wish, and wives
Must lead submissive, duteous lives,
Obedient as the monk or friar,
Who bends the knee before his prior. (Lady Kimberly)*

Women during the medieval ages were not legally equal to men, and mostly their ability to own property depended on their status in relation to a husband or father:

Medieval women were treated differently under the law to men depending on whether or not they were married. In medieval English law, an unmarried woman was under the authority of her father or brother, or another male relative, and they represented her in any court case, or business matter. ("Medieval Society")

A widow, if she was wealthy, could make some inroads for herself, but for her it was a more complicated sequence of steps than for a man. For an estimated half of the population to be so disenfranchised, it is likely that most of the power women of this time were able to wield came from whatever schemes and intrigues they could manage. The role of manipulative adversary may have been a role many women had to play in life, and so it could be that the art of the times reflected this.

The Morgan of the last 50 or so years has become more nuanced, and in some cases, a force for good and peace. Several books have been written from her perspective, as well as retellings colored by our increasing knowledge of post-Roman Britain. The original character of Morgan is allowed to start to shine through again, as an educated and powerful woman, who holds a position of some authority during an unstable time. She is not yet back to her full origins, but still retains the trappings of the medieval Morgan, just shown in a more full and culturally diverse light. She is shown to not be evil, instead as someone protecting a way of life that is just as valid, but is being phased out by culture changes in the world around her. We are given a view of her choices in light of this environment, that help us in some cases identify with her, and see through the cloud of respectability previously surrounding King Arthur and his court.

Although we do not know with certainty that King Arthur and the others in his tale

truly existed, if they, or someone on which they could be based, had existed, it is theorized to have been around the early 6th century. In Monmouth's writing, he mentions Arthur's defeat at the Battle of Camblan in 537 A.D., and it is from this battlefield that he is taken to Morgan for aid: "*To that place after the battle of Camblan we brought Arthur, hurt by wounds...*" (Monmouth) From that bookmark, we can step further back to the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 ("Sub-Roman Britain"), and see a period of about 60 years where those who would be later known as Britians were struggling to rebuild and find ways to go about their daily lives. It is during this time that a Camelot could have tried to form and failed, as those left behind tried their best to fill the power vacuum, or just merely grab what land and wealth they could. Almost 600 years later, when Monmouth begins to write the Vita Merlini, he imagines a grand court of knights, rising out of chaos, to bring order, peace, and noble chivalry, drawing upon ideals more present in his own time.

Morgan through his eyes intrigues me, especially the remark about Dedalus. From his description of her power of flight, we can link her to the Morrigan and place her roots in Celtic mythology, but also, why then mention Dedalus? Is it that Monmouth does not want to equate Morgan with Celtic or pagan origins, so he instead draws upon legends that were likely easily found and disseminated from the Romans? The wings in Deadalus's story were an invention, instead of a magical construct. Instead of having arcane origins, they were constructed from wax and feathers, to help him and his son escape from Crete ("Daedalus"). Monmouth also mentions that Morgan could travel easily, that "when she wishes, she is in Brist, Carnot, or Papie" and "glides out of the air onto your lands." If myths are what comes out of the game of telephone we play with

facts over time, then is it possible that a historical and real Morgan existed, who held knowledge of medicine and early methods of flight? We have found proof that early forms of kites and gliders existed as far back as the 5th century BCE in China and in Greece also, in 400 BCE (“Early Flying Machines”). The logic of having a fast mode of travel, if you are a healer and needed to be somewhere quickly to help someone in need, could have led an educated and curious individual to experiment with methods of flight. The Silk Road is theorized to have brought the apple to England, (“Apple”) so it is possible to imagine that if we find our Morgan on an isle rich in apples, we may also find her the recipient of a wealth of knowledge and science as well.

One could counter argue why this matters at all; why would we object to the role Morgan plays in the Arthurian tales, and not make the same case for Mordred, the Black Knight, or any of the other adversaries our heroes face in their adventures? What makes Morgan so important, that we should debate her role and portrayal? Her simplification of character stands out in a way that not many others in the tales do. Whereas many of the faces we know, like Lancelot, Guinevere, Merlin and Arthur, have only been expanded on, she has been taken apart from them and changed into something unfamiliar. Every hero needs a villain to give them that all-important contrast, and we have chosen Morgan to fit the bill, out of many others who could have met the requirements. Lancelot is put forth as the pinnacle of knighthood, yet he commits adultery with the Queen, and still is counted among those on Arthur’s side. Guinevere herself is cruel and manipulative in her quest to hide her infidelity, exiling a servant girl and embarrassing Morgan to make her leave court:

Guenevra's project had thus succeeded; she had revenged herself upon her enemy, and had removed her from the court, perhaps for ever, but still she was not quite satisfied; it seemed to her that her revenge and triumph might have been yet more complete; many little circumstances might have been absent from the whole adventure, and as she was accustomed, in the manner of great ladies, to make others suffer for her discontent, and had just then no other object on which to pour out the cup of her wrath, the storm burst upon the poor little Genelas; she was that very evening cited before the great council of the ladies, tried, and condemned. A thousand sins occurred, which on this occasion were all brought forward to her account; but the most important charge, or at least that which possessed a little semblance of truth, was, that she had a secret understanding with the enchantress, and probably participated in her excesses.

("The Mantle, page 119 - 120")

Instead of being seen as evil, even though these other characters are the ones committing the crimes Morgan is trying to expose, they are treated as tragic lovers, who can not help but find comfort in each other. Many of the Knights around Arthur are featured in tales which read like parables, where they struggle to show chivalric behavior and uphold the very ideals of the court. We do not lay the blame of the fall of Camelot at their feet, even though it is through their actions that the culture of the court is determined. Instead, it is in the person of Morgan that we are told most of the fault lies, as she is given the form of temptress and trickster, appearing here and there in stories as she manipulates those around her to hinder and assault those of the court.

I would argue that her character, perhaps as a result of the changes she has gone through, becomes more appealing and real in a way that the others of the Arthurian mythos may not be able to accomplish. In her faults we are able to see her more clearly, and in the drama surrounding her schemes we are entertained. She is more memorable than the Knights, with their adventures and noble pursuits. She's mysterious and unusual, as a lady of power who fears no man, and although her schemes are usually foiled, she is never really punished or held accountable for her misdeeds. She is still seen as a source of power, and someone to be wary of. She is both an example of the misogyny often brought upon female characters, and an avatar of staunch and uncontested power. Even though she may be portrayed as evil, she still holds her own against all opposition and in the end, Arthur comes to her for aid.

It is also interesting that much of what she does to those of the court would not be as effective if those people were in truth as noble and pure as their code would lead us to believe. If Lancelot and Guinevere were not having an affair, none of Morgan's art would work on them. Her actions are primarily to expose hypocrisy, even in the case of Arthur's position as King. In the later stories when her focus is at its most dramatic, she disputes Arthur's right to rule as he is the result of Merlin's magic, which allows Uther to take the form of another man and deceive Igraine, Morgan's mother. Morgan, in this manner, acts in the form of a kind of judgment: where the others in the tale have gone astray from their path of chivalry, she sees a weakness she can attack. She is, in a sense, a kind of allegory for the devil, being both one who tempts someone to turn from their morals and one who tricks and deceives. Her ability to shape-shift is also seen as an indication of her evil nature, instead of a sign of her intelligence and connection with

the greater sciences. In the eyes of the medieval writers, Morgan has become the archetype of the treacherous, one who does not show their true form and can only be defeated by those who are pure in their faith and connection with the higher power. In this role, Morgan reminds us of the deception of Eve and the apple, one who ate of the fruit of knowledge and then enticed Adam to join her, thus leading to their expulsion from the Garden.

In our modern times, Morgan takes whatever shape we would like her to. We have cast her in comics, video games, on the stage and in music as good, evil, or somewhere inbetween. ("Morgan le Fay in Modern Culture") She is a shapeshifter of another kind, putting on different masks to either help or hinder as the story around her demands. She is no longer restricted to the rigid stereotypes of the medieval scholars and can be anything from Arthur's greatest warrior, to a time-traveling sorceress. She has shown up in episodes of Doctor Who, Batman, as a Marvel character, in Stargate, MacGyver, and even as "Morgan le Fur" in a Hello Kitty-themed stage play. She has, in a sense, been given back to the people and we have taken her on a journey through other tales where she can be both hero and villain. In this way, we have changed her to fit our whims throughout most of her literary existence, and she has served as a lens through which we can view what others perceive it to mean to be both powerful and feminine. In this, I hope we allow her to take on greater roles in our imaginations in the near future.

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