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READING POWER AND AMBIGUITY
IN THE
SUPERNATURAL WOMEN
OF
MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCE

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the Department of English Literature, School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures, part of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Edinburgh.

I declare that all written work presented here is original and has been composed by myself except where the publications, presentations or personal communications of others have been appropriately cited. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed

Jane Elizabeth Bonsall
31 August, 2018

This thesis explores the different models of supernatural femininity in the Middle English romance genre, specifically analysing the representations of magical women as sites of ambiguity, moral flexibility, and power. Using a range of Middle English romance texts that foreground supernaturally powerful female characters, the thesis examines the conventions and contradictions inherent in the romance genre's representations of magical women, and seeks to connect those representations to specific contemporary cultural anxieties about women and power in late medieval English society.

I use the terms 'supernatural woman' and 'magical woman' as labels to designate the female characters in medieval romance whose extraordinary magical abilities or identities render them powerful in potentially subversive ways, and my work explores the impact such labels have on the perceived morality of these characters. Each chapter focuses on a different type of 'supernatural woman,' exploring romance's treatment of that character-type, and the distinct social context informing that particular representation. The first chapter explores romance's treatment of magical healing women in the Middle English Tristan-tradition, which I read alongside the social history of female medical practitioners in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The second chapter connects the magical Saracen princesses in texts such as *Bevis of Hampton* to contemporary anxieties about queenship, foreignness, and exoticism. The third chapter explores the sexual and economic authority of the 'fairy mistress' characters of *Sir Launfal* and *Partonope of Blois*, which I relate to the power and economic status of women in late medieval England. The fourth chapter then deals with representations of maternity and monstrosity, connecting the Middle English Melusine texts to the medical, and specifically gynaecological treatises of the period. Finally, the thesis concludes with an overview of the way Morgan le Fay's character in the *Morte Darthur* encompasses the authority and ambiguity of all of the previously discussed stereotypes of magical femininity, shaping our understanding of the role of magical women in medieval literature. In all these cases, the labels 'magical' and 'supernatural' complicate the morality of these female characters and their position relative to late medieval social and gender norms.

In addition, my methodology uses the romance genre's intertextual, folkloric nature to read these texts as interwoven and – as such – possessing greater

complexity and potential than their brief, formulaic, plot-driven narratives might suggest. I argue that familiarity with the conventions of the form would have permitted a more subversive reading of these texts' representations of supernaturally powerful women. In particular, the thesis contends that the conservative elements of these texts – for example, the restoration of patriarchal hegemony and the containment or displacement of disruptive femininity omnipresent in their conclusions – are subverted and destabilised when the texts are read as existing in conversation with one another, and as inhabiting a shared, folkloric narrative space.

LAY SUMMARY

This thesis explores the representations of magical women in the medieval English popular literature, focussing on their ambiguity, moral flexibility, and power. This thesis uses a range of popular secular texts that foreground supernaturally powerful female characters, examining the contradictions in those representations, and how they are connected to specific contemporary cultural anxieties about women and power in late medieval English society.

I use the terms 'supernatural woman' and 'magical woman' as labels to designate the female characters in medieval romance whose extraordinary magical abilities or identities make them powerful in surprising and subversive ways; my work explores the impact that label has on the perceived morality of these characters. Each chapter focuses on a different type of 'supernatural woman,' including magical healing women, magical Middle Eastern princesses, 'fairy mistress' characters, and monstrous mothers. Each character-type is then analysed in conjunction with relevant social history, such as the role of women in medicine in the Middle Ages, the medieval views on queenship, women's economic authority, and late medieval understandings of the female body. Finally, this thesis concludes with an overview of the way the character Morgan le Fay encompasses the authority and ambiguity of all of the previously discussed stereotypes of magical femininity, and helps us see the connections between these different characters. In all these cases, the label 'supernatural' complicates the morality of these female characters and their position relative to late medieval social and gender norms.

Romances, tales of adventure and love, were some of the most well-known narratives in the medieval period. This means that the audiences of these texts were often familiar with the stories, either because they had heard the tale before, or simply because they were aware of the conventions of the genre. The way this familiarity would have changed the experience of reading these narratives is key to my analysis, because anticipating the ending of a text, or mentally comparing a text to other similar stories, creates nuanced, ambiguous storylines. I use the romance genre's folkloric nature to read these texts as interwoven and – as such – full of narrative potential. My work explores the unexpected ambiguity and nuance in the representations of these supernaturally powerful female characters that arises from the ways in which these texts would have been read, and from their connections to social history.

I am incredibly grateful to my partner, James MacFadyen, for his limitless love and support, his patience, endless willingness to listen, and especially his unshakable confidence in me that has meant the world through this process.

Finally, I am grateful to all of the storytellers, from the authors of my childhood books, to the teachers in grade school and high school, to the professors in college and university, who taught me both to love stories and to appreicate their power, their meaning, and their vitality to our humanity.

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CITATION PRINCIPLES

Unless otherwise noted, all in-text citations will be to line numbers. References to Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* will be to page numbers in the Vinaver edition (Thomas Malory, *Works,* 2nd edn*,* ed. by Eugène Vinaver, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), given as *Morte*. References to the *De Secretis Mulierum* will be to page numbers in Helen Rodnite Lemay's *Women's Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus's De Secretis Mulierum, With Commentaries* (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), given as *De secretis*.

He threwe the swerde as farre in to the watir as he myght. And there cam an arme and an honde above the watir, and toke hit and cleyght hit, and shoke hit thryse and braundysshed, and than vanysshed with the swerde into the watir…

Whan they were at the watirs syde, evyn faste by the banke hoved a lytyl barge wyth many fayr ladyes in hit, and amonge hem al was a quene…

And in one of their lappis kyng Arthure layde hys hede. And than that quene sayd, 'A my dere brothir! Why have ye taryed so longe frome me? Alas thys wounde on your hede hath caught overmoche colde!'

And anon they rowed fromward the londe…

(Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 716)[1]

This scene marks the culmination of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. In it, the promise implied by Caxton's title of the work at long last reaches fulfilment. It is a significant, even pivotal moment: the end of Arthur's life, the end of Camelot, the end of an era. Critically wounded, Arthur sends his loyal follower to throw his enchanted sword Excalibur into the water, where it is caught by a magically-appearing arm. Then a mysterious barge appears, full of ladies ready to attend to the king. Arthur's sister, Morgan le Fay, takes the wounded king into her care, and the boat sails away "fromward the londe" to the magical island of Avalon. Morgan, though an antagonist throughout Malory's text, here plays the role of devoted sister and healer, and if Arthur is to return as the fabled Once and Future King, he will only be able to do so through the magical healing abilities of his sister and erstwhile foe. At this climactic, significant moment of the 'morte' of Arthur, it is particularly noteworthy that his supernaturally powerful, morally ambiguous sister is at his side.

While Morgan's presence is important, it is not, however, surprising. This moment, which occurs at the end of Arthur's life, at the end of Malory's text, and therefore at the end of the romance tradition of the late medieval period, originates in one of the earliest Arthurian texts to be written in the British Isles, Geoffrey of

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from *Le Morte Darthur* are taken from Thomas Malory, *Works,* 2nd edn*,* ed. by Eugène Vinaver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), henceforth referred to as *Morte.*

Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*.[2] In that text, written in the twelfth century, Morgan performs the same role as she does in Malory's much later fifteenth century text, taking Arthur to her island domain for healing. Morgan le Fay therefore stands at the beginning and the end of the medieval tradition of supernaturally powerful women in romance literature, an archetype and a lens through which many of the other magical women of this genre and period may be viewed. In this passage in particular are evident the critical characteristics and inherent contradictions found in the representations of supernatural women in medieval English romance, specifically their power, their ambiguity, and their simultaneously feminine and un-feminine performance. Supernatural women are often associated with benevolent power and great good fortune for the hero, as evidenced by Morgan's benign (and appropriately feminine) healing skill, which is demonstrated in her confident, and medically proficient observation that Arthur's wound "hath caught overmoche colde." Morgan's magical power and positive authority is also shown in the perfectly timed appearance of her enchanted 'barge,' in her preeminence as a 'quene,' and in the intimacy with which she cares for her brother. Despite this demonstration of benevolent power, however, this moment reveals Morgan's persistent association with magical otherworlds (in this case the Isle of Avalon, to which she conveys Arthur when they depart from the 'londe'), with the uncanny and the mysterious (for example, the magically appearing and vanishing 'arme' and 'honde' which seems to summon Morgan), and with unfeminine, potentially threatening, weaponry and objects of masculine violence (in her association with Arthur's enchanted sword). These potentially negative, threatening, or uncanny elements of this passage are also typical of supernatural women in Middle English romance.

Morgan shares the conflicting elements of her identity which render her character ambiguous with many of the supernatural women of medieval English romance: her power, uncertain loyalties, benevolence, threatening authority, and her intimacy with the hero. Because of this same ambiguity, the supernatural women of the Middle English romance tradition trouble expected boundaries. Their fluid and changeable characteristics invite questions about the stability of identity, especially those identities associated with class, gender, and power in late medieval English literature and society. These magical female characters demand a critical and

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[2] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Life of Merlin: Vita Merlini,* ed. and trans. by Basil F. L. Clark (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973).

questioning reading of the seemingly prescriptive and conservative romance genre, and as this thesis will show, offer an expansive portrait of the ambiguous morality and authority underlying the representations of magically powerful women in Middle English romance. When examined in the context of contemporary social issues to do with gender and power, these supernatural women may be understood as articulating anxieties about the changing world of the late medieval period, and as revealing unexpectedly flexible attitudes toward feminine authority and moral ambiguity from their fourteenth- and fifteenth-century audiences.

Before further exploring this argument, I must first offer some context and explanation of my understanding of the romance genre, the role of women in the composition of romance, and of the meaning of the 'supernatural' in the Middle Ages.

I. The Meaning of Romance

> In th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,
> Of which that Britons speken greet honour,
> Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.
> The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,
> Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.
> This was the olde opinion, as I rede;
> I speke of manye hundred yeres ago.
> But now kan no man se none elves mo…

(Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Wife of Bath's Tale,' 863-70)[3]

The material for this study is, as previously mentioned, the Middle English popular romance corpus. Medieval romance broadly refers to the stories of adventure and chivalry, set in an imagined bygone era or otherworld, "th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour" or 'fayerye,' as Chaucer's Wife of Bath puts it. Romance narratives frequently concern the knights, ladies, and 'elf-queenes' mentioned in the introduction to 'The Wife of Bath's Tale.' This text fits these criteria, and has many traits typical to Middle English romance. Because of this, because of the magical woman at its centre, and because as one of Chaucer's most studied texts 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' is exceptionally well known, I will be referring to this text throughout my introduction

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[3] The edition I will be using for Geoffrey Chaucer's works, including *The Canterbury Tales,* is *The Riverside Chaucer,* 3rd edn, ed. by Larry Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). For 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale' see pp. 105-22.

as a model for my argumentative framework, and to demonstrate the sort of analysis this thesis will utilise.

The definition of 'romance' is somewhat elusive. While there is general scholarly consensus about which texts ought to be categorised as medieval romances, the distinctions of the genre are 'vague,' and 'indeterminate.'[4] The term 'romance' comes from the Old French word 'romanz,' meaning vernacular, and thus initially 'romances' might mean any narratives composed in, or translated into, vernacular French, Italian or Spanish (rather than Latin).[5] The term evolved over time to eventually refer specifically to narratives of chivalry, courtly love and knightly adventure. In the fourteenth century, English writers used the term to denote narratives that contain "fanciful, miraculous, amorous or chivalrous" material[6] – the sort of stories Chaucer describes in the Wife of Bath's Tale, set in "th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour" or the land of "fayerye" (863-65). By the late fourteenth century, 'romance' as a literary mode was a well-established concept, though the precise borders of the genre might be nebulous.

Scholars from the nineteenth century onward have generally categorized medieval romance as the vernacular, secular tales of adventure and the overcoming of trials, of chivalric combat and courtly love, frequently set in exotic, idealised, or otherworldly locations. These texts have aristocratic protagonists, and often concern the maturation of the knightly hero through the involvement of the marvellous or the supernatural, through tests and trials of worthiness and courage, loss and acquisition of land and wealth, and – inevitably – through love affairs leading to marriage.[7] Romance is thus the literature of desire and wish-fulfilment, as the desires of the hero (whether for lost identity, prowess, love, political dominion, material wealth, or "simply *aventure*")[8] eventually are satisfied.

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[4] Ad Putter's states that the romance genre is ill-defined, even "loose and fuzzy at the edges." See Putter's 'A Historical Introduction' in *The Spirit of Middle English Popular Romance*, ed. by Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (New York: Routledge, 2000) pp. 1-2.

[5] Gail Ashton, *Medieval English Romance in Context* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010) p. 17, and W.R.J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (London: Longman, 1987) pp. 1-10.

[6] Putter, p. 2.

[7] For more on the context and content of romance, see Nicola McDonald's 'A Polemical Introduction' in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance,* ed. by Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) pp. 1-21, Carol M. Meale's '"Gode men / Wiues maydnes and alle men": Romance and Its Audiences,' *Readings in Medieval English Romance,* ed. by Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 1994) pp. 209-25, Barron, pp. 177-207, and Putter, p. 1.

[8] McDonald, p. 13.

My study, like other studies of romance and gender, considers the role of women in this process of wish-fulfilment. While the desires of the hero (and, presumably, the male writers and readers of romance) are expressed and fulfilled by the structure of the genre, in what ways and what extent are the desires of women – real or fictional – also articulated? Confined by patriarchal and chivalric norms to limited spaces, freedoms and powers, the female characters in romance may at first glance seem two-dimensional stereotypes, existing purely to serve the hero and the plot. Yet this thesis, like other similar explorations of the roles of women in romance, finds breadth and potential in these female characters. This is possible, I argue, because of the tensions that define the romance genre, because of its audience and impetus, and specifically because of the powerful effect of the idea of magic.

I.1 Dreams and Reality: the Tensions of Romance

There are many critical lenses through which contemporary scholars view romance, and it is not the goal of this thesis to enumerate them all. There are a few key ideas about how we imagine romance that shape my scholarship directly, however, and that thus bear mentioning. These ideas are largely to do with the tension inherent in romance, specifically the tension between romance's expansiveness, and its conservativism.

Scholarship often focuses on the ways in which romance departs from reality (as escapist, imaginative fiction), the ways in which it reflects or engages with reality (as mimetic fiction), or some combination of both. Because of its otherworldly, exotic, imagined settings, its fascination with the marvellous, and its fantastical plot structures, romance is understood to be escapist literature. The 'dream-world' of romance, then, may be read as distinct from reality, with clear distance between the material of the romance and the material lives of its audience – a distance which generates narrative opportunity and possibility.[9] Describing this effect in romance, Nicola McDonald states, "Within the circumscribed space of the narrative, both author and audience are freed from the exigencies of daily life."[10] That freedom stems in part from the romance genre's literary conventions, and from the allusions to orality in the formulaic structures of the narratives. Those allusion amount to the genre "promoting itself as fiction," according to McDonald, who suggests that "the

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[9] Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (London: Harvard University Press, 1976) p. 53.
[10] McDonald, p. 15.

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more flagrantly a text promotes itself as fiction, the greater are its opportunities to test… [the] limits" of reality and draw the reader into imagined otherworlds.[11] In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim discusses the same phenomenon, saying that in fairy tales (as in romances) the specific literary use of impossibilities and superlatives signals that the story takes place "not in time or place of external reality, but in a state of mind" where "normal logic or causations are suspended."[12] This place of suspended logic, the dream-world of romance, is one of endless possibility, typically tinged with nostalgia – a longing for an imagined, by-gone golden age of chivalric honour and glory that Corinne Saunders describes as "always already past."[13] Even more than other literary forms, then, romance invites its audience to read these texts as truly distinct from lived reality, separate and exotic otherworlds into which readers might escape.

However, reading romance as unrelated to reality ignores the many direct and indirect ways romance responds to, engages with, and articulates anxieties about contemporary medieval socio-cultural issues. While the world of romance may be a escapist space of magic and wonder, the challenges, hopes, and fears of the characters in romance are "very much of the world the patrons and poets live in," according to Joan Ferrante.[14] Increasingly, scholars have read "the rich and strange" worlds of romance as "grounded in cultural reality; … tangible and possible."[15] Romance may therefore be understood as mimetic as well as imaginative – reflective of elements of reality despite its exotic trappings.[16] Helen Cooper suggests that romances adapt over time to reflect the changing desires and cultural issues of their audiences,

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[11] McDonald, p. 15.

[12] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage, 1977) p. 62.

[13] Corinne Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance* (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2010) pp. 2-3; for more, see McDonald, and also Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969) p. 4.

[14] Joan M. Ferrante, *To The Glory of Her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) p. 107. See also Roberta L. Krueger, 'Beyond Debate: Gender in Play in Old French Courtly Fiction' in *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, ed. by Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees (New York: Palgrave, 2002) pp. 79-95, and Ashton, pp. 1-2.

[15] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* p. 2.

[16] For more on the mimetic potential of romance, see several of the sections in Roberta Krueger's *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), especially Jeff Rider, 'The Other Worlds of Romance,' pp. 115-31, and Felicity Riddy, 'Middle English Romance: Marriage, Family, Intimacy,' pp. 235-52; see also Lee C. Ramsay, *Chivalric Romances; Popular Literature in Medieval England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), Susan Crane, *Insular Romance*: *Politics, Faith and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Romance* (London: University of California Press, 1986), and Barron, pp. 3-5.

foregrounding material that would respond to contemporary social interests.[17] This is possible in part because of the norms of the genre: "The 'far away and long ago' that is almost a defining feature of the genre, the freeing of romances from familiar place or chronology, makes it especially easy for them to be appropriated for interpretations that fit the immediate historical or cultural moment of subsequent new readers," Cooper states.[18] Romance texts, therefore, may both engage with the struggles and emotions of everyday life and also feature the exotic and the extraordinary – what McDonald terms a "clash of the marvellous and the mundane."[19] Romance's tendency toward this "uneasy combining of ideal and real, its reflexivity and its cultural specificity"[20] means that in the otherworlds of romance exists a space for the working-out of contemporary issues.

This brings us to the second point of tension inherent in romance: the balance of the romance genre's playfulness and permissiveness with its traditionalist, conservative structures. Because most romance narratives, like most fairy tales (which are their direct descendants) end with a 'happily ever after' in which a return to the status quo has been reached, norms of gender, class, nationality, age, and religion are upheld in the conclusions of romances. This is witnessed in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale,' when the old, ugly, poor, opinionated, over-educated Loathly Lady has been transformed into a young, beautiful (and therefore presumably aristocratic), and above all obedient bride ("she obeyed hym in every thyng /That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng…" 1261-2). This process, unsurprisingly, renders her desirable and entirely within the bounds of social expectations. The knight too has undergone a transformation, albeit a less obvious one, as he learns lessons of courtesy, respect, and Christian morals, and is in essence transformed from a boor to a noble knight and an appropriate romance hero. The text then supports norms that we may read as traditionalist and conservative.

However, because of the fantastical, otherworldly settings of romance, these texts are also spaces of play, in which the usual ordered systems – of class, gender, etcetera – may be subverted, if only temporarily. This subversion is exemplified in the bedroom scene in the 'The Wife of Bath's Tale,' in which the sexually vulnerable

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[17] Helen Cooper's masterly work, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), has greatly influenced my understanding of the genre and its flexible potential.
[18] Cooper, *English Romance in Time*, p. 4.
[19] McDonald, p. 15.
[20] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* p. 3.

knight is lectured by his loathsome new wife, as she quotes Dante, Seneca, Boethius, and the Bible to teach him courtesy and morality (1112-1224). The fact that this is a direct inversion of the married dynamic discussed in the 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue' – in which the Wife is subjected to an endless litany of antifeminist literature and lectures from her husband in an effort to control her behaviour (719-91) – makes especially clear how much the romance text intentionally plays with, transforms, subverts, and reimagines power structures. Despite the aforementioned conservative endings, the middle of romance narratives reject conservativism, and witness transformation through subversion of norms and hierarchies.

I will argue that this tension between romance's playful, subversive elements and the conservative status quo to which the narratives eventually return is vital to our understanding of the supernatural women in Middle English romance. As this thesis will show, that 'playful' space in romance often allows for greater power and authority for women than was usual in medieval English society, and in the dream-world of romance, that power is not immediately met with censure or moral condemnation. This is seen in the education, independence, and moral authority of the Loathly Lady, despite her low class, old age, and hideous appearance. But what makes these characters exceptional, I will argue, is the way they are eventually integrated into that conservative conclusion, imagined as a part of a functioning medieval society as wives and mothers, and participating in structures that would have more closely resembled lived social realities of the readers of romance. This, more than anything else, is what the makes the supernatural women in medieval English romance so extraordinary: not merely the ways in which they are powerful, but in the fact that they are not excluded or villainised for those characteristics.

I.2 Who Painted the Lions? Authors, Audiences, and the Question of Gender

> By God! If wommen hadde writen stories,
> As clerkes han withinne hire oratories
> They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
> Than al the mark of adam may redresse
>
> ('The Wife of Bath's Prologue,' 698-701).

In 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue,' Chaucer's Wife of Bath comments on authorship and narrative power, suggesting that negative representations of women in literature come from men's biases. If "wommen hadde writen stories," she says, then perhaps

men in romances would not be characterised as noble, admirable heroes quite so often. Of course, like most medieval literature, the 'stories' considered in this thesis were not written by women, but by men: specifically, the "clerkes" that the Wife of Bath mentions. Her complaints that it is impossible for clerks to "speke good of wyves" (695) allude to the literary and cultural debate about the position of women in the late medieval period that would become known as the *querrelle des femmes*.[21] The questions about women's nature and their roles in society arose initially from clerical antifeminist writings, especially those meditating on Eve's culpability in the Fall, and interpretations of Aristotelian physiological theory. From ancient satire,[22] to the Epistles of Saint Paul, to Jerome's *Against Jovinian*,[23] to Andreas Capellanus's *De Amore*,[24] the idea of women as materially – as well as morally and spiritually – inferior to men became firmly established in ecclesiastical writing. This conversation spilled over into the literary realm with such texts as Jean de Meun's *Le Roman de la Rose*,[25] Boccaccio's *Il Corbaccio*,[26] Jehan le Fevre's *Les Lamentations de Matheolus*,[27] and Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* – not to mention the section from 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue' quoted above,[28] all of which broadly reiterated the clerical opinions about women's wickedness, and often urged men to avoid marriage. Middle English romances rarely engage directly with the subject matter of the *querrelle* (despite the Wife of Bath's pointed comments), but the romance genre as a whole, and Middle English romances especially, offer another perspective into the attitudes toward, and conversations about, women, their moral nature, and their role in society in the late medieval period.

Most romances, both in French and later in English, were written by men, we assume, but that does not preclude women's influence in the composition of these

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[21] For context on the origin of the *querrelle* and the role, in particular, of the fourteenth-century French writer Christine de Pisan in this debate (which would become "the vehicle through which most early feminist thinking evolved"), see Joan Kelly, 'Early Feminist Theory and the "Querelle Des Femmes", 1400-1789,' *Signs*, 8.1 (1982) 4-28, (p. 5).

[22] For example, Ovid's *Art of Love*; for a concise, clear analysis of the connection of this text to the medieval antifeminist tradition, see Alcuin Blamires, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*: *An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) p. 17.

[23] For context on this particularly polemical text, and especially Jerome's positions on virginity over marriage, see Blamires, pp. 63-77.

[24] Blamires, pp. 114-24.

[25] Blamires, pp. 149-166.

[26] Blamires, pp. 166-76.

[27] Blamires, pp. 177-197.

[28] For more on the Wife of Bath's direct response to Jerome's anti-matrimonial text, see Blamires, p. 198, Warren S. Smith, 'The Wife of Bath Debates Jerome,' *The Chaucer Review,* 32.2 (1997) 129-145, and Douglas Wurtele, 'The "Double Sorwe" of the Wife of Bath: Chaucer and the Misogynist Tradition,' *Florilegium,* 11 (1992) 179-205.

texts. Feminist scholars seeking women's (often invisible) roles in medieval literary culture have examined romance for evidence of female influence.[29] Such scholarship has not only pointed to evidence of prominent female patrons of romance (such as Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter, Marie de Champagne)[30] but has also suggested that women were broadly "involved with the vernacular literature which was written in and for secular courts from the mid-twelfth century on," as Joan Ferrante says.[31] She adds that there is evidence that women "commissioned works… insisting on storylines… Formed a significant part of the audience" for many romance texts.[32] That women were active participants in the composition of at least some romance texts is now generally accepted by scholars in the field.

Consequently, romances are often understood as representing women's narrative interests, and scholarship looks to romance for evidence of medieval women's desires. The 'courtly love' structure to which romance adheres – *amour courtois* in French, or, in Occitan, *fin'amor* – certainly casts women in positions of authority.[33] The ennobling passion of a knight for his (noble, virtuous, beautiful) lady is paramount in this literary tradition, and thus a woman's power – to give or withhold

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[29] See for example Roberta L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For more, see E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), and Ferrante.

[30] See for example Moshé Lazar, 'Cupid, the Lady, and the Poet: Modes of Love at Eleanor of Aquitaine's Court,' in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Patron and Politician,* ed. by William W. Kibler (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976) pp. 35-60, and Michael Bryson and Arpi Movsesian's *Love and its Critics: From the Song of Songs to Shakespeare and Milton's Eden* (Cambridge: OpenBook Publishers, 2017) <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0117> [accessed 15 February 2019]. See especially Chapter Four, 'The Troubadours and Fin'amor: Love, Choice, and the Individual,' pp. 121-194.

[31] Ferrante, pp. 107-08.

[32] Ferrante identifies common motifs in romances written for female patrons, suggesting they often "include women as the only heirs to their father's land or as effective rulers or regents, some so independent they refuse to marry (at least at first); a hero who is lower-born and raised in status by marriage to the heroine, and who often needs the help of women more than he serves them;… Heroines are often unusually well educated, which gives them extraordinary, even magic, powers; some are able to manipulate the hero's actions and the events of the story, so they seem to be surrogates for the poet, an identification which at times is virtually explicit…" pp. 107-8.

[33] For a discussion of Andreas Capellanus's codification of the *amour courtois* power dynamic in the French 'courts of love' – and how that dynamic may, or may not, have reflected reality – see Amy Kelly, 'Eleanor of Aquitaine and her Courts of Love,' *Speculum,* 12.1 (1937) 3-19. For an exploration of the role Chrétien de Troyes's *Lancelot, ou, le Chevalier de la Charrete* played in the construction of the idea of courtly love, see Sarah Kay, 'Courts, Clerks, and Courtly Love' in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance,* ed. by Krueger, pp. 81-96. For more on the influence women's tastes may have had on romance literature, see Ferrante, p. 113, Lazar, pp. 35-60, Meale, pp. 209-25, and Bryson and Movsesian, pp. 121-94.

her favour – is elevated.[34] Honouring women becomes a key element of chivalric ideology, and romances reflect that through the centrality and importance of many female characters, their purity, goodness, and willingness to aid the embattled heroes. However, the pedestal upon which women are placed in the courtly love tradition also acts as a prison: women, though nominally powerful in these texts, are frequently confined by virtue, even as they are also, often, enclosed physically in towers, castles, or chambers. Women's roles in these texts are often limited, their freedoms reduced, and because feminine virtue is synonymous with obedience, meekness, passivity and submissiveness – inaction rather than action – even those women with authority are rendered static and contained by the very qualities which elevate them. What emerges, then, are narrow moral and narrative boundaries for the models of acceptable womanhood, within which female characters are strictly confined.

English romance inherits the power-structures and the simultaneous veneration and objectification of the virtuous woman from its French antecedents. The love-objects in Middle English romances remain largely restricted to their passive, virtuous pedestals (or towers) even as the genre begins to move away from the strict norms of chivalry. This is, of course, a broad generalisation; there is a wealth of (vitally important) feminist scholarship that seeks women's power and influence in romance, and that explores the breadth and subversiveness in their representations.[35] The reason that scholarship is so important, however, is because finding nuance, authority and power in the female characters in Middle English romances requires real effort. The majority of Middle English romance heroines remain, by and large, narratively passive, and are treated as objects of exchange for the heroes to win. Though models of purity and goodness, these female characters often become trapped in their personal, embodied virtue, the purpose of which was to reflect the honour and

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[34] This pattern of the knight's romantic submission to his lady originated in the courtly love tradition established in Troubadour poetry of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In Don A. Monson's 'The Troubadour's Lady Reconsidered Again,' *Speculum,* 70.2 (1995) 255-74, he argues that in keeping with expected social hierarchy of *fin'amor* relationships, in which the lady is superior to her lover, writers of the troubadour lyrics often used a "feudal metaphor" which "compares the lover's relationship to his lady to that of a vassal to his lord" (p. 267) – though he is careful to phrase this as a-historical, and purely a literary device to emphasise the petitions of the yearning lover. For more on the contradictory nature of the courtly love tradition's treatment of women see also E. Jane Burns, 'The Man Behind The Lady in Troubadour Lyric,' *Romance Notes,* 25.3 (1985) 254-270.

[35] Just a few relevant examples include Amy Vines, *Women's Power in Late Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), and both Rosamund Allen, 'Female Perspective in Romance and History,' pp. 133-47, and Judith Weiss, 'The Wooing Woman in Anglo-Norman Romance,' in *Romances in Medieval England*, ed. by Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows and Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991) pp. 149-61.

worthiness of the hero.[36] Because male honour is defined by action – deeds of prowess, quests, crusades, or pilgrimages – while female honour by inaction – the passive state of *being* modest, faithful, beautiful, chaste, obedient – good women in romance are bound to honour that is static, confining.

Women who do not conform to the constraints of the passive love-object role are often excluded from the marriage market: they are old, maternal, or lower class (or all of the above, in the case of the Loathly Ladies). They are the plucky serving maids, the wicked step-mothers, or protective, nurturing maternal characters. While such women appear less frequently in romance, given the genre's obsession with love and marriage, they may exhibit a sort of freedom from which most marriageable maidens are excluded.

Supernatural women stand somewhere between these two categories, then – they are often noble, often marriage-partners for the heroes, yet questionably virtuous, usually independent, and physically unconstrained. Neither trapped in the static, chaste tower of the *fin'amor* maiden, nor removed from the central marriage-plot of the romance genre, the supernatural women of medieval romance may be read as at once acceptably part of society and simultaneously inhabiting more complex roles than was usual for female characters. If we, as scholars, hope to find female desires and interests reflected in medieval literature, then perhaps it is to the magical women of Middle English romance that we should look. It may therefore be unsurprising that Chaucer's choice of subject-matter for his 'woman's' story – a tale nominally told by a woman, despite his authorship – should be one with a powerful, transgressive, complex magical woman at its centre. The Wife of Bath's Loathly Lady is not fully free from the restrictive structures of society, nor is the tale truly told in a feminine voice. However, by combining the idea of a female narrator with the supernatural-woman-subject, Chaucer may suggest that out of all the many themes and narratives in fourteenth-century popular literature, this is of particular interest to women.

I.3. Middle English Romance and the Meaning of 'Popular'

We come, then, to the texts that form the body of this study: the popular Middle English romances of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These texts were recorded in manuscripts, often as part of family miscellanies, and had a markedly different

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[36] Seigfried Cristoph, 'Honor, Shame and Gender' in *Arthurian Romance and Gender: Selected Proceedings of the 17th International Arthurian Congress*, ed. by Friedrich Wolfsettel (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995) pp. 28-29.

audience from their courtly French or Anglo-Norman predecessors, and thus different style and narrative impulses. The Old French and Anglo-Norman romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, from which many of the later Middle English romances derive, were composed specifically for members of the aristocracy and the royal court. This literary iteration of the romance tradition, including, and then often modelled after Chrétien de Troyes's lengthy texts, frequently featured multiple subplots and extended introspection. This allowed authors to detail the interior lives of the characters, their motivations, thoughts and feelings, all of which was typically explored with the elegant phrasing and elevated diction appropriate for the aristocratic audience.[37]

Middle English romances, on the other hand, were not restricted to the courtly, aristocratic elite, and this changing audience altered the tone and form of the texts. These briefer narratives were instead read and circulated by an increasingly broad section of society, namely the landed gentry (former feudal lords and land-owners) and the emergent upper-middle classes, comprised of wealthy merchants, yeomen, and tradesmen.[38] These upwardly mobile sections of medieval English society were able to take advantage of the particular opportunities of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries for social climbing, arising from the instability caused by the Black Death, political unrest, and eventually the Hundred Years War.[39] As the literate portion of the population began to expand, books – as family heirlooms, or status-symbols for the educated elite – were in increasing demand, and the production of romances along with them.

It is important to note that French (or Anglo-Norman) was, throughout the fourteenth and much of the fifteenth centuries, still the language of the court of England. The choice to compose or translate these texts into English, then, may be

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[37] For more, see Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, 'The Shape of Romance in Medieval France' in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. by Krueger, pp. 13-28.

[38] For more on the audience of medieval English romance, and particularly the socio-political implications of those changing audiences, see Geraldine Heng's masterful *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), especially pp. 111-13. See also Ashton, pp. 8-9, Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* pp. 4-5 and McDonald, pp. 1-9.

[39] For some further context about this social change, specifically the climactic change and disease that created the conditions for the Peasant's Revolt, see Alasdair Dunn, *The Great Rising of 1381: The Peasants' Revolt and England's Failed Revolution* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing Ltd, 2002) pp. 15-29; the impact on economics and social mobility is explored in S.J. Payling, 'Social mobility, demographic change and landed society in late medieval England,' *Economic History Review,* 45.1 (1992) 51-73. This is discussed in general terms by romance scholars, for example, Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives and Amazons* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1990) p. viii, Putter, pp. 3-15, Ashton, pp. 13-17, and Heng, pp. 98-113. See also Sheila Fisher, 'Women and Men in Late Medieval English Romance' in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. by Krueger, pp. 150-164.

read as intentional, and an active attempt to court a particularly broad, non-aristocratic (and in the time of the Hundred Years War, newly nationalistic) audience.[40] These texts were designed for broad consumption – hence their designation 'popular.' The term 'popular romance,' like any 'popular' media, has two different meanings. First, it can refer to the *popularity* of a text, the broad consumption, approval or enjoyment of a given narrative. Second, it can also refer to media that is *of the people*, art that is representative of the tastes and appetites of a broad cross-section of the population (and not merely the educated, intellectual elite).[41] The Middle English romances I study are popular in both senses of the word – they were well loved and frequently reproduced, and they were also literature of the people.

Throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, it was scholarly habit to treat these Middle English romances with some condescension and an almost patronising attitude because of the ways in which these texts differed from their courtly antecedents. Middle English romances broadly lack the sense of interiority, the narrative detail, and the reflective and introspective elements of the earlier French texts. Instead, medieval English 'popular romance' has been defined as "those texts in Middle English… which show a predominant concern with narrative at the expense of symbolic meaning."[42] Led by action and plot, the texts are quick-paced, prioritising adventure over emotional or spiritual contemplation – presumably to suit the desires of their audience. This also accounts for Middle English romances' markedly worldly (perhaps even inelegant) concern with material wealth. They are often brief texts of only a few thousand lines, full of stock characters, clichés, and formulaic elements, and dramatic or strange incidences are presented with little explanation. The tail-rhymed couplets in which they were composed often recycle rhymes and references from other texts.[43] All of these traits are typical of 'populist' or

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[40] See Heng, pp. 98-113, for an in-depth exploration of the idea of nationalism as it can be witnessed in Middle English romance. See also Stanley Hussey, 'Nationalism and Language in England, c. 1300-1500' in *Nations, Nationalism and Patriotism in the European Past*, ed. by Claus Bjørn, Alexander Grant and Keith J. Stringer (Copenhagen: Academic Press, 1994) pp. 96-108. See also Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* pp. 4-5 and Ashton, pp. 13-17.

[41] For a clear, comprehensive examination of this 'popular' audience, see Jane Gilbert's 'Theoretical Introduction' to *The Spirit of Middle English Popular Romance*, ed. by Putter and Gilbert.

[42] See the introduction to Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton's *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011) p. 7. See also M. F. K. Stokes, 'Lanval to Sir Launfal: A Story Becomes Popular' in *The Spirit of Middle English Popular Romance*, ed, by Putter and Gilbert, pp. 56-77, and Derek Pearsall, 'The Pleasure of Popular Romance' in *Medieval Romance, Medieval Context,* ed. by Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011) p. 12.

[43] For more on the form of Middle English romances, see Pearsall, pp. 12-14.

popular literary forms, and all suggest that the audience for these Middle English romances was a broad cross-section of society.

Some of these features have been used to support arguments about oral transmission of these texts. The debate about the way Middle English romances were passed down has varied over time, and while contemporary scholarship certainly assumes that oral elements were incorporated in late medieval English literary culture, the field has moved away from the idea of wandering minstrels as the primary sources for these texts (despite the direct addresses to the audience at the beginning of many romances).[44] Instead, most contemporary scholarship suggests that these texts were read both privately and in family settings, sometimes possibly performed, but broadly intended for literate lay readers and listeners rather than only clerical, aristocratic, or performing consumers.[45] This feeds into this idea of popularity, once again: gentle or bourgeois consumers of romance, sharing these narratives with their families, servants, and members of their households, added romances to their miscellanies along with prayers, saints' lives, and didactic texts, giving them unusual reach to a broad audience.

Although many of these romances remained popular into the print-culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, their composition predates the printing press in England, and thus we must rely on manuscript or secondary evidence to gauge their literary success. As with any type of medieval literature, manuscript survival makes knowing precise numbers of texts an impossibility. However, the records that we have indicate that Middle English romances were some of the most read and best loved texts of the late medieval period.[46] They were, McDonald suggests, the pulp fiction of their day, full of what Helen Cooper refers to as 'memes' – the formulaic elements so often repeated from text to text that added to their familiarity and popularity – in both senses of the word.[47] They would have been read, privately and aloud, in family homes and halls, perhaps recited, retold, rewritten, reimagined, and overall *remembered* because of this popularity. An example of this, of course, is *The Canterbury Tales*, witnessed in the cast of storytelling characters, who are imagined to be from all walks of life. This is a text narrative that mimics oral culture, indicating

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[44] This "hybrid oral and literary world" (p. 13) is something that Ad Putter describes with clarity (pp. 7-8).

[45] Ashton, pp. 8-19, and Putter, pp. 3-15.

[46] Evidence of this is discussed in Ashton, p. 21, and McDonald, p. 11.

[47] See McDonald, p. 11, and Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* pp. 3-7, for more on the term 'meme' as way of describing the motifs of romance that replicate across time and cultures.

the overlap between the two, characteristic of medieval popular literature. Additionally, the subject matter itself was popular in its breadth, and in the stories Chaucer chose to (re)tell. This includes the Loathly Lady motif in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale,' which may be found in many other contemporary texts, suggesting its broad appeal and 'popularity.' Of course, we also know *The Canterbury Tales* were 'popular' because of the number of manuscripts that have survived, the swiftness with which they were disseminated in print, and their longevity.[48]

Much of this could be taken as a matter of course, but it is worth lingering on this idea of popularity. The broad audience, multivalent transmission, and sheer longevity of these narratives (evidenced by the production and reproduction of media inspired by medieval romance into the present day) are critical to my understanding of these texts because that popularity is key, I argue, to the generation of meaning. The broad reach these texts would have had is what gives significance to any arguments I make. We can only read these texts, and specifically their representations of supernatural women as either having the power to influence social attitudes, or as being reflective of social attitudes, if we can assume their reach and popularity. Only then, armed with the knowledge of the breadth and staying power of these narratives, may we assume these representations of magical women would have actually been engaging, in a broad and meaningful way, with popular conceptions about femininity, authority, and magic.

II. The Meaning of the Supernatural

Throughout this introduction I have been using the terms 'magic' and 'supernatural' freely. Before continuing, it is worth establishing the meaning of those terms in the context of Middle English romance, and, therefore, this thesis. My work is not specifically concerned with the medieval belief in, or practice of magic. However, the way late medieval society understood magic and encountered magic in their day-to-day lives, as well as the way they understood magic in fiction, would have influenced

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[48] *The Canterbury Tales* was one of the first major texts Caxton published, in 1476-77, with a second edition in 1483; the haste with which these editions were composed suggests the appetite of the fifteenth-century audience for these texts, and their popularity. See Lotte Helinga, *Caxton in Focus: The Beginning of Printing in England* (London: British Library, 1982) and Barbara Bordalejo, 'Caxton's Editing of the Canterbury Tales,' *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 108.1 (2014) 41-60.

the way audiences would have conceptualised, and responded to, the supernatural female characters this thesis examines, and is therefore worth exploring.

II.1 History of Magic: Magic in Medieval Society

Before entering into the realm of fiction, it is worth considering the role of magic in medieval society. Richard Kieckhefer's classic study *Magic in the Middle Ages* opens with the idea of magic as a crossroads – a place of convergence between religion and science, popular culture and learned theory, fiction and reality.[49] This intersection of different ideological and theoretical elements, and the grey areas between them, arises as part of the process of Christianity's absorption and replacement of pagan ideas, and it created a medieval conception of magic as varied, multivalent, and relevant to many areas of life. I will sketch in some of the context for medieval magic in order to demonstrate its prevalence in the minds of the inhabitants of late medieval Europe, and in order to illustrate just how narrow the gap between the magical characters of romance and the real world of its readers would have been.

The medieval understanding of magic, like that of philosophy and science, owed a large debt to classical and late antique writings. This inheritance has been explored in depth,[50] and had broad effects on medieval magical thought. From Greek and Roman writers came the ideas of the magical properties of the natural world, of the efficacy of curses and blessings, the powers of spirits and those who can summon them, as well as the idea of occult powers originating from and exotic, often eastern, foreign lands.[51] Christianity transformed, absorbed, and overlaid many of these pre-existing ideas about magic, reframing them to fit a Christian world-view, and incorporating some of the rituals and superstitions from other pagan systems of beliefs as well.

One of the most important transformations of a classical belief to its Christian interpretation was the changing idea of *daimones* (or Latin *daemones*).[52] Ancient

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[49] Much of my understanding of the medieval beliefs in magic comes from Richard Kieckhefer's *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); for the idea of magic as a crossroads, see pp. 1-18.
[50] Examples that look at magic across medieval culture include Kieckhefer's work, as well as *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: the Middle Ages,* ed. by Karen Jolly, Catharina Raudvere, and Edward Peters (London: Athlone, 2002), Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), and Michael D. Bailey, 'From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Late Middle Ages,' *Speculum,* 76 (2001) 960-90.
[51] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* pp. 13-22, Kieckhefer, pp. 19-33.
[52] For more on the idea of *daimones,* or the Latin *daemones,* see Kieckhefer, p. 38, and Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* p. 15.

Greek writers used the term *daimones* to refer to neutral spirits, neither inherently good nor evil, who "mediate between gods and men" and could be associated with "good or malign fortune" or "the restless dead."[53] Seeking the aid of *daimones* would have been seen as morally neutral in the classical world, and indeed, part of ordinary spiritual life as well as magical practice. In Plato's *Symposium*, he explains that *daimones*, which are "neither immortal nor mortal,"[54] and 'interpret and transport' things between gods and men by means of "divination and priestcraft concerning sacrifice and ritual and incantation, and all soothsaying and sorcery."[55] The blurred line between magic and religion in the Classical period is evidenced here in the easy combination of the terms 'priestcraft' and 'sacrifice' with 'divination,' 'soothsaying,' and 'sorcery.' One of the ways early Christian writers sought to distinguish themselves from their pagan contemporaries was through their emphasis on the division between the magic and religion.[56] Christians eventually came to view these spirits as "angels who had turned against their creator, and turned wholly to evil," or demons as we understand them.[57] Any invocation of spirits in search of magical power, then, was reinterpreted as seeking demonic aid. Medieval Christian theologians explained the pagan religious practices of classical authors as the naïve or ignorant worship of devils, and pagan magic relying on *daimones* was reinterpreted as ungodly, even if the pre-Christian practitioners of the classical period did not have wicked intent.[58] Those medieval Christians who attempted to summon spirits, aware of the infernal origin of this power, were seen as committing grave sins, and were often accused of attempting to cast curses, meddle with the natural order of the world, and even raise the dead. One term for such demonic magical practice was 'necromancy' (from the Greek *nekros,* death, and *manteia*, divination). The related term 'nigromancy' was more commonly used in Middle English romance.

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[53] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* p. 15.

[54] From Plato's *Symposium,* 203e. Taken from *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 9* Harold N. Fowler, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925) <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg011.perseus-eng1:203e > [accessed 3 August 2018].

[55] Plato, *Symposium,* 202e-203a.

[56] For more on the way Christianity worked to distinguish itself from pagan precedent and its rejection, particularly, of magic as a part of this, see Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* pp. 36-58.

[57] Kickhefer, p. 38. See also Frank F. Klaassen's *The Transformations of Magic: Illicit Learned Magic in the Later Middle Ages and Renaissance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013).

[58] See Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* p. 60, on Augustine's rejection of the neutrality of *daimones*; see also Augustine's *The City of God, Volume I*, Book VIII, ed. by Marcus Dodds (Project Gutenberg, 2014) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45304/45304-h/45304-h.htm> [accessed 27 August 2018]. See especially the sections VIII.9 (on magic) and VIII.11 (on heathens).

'Nigromancy' signifies black magic, but does not have the dramatic negativity of 'necromancy,' as neither demons nor the dead are necessarily involved. These are the labels levied at magic-users by authors of romance – and other texts as well – in order to denigrate them.[59] The trappings and rituals of nigro/necromancy were presumed to be elaborate: summoning demons required knowledge of Latin, use of spellbooks, appropriate arrangements of arcane symbols, and knowledge of stars and planets. These learned magical practices were assumed to involve extensive study, so when female characters in Middle English romances are described as practicing 'nigromancy' (as Morgan le Fay is when Malory describes her as a "grete clerke of nygromancye," *Morte,* p. 5) the suggestion is that the character is morally suspect, but highly educated.[60]

Another medieval form of magic, also originating in classical thought, was the idea of 'natural magic.'[61] This was also a learned a practice, though with a distinctly different moral flavour to it than 'nigromancy.' Chaucer's 'Doctour of Phisik' practices "magyk natureel" ('General Prologue,' 416), and is educated not only in medical texts (429-34), the humours and 'surgerye' (420-21), but in all the powers of the natural world: herbs, stones, astronomy and predictions, and the effect of celestial bodies on the human physiology.[62] Listed among the sciences, alongside astronomy, philosophy and medicine, the practice of natural magic is also bound up with this idea of education. In this case, knowledge and study of the secret, occult properties of the natural world grant magical power, rather than holiness or demonic intervention. It was thought that God had imbued certain stones, plants, and creatures with extraordinary potential, and a learned practitioner might unlock that potential with the appropriate words, rituals, and processes. Like any science, natural magic could be misused, but unlike demonic magic, it was not seen as inherently wicked. Natural

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[59] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* p. 154, and Cooper, who states, "nigromancy is… magic on the edge of acceptability, not magic conducted through the agency of the dead" (*English Romance in Time,* p. 161).

[60] For more on the implications of the term 'nigromancy' when used to describe women's magic in romance, see Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* p. 169.

[61] Although the ideas of the "marvellous powers in nature… tended to be distinguished from magic" in classical thought, classical discussions of the power of the natural world evolve directly into the medieval idea of 'natural magic' (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* p. 31). According to Saunders, despite the distinctions between (wicked, false, Zoroastrian) magic and (beneficial, scientifically sound) medicine that Pliny draws in his *Historia Naturalis,* his understanding of medicine is "in all but name a natural magic, rooted in the idea of the marvellous workings of nature" (p. 33).

[62] Geoffrey Chaucer, 'General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*' in *The Riverside Chaucer,* ed. by Benson, pp. 23-36, ll. 417-37.

magic was employed in medicine, in charms, and in potions, and was seen, broadly, as beneficial and efficacious.

Demonic magic and natural magic, then, become two of the most prominent categories of learned magic in the medieval period. Although church Fathers, beginning with Augustine, eventually promote the idea that *all* magic is achieved with demonic assistance, and thus is either illusion or sin,[63] magic remained a socially broad and ambiguous category in the popular imagination, resisting those limitations. In addition to the learned magical practices, the medieval imaginative landscape was full of a host of folk-beliefs, credence in charms, blessings and maledictions, superstitions and myths, fairy-queens and spirits of the dead, all of which made magic an integral part of the medieval conception of the world. Magic was used by all social strata in attempts to inspire love,[64] to conceive children,[65] to predict the future (either personal or political),[66] to cure disease,[67] or sometimes to prevent it.[68] Magical beliefs permeated many aspects of medieval culture, crossing the boundaries of social class, gender, and age.

Saunders suggests that "the marvellous was at least potentially part of everyday knowledge, belief and experience" in the Middle ages.[69] By that note, the magic and marvel of the romance genre, though extraordinary and wondrous, might not have seemed as removed from reality as we might expect. Considering widespread folk beliefs in youth-potions, or the power to transform lead into gold through mysterious alchemical processes, the magical transformation of the Loathly Lady into the beautiful maiden, for example, seems less impossible and fantastic. The prevalence of magic in the Middle Ages therefore brings romance audiences closer to the texts, draws them into the stories, and closes the gap between fiction and reality.

II.2 Magic in Romance

Magic is ubiquitous in medieval romance, built into its structures and defining its goals. The worlds romance inhabits are, as we have previously noted, magical, and so

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[63] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* pp. 60-65.
[64] Catherine Rider, 'Women, Men, and Love Magic in Late Medieval English Pastoral Manuals,' *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft,* 7.2 (2012) 190-211. See also Kieckhefer, p. 83, and Saunders, p. 74.
[65] Peter Murray Jones and Lea T Olsan, 'Performative Rituals for Conception and Childbirth in England, 900–1500,' *Bulletin of the History of Medicine,* 89.3 (2015) 406-433.
[66] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* pp. 106-07, Kieckhefer, pp. 85-90.
[67] Kieckhefer, pp. 64-75.
[68] Kieckhefer, pp. 75-80.
[69] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural*, p. 2.

too are many of the denizens of those worlds. Magic in romance is various and ambiguous, witnessed in the genre's broad array of terms for magical practices: 'magyk,' as previously mentioned, is a neutral term; 'enchauntement' is used for magic either neutral or positive; 'sorcerie' is a more negatively-inflected term; 'nigromancy,' more negative still; and eventually 'wycchecraufte,' which would come to have demonic connotations in the later fifteenth century.[70] As we might expect from the range of this terminology, there are also many ways of examining the function, nature, and effects of magic in romance, summed up in Corinne Saunders's masterly *Magic and the Supernatural in Middle English Romance*. Saunders explains the origins of magic in the Middle Ages, then analyses the function of magic in a wide array of romance texts. Her work treats the magic and marvel of romance as integrated within the cultures and contexts which produced them, an analytical approach that has helped shape my understanding of the characters I examine.

The primary function of magic in romance is as a mechanism for the plot, and (usually) a means of testing the hero. Magic operates as a tool for the narrative to progress, and takes the form of magical spaces, magical objects, and magical characters. The magical spaces of romance are those previously mentioned otherworlds, but also the forests, enchanted castles, and wilderness-spaces into which the hero must venture in order to prove his worth. Like the Green Chapel and Castle Hautdesert in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or the Grail Castle in Malory's 'Tale of the Sankgreal' (*Morte*, pp. 513-609), the supernatural places in romance are frequently where the heroes face their greatest trials and tests. Their supernatural nature may be obliquely implied, or signalled overtly. The magical nature of the Loathly Lady's environment in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale,' for example, is made very obvious. The knight comes to "a forest syde, / Wher as he saugh upon a daunce go / Of ladyes foure and twenty, and yet mo" (996-98) who vanish mysteriously as he approaches, leaving the Loathly Lady in their place. The liminal space at the edge of the forest – always associated with *aventure* – as well as the vanishing maidens clearly signal the involvement of the supernatural, indicating to the readers the Loathly Lady's magical nature.

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[70] For context on these terms, see Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* p. 154, and Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* p. 161; for the emergence of the idea of the witch, see Michael D. Bailey, 'The Feminisation of Magic and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch in the Late Middle Ages,' *Essays in Medieval Studies,* 19 (2002) 120-34, and 'From Sorcery to Witchcraft,' and also Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages.*

While the Loathly Lady in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' is transparently supernatural, that magic seems to be contained in her person – she wears no magic rings, and gives no enchanted gifts. This may strike us as unusual, because objects imbued with magical power are perhaps the most commonly occurring forms of magic in Middle English romance, and are frequently handed out by, and associated with, magical women. These range from rings that confer invisibility, invulnerability, or good fortune, to swords whose bearers cannot be defeated, to purses that never run out of gold.[71] The image of the hand rising from the lake to deliver Arthur's magical sword Excalibur (which makes its owner invincible) becomes one of the defining moments of the genre, and other similar weapons appear throughout the romance corpus. Interestingly, these tools do not always serve their expected purpose. Helen Cooper has observed that the true significance of some of the magic objects in romance is revealed when they do not function as they are intended. In her section on 'Magic that Doesn't Work,' Cooper suggests that it is only when the magic sword is dropped, the scabbard of invulnerability possessed by another, that the hero can truly demonstrate his prowess.[72] In fact, relying on magic objects can prevent the hero from proving his worth, as seen in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* in which the hero's great failing is his reliance on the protective qualities of the lady's girdle.[73] This reaffirms my point that magic is interesting not because of its inherently marvellous nature, but because of its effects on the characters and the narrative.

The characters distributing, or associated with, the aforementioned magical objects are often supernatural themselves. The giants, enchantresses, inhumanly-strong knights, fairy-mistresses, dwarves, elf-princes and sorcerers who populate the liminal spaces of romance work either to aid and reward the hero, or to test the hero's mettle. The magical characters who aid the hero set him on his quest, offer magical assistance, and reward him for successful feats of valour and chivalry. The supernatural antagonists (the giants, monsters, superhuman knights, or wicked sorceresses) against whom the hero must fight represent the dark side of the magic of romance, but still serve important roles in the process of the hero's identity-formation. Both of these moral categories are complicated by the function of magic as narrative tool: though beneficial, the magical helper always pushes the hero toward danger (in

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[71] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* pp. 117-51. See also Carolyne Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2006), pp. 19-21.
[72] Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* Chapter 3: 'Magic that Doesn't Work,' pp. 137-72.
[73] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* ed. and trans. by James Winny (Hadleigh: Broadview, 1992). For the explanation of the power of the girdle, see lines 2358-2402.

order to allow him to demonstrate his worth), while the magical antagonist, though nominally wicked, serves the vital purpose of testing and trying the hero.

A third category of magical character embodies this ambiguity and moral uncertainty most obviously. These are the characters who spur the hero on his path, facilitating his trials, but neither aiding him nor fighting him directly. These characters are sometimes known as 'quest-agents' – almost antagonistic, but ultimately useful in their involvement in the hero's quest.[74] The role that the Loathly Lady plays in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' most closely resembles this character-type, because although she aids the hero (offering him the answer to the riddle) her primary function in the text is to ensure that the hero truly learns his lesson, and begins to demonstrate respectful, honourable treatment of women's desires. She also, of course, eventually acts as a magical-benefactor when the magical reward for his moral development is marriage to the superlatively beautiful maiden she has become. Like many magical women in medieval romance, then, the Loathly Lady seems to slip between different character-types and roles, resisting categorisation.

II.3 What is a 'Supernatural Woman'?

By 'supernatural woman' I refer to the female characters in romance who are somehow associated with magical power, either through their magical abilities or their magical identities. The focus for my work, of course, is not on the magic itself, but instead on the women. In my study magic becomes a lens or a label, a tool for examining a particular set of characters. My focus is on the representation of gender in Middle English romance, and the narrative (and moral) impact of magical power bestowed on female characters. Magic acts as a distinguishing characteristic, I argue, that permits – and draws upon traditions of – power, authority, knowledge, and abilities beyond the normal for women in medieval literature, not to mention medieval society. As this thesis will show, then, the label 'supernatural' complicates the morality of these female characters and their position relative to late medieval social and gender norms.

Because magic is ubiquitous in romance, women with magical capabilities are common as well. Many romance texts contain references to women's association with

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[74] For an exploration of the way this idea can be applied to the character of Morgan le Fay, for example, see Phoebe Linton, 'Female Space and Marginality in Malory's *Morte Darthur:* Igraine, Morgause, and Morgan' (doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2017), especially pp. 228-244.

magic, and indeed some specify magic as exclusively the province of women. My focus on the intersection of female characters and supernatural power, then, comes not from any sense that they were unusual within the romance genre; quite the reverse. Women with magical associations were commonplace in late medieval English romance. These characters are only unusual when we step back and compare them to female characters in non-romance narratives, or to the roles women might occupy in their lived social reality of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Their pervasiveness as staple figures in popular romances demonstrates that the romance audience enjoyed consuming narratives about feminine power, at least when presented in this particular way.

Considering the popularity of the romance genre as a whole and the familiarity most audiences would have had with many of these texts, and then considering the omnipresence of magical women in the romance genre, we can then assume that the study of magical women in medieval romance tells us something meaningful about the tastes of medieval audiences. It also means that the patterns found in specific narratives may be assumed to have broader implications – the radical potential of one text may be assumed to apply to other texts as well. As such, my study explores some of the patterns in the representations of supernaturally powerful women in medieval romance, the stereotypes and commonalities, using specific texts to glean insight into the medieval attitudes toward magical women in fiction broadly – and then, perhaps, toward women and power in society.

My definition of the 'supernatural woman' in Middle English romance, then, relies on some of these ideas about stereotype and trope. The magically powerful women I consider in this thesis have their power either through the practice of learned natural magic, or because of their inherently supernatural identities. Learned natural magic is depicted in these romances as, broadly, benign, helpful to the heroes, and morally good. It is used in healing, the concoction of potions, salves and ointments, and through the manipulation of the natural world – usually to the hero's benefit. The first two chapters of this thesis explore some of the representations of women whose magical power is learned, and though elements of moral ambiguity and uncertain acceptability attend these characters because of their unusual agency and authority, by and large they are assumed to be good. In the second half of this thesis I examine supernatural women whose magical powers stem from their inherently magical identities, rather than learned practice. These fairy women and monster-mothers are,

by virtue of their very natures, different, 'other,' existing on the boundaries of the human. Because of this, despite the fact that these magical women usually use their powers to benefit the hero, and often in ways related to acceptable natural magic, their supernatural associations are suspect, and their moral acceptability under greater scrutiny.

My understanding of these distinct categories of feminine magic in romance is in part informed by James Wade's excellent study, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*.[75] Wade's work compares romance texts across time and language, and focuses on the processes through which otherworldly 'fairy' women with inherently magical identities are 'rationalised' – recast as mortal women who practice 'natural magic.' Wade's analysis has helped shape my understanding of these characters, and his identification of the freedom and power associated with magical identities resonates with my own work.

Before moving on, it is worth taking a moment to clarify what this study is *not*. This is not a study of every female character in romance to be associated with magic, or to handle magical objects. As previously mentioned, women dispensing magic rings and swords are so common in romance that the inclusion of all of them would be impossible. Instead, this study focuses on female characters who are persistently, deeply associated with magical spaces, powers, and abilities, rather than merely in possession of enchanted objects. Additionally, this is not a study of miracles, or of female saints. Medieval audiences separated the divine from the magical, and so too does this study, excluding the acts of the superhuman-divine from my thesis. Though female saints, whose *vitae* sometimes take the forms of romances, are often powerful, authoritative, and exceed the expected bounds of femininity as the characters I examine do, they do so without the moral ambiguity of the magical ladies I consider. By being associated with divinity, female saints were both exempt from usual social expectations, and simultaneously no longer potential role models for ordinary womanhood outwith the church. This study explores the grey areas of acceptability for women in romance, the areas of ambiguity and uncertainty, and as such concerns only secular women.

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[75] James Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).

III. Reading Romance, Reading Culture: Methodology

We come, then, to my argument for this thesis, the questions I hope to answer, and how I will answer them. My research questions for this study are partly concerned with genre and representation. By considering the female characters associated with magic in Middle English romance as a group (rather than singly), what patterns, similarities, or differences do we discover? What is universal about supernatural women in Middle English romance, and what varies? What can those constants (particularly their ambiguity) and variables tell us about the genre, and these characters in particular? Additionally, my research questions concern the readers of these texts and their social contexts. How might a medieval audience have thought or felt about morally ambiguous, powerful female characters? What can we learn about medieval literary trends and medieval audiences through an examination of these characters? How does fiction respond to, and engage with, real social attitudes? How are these texts in conversation with reality – and what significance might that conversation have?

My methodology for answering these questions has been three-fold, involving: (1) close-reading and literary analysis, (2) reading romance as inter- and intra-textual, and (3) reading romance within the context of late medieval English culture.

III.1 Close reading and literary analysis

A close-reading of these texts complicates the idea of romance as reliant on stereotype and two-dimensional characters, despite what we might expect and what scholarship suggests. This type of reading reveals the nuance in these texts, and greater ambiguity and greater potential authority for female characters. The literary analysis that follows from this close reading draws in part on feminist critical theory, particularly the idea of gender as performance.[76] In the Middle English romance tradition, in which characters' identities are largely defined by their actions, examining the gender-performance of these magical female characters – especially the ways those performances often simultaneously conform to, and subvert, gender norms – effectively reveals the complexity and ambiguity in their characters.

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[76] See for example Judith Butler's description of Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory, and the idea of gender as performative and constructed, in 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,' *Theatre Journal*, 40.4 (1988) 519-31. See also *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

Close reading of Middle English romances also reveals the 'slippages' in these texts[77] – the narrative gaps, the unexplained elements, the oblique allusions to other stories. Middle English romances, because of their brevity and directness, contain many of these gaps or slippages, with occasional passages described so sparsely as to be almost incomprehensible to modern readers.[78] These slippages ask readers to draw upon their knowledge of the narrative conventions of the genre, which brings us to my second methodological point.

III.2 Intertextual, Intratextual, and Folded Narratives

Middle English romances function despite (or because of) these narrative gaps due to the formulaic, generic mode of romance.[79] Romance fills in its own gaps, and is constantly in conversation with itself, as unexplained elements may connect a text to other, similar texts. This multi-textual quality is, according to Pearsall, "the central value of popular romance: the individual romances do not stand alone, but draw for their effectiveness upon the resonance and accumulated associations in the audience's memory of many such stories."[80] This 'resonance,' and the audience's memory of familiar patterns and repeated tropes, means that the romance genre would have functioned as an intertextual corpus, with readers of one text necessarily familiar with the narrative elements of other texts. We see this in the opening of 'The Wife of Bath's Tale,' for example, in the Wife's allusion to familiar elements of romance: the "olde dayes" of "Kyng Arthour" when the "elf-queene… danced ful ofte in many a grene mede" (863-70) directly invites readers to remember other romance texts, to bring them to mind and draw comparisons between them. This intertextuality allows us to read the Middle English romances as interwoven narratives, in conversation with each other. At the same time, their divergences and differences demonstrate flexible ways of thinking about those set narrative patterns.

This is important because it suggests that medieval audiences may have been familiar with multiple versions of the same texts. Assuming that audiences would

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[77] Ashton, p. 2.

[78] Pearsall explains this with remarkable clarity as he states, "The truest romances are those that are least articulated, most elliptical, with fewest explanations. The telling of the story can be so compressed… that it would be difficult for the audience to follow if they didn't already know the story…" (p. 14).

[79] See Pearsall, p. 13-17, Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* p. 14-15, Ashton, p. 19, McDonald, pp. 1-2, and Putter, p. 3.

[80] Peasall, p. 12. For a further discussion of the way romance transcends the limits of a single text, see also Northrop Frye, who suggests, "With romance it is much harder to avoid the feeling of convention, that the story is one of a family of similar stories" (p. 60).

have had familiarity with different iterations of a tale means that we too can read these texts intertextually, and explore the areas where elements of the narrative tradition bleed into, complicate, and render ambiguous other texts. For example, in some versions of the Loathly Lady narrative, the hag has control over her physical transformations. In other versions, she is the victim of a curse cast by a wicked stepmother.[81] The overlapped, intertextual versions of this story mean that the Loathly Lady can be read either as in control and more powerful (dictating her own transformation) or, alternatively, an innocent victim of a malicious curse – less powerful, but less threatening too. In Chaucer's version of the narrative, the protagonist is an unnamed knight and a rapist, while other Loathly Lady texts feature Gawain, one of Camelot's heroes.[82] Approaching these texts intertextually would mean that Chaucer's Wife of Bath could be read as criticising the structure of Camelot itself through its hero, Gawain – for if, in other versions of the same story, the knight she marries (and chastises, educates, and reforms) is Gawain, and if readers are aware of this, then Chaucer's rapist-knight may be mapped onto Camelot's hero, with potentially subversive effects.

By exploring the critical avenues opened up by this intertextual reading of these narratives, I find greater ambiguous potential for the supernatural female characters, and ways in which they invite openness, and flexible reading. The power of supernatural women is amplified by the shadows cast by other narratives, in which their flexibility becomes powerful possibility.

The assumption I make when discussing this intertextual potential of these romances is that these stories would have been familiar to their audiences. Romances were told and retold, recycled, and reinvented with such frequency and such formulaic predictability that the audience of any given romance may reasonably be assumed to have some foreknowledge of the narrative – or at least a working understanding of some of the key elements. The idea that an audience would have known the story before it was told or read – due to the universally familiar, folkloric nature of the romance genre – would not only have permitted intertextual reading, but also what I refer to as *intra*textual reading. This is what happens when foreknowledge of a story

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[81] Both *The Wedding of Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, and *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* are texts contained in the TEAMS volume, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales,* ed. by Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/hahn-sir-gawain> [accessed 2 February 2019]. See *The Marriage of Sir Gawain,* 181-82, and *The Wedding of Gawain and Dame Ragnelle,* 773.
[82] See *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* and *The Wedding of Gawain and Dame Ragnelle.*

creates a sense of narrative overlap, or folding, and knowledge of the text's conclusion influences the audience's perception of its beginning. Familiarity with a text's conclusion generates a different readerly experience than a reader would have with a text that unfolds in a linear, chronological manner, with unexpected elements that would surprise the reader.[83] Taking 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' as an example, an audience familiar with the precepts of the Loathly Lady formula would expect the hag to transform into a beautiful (submissive, sexually and romantically acceptable,) maiden. The image of that transformed maiden overlays the image of the crone, and that knowledge complicates the Loathly Lady in her hag form. Simultaneously, the obedient, socially-acceptable, marriageable maiden is overlaid with the image of the authoritative, unruly, educated, argumentative, independent(ly minded) Loathly Lady. As if transparencies were laid over each other, the two versions of the character become entangled, enmeshed, and inseparable.

This is only possible because of the folkloric, universally familiar quality of the romance genre. If we read these texts as mysteries, unfolding chronologically at every moment, the characters become temporally trapped, existing moment to moment rather than at all times at once. In a linear narrative, the Loathly Lady is maiden, or hag, but never both. Although we might reflect on the supernatural woman's transformation at the end of the text, that process is not experienced as constantly and powerfully as it is when we read intratextually, when becomes more difficult to separate the maiden from the hag. If we read these texts with the assumption of their familiarity, and foreknowledge of their conclusions, the characters become more ambiguous, with potentially subversive power.

III.3 Reading Culture: Conversations between Text and Context

The final methodological step in the process of finding meaning in the representations of these characters is to examine them in their social historical contexts. It is worth emphasising here that the focus of this thesis is not primarily medieval history, and the historical context I draw upon functions to support my literary analysis. Each chapter of this thesis explores distinct elements of social-historical context, chosen to

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[83] Pearsall extrapolates on this idea, saying, "The audience is not interested in suspense or the unexpected unexpected, only in the expected unexpected… There is a … participation in the story so full and so intense that the only kind of suspense the audience can bear is the pleasant dramatic suspense of expectation delayed and fulfilled…" (p. 14).

reflect something specific about the supernatural woman in a given text or texts, in order to help us understand the significance these characters might have had for their medieval audiences. By identifying, then examining social issues that would have been relevant to the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English audiences of these romances, and that are directly connected to the powerful, subversive elements of the identity of the magical woman in a given text, I examine the ways these texts engage with the social history of the period that produced them. While each chapter considers a distinct historicist element, however, all seek to find points of engagement between text and society, and specifically between the supernatural female characters and the real anxieties about women and power harboured by the readers and writers of these romances.

IV. Chapter Summary

Using the previously described methodology, then, my chapters attempt to answer my research questions while exploring these Middle English romance texts. Employing close reading and literary analysis, consideration of the inter- and intra-textual nature of the genre, and exploring the connections of romance texts to contemporary social anxieties, these chapters work to reveal the powerful, subversive ambiguity in the representations of magical women in late medieval English romance, and the way they challenge our assumptions about the genre, about gender in the Middle Ages, and about the literary appetites of medieval audiences.

The first chapter explores romance's treatment of magical healing women in the Middle English Tristan-tradition, comparing the figures of the Queen of Ireland and her daughter Isolde in the Middle English verse *Sir Tristrem* and Malory's *Morte Darthur*. The way natural magic and women's medical expertise is represented in these texts is then compared with the history of female medical practitioners in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the changing laws and norms regulating women's roles in medicine.

The second chapter considers the Saracen princesses in such texts as *Bevis of Hampton, Octavian* and *The Sowdon of Babylon*, exploring the tensions around exoticism, foreignness, and the learned (and magical) East as it was imagined by a Western European, Christian audience. The representations of the unruly princesses in these texts are then connected to late medieval anxieties about queenship, foreignness,

and power, and the uncertain loyalties of women in the aristocratic marriage market. I use the tumultuous reign of Isabella of France as an example, and an instance in which foreign identity and female power were of particular significance.

The third chapter explores the sexual and economic authority of the 'fairy mistress' characters in such texts as *Sir Launfal* and *Partonope of Blois*, their roles in the education and identity-formation of the hero, and their position outside social norms. I explore the connection between their authoritative command of their bodies and property to their fairy identities, and the otherness (and thus, perhaps, acceptability) that confers. I then locate these texts in the contexts of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century discourse about women's roles in chivalry and education, and in the economy of late medieval England.

The fourth chapter deals with representations of maternity and monstrosity, using the Middle English *Melusine* texts to examine the overlap of – or gap between – physical and moral monstrosity in the medieval mind. Exploring issues of transformation, aging, and inheritance, this chapter compares the representations of the serpent-mother to theories about the female body in some of the medical and gynaecological treatises from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Finally, this thesis concludes with an overview of the way Morgan le Fay's character in the *Morte Darthur* encompasses the authority and ambiguity of all of the previously discussed stereotypes of magical femininity. As healer, exotic queen, fairy lady and monstrous mother, Morgan embodies the broad complexity of the supernatural woman in medieval romance. Her character is, as previously mentioned, one of the earliest versions of a supernatural woman in the medieval romance tradition (with her healer role in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*). Morgan's longevity through changing literary traditions of the high and late medieval period witnesses the popularity of the magical woman archetype. Malory's treatment of Morgan's character stands at the end of the Middle English romance tradition, and in exploring his representation of the ambiguous supernatural woman we see the variation and consistencies in the character-type, and the degree to which his characterisation of Morgan le Fay shapes our understanding of the role of magical women in medieval literature.

1.

POTIONS AND POISONS:
AMBIGUITY AND SOCIAL ANXIETY IN THE FEMALE HEALERS
OF THE MIDDLE ENGLISH TRISTAN LEGENDS

In order to understand the potential subversiveness of supernaturally powerful women in romance, we begin with one of the least threatening, and most common, types of magical female character, the magical healer. Because the heroes of medieval romances are frequently afflicted with grisly wounds – the gravity of which mirrors the height of their heroic prowess – the women who heal these knights must therefore be extraordinarily skilled in medicine. This chapter will explore the representations of magical healing women in late medieval romances, using the healers in the Middle English versions of the Tristan legend, namely the verse *Sir Tristrem* and Thomas Malory's 'Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones,'[1] as case studies. These Middle English Tristan texts contain particularly powerful, skilled, and visible versions of the female-healer character-type found in other similar romances from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The fact that we have two distinct versions of the same text, from different genres and centuries, makes the Tristan texts useful in exploring cultural change and its articulation in the dynamic literary milieu of late medieval England.

I am primarily concerned with the ambiguity of the representations of powerful female healers in romance, since women's medical authority and education were loci of cultural anxiety during the later medieval period. The women in the Tristan tradition reflect this anxiety, exhibited in their powerful medical-magical abilities and the ambivalence of their representations. In the overlapping identities of the healer and the poisoner, and the impressive power of both, we see an underlying concern in the Tristan narrative about women's medical power and their uncertain motivations. In the context of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century history and the gender and class restrictions in the medical profession, the early and late versions of the English Tristan tradition allow us to explore the various ways romance engages, or does *not* engage, with social anxieties about women and healing power.

The way these two different texts countenance controversial material – the metrical verse romances by presenting it without comment or judgment, and Malory

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[1] Malory, *Morte,* pp. 227-506.

through reordering and rationalisation – demonstrate both a change over time in the representation of female power, and the *flexibility* of the romance genre to encompass problematic elements of social life – in this case, the ambiguously powerful figure of the female healer.

I. Women, Medicine, and Education

Before beginning to examine feminine healing power as it is manifested in the medieval Tristan legends, it is worth first establishing some context for women's medical practice in medieval society. Women's traditional association with healing, if not necessarily with the medical profession,[2] was countered in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries by increasingly strict injunctions against women's participation in the medical field.[3] The rise of universities and the formalisation and regulation of medical practice during the high medieval period resulted in tensions within the medical community around licensing and authority, and in guild-related disputes over practice regulations.[4] The division and stratification of the profession – from university-trained physicians, to apothecaries and surgeons who trained as apprentices, to empirics who often had no formal training – resulted in mandates controlling who could practice medicine, and under what conditions.[5] This excluded many groups from formal practice at various points, including non-Christians and professionals without formal training.[6] Of course, given women's inability to attend

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[2] This is an idea found across scholarship, articulated concisely in William L. Minkowski 'Public Health Then and Now: Women Healers of the Middle Ages: Selected Aspects of Their History,' *American Journal of Public Health*, 82.2 (1992) 288-95.

[3] The institutional exclusion of women from profession medicine is detailed in many sources. For a preliminary introduction see the work of Monica Green, especially 'Women's Medical Practice and Health Care in Medieval Europe,' *Signs,* 14.2 (1989) 434-73, and *Making Women's Medicine Masculine: The Rise of Male Authority in Pre-Modern Gynaecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For further discussion see April Harper, 'The Image of the Female Healer in Western Vernacular Literature of the Middle Ages,' *Social History of Medicine*, 24.1 (2011) 108–124, Muriel Joy Hughes, *Women Healers in Medieval Life and Literature* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1943) pp. 82-97, and Minkowski, p. 293.

[4] See specifically Green, 'Women's Medical Practice,' p. 447, and more generally Vern Bullough, *The Development of Medicine as a Profession: The Contribution of the Medieval University to Modern Medicine* (New York: Hafner, 1966). For a discussion of the impact of universities and formalised learning on magic as well as on medicine, see Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 61.

[5] See Green, 'Women's Medical Practice,' p. 447.

[6] Green explores restrictions in medical practice along religious as well as gender lines ('Women's Medical Practice,' p. 443), as does Minkowski (p. 293) and also Kurt Pollak in *The Healers: The Doctor, Then and Now* (London: Nelson, 1968) pp. 78-82.

university and obtain a license to practice medicine, it effectively prevented women from assuming the public role of 'physician.'

This is not to say that women were completely absent from the practice of medicine in the Middle Ages – had they been, there would have been little reason for cultural tension around either the depiction or the reality of women healing. Instead, through wills, court cases, and tax records we know of a (small) number of women in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Europe who held public medical roles.[7] Given women's notorious invisibility in the existing record, these seemingly insignificant numbers are likely far lower than the reality.[8] We also have evidence of the breadth of unofficial female medical practice, suggesting that while their numbers may have been small, the medical practices of female healers would have been varied and broad.[9] While male practitioners far outnumbered their female counterparts, therefore, the existence of female medical professionals was not an unknown phenomenon in the late medieval period.

It is precisely because these women existed and persisted that we know of anxiety around female medical practice, at least at the institutional level. The court cases, like that against the Parisian physician Jacoba Felicie,[10] or Clarisse of Rouen,[11] and the statutes like that of Valencia[12] and the Parliamentary petition in England in

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[7] Harper, in part using Green's research, suggests that "…over two-thirds of women medical practitioners were listed as barbers, surgeons, physicians, leeches, apothecaries, empirics and even sorceresses. …The twelfth-century German legal records … reveal many women practicing … surgery, and specifically battlefield surgery…" (p. 109). See also Jeanne Achterberg, *Woman as Healer* (London: Rider, 1990) pp. 78-9, Green 'Women's Medical Practice,' pp. 442-3 and 447-8, and Minkowski, p. 293.

[8] Green, 'Women's Medical Practice,' p. 444.

[9] For some of the evidence of breadth, see Kate Campbell Hurd-Mead, *A History of Women in Medicine* (Haddam: Haddam Press, 1938) pp. 217-27, pp. 264-90, and pp. 305-17; Montserrat Cabré, 'Women or Healers?: Household Practices and the Categories of Health Care in Late Medieval Iberia,' *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 82.1 (2008) 18-51, Green, 'Women's Medical Practice,' and Harper.

[10] The trial documents from the 1322 prosecution of the Parisian physician Jacoba Felicie for practicing without proper license illuminate some of the priorities of medieval medical regulatory bodies. See especially Monica H. Green, 'Getting to the Source: The Case of Jacoba Felicie and the Impact of the Portable Medieval Reader on the Canon of Medieval Women's History,' *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 42 (2006) 49-62.

[11] See Hurd-Mead, p. 271, for further descriptions of the trials and punishments for women who practiced without a license.

[12] Green discusses the ordinances of the city of Valencia, noting "that prior to 1329 … the ordinances regulating medical practice simply applied to anyone 'who has not learned the science of medicine, be they men or women, Christian, Jew, or Saracen'" but laws enacted in 1329 stipulated that "'no woman may practice medicine or give potions, under penalty of being whipped through the town; but they may care for little children and women to whom, however, they may give no potion'" ('Women's Medical Practice,' pp. 448-49).

1421 (demanding that "no Woman use the practyse of Fisyk"[13]) show a clear legal tendency toward the limitation of women's professional practice. While it seems that women repeatedly broke these injunctions, this only led to their repeated articulation time and again,[14] while the public tension around these practitioners – and particularly the *publicity* and *professionalism* of their roles – appears to have increased in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The continued presence of women in medicine and the increasing public institutional pressures against them – resulting in their near-complete exclusion from formal professional practice – make the powerful healing women in late medieval romances potential sites of tension. The power and apparent training of female healers in romance belies the professional suppression that went on broadly throughout the Middle Ages. Though the literary tradition of the healing woman blithely persisted, it was in a social context of anxiety about the license and authority of medical practitioners in general, and of women in particular. This social tension is articulated in the Tristan romances, I will argue, not in overt comment but in underlying anxiety and ambiguity in the representation of healing women.

II. Female Healers in Romance: Position and Power

The figure of the healing woman is a common motif in medieval romance texts, from the early French tradition through to the works of Thomas Malory in the late fifteenth century. Though these women have a wide range of narrative functions and identities, for the purpose of this analysis I will consider them as falling into a few distinct categories or character-types. Perhaps the least controversial healer-type is the pure, holy maiden, usually a virginal young woman resident in a place of seclusion – thus demonstrably free from worldly corruption and, whether overtly stated or not, reminiscent of someone who lives a life of religious devotion. The healing performed by the holy maiden, as we see in the Old French Vulgate cycle of Arthurian literature and other high- and late-medieval romance texts, recalls hagiographical depictions of healing: the woman acts as a conduit for divine grace, or heals through the power of

[13] C. H. Talbot, *Medicine in Medieval England* (London: Oldbourne Book Co. Ltd, 1967) p. 196, Green, 'Women's Medical Practice', p. 449, Achterberg, p. 80.
[14] See Hurd-Mead, p. 306, for Pope Sixtus's fifteenth-century prohibition of female medical practice; for information on the sixteenth-century so-called "Quack's Charter" which would permit but limit unlicensed practice, see Achterberg, p. 80.

her virginity and chastity rather than through described medical training or knowledge.[15] April Harper discusses this type of romance healer-maiden in her examination of the healing methods utilised by Guivret's sisters in Chretien de Troyes's *Eric et Enide*,[16] noting the emphasis on the convent-like isolation of their dwelling and their impeccable purity, comparing them to female saints and anchorites. Perceval's sister in the grail-quest narratives, both in the Vulgate and in Malory, also fits this type. The holy healer maiden also dwells in isolation, and is devoted to her divine purpose, and that virtue (and her nobility) is therefore the source of her healing power (Malory, *Morte*, pp. 580, 591-92). This type of healing-maiden appears throughout romance, with her spiritual purity directly linked to her healing powers.

Similar and overlapping with the holy maiden category is that of the healer-lover, a young (and also virginal) maiden who becomes the romantic interest and the hero's 'lady,' often identified by the usual hyperbolic descriptors ("of heighe priis," and "bright of hewe"[17]) and by her swift attraction to the wounded hero.[18] The goodness and beneficence of the healer-lovers lends a sense of purity to their affection, despite the erotic charge of the sexualized healing process, and the traditions of *fin'amor* positively affect the portrayal of such healer-lovers as Josian from *Bevis of Hampton*, Lady Loosepaine in *Eger and Grime*, and of course Isolde in the Tristan texts.

The third healer-type commonly found in romance, the older, maternal healer,

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[15] My source for this text was Norris J. Lacy's edition of *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993). For the section relevant to this chapter see Volume 5, 'Lancelot Part V,' trans. by William W. Kibler, pp. 67-83. For a discussion of the healing power of holy platonic love, and of the healer-maiden from the Prose-Lancelot Vulgate Cycle, see Stacey L. Hahn, 'Lancelot and the Demoiselle Guérisseuse: Spiritual vs. Physical Love in the French Prose Lancelot', *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 4 (1987) 57-67 (p. 60). For a discussion of the link between sexual purity and the sort of spiritual healing practiced by the holy maidens in early romances, see Hahn, p. 61.

[16] Harper, p. 116.

[17] All quotations from *Sir Tristrem* will be taken from the online TEAMS Middle English Text Series version, originally from *Lancelot of the Laik and Sir Tristrem*, ed. by Alan Lupack (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994) <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/lupack-lancelot-of-the-laik-and-sir-tristrem> [accessed 2 February 2019]. See especially ll. 1266-67.

[18] Particularly useful examples are Josian in *Bevis of Hampton* and Loosepaine from *Eger and Grime*. See the TEAMS Middle English Text Series volume *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston,* ed. by Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997) <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/salisbury-four-romances-of-england> [accessed 2 February 2019] and *Eger and Grime: A parallel-text edition of the Percy and the Huntington-Laing Versions of the Romance, with an Introductory Study,* ed. by James Ralston Caldwell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933).

has a different moral tone and narrative role.[19] Because of her age, her presumed sexual experience, and the prevailing sense of knowledge rather than innocence that accompanies medieval depictions of mature womanhood, the maternal healer is a figure of greater moral ambiguity than her chaste young counterparts, and her function in the text is weighted differently.[20] Her magical-medical abilities are more likely to be viewed as suspicious, her motives less altruistic and more self-serving. Age, sexual status, perceived sanctity, and the source of the woman's power and authority are then integral to distinguishing between different types of healers and their accompanying moral attributions, and will inform my exploration of the representations of healing women in the Middle English Tristan romances.

Before moving on to the texts in question, however, we must first establish the connection of magic and medicine in romance. The healing women mentioned above utilise a range of medical practices to cure their patients, from divine intervention to surgical procedures, many of which are indistinguishable from 'natural magic.' As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, natural magic was the ability to unlock the secret powers and properties of the natural world, then manipulate and combine them in order to generate extraordinarily powerful remedies.[21] This power was thought to spring not from any inborn supernatural nature of the practitioner, nor from otherworldly or demonic assistance, but through knowledge, learning, and understanding the divinely created 'occult virtues' in specific parts of the natural world.[22] Many of the cures and potions mentioned in this chapter, especially those with dramatic, marvellous effects, would likely have been understood by medieval audiences to be the products of natural magic.

While modern audiences understand magic and science as unrelated and wholly distinct, we must remember that our taxonomies do not necessarily align with medieval ones. Magic and science were seen as overlapping categories in the medieval period, with natural magic claiming scientific respectability and efficacy, and many scientific practices reliant on magical-seeming ritual and superstition. That overlap is seen, for example, in Chaucer's 'Franklin's Tale,' in which the clerk is

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[19] See for example Arnive, from Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, trans. by A.T. Hatto (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).
[20] Corinne Saunders, 'Middle Age in Romance? Magic, Enchantment and Female Power' in *Middle-Aged Women in the Middle Ages,* ed. by Sue Niebrzydowski (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011) pp. 37-52.
[21] See Saunders, 'Middle Age in Romance?' p. 40.
[22] Kieckhefer, p. 9. It is worth noting that scholars from Pliny to Augustine readily accepted and wrote about the marvellous or miraculous aspects of the natural world; see Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in the Medieval English Romance,* pp. 40-41.

specifically associated with formal scientific education – he attended the University in "orliens in fraunce" to study "particuler sciences" – yet practices "magyk natureel" (1118-1125). The clerk remembers that "a bacheler of lawe" (1126) had owned the book of magic, which contained 'sciences' of the moon, and mechanisms of illusion and transformation. While this integration of magic within other scientific modes of study (including the law) may be surprising to modern readers, it would not have been to medieval audiences. This passage illustrates the fact that medieval readers of these romances understood magic to be as much a science as medicine, and part of the same academic field.

Of course, not all healing in romance falls into the category of natural magic – for example, holy healing maidens would not have required the use natural magic to cure patients, as their power to heal comes through divine grace. However, women thought to practice learned, scientific medicine in romance often employ methods indistinguishable from natural magic. The healer-women in the Middle English Tristan tradition fall into the latter category, and as such, the marvellous remedies and powerful potions they brew may be seen as magical, whether explicitly defined as 'magic' in the text or not. This use of natural magic is what warrants the inclusion of these women in this thesis, and an examination of the ambiguities and uncertainties generated by the uneasy boundary between medical and magical practices makes for a useful starting point in this exploration of the supernatural in Middle English romance.

III. The Middle English Tristan Tradition

The two texts I will be using for this study are the Middle English verse romance *Sir Tristrem*, and Thomas Malory's 'Sir Tristram de Lyones.'[23] The story of Tristan and Isolde was persistently popular throughout the Middle Ages, and these two texts have their roots in centuries of narrative tradition. Though the origins of the tale are Celtic,[24] scholars trace the textual Tristan tradition to an early, lost French version of the text, referred to as the 'Ur-Tristan,' from whence came the '*commune*' and

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[23] All quotations and page numbers refer to Vinaver's edition of Malory's *Works,* referenced as *Morte.*
[24] See Joan Tasker Grimbert's introduction to *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook*, ed. by Joan Tasker Grimbert (London: Routledge, 1995) pp. xvi-xviii; see also Stewart Gregory's edition of *Thomas of Britain: Tristran* (London: Garland, 1991) pp. xiii-xiv.

'*courtoise*' branches of the tradition.[25] The earlier 'common' version of the legend is exemplified in Eilhart von Oberge's *Tristran*, and Béroul's *Roman de Tristan*, both composed in the late twelfth century and both stylistically and thematically similar.[26] The later courtly version of the text was originally composed circa 1170 AD by the Anglo-Norman poet Thomas, whose *Tristan* survives only in fragments, and departs dramatically from the common versions in its attention to themes of emotion, courtesy, honour and *fin'amor*.[27] Gottfried von Strassburg's masterful text *Tristan* (c. 1210) and Friar Róbert of Norway's *Tristrams saga* (c. 1226)[28] both have clear links to Thomas's version of the tale, which is also the direct source for the Middle English *Sir Tristrem.*

The popularity of the Tristan tradition is not only witnessed in these texts but also in the abundance of variants, including short *fabliaux*-type stories, Marie de France's *Lai du Chevrefueil,*[29] and the long Old French *Prose Tristan* from the early thirteenth century.[30] The *Prose Tristan* was the first to make the overt connection between Tristan and the Arthurian material, and supplied the primary source for Malory's revision of the legend. This chapter concerns the Middle English articulations of the Tristan material, and the way powerful magical healing women are presented in the English texts, considered in the context of the socio-cultural climate concerning women and healing and of the preexisting Tristan narratives.

III.1 *Sir Tristrem* as Text: Convention and Tradition

The only existing copy of *Sir Tristrem* is found in the Auchinleck Manuscript (NLS, Advocates 19.2.1.) dated to 1331-1340. Scholarship suggests that the romance was originally composed in the late thirteenth century. Despite this position of

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[25] See Alan Lupack's introduction to the TEAMS Middle English Text Series edition of *Sir Tristrem*, originally from *Lancelot of the Laik and Sir Tristrem*. See also Grimbert, p. xvii.
[26] See Lupack's introduction to the TEAMS *Sir Tristrem*, and also Hatto's introduction to Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan,* ed. and trans. by A. T. Hatto, ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Book Ltd, 1960). See also Grimbert, p. xviii.
[27] Grimbert explores the development of the *version commune* and *version courtoise* of the Tristan-legend; for the nature of Thomas's text and the departure of later versions from his narrative style, see also Lupack's discussion of the texts in the TEAMS introduction, and Thomas Rumble, 'The Middle English *Sir Tristrem*: Toward a Reappraisal,' *Comparative Literature,* 11.3 (1959) 221-228.
[28] Grimbert, xix.
[29] Gregory, xvi.
[30] For an exploration of the position of the *Prose Tristan* within the greater Tristan tradition see Chapter 1 in Renee L. Curtis, *Tristan Studies* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1969), especially pages 10-11. See also the introduction to Curtis, *The Romance of Tristan: The Thirteenth Century Old French 'Prose Tristan'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

preeminence as the earliest, and only verse, version of the Tristan tradition in English, the Middle English *Sir Tristrem* has received scant praise, due to its brevity, its blunt manner of discussing indelicate subjects, and the 'un-literary' nature of the popular metrical form.[31] As discussed in the Introduction, Middle English metrical romances are typified by brevity and directness, and according to Derek Pearsall, *Sir Tristrem* exemplifies this form.[32] The short alliterative octosyllabic lines and tail-rhyme propel the narrative forward, and both the rhythmic form and repetitive, familiar content invite the audience to fill in the narrative gaps. This is especially effective in this case, considering *Sir Tristrem* was part of such a well-known tradition. Discussing the brevity and elisions in texts like *Sir Tristrem,* Pearsall goes so far as to suggest that "it would be difficult for the audience to follow if they didn't already know the story."[33] It is especially important, therefore, to consider *Sir Tristrem* in concert with other metrical romances and the earlier variants of the Tristan narrative, as part of an intertextual romance corpus, as suggested in my methodology. How this intertextuality impacts the complex representations of the powerful healing women, and particularly the aspects of their characters that engage with cultural anxieties about women's authority and medical practice, will be the focus of the next several sections of this chapter.

III.2 Healing Women in *Sir Tristrem*: The Queen that 'Michel Can'

The first magical healing woman we will consider is the powerful matriarch in *Sir Tristrem,* the Queen of Ireland and mother of Ysonde. We are first introduced to the Queen of Ireland in her capacity as a healer when she hears word of a mysterious knight who has washed ashore near Dublin afflicted with a grievous wound. Unbeknownst to her, the knight is Tristrem, vassal to the King of Cornwall and Ireland's enemy, and the fetid wound is the souvenir of his deadly combat with her

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[31] While Middle English romances do not adhere to the same standards of elegance as their French predecessors, Lupack argues convincingly that *Sir Tristrem* deals with sexual or indelicate material with unusual frankness, possibly intended for humorous effect, in which case *Sir Tristrem* may function as a satire. In addition to the initial bawdy discussions of 'luf-play,' there are further blatantly sexual (and uncourtly) references, such as the pun around Tristrem's 'quaint' – i.e., cunning – trick to catch sight of Isolde 'queynt' (ll. 2254) and also, the slight confusion of the dog who drinks the love potion (ll. 1675). See Lupack, TEAMS Introduction.

[32] Pearsall, pp. 14-15.

[33] Pearsall, p. 14. This seems to be accepted in scholarship. Lupack observes, "The author of *Sir Tristrem* does seem to expect his audience to know the story as well as some of the conventions of romance" (Lupack, TEAMS Introduction). For a further discussion of this, see Joseph Bédier's introduction to Thomas's, *Le Roman de Tristran: Poème du XIIe siècle*, 2 vols, Ed. by Joseph Bédier (Société des Anciens Textes Français. Paris: Firmin Didot, 1902).

brother Moraunt (1164-65). As is usual in Middle English romances, the Queen's introduction is marked with brevity and directness. Unusually for a female character, however, it is her cunning and knowledge that are the repeated characteristics which the text emphasises. At her introduction we learn that the Queen is the "sleighest… / And mest couthe of medicine" (1203-04). Because she is the "sleighest" or most skillful healer in the land, she is undaunted by the festering wound whose stench and severity baffled all the (presumably male) leeches and doctors who attended Tristrem while he was still in Cornwall (1114-19). Even before she examines Tristrem in person, the Queen of Ireland sends a "plaster kene" (1209) for Tristrem's wound that immediately "cast[s] the stink oway" (1210) and heals him. This virtuosic skill at the preparation of powerful pharmaceutics is what defines her throughout the text, and we are frequently reminded that her most important aspect is her knowledge – she is "the Quen that michel can" (1288, 1528).

Her skill, and the extraordinarily dire nature of his wounds, both are immediately apparent when the Queen's examination of Tristrem's wounds causes him to scream so loudly that his bones burst:

> The levedi of heighe kenne
> His woundes schewe sche lete,
> To wite his wo unwinne;
> So grimli he gan grete,
> His bon brast under skinne… (1233-38)

The professional practice of a physician to search or 'lete' a patient's wound is here exhibited, as is her diagnostic intent: she wishes to examine the wound – "wite his wo" – and from observation determine cause and remedy. Though the description of the following medical procedure is limited, it is evident that her diagnosis and prescriptions pay off:

> A bath thai made him sket
> So lithe
> That Tristrem on his fet
> Gon he might swithe.
> Salves hath he soft
> And drinkes that er lithe. (1240-45)

And thus with baths, salves, drinks and careful attention, he is – miraculously, magically – healed of the wound that had kept him bedridden *for three years* (1123). The extremity of the wound emphasises the power of the Queen's prodigious medical abilities, and her talent, knowledge, and power are all evident in her treatment.

That such knowledge, and the presumed education that provides for it, is

emphasised in a female character is particularly notable in the context of the previously mentioned tensions around women in medical education, and in the authority and legitimacy of their power. Harper's essay indicates that "a clear division is made between the healing techniques of women healers and the sources of their power" by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and she explains that sanctity, shown through prayer and invocations of the divine, is typical in late medieval descriptions of female healing – a way of showing the benign character of potentially problematic power.[34] However, the Queen does not appear to heal through some innate goodness or godliness, but rather through accurate, scientific knowledge of the physiological impact of the herbs, wines, and other ingredients in her medical recipes. Making plasters, examining or 'searching' the wound,[35] herbal baths,[36] salves, and restorative drinks were all part of the physician's repertoire[37] and though *Sir Tristrem* gives only the briefest of descriptions of the Queen's medical practice, the results of her ministrations indicate she is applying effective, educated medicine, representative of the scientific knowledge of the day. This, Harper explains, is specifically the 'learned' brand of medicine, and not the empiric, experiential knowledge of untrustworthy, untrained quacks. It was also, of course, the province of university-trained, and thus male physicians. In the context of women's formal legal exclusion from universities and the public practice of medicine, I would hypothesise that the source of the Queen's prodigious skill and training is a potential site of tension.

The queen adeptly utilises her medical knowledge several times throughout the text. In addition to healing Tristrem upon his initial arrival in Ireland, she also cares for him a second time after his bout with the dragon when venom from the beast's severed tongue has poisoned him (1480-90). Once again, her remedies are in keeping with the medical knowledge of the day: she gives him 'treacle,' (1520) or

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[34] Harper, pp. 114-15.

[35] Harper, p. 116.

[36] The prescription of herbal baths in the Middle Ages was not uncommon, and according to Kate Campbell Hurd-Mead, particular popular among female medical practitioners. See Hurd-Mead, pp. 144, 210, and 227-28. For the frequency of herbal baths among instances of healing in romance texts, see Hughes, p. 56.

[37] See Hurd-Mead's discussion of the thirteenth century and typical practices of the time (p. 210); see also Harper, pp. 116-117.

theriac, which was a Galenic compound antidote for poisons,[38] and he revives nearly instantly. Thereupon the Queen and her daughter Ysonde once again treat him with medicinal baths, and a powerful "drink of main" (1562) that completely restores him to health. Shortly thereafter, fearing for Ysonde's wellbeing and thinking her mad, the Queen has on hand yet another powerful "drink of main" (1581) to calm her daughter. These instances of near-miraculous healing may be read as magical, since natural magic required the same sort of education and could produce the same marvellous results as expert medical practices. Additionally, this prodigious, potentially magical skill continues to demonstrate a learned medical practice of a sort from which women were excluded. Yet these abilities are used in service of the hero and his beloved, suggesting that despite her unusually broad knowledge of medical science, the Queen's depiction would have been read as benign by a contemporary medieval audience.

III.3 Perilous Power: Potions and Poisons

The Queen's ability to manipulate herbs and medicines does not stop at healing, however. She is also responsible for the love potion that seals Tristrem and Ysonde's tragic fate (1644-46). Love potions, unsurprisingly, are an area of particular overlap between the magical and medical professions. This specific 'drink of might' works with powerful amorous effect, and the unique potency of the contents is demonstrated not only through overt mention ("In al the warld nas nought / Swiche drink as ther was in…" 1664-65) but also in the immediate visceral effect of the draught:

> Her love might no man tuin
> Til her ending day…
> Thai loved al in lide
> And therof were thai fain.
> Togider thai gun abide
> In joie and ek in pain
> For thought.
> In ivel time, to sain,
> The drink was ywrought. (1671-83)

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[38] According to the Middle English Dictionary, 'treacle' was defined as: "An antidote for poison or venom, a medicament for drawing out or neutralizing the poison engendered by infection, suppuration, etc." See the online edition of the *Middle English Dictionary (MED),* ed. by Robert E. Lewis, et al., (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952-2001), online edition in the Middle English Compendium, ed. by Frances McSparran, et al., (2018) <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary> [accessed 20 January 2019]. For the appearance of 'treacle' in medieval medical and romance texts, see Hughes, pp. 27-28, and Hurd-Mead, pp. 47-48 and 192.

The love potion is described in nearly identical terms to the earlier antidote the queen prepared to counteract the dragon's venom (1562), and also the one brewed to calm Ysonde's perceived madness (1562), but unlike those potions, this one was "ywrought" in "ivel time" (1682-83). Though the Queen herself is not necessarily 'evil,' in this case her actions are, and in the romance tradition actions often speak louder than words. The author carefully preserves some of the conflict of joy and sorrow, happiness and pain that earlier versions of the Tristan text so aptly portray,[39] and we are meant to read this event as tragic, if inevitable. The Queen's superlative magical-medical abilities continue unabated, and it seems her potions and draughts have extremely powerful effects no matter what their specific function may be, but the benevolent-healer identity is complicated and destabilised by this unorthodox, even negative, potion-brewing.

The other problematic aspect of the Queen of Ireland's potion-making goes unstated in the text of *Sir Tristrem*, but was an accepted part of its predecessors in the courtly Tristan tradition. In *Sir Tristrem*'s closest analogues, the Queen of Ireland herself dresses her brother's blade with poison, so that after his duel with Tristan, Tristan's wounds refuse to heal. In Gottfried von Strassburg's version of the narrative, for example, the Irish champion melodramatically and vehemently implicates his sister as the sole possessor of the knowledge of the poison.[40] Though the Queen is not always directly implicated, the tradition of the poisoned wound is echoed in every version of the text. In *Sir Tristrem,* for instance, the incurable nature of the wound and its unnatural fetid stench can be read as evidence of potent toxins, while in Malory, we are told directly that Tristram's wound is "invenymed" (*Morte,* p. 238) with poison specifically from Ireland. Poison, then, is a constant across the Tristan tradition. We must therefore consider whether it is reasonable to assume that a medieval audience would have made the connection of the Queen 'that michel can' with the powerful, pernicious toxins in Tristrem's wound.

Returning to the earlier arguments from Lupack and Pearsall concerning the intertextual nature of romances in general and the Tristran tradition in particular, we

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[39] For instance, Gottfried von Strassburg's version is deeply emotional: "They who were two and divided now became one and united. … Her anguish was his pain: his pain her anguish. The two were one in joy and sorrow…" (p. 195).

[40] In Gottfried's text, Morold gives an impassioned death-speech: "believe me, Tristan, your plight must irrevocably end in your death! … the sword that has wounded you is bated with deadly poison! No physician or medical skill can save you… save only my sister Isolde, Queen of Ireland. She is versed in herbs of many kinds, in the virtues of all plants, and in the art of medicine. She alone knows the secret…" (Gottfried von Strassburg, p. 134).

are reminded of the assumption that *Sir Tristrem*'s audience had some foreknowledge of the narrative.[41] What *version* of the story would they have been familiar with, however? While there is no way to be sure whether Ysonde's mother poisoned Tristrem's wounds in the texts that *Sir Tristrem*'s audience would have been familiar with*, the Tristan narratives are steeped with references to poison, and the powerful invective against the Queen in several versions suggests that her involvement in the poisoning would have been part of that underlying, intertextual narrative. Not only that, but Malory's text alludes to another reason to assume the Queen's guilt. Tristram learns that the only way for him to be healed is for him to go to "the same contrey that the venym cam fro, and in that countrey sholde he be holpyn, other ellys never" (*Morte*, p. 238), which prompts his journey to Ireland. The implication that a poison could only be healed at its source is a reference to contemporary medieval theories about antidotes and poisons working in balance, often requiring the same ingredients. Without knowledge of specific local herbs and ingredients that went into a poison, the most skilled leech would be powerless. This also, therefore, may cast further suspicion on the Queen of Ireland as the original poisoner, as she is the one to heal Tristrem, and knowledge of the cure necessitated knowledge of the cause. To brew an antidote meant, implicitly, that one could also brew the poison. In *Sir Tristrem,* therefore, the Queen of Ireland's ability to heal Tristrem so quickly may have suggested her knowledge of the poison, and pointed to her role in the poisoning of his wound.[42] Given the interwoven, intertextual nature of the romance genre, and the suggestions of her culpability in other texts, it seems even more probable that a medieval audience would have connected Tristrem's poisoned wounds to the powerful Queen.

III.4 To Kill, Cure, or Charm

Whether or not we assume that a medieval readership would have taken Tristrem's unhealing wounds, in the context of the existing Tristan tradition, as shorthand for poison brewed by Ireland's queen, the deft concoction of magical love potions marks the queen as a figure of moral ambiguity. In her characterisation we see the connection between healer, potion-maker, and poisoner as she prepares love-potions, healing draughts, and poisons with equal ease. A full exploration of the medieval

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[41] See Pearsall, p. 16, and also Lupack, TEAMS Introduction, and Frye, p. 60.
[42] For more, see section IV.4 of this chapter.

associations of female healers with toxins or love potions is beyond the scope of this thesis. My research indicates, however, that at least in the literary representations of female healers, these overlapping categories could be seen as synonymous. More directly, on a satisfyingly physical level we can witness the intimate connection of poisons, medicines, and love magic in their overlapping ingredients. Sidney M. Johnson's exploration of the impact and significance of the 'love-philtre' in Gottfried von Strassburg's version of the Tristan narrative includes a list of some of the most commonly used ingredients in medieval recipes for love potions and aphrodisiacs.[43] According to Johnson, mandrake, deadly nightshade, and henbane were among the ingredients frequently listed in medieval love-potion and aphrodisiac recipes, all of which have intense physiological results and were widely used in medieval medicines as anaesthetics, treatments for nervousness, and generalized pain killers.[44] All these plants, part of the *familia Solanaceae*, regularly contain toxins such as Hyoscamine, a key ingredient in several modern medicines used to treat a variety of illnesses related to the digestive and neurological systems.[45] In the Middle Ages these plants were, it seems, used in small doses as effective stimulants or active ingredients, but in larger doses were known to be extremely toxic.[46] Perhaps, given the narcotic, arousing, stimulating, or even hallucinogenic properties of some of these plants, and others such as poppy, aconite, or hemlock that also feature in Johnson's list of ingredients,[47] their appearance in love potions is not surprising. If the heightened temperature, dilated pupils (especially due to intake of belladonna) and impacted physical and mental state were not enough to convince a medieval audience of the power of these drugs, superstitions relating to love or fertility also arose around several of these plants – for example, the plentiful seedpod of the poppy plant was taken as a symbol of fertility,

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[43] Johnson bases this research largely on the work of Irmgard Müller, specifically 'Liebestrank, Liebeszauber und Schlafmittel in der mittelalterlichen Literatur' in *Liebe – Ehe – Ehebruch in der Literature des Mittelalters, Vorträge des Symposiums,* vol. 13 (Geissen: Institut für deutsche Sprache und mittelalterliche Literatur der Justus Liebig-Universität Giessen, 1984) 71-87. For an introduction to the use of herbs and love potions in the Tristran tradition, see Sidney M. Johnson, 'Interpreting the Love potion in Gottfried's Tristan' in *A Companion to Gottfried von Strassburg's "Tristan,"'* ed. by Will Hasty (Rochester: Camden, 2003) pp. 87-112.

[44] Hughes, p. 35, and Johnson, p. 88.

[45] See Paul E. Berry and William G. D'Arcy's entry for the plant order 'Solanales' in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (*Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*, 2018) <https://www.britannica.com/plant/Solanales> [accessed 18 January 2018], and also Martin H. Keeler and Francis J. Kane, Jr., 'The Use of Hyoscyamine as a Hallucinogen and Intoxicant' in *The American Journal of Psychiatry,* 124.6 (1967) 852-854.

[46] Hurd-Mead, pp. 96 and 147, Hughes, pp. 35-36, Achterberg, pp. 42-43.

[47] Johnson, pp. 88-89.

while mandrake was considered a cure for infertility due to its strangely humanoid appearance.[48]

It is no coincidence that these same ingredients were also the ones listed, eventually, in witch trial documents as the components of the 'flying ointment' that gave one the sensation of bodily transformation or flight.[49] According to Johnson, henbane intake could induce hallucinations simulating flight and turning into animals, and when combined with aconite could "produce the feeling that hair or feathers are growing out of the skin."[50] This emphasises the fragile boundary between perceived magic (witches' oils, love potions, and out-of-body experiences), medicine, and poison, for not only were the three categories imagined as multiple overlapping aspects of the same identity in the medieval mind, but they involved the use of the same array of herbs and plants. This supports the suggestion that the Queen of Ireland in *Sir Tristrem* would have been understood to be able to harm as well as heal, poison as well as charm. The skills needed for one magical-medical practice were not merely similar but synonymous with those needed for the others practices, and as a virtuosic practitioner, her abilities would have been multifaceted.

III.5 Are you a Good Witch, or a Bad Witch? Motivation and Intent

The knowledge and education the Queen of Ireland would have needed to brew, distinctly and effectively, herbal draughts to inspire love, to calm madness, to heal, and (in some versions) to poison falls under the category of the science of natural magic.[51] Education in, and adept mastery of natural magic are demonstrated in the Queen of Ireland's prodigious abilities. However, would such skilled practice have affected a moral reading of her character, as intrinsically either suspicious or commendable? In 'Middle Age in Romance?' Saunders argues that in such narratives the morality of a character using natural magic is determined by their intentions. The science of natural magic is not inherently morally wicked, for as we have seen it can be used to wholly beneficial effect. Equally, however, "natural magic can be

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[48] Johnson, p. 88.

[49] Achterberg discusses the late medieval discourse on witches' 'flying oyle' and the presence of powerful, psychoactive hallucinogenic drugs among the known ingredients. Wolf-bane, henbane, hemlock, mandrake, moonshade tobacco, opium, nightshade, aconite, cannabis, and 'preparations of toad (which would contain bufotenin, a mild hallucinogenic)' all regularly were listed among the substances supposedly used by witches to fly or transform their bodies (p. 93). See also Johnson, p. 89.

[50] Johnson, p. 88.

[51] See the Introduction, section II.1, for a discussion of the medieval conceptions of the various types of magic.

dangerous if misused."[52] Because it is treated as a science, and therefore only as good or as wicked as the human being using it, the moral interpretation of natural magic demands an analysis of motivations and intentions of the practitioner. The Queen of Ireland's medical practice occupies a place of suspended moral judgment in *Sir Tristrem*, and does not automatically make her either good or evil, and as we have seen, she has the capacity and skill to harm as well as heal. The question, therefore, is what she *wants*.

Returning once again to the narrative-focused structure of *Sir Tristrem*, with its limited interiority, we find our primary clues about the motivation and desires of the queen rely on surface readings of her role in the text. Without the introspection and internal conflict detailed at length in the prose romance traditions, the popular Middle English romances have a functional, utilitarian treatment of characters, who exist primarily to serve a particular plot requirement. In the case of the Queen, this function changes and varies: Tristrem needs a wound to send him to Ireland – the Queen of Ireland brews a potion that poisons him. He needs to be healed – she brews a potion that heals him. He needs to fall irrevocably, irresistibly in love – she brews a potion that makes it so. Harper comments on the queen's role in this text, saying that she plays her roles without judgement and seems to simply fill whatever role, brew whatever potion, the plot requires of her.[53] If she has personal desires, intentions, and motivations, they go unstated (as does so much in romance) and change to better serve the needs of the plot.

Though likely responsible for the stinking wound that so torments Tristrem early in the text, the Queen of Ireland is not a true antagonist. As we have seen, she is not consistently motivated by a desire to oppose or harm Tristrem. In addition to healing him – twice – she attempts to save his life when it is threatened by none other than her own daughter. Tristrem, whose identity has been concealed for the duration of his time in Ireland, is revealed as the same knight who slew the Queen's brother when his tellingly notched sword is discovered, fitting the fragment of steel that was found in Moraunt's skull. Interestingly, it is not the Queen but Ysonde who discovers the damning blade. She rushes upon Tristrem while he lies in his bath, recovering from his bout with the dragon, and vocally, violently attempts to murder him (1565-95).

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[52] Saunders, 'Middle Age in Romance?' p. 47.
[53] Harper, p. 113.

> Tho thought Ysonde with care
> To sle Tristrem the knight.
> Ysonde to Tristrem yode
> With his swerd al drain.
> "Moraunt, mi nem the gode,
> Traitour, thou hast slain;
> Forthi thine hert blode
> Sen ich wold ful fain." (1572-79)

The striking image of Ysonde, "the maiden bright of hewe," poised with sword held aloft while Tristrem lies naked and helpless is as arresting for modern readers as it must have been for the original medieval audience. This uncharacteristic and unladylike behaviour is so unexpected that "[t]he Quen whende sche were wode" and swiftly brings another "drink of main" (1580-81) to calm Ysonde's perceived madness – proving not only the versatility of her medical abilities once again, but also the disturbing nature of the image of the murderous maiden.

The shock of having the heroine attempt to kill the hero is witnessed in the Queen's immediate assumption that her daughter has gone mad. In Gottfried von Strassburg's version of the text, the internal criticism of the sword-wielding Isolde is still more pointed. Gottfried points out repeatedly that she is a tender young woman, and thus ought not to kill – but specifically, that she ought not to slay Tristan *with a sword*. Between begging for his life, Tristan exclaims, "Shame on those dazzling white hands – how ill a sword becomes them!" and upon her arrival the Queen, aghast, demands, "Is this ladylike behaviour? Are you out of your senses? ... What is that sword doing in your hands?"[54] Given that no such condemnation is expressed for the Queen when, earlier in the text, she is implicated in the poison that so nearly kills Tristan, we know that it is not Isolde's bloodlust alone that is so shocking but rather the choice of implement. The proper, womanly way to kill a man, of course, is not with phallic weaponry but with poison, as we know from the longstanding medieval association of poison with femininity.[55] Indeed, elsewhere in the corpus of Tristan texts we see that link made explicitly. In the *Prose Tristan*, and Malory's reinterpretation of that text, when Tristan's stepmother wishes to get rid of him so that her own son will inherit, we are told that poison is the only logical option for her.[56] Shortly thereafter when the lady's son is accidentally killed in Tristan's stead and it is

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[54] Gottfried von Strassburg, p. 175.

[55] Andrew Lynch, 'Gesture and Gender in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*' in *Arthurian Romance and Gender: Selected Proceedings of the 17th International Arthurian Congress*, ed. by Friedrich Wolfsettel (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995) pp. 285-95 (p. 287).

[56] Malory, *Morte*, p. 230 and Curtis, *Prose Tristan*, p. 11.

determined that the cause is poison, the king's adviser confidently states that the crime must have been committed by "either a lady or a maiden"[57] – poison is, by popular consensus, a woman's crime. Poison and femininity are therefore linked throughout the Tristan-tradition, both in the person of the Queen and other murderous, maternal women.

Ysonde's attempt on Tristrem's life is jarring, therefore, because she resorts to active violence rather than passive poisoning, and is thereby all the more passionate and visibly emotional. This complexity of Ysonde's emotional characterisation in *Sir Tristrem* and its antecedents gives a human quality to her portrayal, and the conflicting emotions of betrayal and hate followed swiftly by (potion-inspired, yet still overpowering) love offer an unusually multifaceted portrait of Ysonde.[58] The Queen is also complex, largely benevolent but with potential for great danger as she brews one powerful draught after another. While she is not Tristrem's nemesis, neither does she bear him the blinkered, unquestioning loyalty which we see elsewhere in romance, from steadfast servants, faithful lovers and devoted mothers. Her loyalty is instead to her family (first brother, then daughter), and beside her professional healing imperatives she only concerns herself with Tristrem when he offers her family either a threat or an advantage (the marriage-offer to Ysonde). Once Ysonde convinces the Queen that Tristrem is her brother's killer, the Queen no longer bars Ysonde from her attempted homicide. In fact, she prepares to assist her – and, the author tells us, had it not been for the King's intervention, the two women would have had their revenge and "In bath thai hadden him slain" (1594).

We are therefore left with complex, variable motivations and emotions for both women present in this text, particularly the Queen. If we return to the idea of herbal powers and natural magic being rendered either permissible and safe or unstable and dangerous by the perceived intention of the woman utilising said power, then the assumption we must make about the Queen's power is that it remains ambiguous, and changes throughout the text depending on the particular plot-requirement. As a maternal, middle-aged healer woman implicated in poison and magical love potions, and also as an educated, highly skilled healer, her character remains problematic, although the underlying anxieties go unstated. *Sir Tristrem*, like other fourteenth-century popular romances, presents subjects of tension and anxiety

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[57] Curtis, *Prose Tristan*, p. 12.
[58] See Gottfried von Strassburg's delightfully melodramatic version of her revenge-quest: "Nothing will save him now! This sword shall make an end of him!" (pp. 175-76).

without comment, and in a way that neutralizes and makes palatable existing anxieties through the form of ambiguous romance narratives, leaving the figure of the powerful healer-woman in unresolved ambiguity.

IV. Malory's Moveable Parts: Composite Characters and the Quest for Coherency

Thomas Malory composed his version of the Tristan legend, 'Sir Tristram de Lyones,' in 1469-1470, roughly three hundred years after the composition of its French sources and more than a hundred years after *Sir Tristrem* was recorded in the Auchinleck Manuscript.[59] His primary source for this narrative was the *Prose Tristan*, which, as the earliest connection between the Tristan-material and the Arthurian cannon, had a distinctly different flavour than the courtly tradition that preceded *Sir Tristrem*. According to Renee Curtis, the *Prose Tristan* was a departure from preexisting traditions in that "The emphasis has entirely shifted: what was essentially a tale of love… has become a biographical romance, the story of Tristan's life."[60] This change is echoed in Malory, who is interested not only in the biographical aspects of his source material, but in their potential for praise of heroism and worship.[61] Chivalry, rather than courtly love, is Malory's main concern, and thus his version dwells much more on Tristram's martial prowess than it does on his reputation as one of the greatest lovers of the Round Table.[62] It is unsurprising, therefore, that Malory's treatment of the Irish women, their powers of natural magic and their complex motivations differs dramatically from that of the earlier Middle English text.

IV.1 The Noble Surgeon

The initial, most obvious divergence in the treatment of the healing women from the text of *Sir Tristrem* is in Malory's redistribution of healing powers. In his version of

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[59] See Helen Cooper's introduction to Malory's *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript,* ed. by Helen Cooper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. x.
[60] Curtis, *Tristan Studies,* p. 11.
[61] For more on Malory's narrative goals and the importance of chivalry and 'worship' see Dhira B. Mahoney, 'Malory's "Tale of Sir Tristram": Source and Setting Reconsidered,' *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook*, ed. by Joan Tasker Grimbert (London: Routledge, 1995) pp. 223-53, and also Jerome Mandel, 'Constraint and Motivation in Malory's "Lancelot and Elaine"' in *Papers on Language & Literature*, 20 (1984) 243-58.
[62] Grimbert, p. xliii.

the tale, when the wounded Tristram arrives on the shores of Ireland, he is healed by 'La Beale Isode.'

> Thenne the kynge for grete favour made Tramtryste to be put in
> his doughtyrs awarde and kepyng, because she was a noble
> surgeon. And whan she had serched hym she founde in the
> bottome of his wounde that therin was poyson, and so she
> healed hym within a whyle… (*Morte,* p. 238)

We see evidence of Isode's skill and apparent training in her method – searching the wound – and in her ability to recognise and remove the 'poyson' that had thwarted the efforts of " alle maner of lechis and surgeons" who had previously examined Tristram (p. 238). We can therefore assume that Isode's medical practice is educated, scientific, and professional. Not only is her medical practice cast in a clearly beneficent light, but the healing she performs is then the catalyst for Tristram and Isode's love:

> And therefore Tramtrist kyste grete love to La Beale Isode, for
> she was at that tyme the fayrest lady and maydyn of the worlde.
> And there Tramtryst lerned hir to harpe and she began to have
> grete fantasy unto hym." (pp. 238-39)

In Malory, healing is the instrument of their affection, which springs not from a potent potion but from the benevolent intimacy of the relationship of a physician and her patient. This, I believe, is part of Malory's consistent trend of seeking rationality, motivation, and coherence in his plot and characters, rather than relying on the traditional verse-romance devices of 'magic' or symbols as signifiers for emotion and interiority.[63] These attempts to render characters psychologically coherent and rational are evident in the character-transformations of Isode and the Queen of Ireland, and in Malory's reorganisation of the identity of the female healer.

IV.2 Vengeance and Venom

While Malory's 'Beale Isode' enjoys the prominence and authority of the healer's role, the status of her mother, the Queen of Ireland, is greatly altered. She is removed from the position of the caring doctor and takes no part in healing Tristram, and if Isode's prodigious healing skill comes from her mother's instruction, it goes

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[63] Malory's interest in the psychology and rational motivation of his characters is explored at length in Mandel, pp. 243-58.

unmentioned.[64] Instead, the Queen is recast as a vengeful old woman bearing a grudge. She is the one who clings to "that pyese of the swerd" left in her brother's skull by Tristram's death-stroke, "for she thoughte to be revengyd and she myghte" (*Morte,* p. 237). No longer invested in healing the hero, instead throughout the text we read her as consistently seeking his death at every opportunity.

A few sections later, she is also the one who discovers Tristram's duplicity:

> 'Alas!' thenne seyde she... 'this is the same traytoure knyght
> that slewe my brother...' Whan Isode herde her sey so she was
> passynge sore abaysshed, for passyng wel she loved Tramtryste
> and full well she knew the *crewelnesse* of hir modir the
> quene... And than the quene gryped that swerde in her honde
> *fersely,* and with all her myghte she ran streyghte upon
> Tramtryste where he sate in his bene. And there *she had ryved
> hym thorowe* ...whan she was lette of hir *evyll wyll* she ran to
> the kynge ... (p. 242) (*Emphasis mine*)

This description of a 'crewel,' 'ferse,' 'evyll,' and vengeful middle-aged woman, rushing at the defenceless hero with sword held aloft, conjures up a distinctly different set of associations from Ysonde's moment of bloodlust in the earlier texts. Ysonde's dilemma made her emotional turmoil more poignant; the Queen's ill-will, on the other hand, has cast her as the bitter bearer of a bloody grudge. Additionally, Malory gives us Isode's internal criticism of her mother, constructing a narrative division between the two women with her shame at the Queen's bloodthirstiness. This is a far cry from the image of mother and daughter united in their desire for vengeance, as seen in *Sir Tristrem.* This negative representation is consistent with Malory's tendency to isolate positive or negative traits in the characters, in search of moral stability and clarity. By adhering to the *Prose* choice of Isode as the healer, a divergence from the tradition of Thomas, Gottfried and *Sir Tristrem,* Malory then is able to present uncomplicated characters: the educated, healing damsel who loves the hero, and the threatening maternal character poisoned by bitterness and bloodlust who wishes to kill him. Malory has teased apart the separate problematic elements of the Irish women, and reassigned them in a way that supports a more static, linear set of motivations and desires.

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[64] Ann Marie Rasmussen discusses the idea of the Queen as a teacher as well as a mother in the earlier Tristan narratives in her chapter, 'Ez Ist Ir G'Artet Von Mir: Queen Isolde and Princess Isolde in Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan und Isolde*' in *Arthurian Women,* ed. by Thelma S. Fenster, (London: Routledge, 1996) pp. 41-57. See also Joan M. Ferrante, *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature* (London: Columbia University Press, 1975) pp. 92-95.

The rest of Malory's treatment of the two women continues to feed into this polarity: Isode is associated with unadulterated goodness, the Queen with possibly impotent, but certainly suspect, plots and schemes. For example, while we are not told explicitly that the Queen of Ireland is responsible for the poisoned blade with which the Irish champion wounds Tristram, the association of her character with the poison is alluded to even more strongly in Malory than it was in *Sir Tristrem*. As mentioned in section III.3 of this chapter, Malory's tale (following the *Prose Tristan*) includes the episode in which Tristram's stepmother attempts to poison him, reaffirming and underlining the association of poison with older, maternal women. Later, when we learn that the poison in Tristram's wound is Irish, the narrative seems to point obliquely but clearly to the Queen of Ireland. Whether or not we assume that the Queen prepared the poison, however, we are informed of her role in brewing other potions. As in every other version of the story, Isode's mother brews a love-philtre intended for Mark and Isode, so that "ayther shal love other dayes of their lyff," (*Morte,* p. 257) and gives it to the maid-servant Bragwayne, who, of course, tragically fails to prevent Tristram and Isode from accidentally drinking it. Unlike some of the earlier texts in which there is great antipathy between the two prior to the consumption of the philtre, Malory's Tristram and Isode were well on their way to love, if not outright adultery, long before imbibing the Queen's potion, as evidenced in the description of Tristram's healing and their subsequent interactions.[65] The importance of the potion is therefore diminished in Malory's text, and with it the power and authority of Ireland's queen, though not the negativity of her characterisation.

The overlapping aspects of the healer-woman's knowledge and identity have thus been separated out into two distinct categories in Malory. The positive, powerful, beneficent healer is awarded the label of 'noble surgeon' – a carefully distinguished identity which implies goodness, education, and formal training.[66] Additionally, Isode is young, beautiful (and virginal), and defined by her love for the hero. The Queen, on the other hand, has been reduced to the vengeful older woman whose knowledge is limited to magic and poison – the nearly-impotent love-potion and, likely, the venom

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[65] In addition to the "grete fantasy" Isode has for Tristram, we see evidence of their mutual affections several times before they drink the love potion. For example, Tristram feels "grete envy" when Palamedes seeks Isode's hand (p. 239), and at their parting she "wepte hertely," while he swears to be her knight all the days of his life, and they exchange rings (pp. 243-44).
[66] See Pollak, pp. 94-99, for the specific professional distinctions between physician and surgeon, the divisions within each category, and which aspects of surgery women were allowed to practice.

in Tristram's wound – and who is defined by her hatred for the hero. Malory delineates which aspects of the medical profession were falling under suspicion – potions and superstitions associated with women and empirics,[67] as opposed to physicians' or surgeons' regulated practices – and also which types of women were considered threatening and disruptive (unsurprisingly, it is not the pretty young damsel who happens to have medical training).

IV.3 Clarity or Contradiction?

Giving the revenge-quest to the Queen and healing skill to Isode results in a narrative with more streamlined motivations and linear, static characterisations of the Irish women. Malory has removed some of the seemingly contradictory aspects of the Thomas, Gottfried, and *Tristrem* narratives in this attempt to rationalise the text. In doing so, however, he has also removed some of the human complexity that underlies the apparent inconsistencies of the Irish women's actions in *Sir Tristrem.* In the verse romance there is little psychologising or internality, but the complex and varied roles played by the female characters present a picture of feminine psychology that is multi-dimensional, complicated, capable of contradiction and variance, and thus believably human. The understated exploration of the human ability to countenance simultaneous contradictory feelings – demonstrated in *Sir Tristrem* with Ysonde's swift transition from anger to love and in the Queen's complexity – results in a psychologically satisfying narrative that bears emotional weight and elicits readers' sympathies in a way the static goodness or wickedness of Malory's women does not. Malory, on the other hand, presents us with a set of female characters whose motivations and intentions are uncomplicated and straightforward – but thus less interesting, and perhaps less relatably human.

IV.4 Like Mother, Like Daughter: Mirroring and Composite Identity

The effective thematic separation of the parts of the healer-woman's identity in Malory means a visible distinction between the good use of herbal knowledge and the bad, and between good feminine identities and wicked ones. Malory has removed the morally grey areas and relieved the reader of the responsibility of determining what is

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[67] For a discussion of women's agency and association of femininity and poison in Malory, see Lynch, p. 287.

morally acceptable. These distinctions are superficial, however, because the continuities and similarities between Isode and her mother effectively and intimately link their characters.

As we have seen, the ingredients, and thus the knowledge and training, needed for love potions and poisons overlap with those of medieval medicine, and creating a separation between the different types of potion was, even at the time of Malory's composition of his text, a false distinction. The skills needed in the Queen's preparation of poison and potion would have involved manipulation of the same ingredients used by 'noble surgeons' and physicians in their medical practice. In the medieval understanding of medicine, which relied on principles of symmetry and balance, there existed a mirrored relationship between an antidote or theriac (as utilised, presumably, by Isode) and a poison (concocted, we assume, by her mother). As previously observed, in order to brew one, a healer would necessarily have understood the composition of both.[68] Malory, of course, does not detail the processes or recipes the Irish women use in their various practices, but the 'dual natures' of both venom and anti-venom establish that the two were fundamentally, chemically linked.[69]

In case the concrete skills and materials of healing and potion-brewing did not create enough of an explicit link between the two women, there is the added consideration of mother-daughter relationships, and the nearly indistinguishable identities of Isode and her mother. In the broader Tristan-tradition, in fact, the two women bear the same name,[70] and in Gottfried von Strassburg's version both are referred to as 'Queen Isolde' at various points in the text. In fact, as explored in Ann Marie Rasmussen's essay on the two characters,[71] Isolde virtually becomes her mother over the course of the narrative, assuming first her title of 'Queen,' then eventually her cunning, wisdom, and skill in healing.[72] While *Sir Tristrem* does not

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[68] Harper, p. 115.

[69] See section III.3 of this chapter for further discussion of this.

[70] This is according to Gottfried von Strassburg's version of the text, and thus likely Thomas's as well.

[71] See Rasmussen, 'Ez Ist Ir G'Artet Von Mir,' pp. 41-57. Rasmussen explores both the continuity and discontinuity between the two generations of Isoldes, examining how the younger Isolde mirrors her mother, and also how the loving bond between them impacts the plot, Isolde's agency, and the eventual divergence of their fates with the effects of the love-potion. These themes, and the female space created by mother-daughter relationships witnessed in medieval romances, are further explored in Rasmussen's book *Mothers & Daughters in Medieval German Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997). See also Alexandra Sterling-Hellenbrand, *Topographies of Gender in Middle High German Romance* (New York: Garland, 2001) pp.168-74.

[72] In Thomas's version of *Tristran*, when he lies wounded on his deathbed, Tristran claims "nobody can cure me / except Yseut the queen." See Gregory, p. 125, lines 2403-04.

give the 'Quene' a name, she and her daughter do exchange roles and titles, as Ysonde assumes the appellation 'the Quene' upon her marriage to Mark. Additionally, both the Queen of Ireland and her daughter are referred to with nearly identical descriptive epithets in *Sir Tristrem* – Ysonde as "Luffsum under line" (2815-16) and her mother equally as "Lovesom under line" (1202). Though Malory has dispensed with the detail and poetics that linguistically connect the Queen of Ireland and her daughter, the Queen of Cornwall, their traditional mirroring adds to the sense of interconnectedness between the two, emphasising the overlapping aspects of the healer's identity that have been divided between Isode and her mother. When we look at the older and younger queens together, as two aspects of the same character, we are presented with the composite identity of the healer woman, neither good nor wicked, both healing and poisonous, as ambivalent as her verse predecessor in *Sir Tristrem.*

This sort of reading is both intertextual – drawing on other romance traditions – and intratextual – seeing the two women as linked by their names and narratives throughout the texts. I argue that these readings destabilise the categories that Malory has worked so hard to create, adding nuance to both Isode's character, and that of her mother. If we imagine the images of the two queens folded upon each other, their differences and similarities made clear, what happens when the poison from Ireland's queen begin to seep through to the queen of Cornwall? What does an intertextual reading suggest about Isode's character? What do comparisons and equations with Isode do to the Queen of Ireland? To find out, we may consider the characterisation of one woman as a suggestion for interpretation of the other. For example, Malory's Isode is defined by her love for Tristram – and we are meant to admire that. If we view the actions of the Queen of Ireland as arising from similar love and loyalty – viewed through the lens of Isode's characterisation – then her concoction of deadly poison, and her attempt to kill Tristram upon the revelation of his identity, might no longer seem like baseless malice. Instead, they might be read as the results of her deep love for her brother. Isode, on the other hand, becomes implicated in poison and potion-brewing. More importantly, her character may be associated with the darker side of love – obsessive, consuming – even before she drinks the potion. Viewed through the lens of her mother's experience, we see a model of Isode's love which might drive her to brew wicked poison or commit murder in defence of her beloved. While Isode never attempts homicide for love of Tristram the way her mother does for love of her brother, viewing the two characters as layered, composite-versions of each

other adds an element of threat or violence to Isode's character, suggesting the depths to which obsessive love might sink.

Ambivalence and ambiguity are inescapable in the discussion of powerful healing women in these romances, it seems, for despite his best efforts to streamline and simplify the ethical issues at hand and keep Isode and her mother morally distinct, in the conflated, overlapping identities of the maiden and the mother Malory articulates ambivalence toward women who command too much power in natural magic and medicine.

V. Crossroads: Class, Gender, Magic, Medicine

In both *Sir Tristrem* and in Malory, therefore, we see images of healing women who resist singular, simplistic moral readings and who instead offer portraits of feminine healing that are complex and ambiguous. Adhering to literary tradition, the image of the wise – though ambivalent – female healer persists in power in *Sir Tristrem*. In Malory, on the other hand, she is divided into discrete categories that insulate the innocent maiden from disruptive female violence, bloody revenge and magic potions, and the maternal woman from the skilled healing practice. The differences in these two treatments is striking, and worth investigating: what might have informed Malory's decision to choose the *Prose Tristan*, with its distinct, safely contained examples of healing women, as the model for his text, while *Sir Tristrem* is comfortable with so much contradiction and complexity? Although Malory's choices may depend largely on his familiarity with the French prose version, some of the distinctions between the healer-women's treatment in these two texts may arise from the changes in social climate between the early fourteenth and late fifteenth centuries, and the previously mentioned rising anxieties about authority, license and women's power in the later Middle Ages. This is not, of course, the only explanation for such visible textual difference, however. It is also important to consider the role played by the distinctive forms and genres of the two texts.

Like most popular fourteenth-century metrical romances, *Sir Tristrem* is deeply conservative, nostalgic, and like most romances, participates in the literary (re)construction of an imagined golden age, which should be considered when exploring the representations of these ambiguous female healers. In the recreation of

an idealized past, romance's conservative practices distance their content from social reality. In this tradition, the female healer assumes the power, but also the *distance* of a figure of myth or fairy-tale, separate and insulated from reality, something particularly plausible when considered in the context of the intersecting impossibilities of the *noble, professional, female* healer.

As mentioned earlier, the professionalism and public position of the healer underwent a visible transformation over the course of the high and late Middle Ages, and it is reasonable to assume that class consciousness around the employment of professional medical practitioners was an underlying aspect of this change. We know of social tensions within the medical community,[73] and it is reasonable to assume they went hand-in-hand with anxiety and mistrust from outside the medical community as well. This would have included tensions between professional medical practitioners and gentlemen of the aristocratic class, who were forced to put their lives into the hands of their social inferiors. More concerning than that, however, would be the threat to one's identity, as an aristocratic man, in assuming the role of healer. By practicing professional medicine, one would have been aligning oneself with an inferior estate (those who work), and thus surrendering one's nobility. This may be why there are comparatively few male healers in romance – it is, after all, literature populated by noblemen, whose gentility might be called into question by association with professional activities.[74] The exceptions, of course, are the male hermits whose presence is so ubiquitous in Malory. Those hermits are often retired knights, and thus part of the gentry or aristocracy – but like the holy healer maidens mentioned earlier, they live in ascetic, holy isolation, and rather than seeking out patients, simply tend to those who providence sends their way. Their medical practice is more spiritual than scientific, and thus they are not lowering themselves with bourgeois professional pursuits. The same sanctity is also witnessed in the rare instances of knights who heal. When Lancelot heals Sir Urry, for example, it is presented with hagiographical wonder and reverence, and Lancelot's healing powers are clearly the result of his godly virtue rather than anything as ignoble as a physician's or surgeon's training.[75] For women, on the other hand, professional practice was formally impossible. Legally barred from institutions that offered professional training, women's medicine avoided

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[73] See section I of this chapter, and especially Green, 'Women's Medical Practice,' pp. 434-73 and 'Getting to the Source,' pp. 49-62, Hurd-Mead, p. 306, Achterberg, p. 80, and Minkowski, pp. 288-95.
[74] For an example of the damage that a hint of ignobility could have upon knightly reputation, see Chretien de Troyes's *The Knight of the Cart.*
[75] Malory, *Morte,* pp. 667-69.

the stain of ignoble professionalism, and thus noble women were not imperilling their nobility when they acted, as the Queen in *Sir Tristrem*, with obvious medical skill.

This class tension also finds its way into the realm of romance. In his *Decameron*, Book IX, Day Three[76] (the source for Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*), Boccaccio tells the story of Juliet, the daughter of a famous physician, who heals the King of France of a fistula.[77] This tale articulates some of the class-tensions between nobility and medical professionals when the heroine's chosen husband, Bertrand de Roussillon, a duke's son, expresses deep displeasure and shame at the prospect of marrying her – despite her acknowledged beauty – because she is a physician's daughter and thus his social inferior. From Bertrand's perspective, the status of a duke and that of a physician were inherently irreconcilably different, and a partnership between the two would demand that one surrender their identity and status. Juliet, therefore, must go on a quest to prove her worthiness – an inversion of the hero's journey to prove his worth – and to earn Bertrand's love and his nobility. Bertrand's fear, of course, is that it is his status that will be imperilled, and that nobility will give way to middle-class professionalism.

Boccaccio's text also registers other anxieties about the medical profession itself. When Juliet confidently claims that she can heal the king of his painful and apparently incurable affliction, she acknowledges that he may doubt her skills because she is 'young,' and a 'maiden.'[78] Age and gender were seen as impacting the competence and trustworthiness of a healer, casting doubt on their abilities were they not experienced, mature, and male. In fact, this is to whom Juliet must credit her abilities: her knowledge, she asserts, comes "not from her own experience" but from her father, a famous physician – and in case that is not good enough, also from *God*.[79] According to Boccaccio, at least, readers would expect a member of the aristocracy to doubt the capabilities of a woman, or someone deemed young and inexperienced – for perhaps quite understandable reasons. The same audience would also have understood the reluctance of a Duke's son to wed a physician's daughter, skilled though she be. Intersecting anxieties about class, gender, and age seem present in the body of the female healer, in romance and, presumably, in reality.

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[76] Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron,* Vol II. ed. by Edward Hutton (Long Acre: David Nutt, 1909) pp. 89-102.
[77] Boccaccio, p. 91.
[78] Boccaccio, p. 92.
[79] Boccaccio, p. 92.

When we explore the way the Tristan-tradition articulates these anxieties, we are presented with a set of overlapping impossibilities that serve to distance the female healer from reality. In *Sir Tristrem,* we have a medical professional who is a noble – in fact, a politically powerful queen. Additionally, the physician is a woman: doubly impossible. While women were associated with well-being and care-giving, they were, as we have seen, barred from the medical profession, as were members of the aristocracy for reasons of respectability and class. The Queen, therefore, seems truly a fantastical character, a distant fairy-tale. Taken in the context of the nostalgia implicit in so many metrical romance texts, the confluence of impossibilities removes the queen from controversy and keeps her in the separate 'dream-world' of romance.[80]

The same removal from reality might be assumed to apply as well to Malory's Isode – 'beale,' young, explicitly noted as part of the professional class of 'surgeons,' and simultaneously noble. Acceptance into the community of surgeons required lengthy apprenticeship,[81] and was open neither to women nor to the aristocracy in the late fifteenth century. Her specific label can therefore be read as evidence of Malory's nostalgic recreation of a distant golden era – and also a marker of Isode's extraordinary nature. Her extraordinariness acts as permission for her power, and a removal from the controversial elements of reality.

It seems, however, that even in the 'dream world' of romance, reality is not wholly escapable. These same factors – gender, age, and class – that ostensibly distance Isode from controversy and tension bring a sense of heightened negative reality when applied to her mother. Malory casts the older, maternal woman not as a professional 'surgeon' but as a brewer of potions, knowledgeable in herbs. This depiction more immediately reflects a recognisable reality. The Queen's portrayal mirrors the characteristics of the experienced, middle-aged, empirically educated 'wise woman' (*femme sage*)[82] who dealt in herbs and potions, against whom so many injunctions were made,[83] and from whom Boccaccio's Juliet is so keen to distance herself. Cast as untrustworthy, untrained, and linked with superstition and magic

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[80] Frye, p. 53.
[81] Green, 'Women's Medical Practice,' p. 447.
[82] Green, 'Women's Medical Practice,' p. 440.
[83] See Green's discussion of the Valencian statutes of 1329 ('Women's Medical Practice,' pp. 448-49), Talbot's discussion of the 1421 parliamentary petition by the Physicians' Guild to bar all but university-trained men from medical practice (p. 196), Hurd-Mead's discussion of Pope Sixtus IV's edict against the practice of medicine or surgery "by Jews or Gentiles, men or women, who were not graduates of a university" (p. 306), and Achterberg's discussion of the so-called Quack's charter, intended to prevent all but university-trained men from practicing medicine (p. 80).

potions rather than professionalism and science,[84] the Queen of Ireland in Malory's text fits the mould of the untrained empiric herbal healer. Because of this, we can read her noble status as diminished – her class status is jeopardized and her nobility superseded by her ignoble medical practice. Thus it seems that by exploring whether or not the female healer reflects a lived reality, we can discover which types of healing and healers Malory's readers were ready to demonise in his text, and which they were happy to accept – in the late fifteenth century, at least, the best type of female healer was the imaginary kind.

By this logic, we would assume that in the depiction of Isode, at least, her separation from reality is what permits her to so skilfully demonstrate her medical prowess without moral judgment – and as such, Malory has succeeded in writing a powerful woman free from complexity, simply and purely good. However, it seems reality intrudes even in the depictions of Isode, and *Sir Tristrem*'s Queen, as well. Were the noble, wise, healing women truly meant to inhabit romance's 'dream world' devoid of the tensions and anxieties of the real world, then we would anticipate medical practice less scientific and more ostentatiously magical in nature. Instead, we are shown medicine grounded in the medical debates of the day, adhering to contemporary medical understanding, and displaying scientific training and observational skills. The Queen in *Sir Tristrem* uses a 'plaster,' 'treacle,'[85] and herbal baths,[86] practices which reflect cutting edge medieval medical practices.[87] Isode, according to Malory, 'searches' Tristram's wound, and has sufficient medical training to accurately diagnose and remove the harmful toxins poisoning the wound. These distinctly scientific aspects of the Irish women's medical practices ground their depictions in the realm of medieval medicine, and thus in the realities of the tensions around gender, professionalism, license and authority.

When read against and with each other, the healing women in these romances become more obviously ambiguous, grounded in the medical realities of the day, and troubling the boundaries between good and wicked medical practices, between fiction and reality.

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[84] Pollak, p. 98 and Green, 'Women's Medical Practice,' pp. 439-44.
[85] For a discussion of the development of theriac, or treacle, see Hurd-Mead, p. 74.
[86] The use of medical, herbal baths as curatives seems an established practice throughout the medieval period. For discussion of Salernitan cures involving baths, see Hurd-Mead, p. 144, and for thirteenth century practice involving medical baths, Hurd-Mead, p. 210.
[87] Harper, p. 115.

BETWEEN WORLDS:
RISKS AND REWARDS OF FOREIGN QUEENSHIP
IN *BEVIS OF HAMPTON*

This chapter explores the representations of princesses from the exotic, fictional Middle East in the Middle English romance tradition, read in the context of fourteenth-century political history and discourse on foreign queenship. The 'Saracen Princess'[1] characters are ubiquitous in the Old French *chansons de geste*, and although they appear less frequently in the Middle English verse romance tradition, the enduring popularity of such texts as *Octavian*, *The Sowdone of Babylone* and *Bevis of Hampton* – all of which include the Saracen Princess narrative – points to a sustained English appetite for tales of the exotic East. The Saracen Princess, then, was one of the most popular and well known female character-types associated with magic and the supernatural in the English romance tradition.

This study focuses on *Bevis of Hampton* and on Josian, the hero's love-interest, who is a particularly active and self-reliant iteration of the amorous 'Saracen Princess' type. The stories about Saracen Princesses who fall in love with Christian knights follow set tropes and narrative patterns, like most Middle English popular romances, and were repeated with some consistency throughout the literature of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In these tales the hero-knight traditionally encounters grave peril while fighting in the exotic, geographically-vague 'East.' There he is aided by a pagan 'Saracen' princess who falls in love with him. Working against her father, a sultan or emir, the princess aids the Christian hero through deception,

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[1] The term 'Saracen' was used to refer to the non-Christian peoples of Middle and Near East in medieval writings; I use it intentionally to distinguish the fictitious characters in medieval literature from the real historical inhabitants of the Middle East in the medieval era. According to the *Middle English Dictionary* the term 'sarasin(e)' meant "(a) A Turk; also, an Arab; also, a Moslem" and also "(b) a heathen, pagan; an infidel;" its usage in the Middle English romances implies the former rather than the latter usage. See the online edition of the *Middle English Dictionary (MED),* ed. by Robert E. Lewis, et al.

violence, or both, and eventually converts to Christianity.[2] The Saracen Princess characters, and Josian in particular, fit into the framework of my study not merely because of their supernatural powers, but because of their 'other' (or indeed other*worldly*) identities. As denizens of the magical East, the Saracen Princesses, more than any other character type, embody and display the disruptive, contradictory, seductive and magical qualities of the imagined East of medieval romance.

This embodiment of the exotic East and the 'otherness' of the Saracen Princess characters is manifested in their particularly active, often violent, highly educated, and aggressively desiring form of femininity. There is tension between this otherness and their acceptability – even desirability – as wives or lovers for the heroes of these romances. Elements of their identities involve dishonourable, unmaidenly (and un-Christian) behaviour, while at the same time, their attributes which are typical of 'good women' in romance work to mitigate the strangeness of their exoticism, and the tension between the two generates potential anxiety. This particularly *feminine* exoticism allows them to straddle the boundaries between worlds and cultures, transgressing the cultural expectations of both and acting as advisers, intercessors, and agents of exchange. I explore Josian's ambiguous characterisation in *Bevis of Hampton* through the dual lenses of the narrative, considering both the persistent anxieties about her appropriateness as voiced by the hero, and also the insistence from the impartial narration of her acceptability and virtue. This process, I argue, works to first articulate, then neutralise, the uncertainties and anxieties this powerful, feminine otherness might have engendered in the audiences of these Middle English romances. Through these perspectives, it becomes apparent that these romances are concerned with the potential power – either in support of the hero, or in opposition to him – of the foreign queen.

This chapter then draws connections to the broader social and political context of fourteenth-century history, specifically the troubled reign of Edward II and Isabella

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[2] For an exploration of the development of the narrative trope of the amorous Saracen Princess in the French tradition, see F. M. Warren, 'The Enamoured Moslem Princess in Orderic Vital and the French Epic,' *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 29.3 (1914) 341-56, and Sharon Kinoshita, 'The Politics of Courtly Love: *La Prise d'Orange* and the Conversion of the Saracen Queen,' *Romanic Review*, 86.2 (1995) 265-87; for greater detail on the ethnic and moral characterisations of those women, see Jacqueline de Weever, *Sheba's Daughters: Whitening and Demonising the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic* (Garland: London, 1998). For more about the transfer of the French trope to the English romance context, see Dorothee Metlitzki, *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (London: Yale University Press, 1977) pp. 136-77, Bonnie J. Erwin, 'A Good Woman is Hard to Find: Conversion and the Power of Female Desire in *Bevis of Hampton*,' *Exemplaria*, 24.4 (2011) 368-89 (p. 370), and Siobhan Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity: The Auchinleck Manuscript* (Routledge: London, 2005), especially Chapter 2.

of France. In the fourteenth-century discourse about Isabella, her foreignness, her loyalties to her (French) family and her (English) husband, and the potentially disruptive power of her position in between the two, we see writers contemporary to the composition of these romances wrestling with questions of women's power when categorised as other. We may therefore read these romances, which explore the power and ambiguity of foreign queenship, as directly engaging with and responding to the social context of the political moment.

I. Western Gaze, Eastern Object: Understanding the 'Orient' in Medieval Literature

The literature witnessing the Western fascination with the exotic, imagined East[3] proliferated throughout the medieval period.[4] The root of the Saracen Princess narrative – the emir's daughter freeing the Christian knight – emerged during times of especially pressing interest in the 'Orient,' as the Christian West came in greater contact with the peoples and cultures of the near and middle East during the Crusades.[5] Between the First Crusade (1096 CE) and Ninth Crusade (1271 CE), the emerging Western (Christian) countries involved – notably France and England – participated in a process of identity-shaping and affirmation, as contact and contrast with the Eastern 'other' informed the self-perception of the communities and nations

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[3] The term 'imagined East' comes from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003); it seeks to separate the historical near, middle and far East from the potent idea of the 'Orient' as it existed in the minds of the Western medieval audiences and authors whose texts I explore.

[4] For an overview of the religious medieval thought on Islam and the East, see Daniel Norman, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1960); for the influence of Islam and the 'Orient' on such writers as Bede, Isidore of Seville, Augustine, and Dante, see R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1962) pp.16-19 and 55-56; for an exploration of the self-reflective function of the East in Anglo-Saxon literature, including texts such as the *Letter of Alexander* and *The Wonders of the East* (found in the same manuscript as *Beowulf*), see Heide Estes, 'Wonders and Wisdom: Anglo-Saxons and the East,' *English Studies,* 91.4, (2010) 360-73, and also Asa Simon Mittman and Susan M. Kim, *Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript* (Tempe: Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2013). The continued Western medieval fascination with the East is also witnessed in secular Middle English texts, such as *The Book of John Mandeville*, as well as Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* and *Man of Law's Tale*, the romances *Floris and Blanchefleur and Richard Coeur de Lyon,* and the Alexander romances.

[5] For context on the creation of a popular fiction of Islam in the aftermath of the first Crusade, see Southern, pp. 27-33; for the use of the popular narratives of Islam as justification for the First Crusade, see John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval Imagination* (New York: Columbia, 2002) pp. 135-169.

of the West.[6] This resulted in proliferation of popular literature comparing Western and Eastern characters and contexts,[7] from Biblical texts – such as the tale of the Queen of Sheba[8] – to travel writing,[9] to verse and prose romances.

Despite the cultural contact between East and West, however, medieval Christians writing about the 'Orient' were more interested in, and drew more upon, fantasy than fact. Although some of the seeds of the romantic narratives about the 'Orient' sprang from historical reality,[10] the truths buried in those narratives were so fabricated, embellished and transformed over time by the various impulses of romance – religious propaganda, entertainment, wish-fulfilment – that they bear almost no resemblance to any historical reality. When discussing the romance literature of the medieval West that deals with the cultures and peoples of the East, we therefore begin with the supposition that the 'Orient' found in these texts was not the product of experience, cultural exposure, or factual study, but rather of the fertile imaginations of historiographers, jongleurs, and romance writers in medieval France and England. Taken in this context, then, the East in general and the Saracen Princesses in particular become part of the ongoing rhetoric of difference, and the process of understanding identity and self-versus-other, products of imagination rather than representations of real Eastern cultures or peoples.[11] As such, the Saracen Princesses in the Middle English romances may become synecdoches for otherness in

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[6] Said discusses this phenomenon in *Orientalism* (see especially the Introduction, and pages 4-5)*;* see also Southern, pp. 2-14, and Jeffery Jerome Cohen's 'On Saracen Enjoyment: Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England,' *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 31.1 (2001) 113-46 (pp. 114-15), and Calkin, pp. 13-60.

[7] It is worth noting the importance of the portrait of the fictive East, and the amorous Saracen Princess in particular, for the Crusader's imagination. As Jacqueline de Weever explains in *Sheba's Daughters,* the Saracen Princesses' sexualized, desiring characterisation offered Crusaders an abstracted narrative of the military submission of the East to the West (pp. xxvi-xxix). See also Southern, pp. 27-33, Tolan, pp. 121-23 and 135-69, and also Kinoshita, pp. 265-66.

[8] Eastern peoples and locales were regular topics of ecclesiastical writing, not least because the Bible itself is, at its core, an 'Eastern' text. The Song of Songs and the narratives about the Queen of Sheba are examples of non-Western subjects in medieval religious writing (both dealing with 'Oriental' – and usually non-white – lovers). For more on the medieval fascination with both the Song of Songs, and the Queen of Sheba and the unorthodox model of female sovereignty she posed, see de Weever, p. xxi.

[9] The popularity of *The Book of John Mandeville,* for example – which, according to the TEAMS introduction, survived in approximately forty manuscripts – evidences the appeal that tales of the exotic East had for a medieval English audience. See the Introduction to *The Book of John Mandeville*, ed. by Tamarah Kohanski and C. David Benson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007) <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/kohanski-and-benson-the-book-of-john-mandeville-introduction> [accessed 20 January 2019].

[10] Namely the economic, cultural and military involvement of Western European Christendom with the Near and Middle East, and specifically the crusading narratives of Christian soldiers interacting with their Saracen adversaries.

[11] Edward Said describes this phenomenon of cultural imagining in *Orientalism*, pp. 1-9.

early fourteenth-century England, based on perceptions of culture, race, religion, and geographic origin.[12]

I.1 Romance and the Fantasy of the Saracen Princesses

The Middle English texts which include the Saracen Princess characters represent only a fraction of the articulation of the narrative trope of the amorous Eastern woman in medieval literature, and these texts were situated within an even wider literary context of popular imaginings of the West about the mysterious, seductively exotic East. By the time the fourteenth-century Middle English romance texts were being composed, the fantasy of the magical East was well-established in the romance literature of medieval Christian Europe.[13] An imagined Orient suited the needs of romance in that it functioned as an otherworld. Like the fairy otherworlds found elsewhere in romance, the East was a space of possibility, challenge, and difference in which the Western hero could be tested, often by supernatural means. The Orient also served as cultural fantasy, which romance luxuriously exploited, creating narratives of escapist indulgence, magic, and wonder. The Saracen Princess characters were particularly seductive expressions of that narrative impulse, and the magic and exoticism inherent in the medieval conception of the East was crystallized in the representation of the beautiful, magically and medically skilled princess.

If the East as a place of magic, adventure, and wonder was a well-established trope by the late Middle Ages, so too was the Saracen Princess herself. The Old French *chansons de geste* popularized the character and plot pattern, but the foreign woman who falls in love with the Western hero appeared in other genres and periods as well. For example, Orderic Vitalis's *Historia Ecclesiastica* includes the (fictionalized) narrative of a Crusader released from prison by an emir's daughter,

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[12] For an exploration diversity in late medieval England, see *Cultural Diversity in the British Middle Ages,* ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (New York: Palgrave, 2008); for an introduction to English identity and racial difference in the Middle Ages see Geraldine Heng, 'Jews, Saracens, "Black Men," Tartars: England in a World of Racial Difference,' *Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture c.1350–c.1500*, ed. by Peter Brown (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007) pp. 247-69.
[13] See Kieckhefer, p. 116-150. See also the introduction to Carol F. Heffernan's *The Orient in Chaucer and Medieval Romance* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2003) for the spread of oriental material in medieval romance literature; for more on the magical elements in these texts, see Heng, *Empire of Magic* (p. 156, pp. 288-89).

who eventually converts to Christianity.[14] Sources and analogues for that tale, often emphasising love over religious conversion, include Seneca's story of a pirate chief's daughter who frees her father's prisoner,[15] and tales from the Byzantine epic *Digenes Akritas,* in which multiple variants of the amorous-conversion narrative appear: an emir's daughter falls in love with an imprisoned Christian Greek warrior, and the hero's father converts to Christianity for love of his wife.[16] Even some of the tales from the *Arabian Nights* follow the same pattern, though inverted to suit the audience; in these stories amorous Christian women convert to Islam for love of Muslim men.[17] The Old French *chansons de geste* built upon these traditional motifs, emphasising both love and religious conversion as integral parts of the courtship between Western knight and Saracen Princess in such texts as *Prise d'Orange, Chanson de Roland,* and *Fierebras.*[18]

By the time the Middle English romances were composed in the early fourteenth century, the desiring Eastern woman was already a well-established and familiar trope. No longer written in the context of a society wrestling with the Crusades, the Middle English retellings of the Saracen Princess narratives instead used the familiar figure of the Eastern woman to work out issues of identity, otherness, and difference, questions which were becoming increasingly important on a broader scale as England engaged in a string of armed conflicts with France and Spain, and underwent a series of internal crises, ranging from civil war, to famine, to social upheaval.[19] The questions of what it meant to be 'English,' and, more

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[14] In Orderic Vitalis's *Historia Ecclesiastica,* Book 10, he tells of the Christian knight Bohemond who is imprisoned by a Turkish emir, then freed by the emir's daughter who eventually converts to Christianity. The facts of Bohemond's imprisonment and release are corroborated by contemporary sources, but the emir's daughter seems to be Orderic's creation – or perhaps Bohemond's own – and is not mentioned elsewhere: a historical fiction and early version of the amorous Saracen Princess. In 'The Enamoured Moslem Princess in Orderic Vital and the French Epic,' Warren draws connections between the text and classical works, such as Seneca's *Controversiae* (1.6) and the *Gesta Romanorum,* and contemporary *chansons de geste.* For the 'unhistorical' nature of this episode see Heng, *Empire of Magic,* p. 186, Benjamin Z. Kezdar, *Crusade and Mission: European Approaches Toward the Muslims* (Guilford: Princeton University Press, 1984) pp. 69-70; see also Metlitzki, pp. 160-64.

[15] As Warren suggests, useful sources for this tale-type include Seneca's *Controversiae* and the *Gesta Romanorum.* See 'Antonius The Emperor: How a Young Man was Released from Prison by the Daughter of a Pirate (LXVII)' in *Early English versions of the Gesta Romanorum,* ed. by Sidney J. H. Herrtage (London: N. Trübner & Co, 1879. Online edition from the University of Michigan) <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/Grom > [accessed 20 January 2019].

[16] Metlitzki offers a comprehensive summary of the text, including its similarity to Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* and similar narratives from *The Arabian Nights;* see pp. 138-149, and also Kezdar, p. 69-70.

[17] Metlitzki, p. 165.

[18] Warren, pp. 345-58, and Kinoshita, pp. 266-87.

[19] A useful source tracking the history of Edward II's reign and political upheaval in early fourteenth century England is Natalie Fryde's *The Tyranny and Fall of Edward II, 1321–1326* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); see especially Chapter 4, 'The Civil War,' pp. 37-57.

importantly, how one responded to a person – a woman – who was not, were underlying the representations of the Saracen Princess characters, the East in general, and *Bevis of Hampton*'s representations of the two.

II. *Bevis of Hampton* and the Saracen Princess in Middle English

Of the handful of Middle English romances that include the Saracen Princess trope, the stand-out is *Bevis of Hampton*. While other texts, notably *Octavian* and *The Sowdone of Babylone*, follow the same formulaic treatment of the Saracen Princess character as *Bevis of Hampton*, *Bevis* gained popularity and longevity unparalleled by the other texts. It survives in six different manuscripts, all noticeably different in style and expression, but all presumably deriving from the same lost Middle English retelling of the Anglo-Norman *Boeuve de Haumton*.[20] Most critical studies of the Middle English *Bevis* story have used the 'A' version, which is the most complete (and arguably 'best'), and the version I will be using for this study. It is found in the Auchinleck MS (NLS Advocates 19.2.1), compiled between 1331 and 1340 according to the National Library of Scotland, placing this version of *Bevis of Hampton* firmly in the context of the early fourteenth century.

While I will concentrate on just one of these six different extant versions of the narrative, the fact that so many exist allows the assumption that this was a popular narrative in fourteenth-century England. Given my concern with public opinion and the reception of texts in the context of the changing social atmosphere of the later Middle Ages, this popularity of the *Bevis* narrative justifies its prominence in my study. I will identify ways in which this text, and similar texts dealing with the Saracen Princess characters, are situated within the nexus of popular literature and opinion, and therefore how a fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English audience might have responded to this particular portrayal of unruly womanhood in the person of the Saracen Princess.

While focusing on the Saracen Princess in *Bevis*, I also will consider the similarities between her characterisation and that of the other Middle English Saracen

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[20] Details of dating, provenance, and source may be found both in Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury's Intoduction to their TEAMS edition of the text in *Four Romances of England*, and also in Alison Wiggins, 'Importance: The Auchinleck Manuscript' from *The Auchinleck Manuscript*, hosted by the National Library of Scotland's Archival Information website, ed. by David Burnley and Alison Wiggins (The National Library of Scotland's Catalogue, 2003) <http://auchinleck.nls.uk/> [accessed 19 January 2019].

Princesses, not only to emphasise the popularity of this trope, but also because the popular romances exist in overlapping intertextuality, and audiences familiar with one would likely have been familiar with – and might subconsciously made connections to – other similar texts. This idea of an intertextual romance corpus, and of audiences who would have been familiar with the narratives and the conventions of the genre (as introduced in the Introduction and the previous chapter) informs my study of the Saracen Princess characters.

The plotlines of *Bevis*, *Octavian* and *The Sowdone of Babylone* are different, but all three bear striking similarities in their portrayals of the Saracen Princess characters. *Octavian*, a family romance about the twin sons of a calumniated queen, follows the adventures of one of the sons, Florent, who is raised as a peasant but proves his mettle fighting the Saracens who attack Paris.[21] After killing the Saracen champion, a giant,[22] he takes the severed head of his foe to Marsabelle, the daughter of the Saracen emir. Undeterred by the grim gift, the maiden does not turn him away, and in a series of clandestine meetings the two fall in love. Marsabelle eventually helps Florent defeat her father, and in the end the pair are wed. *The Sowdone of Babylone* is one of the many medieval narratives following the exploits of Charlemagne and the 'twelve peers,'[23] who are taken captive in this narrative by the sultan Laban. In this narrative both of the sultan's children – his daughter Floripas and his son Ferumbras – betray him and defect to the side of the Christians. Floripas, through a blend of violence and manipulation, gains charge of the imprisoned knights, and offers her aid in return for the love of one of the Christians (Guy of Burgundy).[24] Both she and her brother aid in the fight against the Saracen forces, and convert to Christianity. Like *Octavian*, *Bevis of Hampton* begins with the hero dispossessed and disinherited, though in this case he is raised by the Saracens against whom he eventually fights. Josian, the Saracen Princess, aids Bevis in his recovery from battle-

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[21] All references are from the TEAMS edition of *Octavian*, from *Four Middle English Romances: Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour or Artois, Sir Tryamour,* ed. by Harriet Hudson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006) <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/hudson-four-middle-english-romances> [accessed 19 January 2019].

[22] Geraldine Heng mentions the frequent appearance of the Saracen giant in medieval romance, and the function of this exaggerated masculinity in the formation of English male identity, in 'Jews, Saracens, "Black Men," Tartars', pp. 259-60.

[23] All references to *The Sowdone of Babylone* are from the TEAMS edition of the text, titled *The Sultan of Babylon,* from *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances,* ed. by Alan Lupack (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1990) <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/lupack-three-middle-english-charlemagne-romances> [accessed 19 January 2019]. For further information on the medieval narratives of Charlemagne and the 'twelve peers,' see Alan Lupack's introduction.

[24] See Lupack's Introduction to *Sowdone,* in *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances*.

wounds, intercedes with her father for him, and pledges her love for him, which eventually he accepts, amidst further episodic adventures including his return to England, and eventual inheritance of both English and Eastern territories. Though distinct in many ways, there are several common threads between the Saracen Princess characters, including their aggressive amorousness, willing conversion, and their betrayal of their fathers.

Unlike *Octavian* and *The Sowdone of Babylone, Bevis* is not a part of the corpus of texts described as 'The Matter of France' or 'The Matter of Rome,' but is instead part of the 'Matter of England.' The hero is identified as from 'Ingelonde' (543) and this geographical specificity is part of my reason for focusing on this text. By identifying the hero as typically English and inherently attached to his home in the British Isles,[25] the politics of identity and difference which I will discuss in the text are intimately relatable to contemporary fourteenth-century English society in a way that similar issues in *Octavian* and *Sowdone* are not.

III. Josian: Dual Perspectives and the Response to Anxiety

The positivity or negativity of the representation the Saracen Princess Josian in *Bevis of Hampton* may be examined both through the narrative description of Josian and the distinct lens of the hero's own perceptions. Unusually for romance, the opinion of the protagonist about his would-be lover is at times quite negative, and his views seem to reflect the anxieties and uncertainties that a contemporary Christian audience might have had about a foreign, non-Christian princess. While the imperative of the text itself is to craft Josian into an acceptable love match for the Christian hero, Bevis's views articulate the underlying anxieties in the representation of this character. With the excuse of exoticism and the 'othering' of the Orient, *Bevis* gives the readers permission to take pleasure in the strangeness of the character, as the sorts of uncertainties a Christian audience might have had about the Saracen woman are first expressed, then gently, textually refuted, and the audience therefore set at ease.

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[25] In their introduction to the TEAMS edition of *Bevis,* Herzman, Drake and Salisbury discuss the definition of the grouping of romance texts designated as the 'Matter of England', defining them as "the non-Arthurian romances dealing largely with English subjects and locales. … reduced interest in the nuances of courtly behaviour …they pay more attention to the socio-political issues contained within folktale motifs". These issues of un-courtly and un-chivalric behaviour evidence themselves throughout the text, and *Bevis of Hampton* is obviously interested in issues of class, status, and upward mobility.

In part because of the multiple representations and perspectives on her character, the portrait of the Saracen Princess in *Bevis of Hampton* is developed more fully, with greater nuance and detail than the other Middle English Saracen Princesses, and thus the tension inherent in the character – between acceptability and exoticism, between dangerous 'other' and seductive similarity – is articulated with particular clarity. Despite these differences, however, Josian does bear striking resemblance to her sisters Floripas (in *The Sowdone of Babylone*) and Marsabelle (*Octavian*) in some key ways that distinguish the Saracen Princess characters from other Middle English romance love interests, and simultaneously categorize the Saracen Princess among them.

III.1 Nobility

We are introduced to Josian upon Bevis's arrival at her father's court in the Kingdom of 'Ermonie' (a reference to modern Armenia).[26] Unlike her father or any of the other 'painims' in the text, Josian's appearance is described with precision and at length, and in a manner that intentionally sets her up as a potential love-match for Bevis in its correspondence with romance norms and conventions of female beauty. From the moment of her introduction, Josian's rank and nobility are clearly established:

> A doughter a hadde of yong age,
> Josiane that maide het,
> Hire schon wer gold upon hire fet… (518-20)

Her introduction gives readers a sense of sumptuous wealth (her 'gold' shoes a typical signifier of exotic Eastern luxury)[27] and of her role in the dynastic succession of Ermonie. Her father is the 'king' of a vast territory, and he makes it clear that Josian is his heir ("…I nave non eir after me dai, /Boute Josian, this faire mai…" 555-56) – thus both by virtue of her role in the marriage economy of the landed gentry, and by her noble birth, she is coded by the text as an acceptable match for Bevis. Both Floripas (*Sowdone*) and Marsabelle (*Octavian*) have fathers who are Saracen 'sultans' ("sowdon" in *Octavian*, 784 and "soudon" in *Sowdone of Babylon*, 84) as well, and their nobility functions in the same way, making the women at least equal in birth – if not in religious identity – to their Christian lovers.

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[26] See Herzman, Drake and Salisbury's Introduction to the TEAMS edition, as well as Erwin, p. 370.
[27] Erwin, p. 373, Metlitzki, p. 167.

It was not uncommon in romances for women to be wealthier than their knights – in fact, it increased the sense of women as rewards and the courtly imperative to earn the lady's love was thus magnified by financial concerns. We see Josian filling this courtly role as a prize to be sought in her pursuit by Brademond, Yvor, and Miles.[28] Bevis, on the other hand, seems to be (unusually, for a romance hero) uncomfortable with the implication of a wealth- or class-difference between them. When, in the heat of an argument, Josian calls Bevis a 'cherl' (1117), his response is vehemently defensive:

> 'Damesele,' a seide, 'thow seist unright;
> Me fader was bothe erl and knight.
> How mighte ich thanne ben a cherl,
> Whan me fader was knight and erl?
> To other contré ich wile te:
> Scheltow me namore ise!' (1125-1130)

His protests about the nobility of his father, in their anxious repetition, followed so swiftly by his pronouncement that he will leave the country in order to remove himself from Josian's presence and her insulting insinuations, read as the product of insecurity and worry. As an exile from his country, without a father or inheritance, Bevis lashes out at the slightest insult to his honour, and their difference in class seems to be a particular source of anxiety for him. Unlike the courtly-love relationship, in which the knight humbles himself and protests his insignificance when compared with his superlatively noble lady, Bevis takes no pleasure in Josian's nobility, but instead must insist upon his own. We see the difference, then, between the aims of the romance (marriage of the hero to a wealthy noblewoman) and the worries of its hero, in his anxiety about his precarious status compared to that of the wealthy, royal Saracen Princess.

III.2 Ethnicity

More dramatic and, from a modern perspective, problematic than the construction of socio-political equality for princess and knight is the erasure of ethnic difference between the two would-be lovers. Josian's physical description mirrors the descriptions of Western women found elsewhere in Middle English romances, and the

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[28] Josian's suitors throughout the text, who pursue her for her wealth and position or as a prize to be won.

implication of the terms used – 'faire,' 'bright,' with a complexion like blood on snow – indicates her physical *whiteness*.

> So *faire* she was and *bright* of mod,
> *Ase snow* upon the *rede blod* -
> Wharto scholde that may discrive?
> Men wiste no *fairer* thing alive,
> So hende ne wel itaught;
> Boute of Cristene lawe she kouthe naught. (521-26)

Josian is not alone in this designated whiteness: both Floripas (*Sowdone*) and Marsabelle (*Octavian*) are described with the same conventional terminology as Josian in *Bevis*. The descriptive terms applied to the Saracen Princesses in all three texts – such as "faire,"[29] "fre"[30] and comparison of women's skin to snow (*Bevis*) or lilies (*Octavian,* 1478) – are all, word for word, the same descriptions used to praise Western women presented in Middle English romances as paragons of feminine beauty. As explained by Jacqueline de Weever in *Sheba's Daughters: Whitening and Demonising the Saracen Women in Medieval French Epic,*[31] the "fairness" can be read as assumed whiteness, something that is, of course, an intentional departure from reality. The Middle Eastern woman portrayed as 'faire' and white is a stark contrast to the 'black devils' found in many other medieval descriptions of Saracens,[32] and a clear erasure of the cultural and ethnic identity of the foreign princess. In medieval theories of ethnicity and difference, and especially in the articulation of those ideas in romance, the idea that one's external appearance reflected one's internal qualities of virtuousness or nobility played into representations of race. In Biblical exegesis, it was long since established that blackness equates to sinfulness. Portraying the Saracen Princess as the blonde, fair-skinned ideal of Western beauty therefore likely had as much to do with intentionally crafting her as morally virtuous as it was with erasing a potential for ethnic difference.[33] Casting the Saracen Princess as a physically

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[29] "Faire" is used twice in *Sowdone* (124, 1807), and seven times in *Octavian* (786, 1058, 1070, 1480, 1541, 1607, 1633).

[30] "Fre" is used once in *Sowdone* (1879), and four times in *Octavian* (784, 1064, 1070, 1510).

[31] See the opening chapters of de Weever's work for a powerful analysis of the function of race, power, and desire in the construction of the Saracen Princess characters.

[32] De Weever explores the gendered articulation of this narrative pattern in depth in her third chapter (pp. 53-109). 'Black Saracen devils' are common in romance, evidenced in texts such as *Richard Coeur de Leon*; throughout the genre blackness is associated with religious or cultural difference. See Heng, 'Jews, Saracens, "Black Men," Tartars', especially pp. 260-62.

[33] De Weever's introduction addresses this tension, and Gregory of Elvira's commentary on the Song of Songs which, famously, features a non-white lover asking, "How can she be black if she is beautiful?" (p. xiii). The answer, of course, is that blackness is incompatible with beauty and moral goodness in the medieval Christian context. Discussing the universal whiteness of love interests in romance, she observes that "poetic doctrine becomes complicitous with biases that define as inferior

Caucasian, typically Western idealized beauty served to render her more acceptable both on an ethnic and cultural level.[34]

Even as we are given the description of Josian's (Westernised) beauty, we are reminded of the fact that "of Cristene lawe she kouthe naught" (526) – and thus her Saracen nature is emphasised, creating a sense of tension between the familiar description and the non-Christian identity of the maiden. Josian's 'fairness' and 'bright' complexion position her within the realm of acceptability, even while her Saracen identity, and her lack of knowledge of "Cristene lawe" remind readers of her unattainableness and difference. Again, the narrative provides us with two different views of Josian – one in which she mirrors Western romance heroines, and the other which reminds us of her otherness. By somehow encompassing both, we see the Saracen Princess as walking an uneasy line between the acceptable and the unacceptable in romance.

III.3 Female Desire

As the authors of these texts wrote the ethnic difference out of their heroines, they also imbued them with an innate desire for Christianity – or at least for Christian men. In scenes that range from "a parody of courtly love"[35] to "chivalric… sudden, consuming, private,"[36] the Saracen Princesses actively pursue romantic relationships with Christian knights. In *Sowdone of Babylone*, Floripas tells one of the prisoners that despite the fact that she has never seen him, she has loved Guy of Burgundy "many a day" (1891) and that it is because of that love that she has thus far helped the Peers. She does not wait for Guy to fall in love with her, however, but bluntly threatens to keep them all imprisoned if he withholds his affections: "And but he wole graunte me his love / of you askape none here…" (1899-1900). The princess Marsabelle in *Octavian* does not pursue her lover with the same tenacity, but there is a presumption of instant desire and affection between the two (1055-75). When Florent bursts into her chambers bearing the severed head of her erstwhile fiancé, the giant Arageous, and making morbid jokes about how her intended was keeping his word to return, she joins in, remarking, "He was ay trewe of his hete – / When he the kynges

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those who are different in race and religion…" (p. xviii). See also Heng, 'Jews, Saracens, "Black Men," Tartars', p. 261.
[34] See de Weever, p. xviii.
[35] Lupack, TEAMS introduction to *Sowdone of Babylone*.
[36] Hudson, TEAMS introduction to *Octavian*.

hevede myght not get, / His owen he hase me sende" (1067-69) and then offers Florent the reward – kisses – she had promised the giant before the battle. In both of these cases, the Saracen Princesses seem to demonstrate willing sexuality and a particularly aggressive desire for Christian knights.

As Judith Weiss argues,[37] there was a significant precedence for the aggressively amorous woman in the earlier Old French romance tradition, which was acceptable because the hero was 'ennobled' by the attentions of the virtuous lady. That aggressive desire is seen less frequently, and viewed with more suspicion, in the Middle English romances, though the trope persisted. The active sexual desire of the Saracen Princesses therefore fits within a spectrum of behaviour for women in romance that is tantalizingly erotic, and only just acceptable. Additionally, like so much of the text, we see the wooing woman represented through multiple lenses, including both Josian's own perspective and inner turmoil, and the anxieties Bevis feels about their interactions. Because of the expressed uncertainties and anxieties from Bevis, it is possible that any hesitation the audience might have felt at taking pleasure in this representation of erotic feminine desire might be erased as the hero's own uncertainties are overcome.

Josian actively pursues her relationship with Bevis, physically positioning herself in Bevis's private space,[38] actively gazing upon him (763-70),[39] initiating their use of love-terms (707), and beginning their physical relationship (708), all of which occurs without preamble or explanation beforehand from the narrator. That Josian is destined to fall in love with Bevis appears to be a given – in a throwaway comment that passes almost unnoticed, the text informs us of the love the 'maide' has for Bevis, but it seems almost a footnote compared with the love he inspires in her father – and in fact, in everyone who so much as sees him:

> The king him lovede also is brother,
> And the maide that was so sligh.
> So dede everi man that him sigh. (578-80)

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[37] Weiss, 'The Wooing Woman in Anglo-Norman Romance,' pp. 149-61.

[38] The romance trope of the wooing woman's entrance into the bedchamber of the passive love-object marks an aggressive and active brand of femininity that threatens to destabilise the chivalric identity of the pursued knight. We see this in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* in Morgan's intrusion into Lancelot's spaces as he sleeps in Malory's *Morte Darthur,* and other contemporaneous romance texts. For more on the ways female desire was figured as both seductive and dangerous, see Roberta L. Krueger, 'Questions of Gender in Old French Courtly Romance,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance,* ed. by Krueger, pp. 132–49; see also Weiss.

[39] Gazing is a particularly powerful amorous interaction in romance; Anna Caughey suggests the female gaze in particular is characterized as both laudable and 'destabilising' in '"Ladyes war at thare avowing": The Female Gaze in Late-Medieval Scottish Romance' in *Medieval Romance and Material Culture,* ed. by Nicholas Perkins (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2015) pp. 91-110 (p. 108).

This is the only mention of Josian's affection for Bevis before she calls him her lover, and it is remarkably brief. It seems an insufficiently detailed introduction to the primary romantic relationship of the narrative, unless we consider it within the context of the amorous Saracen Princess literary tradition. In *all* such narratives, beautiful Saracen Princesses desire Christian knights. In this intertextual context, therefore, in which the text is informed by the conventions of the genre, Josian's eventual declaration of affection for Bevis seems unsurprising, and its lack of preamble neither problematic nor even atypical.

Josian first demonstrates her affection for Bevis at a particularly fraught moment in the text. She comes to Bevis's room to calm him after he engaged in a religiously-inspired bloodbath in which he slaughtered her father's men and earned the displeasure of the sultan. Josian herself seems unconcerned by this violence, however, and in an attempt to sooth Bevis, she addresses him as her "lemman," and kisses him "bothe moth and chin / And yaf him confort gode afin" (707, 709-10). This sudden affectionate, intimate gesture, and the amorously inflected title 'lemman' both may surprise a modern audience since no prior suggestion of a relationship between Bevis and Josian had been made. It seems, however, that the tradition of the aggressively amorous Saracen maiden actively pursuing her beloved Christian knight was so well established that it hardly needed to be explicitly stated in *Bevis*. This sense of tradition and expectedness, even of narrative destiny, adds to the romance's construction of Josian as an appropriate love interest for Bevis, and someone whom a medieval audience would have readily accepted as such.

Despite the positive outcome the text anticipates for their relationship, however, Bevis himself repeatedly expresses doubt and negative feelings about Josian and their romantic relationship – quite unlike the courtly narratives that even popular romances so often parroted, in which deep and ennobling love for the idealized lady was a common theme. Even before their first real textual interaction, Bevis espouses a negative opinion of Josian. He refers to her as a 'hethene hounde' (692), a particularly objectionable phrase, especially shocking in a corpus of literature that, while never feminist, explicitly espouses ideals of honouring and praising women and female virtue. Bevis also twice rejects Josian's frankly sexual advances (1096-98 and 1105-

1110)[40] which sends her into a storm of cursing and heartbreak, and then pretends to be asleep when she comes to his chambers to make amends. It is not until "She fel adoun and wep wel sore" and has promised "Min false godes al forsake /And Cristendom for thee love take!" (1190, 1195-96) that he at last relents and accepts her as his lover.

This lengthy process of uncertainty and rejection (not to mention downright bigotry and slander) may be read as an expression of the anxieties and censorious worries a medieval English audience might have had about the representation of a sexually aggressive, desiring, pagan noblewoman. By articulating that tension, between desire on the one hand and respectable concern on the other, the narrative permits the audience to take pleasure in the tantalizing representation of desiring femininity, and perhaps even criticize Bevis for his inability to accept the 'ennobling' love of a good woman.[41]

III.4 Intercession, Counsel

One of the characteristic ways the Saracen Princesses demonstrate their authority and power is through the practice of intercession and counsel. Intercession was seen as an appropriate way for women to influence powerful men, as it was persuasive rather than active. The role of intercessor could also be disruptively potent, as we shall see, and have potentially destabilising effects on masculine authority. Josian performs the role of the mediating intercessor at the same time as she instigates her romantic relationship with Bevis. She comes to Bevis's chambers after negotiating with her father, who is incensed at the wanton slaughter of his men. With little provocation and thinly excused bloodlust ('self-defence'), Bevis had, in the space of an hour, brutally butchered fifty of the king's men in a strange defence of his pride and his (newfound)

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[40] Josian initially employs typical romance language (albeit unusual in its frankly sexual nature) when she claims that she will die if Bevis refuses to have sex with her: "…Boute thow me love, icham dede, /And boute thow with me do thee wille." / "For Gode," queth Beves, "that ich do nelle!" (1096-98). Later, Josian makes clear that sleeping with Bevis – explicitly, having him as her lover, having his "naked" body, and having him 'do his will' with her – means more to her than gold or riches. Again, Bevis replies, "For Gode,… that I do nelle!" (1106-1110)

[41] Erwin discusses this tension between Bevis's anxieties and the accepted maxim that a woman's love increased knightly worth (p. 376). Caughey (pp. 100-101) explains the female gaze would "increase military power" and "provide a strong impetus to success," creating further pressure for Bevis to conform to the romance structure of love and marriage.

faith.[42] The king is, perhaps reasonably, ready to have Bevis executed for his excessively violent behaviour (651-54). Bevis is equally intransigent, fired with his newfound religious zeal and ready to call out – or kill – any whom he recognises as 'panims.' This includes his would-be-lover Josian, whom he wrathfully terms a "hethene hounde" (692). It is Josian's duty to bridge the divide between the sultan and his Christian ward, a feat which she achieves by appealing to the affections and religious beliefs of both of the men in turn, adeptly utilising her typically feminine skills of intercession and merciful negotiation to maintain peace. She approaches her father first, in an exchange that follows the traditional principles of feminine appeal for mercy:

> "Sire, ich wot wel in me thought,
> That thine men ne slough he nought,
> Be *Mahoun ne be Tervagaunt*,
> Boute hit were himself defendaunt!
> Ac, fader," she saide, "be me red,
> Er thow do Beves to ded,
> Ich praie, sire, *for love o me*,
> Do bringe that child before thee!
> Whan the child, that is so bold,
> His owene tale hath itolde,
> And thow wite the soth, aplight,
> Who hath the wrong, who hath right,
> Yef him his dom, that he schel have,
> Whather thow wilt him slen or save!" (657-70)

Josian's speech is full of terms for thought, knowledge, and rationality, suggesting it would be the *wise* thing to suspend judgement on Bevis, but in addition to her reasoned arguments she also appeals to her father's faith. She adjures him by "Mahoun" and "Tervagaunt" – the appellations used in Middle English romance to designate imagined Muslim deities.[43] She also implores to him to follow due course of law "for love o me," making an emotional appeal. As Calkin notes, she uses the method most likely to convince her father to listen to her, by playing upon his identity as a just ruler (by reminding him of the law and just process), his religious convictions

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[42] For further analysis of this episode, and the role of religious violence in Bevis's self-created identity, see Erwin, p. 375. This moment clearly exhibits an element of the strange unchivalrousness that persists throughout *Bevis;* Metlitzki suggests this is because *Bevis* and other Middle English romances about the East "are essentially vehicles of fanatical propaganda in which the moral idea of chivalry is subservient to the requirements of religion, politics, and ideology. Pagans are wrong and Christians are right whatever they do. The ideal held up to the audience is not courtly love or perfect knighthood. It is the triumph of Christianity over Islam" (pp. 160-61).

[43] For the development of these particular terms medieval Western authors used to designate 'Saracen' deities, see Southern, p. 32.

(by invoking their deities), and his emotions (his love for her).[44] Her importance and influence in the court of Ermonie is witnessed in the king's ready acceptance of her advice – "Ase thow havest seid, so it schel be!" (672).

Her appeal to Bevis is equally successful. Despite the fact that he initially threatens violence and rejects her overtures when they are delivered by intermediaries, when she comes to him in person he relents, accepts her loving attentions, and eventually goes to make peace with her father. The two-fold argument Josian makes with Bevis mirrors the strategies she employed in convincing her father to listen to her: she appeals to the appropriate deity ("For Godes love…" 708) and his emotions, extending the promise of her love. For Bevis, it is not merely her love but also her body that she uses in her negotiations. With her kisses, the physical 'confort' and 'solaste' (710-11) she gives him, her medical care for his body and the tantalizing promise of access to her own, Josian's appeal could not have been made effectively via messenger – the female body interacting with the hero's body presents the most powerful argument.

The role of the merciful intercessor who, without having official authority in her own right yet commands remarkable influence and (soft) power, is seen as inherently feminine and typical of Middle English romances.[45] Although Josian is not a dramatic wailing woman like the black-clothed widows or plaintive wives in Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale,'[46] nor a pregnant queen as in Froissart's (largely fictionalized) account of Philippa of Hainault's acts of intercession,[47] the changing terms and careful performance Josian employs in her various appeals highlight the embodied, feminine, and occasionally sexual nature of the role, and her particular ability to perform it.[48] Josian's successful intercession demonstrates her worthiness as a noble or royal consort and underlines her position as a sultan's daughter and heir, thereby emphasising her appropriateness as Bevis's romantic partner.

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[44] Calkin, p. 69.

[45] Examples of female intercession in Middle English romances include the pregnant queen in *Athelston*, the wailing widows and weeping women in Chaucer's 'The Knight's Tale,' and patient Griselda in 'The Clerk's Tale,' in *The Riverside Chaucer,* ed. by Benson, pp. 37-66 and pp. 138-53. See Heng's discussion of Griselda and intercession in *Empire of Magic* (pp. 218-20); for historical context, see also Liza Benz St. John, *Three Medieval Queens* (New York: Palgrave, 2012) pp. 12-13.

[46] Intercession is described twice in 'The Knight's Tale.' both in the opening scene (ll. 899-902) and again in the appeals of Hyppolyta and Emelye (ll. 1756-60).

[47] See St. John, pp. 53-54, and Calkin, p. 67, for a brief account of Froissart's embellishment in his version of events in the siege of Calais in 1347, in which he described Queen Philippa as 'heavily pregnant,' despite the birth dates of her children making that an impossibility. The embodied, and female, nature of intercession is thus exaggerated in his account, reflecting the image of the pregnant queen seen in romances such as *Athelston.*

[48] St. John, p. 13.

It is worth noting that Josian performs this mediation role so well that it could be termed 'counsel' rather than 'intercession,' suggesting a more authoritative, active advisory capacity. Counsel was not seen as specifically feminine the way intercession was, but women's counsel nevertheless is frequently evidenced in romance as well as medieval history, in narratives of wives counselling their husbands or mothers instructing their sons.[49] Therefore, while Josian's political advice to her father ("be me red…" 661) may be read as notably direct, commanding, and authoritative, we should be aware that the princess-as-counsellor was not outwith the bounds of acceptability in romance, or historical reality. The narrative trope of the Saracen Princess as learned counsellor or advisor, rather than merely pleading intercessor, is even more overtly articulated in some of the other Middle English romances. In *The Sowdone of Babylone,* for example, Floripas explicitly counsels her father on at least three separate occasions, using language of authority: "My fader so dereworth and dere, / Ye shulle be *avysed* of this cas…" (1512-13), "Wherefore I *counsaile* you, my fader dere…" (1519) and "My derworth fadir dere, / By my *counsaile* ye shal not so…" (1840-41). Her father responds, "A, Floripp, i-blessed thou bee, / Thy counsaile is goode at need" (1527-28). The joke for the audience, of course, is that her counsel is *not* good, and she is constantly manipulating her father to serve her own ends. Her counsel demonstrates her disloyalty to her family, and her willingness to lie and behave dishonourably to get what she wants. In acting as counsellor, Floripas empowers herself, and destabilises her father's authority. She demonstrates that she is untrustworthy, and unconfined by the usual structures of loyalty, and thus threatening even to the Christian men she pursues. Although Josian's counsel is benevolent and seemingly honest, unlike Floripas's manipulations, the intertextual proximity of the two Saracen Princesses may suggest a reading of Josian's role as counsellor as potentially duplicitous, dishonourable, and self-serving (rather than the honourable duty of a good daughter and virtuous maiden), and therefore threatening to the stability of the patriarchal authorities with whom she negotiates.

We see, therefore, another example of the Saracen Princess at once performing the role of a good woman – through intercession and merciful mediation – and

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[49] The idea of women's counsel will be explored further in the following chapter. For some examples of women's counsel in the Middle Ages see Albrecht Classen, *The Power of a Woman's Voice in Medieval and Early Modern Literatures* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007) pp. 72-73, and Rosemarie Deist, *Gender and Power: Counsellors and their Masters in Antiquity and Medieval Courtly Romance* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 2003) p. 230. See also Jennifer Summit, 'Women and Authorship' in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing,* ed. by Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp. 91-108.

simultaneously threatening the stability of patriarchal authority by becoming too powerful, too authoritative. In reading these characters intertextually, we are presented both with the benign version of the Saracen Princess, and the potentially threatening and subversive one.

III.5 The Scientific East

Josian continues to demonstrate her intelligence, and also her appropriateness as a potential wife, with her medical attentions to Bevis's wounds.

> In to chaumber she gan him take
> And riche bathes she let him make,
> That withinne a lite stoned
> He was bothe hol and sonde.
> Thanne was he ase fresch to fight,
> So was the faukoun to the flight. (731-36)

Her medical abilities and apparent training evoke the traditional images of female healers seen elsewhere in romance[50] including such texts as *Sir Tristrem*, Malory's 'Tale of Sir Tristram,' *Partonope of Blois*, and vitae of Mary and female saints as well. Healing women were a persistent and commonplace theme in romance, despite potential tensions around issues of authority, professionalism, and intent, which the fantastical nature of romance literature regularly dispelled (as seen in the previous chapter) – and which the exotic East as a setting made still more removed from reality.

We also see Josian's medical abilities and skills with herbs later in the text with her near-miraculous use of herbal treatments to utterly transform her appearance, something explicitly credited to her Saracen education:

> While she was in Ermonie,
> Bothe fysik and sirgirie
> She hadde lerned of meisters grete
> Of Boloyne the gras and of Tulete,
> That she knew erbes mani and fale,
> To make bothe boute and bale.
> On she tok up of the grounde,
> That was an erbe of meche mounde,
> To make a man in semlaunt there,
> A foule mesel also if a were. (3671-80)

Josian's education is evidenced in her ability to recognise the potent herb, and to use it to transform her appearance into that of a leper or 'mesel' – a feat suggesting the

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[50] For more on healing women in romance, see previous chapter.

overlap of science and 'natural magic.' These instances articulate a Western medieval perception of the Arabic East as a place of knowledge and learning, and in crediting Josian's education to masters from Bologna and Toulouse, cities known for their medical schools, the narrative earmarks Josian's medical abilities as professional and scientific. Because of the preservation of Greek science and philosophy in the Arabic world throughout the Late Antique and early medieval periods,[51] and because of the tradition of rigorous education in these works which produced scientific and medical texts that would shape medieval medicine,[52] the medieval East was rightly viewed by the medieval West as a locus of scientific knowledge. Josian's position within the 'Learned East' where wonders abound may mean that the text does not demand that its audience confront the potentially problematic undertones of the highly educated, skilful Saracen maiden who can so radically (and unpleasantly) transform her appearance. That she is "wel itaught" is expected within the narrative conventions of the genre, and this broad and scientific education, available even for a woman, would have fed into the audience's perceptions of the East as a place of wonders and unusual learning.

Josian's medical-magical skills lie at the intersection of the ideas of a wondrous, exotic Orient, and of the Learned East – an overlapping set of cultural imaginings. Any potential underlying anxieties about the representation of a highly skilled, professionally-trained woman are thoroughly assuaged by the explanation of the learned, and also wondrous and exotic, East. Josian 'deploys'[53] her medical skills in service of the hero, and eventually, in her use of the transformative herbs, to preserve her chastity and maintain her role as a laudable wife. Because of these positive intentions, the text insists that despite her impressive power Josian remains an exotic but conventionally acceptable and 'good' female character.

IV. Conversion and Unstable Identity

We have seen, therefore, that throughout the early stages of this text, Josian is crafted as an appropriate romantic match for Bevis. She meets the romance criteria of nobility

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[51] Kieckhefer, pp. 116-150, and Metlitzki, pp. 13-16.
[52] See Metlitzki, pp. 13-16, for an overview of the Western perception of Middle Eastern scientific knowledge and medicine, including the work of scholars such as Rhases, Adelard, and others.
[53] Calkin discusses the created nature of Josian's identity, and her intentional 'deployment' of conventional aspects of Christian femininity (pp. 66-92).

and beauty, in addition to which she offers her diplomatic connections, her personal wealth and inherited kingdom, and her impressive intellectual and practical abilities. Perhaps we might reasonably state that in fact, insofar as literary characters may be assumed to have agency at all, Josian *crafts herself* – she represents herself, expresses herself and behaves toward Bevis, her father, and other men (including Miles, Ascopard and Yvor) in a way that intentionally creates a persona of appropriateness and acceptability.[54] She chooses her lover, then actively pursues a relationship with him, and in order to do so forges a new identity for herself, as the virgin Christian-to-be, noble, beneficent, and desirable.

IV.1 Willed Conversion

It is this very process of identity-shaping that might be read as casting doubt on Josian as a character and an appropriately Christian marital partner for Bevis.[55] We see evidence of Josian's unstable, created identity in the process of her conversion, over several interactions and conversations with Bevis. In her negotiations with Bevis and her father, she changes her invocation of deities in the space of a handful of lines, appealing to her father "Be Mahoun ne be Tervagaunt" (659), underlining their cultural and personal bonds, while to Bevis she pleads "for Godes love" (708), reminding him of his newfound love of the Christian God, and simultaneously inviting him to associate *her* with that religious love. This momentary adoption of Christian language does not indicate an immediate conversion, however, and when bemoaning her lovesickness shortly thereafter Josian exclaims "O Mahoun!" (891). Clearly despite her earlier invocation of the Christian God, her automatic appeal for assistance is to the 'Saracen' deities. Shortly thereafter, attempting to seduce Bevis, she tries to use Christian terminology as part of the argument in her favour:

> "Merci," she seide, "yet with than
> Ichavede thee lever to me lemman,
> Thee bodi in thee scherte naked,
> Than al the gold, that Crist hath maked,
> And thow wost with me do thee wille!" (1105-09)

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[54] See Calkin, pp. 66-92, and Erwin, pp. 371-86, for the transformative and created nature of Josian's identity.

[55] Both Erwin and Calkin use the postcolonial philosopher Homi Bhabha's work on identity and mimicry to explore the function of Josian's created identity, and conversion. Erwin hypotheses that like colonized peoples who attempt to 'self-shape' and assume the identity or rhetoric of the colonizer but – critically – never quite succeed, so Josian attempts to assume a Christian identity, but through Bevis's sustained anxieties we know she fails (Erwin, p. 371). Calkin looks at Josian's identity performance as a form of subversion as she uses Christian norms to fulfill her own ends, as Bhabha theorized indigenous people under colonial rule would have done (Calkin, p. 74).

The implication is that she has a partial understanding of Bevis's impulses and desires, but does not know enough about the Christian faith to use it effectively to her advantage – she combines her sensuous and embodied language of seduction with images of avarice. The reference to Christ being the source of the aforementioned wealth may be read as a desperate bid for Bevis's approval – but one which fails. Bevis refuses to accept Josian's offer of love (and, implicitly, sexual intimacy) because of the pagan and, inherently, threateningly sinful implications of the scene, at least from his perspective. However, the alternative lens the text provides – that of the ennobling quality of a virtuous woman's love – may make Bevis's rejection of Josian an object of censure, or even emasculation. Josian certainly responds with feeling, exclaiming, "Mahoun thee yeve tene and wrake!" (1118) and "Mahoun yeve thee tene and care!" (1124). When angered, Josian falls back upon her familiar religious appeals to 'Mahoun.' Throughout the first half of the text, then, we see Josian using and misusing both Christian *and* Saracen terms, adopting or shedding identities as she chooses, while Bevis responds with uncertainty.

When the moment of clear, vocalized conversion arrives, it stems not from religious conviction, but from a series of conscious decisions on Josian's part.

> "Forghem me, that ichave misede,
> And ich wile right now to mede
> Min false godes al forsake
> And Cristendom for thee love take!"
> "In that maner," queth the knight,
> "I graunte thee, me swete wight!"
> And kiste hire at that cordement. (1193-99)

This is not so much a moment of religious conviction or recognising the 'true faith' as it is a bargaining tool – *if* you will forgive me and love me, *then* I will convert for you. The author gives us no sense that Josian believes in the core tenets of Christianity, but rather that her consuming love for Bevis is more important than anything else. This is something we see still more dramatically in some of the other Saracen Princesses' narratives. In the *Sowdone of Babylone*, Floripas bargains for the love of Guy of Burgundy, frankly threatening the Peers:

> For his love I do alle that I maye
> To chere you with dede and thought.
> For his love wille I cristenede be
> And lefe Mahoundes laye…
> And but he wole graunte me his love,
> Of you askape shalle none here.

By Him that is almyghty above,
Ye shalle abye it ellis ful dere. (1893-1902)

The conversion is almost a footnote in the negotiation processes. Much more to the point, Floripas is in a position to put the lives of all the Peers at risk unless Guy yields to her love. Guy is initially unwilling to do so, as is Bevis (above), but under pressure from his companions he relents. Though Josian does not commit or threaten murder in pursuit of her lover as Floripas does, the same sense of conversion as one part of an exchange appears in her promise to adopt the Christian faith as it does in *The Sowdone of Babylone*, rendering her eventual Christianity a willed identity rather than arising from some inborn faith or goodness.

In case the promise of conversion was not tenuous enough, Josian later uses the same language to describe the Christian God as she had used to denounce her Saracen ones, saying in rage, "That ilche God, that thow of speke, / He is fals and thow ert eke!" (2107-08). Although her belief that Bevis has betrayed her proves unfounded and thus her acceptance of the Christian God is restored, the lingering idea is that Josian's Christianity is unstable, and depends not upon a firm basis of faith and conviction, but rather on her choices to assume a Christian identity to pursue her own ends. Thus, that identity could be subject to change once again should she so desire.[56] The control Josian exhibits over her identity and her ability to manipulate it at will makes her identity unstable and thus unpredictable and threatening.

IV.2 Ineffectual Conversion

Adding to the reader's impression of incomplete conversion and Josian's mere mimicry of a Christian identity is the fact that even after her baptism and (Christian) marriage, Josian's behaviour still seems to fit the expectations of a Saracen Princess, rather than those of a demure Christian wife. As an exotic Saracen Princess, Josian's medical and magical education, her use of trickery and deceit as well as persuasive negotiation, her overt seductiveness, and her violence and cunning in escaping her would-be suitors all presumably stem from her identity as part of the Eastern Saracen context. One would therefore reasonably assume that in the process of assimilation and conversion (the assumption of an identity deemed acceptable for a noblewoman

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[56] For more on the changeability – and erotics – of conversion, see Heng, *Empire of Magic*, p. 187; for more on conversion for love rather than faith see also de Weever, pp. xvi.

in Western Christian society) the vestiges of Saracen exoticism and difference would be excised from Josian's character. However, this is not the case.

She does initially appear to have changed, as seen when Bevis departs to win back his lands and inheritance, and Josian asks him, "Who schel me than wisse and rede?" (2942). This suggests that she now defers to men's wisdom and advice, rather than offering her own. This state of dependence and deference is short-lived, however. Even after her conversion and baptism (2590), Josian remains associated with seduction and desire, and must resort to the sorts of deceit, violence and manipulation common in depictions of the Saracen Princesses. In Bevis's absence, she is carried off by a knight, Miles, who forces her to marry him. She uses her expert manipulation and trickery to outwit her would-be-husband/rapist, playing the demure, shy maiden to get him to dismiss his retainers and leave them in privacy while the marriage is to be consummated, protesting that "wimmen beth schamfast" if observed *in flagrante* (3201). Once they are alone, she then handily strangles him with his bedclothes (3220). Assuming a façade of maidenly modesty when it fits her needs, using violence and deceit, and still an irresistible object of male lust: Josian's Christianity has not altered the key aspects of her Saracen Princess identity.

Even after Josian has married Bevis (3477) and given birth to their twin sons (3640) – the most traditional and acceptable thing a romance heroine can do – Josian still does not conform to the stereotypical standards of (Western, Christian) female behaviour. She is still an object of desire, and still uses deceit and manipulation and her extraordinary Saracen education to achieve her ends. Immediately after giving birth and still weak from labour, Josian is attacked by Bevis's enemies who bind her and beat her with their swords before carrying her off to her one-time husband Yvor. Requesting privacy from her kidnappers in a pretence of feminine modesty, to 'do her needs' away from their gaze (3659), she again manages to ensure her freedom. She uses the opportunity to hideously transform her appearance, using skills which, as previously discussed, she had learned as part of her specifically Saracen education in herbs, natural magic, and 'fysik and sirgirie' (3671-3680). This education taught her to recognise the herb which makes her appear like a leper or a 'foule mesel.' She eats the herb, and the transformation is so complete that her kidnapper Yvor does not initially recognise her – despite the fact that they were, earlier in the text, married for *seven years* – thus witnessing the efficacy of her herbal knowledge and Saracen education.

No longer the object of Yvor's lust, Josian must support herself while making her way back to Bevis's side, and again using the skills from her Saracen upbringing, she earns money by playing her fiddle in market squares to provide for herself and her retainer. Her educational origins are once again credited directly:

> While Josian was in Ermonie,
> She hadde lerned of minstralcie,
> Upon a fithele for to play
> Staumpes, notes, garibles gay… (3905-08)

The suggestion that Josian is so resourceful that, in a pinch, she takes up a temporary music career to support herself, is again evidence of the competence and self-reliance of the Saracen Princess characters. Between this public professional role as a musician, her constant pursuit by other men (Yvor and Miles), her use of trickery, violence, and powerful herbs to escape their advances, we see Josian persisting in her role as the powerful, self-possessed Saracen Princess, despite her conversion – making that conversion itself unstable and ineffectual.

There seem, therefore, to be potential anxieties about identity and otherness surrounding Josian's characterisation and conversion process. Her willed adoption of new identities, and intentional deployment of those identities when it suits her purpose, make her Christianity potentially temporary, and changeable.[57] Added to that, we see Josian's conversion as incomplete, for even after her baptism she continues to behave in ways that are acceptable *only* for a Saracen other, not a Christian woman, at least by the standards of a traditional medieval society – or, it seems, by Bevis himself.[58] For while the romance itself seems to revel in the exaggerated violence and seductiveness of both hero and heroine, allowing the audience to take pleasure in the sex and gore, the hero himself is much less open-minded. This is evidenced in Bevis' response to the episode with the lions just prior to Josian's conversion, when, because of her status as a king's daughter and a virgin (2390-94) the two ferocious lions cannot harm Josian, but attack Bevis instead. Josian offers to hold back one of the beasts while Bevis fights the other, and he chastises her, saying:

> "Dame, forsoth, ywys,
> I myght yelp of lytel prys,
> There I had a lyon quelde,

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[57] For more on anxieties about the permanence of conversion, see Heng, pp. 186-88, Metlitzki, p. 138, de Weever, p. xvi; see also Erwin, pp. 371-75, and her discussion of the performance of male identity as stable, versus female identity as fluid.

[58] For more on this theme see Erwin, pp. 381-83.

> The while a woman another helde!
> Thow shalt never umbraide me,
> When thou comest hoom to my contré:
> But thou let hem goo both twoo,
> Have good day, fro thee I goo!'' (2412-20)

Bevis feels his masculinity and his reputation at home in England will be compromised if a woman helps him defeat the lions, and he imagines her reproaching ('umbraide'-ing) him for his less than perfect prowess. This is a grave matter – serious enough that he promises to abandon her unless she releases the lions to let him demonstrate his manly strength. Josian immediately proves that she has not yet learned to be properly obedient, for although she listens to Bevis initially, shortly thereafter it appears Bevis has been mortally wounded, and she again interferes.

> Anon she hente that lioun:
> Beves bad hire go sitte adoun,
> And swor be God in Trinité,
> Boute she lete that lioun be,
> A wolde hire sle in that destresse
> Ase fain ase the liounesse.   (2473-79)

We see here the hierarchy of what Bevis values: his reputation is clearly more important than Josian. The gravity of the peril she poses to his pride, his identity, and his reputation is witnessed in Bevis's statement that he would as soon kill her as the lioness, if she continues to intervene in his display of masculine prowess. This also demonstrates the extraordinary (and extraordinarily unpleasant) nature of their relationship, and of Bevis's deep anxieties about Josian's ability to behave as he believes a good woman should.[59] Although this episode occurs before Josian's conversion, Bevis's anxieties persist long after she has converted. We may therefore read her character as uncertain or ambiguous, despite the way the text overtly demonstrates her appropriateness as Bevis's partner. The audience of the text may not necessarily share Bevis's views, and her otherness is figured as attractive, but its power is sufficient to cause the hero deep unease. The patterns of authority, power, and exotic allure continue, as we have seen, after the moment of her conversion throughout the rest of the text, continually reasserting her otherness and Easternness in the minds of the readers.

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[59] Erwin, pp. 379-86.

V. Embracing Both Worlds: Accepting Josian's Ambiguity

We are left with a portrait of Josian as both an acceptable romance heroine, and an ambiguous Saracen 'other.' The overall argument of the narrative is that in her noble, landed status, her prioritization of the hero, her Western-seeming (and therefore virtuous) beauty, and her careful fulfilment of the duties of wife and mother (bearing Bevis's children), Josian is a good woman, and these traits may work to neutralize her Saracen difference. Simultaneously, however, through the lens of Bevis's anxieties, she is represented as a persistently different, powerful, active, and only tenuously Christian embodiment of the Saracen other. She is virtuous yet lusting, noble yet threatening to Bevis's masculine identity.[60] Because the text ends with a fairy-tale resolution in which Josian (now "twies queen," 4256) and Bevis rule happily for twenty years, it is clear that Josian's goodness, her positive role in the narrative, in the politics of England, Armenia and 'Mombraunt,' and in Bevis's personal journey, all supersede her ambiguities. Yet the sweetness of the end does not erase the questions raised throughout the text – about gendered power, and stable identities – but it does offer a comforting example of how such uncertainties might be positively managed. If we take this narrative as a model, the way to navigate ambiguities and contradictions, it seems, is by embracing them rather than attempting to eradicate them. Throughout this romance the readers are permitted, and Bevis (slowly, painfully) learns, to accept and take pleasure in Josian's independence, strength, and sensuality.

This is made possible because the text insists, persistently and persuasively, that Josian is a morally good despite her otherness. By having Bevis articulate some of the uncertainties a good Christian audience might have had about this character, and then narratively refuting those worries and anxieties, the audience is permitted to take pleasure in the seductive otherness of Josian's character. Those worries are also shown to be unnecessary and spurious, as the text portrays Bevis as nervous, overbearing, and insecure, suggesting to a medieval audience that of the two perspectives on the Saracen Princess, it is the narrative's positive assessment of Josian that we should consider valid, rather than the protagonist's negative one.

VI. Saracen Princess, Foreign Queen

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[60] See Erwin's discussion of Josian's threat to Bevis's chivalric identity, especially pages 376-82.

The question we are left with, then, is how might a contemporary audience have responded to Josian's characterisation? As we discussed, the Saracen Princess of medieval romance was not a reflection of real Middle Eastern Muslim womanhood, but rather an open metaphor for female difference. In this case, Josian's characterisation functions as a particularly salient metaphor for non-English, 'foreign' queens of England in the early fourteenth century.

If we consider 'conversion' not only as a commitment to different religious beliefs but as a process of exchanging one set of cultural mores, one set of political loyalties, and one geographically situated identity for another, then the foreign queens of England in the Middle Ages underwent a 'conversion' process not unlike that of the Saracen Princesses of romance.[61] Not only does Josian's character invite comparisons to the daughters of royal houses given to England's kings in marriage, but this comparison is given particular relevance and urgency because the Auchinleck Manuscript's compilation coincided with a period of history during which the foreignness of England's queen was of particular note.

VI.1 Isabella of France

As Siobhan Bly Calkin argues in *Saracens and the Making of English Identity*,[62] it is surprisingly easy to look at Josian's character as an expression of the English concerns with, and opinions about foreign queenship. At the time of the compilation/composition of the Auchinleck Manuscript, England's kings habitually married princesses from other royal families, for reasons of political advantage, military resolutions, economics, etcetera.[63] The foreignness of England's queen came into particularly sharp focus during the first quarter of the fourteenth century, however, during the reign of Edward II (b. 1284, d. 1327) and his queen consort Isabella of France (b. 1295, d. 1358). The daughter of Philip IV of France and sister to the following three French reigning monarchs,[64] Isabella's position between the

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[61] See Theresa Earenfight's work *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) for context on the position of queens in medieval Europe as marriage and movement made royal women particularly 'vital' military and political success (p. 126).

[62] See Calkin for context on the formation of English identity in relation to narratives like *Bevis of Hampton*, and foreign queens of England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (pp. 62-67 and 93-95).

[63] In fact, the practice was almost universal – with his marriage to Elizabeth Woodville in 1464, Edward IV was the first king of England to marry an Englishwoman for centuries. For more see Earenfight, pp. 126-27, and Calkin, pp. 63-64; see also Gordon Kipling, *Enter the King: Theatre, Liturgy and Ritual in Medieval Civic Triumph* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998) pp. 310-11, and p. 327.

[64] St. John, pp. 1-3.

French and English crowns highlighted the role of foreign queenship in English politics during her time as consort and (unofficial) regent from 1308 to 1330.[65] During the course of her dramatic reign, Isabella's foreignness was integral to her beneficial power, and also to the threat she posed to the stability of English rule. The events of Isabella's life, from her performance of the duties of wife, mediatrix and intercessor to her eventual role as invading conqueror, regent and Queen-mother, echo the motifs of foreign queenship, both good and bad, that we see in *Bevis of Hampton*. Her position on the political and cultural border between England and France, and her movement between the two, is reminiscent of Josian's textual movement. Understanding Isabella's performance of the role of the foreign consort, and how she was perceived by her contemporaries, will better illuminate the Saracen Princess characters who are the focus of this chapter, and how we might imagine their reception in a fourteenth-century English context.

Because the French and English crowns were closely linked culturally, politically, familially, and linguistically, calling a French queen of England 'foreign' may be seen as a stretch. However, territorial disputes in the early fourteenth century caused the divisions between the two countries to be more sharply drawn, and more clearly realised.[66] Additionally, as we shall see, the particular rhetoric about foreignness and difference that was applied to Isabella at different parts of her life, and both the restrictions and power those labels lent her, evidence the impact of even proximal 'foreignness' on female power in the Middle Ages.

VI.2 Feminine Intercession and Mediation

Isabella married Edward II in 1308 as part of ongoing peace treaties between France and England, but because of her youth and Edward's preference for the counsel and company of his favourite, Piers Gaveston, she played a minor political role for several years. Isabella fully stepped into her public role as advisor, confidante, and ambassador in 1313 – 1314, after the birth of her son (the future Edward III) and the

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[65] John Carmi Parsons, 'Isabella (1295–1358)' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, 2008) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14484> [accessed 20 January 2019].
[66] For a careful examination of the Anglo-French relationship during this period, see Ardis Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language, and the Nation in the Hundred Years War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

death of Gaveston.[67] With constant tensions and territorial disputes between Edward II and the French monarch, Isabella's French familial connections stood her in good stead, and in addition to accompanying her husband on trips to France in 1313 and 1320, Isabella was sent in 1314 to act *for* Edward as his ambassador in negotiations with her father about the governance of Gascony.[68] This successful negotiation demonstrated the benefits of Isabella's French connections and her potential influence as an international mediator and peacekeeper, while her French familial origins offered England an advantage in the maintenance of continental territorial claims. That the public at large – and, vitally, her husband – considered her *personally* successful in those negotiations is witnessed by the fact that Isabella was chosen again to represent Edward's interests in 1325,[69] when tensions around Gascony reached a breaking point, her brother Charles V invaded, and the English forces had been routed.[70] Contemporary chroniclers, including the author of the *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, assumed Edward's reasoning for choosing Isabella as his representative was his knowledge that "because of his affection for his sister, the French king [would]… renew the truce" – an assumption which proved correct.[71]

Isabella's intercessory role is relevant because of its parallels to Josian's narrative: daughter of one king, wife of another, both women perform parallel processes of intercession and negotiation. As previously mentioned, the tradition of queenly intercession was not, of course, limited to these particular women, but both Josian and Isabella's performance of queenly intercession demonstrates their positive assumption of wifely and womanly virtues, and the power attendant in that identity. The particular inflection of *foreignness* in their intercession does not set them apart from other queenly appeals for mercy, but makes their power visible in a broad, international context rather than merely a domestic one.

Isabella also acted as a successful intercessor and mediator in domestic (rather than foreign) disputes. In 1313, 1318 and 1321 Isabella intervened in disputes between her rash and impulsive husband and his aggrieved barons, reconciling him

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[67] St. John discusses Isabella's role as a 'key negotiator,' (pp. 2-3) and how the birth of her son helped 'lessen Edward's grief' at Gaveston's demise (p. 39), supported by Helen Castor in *She Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2010) pp. 252-61. For more on Edward's 'all-consuming' relationship with Gaveston and its effect on English politics from 1306 to 1313, see Castor, pp. 230-36, and St. John, p. 52.
[68] The importance of the informal, personal nature of Isabella's influence in negotiations and intercessionary acts is discussed in Castor, p. 257 and St. John, p. 33.
[69] St. John, p. 3, Castor, pp. 283-85.
[70] Castor, pp. 281-84.
[71] Castor, p. 184.

with them after the murder of his beloved Gaveston,[72] negotiating an agreement with the powerful earl of Lancaster, and eventually publicly falling to her knees to plead "for the common people" that he come to an accord with his barons and exile his next favourite, Hugh Despenser the Younger.[73] Female intercession was traditionally staged to remind powerful lords of their duty to be merciful – a feminine rather than a male virtue – and thus intercession was a public performance through which kings could be persuaded to change their minds without compromising their dignity. It was also a *gendered* performance, demonstrating submissive womanhood in contrast to masculine active authority. Isabella's public intercessions thus show her as an effective queen, and also a model of feminine virtue.[74]

Romance, as we have seen, reiterates this trend, with the overtly feminine acts of intercession not only in *Bevis of Hampton* but also in such texts as 'The Knight's Tale,' and *Athelston*, with the motif of the pregnant queen.[75] That motif is repeated as well in the intentional recrafting of political narratives of intercession both by real queens and by those writing history – for example, the instance of Philippa of Hainault and the Burghers of Calais. Froissart's version of the events of the siege of Calais in 1347 included a description of the queen as "heavily pregnant, despite the birth dates of her children making that an impossibility."[76] It seems that it was important to Froissart's narrative, however, to emphasise the femininity of the intercessor, and the particularly feminine power that the image of the pregnant queen – whose womb contained a potential heir to the throne – could have. The embodied, female nature of intercession is thus emphasised in his account, and we see similar impulses in the descriptions of both earlier and later incidences of queenly intercessions. The way people responded to queenly intercession throughout the later Middle Ages was bound up in assumptions about gender roles and the sorts of power available to women, and those responses remained largely the same long after the particular literary and historical moment of Isabella's intercessions and the composition of *Bevis of Hampton*.

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[72] See especially Castor, p. 256.

[73] According the St. John, the *Annales Paulini,* the *Vita Edwardi Secundi* and the *St. Alban's Chronicle* all give instances of Isabella's intercession and role in mediation (p. 52). See also Castor, p. 264.

[74] For the gendered aspects of intercession, and its particular expression as part of the role of the queen, see St. John, pp. 53-56, in which she discusses Froissart's treatment of Philippa of Hainault's intercession for the Burghers of Calais. For more on the effect of pregnancy on Isabella's political effectiveness, see also Castor, p. 264.

[75] See for example Herzman, Drake and Salisbury's Introduction to *Athelston,* in *Four Romances of England*.

[76] St John, pp. 53-56.

As both a domestic and international peacemaker, Isabella was active and influential, and that pattern of conflict resolution is reflected in Josian's intercessions between her father and Bevis. As we discussed earlier in the chapter, Josian deploys imagery and references to the acceptable forms of womanly identity that will best convince her father to show mercy (655-670), acting the part of the devout religious devotee ("Be Mahoun ne be Tervagaunt," 659) and the loving daughter ("Ich praie, sire, for love o me," 663). Though she does not fall to her knees, the process of begging for justice and mercy is conventional womanly intercessionary behaviour, like Isabella's pleas for peace both with her French relatives and with Edward in his conflicts with his lords. Josian's intercession with Bevis is, as we mentioned, also specifically gendered behaviour, embodied and – in this case – sexualized (705-712). Josian's behaviour, kissing Bevis and coming to his bedchamber, evokes the medieval assumption that there was erotic potential in a woman's ability to persuade her husband.[77] That erotic persuasion was feared as over-powerful when misdirected, but when used for moral or financial improvement, was lauded by a range of medieval authors, from Christine de Pizan, who argues in her *Book of the Three Virtues* for a wife's particular ability to persuade her husband in private,[78] to clerics like Thomas of Chobham, who exhorted married women to positively influence their husbands – morally and economically – while "in the midst of their embraces."[79] We can perhaps read this erotic, embodied aspect into Isabella's (successful) intercessionary acts with her husband – and a lack of sexual intimacy as related to a lack of successful intercessions. Lisa Benz St. John, tracking Isabella's acts of intercession through the Chancery and other avenues, argues that when the queen's physical, intimate access to Edward was limited, her intercessionary success decreased, and the influence of the men he favoured – Gaveston, then later Despenser – increased.[80] This was evidently the state of things in the years between 1321 and 1325, when the enmity between Edward's nobles and Edward's favourite Despenser reached its peak, and the queen herself was no longer able to functionally intercede with her reckless husband.

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[77] There are many sources that discuss the danger associated with a woman's argumentative ability. See St. John, pp. 12-13.

[78] See Christine de Pisan's Book 2, Section 10 of *Treasure of the City of Ladies; Or, the Book of the Three Virtues,* ed. by Sarah Lawson (London: Penguin, 1985); see also St. John, pp. 12-13.

[79] In *Summa confessorum* (7.2.15), Thomas of Chobham commands women to "be preachers to their husbands, because no priest is able to soften the heart of a man the way his wife can." For discussion of Thomas's influence, see Sharon Farmer, 'Persuasive Voices: Clerical Images of Medieval Wives,' *Speculum*, 61.3 (1986) 517-43.

[80] St. John, pp. 12-13 and 40-43.

VI.3 Tensions, Rebellions

The foreignness of the queen was brought into particularly sharp relief by the events surrounding Isabella's second ambassadorial journey to France in 1325. In the month prior to her departure, Edward had responded to the aggression of the French by seizing the lands and holdings of French persons residing in England, apparently including his own wife. At the urging of Despenser, Edward removed Isabella's (French) household retainers, seized her personal properties and lands, and gave the care of their youngest children over to the Despenser family.[81] It was implied that this was for the better protection of her lands and their children, but it was, transparently, due to her French origins and the perceived threat her relationship to the French crown posed.[82] Despite this apparent lack of confidence in his wife's allegiance, however, Edward still deemed Isabella the best choice to mediate between the two kings when it became apparent that no easy accord would be reached over the sovereignty of Gascony. In the months following her arrival in Paris, Isabella negotiated a cessation of hostilities and a reasonably favourable peace treaty.[83] However, it hinged upon Edward's performance of homage for the French territories in question, something which could require his presence in the French court. Unwilling or unable to leave England while in the midst of domestic power-struggles with his lords, and utterly under the influence of the Despensers, Edward II refused to come to France. In his place he sent his son, the future Edward III, to perform homage in his father's stead. Isabella convinced Charles V to agree to this, provided Edward II would first cede sovereignty of the regions of Aquitaine and Ponthieu to the fourteen-year-old prince.[84]

Messengers who accompanied the crown prince across the channel conveyed Edward's demand for Isabella's immediate return to England; she flatly, and publicly,

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[81] For more on the rise of the military conflict with France and the effects on Isabella's standing, see Fryde, Chapter 10 (pp. 134-148), especially p. 146; see also Castor, pp. 281-82.

[82] St. John argues it was Isabella's French origins that led to the removal of her privileges and queenly rights (p. 88), basing her argument in part on the evidence of the Gascon Rolls, which state that "Because of the war against the king moved by the king of France, it was ordained by the king and his council that all French persons living within the realm of England, including members of the households of the king or the queen consort, be arrested,… and their lands, goods and chattels seized into the king's hands." Following this, the king then seized Isabella's lands as well, therefore treating her like any other French person living in England. By this note, the foreignness of the queen outweighed her married identity. Found at 'The Gascon Rolls Project', Gascon Roll Entry C 61/36 for the 18th year of the reign of Edward II, membrane 24d. Entry 113, for 28 October 1324. <http://www.gasconrolls.org/en/edition/calendars/C61_36/document.html#m24d> [accessed 20 January 2019].

[83] For more on the nature of this treaty, see Castor, pp. 283-85, St. John, p. 3, and Fryde, pp. 147-48.

[84] Castor, pp. 285-86, Fryde, pp. 148.

refused. As reported in the *Vita Edwardi Secundi,* in response to the king's messengers the queen replied:

> 'I feel that marriage is a joining together of man and woman, maintaining the undivided habit of life, and that someone has come between my husband and myself trying to break this bond; I protest that I will not return until this intruder is removed, but, discarding my marriage garment, shall assume the robes of widowhood and mourning until I am avenged of this Pharisee.' The King of France not wishing to seem to detain her said, 'The queen has come of her own will, and may freely return if she so wishes. But if she prefers to remain in these parts, she is my sister, and I refuse to expel her.'[85]

Isabella cast herself in the role of the dutiful but wronged wife, calling upon popular conceptions of the rights and privileges of queens and spouses and using evocative representations of widowhood and bereavement to dramatize her predicament as the queen without a (loyal, honourable) king, a wife without a husband. In doing so, she also drew implicit comparisons between herself and the people of England, who had "long been afflicted with many oppressions committed by the king and his ministers."[86] Isabella's Frenchness gave her space to stage this rebellion without fear of immediate reprisals, witnessed in Charles's refusal to 'expel her,' and although Charles would eventually capitulate to papal pressure and deny her support in France, her initial welcome gave her the time she needed to muster her forces and plan her next steps. Framed as wifely devotion, and possible because of her foreign birth, this political moment was crafted as one of the calumniated, and devoted, queen whose priorities were her husband and her realm, and whose foreign connections allowed her to fight for the wellbeing of both.[87]

This event was perceived differently by Edward and Despenser, of course, who pressured the English bishops into writing pleading letters to Isabella, begging her to return. The *Vita* reports that the barons addressed Isabella as "Most dear and potent lady," and articulated deep anxieties about the potential dangers posed by Isabella's unruly behaviour:

> …all the inhabitants of our land fear that many evils will result from your refusal to return. They fear the arrival of *foreigners* and that their goods will be *plundered*; … The English people predict from

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[85] The version of the *Vita Edwardi Secundi* here quoted is N. Denholm-Young's translation, *The Life of Edward the Second, By the So-called Monk of Malmesbury* (Nelson and Sons Ltd, Edinburgh, 1957) (pp. 142-43), hereafter referred to as *Vita*.

[86] See Fryde's discussion of the fallout of Edward's deposition, and the popular support for Isabella's regime at the time of her coup, including the sermon from Archbishop Reynolds in 1327 which framed the plight of the populace in these terms (p. 200).

[87] See Castor, pp. 293-94 and 297-98, and Fryde, pp. 187-89.

> these *threats* the coming of *foreigners*, and say, if the French come
> they will *plunder the land*. It is impossible that the innocent should
> not suffer equally with the guilty…[88] (*Emphasis mine.*)

The fear seems to be that if Isabella does not return peacefully and soon, then an invasion would be imminent. The picture these bishops, on Edward's orders, paint of the invading foreign queen, at the head of an army of alien plunderers set to ravish the English countryside and threaten the crown, is the inverse of the image of the benevolent lady and dutiful, sorrowing wife that Isabella presented. Edward's response to her unruly queenship, articulated through the bishops' letters, is grave concern and anxiety. Once again, therefore, we return to the issue of narrative and the possibilities of multiple interpretations of events. As in *Bevis of Hampton,* we again see a husband expressing deep anxiety about the performance of his foreign wife. While the overarching narrative of *Bevis* seems to argue for the interpretation of Josian's character as that of a dutiful, loyal wife, much like Isabella's self-identified role, the two distinct narratives about wifely performance create a sense of ambivalence and broad potential – both for how we imagine a medieval audience might have responded to Josian's character, and for an understanding of Isabella of France as well.

Unlike the anxieties articulated in *Bevis of Hampton,* however, Edward II's fears were, in fact, realized – at least in part. Isabella connected with several of the political exiles, enemies of Edward II and the Despensers, then residing in France – most notably and intimately with Roger Mortimer of Wigmore (b. 1287, d. 1330) with whom she began a passionate affair.[89] Isabella arranged a marriage for her son Edward III to the daughter of the powerful John of Hainault, and with the added military support this provided her, as well as the increasing support of the English lords, gathered an army. With Mortimer and young Edward III at the head of her forces, she led a swift, successful invasion and coup against her husband, gaining the support of Edward's lords (who, after a decade of in-fighting, humiliating military losses to the Scots,[90] and brutal repression,[91] were delighted to dispense with the

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[88] *Vita,* pp. 144-45.
[89] For more on Mortimer's background, see Castor, p. 282; for Isabella and Mortimer's affair – both its advantages and its serious detriments – see Castor, pp. 288-89, St. John, p. 3, and Fryde, p. 180.
[90] For more on Edward's many campaigns against the Scots see Castor, pp. 239-240, 257-60, and 278-80. See also Fryde, 'Chapter 9: The defeat in Scotland 1322–3,' pp. 119-133.
[91] Fryde, pp. 150-164, and Castor, pp. 274-76.

Despenser's corruption). It seems she also won the hearts of the general populace.[92] As his supporters defected and joined Isabella's forces, Edward suffered a steep decline in fortunes as he fled further west. He was at last captured in Wales in the fall of 1326, quickly followed by his deposition, imprisonment, and, eventually, his death.[93] Isabella and Mortimer ruled as unofficial regents for the following five years, until Edward III came into his majority and officially seized power, after which she lived briefly under house arrest before beginning a lengthy retirement as queen dowager.

This extraordinary military action from a queen was made possible by Isabella's foreign origins. The grave insult to her person – the seizure of her lands and removal of her household staff in 1324, on account of the threat posed by her ties to France – precipitated Isabella's outright rebellion, and deepened the preexisting divide between the queen and her husband. Her fraternal relationship to the king of France justified her ambassadorial role, and also gave her the protection she needed to stage her rebellion, gather her allies, and forge the marriage alliance with the ruling family of Hainault. When she arrived on the shores of England with her forces, the lords accepted her as the wife and mother of England's king. Edward, however, was fleeing west, running from the army of 'foreigners'[94] and the French woman at their head.

VI.4 Ferrea Virago: Iron Lady, Wicked Mother

As previously discussed, *Bevis of Hampton* presents two perspectives on Josian's character: that of the narrative, which invites the audience to take pleasure in her independence, her strength, her seductiveness and her intellect, and on the other hand, Bevis's perspective, fearful and uncertain, ready to view Josian's Saracen nature as threatening and negative. Overall, her character may be read as ambiguous. Even considering that negative reading of Josian, however, in which her self-reliance, her otherness, and her non-Christian origins are signals of threatening uncertainty, how much more anxiety might the foreignness of real queens like Isabella have provoked, when they could, on a whim, either ease diplomatic disputes through mediation or,

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[92] For the upheaval in London in particular, see Fryde, pp. 165-75 and 200-01; see also Castor, pp. 294-95.
[93] For detail on the circumstances surrounding Edward's demise and eventual death, see Fryde, pp. 195-206, and Castor, pp. 291-93.
[94] *Vita,* pp. 144-45.

alternatively, lead invading armies of foreign soldiers into England, resulting in the deposition and death of England's king?

As with Josian's character, the trajectory of Isabella's political career may also be open to multiple readings and varied perspectives. Her rise to power after her open rebellion against her husband, however, invites distinctly negative interpretations that no longer resemble the seductive conversion-narrative of the Saracen Princess. Later chroniclers, considering Isabella's warlike behaviour and unfeminine authority during this period, referred to her as a *ferrea virago* – an iron lady, devoid of womanly softness.[95] Josian seems a benign fantasy by comparison. It is worth noting, therefore, that Josian is not the only foreign queen represented in *Bevis of Hampton.* Her performance of good femininity is sharply contrasted with the role played by the hero's mother, the "kinges doughter of Scotlonde" (26). Where Josian works to assimilate to Bevis's cultural context, and to preserve herself and her chaste status as an appropriate bride,[96] Bevis's mother does the opposite. Unhappily married to Bevis's father, a much older man who cannot satisfy her sexual desires (55-66), Bevis's mother arranges for her lover, the emperor of Germany, to ambush and murder him (85-105). She then disinherits Bevis, attempts to have him killed, then sells him to Saracens (500). A bad mother, an adulterous wife, and a traitorous queen, she threatens the stability of the realm as well as the family. There is close relationship between this story arc and Isabella's political trajectory, complete with the implication of Edward leaving her sexually unsatisfied and her role in his overthrow and death after the invasion led by her lover. In the representations of foreign queenship, then, *Bevis of Hampton* may be read as actively engaging with, reinforcing, or subverting the way fourteenth-century audiences thought and felt about real foreign queens like Isabella.

Bevis of Hampton responds to the character of the foreign queen in a variety of ways, and the differences between Josian and Bevis's mother are made obvious in their performance of their roles as foreign wives. Where Josian's performance of the role of the foreign consort is benign, Bevis's mother demonstrates the negative potential of the character. As we mentioned earlier in the chapter, the Saracen Princess characters typically demonstrate unusually active seduction and wooing, and

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[95] Castor cites Geoffrey le Baker's use of the term 'ferrea virago' in reference to Isabella; Baker's "venemously partisan" account of Edward II's death painted the queen as a 'Jezebel,' and "a woman who aped a man, abandoning her feminine virtues, to become cruel and unyielding as iron" (p. 303).
[96] See Calkin, pp. 68-78, for an exploration of Josian's performance of acceptable Christian identity.

Josian is no exception. Her lust is appropriately directed, however, and despite her marriages to other men she remains faithful to Bevis. Bevis's mother, an adulteress, demonstrates unruly feminine desire, with disastrous results. Josian employs everything from magical chastity rings to physical disfigurement to maintain her purity and preserve the claims of Bevis's children, while Bevis's mother actively disinherits her son, acting against his dynastic interests and attempting to destroy his claim to his birthright. Josian uses her connections to other countries – Ermonie (4010-19) and Mombraunt (4574) – to secure additional kingdoms for her husband and sons;[97] Bevis's mother uses her connections to other countries – Germany and Scotland (3318)[98] – to (attempt to) kill Bevis and his father. We see that when foreign queens use their connections and power selfishly, they destroy patriarchal hegemony, disrupting the chains of inheritance and legitimate male rule, supplanting husbands with the lovers of their choosing. When foreign queens use their power in service of their (male) family members, on the other hand, patriarchal and patrilineal inheritance and succession is secured, lands are acquired, and peace is assured.

Between the daughter of the king of Scotland and the daughter of the king of Ermonie, then, *Bevis* offers a complex portrait both of the hopes and the fears of a fourteenth century English audience concerning the foreignness of queens. We can see both positive and negative traits reflected in the life and actions of Isabella of France. While her performance of intercessionary acts and her usefulness in international negotiations demonstrated the positiveness of her foreign birth, we also see her fitting the negative role too, resembling Bevis' mother rather than his wife.

VI.5 Saving Grace: The Power of Narrative

Isabella is not wholly relegated to the wicked-mother stereotype, however. Despite the fact that she performs foreign queenship in a way that was certainly threatening to the king, and thus to England's government, her complexity is evidenced in the outcome of the turmoil. When Edward III led his coup in 1330 and deposed Mortimer and arrested Isabella,[99] the supposition was that, like Bevis's mother, she had been acting in her own interests, rather than her son's – and given the steady stream of cash

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[97] Bevis and Josian's sons inherit her country of origin, as well as the land of her erstwhile husband Yvor.
[98] Bevis's mother has the German emperor as her defender, and at her suggestion they are aided by her father, the king of Scotland (3318).
[99] For more on the coup, see St. John, p. 3 and p. 128, and Castor, pp. 310-13.

flowing directly into her purse rather than the royal coffers, this was likely the case.[100]

A letter from the pope sent shortly after the arrest, however, framed things differently:

> The pope heard … that the king was not showing signs of filial
> affection to his mother, queen Isabella. Should she have done
> anything to justify the king's behaviour to her, the pope exhorts him
> to remember *what his mother has done for him*, and what enmity and
> ill will she has provoked against herself *in his service*, and begs him
> to show mercy…[101] (*Emphasis mine.*)

According to the papal letter, the actions taken by Isabella – opposing her husband, commandeering control of the government and claiming very significant funds – had been in service of Edward III's interests. Whether it reflected the truth or not, this revisionist version of events became the officially accepted one, and dramatically impacted her fate. Her lover Mortimer was duly executed, but Isabella survived, with continued wealth and eventual freedom during her son's majority, likely in part due to this mitigating narrative.[102]

Earlier, at the time of her rebellion in 1326, her invasion itself was also rhetorically framed as being in the interests of the 'realm,' with Isabella merely doing her duty to the people. After the lords formally recanted their allegiance to Edward II, there were numerous popular sermons arguing for young Edward III's right to rule, including one from the Archbishop Reynolds who articulated the popular support for the Edward II's deposition by invoking the idea that "the voice of the people is the voice of God."[103] Justifying the (illegal) transfer of power in a sermon to Commons in 1327 he proclaimed:

> *You have long been afflicted* with many oppressions committed by
> the king and his ministers. *You have fervently acclaime*d the
> proceedings here because *you desire redress*. *Your voice* has been
> clearly heard here, for Edward has been deprived of the
> government of the kingdom and the church and his son made king
> as *you have unanimously consented*. This is because of the
> inadequacy of the former king and his offenses against his
> kingdom and the church.[104] (*Emphasis mine*)

[100] Castor, pp. 304-309.

[101] Found in the Papal Registers: see 'Regesta 116: 1330-1332,' in *Calendar of Papal Registers Relating To Great Britain and Ireland, Volume 2, 1305-1342*, ed. by W. H. Bliss (London, 1895) pp. 498-506. <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-papal-registers/brit-ie/vol2/pp498-506> [accessed 20 January 2019].

[102] For a description of the gory details of that particular bit of political pageantry, see Castor, p. 312.

[103] Fryde describes this scene and the context of Reynold's 'vox populi, vox Dei' comment at some length (p. 200); see also Castor, pp. 298.

[104] Fryde, p. 200.

According to Natalie Fryde's discussion of the event, Reynold's sermon "was greeted by a popular cry of 'let it be done, let it be done,' and by a universal show of hands" (200). While this is in no way proof of universal attitudes, the rhetoric continually puts the responsibility on the common people, making them complicit in the political manoeuvring while painting the movement as a popular one.[105] Isabella capitalized on similar narratives, casting herself and her son as the saviours come to rescue the realm from the king who had 'abandoned' it.[106] We can see from the popularity of her invasion that at least at first, England was prepared to welcome this militaristic foreign queen as saviour, rather than immediately condemning her for her unwomanly behaviour.[107]

As we can see in the chronicles of Geoffrey le Baker and the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century accounts, later generations looked at Isabella's adultery, her violent invasion, and the murkiness of the situation regarding her husband's death and recast her as a 'Jezebel'[108] and a 'she-wolf.'[109] This negative reflection became the most commonly reiterated version of events, and the popularity of her initial rebellion was superseded by respectability politics and the censure of history. The real historical queen who would have been living, interceding and ruling while the Auchinleck Manuscript was being compiled, however, was a complicated, multidimensional woman reflecting both the traits of the good foreign queen, and the bad one.

VII. The Enduring Ambiguity of Foreign Queens

In the years following its composition in the Auchinleck Manuscript, *Bevis of Hampton* enjoyed continuous popularity, appearing in a range of manuscripts

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[105] M. V. Clarke, 'Committees of Estates and the Deposition of Edward II' in *Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1933) pp. 27-46. "All authorities agree that the deposition was carried out by common consent. The Lichfield Chronicle states that it was done 'by clamour of the whole people, unanimously…'" (p. 37). See also Fryde, pp. 198-201.

[106] Castor, p. 297.

[107] For a description of this popularity, see Castor, pp. 292-93; Castor also compares the reception of Isabella with the treatment of Eleanor of Aquitaine, and the former's popularity despite "her overwhelming defiance of the paradigms of female virtue" due to the "greater and preceding sins of her husband" which "vindicated her rebellion" (p. 292).

[108] See Castor's treatment of the chronicle by Geoffrey le Baker, p. 303.

[109] See Castor for a discussion of the anti-feminist term "she-wolf" (p. 31). It was not a term used about Isabella in her lifetime. Thomas Gray, eighteenth-century poet, seems to have combined Christopher Marlowe's depiction of Isabella as a manipulative seductress in *Edward II* with Shakespeare's portrayal of Margaret of Anjou, describing Isabella as a "she-wolf" with "unrelenting fangs, /That tear'st the bowels of thy mangled mate…" in his account of Edward II's death in *The Bard: A Pindaric Ode* (II.1). The term stuck, and Isabella's association with the term "she-wolf" was cemented. For more, see Thomas Gray, *The Bard: A Pindaric Ode* (London: Samuel Bentley, 1837).

throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, eventually in several print sources.[110] The representation of the exotic, erotic, and ambiguous foreign princess continued to be of interest to late medieval and Early Modern audiences, perhaps partly because of the continuing importance of the role of the foreign queen in English society, as one king after another married foreign princesses. In the various narratives surrounding the power and positivity of Philippa of Hainault (known for her intercession and negotiation), Anne of Bohemia (likened to Esther in her goodness and counsel),[111] and later Margaret of Anjou (the original 'she-wolf' according to Shakespeare), it is easy to imagine how the range of responses to foreign femininity elicited by *Bevis of Hampton* might have continued to resonate with an English audience.

One of the consistent themes this study has asked us to consider is the impact of narrative, framing, and the perspective of the reader – both in fiction and in history. The importance of narrative is witnessed in the multiple readings of Josian's character, and the way layers of perspectives – Josian's, Bevis's, the text's – allow for a female character who is simultaneously powerful, problematic, and good. We also see the narrative of queenship being worked out in the various responses to Isabella's reign, showing multiple interpretations and evaluations of the role of the queen, depending on the perspective of the author. The range and complexity of these responses to Isabella's queenship, from 'she-wolf' to saviour, evidence the impact that her authority and power had on the minds of her contemporaries.

Bevis of Hampton, then, may be read as responding to the intense anxieties that would have been the product of the destabilising effects of Isabella's reign on English governance, and the various representations of foreign queenship as articulating the hopes and fears of the population. Josian becomes a figure of hope, for despite her Saracen nature and her uncertain religious/cultural conversion, we still read her as performing foreign queenship in a positive way, offering up an example of how, despite difference, foreign queens could work out for the best. She reflects the positive aspects of Isabella's rule, while Bevis's mother, the King of Scotland's

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[110] Herzman, Drake, and Salisbury's Introduction to the TEAMS edition of *Bevis of Hampton.*

[111] Anne of Bohemia embraced her association with Esther as a figure of mercy and intercession, witnessed in Richard Maidstone's poem *Concordia (The Reconciliation of Richard II with London)* which describes Anne as a "Hester for the realm" (444), and says: "A queen can, for her people, speak the words that please -/ None but a woman can do what no man would dare" (439-40). See the TEAMS edition of Richard Maidstone's *Concordia*, ed. by David R. Carlson, and trans. by A.G. Rigg (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003) <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/carlson-and-rigg-maidstone-concordia> [accessed 20 January 2019].

daughter, offers a warning about the consequences of foreign queenship improperly deployed.

By articulating contemporary anxieties about the dangers posed by the foreign queen – Bevis's mother as the adulterous, murderous and anti-maternal woman – Josian's character by comparison becomes a way of soothing those anxieties. Even when not entirely conforming to a stereotype of submissive womanhood, we are permitted to take pleasure in her character because she demonstrated a way in which foreign queenship can be beneficial and positive, despite cultural differences.

Of course, this thesis is grounded on ideas of overlapping narratives and intratextual comparison of different characters in a given text. Given the similarity of Josian's narrative arc with that of Bevis's mother, it is easy to draw comparisons between the two, and to read one character as an interpretive invitation for the other. In that comparative process, we see not only the differences between the two foreign queens, as previously discussed, but also their potential similarities, but for the bias of narrative and perspective. Bevis's mother's choice to assassinate her husband may be viewed differently when we consider her resemblance to Josian as she escapes Miles's clutches, also by resorting to violence. Both women choose to kill their husbands in order to end unwanted, unhappy marriages; the difference, of course, is in how those marriages, and those husbands, are presented by the text. While I do not suggest that Bevis's mother is a sympathetic character, nor that we should read Josian as a callous murderer, an intratextual examination of these characters further supports the idea of ambiguity and uncertainty in the moral position of these powerful foreign queens, and Josian's already-subversive characterisation becomes still more disruptive when viewed in close comparison with Bevis's mother.

The Saracen Princess is too authoritative, active, and wilful to fit the mould of submissive femininity generally held up by romance literature as the ideal, potentially creating a sense of anxiety that is not completely erased by her conversion or the excuse of the exotic east. But by exploring her character in the context of the text as a whole, and in view of contemporary political upheaval, it seems that the text allows us to read Josian's character as positive and benign, although still the subject of tension and unstable cultural and gender norms.

3.

FAIRY MISTRESS, LORDLY LADY:
REIMAGINING GENDER IN THE FAIRY MISTRESS ROMANCES

This chapter concerns the power and gender-performance of the magical 'fairy mistress' characters in the Middle English romances *Partonope of Blois* and *Sir Launfal*, in the context of fourteenth-century chivalric ideals of knightly identity and lordship, and also contemporary social and legal thought on the roles and authority of men and women. By offering an intertextual reading of these two texts and their subversive representations of gender dynamics, this chapter seeks to explore the complexities of the fairy characters and their radical impact on our understanding of the gender roles prescribed by medieval English romance.

Scholarship exploring the function and significance of the fairy mistress characters in medieval romance, notably by such authors as James Wade, Helen Cooper and Corinne Saunders,[1] has often focused on the autonomous, erotic, and otherworldly aspects of these characters. My work in this chapter will build on that groundwork, specifically using fourteenth-century ideas of chivalry, and late medieval English legal codes, to explore the powerful potential of the fairy women in these texts, and the implications their characterisations carry for our understanding of late medieval conceptions of gender and authority.

Any study of supernatural women in medieval literature would be incomplete without a discussion of the medieval ideas of fairies who populated the stories and imaginations of the peoples of Europe, and specifically of Britain, for centuries. Popular conceptions of fairies – the magical, non-human denizens of a proximal but separate

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[1] James Wade's *Fairies in Medieval Romance* explores the functions of the fairy elements in romance, focusing on the 'internal folklore' and logic of the texts. The fourth chapter of Helen Cooper's *English Romance in Time* also deals directly with the development of the 'fairy mistress' theme with which I am concerned (pp. 173-217). Corinne Saunders's *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance* has also been a useful resource, in particular her fifth chapter, 'Otherworld Enchantments and Faery Realms,' pp. 179-207.

otherworld[2] – appeared first in the British Isles as part of Celtic myth and folklore, and survived in folk culture and belief long after the end of the medieval period.[3] The term 'faerie,' taken from the French *fee,* originated in English in the early fourteenth century. By the end of the century the term was quite common, and used interchangeably with the Anglo-Saxon word 'aelf' or elf.[4] The Middle English romances with which I am concerned take their fairy material primarily from Old French texts, which have their roots in the Celtic traditions of Brittany. Early twentieth-century criticism of these texts often focused on that Celtic precedent, attempting to establish direct links between late medieval and pre-Christian pagan narratives through the repeated motifs and themes present in both Old Irish and medieval French and English texts.[5] Scholarship has mostly moved on from this area of study, in part because, as Helen Cooper states, "direct transmission" from Irish or Welsh sources to English medieval literature is "hard to trace"[6] and of questionable significance at best, and thus it is outwith the scope of this study. The cross-cultural repetition of the fairy narrative evidenced by this longevity and its appearance in myth, legend, and folklore in addition to Middle English romance is worth noting, however, as this illustrates the popularity of these themes across the medieval period. My concern is specifically with the popular Middle English romance tropes of fairy women who love mortal men, as found in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century romances, and how the audiences of those texts might have viewed the authority and power of the fairy women. I am interested in the ways these texts have constructed

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[2] Wade says, "As beings neither angelic nor demonic, fairies constitute the ambiguous supernatural in romance" (p. 3). He offers a nuanced introduction to the breadth of fairy themes in late medieval English romance, and the understanding of an (originally Celtic) otherworld with which they were associated. Saunders explains the layers of influence – classical, Christian, Celtic, and folkloric – that give the medieval faery otherworld its ambiguity (*Magic and the Supernatural,* p. 181). See also Aisling Byrne's 'Fairy Lovers: Sexuality, Order and Narrative in Medieval Romance' in *Sexual Culture in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, ed. by Amanda Hopkins, Robert Allen Rouse and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014) pp. 99-111, especially pages 99-102, and Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* p. 174.

[3] Byrne, pp. 99-103, Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* pp. 177-78, and Wade, p. 6.

[4] See Wade's explanation of the etymology and popularity of these terms, pp. 4-5.

[5] Examples of this type of scholarship include Lucy Allen Paton's work *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* (Boston: Gin and Co., 1903), Roger Sherman Loomis's *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927) and much of the scholarship produced by Tom Peete Cross, especially 'The Celtic Elements in the Lays of "Lanval" and "Graelent"' in *Modern Philology*, 12.10 (1915) 584-644, 'The Celtic Fée in Launfal' in *Anniversary Papers by colleagues and pupils of George Lyman Kittredge* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1913) pp. 377-87 and 'The Celtic Origin of the Lay of Yonec,' *Philology,* 11 (1913) 26-60. Direct transmission and survival of Celtic material, which Loomis and Cross suggest is evidenced by these repeated themes, is not something with which this paper is concerned.

[6] Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* p. 178, Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* p. 180, and Wade, p. 6; see also Byrne, pp. 100-01.

female heroines whose sexual, intellectual, financial, and legal power exceeds that of many women in romances, not to mention women in medieval English society, and trouble our understanding of medieval gender roles in their breadth and potential, offering an unusual lens on contemporary late medieval constructions of gender and sexuality.

I. The Power of a Pattern

The specific romances I will use as exemplars of the fairy-mistress tale-type[7] are *Partonope of Blois*[8] and *Sir Launfal*,[9] but before exploring them in detail it is necessary to first speak about the fairy mistress characters and narratives in medieval romance more generally. The Middle English 'fairy mistress texts' are the romance versions of a very specific tale type, which is part of a broader literary tradition detailing the love affair of a supernatural being and a human, found everywhere from Celtic legends (as previously mentioned) to Greek myths such as *Cupid and Psyche*.[10] There is a clear narrative pattern of events and plot devices to which most of the fairy texts conform, in part or in full, and which is consistent across the genre and across time, and though I consider the texts with fairy women especially, the same elements are often present in narratives with depicting

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[7] The formulaic patterns that emerge in these medieval romances fit within many of the folktale schemas anatomised by the Aarne-Thompson motif index. See Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), especially tale types C31.9, C435.1.1, C932, C31.1.1, C31.1.2, and C31.5, which are the folktales dealing with the taboos of revealing the secrets of, uttering the name of, looking at, or boasting about a supernatural wife. See G. V. Smithers, 'Story-Patterns in Some Breton Lays,' *Medium Aevum*, 22 (1953) 61-92 (p. 62), and Cross, 'The Celtic Fée in Launfal,' p. 379, for more on the set patterns of these 'fairy mistress' narratives. See also Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* pp. 179-206, and Lee C. Ramsay, *Chivalric Romances,* pp. 131-33.

[8] I use A. Trampe Bödtker's edition of *The Middle-English Versions of Partonope of Blois,* EETS 109 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1912; repr. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2002). All quotations and line numbers will be taken from this edition.

[9] I use the online TEAMS version of *Sir Launfal,* from *The Middle English Breton Lays,* ed. by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays> [accessed 21 January 2019]. All quotations and line numbers will be taken from this edition.

[10] See the introduction to Bödtker's *Partonope of Blois*; for the connection with the *Cupid and Psyche* myth, see also Laura A. Hibbard Loomis, *Mediaeval Romance in England* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1924), and the introduction to William Edward Buckley's *The Old English Version of Partonope of Blois* (London: J.B. Nichols and Sons, 1862) pp. viii-xxii. This comparison is further borne out by the Thompson *Motif-Index* entry C32.1 and C421 (which are the taboos of looking at, and offending, a supernatural spouse).

the relationships between fairy men and human women as well.[11] That so many elements of this pattern are recognisable and consistent suggests that medieval English audiences may have responded to the fairy mistress romances with a sense of intertextual familiarity.[12] It also suggests that, in exploring potential audience responses to *Partonope of Blois* and to *Sir Launfal,* we may hypothesise more broadly about social attitudes in medieval England, because the themes and issues at work in these texts are not unique. Even if these specific texts had limited readership, the narrative patterns they display were quite common and appear in other contemporary English romances, notably *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Ywain and Gawain, Melusine*, Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath's Tale' and 'Tale of Sir Thopas,' *Sir Orfeo, Generides, Richard Cœur de Lion, Thomas of Erceldoune,* and Malory's *Morte Darthur,* and would continue into the sixteenth century with Spenser's *Faerie Queen,* and Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream.*[13]

In most of the texts, the first interaction between the fairy women and their chosen mortal paramours occurs outwith the bounds of civilised society, and often coincides with the human resting at midday under a tree, in a forest, beside a river, well, or fountain – physical spaces in the natural world coded as potentially supernatural in folklore and romance.[14] The fairy lady is the one to initiate contact with her human lover, rather than passively waiting for a knight to choose her (a departure from many romance texts, which echo the courtly-love gendered binary of male action contrasted with

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[11] See for example Saunders's examination of the function of the conventions of fairy narratives in *Sir Degarré* and *Sir Orfeo,* in *Magic and the Supernatural* pp. 198-206; see also Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* pp. 173-75.

[12] See Pearsall, 'The Pleasure of Popular Romance,' and also Wade, pp. 2-3.

[13] For more on this pattern as it appears in the Middle English Breton lays, such as *Orfeo* and *Sir Launfal,* see A. J. Bliss's introduction to Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal,* ed. by A. J. Bliss (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1960) pp. 16-31. For an overview of this pattern in medieval romance and early modern literature, see Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* pp. 173-216.

[14] There are numerous examples of this pattern across romance. Heurodis contacts the faerie world while sheltering from the noonday heat under the 'ympe' tree in *Sir Orfeo* (see the TEAMS edition of *Sir Orfeo* from Laskaya and Salisbury's *The Middle English Breton Lays,* line 70). Melusine appears to her lover by a 'fontayne' near a forest in *Melusine* (see for example Alexander Karley Donald's edition of Jean d'Arras's fourteenth-century text *Melusine, Part I,* EETS 68 (London, 1895; repr. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Humanities Text Initiative, 1997) <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/Melusine> [accessed 20 January 2019]). In the Breton lai *Graelent* the hero encounters the fairy maiden by a pool in the forest. In the *Morte Darthur,* Thomas Malory describes Lancelot as sleeping under an apple tree at noon when Morgan le Fay and the other Queens send him into an enchanted sleep (p. 151). In J. A. H. Murray's edition of *Thomas of Erceldoune,* EETS 61 (London: N. Trübner, 1875), Thomas is lying "Vndyre-nethe a semely tre" when he meets the elf-queen. The knight in Chaucer's 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' sees fairy maidens dancing at 'the forest side' before meeting the shape-shifting hag. Both *Launfal* and *Partonope* in part reproduce this pattern. For more on this pattern, see Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* pp. 179 and 198-205, and Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* p. 181.

feminine passivity).[15] Either directly or through magically contrived circumstance, the fairy brings her chosen paramour to her domain, a place of exotic, ostentatious wealth and luxury. The extreme wealth of the setting both increases the otherness and difference of the fairy women, and adds to the sense of these narratives as functioning as wish-fulfilment tales. There almost always follows a sexual element of their relationship, which, as Wade has pointed out, also feeds neatly into the narrative of fairy women as agents of wish-fulfilment, something furthered by the way they give generously to their chosen lovers.[16]

The fairy lady imposes a taboo, or a *geis,*[17] which limits the hero's access to her, and which he must obey for their relationship to continue. This is a motif repeated throughout folklore and fairy tales as well as Celtic myths and romances, seen in *Melusine, Ywain and Gawain, Thomas of Erceldoune,* the myth of Orpheus, and many of the transformed-spouse folktales in the Aarne-Thompson motif index.[18] The taboos to which the human lovers must adhere in *Launfal* and *Partonope* deal with privacy and secrecy, adding to the sense of mystery and magical power associated with the fairy lovers, while the arbitrary nature of those taboos increases the sense of the illogical, and thus non-human, nature of the fairies and their worlds.[19] This is part of the process of differentiation – 'othering' – that sets the fairy women apart from their human counterparts, marking them as *other*worldly and thus free from human moral and logical

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[15] For an examination of romances departing from this expected gender-binary, see Judith Weiss, 'The Wooing Woman in Anglo Norman Romance,' pp. 149-61.

[16] See Wade, pp. 136-38, for gift-giving and the fantasy of wish-fulfilment in the late-medieval economy, and pp. 111-13 for an examination of the sexual politics of the fairy mistress texts.

[17] The term 'geis,' according to the Oxford English Dictionary, comes from Irish folklore and means "a solemn injunction, prohibition, or taboo; a moral obligation"; for further bibliographic and historical context, see the entry for 'geis' in Berhard Maier's *Dictionary of Celtic Religion* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1997). John Revel Reinhard used the term in connecting Celtic and late medieval romance material in his work, *The Survival of Geis in Mediaeval Romance* (Frankfurt: Halle-Saale, 1933), but the term has also been co-opted by some contemporary scholars who are disinterested in the 'anthropological' approach favoured by Reinhard, Cross, Roger Sherman Loomis, and Paton et al., for whom 'geis' communicates the gravity and power of the injunction. See also Wade's discussion of the use of the terms 'taboo' (or 'tabu') and 'geis,' p. 111, and also Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* pp. 204-15.

[18] See also William P. Albrecht's *The Loathly Lady in 'Thomas of Erceldoune'* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954) pp. 28-32.

[19] Saunders discusses the structures of difference between human and faerie worlds in *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001) p. 230. See also Cooper's discussion of 'arbitrary' and 'illogical' aspects of fairy-characters, *English Romance in Time,* pp. 178-79.

restrictions.[20] Thus this private, magical space, although bounded by the taboo, is one of permission and exploration. These taboos are, critically, very different from typical oaths of fidelity, which are fairly commonplace in romance. The knights swear romantic loyalty to the fairy women as well, but the element of the *geis* which defines and distinguishes these relationships is the aspect of privacy and, perhaps more importantly, the seemingly arbitrary imposition of the women's will – their *sovereignty* – to which the knights must accord. That this is not a public affiliation but rather an aspect of private identity separates the space of these relationships from the courtly world of the rest of the text, and establishes a comparison between the public court and the private fairy realm.

This arbitrary and illogical taboo, one of the most consistent aspects of fairy identity in romance, is one of the markers of their non-humanity, and of their difference. That difference, and the nature of the fairy characters themselves, is potentially a site of anxiety for readers of romance, and indeed for the characters therein. In the romances of the later Middle Ages, there was some agreement that 'fairies' were not demonic, nor angelic, but perhaps something in between, or something else entirely. The most frequent theological explanation was that fairies were 'neutral' angels cast out of heaven in the fight against Lucifer, but not fully damned.[21] What Cooper and Wade suggest, however, is that romances embraced this perceived moral neutrality, and thus treat fairy characters as truly outside the bounds of the Christian moral universe – they are not evil, but neither are they *good*.[22] This ambiguity, and potential threat, is demonstrated explicitly in texts such as *Sir Orfeo* (see for example the Fairy King's castle and its morbid occupants, 388-404) and is implicit even in the fairy mistress romances, in which the fairy women are supposedly benign. In *Partonope of Blois*, for example, Melior's magical identity causes fear and overt worry on the part of the hero, and also his mother, who states outright that she suspects that Melior has used "þe deuyllys Enchauntemente" and "crafte of charme"

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[20] Wade, pp. 15-16. See also Saunders's discussion of the 'amorality' of the faery world as it stands 'outside time' and reality in her chapter 'Middle English Romance: Structures of Possession' in *Rape and Ravishment*, pp. 187-233.

[21] See Wade, pp. 14-15, and Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* p. 179. We see, in *Thomas of Erceldoune,* the distinction between the road to the land of faerie, and the roads to Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell – indicating that Faerie is distinct from all of these, and thus, as Cooper states, simply "*somewhere else*" (p. 179). See also C. S. Lewis's discussion of how to fit fairies into the Christian theological model in *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964) pp. 122–38.

[22] See Wade's use of the term 'adoxic' (p. 15) to explain this position outside the Christian understanding of 'good' or 'evil.'

(5056-57) to ensnare her son. She also calls Melior a "ffendys of ffayre" (5656) and a "fende... / That wolle hys body and sowle brynge / In-to some myscheffe..." (5667-69) – thereby conflating demonic and fairy identities, and illustrating the proximity of the two. The anxieties the hero's mother, and later the bishop, have about Melior's uncanny, supernatural nature emphasise the potential threat inherent in her otherworldly identities, and demonstrate the powerful potential of creatures associated with 'ffayre.'[23] In *Launfal*, the question of the nature of fairy identity (demonic, otherworldly, etcetera) is not directly addressed. Abiding by the typical romance convention of allowing readers to use popular narratives and familiar stories to fill in the gaps, the text leaves Tryamour's moral ambiguity unexplored but latent in the text until its conclusion. The element of potential threat that goes hand-in-hand with fairy narratives is at last realized at the very end of the text, when, in a dramatic and shockingly visceral moment, the fairy magically blinds Gwenore – and again the audience is reminded of the importance of fairy difference, and the potentially threatening ambiguity of these fairy women.[24]

Despite the latent threat of their ambiguous inhumanity, the knights begin romantic relationships with the fairy women, and give their word to abide by the conditions of the *geis*. The human hero then goes forth from the magical secret space of the relationship, and, using the fairy woman's gifts, performs outstanding chivalric feats, achieving the heights of chivalric success. Eventually, and perhaps inevitably, the human lover breaks the taboo, and as the magical conditions of the relationship are violated the fairy removes all 'favour' from her lover: the wealth she has bestowed upon him disappears, sexual access to the fairy lady is removed, and the knight must struggle and suffer in order to regain her affections.

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[23] The fact that Melior preempts these concerns, and is so explicit about why Partonope need not fear she is some sort of demon, underlines the proximity of inexplicable fairy magic and the demonic – perhaps especially when that magic is wielded by seductive fairy women, as Wade argues (p. 188). Melior's assurances are explicit: "Off my persone haue ye no ffere/ Demythe me not to be an euell þynge /That shulde be crafte yowre sowle In synne bring" (1881-83). She follows this with an explanation of her faith, saying she is "a trewe crysten woman, / And my lefe ys fully in Crystes lore, /… I truste in cryste þat was borne of Marye…" (1888-92). That Partonope – and the audience – should need such a dramatic and repeated testament to Melior's non-demonic identity emphasises how similar and potentially overlapping the categories of 'fairy' and 'demon' were in the medieval imagination.

[24] See Wade, p. 118, and Corinne Saunders, 'Erotic Magic: The Enchantress in Middle English Romance' in *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain,* ed. by Amanda Hopkins and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007) pp. 38-52 (p. 50), for further exploration of the proximity of wicked seductress and benevolent fairy, and the ensuing anxiety this may have engendered in the Middle English fairy mistress romance texts.

In keeping with romance's pedagogical impulses, and in accordance with the Christian virtues of mercy and forgiveness, the fairy women eventually relent and, like merciful Madonnas,[25] forgive the trespasses of their erring lovers. The wish-fulfilment narrative is therefore complete. However, wish-fulfilment narratives or no, the women in these texts retain a sense of threat, of power, and of subversiveness. They do not remain confined to the safe, permissive otherworld, but rather intrude in, and meddle with, the human realm of reality as depicted by the romances. Their extraordinary natures do not keep them from being comparable to reality nor from being troubling in the way their power and authority destabilise our understanding of medieval gender roles. Through the creation and maintenance of magical spaces, the fairy women are able to perform unfeminine roles in ways that seem to infringe upon the rules of romance's mimetic reality,[26] while the heroes are able to behave in typically unmasculine ways without censure from the text. By transgressing the boundaries between the otherworld of Faerie and the human (real) world, between fantasy and threat, between masculine-coded behaviours and acceptable feminine-coded behaviours, the fairy-mistress characters complicate our understanding of them as purely a male fantasy, and demand to be examined instead as complex, powerful, and with an unstable, and thus radical, gendered identity.

II. *Sir Launfal* and *Partonope of Blois*: Theme and Variation

The two texts I have chosen as case-studies of the fairy mistress narrative type are Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal,*[27] composed in the late fourteenth century, and the

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[25] The confusion of the fairy mistress with the 'Queene of Heaven' is a common theme – in *Thomas of Erceldoune,* Thomas states explicitly that the fairy lady is so beautiful she must surely be the Virgin Mary, for example. See Priscilla Martin's *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives and Amazons* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1990) pp. 16-20, for the association of the courtly ladies of romance with a Marian ideal of merciful mediatrix in medieval devotion, and also Elizabeth M. Biebel-Stanley's discussion of the feminisation of mercy in 'Sovereignty Through the Lady: "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and the Queenship of Anne of Bohemia' in *The English 'Loathly Lady' Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, ed. by S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007) pp. 73-82. For other examples specific to the fairy mistresses and their associations with the Virgin Mary, see Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* p. 183.

[26] See the section I.1 of the Introduction to this thesis for more on romance and mimesis.

[27] For provenance and manuscript information for *Sir Launfal*, see the introduction to A. J. Bliss's edition, and also the introduction to Laskaya and Salisbury's online TEAMS edition.

fifteenth-century *Partonope of Blois*.[28] As exemplars of, and variations upon, the fairy mistress tale type as it is exhibited in Middle English romances, these two texts demonstrate some of the various ways the authors of these texts used the fairy pattern to complicate and reimagine gender norms with layers of complexity and the ambiguity of the supernatural.

II.1. Sir Launfal

The text of *Sir Launfal* exists in one manuscript, the early fifteenth-century MS Cotton Caligula A.ii,[29] but several similar versions of the narrative, first in Old French and then in English, were composed between the late twelfth and early fifteenth centuries.[30] Chestre's immediate source was the popular poem *Sir Landevale*, which derives from Marie de France's Breton lai *Lanval*, though Chestre also likely drew on versions of the lai *Graelent* for inspiration.[31] Related versions of the tale retained popularity long into the fifteenth century, eventually appearing in print as *Sir Lambwell*.[32] *Launfal* therefore holds a place within a well-established narrative tradition with impressive longevity and popularity. Chestre's poem uses compositional elements from contemporary Middle English romances, such the tail-rhyme form and direct, uncomplicated language. This, along with the narrative concern with contemporary realities of political unrest, sets *Launfal* apart from the poem's courtly antecedents, and places it firmly within the context of late fourteenth-century England.[33]

I include *Sir Launfal* in this study not only for its individual significance, but also because it adheres so neatly to the fairy mistress pattern, repeating the motifs and

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[28] For manuscript and provenance information for *Partonope of Blois,* see the introduction to Bödtker's edition.

[29] Bliss, pp. 3-5, and Laskaya and Salisbury's TEAMS introduction.

[30] This includes Marie de France's *Lanval*, which is commonly considered a more courtly, 'aristocratic,' and 'highly crafted' antecedent to Chestre's later version of the text, according to Laskaya and Salisbury. See Bliss, pp. 2-36, for more on the narrative and linguistic peculiarities of Chestre's text, and its relation to the Breton lais that preceded it.

[31] For more on the sources and analogues for *Sir Launfal*, and the text's connection to romances such as *Octavian* and *Libeus Desconus,* see Bliss, pp. 2-3 and 16-41.

[32] See for example the seventeenth-century version of 'Sir Lambwell' in the Percy Folio, British Library MS Additional 27879, which dates from approximately 1650.

[33] Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, pp. 44-47. For more on Chestre's intentional use of the tail-rhyme form and the unexpectedly self-conscious elements of the narrative, see Timothy O'Brien's 'The "Readerly" *Sir Launfal,' Parergon*, 8.1 (1990) 33-45, in which he responds to the oft-repeated claims that *Sir Launfal* is little more than a cheap revision of Marie de France's superior literary text, made by Maldwin Mills in 'The Composition and Style of the "Southern" Octavian, Sir Launfal, and Libeaus Desconus,' *Medium Aevum*, 31 (1962) 88-109.

characteristics described above. Though elements of this pattern appear in other Middle English romances, few articulate the whole of the narrative as obviously and coherently as *Sir Launfal*. For example, in satirizing the fairy-mistress trope found so commonly in verse romances, Chaucer's *Sir Thopas*[34] could be read as a direct parody of the *Launfal-Lanval-Landevale* narrative in particular, since so many elements of the plot were deemed conventional and universal markers of fairy narratives.

   Launfal fits the fairy-mistress pattern from the outset. The fairy's maidens approach him while he lies under a tree, disenfranchised and outside the bounds of civilised society, and the maidens bring him to her elegant, exotic pavilion, which is encrusted with gems and richly embroidered with eastern exotica.[35] The fairy explains that she had loved Launfal from afar, and they begin a sexual relationship. The lady then explains the condition, or taboo, that Launfal may not speak publicly ("make bost") (362) of her, which he swears to obey, after which he is duly awarded rich gifts and the trappings of knightly success (316-33). The fairy mistress in *Sir Launfal*, given (perhaps unsubtly) the name 'Tryamour,' performs some radical roles in the text – in her financial and sexual authority, her embodied legal agency and sovereignty, etcetera – but she also escapes some scrutiny because of her eventual return to the world of faerie, and her consistently magical, otherworldly identity.

II.2 Partonope of Blois

The other text selected for this study, *Partonope of Blois,* offers an example of the way medieval romance writers intentionally manipulated the fairy mistress trope to achieve specific desired effects.[36] The anonymous *Partonope of Blois* dates from the fifteenth century, and exists in six manuscripts, mostly in couplet form. The most complete

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[34] Chaucer's 'The Tale of Sir Thopas' is an intentional parody of the 'well-worn conventions' of popular romance, as Saunders points out in *Magic and the Supernatural* (p. 192); O'Brien suggests that 'Sir Thopas' exhibits "burlesque exaggeration of typical tail-rhyme features," taking elements popular in texts like *Launfal* and exaggerating them to the extreme for comic effect (p. 35). The fact that the 'ridiculous' knight seeks an elf-queen for his paramour, and that the tale then fits many of the fairy conventions, suggests that the themes and motifs in *Launfal* and the related texts were very familiar to English audiences in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

[35] The pavilion is "All of werk of Sarsynys," and adorned with crystals and jewels so rich that the author assures us that not even "Alysaundre the conquerour, /Ne Kyng Artour" have any to compare (274-75). The focus on material wealth and luxury is echoed in the fairy's gifts to Launfal as well.

[36] Wade, p. 111.

version, used by Bödtker in his 1912 edition, is the British Library MS Additional 35288, dating from the late fifteenth century.[37] The source for the text is the twelfth-century French *Partonopeu de Blois,* a courtly revision of the myth of Cupid and Psyche.[38] Melior, the supernatural lady in *Partonope,* is not technically a true fairy mistress. It is eventually revealed that she is a mortal woman, albeit an exotic, magically powerful one, and the Empress of Byzantium (exotically 'other' but not a fairy).[39] However, her human identity is not revealed until partially through the text, and for the first 5,800 lines it is unclear whether she is human or fairy. She is introduced with ambiguity, suspense, even a sense of potential threat, and all the hallmarks of a fairy mistress's defining characteristics, convincing both the readers and Partonope himself that he is dealing with a thing of "fayrye" (743, 887).

Partonope's journey begins with typical supernatural elements: he becomes lost in the woods while hunting (pursuing Melior's magic boar), and upon reaching the shore of the sea, he comes upon a mysterious unmanned boat of extraordinary richness and workmanship. He reluctantly boards the ship, fearful of its supernatural potential, and it carries him to Melior's city, which, like Tryamour's pavilion, is described in terms that highlight its richness and its strangeness.[40] Partonope is unnerved by the fact that the city, the castle, and even the sumptuous feast hall through which he is conducted all are devoid of human presence. Eventually the lady Melior approaches Partonope in the darkened bedchamber in her castle, and they begin a sexual relationship. She then reveals that she has orchestrated his arrival, and that she had loved him from afar. Melior also establishes

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[37] Bödtker's edition uses the British Library MS Additional 35288 as its primary source, with the some of the other MSs in parallel below. The most complete of those are Oxford's University College MS 188 (fifteenth century, Southeast England), and the Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson Poet. 14 (late fifteenth century, Southeast England).

[38] See Note 10 for more on this connection.

[39] See previous chapter for discussion on the Saracen Princesses in Middle English romance, and exoticism as permission for unusual female behaviour.

[40] The city is described as "curious" (879), a "meruayle" (884), and made of "Of Blacke marbell /… Crystalle, / Wyth Iasper also," (880-82) of such brilliance that it shines and illuminates the darkness like the sun. This, perhaps reasonably, causes Partonope some surprise and concern. The motif of a marvellous building so covered with jewels and gems that its walls physically shine is echoed in *Sir Orfeo* (357-76), *Sir Degarré* (770), and other texts with descriptions of fairy dwellings. As Cooper points out (*English Romance in Time,* p. 182), the reference in *Orfeo* to the fairy castle's resemblance to the 'proude court of Paradis' (376) further underlines the similarity between these fairy castles and the description of 'the New Jerusalem' in *Pearl,* down to the magical building materials – crystal, jasper, and gold – and the awe-inspiring effects on the readers. See the TEAMS edition of *Pearl,* ed. by Sarah Stanbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001) <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/stanbury-pearl> [accessed 20 January 2019] ll. 985-1032.

the condition that Partonope may not look at her for two years, to which he agrees, and he is given wealth and knightly accoutrements as a reward (1807-13 and 2516-68).

When Partonope eventually breaks the enchantment laid upon him by Melior, (which he does, like Psyche before him, at his mother's insistence, by smuggling in a magic lantern to illuminate his lover's form) he reveals her body, her human identity, and rids her of her mystery – and thus of her magical identity and her magical powers.[41] She can no longer maintain the enchantments that enabled them to carry on their affair in secret (the illusions that kept Partonope hidden from her nobles, for example). Instead, their relationship is made public, and she is bound by ordinary human obligations and constraints, including the rules of courtly society that prohibit extramarital affairs. For the remainder of the text, as Wade succinctly puts it, "She has been rationalised as human—a rationalisation that comes concurrently with the loss of those powers that associated her with fairy."[42] Through this transformation, the author of *Partonope* gets the best of both worlds, in quite a literal sense – by summoning up the otherworldly atmosphere of the fairy lover narrative, the text begins with a sense of danger and mystery, but by rationalising Melior into a human woman, the text eventually resolves with the hero happily married to a respectable, Christian, *human* woman.

Partonope of Blois intentionally uses the familiar, expected elements of the fairy mistress narrative, so clearly demonstrated in *Sir Launfal*, to create an atmosphere of magic and mystery, further demonstrating the popularity of the motif in the Middle English romance tradition. Despite the eventual revelation of her humanity, Melior's process of 'rationalisation' does not remove her radical potential from the text. The de-masculinising effects on the hero, the inverted gender roles established early in the text, and the understanding of the transferrable and ungendered nature of power created in the 'magical spaces' of the fairy mistress tropes are present in both *Partonope of Blois* and *Sir Launfal*, and the various resolutions at which the two texts eventually arrive can do nothing to mitigate the potentially radical implications of these narratives.

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[41] The connection between Partonope's betrayal – his decision to see Melior against her commandment – and Melior's literal loss of magical power is made explicit. Melior says that because he has seen her 'a-yen [her] will,' she is now "be-rafte" of "connyng," "crafte," and "skylle" (5976-79).
[42] Wade, pp. 22-23.

III. Who's on top? Authority, Sex, Bodies

As narratives of (masculine) wish-fulfilment, it is unsurprising that the fairy mistress texts are often concerned with male desire. However, they also frequently foreground particularly active, authoritative female desire as well. Not only that, these texts demonstrate a persistent fascination with female control of romantic and sexual relationships, and both male and female bodies. The narrative – and legal – implications of this inversion of usual sexual dynamics in romance will be explored in the following sections.

III.1. Seduction and Controlled Bodies

One of the consistent aspects of the fairy mistress characters (and, indeed, most fairy characters throughout the romance genre) is the active sexual role they play in their relationships. Both Melior and Tryamour seek out, select, summon and seduce the objects of their desire, while the knights are passive love-objects rather than active participants. We see this clearly evidenced in the way the exchange is described in *Sir Launfal.* The "gentyll maydenes" (231) sent by Tryamour approach Launfal as he sits "yn sorow and sore" in the woods, to tell him that "Our lady, Dame Tryamour,/Bad thou schuldest com speke wyth here…" (255-56). They bring him through the woodland to her sumptuous pavilion, which he enters to find the fairy lady who "hedde ysent" for Launfal (287). The words "bad" and "ysent" indicate the imperative nature of Tryamour's role in the relationship: linguistically, she is giving commands and dictating the shape of their relationship even before she appears in the text. Her first appearance is explicitly sexually inviting: she is lying on "a bed of prys" (283), nearly naked ("For hete her clothes down sche dede/Almest to her gerdylstede/ Than lay sche uncovert…") (289-91). In *Sir Landevale,* the author makes this still more explicit, saying she is "Almost nakyd" (98).[43] This suggests the body of the fairy mistress as yet another gift-object being awarded to the hero, an element of the wish-fulfilment-narrative. However, the fairy lady does not remain a passive object, but rather inserts her will and her voice into the romantic contract. She immediately refers to Launfal as her "lemman swete," and "Swetyng paramour!" (301, 303), saying "Ther nys no man yn Cristenté / That y love so moche as

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[43] See the appendices of A. J. Bliss's edition of *Sir Launfal* for of the text of *Landevale* (pp. 105-128).

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the" (304-05). The text repeatedly acknowledges that Tryamour had chosen Launfal as her paramour and initiated their sexual interactions – not the reverse. Launfal, unsurprisingly, does not object:

> Launfal beheld that swete wyghth –
> All hys love yn her was lyghth,
> And keste that swete flour
> And sat adoun her bysyde,
> And seyde, "Swetyng, whatso betyde,
> I am to thyn honour!" (307-12)

Tryamour then outlines the various benefits Launfal will receive from their relationship, including a bottomless purse of gold, a steed, a squire, and other knightly trappings (316-33). The two then go to bed, as the text rather frankly describes, saying: "For play, lytyll they sclepte that nyght,/ Tyll on morn hyt was daylyght" (349-50). The will at work in the creation of this relationship is, we have seen, that of the fairy lady – and while Launfal is perfectly pleased with this arrangement, his desires or wishes are not prioritized. The established binary in romances (and, indeed, in medieval discourse on sexuality more broadly) in which activity is male, passivity or stasis female, is here inverted.[44] However, in the context of the fairy narrative, the fairy lady's insistence on and Launfal's acquiescence to their romantic and sexual relationship is framed as acceptable and desirable, despite these reversed gender roles.

There is a similar pattern of female action and male acquiescence in the establishment Partonope and Melior's relationship. Partonope's journey to Melior's bedchamber is marked by the hero's uncertainty, and with a lack of willed action on his part – he continues from the forest to the unmanned ship (733), to the uninhabited town (913), to the eerily empty castle (946) because he does not know what else to do, and feels he has no other choice. He passively accepts this journey rather than taking positive

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[44] In the introduction to Ruth Mazo Karras's *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (London: Routledge, 2012) she discusses medieval understanding of the 'natural' and non-deviant roles of men and women in sex. Linguistically, Karras argues, the medieval terms for sex acts were transitive, involving a subject and direct object – sex was not mutually participatory, but rather the action of one party upon another (p. 3). Citing poetry, Latin word roots and Church doctrine, Karras explains that the actor was considered masculine, while to be acted upon was considered feminine – though she qualifies this with an explanation that 'active' was synonymous with 'penetrating,' and 'passive' with 'penetrated' (p. 4). This does not necessarily signify sexual enjoyment, position, or lust (p. 4), Karras explained; however, considering the linguistic preoccupation with the terms 'active' and 'passive' in relation to gendered sex roles, I leave the question of penetration aside in this analysis and simply am concerned with Melior's active desiring and Partonope's passivity as evidence of the unfeminine and unmasculine sexual roles they perform.

action, but does so with reluctance and misgivings, and repeated exclamations of confusion and fears for his safety. This process of arrival, and the slow penetration of one layer after another of Melior's protective barriers which she has constructed around herself, reads like an extended metaphor for a sexual encounter – but not only is the fairy lady the active participant, bringing the knight to her boudoir step by step, but he is described as overtly unwilling, fearful, reluctant, and helpless. Partonope's unwillingness and reluctance highlight the agency and force of will demonstrated by Melior by comparison, and his emotional state makes this supernatural process overtly mysterious, and potentially threatening. Unlike Launfal, Partonope is not escaping any negative personal circumstances;[45] as far as he can see, the only negative circumstances are the ones in which he finds himself.

Partonope expresses regret that he chose to leave the (dubious) safety of the forest (798-809), for at least death by wild beasts or exposure would not be a hellish, demonic end, which is what he imagines will be his fate while in the sway of Melior's unseen magical forces. He feels unmitigated "fere" at the uncanny emptiness of Melior's domain, her unmanned boat, silent city, and deserted castle, on several different occasions (741, 857, 899, 1000, 1171-83), and is in "mykell drede" of the dark (1157). He is frightened by marvels recognised by the text as extraordinary and wondrous, and unlike the stoic heroes found elsewhere in romance, he openly expresses this anxiety about the 'fayrye' aspects of his adventure – and he expects them to be 'the devil's work' (746, 892, 1006, 1189, 1285). He also repeatedly asks, "what may thys be?" (890, 971, 1005, 1138) and "what may I do?" (1113, 1158, 1145), fearfully questioning the wonders at hand rather than stoically surrendering to the spirit of *aventure*. He also repeatedly begs God to preserve him from (bodily and spiritual) harm, which, he fears, is imminent (745, 787, 1116, 1128, 1144, 1280). Compared with usual knightly stoicism, these expressions of passivity and helplessness seem unusually emotive, and mirror conventional descriptions of feminine emotion found elsewhere in the Middle English romance corpus.

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[45] Launfal is described as being in a state of disenfranchisement and humiliation prior to the arrival of the fairy messengers – uninvited to the feast because of his poverty (187-89), and having had neither food nor drink for three days (195-98), he rides out into the forest to contemplate his misery (207-11). It is perhaps unsurprising, given the grim circumstances in which he finds himself, that Launfal views the arrival of the fairy messengers with wonder and curiosity, not fear.

The image of vulnerability and sexual passivity is cemented when Partonope is described as lying, naked and afraid, in the darkened bedchamber, listening to the approaching footsteps of what he fears may be a physical (or sexual) aggressor:

> þen he sawe þe chamber all derke, …
> For fere he dryst not ryghte well slepe,
> He was in better poynte to wepe…
> He was a-ferde of some myschaunse
> Shulde hym be-falle…
> In þe flore he herde comynge
> A þynge fulle softely what euer hyt were,
> Where-off fully he gan to fere…
> "Allas þe tyme," then sayde he,
> "That euer I was of woman bore,
> For welle I wotte I am butte lore."
> Vnder þe cloþys he can hym hyde, …
> Wenynge hyt had ben sum euylle þynge…   (1174-91)

The passivity, helplessness, and almost childish fear in this text is completely at odds with the depictions of stoic masculinity we see in most romances.[46] Contrasted to this passivity, Melior is a figure of action, both as the architect of the enchanted journey upon which Partonope had so reluctantly embarked, and also as the one to physically approach him as he lies in her bed.

Rarely do Middle English romances offer interiority for female characters, but at this instance, we are given a window into Melior's mind: the author tells us that "A-shamed she ys for wommanhede," for she has a 'lusty man' in her bed (a clear threat to her reputation and her virginity). Her primary concern, however, is what Partonope will think of her. We learn that she had "broughte" "here-selfe" into this situation, "for alle here delyte / And all here plesaunce was hym to haue / To here husband, /… she wyth-owten varyauns / Purposed euer to ben hys" (1220-30). The two emotions are paralyzing, and this dilemma – shame and social propriety warring with personal desire – causes her to lie frozen in the bed beside Partonope, "Ally nyghte þus in grette distresses…"(1253). From this passage, as well as her later admission (1659-72), we know that Melior has

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[46] The notable exception being helpless Gawain cornered in the bedchamber in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* The sexual dynamics in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* have, of course, been the subject of extensive study; for a brief introduction to their relevance to this chapter (in the context of the supernatural or 'fairy' elements of the text) see Jane Gilbert's chapter 'Gender and Sexual Transgression' (pp. 53-69) and Helen Cooper's chapter 'The Supernatural' (pp. 277-93) in *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*, ed. by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997). For further discussion of parallel scenes in other roamnces, see also Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural*, p. 195, and Caroline Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, p. 26.

orchestrated the affair, and "þorowe [her] crafte" (1659) brought Partonope through the woods, over the sea, and into the city. We also know, however, that she is anxious about the aggressive role she has taken, about how Partonope will perceive her, and about how she is performing womanhood.

It is worth noting the similarities between this moment in *Partonope of Blois* and other romance scenes with magical, and amorously aggressive, women, such as the bedroom scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*[47] and Morgan le Fay in Malory's *Morte Darthur*.[48] Both texts echo many elements of the fairy mistress narrative pattern and themes, including the supernatural, inversions of gender roles, and sexual misconduct.[49] In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the knight is the passive, reluctant recipient of the amorous lady's advances, while he is helpless and recumbent in bed, and the looming threat of bodily harm Gawain faces becomes mingled with the threat to his reputation and identity which Lady Bertilak represents. Still more overtly negative, Malory describes Morgan le Fay and three other queens approaching Lancelot while he lies sleeping under an apple tree (*Morte,* p. 151). The woodland setting, the knight in repose, and the white steeds and green silk all signal elements of fairy plotlines – so when the women decide to force Lancelot to choose one of them as his paramour (on pain of death), enchant him, and carry him away bodily to Morgan's castle, they are recreating elements of the sexually aggressive fairy lover narrative, though in potentially more extreme versions.[50]

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[47] James Winny's edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Fitt 3, ll. 1126-1997.

[48] Malory, *Morte,* pp. 151-52 and 394-95.

[49] For more on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* see note 46. For instances of sexually aggressive magical woman whose narratives borrow from fairy mistress tropes, see also Malory's episode of Alexander the Orphan (*Morte,* pp. 394-95) and Morgan and the Three Queens (pp. 151).

[50] See Note 24 for more.

In these Middle English romances, then, there is a pattern of magical women choosing, then 'leading away'[51] – or in other words 'abducting' (from *abducere,* to lead away) – the objects of their sexual desire. I would argue that this pattern is visible even in the fairy mistress texts and the benign interactions between hero and fairy lady, as both Tryamour and Melior orchestrate the affairs, summon, and in some ways bodily *lead away* the human knights.

This interaction, and specifically the term *lead away*, should be considered in terms of the legal discourse on rape and ravishment in the Middle Ages. In the language of late medieval English law, the term *raptus*, or ravishment, referred both to abduction and to rape.[52] According to Corinne Saunders, early Anglo-Saxon law codes originally treated the crimes of rape and abduction as distinctly different crimes. Rape was typically indicated "by the term *niedhæmed* (literally meaning 'forcible coition')" while abduction was "signified by phrases such as *ut álædan* ('to lead out')."[53] Under later Anglo-Norman law, however, this changed. By the late thirteenth century, the Statues of Westminster had firmly established that the issues of abduction and rape were "inextricably linked."[54] Legally, *raptus* signified both rape and abduction – even 'willed abduction,' if a woman ran away from her husband or father – and the blurred elements of sexual threat and bodily seizure overlap in both late medieval English law and literature. I suggest the fairy

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[51] In the *Morte Darthur,* Morgan uses significant terms to describes the plot to imprison Lancelot: "I shalle putte an inchauntement uppon hym that he shall nat awake of all this seven owres, and than I woll lede hym away unto my castle. And whan he is surely within my holde, I shall take the inchauntement frome hym, and than lette hym chose whych of us he woll have unto peramour" (p. 151). The explicit way 'inchauntement' enables the Queens to 'lede away' Lancelot and force him to take a 'peramour' makes obvious the association of feminine magic and forced sexual/romantic relationships between fairy women and knights. For more on the legal meanings of the term 'lead out,' see Saunders's explanation of the Anglo-Saxon precedent for the phrase in 'A Matter of Consent: Middle English Romance the Law of Raptus' in *Medieval Women and the Law*, ed. by Noël James Menuge (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2000) pp. 105-24 (p. 106).

[52] In *Rape and Ravishment*, Saunders details the evolution of the law of rape in medieval England. Anglo-Norman laws, established in a feudal context, considered rape to be an offense to the woman's feudal superior as much as to the woman herself (p. 49). Similarly, in the late fourteenth century, the offense done to a woman was extended to her family, who could then seek retribution (p. 62). This makes 'theft' of female sexual purity, which was of great value in the late medieval marriage market, the central issue in rape cases. See also Saunders, 'A Matter of Consent: Middle English Romance the Law of *Raptus,*' p. 106.

[53] Saunders, 'A Matter of Consent,' p. 106.

[54] See Saunders, 'A Matter of Consent,' p. 106, and Chapter One of *Rape and Ravishment* for the blurring of the two categories of abduction and rape. See also Kim M. Phillips, 'Written on the Body: Reading Rape from the Twelfth to Fifteenth Centuries' in *Medieval Women and the Law*, ed. by Menuge, pp. 125-44, and Janet L. Nelson and Alice Rio's chapter 'Women and Laws in Early Medieval Europe' in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe,* ed. by Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) pp. 103-117 (p. 105).

mistresses' treatment of their knights may be viewed as a form of abduction, and therefore potentially under the umbrella of the legal term *raptus*.

However, this poses many difficulties – the primary one being that central issue in *raptus* cases, as Corinne Saunders says, was "the theft of the woman as property either of her husband or father" – and of course, in the fairy mistress texts it is not the women being abducted.[55] The language of the late medieval English legal codes dealing with *raptus* is predicated on this idea of women as objects of exchange – and thus, linguistically and legally, it does not allow for the possibility of *women* abducting *men*. This is not to say that female violence or threat to male victims never happened, but rather that the language and legal discourse had no space for, or concept of, passive male victims of female aggression.

Yet romance, and especially these texts with magical and sexually aggressive women, show us precisely that. If there is no room in the language of the law for women abducting men, and if we take this description of the fairy lady carrying off her beloved at face value, then she appears to be performing a distinctly unfeminine role, while the passive knight (an object of desire rather than the one actively desiring) appears to be playing an unmasculine role. These romances mimic the power-dynamics of an abduction or assault – with a male aggressor and female victim – but with the genders reversed. This inversion of gender- and sex-roles is not presented as wholly undesirable, because we usually assume the unspoken consent of the knight (recall the fairy mistress texts are wish-fulfilment narratives)[56] but neither is it a wholly comfortable fantasy, as we see from the fear and uncertainty Partonope expresses.

Melior's unfeminine performance creates palpable anxiety and tension, expressed with an unusual degree of unrestrained emotion on the part of the hero. Partonope's feelings throughout the early section of the text are not chivalric bravery and courage, but, as we have seen, something approaching stark terror. Melior expresses anxiety as well, worrying that Partonope will be uncomfortable with her behaviour. Her specific concern is that he will think she may be 'won lyghtly' – that her aggressive actions will mark her as unmaidenly or potentially inconstant, someone who is "to hasty" and "love[s] lyghtly" (1679-80). Although she does not go so far as to refer to her actions as abduction

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[55] Saunders, 'A Matter of Consent,' p. 106-107.
[56] For more on the attractive and pleasurable qualities of female seductive spaces, see Larrington, p. 57.

or ravishment, Melior clearly feels uneasy about the transgressive nature of her too-authoritative, too-aggressive behaviour and the obviously unfeminine power they betray.

The fact that this is followed by what Amy Vines refers to as a 'staged rape' makes the whole encounter more theatrical, transparently performative, and transparently gender-transgressive.[57] After lying still in the bed for a lengthy period of time, the narrator tells us that Melior "streyghte forþe here legge, and happed to ffele" (1298-99) Partonope beside her, and she begins to cry out, though the narrative is careful to describe her cries as "not lowde" and "fulle softe" (1304, 1307). The suggestion is that she does not wish to call attention to this potentially shameful situation, and also, we are reminded, she does not truly object to his presence there. Despite this, she threatens to have him imprisoned, (1328-38) demands he leave at once, and claims that she is 'betrayed' (1340) by his invasion of her space (as though she had not orchestrated his arrival there herself), playing the outraged noble damsel whose honour is at stake. Partonope, too afraid to face the empty castle in the dark, and comforted by the fact that his bed-partner does not seem to be a demon, does not leave, pleads for mercy, and eventually works up the courage to approach her:

> And nere þys lady he gan to gonne.
> Ouer here hys arme he gan to laye,…
> Plesaunce had hym ouer-come
> þat all hys wyttes were fro hym nome. (1534-40)

His sexual desire has overcome his wits, and so when Melior, who does not know "Whatte to done" vehemently rejects him saying "Lette ben!" (1542, 1544), he does not cease his advances. Instead, he pulls her closer. Melior tolerates his actions, the author tells us, "pasyentye," and her protests are made "full mekely." Partonope ignores her pleas, however.

> In hys armes her faste to hym brase.
> And fulle softely þen sho sayde: "Allas!"
> And her legges sho gan to knytte,
> And wyth hys knees he gan hem on-shote.
> And þer-wyth-all she sayde: "Syr, mercy!"
> He wolde not lefe ne be þer-by;
> For of her wordes toke he no hede;
> But þys a-way her maydenhede

[57] Amy Vines, 'A Woman's "Crafte:" Sexual and Chivalric Patronage in Partonope of Blois' in *Women's Power in Late Medieval Romance* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2013) pp. 85-114 (p. 93).

<div style="text-align: center;">Haþe he þen rafte, and gyffe her hys. (1563-71)</div>

This is the description of rape, and Melior's immediate response seems to confirm that reading:

> Thys yonge lady was alle dysmayde...
> Twyes she sayde: "Allas, allas,...
> Had I had strenghte or ells myghte,
> I dar welle say In all þys fflyghte
> Ye shulde not haue had þat nowe ye haue...
> And wyth þat worde she wox all sadde,
> And tenderley she gan to wepe. (1574-89)

With her tears and protests, it seems very much as though the eponymous hero of the romance has raped his future paramour. As Vines reminds us, however, the narrative suggests her protests are feigned[58] – she has already disclosed her motivations to the reader, saying that what she most desires is "hym to haue / To here husband," and that she "purposed euer to ben hys," (1223-24, 1229-30). We also know of her active role in his presence there (1659-1676), perhaps explaining why her complaints are 'soft' and 'gentle,' lacking in force. It seems, therefore, that this resistance and rejection is a performance. Melior establishes her feminine submissiveness and Partonope's sexual dominance in feigning sexual unwillingness to counteract the effects of her too-authoritative (i.e., unfeminine) role in summoning him. The sexual politics of this encounter are, of course, deeply troubling and uncomfortable for modern audiences, despite these suggestions of her unspoken consent from the text. We are left to guess whether medieval readers would have experienced similar discomfort with the sex scenes above. The text does register a clear sense of unease about their sexually charged dynamic more generally, however, evidenced in Melior's performance. It seems her abduction of Partonope was so outwith the bounds of gender-appropriate behaviours that Melior then feels compelled to over-perform feminine submission, embodying female passivity and turning Partonope into a sexual aggressor.

The performance Melior gives here is alternately unfeminine and hyper-feminine, and thus gender-anxious. Her aggression then submission causes Partonope to perform first a feminised and then hyper-masculinised role, while Launfal and Tryamour enact a similar, though less dramatic, dynamic. This gender-play is allowed in part because of the

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[58] Vines, pp. 91-95.

fairy mistresses' assumed sexual voracity – and in part because of their position outwith the Christian moral and ethical codes applicable to human beings.[59] The effect of this reimagining of gender roles is not merely radical in its transformation of the female role but also of the male role as well. The fairy mistresses are given a degree of agency, a 'masculine' (or active) role in wooing and seducing, active sexual desire and extramarital sexual liaisons, all of which go uncriticised by the text. The men, meanwhile, become virtually passive love-objects, and subject to the fairy women's lusts (rather than women being the objects of male desire) which is an especially radical transformation of the male sexual role. This inversion process is exaggerated by the expectations of romance – in a genre devoted to male action and the subjecthood of the male identity, the love-relationships in these texts contain surprisingly *little* male action when it comes to sex and seduction, and in the confines of the magical feminine space, the question of whether the knight is subject or object seems almost moot. While female desire and wooing women were not unheard of in romance texts,[60] for extra-marital sex to be so casually condoned, even celebrated, and still more importantly, for the heroes to transform into reluctant, or at least passive, objectified love-objects, demonstrates the unusual ways sex and gender are configured in these texts. These unconventional performances of gendered sexual behaviour question and destabilise our understanding of the sexual politics of medieval romance.

III. 2. Bodies and the Law

Bodies play a particularly significant role in both of these texts, in ways which undermine our preconceived notions of object/subject gendered relationships in medieval romance. The control of bodies is what defines the fairy mistresses' unusual authority – Melior controls who has access to her body (and how, and when, and in what ways) and uses her powers of enchantment to make Partonope and her subjects bodily invisible. Tryamour also controls who has access to her body, and her bodily absence after Launfal's betrayal (730) is one of the most obvious signs of the gravity of his sin. Additionally, the proof of Launfal's innocence (and thus the preservation of the knight from bodily harm) is writ

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[59] Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment,* pp. 230-231.
[60] For example, see Weiss.

upon the corporeal form of the fairy, when Tryamour rides into the courtroom upon her white horse to prove with her body that he was telling the truth.

        This courtroom scene deserves some particular consideration for its radical reimagining of gender roles and the functions of gendered bodies in romance. After Queen Gwenore propositions Launfal (676-81) and is angrily rejected (683-4, 691-6), she responds with fury: she calls him a coward, says he deserves death (685-86), and makes veiled accusations of homosexuality ("Thou lovyst no woman, ne no woman the," 689).[61] She then tells Arthur that Launfal had "besofte [her] of shame" (716) and attempted to commit adultery with her, in addition to his boasts of loving a woman far more beautiful than she. Gwenore mimics the biblical Potiphar's wife, displacing her adulterous impulses onto the man she attempted to seduce. Launfal's trial, then, becomes embroiled with issues of sexual misconduct, and although the main concern brought before the jurors is the beauty of his lover, the accusations of adultery and homosexuality are also tacitly under consideration. The theme of the innocent victim falsely accused of sexual misconduct is something seen regularly in the 'feminine' romances (such as Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and *Emaré*, for example)[62] and in the motif of the 'Calumniated Wife.'[63] Helen Cooper summarizes this motif, detailing the romance pattern in which the accusations are levelled against "…an individual woman, most often a wife, who is charged with unchastity… Her accuser is most often a man whose advances she has rejected, who aims to displace his own guilt onto her…"[64] This pattern is reproduced in Gwenore's accusations against Launfal, but with a critical gender inversion – Launfal

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[61] This accusation is still more explicit in Marie de France's *Lanval:* "…Asiz le m'ad hum dit sovent / Que des femmez n'avez talent. / Vallez avez bien afeitiez, / Ensemble od eus vus deduiez…" ("*…Often have I been told / From women you withhold. / And with many a knave, / You strangely behave…*") Text from Marie de France, *Poésies de Marie de France*, ed. by B. de Roquefort, (Paris: Marescq, 1832) pp. 222-24. Translation from Joanny Moulin, 'Representations of the Self in the Middle English Breton Lays' in *Études Épistémè*, 25 (2014).

[62] Andrea Hopkins, 'Female Saints and Romance Heroines: Feminine Fiction and Faith among the Literate Elite' in *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England,* ed. by Rosalind Field, Phillipa Hardman and Michelle Sweeney (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010) pp. 121-38. See especially page 123, and her discussion of the feminine, or 'Family' romances, including *Lay le Fresne, Emaré, Le Bone Florence of Rome, The Erle of Toulouse, The King of Tars,* and more tangentially *Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Triamour,* and *Sir Eglamour.*

[63] This motif is exemplified by the Constance narrative in Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale.' See the Thompson *Motif-Index* 707 (II) 'The Calumniated Wife' and also 706 ('The Maiden without Hands'). For a study of the Middle English romances that exhibit the calumniated wife theme, see Margaret Schlauch, *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens* (New York: New York University Press, 1927). See also Cooper's chapter 'Women on Trial' in *The English Romance in Time*.

[64] Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* pp. 269-72.

plays the role typically filled by the calumniated woman, while the queen is the rejected accuser. The hero's passivity in the face of adverse fate also adds to his feminisation (or de-masculinisation). The proper knightly response to such a situation, of course, is to take action and arms, and to prove with prowess the strength of one's innocence (something falsely accused women often require champions to do *for* them). For example, in the face of accusations of adultery in the final books of the *Morte Darthur*, Lancelot demands a combat "before the kynge" where he can answer the accusations "as a knyghte shulde" – with his sword (*Morte,* p. 667). Launfal, on the other hand, does not attempt to answer Gwenore's accusations 'as a knight should' and makes no attempt to settle the matter by combat, but instead awaits the verdict of the court while privately mourning the absence of his fairy lover – something we would expect of the patient-Griselda character-type, but not the eponymous (and masculine) hero of a romance.

When Tryamour eventually arrives at Arthur's court, heralded by her maidens and their otherworldly, ostentatious beauty and wealth (883-91), the beauty of her body and the male gaze upon it receive repeated description. She is said to be:

> As rose on rys her rode was red;
> The her schon upon her hed
> As gold wyre that schynyth bryght;…
> Wyth gentyll body and myddyll small,
> That semely was of *syght*
> Her sadell was semyly set…
> That any *man* myghte *aspye*…
> A softe pas her palfray fond,
> That *men* her schuld *beholde*…
> Sche dede of her mantyll on the flet,
> That *men* schuld her *beholde* the bet…
> Up stod the Quene and ladyes stoute,
> Her for to *beholde* all aboute…
> Kyng Artour seyde wythouten othe,
> *Ech man* may *ysé* that ys sothe   (937-1004, e*mphasis mine*)

The importance of the *sight* of her body is in part judicial, as Launfal's freedom depends on her being more beautiful than Gwenore. Vitally, it also emphasises the fact that Launfal is being rescued by a *woman*, whose femininity is on constant display. She does not need to be 'un-sexed' in order to perform her role of defence attorney, but rather is obviously feminine and legally authoritative at once. Neither is she a silent bodily object,

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but rather through her speech as much as through her presence she preserves Launfal's honour and freedom. She explains the situation to Arthur, and he cannot argue with her:

> Than seyde sche to Artour the Kyng,
> "Syr, hydyr I com for swych a thyng:
> To skere Launfal the knyght;
> That he never, yn no folye,
> Besofte the quene of no drurye,
> By dayes ne be nyght.
>
> "Therfor, Syr Kyng, good kepe thou nyme!
> He bad naght her, but sche bad hym
> Here lemman for to be;
> And he answerede her and seyde
> That hys lemmannes lothlokest mayde
> Was fayryre than was sche." (991-1002)

Tryamour's verbal testament, combined with her presentation of her body as evidence, demonstrates that she is a persuasive and effective legal advocate, witness, and eventually – when she blinds Gwenore in punishment (1006-08) – a judge as well. This is a different sort of courtroom presence than we see from the petitioning or pleading ladies in other romances.[65] Tryamour is described as active and commanding, rather than being framed in the language of petition and request. This setting is also distinctly different from the Court of Ladies seen in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale,' for although Guinevere sits as judge in that scene, that courtroom is imagined as a separate entity from the judicial and legal bodies that ordinarily govern Camelot.[66] Tryamour, on the other hand, intrudes into the male realm of Arthur's court, and disrupts the proceedings of a trial run by men. Tryamour's authoritative success in the legal arena of the courtroom is particularly radical given that women's voices and women's bodies were of limited legal standing in late medieval English law courts. According to Shulamith Shahar's work *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, not only were women "barred from serving as judges or lawyers," but most women's testimony was considered insufficient

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[65] For an example of ladies petitioning their erring husbands for mercy in romance, see *Athelston,* ll. 259-84, in Herzman, Drake, and Salisbury's *Four Romances of England*. For more on mercy and the power of feminine petition and counsel, see the previous chapter. The other Middle English romances in which women are involved in legal penalties or judgment, are usually the texts iterating the 'calumniated queen' motif. These include *Octavian, Emaré, Le Bone Florence of Rome* and others. In these texts, however, the courtroom almost always avoided entirely, with the king or lord passing judgment without the pretence of judicial or legal backing, and the women usually are victimized by the law, rather than using it for their own ends.

[66] 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' ll. 900-918.

evidence in late medieval English courts of law for all crimes except rape.[67] This is in part to do with what Kelleher calls 'the legal fiction of coverture'[68] – women's status as legally subject to their fathers or husbands, rather than full independent adults themselves.[69] There were of course exceptions to this idea of women's legal dependence upon men, such as widows and singlewomen (*femme sole* as opposed to *femme coverte*) and women taking advantage of the grey areas of the law between those two categories, who could and did take advantage of the courts when necessary.[70] By and large, however, women's presence in the courts was curtailed by their marital subjection to the will and person of their husbands, and more generally by the patriarchal medieval view of femininity as distinctly second-class and a disadvantage.[71]

In the context of romance, the role of the valiant rescuer, mounted upon a white steed and cloaked with the power of righteousness and justice, is familiar – of course, that rescuer is almost always a man. Usually it is Lancelot riding in to rescue Guinevere when her reputation has been maligned, as we see in the conclusion of Malory's *Morte Darthur* (p. 684). By setting Tryamour as a parallel to Lancelot, Chestre's text emphasises her unfeminine performance. Both in the context of romance and of late medieval English law, then, Tryamour's behaviour in Launfal's trial is extraordinary, and more

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[67] See Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*. Chaya Galai, trans. (London: Routledge, 2003) pp. 12-14. According to Shahar, women's words had little legal weight in the medieval English court. Recent studies have suggested, however, that women occasionally but knowledgeably took advantage of what legal avenues were available to them, and made use of the courts despite the gendered limitations they faced. For more on this perspective, see for example Sue Sheridan Walker's *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

[68] See Marie A. Kelleher, 'Later Medieval Law in Community Context' in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe,* ed. by Bennett and Karras, pp. 133-47.

[69] Fully exploring the nuances of canon law to do with women's marital and legal status would demand further space than this chapter affords; for the purposes of this chapter, I have relied upon Cordelia Beattie's work, especially '"Living as a Single Person": marital status, performance and the law in late medieval England,' *Women's History Review*, 17.3 (2008) 327-340, and also *Medieval Single Women: the Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 2007); see also Walker, pp. 3-4. For more on medieval marriage laws and their effect on women's freedoms, see Connor McCarthy, *Marriage in Medieval England: Law, Literature and Practice* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2004), especially his discussion of women and/as property (pp. 51-55). For more on ways women's presence in the courts was curtailed by their gender, see Emma Hawkes's work, '"[S]he will … protect and defend her rights boldly by law and reason…": Women's knowledge of Common Law and Equity Courts in Late-Medieval England' in *Medieval Women and the Law,* ed. by Menuge, pp. 145-61.

[70] Beattie, 'Living as a Single Person,' and Walker, pp. 1-13.

[71] See Kelleher, p. 135, for her summary of the canon law perspective of a married couple as one body, with the man as the head, and the woman as the body, and also Hawkes, pp. 146-52. For more on the medieval understanding of gender difference as fundamental and incontrovertible, see the introduction and first chapter of Michelle M. Sauer's *Gender in Medieval Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) pp. 1-46, and Bennett and Karras's introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, pp. 1-14.

authoritative than the typical gendered performance of women in the male realm of the courtroom. Tryamour acts as witness, defence attorney, prosecutor (of the real culprit, Gwenore) and judge meting out grim justice, all roles formally closed to women in reality,[72] but open to the fairy in this text because of the flexibility and permissiveness that seems to go hand in hand with the 'otherness' of magical identity in medieval romance.

IV. Sovereign Lord, Fairy Lady: Chivalry and Gender Performance

Another peculiarity of the fairy mistresses, and one which continues to destabilise our understanding of the characters as traditionally and conventionally feminine, is the lordly role they perform in the chivalric social systems described by these texts. Borrowing from the courtly love tradition, Middle English romances are familiar with the idea of the lady governing a knight's heart or commanding his loyalty,[73] so initially Partonope and Launfal pledging fidelity to their "souereyn lady" (*Partonope,* 1911) seems part of the same pattern and thus unsurprising. In the fairy mistress texts considered here, however, the fairy lady governs not only the heart, but also the body, mind, and – critically – the *wallet* of the knight in question. These are all aspects of knightly identity which are outwith traditionally feminine areas of influence, and that the knights submit to feminine authority in these ways further demonstrates the radical and gender-non-conforming roles played by the fairy women and their chosen lovers.

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[72] Shahar, pp. 13-14.

[73] See section I.2 of the Introduction to this thesis for more on the pattern of the knight's romantic submission to his lady in the courtly love tradition.

IV.1 Education

The fairy mistresses exhibit their influence over the minds of their knights through their performance of the (typically masculine-coded)[74] roles of teacher and chivalric instructor. Of course, neither in romance nor in reality was the possibility of feminine counsel ignored – in romances there are many instances of wives and mothers offering advice and counsel to men.[75] Records show, too, a preponderance of evidence from letters[76] and personal accounts that women did act as counsellors and advisors in the high and late medieval period.[77] Queens and noblewomen counselling their husbands or sons, or even distant religious authorities and popes,[78] were not uncommon occurrences, and we see written evidence from across the medieval period that the value of a (noble)woman's opinion was not uniformly dismissed, but often valued. I would argue that there is a distinct difference, however, between the counsel offered to a husband or adult son, and the advice given by the fairy mistresses to their would-be-lovers, in which the magical

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[74] Stemming from Paul's notorious epistle to Timothy 2:12, women were broadly prohibited from teaching in public throughout the medieval period. Although Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace argue in their introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), that these strictures were far from universal, the prohibitions against women teaching *men,* in *public* (due to their inconsistency, their bodily weakness, their social inferiority, their inability to attain ecclesiastical office, and the sin to which their seductive speech would inspire men) amounted to nearly insurmountable barriers to women performing the public role of instructor to men. See Alcuin Blamires's excerpts from 'The Trial of Walter Brut' in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, pp. 252-54.

[75] As mentioned in the previous chapter, section III.4, while intercession was heavily feminine-coded, counsel was more neutral; many women in romance are portrayed as counselling or advising their sons or husbands. Some examinations of women's participation in written culture, instruction, and counsel in the Middle Ages include: Albrecht Classen, *The Power of a Woman's Voice in Medieval and Early Modern Literatures*, pp. 72-73, Rosemarie Deist, *Gender and Power*: *Counsellors and their Masters in Antiquity and Medieval Courtly Romance*, p. 230, and Jennifer Summit, 'Women and Authorship,' pp. 91-108. The matter of feminine counsel and teaching was discussed in ecclesiastical contexts in the late fourteenth century, particularly in connection with the heretical movements such as Lollardy and the threat they posed to orthodoxy and its hierarchical control of who was and was not permitted to preach. In Blamires's excerpts from 'The Trial of Walter Brut' some of the arguments for and against female preachers are laid out, and the prohibitions found in Paul's epistles are problematized and challenged (Blamires, pp. 250-60). This demonstrates greater flexibility and permissiveness for the idea of some forms of feminine instruction (though not, Brut asserts, of men, nor while in public) than Paul's epistles initially indicate.

[76] For a sense of the breadth of women's participation in the written culture of the early to high Middle Ages via letters, see Joan Ferrante's database, *Epistolae: Medieval Women's Latin Letters Database* (Columbia University, 2014) <https://epistolae.ccnmtl.columbia.edu> [accessed 20 January 2019]. See also Dinshaw and Wallace.

[77] Many of the works of Christine de Pizan are directly relevant, and particularly *The Treasure of the City of Ladies,* ed. and trans. by Sarah Lawson (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), in which she discusses women as counsellors and peacemakers. See also Shawn D. Ramsey's article, 'The Voices of Counsel: Women and Civic Rhetoric in the Middle Ages,' *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 42.5 (2012) 472-89, and her discussion of women's active letter writing and rhetorical practices (p. 487).

[78] Ramsey, pp. 478-79.

women offer not decision-making assistance, but rather formative, identity-moulding instruction which demonstrates their influence over the worldview and behaviour of the knight in question.

In fact, one of the distinguishing features of the fairy mistress narratives is, as we have seen, the sexual (and definitively *not* maternal) relationship the fairy mistresses have with their knights. One could argue that their sexual relationship is part of this process of instructing their chosen knights: sexual maturity is part of the knight's identity, and in helping them attain that maturity the fairy mistresses are crafting the noble masculinity of their lovers. This is not specific to the fairy mistresses, however, nor even women with much agency in romance – the women-as-objects-and-rewards system found elsewhere in romance equally supplies the knights with this stage in their development.[79] Few knights require the ladies to so obviously and actively orchestrate the affair, however.

The idea of a woman – even an aggressive, sexually mature and desiring woman – instructing a young man in sexual play as part of his education is not destabilising for our understanding of medieval gender roles. Where we *do* see instruction and education in a way that seems to exceed an expected feminine role – both by the standards of romance and by an understanding of real social norms of late medieval England – is in Melior's performance of the role of counsellor and chivalric instructor. As Partonope prepares to depart on his first military exploit, Melior charges him to be honourable and chivalrous, and uses his ancestry as a teaching tool:

> Off Ectorys blode ye be þat worthy knyghte,
> Where euer [he were] In batelle or in fyghte,
> Off knyghte-hode euer he bare þe pryse a-waye…
> Alle-way he louyd cheualrye…
> And sethe ye be come of gentylle blode,
> Off Ector of Troye, þat sette no pryse be goode,
> Butte sette hys loue euer in knyghte-hode,
> Loke ye sewe forþe þat no-belle blode,
> And sette yowre herte euer in cheualry.
> Loke In yowre persone fayle no curtesy,
> And be lowly to smale as welle as to grete… (1841-55)

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[79] See for example the third book of Wolfram Von Eschenbach's *Parzival,* trans. by Helen M. Mustard and Charles E. Passage (New York: Random House, 1961), in which the hero's misadventures following his mother's instructions on honourable chivalric identity lead to his eventual knightly maturity.

The way Melior delivers this information suggests that not only is she offering wisdom and counsel about the correct way to approach chivalric pursuits, but that she is also delivering Partonope's identity to him – whether he knew of his ancestry before this moment or not, it reads as though Melior is giving Partonope new information. The narrator, from whom the audience learned of Partonope's heritage in the conventional opening of the text, appears to be ceding his authority to the lady, and Melior then assumes the voice of the narrator. Melior has authorship of Partonope's identity, an extraordinary level of *auctoritas* for a woman in a romance, and this sense of her authority over the knight's narrative is heightened when she issues her demand that he accept knighthood only from her. Adhering to her command, Partonope is not knighted until late in the text, long after the completion of his first chivalric victories when most aspiring young heroes would have received knighthood. This further demonstrates Melior's authority over his knightly identity.

Melior continues to instruct Partonope on how to be a man of worth, and a noble knight, with an extensive and specific list of instructions:

> Drawe yow to armes and to knygthode
> And loke there lacke ynne yowe no manhode
> Loke 3e be large and geuyth faste…
> And yf ye canne aspye ther be
> Any worthy knyghtys thorow the londe
> In alle the haste loke that ye fownde
> There as they bene in armes bolde,
> Wyth gode y-now hem to with-holde
> Loke thatt ye be gentyll, lowly, and meke
> And geuyth to hem gode clothys eke
> Alle-so of speche beyth fayre and lowlyche
> As wele to the pore as to the Reche
> Affter my cowncel loke thatt ye wyrke
> And louyth welle God and holy chyrche …
> Madame sayde he this goode lesson
> Shalle y welle kepe and thys sermon. (2405-34)

The key aspects of chivalric life she touches on here – prowess in battle, Christian morality, duty to the church, chivalric honour, noble generosity, humility, and the establishment and respect for bonds of friendship and alliance – all exceed what we might understand as 'feminine' provinces (issues of the heart, the body, or the home). Instead, her instructions (or 'sermon,' as Partonope says) seem to echo didactic literature written by and for knights, such as Geffroi de Charny's chivalric instructional manual, *A*

Knight's Own Book of Chivalry.[80] Charny's explanation of how a good knight and a good leader of men ought to behave touches on many of the key points Melior offers, including the necessity of military prowess, recognising and valuing men of worth and rewarding them justly, seeking honour and loving faithfully, practicing humility and not boasting, loving one's friends while being 'fierce' to one's enemies, respecting and caring for the poor rather than despising them for their poverty, giving generously, listening to good counsel, giving credit to God for one's achievements, and loving the church.[81] All these aspects of chivalric education echo, point by point, the instructions Melior gives to Partonope, highlighting her awareness of the conventions of the chivalric system and the accuracy with which she articulates formal knightly instruction.

The key components of this instruction on knightly identity, offered both by real 'practicing knights'[82] and by the fairy mistress Melior, echo the messages given to young men in contemporary Middle English courtesy books and didactic literature. For example, the mid-fifteenth century *Boke of Curtasy*[83] stresses similar moral issues, including the importance of forgiveness over vengeance ("To for-gyf þou shalle þe hast; / To veniaunce loke þou come on last; / Draw þe to pese with alle þy strengþe" 185-87), liberality and generosity, treating all men alike regardless of status ("Also of seruice þou shalle be fre / To euery mon in hys degré" 193-94), kindness, and respect for God and the saints (201-03). Didactic literature of this kind was not intended for a courtly aristocratic audience, but rather for the gentry and wealthy merchant classes. This, of course, also reflects the socio-economic standing of the readers and audiences of popular verse romances like *Partonope of Blois* and *Sir Launfal*.[84] Melior's instructions, then, would likely have been familiar to the audience, thereby simultaneously bringing the romance closer to the social reality of conduct and moral instruction, and also bringing the audience into the fantasy of chivalry and wish-fulfilment.

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[80] Geffroi de Charny, *A Knight's Own Book of Chivalry*, Intro. by Richard W. Kaeuper, trans. by Elspeth Kennedy (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).
[81] Geffroi de Charny, *A Knight's Own Book of Chivalry,* pp. 47-70.
[82] See Kaeuper's introduction to Charny's *A Knight's Own Book of Chivalry*, p. 3.
[83] I consulted the edition of *The Boke of Curtasy* included in Furnivall's collection of Middle English instructional poetry, *The Babees Book*, ed. by Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS 32 (London: Trübner, 1868; University of Michigan Library, 2006) <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AHA6127.0001.001 299–327> [accessed 21 January 2019] ll. 299–327.
[84] See the Introduction to this thesis for more.

Neither didactic literature for young men nor formal knightly instruction in the Middle Ages imagined women as teachers of men, however. Literary relatives of the *Boke of Curtasy* include *How the Wise Man Taught His Son* and *How the Goodwife Taught Her Daughter*, and the gender-division in the imagined audiences and subjects of both of the above texts illustrates the prevailing wisdom that while women might educate their daughters, too much feminine influence in young men's education was problematic. Education in the chivalric code as described by Charny would have been part of the process of a knight's training, and older, more experienced knights would be charged with instructing young aspiring knights-to-be. We see this pattern of instruction, for example, in Ramon Llull's thirteenth-century *Buke of the Order of Knyghthood*.[85] Llull describes an old hermit-knight instructing the young squire in the conventions of chivalry and knighthood, and although this is by no means a universally accurate or factual account of the transmission of chivalric lessons, Llull's text represents a version of how noble society imagined knightly instruction to take place. Chivalric instructional literature like the works by Charny and Llull often describes women's role in urging and inspiring knights to achieve chivalric success through their beauty and virtue,[86] but women are not depicted as educators responsible for passing on the tenets of chivalric society. Melior's words are conventional, then, but her role as instructor is not.

The lessons Melior gives Partonope are extraordinary not in their nature, but in the degree to which they adhere to the detailed instructions and codes of behaviour given by men, to men, in contemporary late medieval literature – because the instructor is a *woman*. While women in romance are often highly educated, and magical or exotic 'othered' women in particular,[87] their role in the text is rarely as instructional or as involved with masculine codes of behaviour. That Melior herself is quite learned (we eventually learn of her broad and extraordinary education, from her command of languages, sciences, religion, and philosophy to her expertise in the magic arts) is

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[85] See chapter one of Ramon Llull's *The buke of the order of knyghthood*, trans. by Gilbert Hay, ed. by Beriah Botfield (Edinburgh: Abbotsford Club, 1847). For more on the importance of knightly instruction, and from whom an aspiring knight received their instruction, see Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (London: Yale University Press, 1984) pp. 77-80.

[86] See Geffroi de Charny, p. 52, Section 12 and pp. 66-67, Section 20 for more on the role of women in inspiring knights to noble chivalric success.

[87] For more on the pattern of exotic women and scientific knowledge in Middle English romances, see the previous chapter and the discussion of the 'Learned East' stereotype, and its impact upon the representation of the Saracen Princess characters.

unsurprising (5904-35).[88] This broad knowledge fits within the romance patterns both of exotic women from the magical East, and also of inscrutable fairies, who operate outside the realm of logic and have uncanny omniscience – but chivalric codes and the rules of courtly society fall outside the expected realm of knowledge even for these magically 'other' women. It is the fact that Melior imparts this vitally *masculine*, identity-forming information to Partonope, acting as mentor and teacher rather than merely lover, that destabilises our understanding of her gender as traditionally feminine, and his as traditionally masculine.

Given the biblical prohibitions against women acting as teachers to men (as stated by Paul in Timothy 2:12, "suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence…") and the corresponding lack of female teachers throughout the medieval period,[89] the instructional role played by Melior in this romance is extraordinary, and contrary to social norms of gendered behaviour. She is not the only magical woman to dispense specific, knowledgeable chivalric instruction in Middle English romances, however. There is a pattern of supernaturally 'othered' women teaching and, through precise verbal tutelage, helping craft the masculine knightly identity of a knight in need of training. For example, Melusine (herself a fairy-mistress character) delivers a nearly identical litany of advice on how to be a worthy man in the fourteenth-century *Melusine,*[90] in which she commands her sons to "here the deuyne seruyse,… honoure & worship… holy chirch," to give aid and comfort to "pouere wydowes,… orphenyns,… alle good maydens that men wol haue dysheryted vnlawfully," and to "be meke, humble, swete, curtoys & humayne, both vnto grete & lesse." She also

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[88] Melior's education is described as broad, cutting-edge, and inescapably exotic or 'other.' Because she is her father's only 'heyre' (5904), her father sent 'great clerks' to teach her "clergye and gret wysdoun /That I myght the better gouerne the kingdom." Her education included "the Sevyn seyence" and the virtues of "euery herbe…How in phisike they haue her worching," meaning that she is a skilled healer in addition to her other accomplishments. As a good Christian she also learned "of the trynyte" and general doctrine – but because she is an exotic foreign women, her education naturally also included "nygromancy," and "enchauntements." By the time she is fifteen, she claims, she had surpassed all her masters. The author wishes to impress upon the audience the truly impressive education Melior has received, and her personal wit and intellect is figured as extraordinary but attractive. For more, see lines 5904-35. Compare this description with the education of Josian in *Bevis of Hampton* (3671-80).

[89] For a broad overview of women's education and role in the production and dissemination of knowledge in the medieval period, see Carolyne Larrington, *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook.* (New York: Routledge, 1995), especially Chapter 6: 'Education and Knowledge,' pp. 187-216.

[90] The story of Melusine, the lamia-mother of the house of Lusignan, will be addressed in the following chapter. The version which I use here is the Donald's edition of the Middle English prose *Melusine*. For more information Melusine's function as a fairy character, see Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* pp. 188-92, Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* pp. 175-76 and 188, and Wade, pp. 28-29.

counsels her sons to "…rauysshe no woman," to eschew "pryde," to "doo & kepe justice, yeldyng right aswel to the leste as to the moost," to "Haue an herte as a fyers Lyon ayenst your enemyes," and to share one's wealth amongst one's friends.[91] Melusine's magical identity gives her added authority, Helen Cooper argues,[92] and thus these chivalric lessons – which are so clearly about the roles of men in a masculine-dominant society – can be given by a woman without it seeming uncomfortably incongruous. The same applies to the Lady of Lake's instructions to Lancelot in the prose *Lancelot-Grail.* Upon his departure from her enchanted home in the lake into the Arthurian world of chivalry, she not only teaches Lancelot how knights must behave (touching on the same themes of humility, fairness, piety, justice, bravery and generosity), but explains the whole history and justification of the chivalric order, displaying impressively nuanced and clear understanding of the structures of chivalry.[93]

The contents of these romance women's instructions are echoed in *Partonope of Blois,* as well as in Charny's chivalric manual and the courtesy literature of the day. The primary difference between the roles played by Melusine or the Lady of the Lake and the fairy mistresses in *Partonope* or *Launfal* comes from the fact that Melusine, the Lady of the Lake, and many of the other women we see acting as counsellors to young, inexperienced knights are, in fact, their mothers, or women fulfilling maternal roles. For mothers to educate and counsel their sons (by blood or by fostering, as with Lancelot) is unsurprising, and reflects a romance tradition of maternal women dispensing wisdom to impressionable young men.[94] Feminine influence on the identities of young, impressionable knights is viewed by romance with greater suspicion, however, when that tutelage comes not from a maternal figure, but from a lover. Mothers may safely instruct their sons without disrupting the structures of power in romance, but for a wife to educate her husband or lover is something else entirely, as seen, for example, in the relationship

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[91] This is taken from Donald's edition of *Melusine,* Chapter 20: 'How Vryan & Guyon toke leue of bothe theyre fader & moder, and of the help that they had of þem,' pp. 108-13.
[92] Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* p. 205.
[93] See Norris J. Lacy's edition of the *Lancelot-Grail, Vol. 3* (Lancelot Part I) for this material, especially pages 111-16. For a discussion of this pattern, see Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* p. 205.
[94] For example, it is Parzival's mother educates him about chivalry in Wolfram Von Eschenbach's text (p. 72).

in Chrétien de Troyes's *Eric and Enide*.[95] The fairy mistresses, and Melior in particular, fall into the latter category.

Despite this, the texts offer no overt condemnation, and register no anxiety about the fairy-lady-as-teacher, seen in texts such as *Partonope of Blois*. The texts seem instead to treat these demonstrations of 'unfeminine' knowledge and authority as further proof of the magical difference embodied by these characters. I would argue, however, that the representations of these characters are still subversive, and indeed transformative of both the romance figuration of femininity, and of romantic knightly identity. As E. Jane Burns suggests, the simple act of words – even, and perhaps especially, words to do with patriarchal and masculinist traditions – being delivered by a feminine body is fundamentally transformative, as it necessarily casts light onto the woman as speaker and subject (rather than object), and gives a new perspective to the matter being uttered.[96] Chivalric mandates, I argue, mean something different when delivered by a woman than they do when delivered by a man – and the impact when Melusine commands her sons to "rauysshe no woman" is measurably different from the effect of Arthur 'establishing' the Pentecostal Oath, which includes the similar commandments.[97] Therefore, the quality of masculine identity which Partonope assumes, under Melior's tutelage, is necessarily different in nature to that of a knight instructed by men, and the hero's masculinity is reimagined as the woman-teacher's femininity is reinvented.

IV.2 Arms and Amour

The fairy mistresses' performance of the role of chivalric superior continues as they arm and supply their lovers with the necessary trappings of knighthood. Both Melior and Tryamour bestow gifts of extraordinary (even magical) luxury upon their lovers,

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[95] See Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec and Enide* in *Arthurian Romances*, trans. by Carleton W. Carroll (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1991) pp. 37-122. For more on the misogyny and fear of women's speech and influence in this romance, see Lynn Tarte Ramey's 'Representations of Women in Chrétien's "Erec et Enide": Courtly Literature of Misogyny?' *Romanic Review*, 84.4 (1993) 377-86.

[96] E. Jane Burns, *BodyTalk,* pp. xi-xvi.

[97] Malory, *Morte,* p. 75. The Pentecostal Oath includes many of the same elements touched upon by Melior, and other sets of chivalric codes of instruction: "Than the kynge stablysshed all the knyghtes and gaff them rychesse and londys; and charged them never to do outerage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture of their worship and the lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes socour, strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and enver to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe. Also that no man take no batayles in a wrongefull quarell…"

demonstrative of the wealth and the 'lordly generosity' typical of fairy characters.[98] However, the extraordinary aspect of the wealth in the fairy mistress texts is not its ostentation, but in its provenance and its circulation. The wealth in both *Partonope* and *Launfal* belongs to the fairy lover herself (rather than a father, a husband, or some other man), and the bestowal of that wealth is dependent entirely on her discretion. The gifts the fairy women give exceed the usual symbolic tokens given to knights by their ladies elsewhere in romance narratives (sleeves, tapestries, banners, rings, or other jewellery) – and rather than love tokens and trivial decorative ephemera, the fairy mistresses provide the knights with the tools to succeed in noble society, from tournaments, to life at court, to the battlefield.

In *Partonope of Blois*, as Partonope prepares to depart on his first military exploit (no less than the liberation of France), Melior gives him:

> Howndes and hawkes…
> Mules and stedes also to bere yow…
> Clothes of sylke ye shalle haue goode and fyne
> Fyshe and fflessh, goode brede and eke goode wyne
> Fayre townes and castelles to helle in your hede…   (1807-13)

These are all practical essentials necessary for the noble, chivalric lifestyle. Shortly thereafter, her messengers (mounted on steeds laden with "golde") deliver further "treswore," explicitly designating its intended use: "for this entent / To mayntayne yowr warres, and that in armes / Ye shulde be worthy… / In armes and turnewmentys ye lusty …be" (2516-68). Tryamour's gifts in *Sir Launfal* are similarly practical, and fill a very specific need for knightly accoutrements:

> Ryche I wyll make the.
> I wyll the yeve an alner
> Ymad of sylk and of gold cler…
> As oft thou puttest the hond therinne,
> A mark of gold thou schalt wynne…
> I yeve the Blaunchard, my stede lel,
> And Gyfre, my owen knave.
> And of my armes oo pensel…
> In werre ne yn turnement
> Ne schall the greve no knyghtes dent,
> So well y schall the save. (316-33)

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[98] Roger Sherman Loomis, pp. 204 and 208. See also Lacy, p. 116 for an example of this pattern repeated in the Lady of the Lake arming Lancelot.

The fairy women supply their chosen knights with limitless movable wealth, knightly trappings, and the identity markers that make one's knighthood significant (such as the pennant, which also protects Launfal from bodily harm). Melior even claims for herself the privilege of giving Partonope "the wordre of knyghte …" (2552). As previously mentioned, she forbids him from accepting knighthood from anyone's hand but her own, and Partonope adheres to her command. This means he is not knighted until late in the text, after many successful battles. This is an anomaly in romance, in which one expects the hero to receive knighthood from the king or another senior worthy knight, coinciding with initial success in arms. Both Partonope and Launfal are given the tools necessary to achieve the pinnacle of knighthood by the fairy mistresses, from their swords, to their steeds, to their knighthood itself, not to mention their ennobling love for the object of their devotion.

There is a sense of excess in all of the aspects of the fairy-mistress texts – they are too opulent, too sexually liberated, too overfull of wealth and luxury – but this element of gift-giving and patronage not only feels excessive from the courtly lady character, but seems reminiscent instead of the maintenance and salary that ought to be provided by a feudal lord. The trope of women arming their lovers is seen elsewhere in the romance corpus,[99] and the image of the Lady of the Lake bestowing Excalibur upon Arthur cements the connection of (magical) women and the distribution of extraordinary, powerful knightly accoutrements in Arthurian legend. However, the fairy mistresses have exceeded the role of the supernatural woman whose only function is the passive distribution of phallic symbolism, and they are instead active participants in the chivalric chain of inheritance and succession. This happens through their instruction of the knights, the insertion of their voices and their wills into the formation of the knights' identities, and through the breadth and practicality of their gifts. The fairy ladies are supplying their lovers with the provisions for knighthood, and so it is no surprise that the knights owe fealty not to their king or lord, but to their fairy mistress. All of this demonstrates the way the fairy mistresses are actively intruding in the male world of chivalry, rather than merely rewarding the knights with symbolic tokens.

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[99] For more on the narrative popularity of women arming men in medieval romances, see Elizabeth L'Estrange's work 'Gazing at Gawain: Reconsidering Tournaments, Courtly Love, and the Lady Who Looks,' *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality*, 44.2 (2008) 74-96.

IV.3 Women's Wealth

Late medieval England was a place of dramatic economic change, including change in the position of, and opportunities for, women in the market, the household, and urban economies.[100] Theresa Earenfight describes the changing attitudes of the increasingly urban and industrialized European economic society as an environment in which "women's access to wealth bore powerful social and cultural meanings," reflecting "a dynamic late medieval society in flux, uncertain of the meaning of women and wealth."[101]

Some scholars (such as Caroline Barron and P. J. P. Goldberg) have argued that the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in England witnessed a 'golden age' for women's employment opportunities, citing wage increases, economic mobility and the changing demographics of a post-plague workforce.[102] These arguments have not been universally accepted, however, and scholars such as Barbara Hanawalt, Judith Bennett, and Sandy Bardsley have suggested that the evidence of increased opportunities for women is at least matched by evidence for continued gendered economic discrimination and wage differentiation throughout the late medieval period.[103] The consensus across this divided field seems to be that late medieval English social change and economic mobility likely resulted in some limited changing financial opportunities for women, though these were still curtailed at least in part by the patriarchal economic and legal system.[104]

Given this state of 'uncertainty' about women and wealth, and the economic and social upheaval of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, we might expect the financial liberality and agency of the fairy mistresses to generate some textual anxiety or

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[100] See the introduction to Theresa Earenfight's *Women and Wealth in Late Medieval Europe*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) especially pp. 3-9.

[101] Earenfight, p. 9.

[102] For more on this argument, see Caroline Barron, 'The "Golden Age" of Women in Medieval London' in *Medieval Women in Southern England,* Reading Medieval Studies 15 (1989) 35-58, and P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300-1520* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

[103] Some scholars have argued that patriarchal bias continued to prevent women's advancement despite demographic change. See for example Judith Bennett, *Ale, Beer and Brewsters: Women's Work in a Changing World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Barbara Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law, and Economy in Late Medieval London.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and Sandy Bardsley, *Women's Roles in the Middle Ages* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007). John Hatcher's work seeks to address the nuance and complexity of these issues, as in 'Women's Work Reconsidered: Gender and Wage Differentiation in Late Medieval England' *Past and Present*, 173 (2001) 191-98.

[104] For some of those restrictions to women's social and economic agency in late medieval England, see Shahar.

reservations. Other contemporary texts, such as Langland's *Piers Plowman* for example, articulate clear anxieties and uncertainties both about the latent amorality of material wealth itself (in that it can be used as easily for wickedness as for virtue) as well as about women's control of wealth. Langland's character 'Lady Meed,' an avatar of Edward III's mistress Alice Perrers, embodies these anxieties. Her immorality and corruption, a satirical symbol of excessive wealth and prostitution, give voice to social fears of the negative consequences of unchecked female economic power.[105] However, none of this social anxiety is reflected in the representations of wealth and femininity in the fairy mistress romances. Both *Launfal* and *Partonope of Blois* represent the wealth and generosity of the fairy mistresses as unilaterally positive, safely contained in the permissive magical spaces of these romances. The only anxiety in the text about the behaviour (and thus the financial agency) of the fairy mistress characters comes from women overtly demonised by the texts – the wicked mother and the wicked queen, both shown to be duplicitous and corrupt and thus offering unreliable perspectives. These texts do not invite multiple or varying readings of these fairy women – they are presented as unquestionably good, despite their unconventional natures, authoritative behaviour, and financial control.

If there is textual concern about the movement of wealth and sponsorship of knights in these texts, in fact, it seems to be caused not by the lordly generosity of the fairy women, but by the chivalric failure of the human kings. Both texts establish the fairy mistresses as the financial and political alternative to the heroes' respective kings, and in both cases the heroes choose the patronage of the fairy women rather than that of their lords, whose rule is demonstrably tainted with corruption and sexual misconduct.[106] In *Partonope*, for example, the king of France offers the hero the same wealth, lands, status and honour that Melior had provided him, but only on the condition that Partonope remain in France and marry the king's niece. In doing so, he would be breaking his oath to Melior, and thus he refuses. The king and Partonope's mother then collude to drug him

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[105] See J. A. Burrow, 'Lady Meed and the Power of Money' in *Medium Ævum*, 74.1 (2005) 113-118; W. Mark Ormrod, both 'Who Was Alice Perrers?' in *The Chaucer Review*, 40.3 (2006) 219-229 and 'The Trials of Alice Perrers' in *Speculum*, 83.2 (2008) 366-396. See also C. David Benson, 'The Function of Lady Meed in *Piers Ploughman*' in *English Studies*, 61.3 (1980) 193-205.

[106] See Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* pp.185-87, and also Heidi Breuer, *Crafting the Witch: Gender Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2009) p. 30, who suggests that Arthur's failure to financially supply Launfal is indicative of the 'broken feudal system.'

with "wyne… poyson myghty and fyne" (5179) which the hero's mother had made with "crafte" (denoting cunning and perhaps magic). It is so powerful that "yef that he / Of this wyne drynke a draught /That anone he shulde be caught /In soyche wyse he shulde forget / Melyore his lady swete" (5173-77); to his shame, he eventually does. The king even stoops to officiating a sham marriage for his vassal and his niece, despite the fact that he knows Partonope to be under the influence of powerful drugs. This ignoble, unkingly behaviour, reeking of sexual coercion, demonstrates the weakness of the king as he meddles in the plots and poisons of old women.[107]

In *Launfal,* the knight's position at court requires him to be complicit in corruption and Gwenore's sexual indiscretion. Launfal's objection to Gwenore's adultery at the beginning of the text underlies his initial decision to leave the court, though of course he is also driven by her churlish refusal to offer him the gifts and income that were his due. When Arthur does not rectify the situation, it suggests that the corruptions and impropriety has spread from Gwenore to infect the whole court. When Launfal eventually returns to the court, Gwenore's open sexual infidelity is again of great importance, and Launfal's refusal to become her lover imperils his chivalric career and his life. The willingness of the court and her husband to turn a blind eye to Gwenore's indiscretions and try Launfal anyway, despite the public acknowledgement of her adultery (46-47, 790-9), indicates that the corruption and taint of unchivalrous behaviour and sexual misconduct extend beyond Gwenore herself and into the whole of Arthur's court.[108] In both texts, the fairy women are the ones who provide the knights with the support and wealth they need to reaffirm their chivalric identities. They offer the maintenance-funds the knights ought to be receiving from their liege lords, with none of the accompanying dishonour or sexual misconduct. The courts are corrupt, while the fairy women are

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[107] For the feminisation of drugs and poison, see Chapter I.

[108] For more, see Stephen Guy-Bray, 'Male Trouble and Trials of Masculinity' in *English Studies in Canada*, 34.2-3 (2008) 31-48, and Myra Stokes, '*Lanval* to *Launfal*: A Story Becomes Popular' in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance,* ed. by Putter and Gilbert, especially pp. 56-57. See also Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural*, pp. 186-87.

honourable and display better governance and better care for their vassals than the kings.[109] The rule of lordly-lady, therefore, is shown to be superior to that of male rule.

V. Sovereignty and Space

Between the sexual, intellectual, legal, and financial disruptions posed by the fairy mistress characters, we must ask how all of this is made possible without necessitating the demonisation of these female characters. The argument most often presented is that the 'otherness' of the fairy characters permits their excesses and their gender-play. Making use ("parasitically"[110]) of the fairy mistress romance tropes, these texts signal to us that these magical female characters exist out with the bounds of logic, of Christian morality, of the political and religious hierarchies of medieval life. As fairies, these women are 'other,' and thus permitted to engage in all sorts of behaviours, even those which – in romance as in society – are typically reserved for men.

This, however, is not enough of an excuse or explanation to neutralize the problematic potential of these characters. Given the way both Tryamour and Melior intrude into, and meddle with, the human world of romance, their otherness is incomplete. The fairy mistresses are shown to be *proximally* other rather than fully alien, as witnessed by their involvement in, and understanding of, human financial, legal, and cultural codes, as well as their human-seeming appearance and behaviour. Were the fairy mistresses completely other and without relatable human traits, they would be inaccessible to the romance heroes, as well as to the audience. For the sake of moral acceptability, these fairy women must also be recognisable as 'good' romance ladies, and thus they are not ever as other or different as their otherworldly origins might cause us to expect. The elision of difference is similar to the white-washing and Westernising of the

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[109] Saunders and others have suggested that this largesse and nobility on the part of the fairy women demonstrates that far from being a cause of anxiety, their presence and power is rather a symptom of existing anxiety about authority, class, and governance, and their characterisations may articulate a desire for a magical fix for the broken feudal system. For more on these texts as critiquing Arthurian chivalric society by casting the fairy world as superior, see Corinne Saunders, 'Love and Loyalty in Middle English Romance,' in *Writings on Love in the English Middle Ages,* ed. by Helen Cooney (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) pp. 45–61, as well as *Magic and the Supernatural,* p. 187. See also Breuer, p. 30.

[110] Wade discusses the way authors of romance texts consciously reproduced, and relied upon, the established conventions of fairy-narratives in romance, taking advantage of "what Umberto Eco calls the 'parasitical' nature of fictional worlds" to give their audience a frame of reference of their departures from and adherence to narrative convention (pp. 3-4). For more, see the Introduction to this thesis, section I.1.

Saracen Princesses seen in the previous chapter – accomplished through the highly conventionalised descriptions of the heroines, as well as their involvement with the world of the court. The otherness of the fairy mistresses is not dramatic enough to remove the problematic and radical elements from these texts. Instead, their proximity to humanity keeps them involved with (and, paradoxically, in direct contradiction of) human norms and expectations. We must therefore think more carefully about how difference and otherness are navigated in these texts.

Another way of thinking about their extraordinary license is to consider the physical and metaphorical spaces these fairy women inhabit. We assume, given the 'fairy' label, that they are from an 'other' world.[111] However, the 'land of faerie' ("Oliroun," in *Sir Launfal*) is not where they reside in these texts, nor where they conduct their relationships with their human paramours. Instead, both Tryamour and Melior (and Ywain's lady, in *Ywain and Gawain*, Bertilak's wife in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and even Morgan in Malory's *Morte Darthur*) inhabit liminal spaces, that are proximally rather than distantly other. We see this in the fact that Tryamour is not in 'Oliroun' but a space of her own, somewhere in the romance's idea of 'reality' – albeit a magical, fairy space separate from the human court. Similarly, Melior's castle, enchanted and exotic in the extreme though it undoubtedly is, still exists on the same plane as the French court and the human world of the text. In fact, after Partonope's vow is broken it becomes little more than a particularly rich noble residence. These feminine liminal spaces – be they enchanted pavilions, magical castles, or something else entirely – are apart from 'Faerie,' and we assume that they exist within the bounds of the 'real' mortal world as romance represents it.[112] They are also apart from the human, Christian, 'civilised' world of the court and kingdom, however, demonstrated through their physical distance, the exotica of their decoration, the faerie signals given in the patterns around them, and the wilderness through which their human lovers must travel in order to arrive at the fairy woman's magical space. Apart from both human and inhuman or faerie worlds, these spaces operate under their own rules, in which feminine authority is supreme, and male identity becomes flexible, emotive, submissive, and variable.

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[111] See Cooper's fourth chapter of *English Romance in Time*, titled 'I am off an other countree' (pp. 173-217) for more on the otherness and strangeness of the fairy otherworld. See also Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* pp. 200-06.
[112] For more on this, see Northrop Frye's *The Secular Scripture.*

These liminal spaces are maintained – *crucially* – by the heroes' obedience to their ladies and adherence to their privacy oaths. Privacy and secrecy are at the heart of the *geis* to which the heroes must adhere, as we have seen – Partonope may not see Melior, while Launfal may not speak of Tryamour. When Launfal and Partonope agree to abide by the fairy women's commands about secrecy and privacy, they construct a willed boundary through their silence, separating the private space of the relationship from the public realm. That, in the end, is what allows these radical relationship to proceed – for we see that as soon as that bubble of privacy is broken and the heroes reveal their fairy mistresses, the relationships crumble. Once the relationship has been made public, the magical gender inversions cease to be possible. That moment of the breaking of the *geis* or taboo also signals the end of the knight's willing submission to feminine authority – the knights choose to directly disobey the fairy women's instructions, out of injured pride (Launfal) or pernicious doubt (Partonope). The foundation of the relationship required both privacy and the willingness of the knights to abide by the commands of a woman – thus both privacy and male acknowledgement of, and adherence to, female authority and dominance allows (and is necessary) for an egalitarian relationship with flexible and permissive gender roles, which is impossible elsewhere.

It is worth comparing this paradigm to the brief attempt at an egalitarian marriage described in Chaucer's 'Franklin's Tale.'[113] Averagus swears not to claim any "maistrie" or dominance over his bride, Dorigen, but rather to obey her as a lover should obey his lady. Pleased, Dorigen replies that both men and women desire, and should have, equal lordship over the other in a relationship, while each serving the other. Yet Averagus's condition, upon which he will accept this mutual sovereignty, is that he must have "the name of soveraynetee, / That wolde he have for shame of his degree" (751-52). His public reputation depends upon the outward appearance of mastery and patriarchal dominance, and equality can happen only out of the public eye. This tale suggests that while the private sphere may be one of mutuality and feminine authority, in public a knight would be shamed by such a relationship. Neither Partonope nor Launfal express the need for public displays of dominance that Averagus so frankly articulates, but

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[113] Chaucer, 'The Franklin's Tale' in *The Canterbury Tales,* in *The Riverside Chaucer,* ed. by Benson, pp. 178-89. For a nuanced exploration of this passage in 'The Franklin's Tale' see Mark N. Taylor's 'Servant and Lord / Lady and Wife: The "Franklin's Tale" and Traditions of Courtly and Conjugal Love' in *The Chaucer Review,* 32.1 (1997) 64-81.

perhaps we can read similar (unwritten) anxieties as underlying their decisions to break the privacy-taboos and bring their relationships out of secret, magical spaces into the public sphere of masculine authority.

VI. Things Fall Apart: Broken Vows, Broken Spaces

In the end, of course, like Psyche before them, neither Partonope nor Launfal can keep their promises. Launfal, determined to refute Gwenore's accusations of sexual deviance (689) and incensed at her poor treatment of him, blurts out the forbidden truth of his relationship with Tryamour, thereby breaking his vow to her (694-96). Partonope, filled with doubt incited by his mother and the bishop (5793-5800), hides an enchanted lantern in the bedchamber in order to sneak a glimpse of his lover's form and reveal whether she is, in fact, some sort of demon (5087, 5656-69) – and as he shines the light upon her body, the spell breaks. In revealing the identities and bodies of their lovers, both Launfal and Partonope violate the trust of the fairy women, and demonstrate a disregard for their authority – and so the enchanted equality, the feminine authority and fluid gender roles (as well, practically, as the gold, horses, arms and armour provided by the fairies, not to mention sexual access to the fairy women themselves) disappear.

This failure and loss on the part of the heroes, and the suffering and testing they endure as a result, is a narrative necessity consistent with the imperatives of the romance genre. The purpose of romance is the forging of the hero's identity, and trials and suffering are (perhaps especially, in medieval thought) vital to this process, typically followed by renewal and just reward. Living in the sort of easy, utopian bliss shown early in these texts is narratively uninteresting – we expect romance heroes to work for and earn their blissful rewards as a happy ending. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that these texts break down the utopian fairy spaces, and then reorder and rearrange the plot elements to come to an acceptable resolution. Whether self-inflicted or judicially mandated, the heroes suffer as a result of their infidelity, the magical space of possible egalitarianism is broken along with the vows of the inconstant knights, and the fairies absent themselves.

If the broken taboo and the heroes' suffering are necessary to the plot, however, so too is the peaceful, blissful denouement, in which the betrayed women forgive their

paramours. The pedagogical necessity of mercy as a vaunted virtue ensured that the fairy mistresses of these romances take pity on their erring lovers, and the texts reach a place of resolution. However, the liminal spaces of egalitarianism and female authority have been broken, it seems, and the fairy women can no longer slip between identities and worlds with ease – so the texts adopt different solutions for the problem of how to deal with the fairy mistresses. Chestre's solution, following Marie de France and his other sources, mandates that both Tryamour and Launfal must leave the human world together entirely (not least because they have exposed the corruption and hypocrisy at the heart of King Arthur's court). Chestre's text suggests that the relationship between Tryamour and Launfal – in which the woman's legal, financial, and chivalric status outweighs that of her lover – can only exist in the fully 'other' fantasy world of faerie. The mimetic reality of romance too closely mirrors the structures and morals of Christian society to allow such an inverted gender balance to continue unchecked and uncriticised. In *Partonope of Blois,* Melior is transformed or 'rationalised'[114] and the story loses its fairy-mistress narrative. Instead, the heroine becomes indistinguishable from any other noble (human) woman in romance, in that she is forced into an arranged marriage while pining for a distant lover, without autonomy, control, choice, or magic. By the time she publicly takes Partonope as her husband, the fairy elements of feminine authority have been long-since expunged from the narrative, replaced with male chivalric action and knightly prowess – rather than female desire and female choice leading to seduction, we see instead male desire and strength of arms leading to marriage, as Partonope competes in a tournament for her hand. In both texts, the authors seem to have found some means of contextualising the fairy mistresses and their relationships with their chosen knights in which the radically reimagined gender roles no longer have the potential to trouble a concerned moral reader.

The question that then arises is whether the fairy mistress characters and texts are still subversive. With the reassertion of the status quo (in *Partonope of Blois*) and the removal of the couple from recognisable reality (*Launfal*), are these fantasies anything other than highly conservative? I argue that they still are radical and subversive despite this process of rationalisation, in part because of the same intertextual tradition in the

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[114] For more, see Hibbard, pp. 209, Wade, pp. 9-23, and Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* pp. 185-204.

medieval romance genre discussed earlier in the chapter, and elsewhere in this thesis.[115] An intertextual understanding of romance texts means that an audience would recognise and actively engage with familiar motifs and patterns in a narrative, connecting one text to other similar texts.[116] This means that for a medieval reader, the endings of *Launfal* and *Partonope* may inform each other. If the audiences of these romances knew *both* texts (or the story patterns they exemplify), then overshadowing the clear-cut escape and excuse in *Launfal* is the alternative, in which the powerful royal woman does not leave the human world, but rather marries the hero and governs a human court. Simultaneously, overlaying the depiction of rationalised, powerless Melior in *Partonope of Blois* is the alternate version of her character, a fairy who retains her incredible magical power, and is not subject to any male authority. This makes the nice, neat excuses and escapes in both texts less effective, reminding readers of other possibilities and destabilising the erasure of feminine rule.

The fairy mistresses are complicated and influenced by intertextual comparisons with each other; however, I also argue that the fairy mistress characters and texts must be read intratextually within *themselves.* By applying this idea of comparison and memory to each text individually, we may assume that their beginnings inform, and are layered upon, their ends. Memory of the feminine rule established early in the narrative would thus inform, and disrupt the comfort of, the excuses and escapes written into the (apparently conservative) endings of each of these texts. This non-linear reading of a text, and the multi-layered character-readings it invites, is made possible by the suspended state of the romance genre, in which all stories (and thus all *parts* of all stories) exist at once. This reading of these texts means that despite the authors' attempts to normalize and rationalise (i.e., limit and control) Melior, and despite the narrative escape and excuse for Tryamour, these texts exhibit and maintain a deep sense of unease, and the continued, persistent possibility of feminine authority, sovereignty, and desire.

I would like to take that analytical process – of folding and rereading these narratives with each other and with both beginning and end simultaneously – to look at the treatment of feminine desire in the fairy mistress texts, for example. We approach these fairy mistress texts as vehicles for male wish-fulfilment, and thus feminine desire –

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[115] See the Introduction, section III.2.
[116] Cooper, *English Romance in Time,* p. 15.

though represented as seductive and attractive – is eventually countermanded by the broken taboos, limited and controlled by the narrative. This is representative of the widespread discomfort with female sexuality when left unchecked, and the threat it posed to the patriarchal medieval hierarchy. Because of their active, aggressively desiring sexuality, the fairy mistresses could be easily demonised, as either threatening seductresses[117] – either magical or biblical – or as figures of irreverent bawdry, as the lusting women in the fabliaux so often were depicted. Yet by the time the narratives draw to their inevitable conclusions, both offended fairy women have instead become paragons of morality and forgiveness, and in emphasising their reconciliation with their respective knights, these romances paint the fairy mistresses as merciful Madonna characters. By reading intratextually, and overlaying the Madonna imagery with that of the seductive fairy, we are presented with the possibility of femininity in these romances that is both morally virtuous and desiring, both divinely merciful and earthy.

VII. Conclusion: Whose fairy-tale?

In these fairy mistress romances, then, we see a 'male fantasy' that includes sexually voracious, dubiously Christian, magically powerful, financially independent women, who nevertheless become the heroes' helpmeets and partners. It seems, therefore, that heroes in these romances may desire women with whom they can be fully human, shedding the armour of chivalric perfection and instead becoming dependent, fallible, submissive, and emotionally, financially, and physically vulnerable. The medieval authors seem unsure about how such a relationship might work (and often reinstate something of a recognisable social order by the end of the text) but flirt with egalitarianism throughout the narrative.

A non-linear, inter- and intra-textual reading of these texts, and a multilayered reading of the fairy mistress characters themselves, demands a more flexible understanding of both masculine and feminine identity in Middle English romance. The breadth and potential inherent in these characters is made possible by the authors' intentional manipulation of the fairy mistress meme, the permissiveness of the narrative

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[117] Wade, p. 141, and Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural,* pp. 185 and 195.

expectations around 'otherworldly' fairy characters, and intertextual readings of Middle English romances.

MONSTROUS MATERNITY, *MELUSINE*, AND THE THREAT OF THE MATURE FEMALE BODY

This chapter is concerned, at long last, with the more apparently negative incarnations of magical femininity in medieval English romance. Throughout the previous chapters we have seen instances of remarkable ambiguity in the representations of supernatural women in romance, and the characterisations have largely steered clear of the negativity we might expect from an era that was inching ever closer to the European witch hunts. With the lens of the thesis turned toward monstrosity and the monstrous feminine both in Middle English romance and in late medieval scientific and medical discourse, this chapter searches for some of that same ambiguity and nuance in the frightening, transformed female bodies of monster-mothers. Feminine monstrosity, in fiction and in medieval thought more generally, is, I argue, bound up with issues of maturity and aging. This chapter therefore concerns the supernatural women who are no longer young, who are mothers rather than lovers. Their potential to disturb the borders of acceptability is witnessed not only in their monstrous, excessive bodies, but also in their particular power to threaten the protagonists and the patriarchal, patrilineal order in these texts.

I. Medieval Monsters, Medieval Mothers

Before delving into the romance corpus and the representations of maternity and monstrosity therein, it is first necessary to explore the conceptual groundwork for the medieval understanding of 'monstrosity' and also 'maternity' as specific ontological categories. Understanding the way the audiences of the romance texts would have conceptualised the embodied difference we call monstrosity, as well as physical and performative maternity, is critical to our understanding of how they might have responded to these monstrous women.

I.1 What Makes a Monster? Hybridity and Transgression

The idea of monstrosity in the Middle Ages is one which has been explored in depth, with special focus in recent years on the intersection of representations of monstrousness and medieval ideas of race, ethnicity and difference. Authors such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Bettina Bildhauer, and Debra Higgs Strickland have connected medieval monstrosity to cultural identity creation and affirmation, utilising both contemporary theoretical structures, such as feminist analysis and post-colonial theory, as well as medieval rhetoric of difference to illuminate the troubled borders of 'self' and 'other' in the Middle Ages.[1] These studies have been exceptionally popular and fruitful in part because of the apparent fascination medieval writers, artists, and thinkers had with the idea of monstrosity. This fascination is evidenced through the myriad representations of animal-human hybrids, curiously deformed men, and strange beasts found in the margins of manuscripts, of maps, and of the imagined worlds of romance throughout the medieval period. Texts like *Mandeville's Travels,* the 'Wonders of the East,'[2] the Alexander romances, and even bestiaries all catered to the medieval appetite for wonders and exotica. All of these texts habitually blended a smattering of factual information with the marvellous and the monstrous, giving their texts a veneer of credibility while still functioning as entertainment.[3]

While defining medieval monstrosity poses a constant challenge to scholars due to the manifold forms the 'monstrous' may take, there is a consensus that medieval monstrosity is an expression of persistent difference or 'otherness'[4] in physical form or in moral nature, and that this difference represents the boundaries of ordinary human experience (as understood by medieval Christian Europe). In his seminal work *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature,* David Williams explains that physical deformity functioned as a "vehicle for philosophical and

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[1] See especially: Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) especially the first chapter, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)' pp. 3-25; Bettina Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006) pp. 9-13, and 'Blood, Jews and Monsters in Medieval Culture' in *The Monstrous Middle Ages,* ed. by Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003) pp. 75-96. See also Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003).
[2] Found in the British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV, the same manuscript that contains *Beowulf.*
[3] Alixe Bovey, *Monsters and Grotesques in Medieval Manuscripts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) pp. 19 and 21.
[4] As described in the introduction to *Monsters and the Monstrous in Medieval Northwest Europe,* ed. by K.E. Olsen and L. A. J. R. Houwen, (Leuven: Peeters, 2001) p. 6.

spiritual inquiry," referring to the symbolic functions of representations of monstrosity in the Middle Ages.[5] Williams delineates the taxonomies of medieval monstrosity, from the variously deformed bodies of the 'monstrous races' who populate the margins of *mappae mundi*,[6] to monstrous natural phenomena, to literary monsters. According to Williams, medieval monsters function as symbols of the boundaries of the human, or the acceptable – or, more specifically, as symbols of the transgressions of those boundaries. Through hybridity (humans with animal body parts, or animals with human heads), or unnatural numbers or sizes of appendages (either too few or too many limbs, enormous ears, feet, or heads, etcetera), medieval monsters transgress the borders that describe acceptable human morphology.[7]

While Williams reminds his readers that people in the Middle Ages "believed fully in the physical existence of… monstrous beings" like those described above,[8] he also emphasises the symbolic function of monsters in theological and philosophical discourse. Monsters (from the Latin *monstrare*, meaning 'to show') are signs or figures whose forms de*monstr*ate, or show, some sort of truth – either the surprising breadth of God's creation, which includes creatures beyond the imagining of man, or the monstrous being's internal qualities and characteristics.[9] Thus, as Debra Higgs Strickland suggests, specific sins were often associated with different monstrous deformities:[10] dog-headed men, or cynocephali, are associated with sexual sins; blemmye, who are headless with facial features located on their chests, are associated with greed; and bearded women are "prideful (and thus have begun to resemble men)."[11] Monstrous behaviour and monstrous morphology are linked in medieval thought, as part of the larger overlap between the

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[5] David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996) p. 4.

[6] See also John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous races in Medieval Art and Thought* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000) pp. 26-36, and Olsen and Howen, pp. 7-8.

[7] For a critical background to ideas of boundaries, transgression, and social regulated of bodies, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), especially pp. 116-130.

[8] Williams, p. 8.

[9] See Williams, pp. 10-11, and also p. 108, where he explains that the idea of symbolic monstrosity was so potent in the medieval period in part because of the Neoplatonic theory of the human body as a microcosm of the cosmos; if the human body demonstrates divine order, its integrity becomes immensely important – and the deformed body particularly troubling.

[10] See Strickland, p. 7 for more on the classical precedence for the medieval linking of mental and physical deformity.

[11] Strickland, p. 7.

spiritual and the physical selves, and monstrous physicality was seen as a sign of monstrous moral character and transgression.

This idea of monstrosity as transgression can be read as reaffirming normative identity categories, for in making the 'other' monstrous (and associating monstrosity with sin) medieval authors inscribe normative non-monstrous identities with value and moral acceptability. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests that "Monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual,"[12] and we see this trend in the way monsters are discussed throughout medieval thought. In the context of the monstrous alien 'other' (Jewish or Saracen monsters, for example)[13] this process of making-monstrous becomes part of identity formation for medieval Christian Europe, and a way of underscoring the lines where cultural, ethnic, or bodily divisions were imagined to exist. Monsters, Cohen suggests, "demonstrate borders" which might otherwise have been unclear, between 'us' and 'them,' between acceptable and unacceptable.[14]

On the other hand, many authors have pointed out that in their ability to straddle the boundaries between the human and the inhuman, natural and unnatural, monstrous creatures in medieval texts and thought appear to destabilise those very categories.[15] Cohen describes medieval monsters as "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration."[16] He also suggests that in their descriptions of dog-headed men or men with heads in their chests, "Classical wonder books radically undermine the Aristotelian taxonomic system, for by refusing an easy compartmentalisation of their monstrous contents, they demand a radical re-thinking of boundary and normality."[17] The ordered universe described in classical philosophy is called into question by these liminal creatures that resist categorization. When monsters fail to be fully contained by any of the distinct ontological groups to which they bear similarity their very existence troubles those groups, and in the process of imagining them, their medieval audiences participate in the destabilisation of such presumably

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[12] Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 7.
[13] Bildhauer, 'Blood, Jews and Monsters in Medieval Culture,' Cohen, *Monster Theory*, pp. 10-15, and Strickland, pp. 6-8.
[14] Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 13.
[15] As Eve Salisbury states in her paper, '*Lybeaus Desconus*: Transformation, Adaptation, and the Monstrous-Feminine,' *Arthuriana,* 24.1 (2014) 66-85, monsters "destabilise normative ontological categories" (p. 67).
[16] Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 6.
[17] Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 6.

concrete concepts as 'human,' 'animal,' 'Christian,' or 'other.'[18] The effect that destabilisation may have when it occurs in romance, and when the 'monster' in question is a hybrid not only of human and animal, but also of mother and monster, wife and serpent, good woman and threatening demon, is the subject of this chapter.

I.2 Medieval Maternities: Behaviour over Biology

Like this idea of monstrosity as a physical-moral hybrid, understanding the medieval conception of maternity also involves negotiating the overlap of, or distinction between, physical form and moral function. Scholarship using the medieval rhetoric about maternity as a window into attitudes toward women in the Middle Ages has revealed a sharp division between the discourse on physical, biological maternity, and behavioural or spiritual maternity – between the processes of conception and parturition, and the emotional or qualitative characteristics associated with motherhood.[19] Throughout the medieval period, the female body was frequently demonised and viewed as potentially harmful. Because of this, the biological elements of maternity were discussed in medical and theological writings as negative, even dangerous. This discourse on sexual reproduction and biological motherhood will be discussed later in this chapter.

The idea of motherhood as defined by 'nurturant behaviour,' and thus no longer bound to the sinful act of sexual reproduction or even to the female sex, received much more positive treatment in medieval theological writings. Indeed, regardless of social views of real mothers, the idea of the mother-nurturer was seen as a "particular cultural positive in the Middle Ages."[20] In *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Caroline Walker Bynum explores the way abbots and leaders of religious communities from the twelfth century on used maternal imagery to discuss their duty to nurture and care for the spiritual lives of their followers.[21] Not only that, but throughout

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[18] See Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 12, when he states that by showing us that "difference is arbitrary" and not universal nor concrete, "monsters threaten to destroy cultural apparatus" we use to determine difference.
[19] See the introduction to John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler's *Medieval Mothering* (London: Garland, 1996).
[20] Parsons and Wheeler, p. xii.
[21] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). See especially section IV, 'Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing,' pp. 110-69.

the high medieval period, the Church was discussed as a mother,[22] Christ was referred to as a mother,[23] and even God was imagined as a loving mother.[24] Maternity was imagined as synonymous with generative potential (often including self-sacrifice), with tender, unconditional love, and with nurturant behaviour, all of which were easily mapped on to the (usually masculine) Christian religious figures and leaders.[25]

The increasing popularity of 'feminised' religious language, with allusions to nursing, nurturing and suckling, coincided with an increase in the popularity of the Cult of the Virgin.[26] As the most obvious and extraordinary exemplar of motherhood in the medieval imagination, the veneration of Mother Mary demonstrates the positive light in which motherhood could be viewed in the medieval period, but again evidences the division between the metaphors of maternity and its reality. The Virgin Mary's role as a model of womanhood and the embodied recuperation of the feminine sex from Eve's sin hinges on her maternity: as the mother of Christ, she demonstrates feminine holiness and the virtues women might possess. However, she accomplishes this through her paradoxical virginity. While real medieval mothers might take Mary as a role model for her virtue and maternal piety, they could not hope to emulate her in childbearing while also remaining 'pure' and chaste in body. Mary is an impossibility: she embodies the venerated generative and nurturant maternal qualities, but with none of the attendant sinful associations with sex. Constant debate about the details of Mary's physiology and of her biological conception of Christ (did she lactate? Did she menstruate?[27]) belie the persistent discomfort with the realities of female procreation, despite the fervour of Marian worship in the high medieval period. Bynum states that "there is little evidence

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[22] Bynum, p. 127. See also Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976) p. 197.

[23] The most well-known invocation of the idea of Jesus as mother comes from Julian of Norwich, in which she says that like a mother suckling her children, so "Mother Jesus can feed us with himself… with the blessed sacrament." Julian of Norwich, *Showings,* ed. by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh. The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1978) (p. 298). As Bynum suggests, however, Julian was by no means the only one to refer to Christ with maternal language. See Bynum, pp. 110-69, and Warner p. 200.

[24] Bynum, p. 112, and Warner, p. 199.

[25] Bynum, p. 131.

[26] Bynum, pp. 135-46, and Warner. For the development of the Cult of the Virgin, see Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) pp. 3-120.

[27] For more on the question of the Virgin's biology, see Warner, pp. 197-208, and Susan Zimmerman, 'The Body of the Virgin and the Body of the Beast: Reflections on Medieval Monstrosity,' *Shakespeare Studies*, 41 (2013) 40-53. See also Maria Mar Perez-Gil, 'Mary and the Carnal Maternal Genealogy: Towards a Mariology of the Body,' *Literature and Theology*, 25.3 (2011) 297-311.

that the popularity of feminine and maternal imagery in the high Middle Ages reflects an increased respect for actual women by men"[28] and therefore we ought to continue to separate the religious reverence for the Virgin Mother from our understanding of the lives of real mothers.

This chapter concerns the overlap between biological and behavioural maternity, and specifically how those ideas are disseminated and reimagined in the context of romance. It is worth emphasising, then, the discrepancy between the two ideas of motherhood. Spiritual motherhood was understood as endlessly loving and nurturing, while biological motherhood was understood as essentially threatening and even potentially monstrous. Romance explores both, and additionally, these texts explore the inverse of that benign maternal behaviour, examining the implications of motherhood performed badly. With the idea of good motherhood modelled on the Virgin Mary and applicable to Christ and God himself, we see its power and positive importance. Consequently, motherhood performed badly may therefore be read as a particularly grave or even wicked failing. In these romances, I argue, we see good motherhood associated not just with nurturing behaviours and love, but also with youth. Bad mothers, as we shall see, are older, more mature, and associated with age and even (therefore) monstrosity.

I.3 Monstrous Women in Culture and Romance

How, then, do these categories of monstrosity and maternity overlap? I argue that feminine monstrosity both in romance and in medieval culture is bound up with ideas of maturity and maternity, to do with anxieties about the aging female body. In each chapter of this thesis, the bodies of the supernatural women in question have been awarded careful consideration. This attention has been necessary not only because physical characteristics distinguish these women (the strangely blonde Saracen princess, for example, or the unearthly beauty of the fairy mistresses), but also in part because of the medieval association of femininity with corporeality and the material body.[29] This is particularly true for the monster-women discussed in this chapter, whose corporeality is intimately linked to their 'monstrous' status. These bodies transform, change shape,

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[28] Bynum, p. 143.

[29] Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), especially pp. 29-33, 94, and 106-07. See also Alcuin Blamires, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended,* pp. 1-15.

dissolve and resolve into new configurations, occasionally losing their humanity but never their femininity, nor the sense of unease and fear they inspire. This transformative capability, as we will see, mirrors the transformation of the mature female body in the processes of menstruation, conception, and menopause. Monstrous bodies and mature female bodies are thus the subject of study in this chapter.

The preoccupation with the transformative female body was not, of course, limited to the romance genre in the Middle Ages. In the (pseudo-)scientific and philosophical literature of the medieval period, women were considered aberrant and monstrous in their very biological natures, by virtue of their alterity when compared with men (who were, of course, taken as the norm).[30] As previously mentioned, women's biology, especially menstruation and parturition, was routinely cast as malign, even venomous, and according to may late medieval medical writers, especially designed to harm those around them (i.e., men). We will return to these 'scientific' claims about the monstrous female body later in the chapter, and the way their various interpretations across the medieval period resulted in particularly focused misogyny directed at feminine bodies and women's role in reproduction. The attitudes of romance audiences toward the monstrous maternal bodies described in these romances would have been informed by some of this discourse, and the cultural anxieties about maternal bodies it encouraged, drawing feminine monstrosity out of the realm of fiction and linking it to lived reality.

With the science of the day suggesting the mature female body was not merely defective but an embodiment of toxicity and evil, it is perhaps unsurprising that we encounter many and various versions of monstrous women in the popular fiction of the late medieval period, and in romances in particular. Romances are, by nature, narratives thick with monsters of every imaginable genus who provide the danger and testing necessary for the establishment of the protagonist's heroic identity. Knightly heroes must traditionally strive against the giants, dragons and other beasts which inhabit the marginal or liminal spaces of romance as they prove their worth and prowess, contrasting the civility of the chivalric order with the wildness of their monstrous foes. When those

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[30] In the first century CE, in his work *Historia Naturalis* Pliny the Elder wrote, "nothing could easily be found that is more remarkable/monstrous (*monstrificum*) than the monthly flux of women." Medieval sources continue and augment this view of menstruation as monstrous, a theme to which we will return later in the chapter. See Bildhauer, 'Blood, Jews, and Monsters' p. 90. See also Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 24, and Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, pp. 88-89.

monstrous antagonists begin to more closely resemble humans – such as the Green Knight, for example, or otherworldly fairy characters – the monstrous intrudes into the spaces of civilisation, threatening the chivalric order intimately rather than from a distance (something witnessed in the previous chapter). This is something particular to romance, for in other genres that depict monstrosity – such as travel-writing or bestiaries, for example – the monsters usually remain liminal and distant, threatening only if one sets out to encounter them. With the human-monsters of romance, however, the danger is intimate, even desired, and thus has potential to disturb social and ontological boundaries.

This simultaneous occurrence of intimacy and fear, of desire and revulsion, echoes Julia Kristeva's writing on abjection.[31] According to Kristeva, abjection is the rejection of some threatening, yet intimate, part of the self, a "vortex of summons and repulsions" in which the abject is both desired and rejected, and is both familiar and alien or uncanny at once.[32] This, in effect, describes the romance trend of monstrosity made intimate. This is demonstrated especially clearly in romance when there is a female monster – for often in those texts, not only does the monstrous element enter into the world of the court, but often into the bedchamber (or familial spaces) of the protagonist. Loathly Ladies, demonic lovers, and transformed animal-brides all are frightening or revolting in some way, and all have intimate access to the protagonist's body. When the monstrous element is also the love-object in the text, we see abjection as a "simultaneity of anxiety and desire."[33] Intimately threatening, their monstrosity pulls the hero into contact with the monstrous or the inhuman.

When it is the mother-figure in a text (the embodiment of stability, comfort, succour, safety) who becomes monstrous, she threatens the humanity not only of her husband but also, frighteningly, of her children. Traditionally, the textual response to a monster-mother is abjection, rejection, demonisation. The monster-mother is a figure that "disturbs identity, system, order… does not respect borders, positions, rules… in-between, the ambiguous, the composite"[34] and as such, is troubling to the world of

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[31] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.* Leon S. Roudiez, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

[32] See the introduction to Mills and Bildhauer's *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, where Freud's "das Unheimliche," or the "uncanny" is discussed as "something which is familiar … and which has become alienated…" (p. 19).

[33] Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 19.

[34] Kristeva, p. 4.

romance. As we shall see, however, the romance genre's monster-mothers, like Melusine, persist, and resist the narrative impulse to reject or abject them, giving them lingering power to transgress borders, and question systems of order. Monstrosity and motherhood are a potent combination in these romances, and offer continuous engagement with social anxieties about maternity, maturity, and the female body in the late medieval period.

II. Melusine

As mentioned earlier, the criteria for monstrosity in medieval thought are embedded in notions of physicality, with the idea of moral monstrosity or deformity dovetailing, but coming second to, the physical manifestation. There are few versions of the monstrous feminine in medieval romance which more clearly meet this definition than the eponymous serpent-lady in the romance *Melusine*. Melusine's dramatic physical transformation into a serpent, her relationships with her husband and her children, her uneasy moral position throughout the text, and the narrative connections to the fairy mistresses (discussed in the previous chapter) make Melusine a useful example of the complexities of feminine monstrosity in romance.

II.1. Provenance

The Middle French prose *Roman de Mélusine*, composed by Jean d'Arras circa 1393,[35] has been widely claimed to be the original, or at least the most influential, version of the legend. D'Arras's work, which was dedicated to the Duc de Berry, drew from earlier folk traditions and tales, such as the writings of Pierre Bersuire (1285-1362), a prior of the Abbey of St. Eloi who recorded an account of the tale, and Gervase of Tilbury (c.1152-1234) whose Latin work *Otia Imperialia* ('Diversions for Emperors') d'Arras mentions specifically.[36] Shortly after d'Arras composed his prose version of the legend, another French writer called Coudrette composed a verse version in octosyllabic couplets (written

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[35] Jean d'Arras, *Roman de Mélusine*, ed. by Louis Stouff, (Geneva: Slatkine, 1974).
[36] Gareth Knight's 'Afterward' to his translation of André Lebey's *The Romance of the Faery Melusine*, trans. by Gareth Knight (Cheltenham: Skylight Press, 2011) p. 145. See also Book I, pp. 4-5 of A. K. Donald's edition of the Middle English prose *Melusine, Part I*.

c. 1401),[37] specifically dedicated to Guillaume Larcheveque, Lord of Partenay.[38] Each French version of the text, as Melissa Ridley Elmes puts it, functions as a "fusion of historical chronicle and romance intended to support the political designs of the patrons."[39] Written against the backdrop of the Hundred Years War, the texts use extensive genealogical 'evidence' to validate their different hereditary claims on the castle of Lusignan and surrounding territories. For example, Jean d'Arras's patron, the powerful Duc de Berry, laid siege to Lusignan Castle in 1374-75, roughly twenty years before the text was composed.[40] In reclaiming the fortress from its English occupiers, Berry used his (supposed) distant descent from the Lusignan line to cement his claim, as well as the Melusine legend specifically (reporting that a vision of Melusine appeared to foretell his tenure as lord of Lusignan).[41] The Melusine narrative gained widespread popularity in the British Isles as well as on the continent, and both prose and verse versions have Middle English translations dating from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries.

The Middle English prose *Melusine*,[42] composed circa 1500, follows Jean d'Arras's text closely. It is found in London, British Library, Royal MS 18 B II. The Middle English verse *Romans of Partenay, or of Lusignen, Otherwise Known as the Tale of Melusine*,[43] written in rhyme royal, dates from circa 1500 and is preserved in

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[37] Coudrette, *Le Roman de Mélusine ou histoire de Lusignan par Courdrette,* ed. by Eleanor Roach (Paris: Klincksieck, 1982).

[38] Melissa Ridley Elmes, 'Melusine' in the *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature in Britain,* ed. by Sian Echard and Robert Rouse (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, Ltd. 2017) pp. 1316-18.

[39] Elmes, p. 1317. Broadly informing my understanding of the French political, literary and cultural context surrounding these versions of the Melusine tale are the collected essays found in Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox's volume, *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996). For more information about the historical connections between Melusine, the texts' patrons, and the Hundred Years War, see several essays contained in this volume, especially Kevin Brownlee, 'Melusine's Hybrid Body and the Poetics of Metamorphosis,' pp. 76-99, Stephen G. Nichols, 'Melusine Between Myth and History: Profile of a Female Demon,' pp. 137-64, and Jane H. M. Taylor, 'Melusine's Progeny: Patterns and Perplexities,' pp. 165-84.

[40] Kevin Brownlee, pp. 94-95, Nichols, pp. 137 and 158-59, and Taylor, p. 166.

[41] The Melusine legend, as reported by Jean d'Arras, includes the caveat that the supernatural lady will always appear at the castle three days before it changes hands, a harbinger of new lordship. According to d'Arras, the English lord Creswell who commanded Lusignan in 1374 was visited in his bedchamber by a vision of Melusine, first as a serpent then as a lady, demanding that he hand over the castle to its new lord, the Duc de Berry. See Kevin Brownlee, 94-95.

[42] A. K. Donald, ed. *Melusine, Part I.* All references to the prose version of the Melusine legend refer to this edition, referenced as *Melusine.*

[43] W. W. Skeat, ed. *The Romans of Partenay or of Lusignen, Otherwise Known as the Tale of Melusine.* EETS 22 (London: Published for the Early English Text Society by K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1866). All references to the verse version of the Melusine legend refer to this edition, referenced as *Romans.*

Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.9.17. Fragments of an additional printed version of the text, possibly the work of Wynkyn de Worde, are essentially contemporary with the two manuscript versions,[44] and suggest that the Melusine narrative was somewhat in vogue in England the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Though there are discrepancies in some of the details and in the order of events between these two versions (the prose begins by offering back-story and the details of Melusine's parentage, while the verse version treats those sections as, essentially, an extended late-reveal flashback), in most other respects the two texts are close parallels. I have thus used both the prose and verse Middle English texts equally, indicating the prose as *Melusine* and the verse as *Romans of Partenay,* or *Romans*.

II.2 Fairy-tale, Monster-tale: Narrative in the Melusine Legend

It is critical to note that, from the outset, the Melusine narrative closely follows the pre-established tenets of the fairy mistress texts outlined in the previous chapter. The protagonist Raymond, lost and disenfranchised, encounters the mysterious, magical woman Melusine in the forest, in this case by a fountain (with both forests and water being strongly associated with fairy-narratives) (*Melusine* VI pp. 27-34, *Romans* 323-24). She initiates their romantic relationship, and offers him love, riches, a position in society, and good fortune so long as he obeys her command (*Melusine* VI pp. 30-32, *Romans* 455-511). As we saw in *Launfal* and *Partonope of Blois*, the prohibition or *geis* in such narratives is often to do with privacy, and Melusine's command fits that pattern: Raymond must swear to leave her undisturbed and in privacy on Saturdays, or face dire consequences.[45] Of course Raymond agrees, the two are married, and all the good fortune that Melusine had promised comes to pass.

Due to Melusine's cleverness, her magical ability, and her seemingly limitless wealth,[46] Raymond's estate dramatically increases. The beneficence of the fairy mistresses is usually welcome in romances, but it is particularly important for Raymond, given his precarious social position at the start of the text. Raymond is a younger son,

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[44] Elmes, p. 1317.

[45] Melusine tells Raymond that if he breaks his word, his heirs will lose their lands (*Romans,* ll. 509-11).

[46] See especially *Melusine,* XV, pp. 52-54, in which an abundance of terms signifying luxury are repeated: 'riche' or 'ryche' appears eleven times, 'gold' three times, 'perlys' three times, precious stones three times, and sights that cause outsiders to wonder and 'meruayll' twice.

excluded from the direct line of inheritance, and he also is responsible for the death of his foster-father, his uncle, in a hunting accident (*Melusine* V pp. 25-28, *Romans* 246-301). Melusine helps Raymond concoct a lie concealing his role in his uncle's death, and devises a plan to trick his cousin into granting Raymond a vast territory – much larger than anything he might otherwise have been granted.[47] Under her benign auspices he comes to control the territories of Lusignan, Parthenay, and also Melle, La Rochelle, and the surrounding environs, which become his family's legacy. She also personally builds, or 'has built,' a seemingly endless array of castles, towers, towns, fortifications in the region of Poitiers. Each year, the narrators tell us, Melusine has another son, and also, in her spare time, undertakes a building project, fortifying or constructing towns, halls, bridges, and towers (*Melusine* IXX pp. 62-65 and 103-05, *Romans* 1123-1266). At last, as both medieval and modern audiences might have expected, all this good fortune comes to an end when Raymond, goaded by a malicious relative, decides to spy on Melusine on a Saturday. He violates her privacy, catches sight of her bathing, and is horrified by the sight of her "gret and orrible" tail (*Romans* 2808). Raymond's betrayal, and his discovery of her serpent tail, precipitates Melusine's eventual departure and the loss of all Raymond's good fortune.

With the exception of this monstrous tail, Melusine's story thus far closely resembles the fairy mistress texts previously discussed. This similarity is emphasised further by the parallel narrative of Melusine's mother, Pressine, which is related at the beginning of the prose, and end of the verse text. Pressine is as mysterious and as magical as her daughter, and her story follows the same basic points: a young nobleman ("Elynas," *Melusine* I p. 4, or "Helmas," *Romans* 4386) encounters the beautiful maiden bathing in the woods; she offers him wealth, good fortune, and her hand in marriage as long as he agrees to a single prohibition – that he does not look at her while she lies in

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[47] See *Melusine* VI pp. 32-34 and IX pp. 38-40, and *Romans* 519-81. Melusine's plan to trick the earl into granting Raymond an extraordinarily large amount of land is the same as that employed by Dido in the myth of Dido and Aeneas. Melusine tells Raymond to request that his cousin grant him only "as moche of ground as the hyd or skynne of a hert may comprehende" (*Melusine* IX p. 39). The earl agrees to this seemingly small request. Following Melusine's instructions, Raymond then slices the skin into almost magically thin strips, and the resulting rope encompasses a large stretch of forested land. See Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. by Rosalind Brown-Grant (London: Penguin, 1999) p. 84, for the founding of Carthage through the 'good sense and cleverness of Queen Dido' who employs the same stratefy. For a full discussion of these parallel instances of women founding cities and dynasties through their own cleverness, see Barbara A. Goodman, 'The City of Ladies; a Lady of Cities' in *MMF*, 45.2 (2009) 41-62 (pp. 48-49).

childbed (*Melusine* I pp. 4-11). He eventually breaks her command, and Pressine takes her triplet daughters (including Melusine) away with her to Avalon where she raises them in solitary exile (*Melusine* I pp. 12-14, *Romans* 4390-4405). Barring only the absence of a redemption arc for the hero, these events – and their parallels in Melusine's tale – mirror those of the fairy-mistress narratives found in romances such as *Sir Launfal* and *Partonope of Blois*.

However, there are a few key differences between the Melusine texts and those concerning the fairy mistresses, and these differences will guide my analysis of this narrative. The lack of redemption for the male protagonist means that the magical women in these texts are not allowed the luxury of mitigating moments of mercy. Instead, there is an unforgiving harshness to their stories, even if the women in question are not necessarily personally merciless. Additionally, the fact that the betrayal takes place after years of marriage and – critically – the birth of several children means that this violation of trust has a different quality from the broken vows seen in the fairy narratives. While those might be explained (if not excused) as youthful indiscretions, the broken bond between husband and wife carries a distinctly different moral weight. These women are transformed by their maternal roles as well, and their relationships with their children define their identities and the quality of their supernatural otherness. Then, of course, there is the simple fact of Melusine's tail – a marker of monstrous difference far more dramatic and affecting than anything seen in the courtly narratives to do with fairy lovers. These qualities – morality, maturity, maternity, monstrosity – mark Melusine as distinct from the fairy ladies she in part resembles.

II.3 Betrayal and Monstrosity: Melusine's Tail

What, then, makes Melusine a monster? And why should her monstrosity in particular concern us? The answer, I think, is located in her body – in her transforming, aging, changeable, *feminine* corporeal form – and in the way other (male) characters respond and react to her body.

The two texts (the verse *Romans* and prose *Melusine*) reveal the heroine's physical monstrosity in different ways. The prose *Melusine* cuts right to the chase: after Melusine and her sisters imprison their erring father in a mountain, to spend his life "in

myserye" as penance for his betrayal, their grieving mother takes vengeance on her daughters, punishing them for their actions against their father. Calling them "euyl-herted" and "without pyte" (*Melusine* I p. 14), Pressine curses Melusine, the ring-leader, so that she will be "euery satirday tourned vnto a serpent fro the nauyll dounward" (I p. 15). Like the 'Beauty and the Beast' folk-traditions to which this narrative is related, she continues with the caveat that should Melusine find a worthy man who will be faithful to her, she will live happily, go to heaven after her death, and have good fortune in life – specifically, that "out of thy *body* shall yssue a fayre lynee, which shalbe gret & of highe proesse" (I p. 15). Good fortune, for Melusine, means bearing noble children.[48]

Both the punishment for Melusine's sin and the potential good fortune she may find if all goes well are rooted in Melusine's body. We have direct references to her (distinctly feminine) body both as her mother describes the serpent tail (issuing from the 'navel downward' – calling to mind Melusine's genitalia and images of her naked torso) and also her ability to bear children (to 'issue' them from her 'body'). This focus on the physicality and corporeality of Melusine's identity, both as mother and as monster, is perhaps unsurprising because of her femininity – the association of women with materiality and corporeality in medieval thought is well documented. In medieval thought, women were traditionally assumed to be 'of the flesh'[49] while men were associated with spirit and form. Theological, philosophical and medical writings reinforce those binary associations. That the female body, monstrous and human at once, should be a site of particular focus and concern in romance is subsequently unsurprising.

This physical monstrosity is kept a secret from Melusine's husband for the first portion of each text, and during this period Raymond and Melusine establish a life together: Melusine gives Raymond endless wealth and – critically, for a disenfranchised younger son – lands, builds castles and towns, and gives birth to ten sons.[50] The narrative

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[48] Melusine's two sisters face strict punishments as well for their involvement in their father's demise, but as Melusine is the "oldest" who ought to be "moost knowyng" (*Melusine,* I p. 15), her punishment is correspondingly greater. The two sisters are imprisoned by enchantment, but neither one is made monstrous; they are trapped in architectural, physical spaces rather than in their own bodies. None of the hallmarks of monstrosity – hybridity, transformation, etcetera – are experienced by Melusine's sisters; she alone em*bodies* their collective sins, and expresses them through her monstrous physical transformation.

[49] Bloch, p. 94. For more, see Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood,* p. 87, and Laura Jose, 'Monstrous Conceptions: Sex, Madness and Gender in Medieval Medical Texts,' *Comparative Critical Studies*, 5.2-3 (2008) 153-63.

[50] For more on the way Melusine establishes the ideal noble family, see Douglas Kelly, 'The Domestication of the Marvellous in the Melusine Romances,' in *Melusine of Lusignan,* ed. by Maddox and Sturm-Maddox, pp. 32-47, especially pp. 32-33.

establishes a clear picture of material comfort, stability, and good fortune, and although Melusine may wield extraordinary power in her roles as architect, benefactress, and patroness, the text registers no discomfort with this.[51] Instead, the terms used both by other characters and by the narrators signify honour, respect, and positivity: not only is she called "fayre" on numerous occasions (*Melusine* XIX p. 63), but she also is renowned for her charity ("moche good she dide to poure folk" *Melusine* XIX p. 103), for her "wyt, curtoysye and humilite," and her "valeur," (XXXVII p. 298), and for her maternal love ("she loued them with moderly loue, as she that had nourysshed them," XX p. 109). This emphasis on Melusine's performance of the role of a good, nurturing mother, defined by her care and concern for her children, feeds into her reputation as an exemplary woman: "[A]ll the world spake wele" of Melusine, Raymond asserts (XXXVII p. 298). The entirety of this atmosphere of positivity, prosperity and well-being combines to make the eventual revelation of Melusine's monstrosity all the more shocking and disruptive to the established internal order of the world of the text. In the verse *Romans* in particular, due to the fact the text conceals the particulars of Melusine's secret (the episode when her mother curses her is relayed after the fact), the audience learns of Melusine's physical deformity at the same time Raymond does, through his perspective.

After being convinced by his cousin that Melusine's weekly disappearances are the result of a sordid affair,[52] and therefore having his masculinity called into question while feeling betrayed by the woman he loves, Raymond *penetrates* the veils of privacy and secrecy where Melusine hides herself each Saturday. It is described as a violent, even shocking violation of her trust, and one of the most transparent rape-metaphors I have encountered, worded in a way that highlights the transgressive nature of what he is doing,[53] and the way he must forcibly enter into this space which he had sworn to respect.

> Then drawing his swerd…
> The poynt gayn the dore put he ther-vnto,
> So he shifte And smote here And ther so faste,
> That the yren dore persed at the laste. (*Romans* 2790-93)

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[51] For more on the textual anxieties about feminine power and social control present in the fairy-mistress narratives, see the previous chapter.

[52] The 'Erle of Forrest' uses language that deliberately questions Raymond's chivalric reputation, reporting that "men sain" it is "shameful" that he is so "enchanted" by his "fayry" wife, and is not "hardy" enough to control her; he also says that Melusine is sleeping with "anothir man," and is a "trayteresse" to Raymond (*Romans* 2758-71). See the previous chapter for further analysis of the way challenges to chivalric identity prompt Launfal and Partonope to make the same, disastrous choice.

[53] Kevin Brownlee, p. 79.

What he finds shocks him:

> Unto hir nauell shewing ther full white,
> like As is the snow A faire branche vppon,
> The body welle made, frike in ioly plite,
> The visage pure, fresh, clenly hir person,
> To properly speke off hir faccion,
> Neuer non fairer ne more reuerent;
> But A taill had beneth of serpent!
> Gret And orrible was it verily;
> With siluer And Asure the tail burlid was,
> Strongly the water ther bete…   (*Romans* 2801-10)

The drama of this moment comes partly from Raymond's surprise, and partly from the striking physicality of Melusine's serpent-tail. In both texts the authors emphasise the strange corporeal properties of this tail. The prose text states that Raymond saw "the tayll as grete & thykk as a barell, and so long it was that she made it touche… the rouf of the chambre" (*Melusine* XXXVII p. 297). The fact that this thick, 'burled' (striped) tail, which beats the bathwater and slaps the rafters, is textually and physically proximal to Melusine's naked (feminine, sexual) body in both versions of the text emphasises its comparative inhuman physicality, and the intimate juxtaposition of the soft, white body of the woman with the scaled tail of serpent is striking. Her paradoxical hybridity, embodying both serpent and woman at once, makes Melusine quintessentially monstrous – perhaps even more monstrous than a fully transformed serpent, as we see later in the text. Uneasily caught between the human and the animal worlds in this hybrid state, Melusine's body recalls Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's designation of monsters as "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration."[54] Evidently monstrous, yet still seemingly embodying female sexual beauty, Melusine's body demonstrates that she is not wholly monster nor wholly human woman, but both.

These descriptions of Melusine's monstrous tail seem designed to inspire awe and wonder, but perhaps also a sense of fear and danger – for surely a human-serpent hybrid-creature with a fifteen-foot long tail as 'thick as a barrel' is just the sort of monster which knights set out to defeat throughout medieval romances. Melusine is presumably physically, as well as magically and financially, more powerful than Raymond – an

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[54] Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 6.

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unusual set of characteristics for the heroine of a romance. Not only is she monstrously large and strong, however, but there is also a strange impermeability to this image of the scaled, sealed tail. Bettina Bildhauer has pointed that "This serpent-like skin begins at the navel, so that there should be no room for a vagina or other orifice in the lower half of her body… This smooth enclosure is evident in many pictorial representations."[55] Melusine-as-serpent is thus impenetrable, smooth and defended with scaly armour, embodying an unfeminine, threatening physical state akin to that of a sexless virago or man.[56]

II.4 Monstrous De*monstra*tion: Reading the Tail

Beyond the readerly pleasure of witnessing the fairy-lady-protagonist transform into a partial dragon, Melusine's tail is laden with significance because of the messages it sends to readers and characters alike – and because of the messages it does *not* send. Like the symbolic function of monstrosity elsewhere in medieval literature and thought, in which it acts as a sign (*monstrare*), Melusine's tail does communicate symbolic meaning – though that meaning is not, perhaps, immediately apparent.

After all the work of the previous chapters, in which the complexity and ambiguity of so many magical women in Middle English romances was explored, we as readers may correctly anticipate that the conventional response to the discovery of Melusine's monstrous hybridity – horror, shock, revulsion – is not what Raymond displays. Initially at least, Raymond's primary concern is not for Melusine's serpentine appendage, but rather the fact that she must now leave him.

> 'Halas, Melusyne,… of whom all the world spake wele,
> now haue I lost you for euer. Now haue I fonde the ende of
> my Joye / and the begynnyng … of myn euerlastyng
> heuynes / Farwel beaute, bounte, swetenes, amyablete /
> Farwel wyt, curtoysye, & humilite / Farwel al my joye, al
> my comfort & myn hoop / Farwel myn herte, my prowes,
> my valyaunce, For that lytel of honour whiche god had lent
> me, it came thrugh your noblesse, my swete & entierly
> belouyd lady. (*Melusine* XXXVII p. 298)

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[55] Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood,* p. 117.
[56] For more on Melusine's co-opted male role, see Marina S. Brownlee, 'Interference in Mélusine' in *Melusine of Lusignan,* ed. by Maddox and Sturm-Maddox, pp. 226-40, especially pp. 228-29; also, from the same volume, Gabrielle M. Spiegel, 'Maternity and Monstrosity: Reproductive Biology in the *Roman de Mélusine*,' pp. 100-24, especially pp. 107-08.

The practical effects of his "venymous treson" and betrayal leave Raymond swooning, for "heuinesse sore hym doth torment…/ Wonder pale he waxe… / For end had he none of this grett doloure" (*Romans* 2867-70). His weeping, wailing, and self-recrimination are all due to his anguish at the fact that he had "don amys" (*Romans* 2874), and *not* due to Melusine's habitual scaly transformation. After his initial sight of her tail, Raymond's only comment about her monstrous body is how he has sullied it with his unfaithful gaze ("By my venymous treason I haue maculate[57] your excellent figure…" *Melusine* XXXVII pp. 298-99). Rather than dwelling on her serpent tail, he places the blame on himself, mourning "that by my diffaute you haue I lost" and, the narrator makes clear, that "For sorrow ther of … [he] quaked and swat" (*Romans* 2875-76). Melusine, the "wysest, the fayrest, & moost noble lady" (*Melusine* XXXVII p. 298), has not had her character besmirched by this revelation, but rather, by his faithlessness, Raymond is shown to be ignoble and capable of unworthy actions.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Melusine's physical monstrosity is insignificant, or that Raymond is not affected by the sight of it. Rather, the texts suggests instead that the monstrous transformation which Melusine undergoes each week is insignificant only as long as she remains morally above reproach otherwise. While Melusine is perceived by the other characters to be a good woman, wife, and mother, her tail is an oddity rather than a symptom of wickedness – but as soon as events conspire to cast doubt on her moral standing, that physicality is read as a symbol of internal character. Like Melusine herself, interpretations of her body and its significance change and transform throughout the text.

Before further exploring the way Raymond (and thus the text) read Melusine's tail differently at various points in the narrative, we must first mention their sons, whose aberrant physicality and attendant moral uncertainty parallels Melusine's transformation and its ambiguous symbolic meaning. All ten of Melusine's sons are born with various physical deformities, referred to as 'mother-marks,'[58] which signal Melusine's monstrous

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[57] According to the Middle English Dictionary, "maculate" means "To spoil (something), pollute." Our most common association with the word is, of course, the *immaculate* conception – and the suggestion that Raymond has somehow spoiled or polluted Melusine's body, the same way procreative sex might 'maculate' a woman's body, suggests that Melusine had retained some sort of holy purity up to this point, despite her maternity and her monstrousness. See the online edition of the *Middle English Dictionary (MED),* ed. by Robert E. Lewis, et al.
[58] For more on the significance of these marks, see Kelly, pp. 39-42, Spiegel, p. 102 and p. 109.

influence on her children to the reader. The authors of the two texts seem to have delighted in flexing their imaginative muscles in coming up with all possible ways men might be visibly distinctive and different yet also recognisably human. Uryan has mismatched eyes and huge ears; Guy has eyes set unevenly; Raynald has only one eye; Anthony has a birthmark like the claw mark of a lion across his face; Geffray's long incisors give him the name 'Geffray with the grete toeth;' Froymond's nose is topped with a tuft of hair (*Melusine* XIX pp. 102-05). Despite these physical deformities, however, all of Melusine and Raymond's sons are not only still distinctly human, but are, in fact, exemplary knights and models of ideal chivalric virtues. They are described as "of gret renoun" (*Romans* 1159), "hardy" and fearless (*Romans* 1231), "marvellous strong" (*Romans* 1247), "sage, subtile, wel taught, myghty and stronge" (*Romans* 1264). They marry king's daughters,[59] and fight giants[60] and infidels,[61] and generally behave like ideal heroic, noble sons. Their military and romantic conquests expand the family's influence and authority. Additionally, mindful of their multitude, they consciously leave their homeland not only to search for glory but also from remarkable practicality and a sense of familial duty, providing opportunities for their brothers (*Melusine* XX pp. 107-08). This, of course, serves the genealogical/geopolitical goals of the romance, as through these valorous sons' international exploits the Lusignan family is able to claim territories across Europe and the near East, casting Lusignan's founders as glorious crusader-kings. Despite the oddities of their appearances, therefore, Melusine's sons are shown to be models of knighthood, and worthy ancestors for the later claimants to the House of Lusignan. As readers of romance, we may find this surprising, for, as Marina Brownlee states, "in the world of romance, physical beauty or deformity mirrors the ethical fibre of the character in question."[62] Despite this, the external signs presented by Melusine and her children (of monstrosity and deformity) are not read by the other characters in the narrative the way we might expect. Raymond does not consider Melusine's tail an

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[59] We see evidence of this in the chapter-headings in the verse *Melusine*: 'Cap. XXIV. How Vryan espoused Ermyne, doughter vnto the kinge of Cypre,' 'Cap. XXVIII. How Anthony espoused Crystyne, Duchesse of Lucembourgh,' and 'Cap. XXXV. How Regnauld espoused Eglantyne, daughter to the kynge of Behayne.'

[60] Ibid. 'Cap. XXXVIII. How geffray slough Guedon, the geaunt, in garande,' and 'Cap. XLIX. How geffray with the grete toeth rane ayenst the geaunt & ouerthrew hym with hys spere.'

[61] Ibid. 'Cap. XXXIII. How the kynge Zelodius & the other saracyns were brent and bruyled.'

[62] Marina Brownlee, p. 238. For more on the surprisingly laudable character of Melusine's sons, see also Taylor, p. 174, where she states, "In a romance world, we know, deformity of any sort is generally equated with moral turpitude."

obvious symbol of demonic influence, and her 'mother-marks' on her sons do not make them morally – only physically – disfigured.

The notable exception to this is the youngest brother, three-eyed and frightening, who is unsubtly christened Horrible. Horrible is said to be not merely a "thyng terrible" to see (*Romans* 1272), but unlike his deformed brothers, he "was of wycked doing,/ In no goodness, thought but to do ille thing" (*Romans* 1273-74). The prose text states bluntly that "he was so euyl and so cruel that at the foureth yere of hys age he slew two of hys nourryces" (*Melusine* XIX p. 105), something that we see in narratives of demonic children like *Sir Gowther*.[63] This emphasis on what Horrible chooses to *do,* (his *doing* is wicked and 'ill') makes it clear that this distinguishes him from his honourable brothers. Despite Horrible's aberrant behaviour and "wycked doing," however, overall Melusine and Raymond's sons are seen to be filling the requirements of admirable chivalric heroes (considering both Coudrette and Jean d'Arras were writing for powerful patrons attempting to trace their separate lineages back to this family, perhaps that is unsurprising).[64] The physical deformities of the brothers do not make them monsters, despite signifying some sort of difference.

While the distinction between physical and moral monstrosity is made clear in the representations of both Melusine and her children, that distinction is also shown to be easily erased. The sixth of Melusine's sons, Geffray 'with the grete toeth,' learns that his younger brother Fromont has decided to become a humble monk and "leue chiualry" (*Romans* 3262), and has thereby lost any chance of bringing honour to the family, it seems. Geffray flies into a fury, an overreaction so violent and dramatic that it is clearly intended to shock the readers. His "wode rage" (*Romans* 3291) is so passionate he turns "vermail rede as blode" and "uomed (*foamed*) and watte, a swine resembling" (*Romans* 3213, 3215). His appearance is so strange and inhuman he frightens all who behold him. The author of the verse text is careful to tell us that Geffray's "witte [is] gon And loste"

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[63] In Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury's 'Sir Gowther: Introduction' in their TEAMS edition of *The Middle English Breton Lays*, they comment on the fact that Gowther also "suckles nine wet nurses to death," and suggest that "According to folk belief the presence of teeth at an early age functioned as proof of demonic paternity." Melusine's children all grow with extraordinary rapidity, which falls under the same category, according to Laskaya and Salisbury. This pattern of thought persisted through to the early modern period, as evidenced by rumours that Richard III was born "not vntothed" (Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 9), suggesting his 'monstrous' nature apparent from birth.
[64] For the ambiguities inherent in Melusine's figuration as a founding mother, see Taylor, p. 173, Spiegel, p. 118, and Nichols, pp. 158-62.

(*Romans* 3212) – he is out of his mind – before informing the readers that Geffray then shuts his brother Fromont up in the abbey, along with the abbot and all the monks, and sets fire to it, burning them alive.

By any standard, Geffray's actions are reprehensible, and in the context of Middle English romances such behaviour is shocking – both to medieval and modern audiences. Mass murder outside of open warfare is extremely rare in the romance tradition, and the murder of religious figures still more so.[65] One of the only comparable events from contemporary Middle English romance texts is the episode in *Sir Gowther*[66] in which the as-yet-unredeemed, demonic protagonist leads a group of men to a nunnery where they rape the nuns before shutting them in the church and setting it ablaze (*Gowther* 181-92). This is clearly intended to horrify and shock the audience. Laskaya and Salisbury suggest that this episode was considered so unspeakably awful, in fact, that one redactor omitted the episode entirely, and as such it appears in only one of the extant manuscript versions.[67] That this particular act – raping and burning nuns – was judged to be so reprehensible as to be unacceptable for the fifteenth-century audiences of *Sir Gowther* suggests that Geffray's actions in *Melusine* may have registered a similar level of revulsion and distress from the readers.

In *Gowther* this particular act is one of the many signs indicating or proving the protagonist's demonic parentage: his mother, a childless queen, had been seduced by a "felturd fende" (*Gowther* 74) in disguise, and Gowther is the product of their unholy union. Like Merlin, mentioned in *Gowther* as another child with demonic paternity (and, in fact, Gowther's half-brother, 97-99), Gowther's paternity is intended to explain his aberrant behaviour, even as his behaviour verifies the demonic nature of his conception.

In the *Melusine* texts, however, there is no fiendish father who can be blamed for Geffray's behaviour. Instead, predictably, the (very human) Raymond immediately assumes that Melusine herself is to blame. When news reaches Raymond of Geffray's atrocity (including, we must remember, the murder of another of Raymond's sons, Fromont), Raymond initially responds with denial, saying "that may not be, / I can not

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[65] The obvious exceptions, of course, are saints' vitae and passions, but the deaths of Christians and religious figures in those texts are intended to illustrate the holiness of the victims, and the unholy wickedness of the perpetrators. Rarely, if ever, do the protagonists of medieval romances engage in mass murder, and certainly not of Christian religious figures.

[66] Laskaya and Salisbury's edition of *Sir Gowther,* from TEAMS.

[67] Laskaya and Salisbury's introduction to *Sir Gowther.*

beleue it" (*Melusine* XLI p. 310). After confirming the truth of the tale, however, he is so overcome with rage and grief that – like his son – he nearly loses his mind. The prose text says, "He toke such yre & anger at herte, that almost he was out of hys wyt" (*Melusine* XLI p. 310). The verse text repeats that sentiment, saying Raymond is "so inly malice, full of wrath and yre, / In such cas brought, wiste not what say ne don" (*Romans* 3446-47). This narrative has a habit of explaining (if not fully excusing) the irrational, immoral decisions of its male characters by describing them as 'out of their wits' or unable to control themselves, carried away in a fit of passion.

In this state of emotional distress, Raymond privately bewails his fate, and bemoans his marriage to "thys diffamed serpent" (*Romans* 3475). He is sure that his ill luck, and Geffray's actions, are Melusine's fault, the result of "fantosme or spyryt werke of this woman" (*Melusine* XLI p. 311). Moreover, Raymond is convinced that *all* Melusine's children will be flawed or wicked in some way, and for the first time he connects his sons' deformities to the character of their mother: "as I trowe she neuer bare no child that shall at thende haue perfection, For yet hath she brought me none but it hath some strange token…" (XLI p. 311), and "I trow thes children which that she bare/In this worle ne shall no maner good do" (*Romans* 3481-82). He recalls her serpent form, and elaborates for the first time on the horror and fear inspired by that sight:

> Full Grett hiduousnesse to my hert made.
> Neuer was ther man if hir gan to se
> In the estat that I ther saw hir clad
> But that wold Anon Away fro hir fle
> For it was thing dredfull As myght be.
> God me ward and kepe fro werk diabolike
> And stredfaste me hold in feith catholike! (*Romans* 3494-3500)

Though Raymond certainly felt fear and wonder at his initial sight of Melusine, this bitter invective – and accusations of 'werk diabolike' – seems spurred by his overwrought emotional state, exaggerating the fear and horror he initially felt upon seeing his wife's serpent form. In light of the tragedy of Geffray's actions, Raymond can no longer see his partner, wife, and architect of all his good fortune. Instead, all he can see is the monster whose influence, he presumes, created such diabolical impulses in his (heretofore) noble sons.

It is that issue – the fear of corrupting maternal influence – to which Raymond returns again and again, linking Geffray's behaviour with Melusine's monstrous body. So

when Melusine comes to Raymond's chamber, warned by his worried barons that he is inconsolable, the accusations which he levels at her are, unsurprisingly, to do with her monstrous body and her corrupting influence on her children. In the prose text Raymond declaims, with a melodramatic flourish, "Goo thou hens, fals serpente / by god! nother thou nor thy birthe shalbe at thende but fantosme / nor none child that thou hast brought shal come at last to perfection… good fruyt yssued neuer of the…" (*Melusine* XLII p. 314). This obsession with her flawed 'fruit' is condensed and crystallized in the prose version, in which Raymond simply shouts, "ha! serpent! thy line in lif no good shall doo!" (*Romans* 3546-48). Because she is a 'serpent,' Raymond asserts, her children are necessarily monstrous as well.

Raymond hurls this invective at Melusine publicly, before their entire court, and it signals the end of their relationship. So long as Raymond kept Melusine's condition a secret they could continue to live together, but once made publicly known, the curse comes into effect and she must leave.[68] Despite knowing that she will be trapped in her monstrous form, in endless torment "vnto the day of domme" (*Melusine* XLIII p. 316) because of her husband's unwise words, Melusine forgives Raymond (*Melusine* XLIII p. 317). She also makes sure to exonerate her children of any guilt or culpability. She offers an explanation for Geffray's actions, saying that God, whose "jugements … be ryght secret & meruayllous," could only have allowed the abbey to be burned in order to punish the "monkes mysdedes & synnes, whiche were of euyl, inordinate, & vnrelygious lyuyng" (*Melusine* XLI p. 314). She also reveals her parentage for the first time, actively dispelling the myths about her identity and the bloodlines her children have inherited. She leaps to the window sill from whence she proclaims,

> Far wel… I beseche you… to pray to the good lord
> deuoutely for me… I wyl lete you knowe what I am & who
> was my fader, to thentent that ye reproche not my children,
> that they be not borne but of a mortal woman, and not of a
> serpent, nor as a creature of the fayry / and that they are the
> children of the doughter of kynge Elynas of Albanye and of
> þe queene Pressyne… farwel, my lord Raymondyn…
> thinke of your two sones Raymond & Theodoryk.
> (*Melusine* XLVI p. 320)

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[68] This aligns perfectly with our expectations of the fairy mistress trope, although the nature of the revelation (physical monstrosity), the reason for it (the behaviour of their son), and the outcome (monstrous transformation and tragic separation) demonstrate the way maternity and maturity categorically transform the fairy mistress motif.

Even as her suggested status as a maternal monster had been the repeated subject of Raymond's accusation, refuting that claim by asserting her humanity (and her royal blood) is her immediate aim in this speech. By proclaiming the identities of her parents, Melusine hopes to dismiss the idea that her children might be the monstrous offspring of a 'serpent,' freeing them from the dishonour that would attend accusations of unnatural conception. We are forcibly reminded of the genealogical impulses of this romance: the patrons for whom the French authors composed these texts were invested in the recuperation of Melusine's lineage, so perhaps it is no coincidence that the two youngest sons – the only ones who are not described as disfigured or marked[69] – are the ones Melusine mentions at this juncture, as she attempts to assert her humanity and role as the founding mother of a dynasty.

However, the power of her passionate testament to her own humanity (and thereby that of her children) is somewhat undermined by her subsequent transformation. After giving a "sore syghe," she "flawgh in to thayer out of the wyndowe, transfigured lyke a serpent grete & long in xv foote of length." She flies thrice around the castle, making such a "horrible cry & pyteous, that caused them that beheld her to wepe for pyte" (*Melusine* XLVI p. 320-21). The verse text emphasises the same elements – her shocking physicality and size, her circling of the castle, and the "piteuous," and "wonder dolorous" sound of her cry (*Romans* 3867-78). With this melodramatic exit, Melusine departs, and unlike the fairy mistress texts, this tale has no happy ending. Melusine is doomed to endless suffering, and can never return to her life as wife and noblewoman. However, the fairy-tale structure of the narrative predicts that she will return (in serpent form) each time a new lord of Lusignan is chosen (*Romans* 3720), something which Jean d'Arras exploits in support of his patron's claim to Lusignan.[70] Jean d'Arras includes a 'historical' anecdote as demonstration of the veracity of this aspect of the legend, supposedly reported to him by his patron, the Duc de Berry. As previously mentioned, d'Arras claims that during Berry's siege of Lusignan in 1373-74, twenty years prior to the composition of the text, the English lord holding Lusignan Castle was visited by a vision of a huge serpent three days before he yielded the fortress to Berry. Donald

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[69] Kelly, pp. 35-43 and Taylor, p. 174.
[70] See note 23, and Kevin Brownlee, pp. 94-95.

Maddox observes that the Duc de Berry's hereditary right to castle was tenuous at best, but a *merveille* like the appearance of Melusine would have been seen to demonstrate that "Jean de Berry is the rightful heir."[71]

To claim Melusine as one's foremother might be seen as a double-edged sword, however, for as we have seen, the lasting impression she leaves is not that of a human being, but of an uncanny, mysterious winged serpent. While claiming her blessing to cement his lordship of Lusignan may have served the Duc de Berry's political aims, "what Jean de Berry is appropriating is an ambiguous inheritance," rife with uncertainty and the danger of disfigurement, monstrosity, and loss.[72] However, even as a problematic serpent, Melusine still represents the qualities desirable in a "suitably momentous" founding figure for a dynasty. Her legacy amply demonstrates the "valor, beneficence, justice, [and] authority" which one might hope for in a founding figure, as seen in her building projects and chivalric discourse. Not only that, but the monstrous qualities attributed to the serpent – huge size, unnatural strength, inhuman physical abilities and the lingering threat of violence – are threatening when possessed by a (half-human) woman, but become purely animal when possessed by the dragon, and therefore able to be appropriated by male heirs like Jean de Berry. For the male descendents of the Lusignan line, the monstrosity of the serpent can be seen as exaggerated masculine traits, acceptable as a family totem when mentally divorced from the feminine body.

The division of feminine-body and monster-body is not, however, fully complete. The texts inform us of the exception to Melusine's eternal banishment, the visits she makes to 'nourish' and suckle her two youngest sons, presumably despite her monstrous form.[73] The prose text states, "Melusyne came euery day to vysyte her children, & held them tofore the fyre and eased them as she coude... And more encreced the two children in nature in a weke than dide other children in a moneth; wherof the peuple had grete meruayll… but… neuer after saw [Raymond] her in fourme of a woman" (*Melusine* XLVIII p. 323). This description mirrors earlier mentions of her maternal 'loue' for, and nourishment of her children (XIX p. 103, and XX p. 109), from the care and attention she

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[71] Donald Maddox, 'Configuring the Epilogue: Ending and the Ends of Fiction in the *Roman de Mélusine*' in *Melusine of Lusignan,* ed. by Maddox and Sturm-Maddox, pp. 267-87, especially pp. 277-78.
[72] Taylor, p. 173.
[73] It is worth noting that several late medieval images of Melusine, including those found in BNF, Français 24383, (1401-1500), fol. 30r. and BNF, Français 12575, fol. 89, are of Melusine nursing her two youngest sons, while still a serpent from the waist down.

gives to the rapidity of the children's growth, despite the fact that she has lost the 'fourme of a woman' and is now a serpent. Melusine continues to perform motherhood admirably even when her human identity has been subsumed by her monstrous one. Maternity and monstrosity can coexist, it seems, even if monstrosity and married life cannot.

Her continued performance of the role of the good mother – like a strange, scaley, yet saintly madonna suckling her children despite her persecution – is further evidence from the text of just how terribly Raymond sinned by ignoring her commands. The text suggests that despite her dragon-body, she still has a mother's heart – demonstrating once again the division between the body and the behaviour of the mother. Melusine, it seems, continues to care for and nurture her children as a good mother should do, despite her tail and scales, and her patient submission to her fate is therefore given the cast of martyrdom. The ambiguity of this text is encapsulated in this image – the serpent-mother, monstrous yet good, dutiful and maligned and unearthly.

III. Demonising the Mother: Monstrous Maternity in Romance

The link between monstrosity and maternity, between immoral, deformed sons and their serpent-mother, is a common pattern in romance. The swiftness with which Raymond leaps to the assumption that Geffray's flaws are Melusine's fault – and also a product of her newly acknowledged monstrosity – is evidence of a pattern found elsewhere in the romance genre (and in society). It was commonplace in romance for one's qualities to be linked to one's birth, and thence one's parents. For example, the tradition of the Fair Unknown only exists because of this pattern, as the remarkable knight's secret parentage and high birth are presumably linked to his nobility and virtue.[74] As previously mentioned, *Sir Gowther* is an example of the negative version of that trope, as Gowther's wicked actions are considered proof of, and are attributed to, his diabolical paternity. Monstrous *maternity,* on the other hand, seems also to have been a prevalent concept throughout the Middle English romance genre, but is represented in complex ways that both comment on and reinforce stereotypical notions about gender, age, and morality.

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[74] See Salisbury, '*Lybeaus Desconus.*' See also Eve Salisbury and James Weldon's Introduction to *Lybeaus Desconus* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013) <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/salisbury-and-weldon-lybeaus-desconus-introduction> [accessed 24 January 2019].

III.1 The Constance Saga: Virtuous Maternity Maligned

While blaming women for their children's faults certainly occurred in late medieval English society, this pattern is evidenced in the romance genre in ways that simultaneously emphasise its ubiquity yet problematize its claims. In the female-centred Middle English 'Constance' texts, including John Gower's 'Tale of Constance' in the *Confessio Amantis*,[75] Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale,'[76] and *Emaré*,[77] motherhood is represented as vulnerable to slander and accusation. Even as these romances show that narratives about failed motherhood can be spurious, they also perpetuate the pattern of making maternal women monstrous, while reinforcing the binary divisions between 'good' and 'bad' motherhood. The heroines in the Constance texts not only demonstrate good, self-sacrificing, nurturing motherhood, but in their youth, virtue, and holiness, they become almost saint-like. The alternative, the evil mothers-in-law whose actions are characterised not by nurturing love but by malice and self-interest, present the inverse of this understanding of maternity. These texts reflect not only the patterns of thinking about maternity and monstrosity that we see in Melusine, then, but also exemplify some of the binary thinking that informed medieval understandings of maternal character.

We see the pattern of connecting women's faults to the deformities of their children in all three of the above mentioned texts, when the innocent, saint-like heroine marries the king and gives birth to a son.[78] The texts emphasise the fortunate, divinely-mandated nature of this conception with the repeated assurances that this is an event blessed by God ("Cristes wille" in 'Man of Law's Tale,' 721) (the "hihe makere of nature" visits Constance in Gower's text, 916) (Emaré conceives "As God wolde hyt sholde be," 480, and has a son "as Goddys wyll was," 500). Such an atmosphere of holiness attends these births that they echo the idea of the immaculate conception, further

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[75] John Gower, 'The Tale of Constance' in *Confessio Amantis,* ed. by Russell A. Peck and Andrew Galloway (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013) <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confessio-amantis-volume-1> [accessed 24 January 2019]. Book 2, ll. 587-1612.

[76] Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Man of Law's Tale,' from *The Canterbury Tales* in *The Riverside Chaucer, Third Edition,* ed. by Benson, pp. 87-104.

[77] *Emaré*, from Laskaya and Salisbury's edition of *The Middle English Breton Lays*.

[78] For more on the background of the 'Constance' tradition, see Thomas Leek's study of the precursors to Chaucer's and Gower's versions in his doctoral thesis, 'The Thirteenth-Century "Constance" Tales' (ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, University of Minnesota, 2009).

emphasised by the exaggerated virtue of the heroines – no hint of sin taints the young women in these texts. This means that even in a state of maternity, the young heroines of the Constance-texts seem to retain some spiritual virginity, a stainless, saint-like purity that renders them safe, youthful, sensual and acceptable. In each of these texts, however, the king is absent at the time of his wife's laying in, and the birth is wilfully misreported. The newborn infant is labelled monstrous, and the young mother blamed for this monstrosity. In each text, the king's mother (Emaré/Constance's mother-in-law) steals the letter informing the king, her son, of the birth of his heir, and writes a new, defamatory letter in which she blames the young wife for a monstrous birth.[79] In *Emaré* the mother-in-law says,

> the qwene had born a devyll;
> Durste no mon come her hende.
> Thre heddes hadde he there,
> A lyon, a dragon, and a beere:
> A fowll feltred fende. (536-40)

The three heads – of lion, dragon, and bear – are a particularly frightening touch, illustrating the monstrousness of this thrice-hybrid child. The implication, of course, is that in order to give birth to a 'fowll feltred fende,' the young woman must have committed some grave sin, or else she must be diabolical herself, implied by the fact that all fear to approach her. In 'The Man of Law's Tale,' the reported 'feendly creature' is so horrible that no one will come near, and the mother-in-law states that,

> The mooder was an elf, by aventure,
> Ycomen by charmes or by sorcerie,
> And every wight hateth hir compaignye. (748-56)

Here we see the explanation for the 'feendly' baby: the mother is an 'elf' and hated for her use of charms and sorcery. The mother-in-law's letter in Gower's 'Tale of Constance'

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[79] The term 'monstrous birth' refers to instances of infants born with birth defects that were severe enough to classify a child 'monstrous,' such as malformed, missing, or superabundant limbs or features; according to Aristotle, these infants represented "errors in nature," or, according to late medieval medical texts, bodies "outside the bounds of the common course of the nature of the species" according to Sarah Alison Miller, in *Medieval Monstrosity and the Female Body* (London: Routledge, 2010) p. 86. Monstrous births feature regularly in late medieval scientific literature as well as romance, and often were assumed to signify demonic interference, or the mother's sexual misconduct. A useful sixteenth-century example of the evolution of this topos is Ambroise Paré's work *On Monsters and Marvels*, trans. by Janis L. Pallister (London: University of Chicago Press, 1982). For more on the significance of monstrous births in medieval romance, see Jane Gilbert, 'Unnatural Mothers and Monstrous Children in The King of Tars and Sir Gowther' in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. by Jocelyn Wogan Browne (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000) pp. 329-44.

reiterates many of the same themes, saying that the wife's 'faierie' nature is what causes her child to be "al amis" and improperly formed (964-69). These sorts of accusations are consistent across all the iterations of this narrative, as is the idea that the child's form causes fear, revulsion, and avoidance. In these letters, then, the mothers-in-law represent both the young mother and child as monstrous, with the nature of one informing the nature of the other.

These texts demonstrate that the claims linking the character of the mother to the (supposed) monstrosity of her child are eminently believable. Although the heroine's husband does not wish her ill, he *does* believe the report immediately. In all three texts, we see the king's response marked by sadness,[80] but no hesitation or question about this claim which, to a modern audience, seems markedly strange. He readily accepts that such a monstrous birth is possible, and believes she may be morally and physically responsible despite her obvious virtue, and the patience and forgiveness with which she responds to these accusations. As we saw in *Melusine,* the assumption of a mother's culpability in the nature of her children seems to have been readily accepted, even expected, by the characters and readers of romance.

III.2 Maternal Malice

Of course, the audience of these narratives knows that it is not the child, nor the heroine, who is the real 'fende' in these tales, but rather the king's mother. In each of these narratives, the heroine's mother-in-law is a wicked antagonist whose hatred for the young woman prompts her to tell such lies. This malice is not given much justification or explanation in the texts, but rather is presented essentially as a matter of course. In 'The Man of Law's Tale' the mother-in-law is introduced as a lone objector to the marriage, described as "ful of tirannye" (696) and so upset by the her son's marriage that "hir cursed herte" nearly bursts (697). The 'strangeness' or foreignness of the heroine is the only justification for her ire, here – and while the marriage of the king to a penniless foreigner without political connections might reasonably have been the cause for some concern, it certainly does not seem like justification for murder. In *Emaré* there is even

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[80] *Emaré,* ll. 559-64, 'The Man of Law's Tale,' ll. 757-59, and 'The Tale of Constance,' ll. 990-96.

less explanation given: she described only as "olde" and "of wykked thowght" (445, 528), and there is no indication of why she might be so set against Emaré.

It seems that the audience of these texts would have accepted the wicked-mother-in-law character without much explanation, taking her "wykked" malice and "feenlych spirit" for granted. The authors flex their rhetorical muscles in an effort to fully illustrate the horror of this diabolical anti-maternal woman (see, for instance, Chaucer 778-84) but spend little to no time offering reasons for her behaviour. I would argue that simply by describing her as "olde," the authors are laying the groundwork for this demonisation, relying on the binary understanding of good and bad maternity in romance that hinged on ideas about youth and age, virtue and wickedness. Constance is endlessly patient, forgiving, and virtuous – and in contrast with her saintliness, the older mother seems increasingly diabolical. The young mother, a patient Madonna, is perfect and good, while the old mother is inexplicably, inescapably, inherently wicked. Some of this may reflect the romance genre's preoccupation with youth, and also broader social fears about maturing women's bodies; it also suggests the binary thinking about good, virtuous motherhood and its monstrous alternative.

Perhaps the authors of these texts felt that offering further justification for the enmity of an older woman toward a younger one was unnecessary, and that the cause of the mother-in-law's sentiments was self-evident. And, in the context of the intensely patriarchal medieval aristocracy and gentry, that may be true. Given that (noble)women's power came through men, then the mother of a king would certainly see his new wife – and still *more* powerfully, the mother of his son and heir – as a threat. This power-dynamic is overtly articulated elsewhere in the Constance narratives, in fact, when Constance is engaged to a sultan who is converted to Christianity by her holiness (Gower 625-39) (Chaucer 186-89, 225-27). The sultan's mother disapproves of this match, and in Gower's text she explicitly connects her displeasure to her own diminished status: if her son marries Constance, she says, "Than have I lost my joies hiere, / For myn *astat schal so be lassed*" (648-49, *emphasis mine*). Chaucer compares the 'sultanesse' directly to 'envious' Satan (Chaucer 358-71), and when she eventually slaughters her son and all his court, turning the wedding feast into a bloodbath, the text claims that it was because she wanted to "lead the countree" herself (433-34). The implication is that power is the motivating factor in intergenerational conflicts between women, and these sultans'

mothers are acting out of self-interest rather than baseless malice. Perhaps, then, we should assume a medieval audience would have understood the malicious attitudes of the king's mother later in the Constance-saga to stem from similar envy and fear of losing the king's favour (one of the only routes to power available to an older woman).

The idea that mothers have power through their children seems accepted throughout romance, and may help explain the timing of the mother-in-law's actions – she vilifies the heroine not after the marriage, but immediately after Constance/Emaré has given birth to an heir and thus gained maternal power. This is also the moment when the heroine becomes vulnerable to the sorts of slander only levelled at mothers. It is unsurprising, then, that this trope (of the mother-in-law lying and accusing her daughter-in-law of some misdeed, specifically something which invalidates her role as a mother of legitimate heirs) is found elsewhere in the romance corpus.[81] The longevity and breadth of this textual tradition indicates that accusing a mother of culpability in some fault of her children was a popular and broadly familiar narrative trope, and thus these texts suggest little readerly surprise, or need for explanation, for the mothers-in-law and their villainy.

Mothers are vulnerable to attack, defamation and blame in all these romances – as witnessed by the swiftness with which the king in the Constance-saga accepts his mother's lies. Even when the young heroine is exonerated, however, the texts still assign blame to *another* mother, though this time one much older and demonstrably more malicious. While these texts might frame the conflict between the heroine and the older mother-in-law as to do with female routes to influence and power, the real conflict seems transparently to do with youth and age. Despite the 'monster-mother' trope being shown as fallacious in the case of the heroine, the pattern of (negative) maternal influence is still present and problematic in these texts. These romances demonise mother-figures, even if some mothers are shown to be good. Maternity that is performed incorrectly, or that is too powerful, influential, mature, or self-motivated*,* is a source of anxiety in these narratives, and so even while one mother is proven innocent, another is shown to be a fiendish monster.

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[81] See for example Hudson's edition of *Octavian*, in *Four Middle English Romances*. We also see examples of anti-maternal behaviour from mature mothers in *Melusine*, as her affliction comes from a curse laid upon her by her mother (*Melusine* I. 14-15), and in some of the Loathly Lady texts, which will be discussed later in this chapter. For more on this theme, see Russell A. Peck, 'Folklore and Powerful Women' in *The English 'Loathly Lady' Tales,* ed. by Passmore and Carter, pp. 112-13.

Where, then, does Melusine fall, in this binary understanding of maternal behaviour? As we have seen, she performs good, nurturing, loving motherhood even after her physical monstrous transformation. She is, on multiple occasions, described as loving and nursing her youngest children (see *Melusine* XLVIII p. 323), and certainly responds with forgiveness and self-sacrificing patience to all accusations. However, her apparent maturity, sensuality, and the simple fact of the monstrous tail all preclude her from that virgin-mother category of the Constance characters. While she does not fit the anti-maternal, wicked mother character-type, neither is she a saint. Therefore, Melusine complicates and destabilises this image of a maternal binary. We must therefore conclude that Melusine's maternal monstrosity is not behavioural; instead, it is biological. We turn, then, to the medieval scientific understandings of the biology of maternity and monstrosity.

IV. Medieval Medicine and Maternity: Feminine Biology as Monstrosity

We expect to find monsters in romance. Neither caricatures of wicked-mothers-in-law nor fearsome dragons surprise us, nor are out of place in the genre. However, this idea of monstrous maternity was not limited to fiction; rather, it echoes late medieval scientific discourse on mature women's bodies. As previously mentioned, medieval scientific writing typically registers deep anxieties about female biology, and specifically the processes to do with procreation and maturation. Given that, and given the embodied nature of Melusine's monstrosity, the connection of her monstrous status to the bodies and behaviours of her offspring and thus to her maternity in particular, it is worth examining the medieval scientific thought which connected maternal bodies and monstrosity. Contemporary discourse about heritability and the influence the maternal body was imagined to have on the foetus during conception and pregnancy would have affected the way the late medieval English readership would have responded to representations of maternity and monstrosity in texts like *Melusine*. To better understand how a contemporary audience might have conceptualised Melusine's tale (and her monstrous body), we must understand her role as a mother and the character of the maternal body in late medieval thought.

At the start of this chapter, we discussed the medieval distinctions between motherly love and biological maternity. While the former was seen as benign, and even desirable for men in some cases,[82] we now turn to the latter – the inescapably physical, physiological processes of the mature, maternal body. These processes, including menstruation, menopause, and lactation, are what separated real medieval women from the Virgin Mary's (impossible) model of motherhood, of course. Mary's body was imagined to be "physically and sexually bounded and unpenetrated,"[83] and thus inherently unlike mature feminine bodies, whose openness and excretions caused so much concern for medieval scientific writers, as we shall see. So while the moral, nurturant behaviours of maternity were, of course, accessible to medieval mothers, the simultaneous embodied state of virginity modelled by Mary would be inaccessible. The Virgin Mary is the exception, not the rule, when it comes to late medieval discourse on maternity, especially in the scientific or medical writing concerned with the bodies (rather than the souls) of women, which will be the subject of this section.

IV.1 Late Medieval Science: The Matter of Bodies, and Bodies that Matter

A complete summary of late medieval medical and scientific thought on gendered bodies and their roles in procreation is, of course, outwith the scope of this study. The scholarship on the subject is extensive, and, as seen in the work of such authors as Joan Cadden and Monica Green, often undertakes the task of untangling the knotted web of classical, patristic, philosophical, theological, popular, and scientific theories which influenced medieval medical authorities' understanding of the human body.[84] Medieval theories about sex and procreation were various and often contradictory, informed by a range of Classical natural philosophical and medical writings, which were then filtered through the lenses of late antique and medieval redactors, commentators, and translators. The theories which, over time, gained the greatest popularity, and which are most clearly

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[82] Bynum, pp. 110-69.

[83] Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, pp. 126.

[84] Some of the texts that I have found most helpful while grappling with the medieval understanding of the (gendered) body are Monica Green's *Making Women's Medicine Masculine,* Carole Rawcliffe's *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1995), Katherine Park, 'Medicine and Society in medieval Europe, 500-1500,' in *Medicine in Society: Historical Essays,* ed. by Andrew Wear (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp. 59-90, and Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*.

evidenced in the scientific and medical writing of the late medieval and early modern period, are typically informed by authors such as Hippocrates, Galen, and most especially Aristotle.

Aristotelian theories of gender difference as evidenced in medieval medical and philosophical works are typically characterised by their use of polarities. Women, according to Aristotelian thought, are deficient in heat, and thus are cold and wet, while men are warm and dry.[85] This is not described as mere *difference*, but rather deficiency or failure: had women possessed the appropriate, desired level of heat, they would have attained the more perfect (male) form, and would produce semen (which is blood that is highly refined or 'digested' by the body's heat). Lacking that necessary heat, they instead are gendered female and produce menstrual blood, as 'failed males.'[86] This idea of sex difference based on heat influenced the way human conception was discussed, unsurprisingly – for if semen is the superior, refined fluid, then its role in human generation must surely be 'superior' as well.[87] This is evidenced in Aristotle's theory of human generation:

> The female always provides the material, the male provides
> that which fashions the material into shape… Thus the
> physical part, the body, comes from the female, and the
> Soul from the male...[88]

According to Aristotle, women do not have a 'seed' (like male semen) but instead produce formless matter (menses) which is influenced and worked upon by the male 'seed.' This theory, widely accepted throughout the medieval period, valorises the 'nobility' and even spiritual qualities of male semen, while reducing the female contribution to the embryo to base – and, as we will see, potentially dangerous – materiality. Unbounded feminine matter requires (masculine) form in order to become a body,[89] echoing medieval social hierarchies and theories of gendered authority and control.

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[85] Cadden offers a comprehensive introduction not only to Aristotelian theory, but also to the various routes through which it was disseminated in the Middle Ages. For the male/female, hot/cold dichotomy in particular, see Cadden, pp. 22-24, and Jose, p. 154.
[86] Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine*, p. 218. See also Cadden, p. 23, Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood,* p. 91, and Jose, p. 154.
[87] Cadden, p. 23.
[88] Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, ed. and trans. by A. L. Peck (London: Heinemann, 1963) pp. 184-5 (2.738 b).
[89] Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood,* p. 86.

Of course, alternatives to these Aristotelian theories were circulated in medieval scholarly discourse, as part of the increasingly urgent and impassioned discussions about procreation and the role of women in human generation.[90] Foremost among these alternatives was the Galenic theory of generation, which drew on Hippocrates's ideas of 'pangenesis' and the necessity of two 'seeds' – one male, one female – for generation.[91] Galen therefore saw menstrual blood as something distinct from that female 'seed.'[92] However, Galen's writing still suggests that females are "less perfect" than males, despite his suggestion that women might contribute something more than base matter to the creation of a child.[93] Medieval writers interpreted these theories in a variety of ways, and the resulting medieval discourse on sex difference was broad and varied. However, a consistency across these theories is that they made room for the increasingly focused misogyny pervasive in late medieval writing about female biology.

IV.2 Making Monsters: *De secretis mulierum* and the Female Body

This rhetoric crystallized and was made accessible to future audiences in the popular late medieval text *De secretis mulierum,* or, *The Secrets of Women.* This 'medico-philosophical' text[94] was composed in the early fourteenth century by a cleric known as 'Pseudo-Albertus' (due to his erroneous conflation with Albertus Magnus, who may have been his instructor).[95] It was heavily annotated by two commentators (A and B) whose additions were regularly reproduced along with the original text in many of the (83 surviving) manuscripts and (120 surviving) later print editions.[96] *De secretis* claimed to

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[90] Cadden explains that the late medieval debate – largely in universities, and other all-male communities – about the existence of female seed "took on a clarity, specificity, and urgency foreign to earlier medieval treatments" (p. 117).

[91] Cadden, pp. 106-121.

[92] For more on Galenic and Hippocratic theories, see Cadden, pp. 16, 30-54 and 117-21. See also Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood,* p. 88, Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine*, p. 209, Jose, p. 154, and Miller, p. 5.

[93] Cadden, p. 33.

[94] See Miller, p. 61, for the use of this term. The edition that I have used for this text is Helen Rodnite Lemay's *Women's Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus's De Secretis Mulierum, With Commentaries* (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), which I will refer to in-text as '*De secretis.*' Lemay's translated text compiles texts from multiple manuscript versions of *De secretis.* She also offers a comprehensive introduction, which I have cited separately as 'Introduction to *De secretis mulierum.*' I have relied on Lemay's translations from the Latin unless otherwise noted.

[95] Lemay, 'Introduction to *De secretis mulierum,*' pp. 23-24, Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood,* p. 32, and Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine*, p. 209.

[96] Miller, pp. 55-57.

be a revelation of the secrets of women's bodies, and was initially intended for a clerical (and thus exclusively male) audience. Additionally, Pseudo-Albertus intended the text for mature audiences only – the author suggested that no child, "nor anyone of childlike disposition" (*De secretis,* p. 59) be allowed to peruse it, as the matter contained therein is deemed too dangerous and/or seductive for a vulnerable or immature reader. The secrets about "the nature of women" (*De secretis,* p. 59) were deemed so confounding and corrupting that even reading about the venomous fluids, the 'seepage' and 'leaks'[97] and toxic vapours produced by female bodies had the potential to damage or infect an innocent reader.

De secretis borrows from earlier medical and philosophical texts (which the authors frequently misread and misattributed)[98] and it blends medical, theological and philosophical theories about women's bodies in a way that proved particularly potent. Monica Green describes this text as "one of the most influential documents in the history of medieval scientific attitudes toward women,"[99] while Lemay convincingly argues that *De secretis* in particular evidences (and likely influenced) the rise of the misogynist ideas about the female body that would eventually inform such texts as the *Malleus Malificarum*.[100] Not only can this text be considered a direct influence on later writing and thinking, but it also functions as a useful gauge for the way ideas about female biology changed in the later medieval period.

Before continuing, I should note that the theories contained in *De secretis* were not universal. Other medical and gynaecological treatises of the period contained less extreme views than some of those propounded by the authors of *De secretis*. However, the basic tenets of Aristotelian philosophy and their translation into deeply misogynist medical thought, as shown here, were more or less constant across much of the medieval medical field. I choose to focus on *De secretis*, then, not only because it was extraordinarily widespread and thus influential, but also because it evidences and

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[97] In *Medieval Blood,* Bildhauer summarizes this anxious conceptualisation of the female body as "not a closed container, but a permeable, leaking one" from which toxins might escape (p. 93). See Bildhauer, pp. 93-98, and also Miller, pp. 82-89.

[98] Lemay, 'Introduction to *De secretis mulierum*,' p. 18. In addition to Albertus Magnus, whose influence is seen throughout the text, the authorities most frequently quoted and misquoted by the authors of *De Secretis* are Avicenna, Averroës and Aristotle. See Miller, p. 6, and pp. 60-62.

[99] Monica Green, *Women's Healthcare in the Medieval West: Texts and Contexts* (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 2000) pp. 14-15.

[100] Lemay, 'Introduction to *De secretis mulierum*,' pp. 49-58 and Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, pp. 112-13.

summarises many of the misogynist precepts of late medieval gynaecological thought. Despite its particularly negative tone (stemming, perhaps, from its clerical audience) it broadly represents the trends in late medieval writing about medicine and women's bodies. In its understanding of, and representations of, the bodies of mature and maternal women as monstrous, *De secretis mulierum* provides a striking parallel to the romances like *Melusine*, demonstrating that monstrous women were not purely the province of romance, but rather part of late medieval scientific discourse.

IV.3 Conception and Menstruation in *De secretis*

As we will see, the position that *De secretis mulierum* takes on human generation, the values and characteristics of male and female contributions to the creation of children, and the character of maternal bodies is especially relevant to this chapter on monstrous femininity because it broadly engages in representing women as biological monstrosities.

In its treatment of Aristotelian and Galenic theories of sex difference, *De secretis* demonstrates the unclear (and particularly misogynist) thinking that distinguishes this text. Pseudo-Albertus initially makes a distinction between the Aristotelian and Galenic schools of thought (and while he refuses to opine about which is correct, his Aristotelian leanings quickly become apparent). First, the author explains Aristotle's theory – that the father's 'seed' is the formative principle of the generation of the human embryo, while the mother provides menses, the 'matter' in need of shaping.[101] Pseudo-Albertus then acknowledges the alternative (Galenic) theory, that "the foetus is made up of male and female seed together" (*De secretis,* p. 64), and that this 'seed' is distinct from menstrual blood.[102] However, Pseudo-Albertus immediately confuses this theory with the Aristotelian one, saying "When a woman is having sexual intercourse with a man she releases her *menses* at the same time that the man releases sperm, and both *seeds* enter the vulva (vagina) simultaneously and are mixed together, and then the woman conceives" (*De secretis,* p. 65, *emphasis mine*). We see that Pseudo-Albertus here takes the Galenic idea of the necessity of both male and female 'seeds' for generation, but

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[101] Lemay, 'Introduction to *De secretis mulierum*,' pp. 20-21 and 64, Miller, p. 80, Jose, p. 154, and Cadden, pp. 22-24.
[102] See Miller pp. 5 and 81-83, and also *De secretis*, pp. 63-65. The author of *De secretis* says this is the theory espoused by 'the doctors,' by which he means authorities such as Hippocrates, Soranus, and especially Galen.

conflates the female 'seed' with menstrual blood, using the word *menstruum* for both.[103] This lack of clarity evidences the overall trend of this text, which is both the elision of positive female contribution to conception, and overall confusion.

This conflation of menstrual blood and the idea of a female 'seed' is important because of the medieval discourse around menses as toxic and 'impure,' and the particular misogyny of menstrual taboos in medieval and classical thought. As early as the first century A.D. Pliny the Elder described the harmful effects of contact with menstrual fluid, and stated, "nothing could be found that is more remarkable/monstrous [*monstrificum*] than the monthly flux of women."[104] This attitude was occasionally echoed by early and high medieval philosophers and theologians, including Isidore of Seville, but Lemay suggests that it was not until the thirteenth century and the "recovery and assimilation of Aristotelian writings" that medieval medical and scientific writers turned their focus onto the imagined toxicity and "polluted" nature of menses with such focus and fervour.[105] The writings of Albertus Magnus (upon whose ideas the *De secretis* is based) and other thirteenth-century (and later) scientific writers show "systematic censure of the female because of her physical nature. Menses are clearly an impure, corrupt matter that define a woman's being and produce moral turpitude."[106] There were certainly some medieval medical texts, such as the *Trotula* and other treatises evidencing something approaching an actual understanding of women's physiology, that argued that menstruation had a healthy, purgative function and was a necessary part of women's health.[107] However, even those texts were prone to the interpretation that such purgation was necessary precisely because of the toxic nature of menstrual blood itself. The idea of

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[103] Miller, p. 81, and Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, p. 88.

[104] See Pliny, *Natural History, 10 vols.* ed. and trans. by Harris Rackham, for the Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1938-63). See Volume II, pp. 548-9 (7.64). See also Miller, p. 81, and Bildhauer, "Blood, Jews and Monsters in Medieval Culture," p. 90, and *Medieval Blood,* pp. 97-98.

[105] Lemay, 'Introduction to *De secretis mulierum*,' p. 34. For more on the treatment of menstruation in Isidore's *Etymologiae*, including his suggestion that "If crops come into contact with this flow they do not germinate; new wine becomes sour; grasses dry up. Trees lose their fruit; iron rusts; metals tarnish. Dogs who ingest this matter become rabid…" see Lemay, 'Introduction to *De secretis mulierum*,' p. 37. For the development of the ideas of female biology over time, see Lemay, 'Introduction to *De secretis mulierum*,' pp. 35-50 and Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine.* See also Cadden, pp. 117-21 for the change in the breadth and tone of scholarly debates about the role of women in reproduction in late medieval universities and monastic communities.

[106] Lemay, 'Introduction to *De secretis mulierum*,' p. 49.

[107] See Monica Green's *The Trotula: A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), and Sue Niebrzydowski's 'Introduction: "Becoming Bene-Staw": the Middle-Aged Woman in the Middle Ages' in *Middle-Aged Women in the Middle Ages,* ed. by Sue Niebrzydowski, pp. 1-14. See also Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood,* pp. 94.

menses as containing toxic or waste material was nearly universal in late medieval scientific discourse. *De secretis mulierum* is prime example of this. This discourse on menstruation is critical to our understanding of late medieval theories of sex difference, not only because, for these authors, menstruation seems to define all of female nature – so discussions of menses become discussions of femininity, more broadly[108] – but also because menstrual blood is assumed, in the mix of Aristotelian and Galenic theories espoused by *De secretis*, to be the substance from which embryos are generated, and thus the source of all human life.

First, Pseudo-Albertus describes the menses as "superfluous food" which exists in women but not in men because women lack sufficient heat to 'digest' and process excess matter. This signals feminine deficiency at best, toxicity at worst (*De secretis,* p. 74). This 'undigested' waste-material, the authors of *De secretis* explain, collects in the woman's womb as increasingly poisonous fluid. Commentator B states, "the menses of women is extremely poisonous and infects the body, so that … if menses touch the twig of a green tree it immediately dries up, therefore nature makes a great effort to expel this matter…" (*De secretis,* p. 75).[109] In *De secretis* it is made clear that this toxic menstrual fluid does *not* harm the woman herself (as had been previously theorized)[110] due to the fact that, like vipers who are not harmed by the venom they carry within themselves, "since women are naturally poisoned, they do not poison themselves."[111] However, the authors are insistent that the poison of female menstrual blood could infect *others* – innocent children and men in particular.[112] Commentator B discusses the danger of having sex with a woman while she is menstruating, explaining that not only would the foetus conceived in such a union be "leprous and fragile," but also, he insists, contact with menstrual blood is, unsurprisingly, "very harmful to the male member" (*De secretis,* p. 77). Commentator A agrees, saying that sex with a menstruating women would cause a man to "contract leprosy, and become seriously ill" or "cancerous" (*De secretis,* pp. 60, 88).

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[108] Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine,* p. 25.
[109] He references Albertus Magnus's text *De Quaestiones Super Animalibus* which articulates this position; in Book 9, Question 9 in particular, Albertus Magnus discusses the potential for toxic menstrual 'vapours' to weaken the cerebrum and infect women's eyes (Lemay, 'Introduction to *De secretis mulierum,*' p. 48).
[110] See Miller, p. 83, and Cadden, p. 33-34, for the position Galenic medicine took on menstruation.
[111] Miller, p. 83, and *De secretis,* p. 130.
[112] Jose, pp. 158-9.

Leprosy and illness seem to be regular results of intimate contact with menstrual blood, then – but the malefic effects of menses are not limited to physical contact. Following Albertus Magnus's propositions and the laws of humoral theory,[113] the authors of *De secretis* explain that menses could, if concentrated, become toxic 'vapours' which would travel throughout the body of the woman. Pseudo-Albertus describes how women who have retained menses (including those who are post-menopausal) can become so suffused with toxins that they can infect the air around them, and thereby "poison the eyes of children lying in their cradles by their glance,"[114] a theory which was readily incorporated into the rhetoric about witchcraft, including that of the *Malleus Maleficarum*.[115] Commentator A expands on this, saying, "…women are so full of venom in the time of their menstruation that they poison animals by their glance; they infect children in the cradle; they spot the cleanest mirror…" (*De secretis,* p. 60). Later, Commentator B adds that "When men go near [menstruating] women they are made hoarse… because the venomous humours from the woman's body infect the air by her breath, and the infected air travels to the man's vocal cords and arteries…" (*De secretis,* p. 130). Thus, it seems, the toxicity of menstruation extends beyond immediate bodily contact and could be transmitted simply by sharing space with a female body. Men (drawn to women sexually, and thus in intimate danger) and children (whose bodies are 'porous' and vulnerable to infection, *De secretis,* p. 131), should therefore fear women who are menstruating, or who have retained menses – or, perhaps, fear women and their bodies more generally.

This idea of the poisonous, noxious menstrual body was ubiquitous in medieval thought, though the authors of *De secretis* take it to extremes that stretch the imagination. For example, Pseudo-Albertus reports that menstruating women will, at times, hide sharpened iron inside their vaginas during certain phases of the moon when the penis is particularly vulnerable to injury "out of vindictiveness and malice" (*De secretis,* p. 89). The resulting wound is then in contact with menstrual blood which "infects it with

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[113] Lemay, 'Introduction to *De secretis mulierum*,' p. 48. See also Irven M. Resnick, *Marks of Distinctions: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the High Middle Ages* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002)*,* especially his section on medieval physiognomy, theories of humours or 'complexions,' and the role they played in constituting an understanding of sex difference (pp. 19-34).

[114] *De secretis,* pp. 129-31, and Lemay's discussion of Albertus Magnus in 'Introduction to *De secretis mulierum*,' pp. 47-49. See also Miller, pp. 83-85.

[115] Lemay, 'Introduction to *De secretis mulierum*,' pp. 49-58, and Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, pp. 111-13.

venom."[116] This idea of women using both sophisticated medical knowledge and their own inherent toxicity to entrap and injure men suggests that the dangerous secrets that *De secretis* contains are to do not merely with women's blood, but with their intentions or inherent morality.[117] This moral component reappears shortly later in the text, when the author confidently states that women's hair becomes so corrupted during menstruation that it must be 'hidden' to keep its venom contained and protect innocent people from its effects. Just in case his readers have failed to grasp the full severity of this, he adds that if the hair of a menstruating woman is buried in the ground during the winter, by summer it will grow into "a long, stout serpent."[118] The idea that women's hairs might 'rot' and produce serpents – creatures with obvious negative associations, the representations of embodied sin and foulness – demonstrates a serious (and perhaps intentional) lack of comprehension of female biology, and the culmination of the misogynist thought about the 'venomous' female menstrual body.

IV.4 The Serpent and Her Children: Medieval Maternity from Science to Romance

Throughout *De secretis mulierum*, then, we see evidence of the late-medieval menstrual taboo and the corresponding suggestion that women's bodies were not merely deficient or flawed, but actively poisonous and harmful *to others*. The fact that women's menstrual blood was imagined both to be frighteningly poisonous and also simultaneously the female equivalent of semen, as previously discussed, meant that according to *De secretis mulierum* and similar texts, children were generated and conceived in a maternal body that was actively hostile. Not only do the authors of *De secretis* describe the womb as "the sewer of the body," (a deeply awful thought, and one massively inconsistent with the cultural veneration of procreation),[119] but the very material mothers were imagined to contribute to the process of conception – menses – was also assumed to be toxic. This makes the connection of maternity and monstrosity obvious – because if the womb had

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[116] *De secretis*, p. 89, and Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood,* pp. 98-100.

[117] This idea is explored in depth in Miller's chapter on *De secretis mulierum,* especially 'Part Two: Secrecy's Discursive Boundaries,' pp. 58-62.

[118] *De secretis*, p. 96. Pseudo-Albertus quotes Avicenna and says "Take the hairs of a menstruating woman and place them in the fertile earth under the manure during the winter, then… a long, stout serpent will be generated…" Commentator B adds during her "menstrual period" a woman's hair is "venomous." See also Lemay, 'Introduction to *De secretis mulierum*,' p. 53.

[119] *De secretis*, pp. 133-34. See also Jose, p. 154, and Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, pp. 91-104.

such negativity associated with it, and if the foetus was presumably formed of the same substance which would cause cancer, leprosy, and the spontaneous generation of serpents, it is a wonder any children survived pregnancies, or escaped the perils of the womb unscathed. It is no surprise, then, that the 'monstrous births' recorded in the latter medieval period – children born somehow disfigured – were often attributed to some failing on the part of their mother.[120]

De secretis addresses the anxieties about monstrous births directly, saying that monsters are "errors in nature" that come about because there is "too little matter" or a "superabundance of matter" for foetal development (*De secretis*, pp. 112 and 115). Of course, since Aristotelian theory states that women provide the 'matter' for conception while men provide the form, it is the mother who would bear responsibility for these irregularly formed offspring. Monstrosity, *De secretis* states, might be caused by improper or "irregular coitus" (p. 114), but also, more likely, by "a poor disposition of the womb" which could be "slippery or harmful" (p. 115). There is no overt, immediate demonisation of the women witnessed here, only a subtle suggestion of the damning defects of the female body. The overall sense, however, is one of feminine culpability. Following all the previous discourse about the character of menstrual blood and the womb, of course, the suggestion that the womb might be "slippery and harmful" feels rather like a coy understatement. Later sixteenth-century treatises on monsters (for example, Ambroise Paré's *On Monsters and Marvels*) often discuss these same reasons for 'monstrous births,' and they reiterate the idea that children conceived during menstruation will be "leprous and ill" with "smallpox or measles, and endless other diseases."[121] Once again, this suggests that a deformed or monstrous child is, naturally, the fault of the mother.

This argument is still further emphasised by the fact that, according to the Aristotelian principles upon which *De secretis* relies, femininity itself was a demonstration of monstrous aberration. According to Aristotle's theories of human generation, as previously noted, women's cold, damp state reflected a "deformity."[122] Still more damning to women, however, was the idea that children ought to take after

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[120] See note 79 in this chapter for more. See Paré, and also Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, p. 131.
[121] Paré, p. 5.
[122] See Bildhauer's discussion of women as not only "not fully formed" but actually "deformed" in *Medieval Blood,* pp. 88-89, and also Miller, p. 86.

their parents – or, in imbalanced medieval generative theory, their father (the worthier parent). According to Aristotle's *Generation of Animals,* "Anyone who does not take after his parents is… a monstrosity… The first beginning of this deviation is when a female is formed instead of a male,"[123] because of course, "Nature always intends to produce a male" (*De secretis,* p. 117). Therefore, "the female body is the first and most common instance of monstrosity" in medieval thought.[124]

Where, then, does *Melusine*, with her disfigured children, her physical monstrosity, and her maternal identity fit into the medical/scientific discourse about female biology in the later Middle Ages? From what *De secretis* tells us, at least, her monstrous body and the way she passes monstrous traits to her children dovetails exactly with contemporary theories of the body. In the context of late medieval medical and scientific discourse about women's bodies, Melusine's frightening, transformative physicality is par for the course, if exaggerated. And if any menstruating woman could generate serpents from their hair, how much stranger is it, really, to partially transform into one? By the medico-philosophical standards articulated in *De secretis*, Melusine is certainly a monster, but hardly more monstrous than any human woman. She does not, after all, kill infants with her gaze nor give her husband leprosy as a menstruating woman might. The children she gives birth to have distinctive deformities, but excluding the (morally) monstrous Horrible, none are monsters, nor physically harmed – her children are not the weak, ill, leprous products of 'impure' conception, but rather powerful leaders of men, able not merely to survive in the chivalric world but to excel. We may read the representation of Melusine's monstrosity, therefore, as a strangely tempered version of the full monstrous potential of the mature female body as it was understood by late medieval scientific thought.

Given the discourse around generation, and the way that menstrual blood and female influence on the embryo were routinely blamed for monstrous deformity, it is no wonder that Raymond would leap to the conclusion that the perceived monstrosity of his erring children was their mother's fault. Additionally, again given the regularity of such rhetoric, the repeated articulation of the monstrous-birth trope across the romance genre is perhaps unsurprising. The monstrous mothers in romances embody exaggerated moral

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[123] Miller, p. 6.
[124] Miller, p. 6, and *De secretis*, p. 117.

or physical monstrosity, but their monstrosity seems like the logical extension of the way *all* women were considered to be 'monsters' and 'against nature' in contemporary medical and scientific thought.

V. Age and Abjection: Mature Femininity and Grotesque Bodies

The monstrosity of the feminine body in medieval scientific thought is, we have seen, largely to do with its lack of proper form, proper boundaries, its seepages and leaks – and thus with its potential to harm others, especially men. Looking at the female body elsewhere in medieval thought, and using Mikhail Bakhtin's theories to describe different types of bodies, we can further isolate the specifically monstrous characteristics of the feminine body.

V.1 Bakhtin's Grotesque and Feminine Physiology

De secretis does not, of course, deal only with maternal bodies, and the clerical opinions and forms of misogynist thought about different female bodies vary in the text. It is not every female body that is deemed dangerous, but specifically those that are mature – menstrual, menopausal, or post-menopausal. The prepubescent female body, and the virgin female body, are considered 'perfect' – sealed, contained, and thus harmless. This echoes the medieval rhetoric applied to descriptions of the Virgin Mary, whose body was imagined as bounded and impermeable despite her maternity. Biblical and ecclesiastical references to Mary emphasise this embodied but enclosed virgin state. In Ezekiel and the Song of Songs, for example, Mary is referenced as an "enclosed garden" and a "closed door,"[125] while in Ambrose's *De institutione virginis,* Mary is referred to as a "shut gate" with locks that are "unbroached."[126] In Hippocratic anatomical theory the virgin womb was imagined as a "stoppered, upside-down jug,"[127] so like other virgin bodies, Mary's body was "presumed not to bleed, in particular not to menstruate," according to

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[125] See Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, p. 126, where she references the Song of Songs 4.12, and Ezekiel 44: 1-3.
[126] Miller, pp. 65-66.
[127] Miller, p. 72.

Bildhauer.[128] In the sealed, controlled space of the virgin female body, there is nowhere for toxic, dangerous vapours or fluids to leak, or seep, or escape; in the menstrual, maternal, or menopausal body, however, that danger becomes real.[129]

These two imagined bodies – one closed, 'finished,' and smooth; one opened and enveloping, intruding and escaping its own borders – reflect the 'perfect' and 'grotesque' bodies discussed by the cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin.[130] Part of Bakhtin's work is an exploration of the medieval and renaissance ideas of the body, and particularly the medieval representation of the earthy, corporeal body, to which Bakhtin gives the term 'grotesque,' but which medieval writers might term 'monstrous.' Bakhtin explains that the grotesque body "is a body in the act of becoming," transformative rather than static.[131] It is also a body which is defined by its uncontained, uncontrollable nature:

> The grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is
> not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself,
> transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the
> body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through
> which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through
> which the body itself goes out to meet the world.[132]

The human body is made grotesque, according to Bakhtin, at the sites of interaction and exchange between the body and the world, the loci of "interchange and an interorientation"[133] between the supposedly self-contained human form and the environment which it inhabits. Such interactions are absent, Bakhtin explains, from the classical or neoclassical ideal of the body, which he characterizes as a "completed, finished product... All signs of its unfinished character, of its growth and proliferation were eliminated; its protuberances and offshoots were removed, its convexities... smoothed out, its apertures closed."[134] Bakhtin identifies this 'perfect' body as a product of the renaissance, while the grotesque (or monstrous) body is represented in medieval art

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[128] Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood,* p. 126.
[129] Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood,* pp. 91-94 and 98-105.
[130] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
[131] Bakhtin, p. 317.
[132] Bakhtin, p. 26.
[133] Bakhtin, p. 317.
[134] Bakhtin, p. 29.

and performance, he claims.[135] However, we can also read these distinctions as applying to the medieval understanding of male and female biology respectively.

The idea of a body that is perfect, wholly complete, and formed in obedience to the will of nature (or God) is one found in the descriptions of male biology in *De secretis mulierum*, and in late medieval scientific writing more generally. Not only does the text insist that "Nature always intends to produce a male" (*De secretis,* p. 117) which is, of course, the 'worthier' option, but also the many types of toxicity and venom associated with female biology are absent in men because of their superior (and more *complete*) biological make-up. The 'hot and dry' male state prevents them from experiencing the poison of menses,[136] as men's humours are so well balanced that they achieve a sort of physiological 'perfection.' This perfection is discussed at length in John Trevisa's fourteenth-century translation of Bartolomeus Anglicus's work, *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, which states, "The male passiþ þe femel in parfite complexion and wirkyng, in wiþ and discrecioun, in mit and in lordschippe… In the male beþ vertues form al and of schapinge and werchinge…"[137] This male form, perfect and superior by nature, is contrasted, then, with the representation of the grotesque female body.

Not only can we see this perfect/grotesque dichotomy reflected in the medieval gender binary, but we can also see it, as previously noted, in the virginal/mature female bodies found in both medieval scientific literature and in the romance corpus. The danger posed by female bodies, as articulated in *De secretis mulierum*, arises not simply from their toxicity, but rather from the potential for that toxicity to extend beyond the confines of their bodies – specifically mature female bodies which 'transgress their own boundaries.'[138] Women's poisonous menstrual blood poses little to no danger to the women themselves, it seems. Instead, the concern is for the men who might be affected by their pathologies.[139] All of the issues with menses discussed in the previous section are really anxieties about what women's bodies can do to *others*, as we saw. Blood leaking

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[135] Bakhtin, p. 29.

[136] *De secretis*, p. 74. See also Cadden, pp. 23-24 and Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, pp. 88-89. This means, of course, that "serpents cannot be generated from the hairs of males because the humours in men are well digested so their hair is not poisonous" (*De secretis*, p. 96).

[137] Cadden (pp. 183-88) discusses Bartolomeus Anglicus's involvement with the discourse on gendered biology, and the way one's 'complexion' or constitution predisposed a person to particular character traits and social roles. See also Jose, p. 154, where she quotes Trevisa's translation of Bartolomeus.

[138] Bakhtin, p. 317.

[139] Green, p. 219, and Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, pp. 98-100.

from impure vessels, or toxic vapours escaping through women's eyes or hair, are prime examples of the grotesque body refusing to be constrained within its own borders,[140] expanding beyond them and – critically, for the anxious male authors and audiences of texts in the tradition of *De secretis* – interacting with and therefore also potentially damaging those around them. The virgin female body exhibits none of these grotesque (or monstrous) characteristics, and rather than being an object of disgust and horror for the male authors and audiences, is instead an object of desire. Contained and unthreatening, female virginity is attractive while mature femininity is frighteningly unbounded.

V.2 "Thogh that I be foul, and oold, and poore": The Loathly Ladies

We see these two paradigms – that of the toxic, threatening old woman and the beautiful virgin maiden – contrasted particularly clearly in the Loathly Lady texts. The cluster of Middle English romances which contain the 'Loathly Lady' character-type vary in focus and form, but Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath's Tale,'[141] Gower's 'The Tale of Florent,'[142] and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain to Dame Ragnelle,*[143] as well as later sixteenth-century texts all feature the central motif of a hideous, threatening old woman who eventually transforms into a beautiful maiden when the knight agrees to her (sexual) demands.[144] The Loathly Ladies embody another type of monstrous, magical femininity, not maternal but post-menopausal in this case, whose transformative body represents male anxieties about female biology and power.[145] Throughout these Middle English romances, the Loathly Lady has the answer to a question the male protagonist seeks – namely, "What

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[140] See Miller's discussion of aging femininity, and the stereotype of the sexualized old woman whose "gaping orifices" allow "commerce between inside and outside" (p. 3).

[141] Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Wife of Bath's Tale,' *The Canterbury Tales* in *The Riverside Chaucer, Third Edition,* Benson, ed. pp. 105-122.

[142] John Gower, 'The Tale of Florent' in *Confessio Amantis,* ed. by Russell A. Peck, and trans. by Andrew Galloway. Book 1, ll. 1407-1861.

[143] 'The Wedding of Sir Gawain to Dame Ragnelle' in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. by Thomas Hahn.

[144] For a comprehensive introduction to current scholarship on the English Loathly Lady narratives, see S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter's collection, *The English 'Loathly Lady' Tales*. See also Thomas Hahn's Introduction to his edition of *The Wedding of Sir Gawain to Dame Ragnelle* in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*.

[145] See Ellen M. Caldwell, 'Brains or Beauty: Limited Sovereignty in the Loathly Lady Tales "The Wife of Bath's Tale," "Thomas of Erceldoune," and "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle,"' in *The English 'Loathly Lady' Tales,* ed. by Passmore and Carter, pp. 235-37.

thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (Chaucer 911). The answer – 'sovereignty' over men – foregrounds the issue of authority, while the price the knight must pay – his hand in marriage – foregrounds the issue of bodies (especially those that are presented as potentially sexual).

While on his quest for the answer to the riddle, "whate wemen love best" (*Ragnelle* 89), the knight-protagonist encounters a woman of terrifying ugliness. Chaucer remarks with some restraint that this "olde wyf" is so ugly that "A fouler wight ther may no man devyse" (1005), while Gower describes with relish:

> Hire yhen smale and depe set,
> Hire chekes… rivelen as an emty skyn
> Hangende doun unto the chin,
> Hire lippes schrunken ben for age…
> Hir front was nargh, hir lockes hore…
> Hire necke is schort, hir schuldres courbe…" (1678-86)

All of this categorically contradicts the beauty standards of romance, and specifically signals age and decrepitude, with her dangling cheeks, withered lips and curved shoulders. The author of *The Marriage of Sir Gawain to Dame Ragnelle* elaborates still further:

> Her face was red, her nose snotyd withalle,
> Her mowithe wyde, her tethe yalowe overe alle,
> With bleryd eyen gretter then a balle…
> Her tethe hyng overe her lyppes,
> Her chekys syde as wemens hippes…
> Her here cloteryd on an hepe… (*Ragnelle* 231-39)

This description gives us not only age, but exaggerated, excessive age. Her "pappys" hang like saddlebags, the author tells us, and her teeth are not merely yellow and 'hanging over her lips' but actually tusks surrounded by grey hairs (*Ragnelle* 241, 551-52). Her physique is described as heavy, large, and of intimidating girth. Gower says that there is "nothing small" about her (1688), while Ragnelle has the dimensions of a "barrell," and is "a yard broad" (*Ragnelle* 240, 242). Like Melusine's massive tail, which was also described as as thick as a barrel (*Melusine* XXXVII p. 297), the Loathly Lady's size adds an element of intimidation to her already monstrous body, which, of course, directly opposes the lithe, slender bodies of the ladies found elsewhere in romance.

These physical descriptions, and the emphasis on (grotesque, monstrous) protrusions and extrusions of the body beyond its usual confines, locate the Loathly

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Ladies' bodies in the category of 'grotesque' as described by Bakhtin. The romance writers were not the first to imagine this particular figure – Edward I, in one of his Arthurian-inspired pageants in 1299, had a series of romance-characters visit his court to demand services and oaths of his knights. One of these was a 'Loathly Lady' character type, whose physical form mirrored not only the crone of the later romances, but also the ideas of the grotesque body:

> The Loathly Damsel entered, her nose a foot long and a palm in
> width, her ears like those of an ass, coarse braids hanging down to
> her girdle, a goitre on her long red neck, two teeth projecting a
> finger's length from her wry mouth…[146]

Again, the emphases in the characterisation of the Loathly Lady are grotesque bodily excesses – her huge nose, ears, and teeth – and signs of age, ill-health, and poor sanitation – the goitre, the coarseness of her hair, the redness of her neck. These representations of aging femininity taken to a monstrous extreme, coupled with obvious revulsion from those who encounter her, demonstrates the trend in fiction – both romance and romance-inspired pageantry and performance – to make mature femininity monstrous and frightening.

That monstrosity, and particularly the idea of the grotesque openings and expansions into the world as evidenced by these monstrous, unbounded female bodies, is one again characterized through not only physical excess, but also through the threat to the male body through sexual intercourse. We see the Loathly Lady's monstrous appetite for food in *Ragnelle* (604-619), but much more prevalent is the constant undercurrent of sexual appetite in all of these texts, as the Loathly Ladies demand consummated marriage – and, it is therefore implied, sex – in payment for their service. The Loathly Lady in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' is clear that she expects to be the knight's "wyf" and "eek thy love" (1072), and when he begs her for mercy, crying "Taak al my good, and lat my body go!" (1067) she does not relent. Evidently, the Loathly Lady is not interested in his wealth, but rather desires intimate access to his body in the marriage bed. The Loathly Ladies in the other texts express the same sentiment, and the knights react similarly as well. Gower tells us that Florent "thenkth wel nyh his herte brekth/ For sorwe" (1700-01) at the fact that he cannot escape his promise to the old woman. This reluctance to marry

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[146] Roger Sherman Loomis, 'Edward I, Arthurian Enthusiast,' *Speculum*, 28.1 (1953), 114-127 (p.119).

the Loathly Lady is more than a simple aristocratic disinclination for an enigmatic, lower-class, impoverished marriage partner, (because, as Florent realizes, her age might ensure their marriage would be a brief one, 1575-77) but is instead specifically located in the threat of having to have sex with the grotesque female body the Loathly Lady represents.[147]

The horror the knight-protagonists express at this sexual obligation reflects broader social attitudes toward the aging female and sexual contact. The threat of intimate engagement with the grotesque, old, female body, would, for the medieval audience that was familiar with texts like *De secretis mulierum*, have signified real danger. Post-menopausal women, according to *De secretis,* were of course considered to be "even more seriously infected" or toxic than younger women due to the imagined retention and build up of menstrual blood.[148] The authors describe the effects of menopause, and claim "the retention of the menses results in an abundance of evil humours…" (*De secretis,* p. 129). This imagined "abundance of evil humours" gave rise to the theory that old women harm children with their gaze (*De secretis* 129, 131), and to the idea of their toxicity in general.[149] The authors of *De secretis* do not directly address the idea of the consequences (or possibility) of sex with an older woman, but given this superlatively poisonous state attributed to the aged female body, then surely intercourse with a post-menopausal woman would be considered highly dangerous. Assuming the grey-haired, ancient Loathly Ladies fit this age bracket, the anxiety felt by the knight-

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[147] See Cohen's discussion of the "perversely erotic" monstrous body (*Monster Theory*, p. 6) and the uncomfortable elements of sexual fantasy that seem inherently linked to many forms of monstrosity (p. 17); see also Miller's discussion of the "eroticised and repulsive" aging, monstrous female body (p. 3).

[148] This was assumed to occur "because the menstrual flow has a purgative function," as previously noted (*De secretis*, p. 129).

[149] Commentator B elaborates on the toxicity of older women, saying that "old women ought not to be permitted to play with children and kiss them, because they poison them to such a degree that sometimes they die…" (*De secretis*, p. 131). This poisonous quality is not limited to their interactions with infants, of course, but rather is endemic to old women more generally, as evidenced by Commentator A's strange story about an old woman who "forced a camel into a ditch" with the power of her gaze (*De secretis,* p. 130). This generalized toxicity prompts the commentators to wonder how aging women survive in such a toxic state. The answer, Commentator A suggests, is that women are "naturally poisoned" and thus unharmed by their own venom (*De secretis,* p. 130), an assertion which is immediately followed by the tale of girl who ate poison and killed men who slept with her, from Avicenna's *Canon*. Women's 'natural' tolerance to poisonous material is witnessed elsewhere in nature, Commentator B explains, comparing women to other "poisonous animals, such as spiders and snakes." Once again, we see feminine physiology linked with representations of serpents. For more, see *De secretis*, pp. 129-31. See also Marina S. Brownlee, where she discusses the disturbing negativity of the associations of women with snakes and serpents in a Christian contexts, and notes that Melusine's "serpentine connotation [is]…troubling for a Christian axiology" (p. 229).

protagonists of the Loathly Lady texts as these old and visibly frightening, poisonous-looking women pressure them for sex is perhaps understandable.

It is interesting to note that age alone was not imagined to be the sole contributor to this poisonous corporeal state. Like the Loathly Ladies, who are defined by their impoverished state as much as by their age, a woman's class was imagined to influence her toxicity as well as her maturity. Pseudo-Albertus states that the superabundance of 'evil humours' is "especially true of poor women who are nourished by coarse food, which contributes to poisonous matter" (*De secretis,* p. 129), and Commentator B links age and class explicitly, saying poisonous vapours are "caused especially by old women and poor women, because old women do not work and poor women consume gross foods, and therefore their humours are more venomous" (*De secretis,* p. 131). If poverty and lower-class origins were assumed to increase the poisonous nature of women's bodies, then the knights facing the prospect of marriage to the Loathly Ladies are doubly endangered, as the descriptions of these women highlight their age and poverty explicitly.

V.3 Changing Bodies, Changing Power: The Transformation of the Loathly Ladies

Of course, this demonisation of aging, impoverished femininity is what Chaucer's Loathly Lady explicitly rejects. The text of 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' overtly signals that the knight's dismissal of her for being "loothly," "oold," and "of so lough a kynde" (of such a low estate) (1106-07) comes from his ignorance and bigotry. The arguments against the knight's prejudices are presented by the (surprisingly well educated) Loathly Lady herself. Quoting Dante, Valerius, Boethius, and Seneca, (1132-90) the Loathly Lady lectures the knight on 'gentillesse,' saying that it comes from God and virtue rather than aristocratic birth, and reminds him that Christ chose to live in poverty (1184-90). As for her advanced years, she reminds him that age should be a cause for respect, not revulsion. Moreover, her age is a virtual guarantee of sexual fidelity (1215-22). The knight is educated along with the audience as the Wife of Bath, through her Loathly mouthpiece, takes apart the misogynist arguments that label the aging female body monstrous. In this impassioned defence of the old, poor, low-class woman, we see potential for the inversion of the medico-philosophical theories of femininity and monstrosity previously discussed.

However, this defence of poor and aging femininity is undercut by the Loathly Lady's transformation at the end of the text, as her 'loothly' and 'oold' body shrinks and reforms into the acceptable, safe shape of the beautiful, young, noble maiden, taking on a more desirable and, we assume, generally superior form. The monster-woman – grotesque, excessive, uncouth, unclean, with a weather-darkened complexion – transforms into a 'bright' and lovely maiden when the knight grants her 'sovereignty' (i.e., control over her body and life). After her transformation we are told that Ragnelle is the "fayrest creature" that the knight has ever seen (*Ragnelle* 641), while Gower makes sure that the transformed lady is identified as not just the "faireste" woman in the world but also only "eyhtetiene wynter age" (Gower 1802-05). Chaucer also emphasises her youth, saying "she so fair was, and so yong" (1257). With this magical transformation from age and ugliness to youth and beauty goes a metaphorical reconstruction of the lady's virginity: her maiden-body symbolizes sexual purity and appropriateness. The fact that the Loathly Lady picks this form over that of the old hag – despite all her passionate arguments against demonising women for age or poverty – signals that even if her Loathly form is not wholly monstrous, it is still undesirable and inferior to that of the maiden.

As the Loathly body becomes lovely, the male protagonists – and the texts themselves – seem to project a transformed character or personality onto the Loathly Lady as well, and to respond to her accordingly. As the monstrous female body is transformed, the male protagonists experience joy, relief, and sexual attraction. We see this particularly clearly in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale,' for after the knight witnesses the transformation of his wife, "For joye he hente hire in hise armes two" and "A thousand tyme a-rewe he gan hir kisse" (1258, 1260) – an example of physical attraction that would have been unthinkable were she still the Loathly Lady. The grotesque, lecherous hag has become the young, slender, object of desire. No longer actively (and frighteningly) desiring, the maiden conforms to the confines imposed upon her by society, and instead of being associated with unruly appetite, is instead associated with virtue, obedience, and confinement. We presume that, as her open and perversely erotic old body has become young, small and closed, her threatening desire has diminished as well. At the very least, her desires come, appropriately, secondary to those of her new lord. Immediately after her transformation, Chaucer tells us that the lady "obeyed hym in

every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng" (1261-62), signalling that it is not merely her external appearance that has changed, but also her (opinionated, desiring, stubborn) character as her desires are subsumed by her obedience to his.

Scholarship devoted to the Loathly Lady texts often focuses on this transformation of internal character or agency along with the transformation of her external body, especially concerning the idea of the authority or 'sovereignty' of the Loathly Lady. This is especially appropriate given the overt textual engagement with questions of women's power. It has often been noted, then, that while the Loathly Ladies enjoy a measure of power and authority while ugly and grotesque, they appear to lose that agency when inhabiting acceptable, appropriate (bounded, controllable) maiden-bodies.[150] The Wife of Bath's hag demonstrates this most dramatically. As a loathly hag, she is stubborn, determined and desiring, quoting scholarly sources as she educates her unwilling paramour in her quest for sovereignty, while after her transformation she becomes passive and agrees to 'obey' her husband 'in every thyng' (1261). The 'sovereignty' which she has won is therefore "undercut by the reassertion of convention,"[151] and her power curtailed as her body becomes beautiful. The threatening aspects of the Loathly Ladies' characters – their sexual desire, their uncanny knowledge, their potential to harm the knights through withheld information or union with their poisonous bodies – are transformed as fully as their external forms. As their threatening 'sovereignty' disappears, and only obedient, beautiful maidenhood remains, we see these narratives separating monstrous feminine authority from appropriate, marriageable womanhood.

VI. Conclusion: An Emotional Reading of the Transformed Female Body

The monstrosity discussed in these texts is grounded in and reflects social attitudes informed by supposedly scientific theories about female physiology, as we have seen. The transformations described in these romances, however, are connected to the *reality* of that female physiology. The cyclical nature of Melusine's affliction (suggestive of a menstrual cycle), and the Loathly Ladies' inverted transformation of young virgin girls

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[150] For more on this trope, see Caldwell, pp. 236-37.
[151] Caldwell, p. 239.

into post-menopausal, sexually experienced women, reflect the realities of the changes the female body undergoes.[152] While the transformations described in these romances warp and exaggerate those feminine biological processes, there is nevertheless an echo of real (male) fear of real (female) physiological transformation. The incomprehension and fear articulated in texts such as the *De secretis mulierum* demonstrate medieval male anxieties about women's natural biological processes, and these romances, in their tendency to make mature femininity monstrous, echo those same anxieties.

Male emotion about female transformation is thus at the root of these texts, I would argue. Both the Melusine tale and the Loathly Lady narratives hinge not merely on the idea of monstrous femininity, but on the idea of female transformation and change, and the (male) emotions that are engendered when the female body enters or leaves a state of imagined monstrosity. We see the (transformative) nature of emotions about the transforming female body in Raymond's responses to Melusine's tail, as her perceived morality transforms along with her corporeal body. Raymond's feelings about Melusine's serpentine appendage are, initially, self-directed sorrow and recrimination, as long as he was perceiving her as a morally 'good' woman and wife. However, Melusine as a 'good woman' is overwritten by the evil of her sons, and in Raymond's eyes she becomes a monstrous mother of monsters. The rage, fear, grief and distress Raymond experiences at the news of his son's death are written into the way he reads Melusine's tail and causes his interpretation of the tail as a symbol of monstrosity and evil. Viewed through the lens of negative male emotion, the serpent-tail becomes a feminine threat to chivalric masculine identity and lineage. Ironically, Melusine's resulting departure also causes Raymond grief, fear, and distress, and loss of chivalric identity. Melusine's monstrous transformation is thus both caused by, and the cause of, male anxiety, fear, and grief.

If the Melusine narrative is a conversation about male anxiety, however (and specifically about the toxic effects of unwarranted mistrust and male fear), the Loathly Lady texts represent a male fantasy. The changing, aging female body that magically turns back time may, of course, be read as a female fantasy as well, but the impact of the opinionated, lecherous crone becoming an obedient, virginal object of desire reflects a specifically male desire with particular clarity. Once the monstrous version of femininity is eradicated, the text/knight is left with the neatly contained, acceptable version of

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[152] Caldwell, p. 235.

femininity. And as we have seen, this causes the male protagonists to experience relief, elation, and newfound sexual desire. These are the emotions that are traditionally witnessed at the ends of romances, of course – the expected emotions attendant on the wish-fulfilment narratives of marriage and production of progeny that mark so many romance texts. The Loathly Lady texts, then, are also particularly *romance* fantasies, as the genre's preoccupation with perpetual youth is satisfied in the restoration of the Loathly Lady to a state of virginal, youthful perfection.

There is an element of that wish-fulfilment narrative tone even in the (rather less happy) resolution of the Melusine texts as well, for although Raymond mourns Melusine's departure, there is a sense of settling and clarity as she transforms fully into a serpent at last. No longer a serpent-woman hybrid, unsettlingly attractive above the waist while frightening and monstrous below, her ambiguous biology has resolved into one, comprehensible (if monstrous) category. She flies out of the window once she has fully transformed: "In-to a serpent changed tho was she, / Of huge grettnesse and length…" (*Romans* 3867-68). The ontological uncertainty of Melusine's identity is settled by this supernatural departure and the transfiguration of her body, so despite the sorrow of her husband and family, some element of unease has been removed from the narrative. The wailing, serpentine monster that flies around the castle in the dark of the night is comprehensible in a way that the domestic, maternal, home-building monster is not.

However, I would argue that we cannot read the conclusions of these romances – either the Melusine or the Loathly Lady texts – as free of anxiety or ambiguity. The familiarity of the romance genre is critical, here. As discussed in the previous chapters, the audience of these texts would have known the stories before reading or hearing them, and would have been familiar with the conventions of the genre.[153] The entirety of the narrative would thus have existed in the minds of the audience at once, which would have meant that the audience's understanding and expectations of the text and genre would have influenced the way they experienced it. Reading these texts intratextually would have meant that the audience's foreknowledge of the ending would have informed their feelings about the text all the way through.

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[153] See Cohen's discussion of functions of fantasy through specific temporal genres – monster-tales or horror stories, he suggest, are possible because "the audience knows how the genre works" (*Monster Theory*, p. 17).

If we read these texts, with their foregrounded monstrous female bodies, in this intratextual, flexible, folded manner, then they take on a rather different emotional character. The texts are unambiguous about the fact that Melusine's goodness coexists and overlaps with her monstrosity, as seen with her hybrid body, and even as a fully transformed serpent Melusine still, we are told, attends to her children as a good mother ought to do. Similarly, the Loathly Lady and virgin damsel are always, we assume, the same person: the maiden is locked inside the body of the hag, and the ancient, ugly old woman is always the future of the maiden. Knowing that she has the potential to be beautiful and virtuous, does our reading of her educated lectures, her sexual appetites and her demands change? Knowing that she was (or will be) old and 'foul,' does our reading of her eventual obedience and compliant behaviour change? In this reading, these characters expand beyond safe, coherent categories; they are thus the very definition of monstrous as they are simultaneously good and ugly, threateningly powerful and beautiful, monstrous and maternal at once.

Considered in this light, the appropriateness of Melusine as a founding mother for the Lusignan line, and the appropriation of her narrative and influence by Jean d'Arras's patron, must be reconsidered. The division of the monster-body from the feminine-body works, as we previously noted, to make Melusine a more acceptable, safe founding figure, as her eventual full transformation into a winged serpent separates the inhuman dragon from the image of the (already troublingly powerful) matriarch. Yet reading the text as overlapping upon itself, with the whole of the narrative familiar and well-known to its audience, necessitates the coincidence of the monster and the mother. The serpent-apparition's monstrous-heroic qualities (strength, size, etcetera) are overlaid with, and problematized by, the sexual/maternal female body and the feminine qualities of procreation and childbirth. Melusine, by this reading, is always both serpent and mother, always hybrid, always monstrous.

In Conclusion: Morgan le Fay

In the study of the magical women of Middle English romance, we have thus far seen evidence of ambiguity, of transformation, of the permissiveness of the romance genre. We have also seen, I argue, evidence that flexible reading has the potential to heighten ambiguity and female power. We have seen supernatural women who trouble the boundaries of acceptability and morality, and whose uncertain natures are further emphasised and accentuated through intertextual, folded readings of these texts.

At the end of this thesis, and at the end of the medieval period, we are left with some important questions. How do we understand the supernatural women of Middle English romance when examined in sum, rather than as separate, disparate characters? How can we draw these characters together, and what might they reveal when we do? Additionally, how are these supernatural women transformed over time? As the medieval period wanes, what remains of this ambiguity, and what is changed? To help answer some of those questions, I will now turn at long last to one of the most well known 'magical women' of medieval romance literature, Morgan le Fay.

Morgan le Fay, the quintessential 'magical woman' of medieval romance, embodies aspects of all the previously discussed models of magical femininity – healer, exotic queen, fairy-mistress, monster-mother – and so her character synthesises many elements of this thesis. As mentioned in the Introduction, Morgan's character has particular longevity – she is one of the earliest-appearing magical-women in medieval romance, and also, in Malory, one of the latest. Because she is a particularly enduring character, we may see the changing treatment of Morgan over time as a reflection of broader changes to late medieval thought about women and magic. In Morgan's transformed role from early Arthurian texts to Malory's *Morte Darthur*, we see the increasingly negative portrayals of magically powerful femininity in medieval thought.

I focus on Thomas Malory's work for this conclusion not only because of its chronological position at the end of the medieval period, but also because of his competing impulses to both preserve the traditions of Arthurian romance, and to offer new clarity and linear motivations for his characters. His treatment of Morgan le Fay becomes the definitive one, influencing the way she is represented in Arthurian texts for

centuries. Consequently, the way Malory inscribes and also erases ambiguities in his representations of magical women is influential to the way this genre, and the supernatural women considered in this thesis, are understood thereafter. I will argue that Morgan's characterisation in Malory's *Morte Darthur* is the product of the combined influence of the inherent permissiveness, complexity, and ambiguity of romance on the one hand, and on the other, the socio-cultural fears and suspicions of the late fifteenth century. Composed in the context of the witch hunts and ever-increasing anxieties about orthodoxy, gender and power, Malory's representation of Morgan le Fay may be read as reflecting and responding to particularly potent social pressures, and is both markedly negative and literarily consequential.

We will conclude with a consideration of Malory's position as bridging the gap between medieval and modern literature, and the way his particular literary impulses and forms reflect the changing literary culture of the late medieval period – and what that means for the supernatural women considered in this thesis.

I. Introducing Morgan, Introducing Malory

By the time Sir Thomas Malory began composition of his *Morte Darthur* in the 1460s,[1] the figure of Morgan le Fay was a well-known, recurring character throughout Arthurian romance. Malory drew on many earlier depictions of Morgan for his iteration of her character (as indeed he did more generally)[2] and the contradictory nature of some of those different versions may in part account for some of the strange or ambiguous elements in Malory's Morgan.

From her 'literary birth' in Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth century Latin text, the *Vita Merlini*, to her role as a healer in Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide* and *Yvain*, to

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[1] The version of the *Le Morte Darthur* used for this chapter is, as with the rest of the thesis, Vinaver's edition of Thomas Malory, *Works*. Vinaver's edition eschews Caxton's title ('Le Morte Darthur') and instead is suggestive of his broader 'many books' theory of Malory's writing. I use Caxton's title in text to refer to Malory's works for simplicity, rather than to suggest a position in the single- or many-books debate.

[2] Malory's primary sources were the French *Suite du Merlin*, the English alliterative *Morte Arthure* (for the section describing the war against the Emperor Lucius), the *Tristan en Prose*, and several texts from the French Vulgate Cycle, including the Prose *Lancelot*, the *Queste del Saint Graal*, and *La Mort le Roi Artu*. For details on Malory's sources, see Helen Cooper's introduction to *Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) pp. xix-xxi.

her increasing malevolence in the Old French *Vulgate* and *Post-Vulgate* cycles and the *Prose Tristan*, Morgan's role in high medieval romance varied dramatically.[3] The translation of her narrative tradition into the English romances, including the *Stanzaic Morte Darthur* and the *Prose Merlin* (both translations of the *Vulgate Cycle*), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and eventually Malory's *Morte Darthur*, created space and scope both for further variation and also simultaneously for repetition of key themes. Rather than track Morgan's character chronologically, I will consider her character thematically instead, focusing on the way she fits the 'magical woman' moulds explored in this thesis. In doing so, I argue that Morgan's character acts as a lens through which the powerful patterns and surprising variations of the supernatural woman in romance may be viewed, and the late medieval articulations of Morgan's character may suggest the evolutionary direction of the supernatural woman in romance more generally.

Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is primarily a reworking of earlier Old French Arthurian material, especially the Vulgate cycle and the *Tristan en Prose*.[4] While sections of his narrative rely on other sources, those two texts most clearly influence his depiction of Morgan le Fay according to Carolyne Larrington, who states that their representations of Morgan as "responsible for casual, malicious instances of the marvellous" are particularly visible in Malory's reinterpretation of her character.[5] While most of the Old French Arthurian texts represent Morgan's character as ambiguous at best, Malory's selection of these particular texts, with their overtly negative portrayals of Morgan, results in a depiction of Morgan as morally corrupt in the *Morte*, visible especially when her character is viewed in comparison with other narratives of magical women in romance.

Because Malory's work is so closely connected to the French Arthurian tradition, his authorial role has, at times, been referred to as essentially that of a redactor. This

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[3] Maureen Fries examines Morgan's role from Monmouth to her later appearances in 'From the Lady to the Tramp: The Decline of Morgan le Fay in Medieval Romance,' *Arthuriana*, 4.1 (1994) 1-18 (pp. 1-2). This transformation is explored in depth by Carolyne Larrington, in *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*.

[4] For details on Malory's handling of his sources, see *Malory's Originality: A Critical Study of* Le Morte Darthur, ed. by R. M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964) which explores the influences in Malory's work section by section. See also Eugène Vinaver's Introduction to *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, In Three Volumes* (Volume 1) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), especially pp. xli-lxxxv. Additionally, see Larrington, p. 37 and pp. 84-85, and Cooper's Introduction to *Le Morte Darthur*, p. xix-xxi.

[5] This refers to Malory's 'invention' of Morgan's culpability in several instances of cruelty, including the episode with the damsel trapped in perpetually boiling water (pp. 84-5). See also Larrington, p. 37.

would be doing his work an injustice, however. Lumiansky suggests that Malory's writing evidences "careful shaping of his borrowed materials"[6] in service of his overall aim: "to draw the Arthurian themes together into new patterns of order and coherence."[7] This process of seeking coherence aligns with Malory's preference for the secular over the spiritual; throughout the *Morte* he reduces the role of the supernatural and the religious, the mysterious and the uncanny, focusing instead on character development and chivalric identity.[8] According to Larrington, Malory also "consistently reduces the role of Morgan and the other enchantresses, preferring to emphasise a tangle of multiple causes for the downfall of the Round Table."[9] As the marvellous and the supernatural are downplayed in Malory's text to make room for chivalric feats of heroism, Morgan le Fay's power and presence are also consequently reduced.

While Malory does not *invent* the elements of Morgan le Fay's character as they appear in the *Morte*, then, he does carefully select those elements from his source texts and shape them intentionally in the recreation of her character as less influential, and more negative. The image of Morgan that he teases out from the web of high medieval Arthurian legends, therefore, is one that specifically suits his narrative goals of 'order and coherence' because of this consistency. The competing impulses in Malory's work – innovation to prioritise order, and simultaneous adherence to romance tradition – produce a version of Morgan's character with internal inconsistencies, as we shall see, with Malory's veneer of negativity overlying the persistent ambiguity arising from the romance genre's intertextual and perpetually uncertain portrayal of magical women.

II. Morgan as Healer

Perhaps the most consistent aspect of Morgan le Fay's characterisation, crossing the boundaries of time, language and genre, is her role as a healer. We may therefore explore

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[6] Lumiansky, p. 7.
[7] Thomas L. Wright, '"The Tale of King Arthur:" Beginnings and Foreshadowings,' in *Malory's Originality,* ed. by Lumiansky, pp. 9-66 (p. 61). See also Cooper's Introduction to *Le Morte Darthur*, pp. xx.
[8] See Vinaver's comment that Malory attempts to "deprive the story of its religious significance," and his analysis of the prioritization of chivalry and character, p. xxi. See also K. S. Whetter, *The Manuscript and Meaning of Malory's Morte Darthur: Rubrication, Commemoration, Memorialization* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017), especially the chapter titled 'Malory's Sacralized Secularity,' pp. 105-58.
[9] Larrington, p. 45.

her character in comparison with the ambiguous, powerful healing women in the Middle English Tristan tradition, examined in the first chapter of this thesis. The earliest references to Morgan in the Arthurian tradition, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* (c. 1150),[10] specifically credit her healing abilities. Arthur's gravely wounded body is brought to Avalon so that Morgan's powerful leechcraft can restore the king to health, as the bard Taliesin states:

> "Her name is Morgen, and she has learned the uses of all plants in curing the ills of the body. …Morgen received us with due honour. She put the king in her chamber on a golden bed, uncovered his wound with her noble hand and looked long at it. At length she said he could be cured if only he stayed with her a long while and accepted her treatment."[11]

Morgan is described by Geoffrey of Monmouth as a powerful, learned, and magical woman, whose abilities are matched only by her beauty. Avalon, the 'Island of Apples,' is in this text rechristened the 'Fortunate Isle' and is described as an earthly paradise where fruit trees and crops spring 'spontaneously' from the earth. The generative quality of this island creates associations with fecundity, bounty, and life, emphasising the connection of Morgan's healing with the forces of nature. She is also described as knowing "the art of changing her shape, of flying through the air, like Daedalus, on strange wings . . . and at will she glides down from the sky…"[12] This magical 'art' (*ars*) of shapeshifting, and of flight, does not cast the *Vita Merlini'*s Morgan in a negative light, but rather further enhances her reputation for knowledge and scholarly study. That scholarly knowledge is further evidenced by the claim that she teaches mathematics to the nine 'sisters' with whom she rules.[13] This association with both scholarship and magic is reminiscent of the learned natural magic that the healers in the Tristan texts were assumed to practice,[14] and Morgan is therefore imagined as a learned medical practitioner whose powers spring from the natural world and her prodigious education, rather than any nefarious source.

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[10] Larrington, pp. 4-5 and 7-8, and Fries, pp. 1-2.
[11] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Life of Merlin: Vita Merlini,* ed. and trans. by Clark, ll. 908-38. For more, see also Larrington, pp. 7-8.
[12] Geoffrey of Monmouth, ll. 908-38.
[13] Their number and academic associations may make these 'sisters' parallels to the nine liberal arts, further emphasising Morgan's learned reputation.
[14] See chapter one, section II.

Her reputation for healing remains one of Morgan's defining characteristics throughout the next several centuries of Arthurian material. Morgan does not personally appear in Chrétien de Troyes's romances, but her medical reputation is, it seems, well established: the author refers to her as 'Morgan the Wise,' and her healing ointments are credited with nearly supernatural powers in both *Erec et Enide* and *Yvain*.[15] In these texts, the eponymous heroes are healed by Morgan's ointments (despite her physical absence), which are so potent that, like the love-potion and calming draughts in the Tristan tradition, they effect the mind as well as the body.[16]

Even in Malory's much later treatment of Morgan's character, the learned-healer aspects of her identity remain constant, as do her associations with all-female spaces of seclusion, separation, and holiness. She is, we are told, "put to scole in a nonnery, and ther she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye" (Malory, *Morte,* p. 5). Once again, we see Morgan placed in all-female spaces of education and learning, though Malory's primary concern is to inform us of her powerful (and presumably negative) magical abilities. Malory's choice of the word "nygromancye" indicates a shift away from the benign natural magic of Morgan's earlier healing, for as Cooper suggests, 'nigromancy' is on the 'boundary of the acceptable' at best, and associated with demonic magic at worst.[17] Malory does not make clear what type of magic this 'nigromancy' is, but by suggesting Morgan implements black magic, he signals overt negativity in her character. Despite this, we may assume that her education is what gives her the necessary knowledge and skill to heal various knights throughout the text, including – critically – Arthur, in that indelible final scene (which will be considered later in this conclusion).

As we saw in the first chapter of this thesis, the knowledge of herbs, potions and healing salves can lead to moral ambiguity, for that which heals can easily harm instead. We saw, in the ambiguous portrayal of the Queen of Ireland in *Sir Tristrem,* the multivalent ways in which herbal knowledge can be deployed, and Morgan le Fay's medical knowledge in Malory demonstrates the same moral uncertainty. We see this particularly clearly when Morgan involves herself with the fortunes of a handsome young

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[15] Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*. See *Erec et Enide* (l. 4172, p. 89) and *Yvain* (l. 2957, p.332).
[16] The (overzealous) application of herbal ointment to Yvain's body, for example, cures his madness. See Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain* l. 2957, p. 332. Compare this to the 'drynks' brewed by the Queen of Ireland, as discussed in Chapter 1, sections III.3 and III.5.
[17] Cooper, *The English Romance in Time,* p. 161.

knight, Alysaundir le Orphelyne (or, Alexander the Orphan).[18] After he has been wounded in battle, Morgan tends to him (in typical noblewoman-as-healer fashion), but the healing process is markedly strange:

> Than quene Morgan le Fay serched his woundis and gaff hym suche an oynement that he sholde have dyed. And so on the morne whan she cam to hym agayne he complayned hym sore. And than she put another oynemente uppon hym, and than he was oute of his payne. (Malory, *Morte,* p. 394)

The suggestion here is that Morgan decides to first poison, then heal, Alysaundir. Poisoning a knight's wounds represents, of course, a gross misuse of the healer's knowledge. The 'oynements' that have such powerful physiological effects on the knight are distinguished in this text only by Morgan's intentions, and their efficacy demonstrates her herbal knowledge and powerful magical-medical skill. There was, of course, the suggestion of poison in the Tristan texts as well. As we saw in *Sir Tristrem*, the audience would likely have presumed that the Queen of Ireland was responsible for the poison that prevented Tristrem's wounds from healing. However, the moral quality of the Queen of Ireland's use of poison – which she brews to aid her brother in his fight with Tristrem – differs entirely from Morgan's actions here. Her intentions – which, as we know, are what distinguish the good use of natural magic from the bad – are self-serving, manipulative, and dishonest, while the Queen of Ireland's intentions are clear and honourable. Additionally, when the Queen of Ireland actually has Tristrem's wounded body in her care, she immediately heals him; Morgan, on the other hand, treats Alysaundir's injuries with 'oynements' to bring him to the brink of death, thereby ensuring that he is vulnerable to her manipulations. In this episode, then, we see Morgan performing a significantly more negative version of the (already-ambiguous) role of the magical healer in romance.

Morgan's misuse of the healer's skill is further evidenced in this passage by the 'drynke' which she gives to Alysaundir, which has such power "that of three dayes and three nyghtes he waked never, but slept" (*Morte,* p. 395). While he sleeps, she is able to carry him off to her castle. Ointments, draughts and medicines, then, are used in this text to place worthy knights into positions of vulnerability, with healer-women in control of their fate. Morgan intentionally uses her medical herbal knowledge as a way to tip the

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[18] For context for this episode, see Larrington, p. 19.

balance of power in her favour, as demonstrated yet again in her subsequent interactions with her prisoner:

> Than Morgan le Fay com to sir Alysaundir and axed hym yf he
> wolde fayne be hole. 'Madame, who wolde be syke and he myghte
> be hole?' 'Well,' seyde Morgan le Fay, 'than shall ye promyse me
> by youre knygthode that this daye twelve-monthe and a daye ye
> shalle not passe the compas of thys Castel…' (*Morte,* p. 395)

The threat of withheld medical treatment is serious enough to persuade Alysaundir to swear (against his will) to remain in Morgan's territory, surrendering his body to her control. Once again, we see Morgan's intentions are self-serving, and a corruption of the altruism assumed of healing maidens. The effect of this, then, is a portrait of Morgan-as-healer, but also a character who uses her herbal and medical knowledge selfishly, to harm as well as heal, and to leverage power over men.

It is implied that this coercion has a sexual component as well. Alysaundir's promise to remain in the castle, subject to her magical-medical treatment, makes him sexually vulnerable to Morgan who, we learn, keeps him there "for none other entente but for to doo her pleasyr." Alysaundir melodramatically responds to this suggestion, saying "O Jesu defende me… I had levir kut away my hangers than I wolde do her ony suche pleasure" (p. 395). As we saw in the Tristan texts, it was not unusual for the healing process to contain erotic subtext, especially when the lady-as-leech heals the wounded hero.[19] In Malory, Isode's relationship with Tristram began as a result of their interactions during his recovery from his wounds,[20] and of course the Queen of Ireland, who heals Sir Tristrem in the verse text, is also the one to eventually brew the love potion that causes their illicit passion. The sexual element of this healing episode in the *Morte* is unusual, however, in its menacing, non-consensual quality. The threat of withheld medical treatment as a way to coerce the hero into a sexual relationship with the lady-healer is unprecedented in the texts explored in this thesis, and deeply negative. None of the healing women discussed in the first chapter fill so threatening a role, and none so obviously misuse the healer's power to further their own erotic ends. Once again, then, there are echoes of the pre-existing tropes of the magical healing woman in Malory's

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[19] See Larrington, p. 87, for more on this episode both in Malory and in the *Tristan en Prose,* Malory's source, and subversion of the stereotype of the lady-as-leech.
[20] As seen in Chapter One, section VI.1.

representation of Morgan le Fay, but this version of the healer-woman is characterised by extraordinary depths of self-interest, manipulation, and wickedness.

III. Intimacy and Betrayal: Morgan as a (Foreign) Queen

The second chapter of this thesis explored ideas of familiarity, strangeness, and the powerful permission of otherness when it comes to magical, exotic royal women in romance. Romances like *Bevis of Hampton* explore the attraction and danger inherent in the foreign queen's overlapping characteristics of intimacy with the protagonist, and alien interests and allegiances, and because much of Morgan's identity hinges on similar tensions between intimate kinship relationships and her ambitions as a rival and queen in her own right, she may therefore be read in comparison with these female characters.

As we saw in the second chapter of this thesis, the idea of a foreign queen was understood as at once attractive, due to the diplomatic ties and geopolitical influence she might bring, and also as a source of danger or uncertainty, due to her potentially divided loyalties and her ability to use her foreign connections to destabilise domestic power. While narratives like *Bevis of Hampton* worked to reassure audiences that foreign queenship, embodied by the Saracen Princesses, might be a net positive, that text also articulated the negative version of foreign queenship in the representation of Bevis's mother, who uses her ties to her (foreign) country of birth to gain military support for her (foreign) lover's assassination of her husband. As we noted, this narrative closely paralleled the real political career of Isabella of France, giving weight to the anxieties expressed by these romances. Though a queen, Morgan, of course, is not 'foreign.' However, in her divided loyalties, in her choice to use her connections to further her own dynastic interests, and in the overlap of the personal and the political in her betrayal of Arthur, we see Morgan falling into the pattern of the negative version of the foreign queen.

Morgan is commonly referred to as 'Quene' in Malory's text, and at one point introduces herself as "quene Morgan le Fay quene of the land of Gorre" (*Morte,* p. 152). The land of Gorre is not truly her dominion, however, but the province of her husband Uriens, and part of Arthur's territory. As it relates to "the land of Gorre," then, the title 'quene' seems to be more a formality than denoting any real power or authority. We see

Morgan acting with queenly authority in other ways, however, both in her control of lands, castles and men at various points in the *Morte*,[21] but also – and perhaps more powerfully – in her association with Avalon, the Fortunate Isle described in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*. In the *Vita Merlini* Morgan is described as 'the first' (*prior*) among her 'sisters' with whom she governs Avalon, giving her a version of the role of queen. Avalon, like the imagined East of medieval romance, is a place of marvels and magic, and as a denizen of such a land, Morgan's powers seem not only acceptable but expected. Throughout medieval romance tradition, we see Morgan's queenly authority and magical abilities rendered benign or acceptable when she remains safely confined in her otherworldly paradise, but they become catalysts for dangerous instability when they intrude into the chivalric order.[22]

This intrusion happens in part because of her intimate kinship relationship with King Arthur. While the magical Saracen Princesses and other foreign queens discussed in chapter two were dangerous primarily because of their romantic intimacy with the hero, Morgan's close relationship with Arthur as his sister leads to similar issues of uncertain allegiance and divided loyalties. In her earliest incarnations, Morgan is not imagined as Arthur's sister, and perhaps not even necessarily human but rather fully supernatural.[23] Morgan is first described as Arthur's sister in Etienne de Rouen's *Draco Normannicus* (c. 1168)[24] and around the same time by Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec* (c. 1150-75). Once Morgan is identified as Arthur's sister her behaviour becomes subject to greater scrutiny, and her personal power and authority are seen as more threatening to the integrity of the court. Due to their sibling relationship, her behaviour and character begin to reflect on Arthur.[25] As Morgan is increasingly integrated into the fabric of Arthurian society, she becomes more involved in the destabilisation of the chivalric order, and cast specifically

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[21] For more on Morgan's castles and territories clearly defined as places of threatening female authority and queenship, see the episodes with her abduction of Lancelot (*Morte*, pp. 151-52) and Alysaundir (pp. 394-95), and her attempts to ambush for Lancelot and Tristram by luring them into one of her castles (p. 315).

[22] See Larrington's third chapter, 'Morgan and Chivalry' for more on Morgan's disruptive potential (pp. 51-73).

[23] Wade describes the process of 'rationalisation' as Morgan is transformed from an otherworldly fairy to a human enchantress in *Fairies in Medieval Romance*; see especially pp. 9-21.

[24] Etienne de Rouen describes "Morgan the eternal nymph" who "receives her brother, cares for him and feeds him, heals him" (Larrington, p. 29). For more, see Wade, pp. 62-64.

[25] Cooper, *The English Romance in Time,* pp. 185-86, and Wade, pp. 9-11 and 17.

as an antagonist.[26] In making Morgan Arthur's sister, the authors of the Old French romances curtailed her character's freedom, and created sources of tension and enmity between her and the court.

Malory expands upon these tensions, and uses Morgan's established identity as Arthur's sister to cast her not only as an antagonist, but as guilty of reprehensible betrayal. The episode with the stolen sword and scabbard[27] illustrates this clearly. When Arthur first receives Excalibur and its enchanted scabbard, Merlin counsels him to take particular care of the scabbard because of its protective powers (*Morte,* p. 49). Arthur, heeding him, decides that the best person to safeguard the scabbard is his sister, Morgan le Fay. Malory tells us of Arthur's confidence in Morgan, and makes sure to identify her as his kinswoman, emphasising the importance of that relationship: "for grete trust Arthur betoke the scawberde to Morgan le Fay hys sister…" (p. 49). Malory immediately reveals Morgan's impending disloyalty and betrayal, contrasting Arthur's "grete trust" with her deceit and faithlessness. Malory states, "she loved another knyght bettir than hir husbande, kynge Uriens, othir kynge Arthure. And she wolde have had Arthure hir brother slayne, and ther for she lete make anothir scawberd… lyke it by enchauntement and gaf the scawberd Excalibur to her lover" (p. 49). This phrasing links her adultery with her betrayal of Arthur. The suggestion is that she should love "Arthure hir brother" nearly as much (or more) than her husband, and certainly more than any other knight, means that in taking a lover whom she prefers over either husband or brother she is committing a double offense. This also connects her more clearly to the foreign queens in chapter two, who betray their husbands by conspiring with their lovers, as Morgan does here. Like the foreign queens, there is a danger that that intimate relationship will be undercut by other loyalties, and, when she chooses another man over her husband and

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[26] Fries, p. 4. The way Morgan is bound by the rules and pressures of chivalric norms shapes her relationship with Guiomar in the French tradition (including the Vulgate *Lancelot*, the *Estoire Merlin* and its Middle English translation *The Prose Merlin*, and others); in these texts, the illicit relationship is described as shameful not merely to Morgan herself, but as bringing shame upon Arthur as well because of their close ties of kinship. Guenevere forces the lovers to separate, seeking to preserve Arthur's reputation; this, we may assume, triggers the intense enmity that Morgan harbours for the queen in later texts. For further context see Larrington, pp. 41-42, and Fries, p. 4.

[27] A modified version of the same tale in the Post-Vulgate *Suite de Merlin*; see Larrington, p. 33.

brother, we see those fears realised.[28] This, according to Larrington and others, relates to the changing understanding of marriage in late medieval Europe, and the expectation that women's loyalties would be given both to their birth-family and to their husbands, creating a potential site of conflict between the two.[29] More generally, of course, this question of a woman's divided loyalties is a problem inherent in the medieval marriage system – and for monarchy in particular – in which intimate relationships have political currency.

Malory later relates the full story of Morgan's attempt to have "Arthure hir brother slayne" and the effects of her magical counterfeit scabbard. In this episode, Arthur, Morgan's husband King Uriens, and her lover Accolon are all hunting together. They pursue a hart to the shores of a lake, and encounter a (stereotypically mysterious and seemingly unmanned) magical ship, hung with silks and lit with torches. They are tended by a bevy of maidens who mysteriously appear to see them fed and cared for, and all are led to separate chambers to sleep. Each wakes in a separate location: Accolon is beside a (fairy) well, Arthur in the dungeon of a wicked knight, and Uriens is "in Camelot abedde in his wyves armys, Morgan le Fay" (*Morte,* p. 82).[30] One of Morgan's seemingly endless "damesels" helps arrange for Arthur to fight in his captor's stead in exchange for his freedom. Simultaneously, a dwarf approaches Accolon, announcing he comes from Morgan le Fay, and saying that Accolon "shall fyghte to-morne wyth a knyghte… And therefore she hath sent the Excalebir, Arthurs swerde, and the scawberde, and she byddyth yow as ye love her that ye do that batayle to the uttirmoste without ony mercy" (p. 84). Thus Malory sets up the conflict between Arthur, the man to whom Morgan

[28] For more on this, see Wright's discussion of this episode; Wright explains that Malory's repeated emphasis on the familial relationship between Morgan and Arthur, evidenced in the reiterated phrases "hir brother" and "hys sistir," is original to Malory's work, and not found in the *Suite* from which this episode is taken. Wright explains the importance of this for Malory, and the way this demonstrates a "failure of confidence among members of Arthur's own family and court" (p. 60).

[29] Larrington discusses the twelfth-century redefinition of marriage, saying that the new emphasis on a wife's "freely given consent" and on her role as "companion to her husband" might mean that "brothers can no longer be certain that their sisters owe a stronger loyalty to their birth family than to their husband and in-laws," and that "Women's private desires may be working against the interests of masculine authority within their original families" (pp. 39-40). For more on this, see Felicity Riddy, 'Middle English Romance: Family, Marriage, Intimacy,' especially pp. 241-8.

[30] Larrington notes the stereotypical fairy scenario at play here, from the well, to the enchanted ship, to the stag (p. 34). See also Laurence Harf-Lancner, *Les Fées au Moyen Âge: Morgane et Melusine: La Naissance des Fées,* (Paris: Libraire Honoré Champion, 1984) pp. 221-41.

ought to be loyal, and Accolon, the lover to whom she has given her loyalties (and the magically powerful weapons).

As the two men, unaware of each other's identities, prepare to do battle, Arthur is approached by yet another of Morgan's damsels, who gives him "a swerd lyke unto Excaliber and the scawberde," saying Morgan has sent them to Arthur "for grete love" (p. 85). Arthur believes her: "he thanke her and wente hit had bene so; but she was falce, for the swerde and the scawberde was counterfete and brutyll and false" (p. 85). The fake sword and scabbard have none of the magical powers of the originals, and so Arthur fights at a disadvantage. Malory makes sure to remind us that Morgan le Fay, and the "grete love" she claims to have for her brother, is just as "falce" as the fake weapon she delivers to Arthur. The battle between Accolon and Arthur goes badly for the king, but eventually he is aided by the "Damesel of the Lake" (p. 85),[31] who has "com thidir for the love of kynge Arthur" (p. 85). Unlike Morgan's professed affections, we are meant to believe *this* love is genuine. She causes Accolon to drop his sword, and without the magical powers of Excalibur, he cannot defeat Arthur, who is then victorious.[32]

Defeated, Accolon confesses his treason, his relationship with Morgan, and how he received Excalibur:

> Morgan le Fay… sente hit me yestirday… to the entente to sle
> kynge Arthure, hir brothir; for ye shall undirstonde that kynge
> Arthur ys the man in the worlde that she hatyth moste, because he
> is moste of worship and of prouesse of ony of her bloode. Also she
> lovyth me oute of mesure as paramour, and I hir agayne. And if
> she myght brynge hit aboute to sle Arthure by hir crauftis, she
> wolde sle hir husbonde kynge Uryence lyghtly. And than had she
> devysed to have me kynge in this londe and so to reigne, and she to
> be my quene. (*Morte,* p. 88)

This idea, that Morgan hates Arthur because among all her blood "he is moste of worship," is as close to justifying or explaining Morgan's malice as Malory ever comes. However, over-analysing the thinness of that excuse for her malice while ignoring the other motivating factors here would be an error. Morgan's motivations – love for Accolon, and desire to be queen – demonstrate key elements of her identity, reflective of her desire for autonomy, choice, and control. She wishes to choose her sexual partner,

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[31] For an exploration of the various iterations of the character of the Lady of the Lake, see Larrington, pp. 97-121.
[32] Cooper, *The English Romance in Time,* 'Chapter 3: Magic that Doesn't Work,' pp. 137-72.

and to wrest control more generally from the chivalric leaders of Camelot. In this passage we see the importance and power of her magic "crauftis," as well as her blood-ties to Arthur. Accolon readily believes that with Arthur's death, she would be able to install him on the throne, and rule beside him as queen. Whether he thinks this possible because of her supernatural powers, or because of the royal status he would gain by marrying her, or a combination of both, is unclear. What is clear, however, is that she depends upon the intimacy of her relationship with Arthur to achieve this end, practically (in her ability to ensure he fights with counterfeit weaponry) and perhaps for public legitimacy for her claim as queen.

Arthur responds to this revelation by emphasising Morgan's deceit and the seriousness of her betrayal, and all but completely dismissing Accolon's own culpability. He says, "therefore thou art a traytoure; 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, *Morte,* p. 88). Arthur reduces the love "oute of mesure" that Accolon previously mentioned to "fals lustes," and, perhaps in the spirit of knightly camaraderie, assumes that Accolon must have been compelled by magic and "fals crauftis" to betray his lord, and thus is not truly to blame. As for Morgan, however, Arthur swears vengeance. He sees her actions as a betrayal of the worst kind, because he had so loved and trusted her. He mourns, saying, "God knowyth I have honoured hir and worshipped hir more than all my kyn, and more have I trusted hir than my wyff and all my kyn aftir" (p. 88).[33] We see again the closeness of Morgan and Arthur paralleling that of a romantic relationship, and further associating her betrayal with the actions of the threatening foreign queens like Bevis's mother, or Isabella of France, who betray their husbands in search of power and sexual freedom. In Malory as well as the Saracen Princess romances, then, we see anxieties about the dangers of intimate relationships with powerful, sexually autonomous, royal women.

Of course, the magical Saracen princesses in Middle English romances like *Bevis of Hampton* showed the way anxieties about the complex loyalties of powerful and/or foreign women might be neutralised, as well as their dangers. Josian and the other Saracen Princesses all have threatening or ambiguous potential, but their loyalty, faithfulness and virtue all soothe the textual anxieties about their potentially disruptive power. Malory's Morgan le Fay does not resemble those virtuous foreign queens, then,

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[33] Wright, p. 60, and Larrington, p. 35.

but rather characters like Bevis of Hampton's wicked mother, who uses her connections to foreign powers and her own noble status to usurp control and assassinate her husband, pursuing her own erotic and personal ends. Self-interest, disloyalty to patriarchal authority, and violence also characterised Isabella of France's political career, and as we have seen, these seem to be persistent defining characteristics of Morgan le Fay's character in Malory. Once again, therefore, we see Malory's Morgan reflecting pre-existing models of behaviour for (magically) powerful women in romance, but reimagined and selected in order to create a particularly negative portrait of Morgan le Fay.

IV. Morgan as Fairy Mistress

The third chapter of this thesis explored issues of power, permission, and otherness in the representations of the Fairy Mistresses in *Sir Launfal* and *Partonope of Blois*. Though each of those texts deals with the idea of otherworldly identities in slightly different ways, there are several clear narrative elements that act as identifying features for the supernatural, 'faerie' otherworld, and the transgressive behaviours of fairy women, which may be compared to Morgan le Fay's characterisation.

Long before Malory composed the *Morte Darthur*, Morgan le Fay was compared to, and categorised with, denizens of the fairy otherworld, as evidenced by her title. The appellation 'Le Fay,' or 'the fairy,' is attached to Morgan early in the medieval romance tradition, and it becomes her constant identifying term across texts and genres, especially in the high and later medieval period. The reference to Morgan as a fairy specifically may perhaps derive from Gervase of Tilbury's twelfth-century *Otia Imperialia,* in which he refers to the enchantress as 'Morganda Fatata,' most commonly translated as 'Morgan the fairy.'[34] A similar title, 'Fata Morgana,' is given to her in the Italian tradition. 'Fata' means fairy in Italian, though in the original Latin 'fata' meant fate, doom, or destiny. We see echoes of these grand meanings of 'fata' elsewhere in the references to Morgan in the medieval romance genre: Chrétien de Troyes describes her as "*la sage,*" (*Yvain,* p.332, l. 2957), translated in the Middle English *Ywain and Gawain* as "Morgan the

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[34] For more on the evolution of this title, see Wade, p. 5.

Wise" (1753), while the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* refers to her as a "goddes."[35] These names are consistently associated with magical foreknowledge, powerful supernatural identity, and associations with a non-human otherworld. The Prose *Lancelot,* in which Morgan is human, attempts to elide these quasi-divine elements from Morgan's identity, rationalising her title 'le Fay' by explaining that in Arthur's day, "the word 'fairy' was used for all women that practiced magic…"[36] Helen Cooper suggests that eventually Morgan is so removed from the supernatural otherworld that 'le Fay' is little more than "a courtesy title granted her on account of the exceptional learning that supplies her skill in magic."[37] Still, 'le Fay' continues to signify magical knowledge, and persistently carries with it an association with Celtic-type faerie otherworlds. As such, we can read Morgan's title as a shorthand for a set of supernatural characteristics, and a direct connection to the 'fairy' ladies explored elsewhere in this thesis.

Morgan is also associated with the fairy mistresses in her connection to magical environments, which exactly fit the distinguishing features of the fairy-pattern found in the texts explored in Chapter Three. We see this in Malory's description of the (previously mentioned) unmanned boat which approaches Arthur, Uriens, and Accolon, which, we eventually learn, is sent by Morgan le Fay. As in the fairy mistress texts, Arthur and his knights encounter the supernatural boat after being lost in the woods while hunting. Uncertain of their way forward, they come to the shore of a lake, where a strange boat, richly bedecked in silks, comes "ryght unto them and landed on the sandis" (*Morte,* p. 82). All of this fits the fairy-mistress pattern, discussed in Chapter Three (section I). It seems this "lytll ship" is empty, as Arthur and the others can see "none erthely creature therin" (p. 82). This, of course, echoes the descriptions of the empty boat which transports Partonope of Blois to the home of the fairy mistress Melior, and the same combination of the eerie, the marvellous, and the opulent is found in both texts. Twelve damsels "suddeynly" appear and serve the king "all wynes and metys that they coude thynke of. But of that the kynge had grete mervayle, for he never fared bettir in his lyff" (p. 82). That sense of "mervayle" is the same response had by Partonope, Launfal,

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[35] As does Gerald of Wales. See J. R. R. Tolkien's note on line 2452 of his edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon; Second Edition edited by Norman Davis (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1967).
[36] Lacy's *Lancelot-Grail,* Volume 2, p. 11. See also Larrington, pp. 14.
[37] Cooper, *The English Romance in Time,* p. 186, and also Wade, pp. 9-10.

and other knightly protagonists when faced with the wondrous supernatural. The material wealth demonstrated by the silk-laden boat and the opulent feast is further shown in the bedchamber to which Arthur is subsequently led – "a rycher besene chambir sawe he never none" (p. 82). The tone of this passage, its combined elements of mystery and opulence, echoes the defining patterns of the fairy mistress texts, underlining the connections between Morgan and the fairy mistresses.

Of course, the most obvious difference between this episode with Arthur and his knights and the related episodes in texts like *Partonope of Blois* lies in the outcome. This fairy encounter does not signal the start of a supernatural romantic relationship and good fortune for the protagonist, but rather imperils Arthur and his knights. As mentioned in the previous section, while Uriens wakes up in bed with his wife Morgan, Arthur awakes in a "durke preson," and Accolon beside a well, cursing the "false damysels that faryth thus with theire inchauntementes" who "betrayed" them, saying they were "fendis and no women" (Malory, *Morte,* p. 84). The dire consequences that result from this (Arthur's fight-to-the-death with Accolon and the loss of the scabbard) are a far cry from the sexual and economic bliss that we see in the fairy mistress texts, demonstrating that the fairy-environment inhabited by Morgan le Fay is a less benign, more threatening version of the fairy otherworld.[38]

Perhaps the most salient comparison of Morgan to the fairy mistress characters is in their performance of the role of the sexually-desiring magical woman, who actively, even aggressively pursues the object of her affections. In *Partonope of Blois* and *Sir Launfal* we noted the surprising construction of passive, vulnerable masculine identity, contrasted with the actively desiring – yet still attractive – female one. And, as noted in Chapter Three, section III.1, Morgan le Fay fits this pattern at times as well. In the section Vinaver calls the 'Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake,' Malory describes Lancelot lying under an "appil-tre slepyng" at noon, when he is approached by "four quenys of grete astate" (*Morte,* p. 151), one of whom is Morgan le Fay. These 'quenys' are described riding "four whyghte mulys" with a luxurious "grene sylke" canopy above

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[38] It is worth noting that Arthur and the others only find themselves in danger after entering the bedchambers on the ship. In Chapter Three we explored the way the bedchamber could figure as a place of danger and threat to masculine identity, noting that male vulnerability to female sexual desire and manipulation is a recurrent theme in the fairy mistress texts (see Chapter Three, section III.1). Similarly, it is only after entering the (sexually-charged space of the) bedchamber that the knights are subject and vulnerable to Morgan le Fay's enchantments.

their heads. Everything about this moment is reflective of other fairy mistress narrative patterns and the luxurious supernatural, as seen in texts such as *Launfal* or *Partonope*, or even *Sir Orfeo* or *Sir Degaré*. The queens recognise Lancelot, and begin to "stryve for that knyghte, and every of hem seyde they wolde have hym to hir love" (p. 151). The potentially comical tone of this inversion of usual gender-roles, a parody of knights fighting or 'stryving' for a lady's love, is undercut by the real underlying threat of these women's power and sexual aggression, especially that of Morgan le Fay. She is the one to propose the (decidedly sinister) solution to their competition:

> 'We shall nat stryve,' seyde Morgan le Fay, that was kyng Arthurs sister.
> 'I shall put an inchauntement uppon hym that he shall nat awake of all
> this seven owres, and than I woll lede hym away unto my castell. And
> whan he is surely within my holde, I shall take the inchauntement frome
> hym, and than lette hym chose whych of us he woll have unto peramour.'
> (Malory, *Morte,* p. 151)

Again, as mentioned in Chapter Three, the term 'lead away' was a legal euphemism for ravishment, kidnap, and/or rape.[39] Morgan's use of magic to keep Lancelot asleep, then to kidnap him and secure him in her castle 'within her hold,' with the intent to coerce him into a sexual relationship, is discussed in the text with the legal language of ravishment and assault. This makes explicit the threat, power, and moral implications of Morgan's actions, and according to Larrington, demonstrates "the text's broad characterisation of Morgan as a sexual threat to knights."[40] We may therefore read this as a serious indictment of Morgan's character by Malory. It is worth noting that the only other character to prey on the bodies of helpless knights in Malory's text is the necrophiliac enchantress Hellawes. Hellawes also reportedly desires Lancelot's love, but since she cannot enjoy his "body on lyve," she hoped, she says, to "have thy body dede. Than wolde I have bawmed hit and sered hit, and so to have kepte hit my lyve dayes; and dayly I sholde have clypped the and kyssed the…" (*Morte*, p. 168). With this disturbing image of aggressive female desire as the only parallel to Morgan's decision to magically drug Lancelot and "lede hym away," the already sinister implications of her actions become still more frightening.

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[39] For more detail on this, see Chapter Three, section III.1.
[40] Larrington, p. 70.

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In Chapter Three we saw that being romantically or sexually pursued by the fairy mistresses could seriously impact the chivalric identities of their chosen knights, and in Morgan's interactions with Lancelot, this is also apparent. After Morgan's plan is executed, and Lancelot has been secured in Morgan's castle, the queens approach him with their proposition. They inform him that he is their "presonere," that they know his identity, that he has no choice but to take one of them as his "peramour," and that he will therefore lose Guenevere's love. His reputation as a loyal, devoted lover is integral to Lancelot's character, so in this episode the queens threaten to destroy a vital element of his chivalric identity (*Morte,* p. 152). In the fairy mistress texts, of course, we saw that accepting the love of the fairy lady made the chosen heroes into worthier, more noble, and more successful knights, but for Lancelot the reverse would be true. Morgan's role as a pseudo-fairy-mistress, therefore, is destructive for chivalric identity instead of constructive.

Despite facing the threat of death in prison should he refuse to choose, Lancelot is firm in his resolve: "Yet had I lever dye in this preson with worshyp than to have one of you to my peramoure, maugré myne hede… I woll none of you, for ye be false enchaunters" (p. 152). This rejection is reminiscent of the previously mentioned instance with Alysaundir the Orphan. In that episode as well, the object of Morgan's desire is a prisoner, and her sexual intent is described in language laden with reference to power and control: "quene Morgan kepyth you here for none other entente but for to do hir plesure whan hit lykyth hir" (p. 395). In both cases, Morgan attempts to imprison a knight for her own sexual pleasure, despite the knight's objections, and both knights vehemently reject Morgan's advances. In this refusal we see the most obvious difference between Morgan-as-fairy-mistress and the fairy mistresses of other romances, and that is simply the impossibility of reciprocal desire. When the fairy-lady Melior aggressively approaches Partonope, he initially fears and worries but soon returns her affections with enthusiasm (*Partonope of Blois* 798-1280; see Chapter Three, section III.1). Similarly, when Sir Launfal's fairy lady Tryamour summons the knight to her and calls him her "lemman swete" (*Launfal* 301), he replies with delight, saying that she has "All hys love" (308). These knights are granted power, wealth, and chivalric advancement as well as sex and the lady's love. Of course, neither Lancelot nor Alysaundir need any of these things from Morgan, and therefore respond negatively. With the fairy mistresses, the potentially

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sexually threatening elements of their pursuit of the knights are neutralised or at least rendered an acceptable fantasy by the knights' ready acquiescence. The knights' willingness to participate in these relationships – helped along, perhaps, by the financial incentives – make the actions of the fairy mistress characters thrillingly seductive rather than truly frightening. Without that mitigating element, Morgan's sexual aggression simply reads like coercion, if not outright assault. Despite her magical power, her wealth, her desire, and her otherworldly identity that align her with the fairy characters in other romances, then, Morgan in Malory is a failed (and frightening) fairy-mistress, because she is rejected by the objects of her affections.

V. Morgan as Monster Mother

We turn, then, to the final chapter of this thesis, and consider Morgan's character in light of the discourse around maternity and monstrosity in late medieval thought. In comparing the narrative of the serpent-mother Melusine to gynaecological texts like *De secretis mulierum* in chapter four, we found evidence of the romance genre engaging with contemporary anxieties about the mature female body in general, about the dangers of intimate, sexual contact with the aging and/or maternal female body in particular. The treatment of Morgan's character in late Middle English romances reflects some of these same anxieties.

V.1 Loathly Ladies, Transformation, and Unstable Bodies

Though sadly Morgan le Fay does not assume the form of a dragon in Malory's *Morte Darthur* (or any other text),[41] she does possess some of the shape-shifting capabilities that

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[41] However, Morgan is implicated in monstrous transformation from human to dragon in the Italian *cantare* about Morgan's daughter, *Ponzela Gaia*. In this narrative Morgan has apparently transformed her daughter into a frightening, monstrous serpent, though the maiden assumes human form to woo her beloved, Galvano (Gawain) who must obey her request for privacy or risk losing her (echoing the fairy-mistress texts). See Giorgio Varanini's edition of the text, *Ponzela Gaia: Cantare dialetalle Inedito del sec. XV* (Bologna: Commissione per I Testi di Lingua, 1957). For context on this narrative, see Maria Bendinelli Predelli, 'Monstrous Children of Lanval: The Cantare of Ponzela Gaia,' in *Courtly Arts and the Art of Courtliness: Selected Papers from the Eleventh Triennial Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society*, ed. by Keith Busby and Christopher Kleinhenz (Cambridge: Brewer, 2006) pp. 543-552.

define Melusine's monstrosity.[42] We see these transformative abilities after she has stolen Arthur's scabbard following his fight with Accolon. Morgan flees into the countryside to escape Arthur, who is in hot pursuit, and arrives in a valley full of stones. Fearing capture, she "shope hirself, horse and man, by enchauntement unto a grete marbyll stonys" (*Morte,* p. 92). This extraordinary magical transformation – not only of Morgan herself but of her entire company, "horse and man," – causes wonder and consternation to Arthur's party when they at last catch up. Rather than recognising this as the effect of Morgan's magic and a demonstration of her will and power, Arthur assumes that this is "the vengeaunce of God" (p. 92). The fact that the king mistakenly attributes Morgan's sorcery to God indicates the impressive power of Morgan's magic. At the same time, the assumption that Morgan's wickedness is great enough to have brought the wrath of God down upon her head tells us something about Arthur's perception of her morality. Interpreting this transformation as Morgan's demise, Arthur says that he is "sory" this "mysaventure" has occurred. Of course, as soon as he has departed, Morgan "turned all their lyknesse as she and they were before" (p. 92), suggesting that Arthur's pity was misplaced and undeserved. In this episode, then, while exploring Morgan's ability to change her shape, Malory demonstrates the power of Morgan's magic while also suggesting that she is wicked enough that one might reasonably assume, as Arthur does, that she deserves divine retribution.

The motif of Morgan as shape-shifter appears in other late Middle English romance texts as well. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* for example, Morgan's Loathly-Lady type role is often read as the transformed double of Lady Bertilak.[43] In this text 'Morgne' and Lady Bertilak are introduced in mirrored blazons, with the lady's youth, rosy complexion, and snow-white "brest and… bry3t þrote" directly contrasted in alternating lines with the old woman's "rugh ronkled chekez," "blake chyn," and her dark, "soure" eyes and lips (946-69).[44] This links the two, making each the inverse of the other. Because of this, when Lady Bertilak approaches Gawain in his bedchamber armed

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[42] For the more on the medieval enchantresses' inheritance shapeshifting from classical sorceresses like Circe, see Larrington, p. 21, and Fries, p. 2.

[43] Larrington dryly suggests that "most scholars, except the most literal minded, accept the Lady as a manifestation of Morgan" (p. 66). For more on the relationship between the two, see Larrington, pp. 60-68, and Heng, 'Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,' PMLA,* 106.3 (1991) 500-514, especially p. 503.

[44] Taken from James Winny's edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*

with clever words and the norms of courtesy, the danger of the scene arises not merely from the potential shame of adultery and dishonour but also from the association of the young woman with the loathly, old one. As we saw in the Loathly Lady texts, the threat of sexual intimacy with the aging female body was a serious concern in both romance and society. Therefore, while (young) Lady Bertilak is the one to directly proposition Gawain (not Morgan-as-Loathly-Lady), the link between the two means that sexually engaging with Lady Bertilak may in fact mean intimately engaging with her double, Morgan.[45] Of course, we eventually learn that Morgan is the one to orchestrate the whole adventure. Not only is she implicated in Lady Bertilak's seductions, then, but also, as the author of the beheading plot, Morgan is responsible for the Green Knight's transformation and shape-shifting as he takes first the shape of the supernatural Green Knight then the lord of Hautdesert. Although we do not see 'Morgne' transform her own body in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* then, this text still consistently represents Morgan as linked to ideas of shape shifting and transformed bodies, and associated with the threat of intimacy with the mature female body. Also, as seen in Malory, the range of Morgan's shape-shifting seems to have expanded beyond the bounds of her own body, allowing her to transform her knights and followers in *Le Morte Darthur*, and Lord and Lady Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* Morgan's unstable, transformed physical body – like those of the Loathly Lady characters – renders other bodies in proximity to her unstable and changeable as well, as if her power were seeping out and infecting others as insidiously as the authors of *De Secretis Mulierum* feared female body-fluids might do.

V.2 Morgan and the Monstrous Maternal

The similarities between Morgan and the Melusine-model of the monstrous supernatural woman does not end with shape-shifting, of course. After all, the anxiety at the heart of the Melusine narrative was not to do with her monstrosity alone, but rather with the implications of sex with, and children produced by, the monstrous (mature, maternal) female body. These anxieties about the monstrous maternal body, and the threat that sex with mature (and especially magical) women might pose to the male chivalric system and

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[45] For more, see Chapter Four, section IV.

patriarchal line of inheritance are something Malory explores in his characterisation of Morgan.

We see Morgan as monster-mother, and the threat she poses to Camelot's patrilineal, patriarchal structure, just before the episode in which she steals the scabbard and shape-shifts. Incorrecting predicting the outcome of Arthur's duel with Accolon, and assuming that it will have resulted in the king's death, Morgan decides to kill her husband, Uriens. This, of course, would free her to marry her lover Accolon and ascend to the throne. She picks her moment with care, choosing a time when Uriens is vulnerable, helpless, and "on slepe on his bedde" (Malory, *Morte,* p. 90). Her choice of the bedchamber as the ideal place to kill her husband underlines the association of Morgan with the potential perils of (sexual, marital) intimacy, and the trope of the bedchamber as a place of female aggression and male vulnerability, as previously noted. We also see her appropriating objects associated with masculine identity, in this case Uriens's sword with which she plans to kill him. Although the damsel who brings the sword holds it with "quakyng hondis," Morgan herself handles the masculine-coded weapon with confidence: "lyghtly she toke the swerde and pullyd hit oute, and wente boldely unto the beddes syde and awayted how and where she myght sle hym beste" (p. 90). This easy control of material objects usually associated with masculine chivalric identity is, as discussed in both chapters three and four, one of the ways Melusine and similar magical women in romance may transcend their usual gender roles. However, Melusine, Tryamour and Melior (in *Partonope of Blois*) all manipulated objects associated with masculine, chivalric identity in support of their chosen paramours. Morgan deploys this unwomanly power to serve her own interests, actively attempting to kill her husband, rob her son of his father, and disrupt the patriarchal hierarchy. This, of course, signals just how "detached from social norms" Morgan is, as she prepares to kill her husband, an unarmed, defenceless knight.[46]

Before she can strike the fatal blow, however, Morgan's son Ywain intervenes: "as she hevyd up the swerde to smyte, sir Uwayne lepte unto his modir and caught hir by the honde and seyde, 'A, fende, what wolt thou do? And thou were nat my modir, with this swerde I sholde smyte of thyne hede!'" (Malory, *Morte,* p. 90). The drama of this tableau and the vehemence of Ywain's words emphasise the gravity of Morgan's

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[46] Larrington, p. 39.

treachery here. In saying that it is only their familial relationship that prevents Ywain from immediately beheading Morgan, Malory reminds his readers of the importance of family to anyone of nobility and worth (and therefore shows Morgan to be especially monstrous in her disregard for husband and brother). Additionally, violence against women is a serious offense in the *Morte Darthur*, and characters who injure women are treated with censure.[47] That Ywain would be tempted to behead a woman, his mother no less, demonstrates the disturbing nature of Morgan's attempted violence, and the way she disrupts chivalric norms. This disruptive, disturbing quality is explicitly labelled as demonic or monstrous when Ywain calls her a 'fiend.' He then accuses Morgan of demonic maternity, saying, "men seyde that Merlyon was begotyn of a fende, but I may sey an erthely fende bare me" (p. 90).[48] This idea of the too-powerful mother as "erthely fende" whose corrupting influence might plague the men most intimately associated with her (her husband and son) was, as we saw in chapter four, of significant social currency in both the popular fiction and the pseudo-medical texts of the late Middle Ages. By referring to Morgan as a 'fende' and associating her with the devil, Morgan is placed still more firmly in the company of Melusine and the other 'monstrous' mothers of late Middle English romance.

Morgan does not succeed in killing her husband, but neither is she punished for her attempt. Uriens remains asleep, incredibly, while Ywain stays Morgan's hand. Morgan then begs her son for mercy and secrecy. She plays upon other stereotypes of femininity and the demonic in her appeal to him, saying, "A, fayre son Uwayne, have mercy uppon me! I was tempted with a fende" (*Morte,* p. 90). Ywain accepts this excuse, and her (flimsy-seeming) promise for good behaviour in the future (she claims she will "nevermore do so"), and keeps her actions a secret. Morgan therefore escapes the damning label of 'fende' only by persuading her son that she had been 'tempted' by one. Of course, women's susceptibility to the devil's seductions makes the latter understandable, and the former a greater threat. We know, of course, that Morgan was not tempted by any 'fende' but rather was simply acting in self-interest. Given that, perhaps Malory suggests that Ywain was right, and that Morgan as mother and wife is truly an

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[47] See for example the Pentecostal Oath (*Works,* p. 75).
[48] For more examples of Morgan as demonic, see Larrington's descriptions of Morgan in *Prophesies de Merlin* (pp. 23-24) and in Hartmann von Aue's *Erec* (p. 11).

'erthely fende.' Morally speaking, then, we may read Morgan as far more monstrous than Melusine, despite her lack of serpent's tail.

V.3 Morgawse

While considering the specific elements of this bedchamber scene – the mother, son, and recumbent husband, and the accusations of monstrosity and threats of beheading – it is worth drawing a comparison to a parallel episode in Malory concerning another of Arthur's half-sisters, Morgawse. According to Malory, Morgawse is the mother of several of Arthur's most loyal knights (Gawain, Gareth, Gaheris, Agravaine), and her character mirrors, and in some texts overlaps with Morgan's.[49] Though distinct characters in the *Morte Darthur*, their similar narrative position as Arthur's sisters and mothers to his knights means that the two are often read as linked. Whether or not we consider a reading of the two women as connected useful in general, we see the parallels between the two sisters especially clearly in Morgawse's death-scene, in which the depiction of Morgawse as maternal yet sexual – and thereby monstrous – connects her character to Morgan's.

When Morgawse's sons learn that their mother is having a 'shameful' affair with Lamorak, the son of their father's killer, they cannot bear the injury to their honour, so they plan "to slee sir Lamorak" (Malory, *Morte*, p. 377). Gaheris catches Morgawse and Lamorak in bed together, and something about the sight so disturbs him that "suddaynly he gate his modir by the heyre and strake of her hede" (p. 377), a particularly shocking moment of violence. We see here the same elements, the same movable parts, that were present in the scene of Morgan's attempted murder Uriens: the unfaithful wife, the bedchamber setting, the vulnerable sex-partner (disarmed and un-manned), the furious, vengeful son, the threat of violence. However, the bond of mother and son prevented Ywain from killing Morgan despite her murderous intent, while in this case the sight of his mother engaged in illicit sex causes Gaheris such distress that he abandons the code of chivalry and kills Morgawse. This matricide is a "fowle and evyll" thing, as Lamorak immediately laments (p. 378). Through Gaheris's instinctual revulsion Malory explores the disturbing quality of the sexual, mature, maternal body in greater length than he did in

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[49] Larrington, pp. 122-43.

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the scene with Morgan and Ywain, taking the threat of that moment to its logical conclusion, both in the wickedness of the mother, and the rage of the shamed son.

Morgawse embodies the dangers of the sexually promiscuous mature woman elsewhere in the *Morte Darthur* as well, of course, as she is also the mother of Mordred. Prior to the revelation of Arthur's identity, Morgawse comes to Arthur's court to spy for her husband, King Lot, bringing her four sons with her. Despite the fact that she is married to one of his rivals, significantly older, and in the court under false pretenses, Morgawse and Arthur have a brief affair, not knowing they are half-siblings. Morgawse conceives, and Mordred – Arthur's son and nephew – will eventually bring about the destruction of the Round Table (*Morte,* p. 27). The incest taboo alone is enough to make this moment monstrous, but allusions to unnatural monstrosity are made plain by the prophetic dream Arthur has immediately following their liaison: "hym thought there was com into hys londe gryffens and serpentes, and hym thought they brente and slowghe all the people in the londe;… he faughte with them and they dud hym grete harme and wounded hym full sore" (p. 28). In this dream, Arthur and Morgawse's son Mordred is represented by the "gryffons and serpentes" that lay waste to the land, making Morgawse the mother of monsters. While Malory makes sure to reiterate that neither party knew of their kinship, this episode portrays Morgawse as less innocent than Arthur: she is older, more experienced, and has come "to aspye" (p. 27), making her purpose nefarious. Also, while Arthur is yet unmarried at this point in the text, Morgawse is committing adultery by sleeping with the king, and she does so without a hint of the overwhelming love and passion that so often excuses adultery in courtly narratives. Therefore, while Malory may not accuse Morgawse of intentionally committing incest, she is culpable and guilty in a way that Arthur is not, and therefore more responsible for the conception of monstrous Mordred.

In the treatment of Morgan and her mirror, Morgawse, Malory explores the dangers of intimacy with powerful, mature women. Fiendish, monstrous, and so treacherous that she might deserve damnation, Morgan-as-mother reflects the anxieties about maternity, again, and the unstable female body explored in Chapter Four, but unlike most of the ambiguous monster-mothers we discussed, Morgan and Morgawse are actually, Malory insists, as monstrous as they seem.

VI. Morgan le Fay, Wicked Witch?

Throughout this chapter, the conclusions we have reached have consistently been that in her incarnation in the *Morte Darthur*, Morgan le Fay is connected to the other supernatural women of Middle English romance, but Malory's iteration of her character is a particularly negative one. Considering the social and political moment in which Malory lived and wrote, it is therefore pertinent to ask the question of whether we can, or should, consider Morgan le Fay a prototype for the figure of the wicked witch.

In order to understand Malory's use of the term 'witch,' we must first come to grips with the meaning of witchcraft in the late medieval period.[50] The idea of witchcraft as it came to be understood in the early modern period did not truly emerge in the European consciousness until the fifteenth century, when various medieval theories of magic coalesced into the single coherent concept of the 'witch.' Prior to this, across medieval Europe there had been isolated incidents of people accused of sorcery or witchcraft, but those accusations lacked the unifying criteria, and the overwhelming anxiety about organised demonic practices, that characterised the later witch trials.[51] Witches were generally categorised among other types of magic users, as we see in Chaucer's *House of Fame,* in which "wicches" are included amongst other entertainers and clerks who practice natural magic, suggesting that at this date, there was no clear distinction between 'witches' and other practitioners of magic: "jugelours, /Magiciens and tregetours,/ And Phitonesses, charmeresses, Olde wicches, sorceresses…" (1259-63).[52] The sorts of magical crimes that accused witches were imagined to have committed up to the late fourteenth century were varied, often to do with weather- or love-magic, and frequently deemed mere illusion by clerical and scholarly critics. Additionally, according to Kieckhefer, men accused of witchcraft equalled or even outnumbered

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[50] For a general exploration of the idea of witchcraft from this period, see Jeffrey Burton Russell's *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, Richard Kieckhefer's *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300-1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), Brian Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), and Michael D. Bailey, 'From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Late Middle Ages.'

[51] Michael D. Bailey, 'The Feminisation of Magic and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch in the Late Middle Ages.' See also Richard Kieckhefer, 'The First Wave of Trials for Diabolical Witchcraft' in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. by Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) pp. 159-78.

[52] Geoffrey Chaucer, *House of Fame* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Benson, pp. 347-375.

women in England during this period.[53] It is possible that this may have been due to the fact that some of these accusations concerned magical practices that had masculine connotations, including 'nigromancy' and necromancy. As we saw in the introduction to this thesis, 'nigromancy' was a complex, learned science borrowed from Arabic and Hellenic occult texts, often involving pseudo-religious rituals, texts in occult languages and complicated formulae, and therefore codified as masculine.[54]

It was not until the 1430s that the accusations and processes of witch trials began to take recognisable shape, and women began to be accused in greater numbers. The Dominican theologian Johannes Nider's text *Formicarius* (c.1437) was especially influential in this change.[55] This text claimed to report evidence from witch trials held early in the century in Switzerland (despite being largely the product of Nider's own imagination) and the views of witches articulated in the *Formicarius* shape the way witchcraft is imagined in clerical and judicial texts well into the early modern era. According to Nider, in order to gain magical powers witches: made pacts with the devil, attended ritual nocturnal gatherings known as 'sabbaths,' flew through the air with the help of rods, brooms, or beasts, renounced the faith or desecrated holy objects, practiced *maleficium* (malicious magic and curses), and killed and ate children.[56] Some of these practices relate to late medieval fears about heresy (such as the ritual gatherings),[57] others originated in folklore (such as the midnight flights), but their combination became a potent label with damning applications. Additionally, witches were thought to engage in acts of sexual depravity with demons or the devil himself, and were assumed to submit themselves physically as well as spiritually to demonic beings. These very specific behaviours became almost universally associated with the idea of witchcraft throughout the fifteenth century, and were reiterated nearly verbatim in Heinrich Kramer's witch-

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[53] Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, pp. 106–47. See also Karen Jones and Michael Zell, '"The divels speciall instruments": women and witchcraft before the "great witch-hunt,"' *Social History*, 30.1 (2005) 45-63 (p. 48).
[54] Bailey, *Feminisation of Magic,* pp. 126-8.
[55] Bailey, *Feminisation of Magic,* pp. 120-28, and also *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).
[56] For more on the particular practices often mentioned in accusations of witchcraft, see Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: The Demonisation of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (London: Random House, 1993) pp. 202-12, Bailey *Feminisation of Magic,* p. 122, and Kieckhefer 'The First Wave of Trials,' pp. 160-64.
[57] Cohn discusses this particularly in relation to the persecutions of the Waldensians*,* pp. 202-03. See also Kieckhefer, 'The First Wave of Trials,' pp. 166-68, and also Jones and Zell, p. 48.

hunting manual, *Malleus maleficarum* (or, 'The Hammer of the Witches,' c. 1487).[58] Kramer's work, which would become the definitive treatise on witchcraft in the following centuries, borrowed extensively from Nider's writing, and emphasised this element of submission in witchcraft. Kramer crystallised the connection between femininity and witchcraft that Nider proposed due to witches' assumed submission to, and sexual relations with the devil, as well, as the generally accepted idea of women's natural weakness of body and spirit.[59] Unsurprisingly, then, from the fifteenth century onward as the number of witch trials increased and so too did the popularity of such texts as the *Malleus*, women accused of witchcraft outnumbered men.[60] Of course, there was no real sudden swell of popularity of demonic practices among women in the fifteenth century, but rather an increase in accusations of witchcraft made for various, often self-interested, reasons. Historians have speculated about the many causes for this rising number of accusations, ranging from the need to allocate blame for poor climate and famine,[61] to (masculine) anxieties about the religious and social changes of the period,[62] to simple interpersonal malice and fear,[63] to real religious convictions. Given that trials for witchcraft frequently resulted in torture and execution,[64] such accusations were serious things, to be treated with gravity and caution.

The coalescence of the idea of the witch in the mid- to late-fifteenth-century meant that at the time Malory composed the *Morte Darthur*, witches would have been distinguished from other magic-users, identified by a clear set of diabolical behaviours, and associated with devil-worship. The act of accusing someone of witchcraft would also

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[58] Christopher S. Mackay, *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the 'Malleus Maleficarum'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For more, see H. P. Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 25-26.

[59] For more on this, see Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), especially pp. 32-52, and Stuart Clark, *Thinking With Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), especially pp. 110-11. See also Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, and *Magic in the Middle Ages,* p. 187; also, see Bailey, *Feminisation of Magic,* pp. 120-28, Russell, p. 145 and pp. 182-83, and Levack, p. 27-46.

[60] Bailey, *Feminisation of Magic*, and Jones and Zell, pp. 48-49.

[61] Kieckhefer, 'The First Wave of Trials,' p. 163.

[62] For more on this, see for example Marianne Hester, 'Patriarchal reconstruction and witch-hunting,' in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp. 288-306 (pp. 289-92). See also Gerhild Scholz Williams, *Defining Dominion: The Discourses of Magic and Witchcraft in Early Modern France and Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

[63] Cohn, pp. 229-30.

[64] Levack, p. 20.

have carried clear significance, and would have been understood as a serious and damaging claim. Malory's use of the term "wytche," then, is laden with meaning particular to this moment of changing attitudes, and worthy of close examination.

Malory uses the terms "wytche" and "wycchecrafte" only four times in total in Caxton's edition of *Le Morte Darthur* (he uses each term twice).[65] Of those four usages, all are accusations made in-text by various (male) characters rather than authorial declarations. Though the specifics vary, in every case the term "wytche" is used pejoratively, carrying connotations of deception and antisocial intent, and is highly negative. This stands in stark contrast to the terms "enchauntement" (appearing thirty times in the text), "sorceress" (appearing nine times), "enchauntress" (appearing four times), "subtyl crafte" (an allusion to magic, appearing four times in the text), and "enchaunter" (appearing twice). All these other terms to do with magic or magic-users carry a variable moral tone in *Le Morte Darthur*, with "enchauntment" or "inchauntement" in particular often signifying positive marvels or wonders. "Sorceress" does carry a consistently negative tone, but its use is less unilaterally pejorative than "wytche" and like the rest of the words for magic-users in Malory's text, is a narratorial descriptor rather than a weaponised insult.

The first usage of "wytche" in the *Morte* is during the consolidation of Arthur's kingdom. Merlin explains Arthur's parentage, and his words are met with mixed responses: "Some of the kynges had merveyl of Merlyns wordes and demed well that it shold be as he said, and som of hem lough hym to scorne… and mo other called hym a wytche" (Malory, *Morte,* p. 12). Merlin, who in Arthurian tradition is known to be "a devyls son" (p. 77), and whose enemies whisper that "he knowith all thynges by the devylles craffte" (p. 74), may be the character in the *Morte* who most deserves the title 'witch,' given the fifteenth-century understanding of witchcraft as explicitly associated with the demonic and the diabolical. Nevertheless, it is not the narrator but Arthur's rival kings who use the term, and the implication is that by vilifying Merlin and associating him with wicked magic and deceit, they can avoid recognising Arthur's claim to the throne. Their use of the term 'witch,' then, is seen in the text as an intentional attempt to

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smear Merlin's reputation and defend their autonomy. There are similar impulses at work in the second use of the term "wytche," when Balen draws a sword that no other knight could draw. Because he is "pourely arayed" and unknown to the court (p. 39), the other knights find it impossible to believe that he was worthier and more noble than they, so many of them "seyde that Balyne dud nat this aventure all only by myght but by wycchecrauffte" (p. 40) – in essence, accusing Balen of cheating. Here again, the term "wycchecrauffte" is used by men whose might and chivalric identities are threatened by another man, and their choice of words reflects the idea that "wycchecrauffte" is intimately associated with falsehood and dishonourable trickery, and may be weaponised to discredit or attack others. Given our modern understanding of witchcraft as a gendered accusation, we may find it surprising that men are accused of witchcraft in the *Morte*. However, we should remember that until the fifteenth century, men were as likely to be accused of witchcraft as women in much of Europe, and more likely in England. Malory's contemporaries would likely have found these accusations unsurprising, therefore, despite the fact that the social discourse on witchcraft was becoming increasingly gendered. We can see that changing discourse in the overtly negative meaning of the term 'wytch' in Malory, and the serious and specific implications of being accused of witchcraft.

The term 'wytch' is twice directed at women in the *Morte*, in each instance by men whose sexual reputations have been besmirched. After his tryst with Elaine, and reeling from the revelation that he unknowingly slept with someone other than Guenevere, Lancelot curses the woman who caused this infidelity, saying that if he can find her, she "shall lose her hede for her wycchecrauftys" (*Morte*, p. 481). The woman at fault, Dame Brusen, is described by Malory as "one of the grettyst enchaunters that was that tyme in the world" (p. 479), though her actions involve trickery as much as actual magic. Using what appears to be one of Guenevere's rings, Brusen convinces Lancelot that the queen is secretly awaiting him. When he arrives at the bedchamber, Brusen then "brought sir Launcelot a kuppe of wyne, and anone as he had drunken that wyne he was so asoted and madde that he myght make no delay but wythoute ony let he wente to bedde. And so he wende that mayden Elayne had bene quene Guenyver" (p. 480). There is no description of the aphrodisiac spell or potion that causes Lancelot to become "assoted and madde," but when he awakes the next morning, "the enchauntemente was

paste. Thene he knew hymself that he had done amysse" (p. 480). Lancelot reacts to this encounter with violent, despairing rage, and threatens to kill Elayne on the spot. Her beauty calms him, however, and instead he simply swears vengeance against Brusen, calling her actions "wycchecrauftys" (p. 481). It is again worth noting that the narrator does not call Brusen a witch, but rather a great enchantress. This is perhaps because her moral function in the text is ambiguous at least. Her actions cause Lancelot pain and distress, but also bring about the conception of Galahad, a spiritual necessity integral for the Quest of the Sankgraal. From the text's perspective, then, Brusen's magic may be seen as a necessary evil, and the label 'witch' only applied by the injured, furious Lancelot whose identity as a faithful lover has just been damaged.

The other use of 'wytch' is directed at Morgan, and is to do with one of her several attempts to expose Lancelot and Guenevere's affair and the hypocrisy at the heart of Arthurian society. Morgan devises an enchanted drinking horn that acts as a chastity test: only women who are faithful to their husbands can drink from it successfully, while women who have committed adultery "sholde spylle all the drynke" (Malory, *Morte,* p. 270). Morgan intends to send it to Arthur's court to expose Guenevere and Lancelot, but the horn is instead taken to the court of King Mark and his famously adulterous queen, Isode.[66] Isode cannot drink from the horn without spilling, of course, but neither can ninety-six of the hundred ladies who also try to drink from it. This demonstrates an almost parodic exaggeration of the culture of adultery-as-courtly-love that Morgan, and perhaps Malory, wishes to criticise, despite the fact that Mark's court is not her original target. Mark, furious and unyielding, swears that Isode "sholde be brente and the other ladyes also" (p. 270). His barons, on the other hand, are not prepared to allow their wives and lovers to be put to death: they "seyde playnly they wolde nat have tho ladyes brente for an horne maade by sorsery that cam 'frome the false sorseres and wycche moste that is now lyvyng'" (p. 270). The suggestion the barons make is that because the horn comes from a "false … sorseres and wycche," the results of the chastity test must be discounted – witches are deceitful, so no test they offer should be considered valid. The rush to denial by the barons might suggest that they may, in fact, believe the efficacy of the horn, but wish to preserve their reputations (and those of their wives and lovers) by accusing

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[66] Malory here overtly parallels the Mark/Isode/Tristram love triangle with the Arthur/Guenevere/Lancelot triangle, potentially using Mark and Isolde as a vehicle to criticise Arthur's failings and Guenevere's adultery.

the horn's creator of being a witch. Injured masculine identity, once again, prompts Malory's characters to use the term 'witch,' attempting to discredit someone else. The women in Malory's text who are accused of witchcraft – Brusen and Morgan – do, in fact, practice magic, but at least in the instances in question, they are not 'false,' deceitful, or wicked as the term 'witch' implies.

In every instance, Malory shows (male) characters accusing others of being a witch in order to protect some elements of themselves: Arthur's rival kings accuse Merlin of witchcraft when he threatens their autonomy; the knights of the Round Table accuse Balen of cheating with witchcraft when he threatens their chivalric reputations; Lancelot calls Brusen a witch to blame her for his infidelity to Guenevere; Mark's barons accuse Morgan of witchcraft when her drinking horn exposes them as cuckolds. Malory's narratorial voice does not use the term 'wytch,' and in fact implies that the accusations are false (or at least flawed) in their suggestions of deceit and falsehood, defensive responses to injured ego and identity. *Le Morte Darthur*, then, reflects the way accusations of witchcraft could be weaponised, something of increasing relevance in the late fifteenth century. In this, we may read Malory as influenced by the changing cultural treatment of such accusations in English society, both in his understanding of the potency of accusations of witchcraft, and also in his depictions of the reasons such accusations might be made. Accusations of witchcraft are a mechanism of self-defence or slander rather than a claim to truth, Malory demonstrates, showing protagonists accusing others of witchcraft for a range of self-interested reasons. Intentionally or otherwise, Malory may anticipate our historical perspective on accusations of witchcraft in this (that it has more to do with the fears of the accuser than any demonic actions of the accused), while also participating in, and reflecting the fifteenth-century social discourse on witchcraft.

We may also read Malory's portrayal of Morgan le Fay as produced, or at least influenced by, this particular cultural moment. In his attempts to rationalise his characters, to give them coherent motivation throughout his text, Malory consistently casts Morgan as an antagonist. That, it seems, is the only role that makes sense for such a powerful and self-serving woman in the context of the late medieval (misogynist) culture of anxieties about women's power and the changing discourse on witchcraft. In the end, then, Malory's Morgan is not a 'witch' – the narrator does not call her a witch, and we are meant to criticise claims of her witchcraft. She is, however, consistently a villain and

antagonist, and it is possible to read this depiction of her as a product of a time of increasing anxiety and suspicion about women and magic, even as Malory's depictions of accusations of witchcraft may be read as stemming from the same social changes.

VII. Back to the Beginning: Ambiguity and Rehabilitation in Malory's Conclusion

The conclusion to *Le Morte Darthur*, and the final mention of Morgan le Fay in medieval Arthurian literature, subverts all of the previous arguments about Malory's Morgan. Arthur's death-scene involves the reappearance of Morgan, but in an incarnation of the character more reminiscent of Geoffrey of Monmouth than anything seen heretofore in Malory. Throughout her varied career in medieval romance, Morgan "always presides over [Arthur's] passing from this world… From the early thirteenth century onwards, Morgan is always a comforting presence on the barge that bears Arthur away from his last battle."[67] Malory, though innovative and interested in originality in service of coherence, does not diverge from this tradition, and Morgan plays her usual role as psychopomp in the *Morte*. Her character's role as the purported healer of Arthur, and the facilitator of his fabled return, demands that we question the negative stereotypes seen elsewhere in Malory's treatment of Morgan's character, and also poses some questions about the fate of the supernatural woman at the end of the Middle Ages.

The setting for the death of Arthur is imbued with the same sense of mystery and the uncanny as some of the other 'fairy' episodes in Malory (such as the scenes with the unmanned boats). Arthur's departure to Avalon is precipitated by Bedivere ritually throwing Excalibur into the waters of a lake, and reporting to the wounded king that "he threwe the swerde as farre in to the watir as he myght. And there cam an arme and an honde above the watir, and toke hit and cleyght hit, and shoke hit thryse and braundysshed, and than vanysshed" (Malory, *Morte*, p. 716). Bedivere then carries Arthur to the lakeshore, where they are met by "a lytyl barge wyth many fayr ladyes in hit, and amonge hem al was a quene, and all they had blak hoodis. And alt they wepte and shryked when they saw kyng Arthur" (p. 716). Again, the trope of the magically appearing boat, associated with women and the supernatural, heralds further mystery: in

[67] Larrington, pp. 29-30.

this case, the appearance of Morgan le Fay, and the healing of Arthur. Arthur's wounded body is laid in the boat, received by "thre ladyes," and "And in one of their lappis kyng Arthure layde hys hede. And than that quene sayd, 'A my dere brothir! Why have ye taryed so longe frome me? Alas thys wounde on your hede hath caught overmoche colde!'" (p. 716). This touching moment of sibling affection and the tenderness of the image of the king's head laid in his sister's lap is a far cry from the Morgan seen elsewhere in *Le Morte Darthur*. We see, also, the suggestion that she has returned to her role of healer as she examines the king's wound, noting with a healer's precision that it has "caught overmoche colde,"[68] and as Arthur states, plans to take him "to the vale of Avylyon to hele [him] of [his] grevous wounde" (p. 716).

As previously stated, this role is the one played by Morgan throughout the medieval Arthurian tradition.[69] Here, more than ever, Malory relies on his 'Frenche bookes,' and we may read some authorial uncertainty in his attribution of events to various sources. For example, he tells this final scene from Bedivere's perspective, and relies on the knight's 'account' of events when relating the discovery of Arthur's tomb, and Bedivere's grief at realising that Arthur has indeed died ("'Alas!' syde sir Bedyvere, 'that was my lord kynge Arthur whych lyeth here gravyn in thys chapel!' Than sir Bedwere sowned…" *Morte,* p. 716). Malory then reminds us that Bedivere is an unreliable narrator, and that the "ermyte" in whose chapel the supposed grave of Arthur lies "knew nat in sertayne that he was veryly the body of kynge Arthur," but only made this claim because of Bedivere's assumption about the "newe gravyn" tomb (pp. 716-17). It is not a verified fact that Arthur has died, Malory tells us. This is simply the "tale syr Bedwere, a knyght of the Table Rounde made… to be wrytten" (p. 717). Malory therefore turns to other authorities for clarity on the final fate of the king. The only real certainties, he informs us, are the events he already described: that Arthur was "lad away"[70] to Avalon by "three quenys" and "that one was kyng Arthurs syster, quene Morgan le Fay" (p. 717). Beyond that, though, all is hearsay and rumour, and Malory makes sure that he makes no claims of certainty: "of Arthur I fynde no more wrytten in

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[68] For more on the language of healing in romance, see Chapter One, especially section III.2.

[69] Larrington, pp. 45-46.

[70] Again, 'ledde away' echoes the legal language of ravishment. See the treatment of this term as containing potential for female power and male vulnerability in Chapter Three, section III.1, and in section IV of this conclusion.

bokis that bene auctorysed, nothir more of the verry sertaynté of his dethe harde I never rede," Malory states, emphasising the lack of information with the repeated terms "no more," "nothir more," and "harde I never rad." He again bemoans this absence of 'auctorysed' texts, complaining, "More of the deth of kyng Arthur coude I never fynde" (p. 717), and this lack casts a pall of uncertainty over the end of the narrative.

The "bokis that bene auctorysed" upon which Malory relies offer no clarity about Arthur's fate, but we can see Malory's adherence to tradition, his reliance on romance patterns and narratives, not only in his repeated mention of these "bokis" but also in the conclusion of the text: "Yet *som men say* in many partys of Inglonde that kyng Arthure ys nat dede, but had by the wyll of oure Lord Jesu into another place; and *men say* that he shall com agayne, and he shall wynne the Holy Crosse" (*Morte*, p. 717, *emphasis mine*). The fabled return of Arthur that "som men" foretell – possible, of course, only because of the healing powers of Morgan le Fay – is a narrative that rational, secularising Malory resists, reminding his readers that *other* men than he make this claim. Malory makes his own position clear: "Yet *I woll nat say* that hit shall be so, but rather *I wolde say*: here in thys worlde he chaunged hys lyff" (p. 717, *emphasis mine*). Immediately thereafter, however, in the most enduring lines of the *Morte*, the romance-tradition again reasserts itself in the opinions attributed to "many men," directly contradicting Malory's stated opinion: "*many men* say that there ys wrytten uppon the tumbe thys: Hic iacet Arthurus Rex quondam Rex que futurus" (p. 717). The romance genre has the last word, literally, in the *Morte Darthur*, and in concluding with this suggestion of the return of the Once and Future King, Malory implicitly makes space for the possibility of Morgan le Fay as benevolent, beneficent healer.

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The process of comparing Morgan le Fay to the representations of other supernatural women in medieval romance is, in essence, reading her character intertextually. As we explore the overlapping motifs, patterns, and narratives found both in her role in the *Morte* and in the other romances examined in this thesis, the common thread found in all of them is their inherent ambiguity, their interconnectedness, and their resulting moral complexity. This intertextual reading of Malory's Morgan with the other

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supernatural women demonstrates the unifying elements in the representations of these magical women in Middle English romance, while also demonstrating their nuance, difference, and breadth.

However, it also evidences the way Malory's text tends to push Morgan into rationalised negativity. In reading her character overlaid with the representations of the other magical women, it becomes increasingly clear that the version of Morgan that appears in the *Morte Darthur* represents a particularly and consistently negative, antagonistic version of the supernatural woman. Her motivations are further explained, and more self-serving, malicious, and wicked, than many of the other magical women examined in this thesis, demonstrating Malory's overall trend toward the elision of uncertainty and the promotion of linear, clear rationality. Of course, as we have also seen, Malory is bound to the romance genre's forms and traditions, and therefore all the narrative uncertainty and ambiguity of centuries of overlapping, intertextual narratives. This means that Morgan plays her final, positive role as Arthur's loving sister and healer, meaning her character – like those of all the other supernatural women in this thesis – resists any single categorisation, remaining deeply ambiguous.

The final question we are left with, then, is what happens to the ambiguous supernatural female characters in romance as society and literary culture changes and the medieval period wanes. As we saw, Malory's text evidences an early version of the modern push toward a naturalist mode of writing, characters with clear motivations, interiority, and unambiguous identities. This change is visible in form as well as content, as the mode of reading also changes with Malory: Caxton's publication of the *Morte Darthur* (c.1485) follows close upon the heels of Malory's composition, and thus the life of the text was primarily in print rather than in manuscript (or oral) form.[71] The consumption and dissemination of earlier verse romances, as discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, involved a mix of oral and literary traditions reliant on folkloric and intertextual elements; print-culture moves away from this form of reading. With Caxton's edition of the *Morte,* then, we see romance transformed not merely in its expression, style, and clarity (evidenced by Caxton's preface, which so clearly attempts to frame and delineate the contents of the text), but also in the way it would have been consumed. This trend is further seen in early modern romances – in the writings of

[71] For details on Caxton's edition, see Vinaver, pp. xxx-xxxv, and also Lumiansky, pp. 1-7.

authors such as Spenser and Sidney, for example, we see the vagueness, the narrative gaps, the uncertainties of medieval English romances being filled in with moral certainties, concrete characterisations, and plots not just well described but laden with detail and precision. There is much less scope for an ambiguous reading of the morality of the characters in *The Faerie Queene,* for instance, and no lack of detail and description in Sidney's *Arcadia*. The blank spaces at the edges of the mappae mundi, the mysteries at the depths of the forests, and uncertainties of the faery otherworlds are all, increasingly, pinned down and made concrete, ambiguities erased. In this process, as well, the intertextual, folded reading of medieval romances no longer applies. Texts known for their literary, rather than their folkloric qualities no longer engender the same sort of audience engagement, and therefore no longer have the flexible potential generated by willing listeners and readers filling in the narrative gaps with their own range of interpretations. For the ambiguous, powerful, and multivalent supernatural women of Middle English romance, then, we see a narrowing of narrative possibilities. Locked into roles defined by distinct moral categories, by clarity of detail, or simply by the print medium, they become static, crystallised versions of themselves, trapped in a single form or moral interpretation. As the medieval romance genre evolves into the romances of the early modern period, the supernatural female characters explored in this thesis lose some of the ambiguity and potential – and perhaps humanity – that the flexible romance genre, and its intertexual, folded form of reading makes so particularly powerful.

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