

Geoffrey of Monmouth's Magical Morgen:

Representing Her Real-World Counterparts in the *Vita Merlini*

To date, the introduction of the enchantress known as Morgen of Avalun to the Arthurian corpus has been definitively credited to Geoffrey of Monmouth and his lesser-known work, the *Vita Merlini*, or *Life of Merlin*. Though much scholarship^[1] traces the literary provenance of Morgen's character – her Classical and Celtic prototypes – comparatively little examines the historical: the cunning women, midwives, and healers in the real world of early-medieval England who Morgen served to represent. I believe that a closer examination of the *Vita's* historical context reveals that, within the culture of the Middle Ages, Morgen's facility with magic and healing would not have been viewed as entirely fictional. Despite what many^[2] suggest, and what the author's background and education would imply, Geoffrey's image of Morgen as a learned magician and skilled healer would not only have been based upon Celtic and Classical literary sources, but also deeply rooted in the beliefs and practices of her real-world counterparts. Many of the magical abilities attributed to Morgen by Geoffrey would have been considered throughout medieval Europe as real, and commonplace. The result is that Morgen serves as a fictional representative of the wise women, midwives, and village healers who practiced magic and medicine in medieval England. In this way, Morgen may be seen not only as the

descendant of a rich literary lineage, but also as a product of her immediate environment.

To fully comprehend Morgen's role in the *Vita Merlini*, modern readers must first understand the paradigm of magic already in place in the medieval mind: the nature of magic; its classifications, usage, and practitioners; and the perceived reality, and subsequent social and literary implications of its inclusion. Morgan's magically aided facility with herbs and healing, for example, would have taken no great stretch of the imagination for a medieval audience to believe. To such an audience, Morgen's abilities would not be alien or inconceivable at all, but *familiar* – relatable even – because they were already considered widely 'in practice.' Historian Michael Bailey argues that magic and its effects were indeed understood as genuine and tangible, and that in a society continuously exposed death and disease with little true medical expertise, magical rites and spells were most commonly and acceptably used for healing.^[3] The responsibility of healing, scholars argue, would have fallen to the women.^[4] The medieval conception of magical healing as real, efficacious, and particularly feminine can be directly connected to Morgen's express purpose in the *Vita*: the healing of Arthur's wounds. In the short passage in which she makes her literary debut, Morgen functions as a strikingly noble and complementary representation of her real-world counterparts.

Many scholars agree that the first portrayal of Morgen as Arthur's potential physician and healer is by far the most benevolent and complimentary: occurring in such a light as allowed for her learning, beauty, and supernatural skills to shine their brightest. Such scholars often refer to the first version of Morgen as a kind of pre-lapsarian one to which all later incarnations are compared, moving progressively away from this positive, potential savior portrayal to an increasingly sinister and antagonistic one. Maureen Fries plainly holds this view, stating "This initial portrait of Morgan and her realm is a positive [one] ... evil is not yet connected to Morgan in this, Taliesin's speech, at the moment of her literary birth."^[5] Likewise, even Jill M. Hebert, one of the first scholars to suggest that this one-dimensional interpretation perpetuated by Fries is perhaps an oversimplification of Geoffrey's Morgen concedes, "Geoffrey portrays Morgan as the well-educated ruler of a magical island who can change her shape, fly, and move about the world at will. So talented a physician, herbalist, and pharmacist is she that Arthur's men bring him to her in trust, believing that she may cure his mortal wound."^[6] Both Fries and Hebert agree on three essentials: that in his work Geoffrey portrays Morgan "positively," that "evil is not yet connected to [her]," and that she possesses numerous talents both magical and mundane. If one accepts the image of Morgen as a highly educated woman able to demonstrate superior medical and magical abilities while remaining fundamentally 'good,' what might that then reveal about the attitudes

surrounding the real women from whom this portion of her character potentially derives?

A simple answer would be that the negative associations with magic and superstition had not yet attached themselves to the profession of learned and healing women. However, the very nature of magic – its connotations with superstition, femininity, and *otherness* embedded in the language used to define and describe it – indicate a far more complex explanation. The constructs of medieval romance literature – a classification to which I believe that Geoffrey's *Vita* belongs^[7] – offer the perfect medium for examining the societies they were written to reflect. Ubiquitous within the genre, magic provided the opportunity for power and agency to exist where typically there would be little to none. In Morgen's case, magic and its effects were already considered real and widely practiced, and women constituted a large number of these practitioners. Logic would follow then, that since such power was already considered real, Geoffrey created Morgen not as a kind of fictional fantasy fulfillment for medieval women, but as an exemplar of them. The most important models Geoffrey uses for Morgen are not those of then-bygone fantasy, they are those of contemporary flesh and blood.

I am convinced that the foundations of substantiation for this theory lie in the details of Geoffrey's work, life, and intellectual environment. A well-connected cleric and scholar, Geoffrey of Monmouth was a

prolific writer who sought patronage in high places.[8] Compiling his chronicles in a highly imaginative and mag-pie-like manner, Geoffrey possessed enough education, influence, and finesse to pass his stories off as true histories. Geoffrey's claim that his previous masterwork, the *Historia Regum Britanniae* was originally sourced from a 'very ancient book in the British language' gave credence to his writing.[9] Historian Robert Caldwell explains the nature of Geoffrey's work:

Well read, though not deeply learned, [Geoffrey] pillaged other authors with unequalled audacity to fabricate what he certainly did not believe himself, and he did so with an unerring eye for what would prove acceptable. Vivid and concrete, practical and sophisticated, with a minimum of marvels and only a touch of grotesque humour, he mingled borrowed fact, which he twisted as he saw fit, with his own effective but purely imaginary detail to give an account that was plausible, if unverifiable, and convincing to most of his contemporaries because his characters behaved exactly as they did themselves (75).

On the heels of his wildly successful *Historia*[10] the *Vita Merlini* was well-positioned to be taken seriously, something that a book about the life of a wizard-turned-wild man and back again was otherwise typically unlikely to accomplish. Written as the medieval version of a spinoff to the *Historia*, the terms "vivid," "practical," and "plausible, if unverifiable" could also conceivably describe the *Vita*. Also like

the *Historia*, Geoffrey wrote the *Vita* in Latin,[11] which indicates that it was meant for an educated and elite audience – most likely as Caldwell suggests primarily Geoffrey’s “contemporaries” – and, as his own dedication indicates, his superiors.[12]As a well-connected cleric and scholar situated in a hub of politics and learning, Geoffrey of Monmouth was perfectly positioned to provide a pseudo-history that, though fantastical, was understood as representative of real people and recent events. Though enough of the events in the *Historia* and the *Vita* have now been proven false to the point they are considered to be works of fiction by historians, they would have been taken seriously by medieval readers, and the same attitude of perspective and skepticism scholars now possess was not applied.

In relation to Morgen’s character, the degree of credence and seriousness with which the *Vita* was read is of particular importance because it situates her introduction not as a fictional creation positioned only within the realm of make-believe, but instead as part of a larger, previously-established and accepted historical framework. Morgen enters as a fully-formed and formidable figure in the world of King Arthur, whose exploits and existence were already ‘verified’ by his inclusion in the *Historia*. The establishment of an historical precedence for Morgen is particularly significant because there is no direct evidence to date of a literary one. In this first appearance then, her status was understood not only as a *literary character*, but also as

a potential *historical figure*. The notion of Morgen as not entirely fictional, or perhaps having existed at some point in the not-so-distant past establishes her as a *real* woman, capable of representing real women. Examination of the historical context in which Morgen was conceived reveals the dynamic of her representational function within that context; namely, medieval romance culture. Historian of magic Richard Kieckhefer observes that romances reflected the nature of medieval courtly culture, and that despite being set in the “immemorial past” often projected the customs of the author and audience’s own time and acted as a reflection of the attitudes and values held by both writer and readers.[\[13\]](#) Applied to Morgen, Kieckhefer’s theory suggests that she was in fact a product of the contemporary culture – the attitudes and values of Geoffrey’s own day – as opposed to a product of Geoffrey’s wild imagination or the distant descendant of someone else’s. In relation to magic, these attitudes and values were determined primarily by necessity. For the majority, the perceived tangible benefits of ‘practical’ magic far outweighed the more esoteric and mystical applications.

In the medieval world there was no more practical or tangible application than the business of staying alive. This is unsurprising, Dr. Bailey concedes, in a world fraught with injury and disease but lacking any effective means to treat these problems.[\[14\]](#) Indeed, many scholars agree[\[15\]](#) that, within the medical profession, the high

demand for medical care combined with the short supply of formally trained and educated professionals and the believed efficaciousness of magic to create a field where the lines between what was magic and what was medicine, what real and what was not, nearly nonexistent. The amalgamated dynamic of magic and medicine in medieval culture led to a kind of demystification, or acceptance of magical uses for medicinal purposes. Most medical ‘treatment’ was carried out by local leeches, barber-surgeons, midwives, and cunning women or healers who – in addition to a basic working knowledge of the body gained primarily from experience – typically employed the use of any number of magical objects, incantations, or rituals, and possessed anything from basic to extensive knowledge of herb lore. Such was the potential and expertise of these lay practitioners that:

There is every indication that monks learned about medicinal and magic herbs from laypeople as well as from classical authors, that lay practitioners learned healing charms from monks and priests, and that before medicine became a university subject there was little to distinguish physicians from lay healers... empirical practitioners relied upon much of the same practical knowledge as did those with formal training.[16]

Practitioners from every end of the medical spectrum were familiar with the use of simples,[17] common incantations, and the use of objects such as talismans for healing purposes. As opposed to the

strictly hierarchical nature of professionalized healing one might imagine, in reality, the sharing and distribution of information was quite democratic. The reliance upon shared expertise between educated physicians and lay practitioners meant there was little more than the title that separated the two. The reduced significance of an official title, and general understanding that those without one lends a professionalism that would not otherwise be afforded to Morgen, “The one who is first among them has greater skill in healing.”^[18] As later detailed in this paper, there are several potential reasons for Morgen’s position as “first among,” her sisters: teaches them astrology and she is the most beautiful among them; which by medieval standards indicated that she was, in fact, morally superior. As to comparison with her shapeshifting or flying skills, the text leaves these to the imagination, however she is first in all others, and most importantly to Arthur’s welfare: Morgen is the *most* skilled at healing. Healing magic was most likely transmitted orally, blended elements of practical wisdom with what scholars now recognize as magical ritual or object, and was practiced widely by a wide variety of both professionals and laypeople throughout Europe during the Middle Ages. Morgen acts as a kind of exemplar, perhaps paragon even, for this type of healing magic.

The commonality of healing magic meant it was generally categorized as ‘white,’ or ‘good’ magic because it was for the most part understood

as practical and beneficial. Naturally, for every light there is a dark. Intimate knowledge of healing or 'white' magic suggested the potential for equally intimate knowledge of 'dark' magic. According to Dr. Bailey, helpful and harmful magic were understood as intimately related, and that those who possessed the capacity to work with beneficial magic were also viewed as potential agents of harmful or malevolent magic.

[19]The blurry lines between medicine and magic were further distorted by the lack of distinction between harmful and beneficial magic. In relation to Morgen, the potential power for harm in addition to her "greater skill" for healing does not appear to be a concern. In his final hour of need Arthur is entrusted to Morgen completely by his companions:

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. We therefore happily committed the king to her care.

[20]

This passage details the crucial moment of Morgen's primary function within the *Vita Merlini* text as Arthur's potential healer, fulfilling what Maureen Fries calls her role as a "connector of life." [21] To reconnect the wounded king with life is, after all, the reason Merlin and company bring him to the island of Avalun in the first place. After examination, Morgen appears confident in her ability to treat and "cure" Arthur, and

Taliesin and the knights “happily” commit him to her presumably long-term care. It makes sense that the act of healing, or “life-giving” would be considered a good thing, and any sort of act or ability that would have enhanced this effect, magical or no, would have been viewed as inherently ‘good.’ Morgen’s reputation for healing, being formidable enough for Arthur’s men to bring their king to her, must then so too have been considered ‘good.’

Morgen’s capacity for healing provides the most tangible clue to her potential real-world medieval prototypes. About such women – amateur healers, midwives, and cunning women – there is much speculation and little evidence. In the early Middle Ages, the structure of professionalized medicine was undeniably bottom-heavy. The scarcity and cost of books, lack of reading ability, and status of education as only available to a privileged elite meant that the role of a medical professional during this time by necessity – as there were fewer ‘professional’ doctors and significantly more death and disease – was extended beyond that narrow definition to include the laity. An unclear and uneasy hierarchy ran from learned surgeons on downward to include clerical “leeches” or amateur physicians, barber surgeons, midwives, and laywomen. The last group was primarily formed not through any conscious or concentrated effort of their own, but instead because, as the sphere of home and hearth naturally fell to wives and mothers, so too did the practice of healing everyday

ailments such as fevers, colds, cuts and scrapes. Scholar of medieval romance literature Corinne Saunders explains the dynamic of medieval medicine as it was portrayed in contemporary fiction:

The comparative rarity of learned medicine opens out the practice of natural magic in romance: the knowledge of remedies, charms and potions is not exclusive to the doctor, but available to others, and is particularly the sphere of those in some way on the margins of society – monks, hermits, [and] women.[\[22\]](#)

Here Saunders makes the connection between the dynamic and classification of the medical profession as the medieval population understood it, and the practice of healing magic as it was portrayed within their literature. As Saunders indicates, the associations between the idea of a “natural” branch of medicine that extended to include knowledge of “charms and potions” and the notion that such practices were primarily performed by the marginalized portions of society are solidified within by the constructs of medieval romance literature. Contemporary non-fictional literature supports this theory.

Compared to the academic Latinate texts, medieval herbals existed in abundance and were much easier for the average amateur to get their hands on. The informal and unprofessionalized nature of the woman healer’s position suggests the majority of knowledge was acquired via such texts (the term ‘texts’ here applied loosely as the majority of

herbals conveyed knowledge pictorially, and literacy was not often necessary), and passed on orally.^[23] The perceived power of orality, or words within medieval healing, is reflected in the primary medium through which it was obtained. In her book on the feminine nature of the language of medieval medicine, scholar Louise Bishop argues that the relationship between spoken words and the physical body were understood by medieval people to possess an interconnectivity that does not exist in the modern mind.^[24] In short, the use of words, in medicine and in magic, held a certain power. In a primarily oral culture, and professional tradition where matters of life and death were concerned, this power would be amplified tenfold in the imagination, if not in reality. By drawing connections between words and a tangible bodily or physical manifestation, and the status of women as inhabiting the lowest rung of the medieval medical field, we find a potential clue as to the perceived relationships between marginalized women, magic, and medicine at this time. Particularly, how the unique class of women that comprised this group is represented – as Saunders suggests – and often exaggerated by their imaginary romantic counterparts, of which Morgen is a prime example.

Though magic was not as clearly gender-based as it would become in later centuries, by the twelfth century divisions in the *kinds* of magic, and people who practiced them, were beginning to form. The category of healing was already highly feminized, and would only become

more-so later, in opposition to “medicine.” Women were often in charge of the domestic sphere, and the traditional gathering and preparation duties that fell naturally within it. With gardening, housekeeping, and childcare came subsequent opportunities to pass down basic knowledge of curatives, home remedies, simples, charms, and poultices. According to Louise Bishop, historically women healers “Inhabited medieval England’s cultural imaginary as they inhabited medieval Europe’s.”^[25] The idealized world of romance literature was a natural extension of this cultural imaginary. The female healers of romance were typically not the major characters, but rather expedients that delivered sleeping drafts or love potions to further complicate the plot, or helpmeets that provided medical care which enabled the hero to continue on. Kieckhefer uses particularly telling language as he examines the function of these characters, describing them as “kindly,” “nurturing,” and the aid they give “magical refreshment.”^[26] Though Morgen clearly represents the latter of the two options listed above, the princess Yseult from the contemporary romantic *Tristram Legend*, whose origins – like Morgen’s *Vita* incarnation – find their roots in Celtic sources, provides an example of the former.^[27] The contrasting intents of the two contemporary characters illustrate the potential capacity of female medico-magical practitioners to use their knowledge for either altruistic, or self-serving purposes.

[1] For more information and theories concerning the possible prototypes for Morgen's character see, Fries, Maureen. "From the Lady to the Tramp: The Decline of Morgan Le Fay in Medieval Romance." *Arthuriana* 4, no. 1 (1994): 1–18. Larrington, Carolyne. "Magic and the Enchantress." In *King Arthur's Enchantresses*, 7–28. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006. Loomis, Roger Sherman. "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Arthurian Origins." *Speculum* 3, no. 1 (1928): 16–33.

[2] Particularly, Loomis, Roger Sherman. "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Arthurian Origins." *Speculum* 3, no. 1 (1928): 16–33. And see also, Curley, Michael J. "The Life of Merlin." In *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 109–29. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994. Hebert, Jill M. "For the Healing of His Wounds." In *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter*, 15–38. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013. Wright, Neil. *Geoffrey of Monmouth*. Edited by Michael D. Reeve. Edition an. New York: Boydell Press, 2007.

[3] Bailey, Michael D. *Magic and Superstition in Europe*, 80. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007.

[4] For further examination of the feminine tradition of lay-healers see, Bishop, Louise M. "Galen's Shadow: An Outline of Medieval Medicine and Healing." In *Words, Stones, & Herbs*, 11–43. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007. Briggs, Robin. "Supernatural Powers and Natural Remedies." In *Witches & Neighbors: The Social*

and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft, 97–134. New York: Viking, 1996. Kieckhefer, Richard. “The Common Tradition of Medieval Magic.” In *Magic in the Middle Ages*, Magic in the Middle Ages. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Saunders, Corinne. “White Magic: Natural Arts and Marvellous Technology.” In *Magic and the Supernatural*, 117–51. Rochester, New York: D. S. Brewer, 2010. Wilson, Stephen. “Folk Healers and Magical Cures.” In *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe*, 333–71. New York: Hambledon and London, 2000.

[5] Fries, 2.

[6] Hebert, 23.

[7] This opinion is also held by Geraldine Heng who argues that Geoffrey of Monmouth was largely responsible for the creation of what would become the romance literature genre in medieval England in her chapter: “History as Romance: The Genesis of a Medieval Genre.” In *Empire of Magic*, 17–62. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

[8] Scholar Neil Wright discusses Geoffrey’s frustrated attempts to gain patronage from two successive bishops in his book *Geoffrey of Monmouth*. Edited by Michael D. Reeve. Edition an. New York: Boydell Press, 2007.

[9] Historian Michael Curley contends that Geoffrey's presence in Oxford may provide a tenuous support for the 'old rare book' story: "The evidence of the Oxford charters suggests... that Geoffrey belonged to a close-knit group of scholars, prelates, and noblemen connected to Lincoln and Oxford... Oxford and Lincoln were undoubtedly important urban networks through which books and information were constantly passing and where enterprising authors could find patrons and colleagues" Curley, Michael J. "The Life of Merlin." In *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 3. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994.

[10] According to Curley, there is evidence it was considered a seminal work and widely copied and cited well into the seventeenth century.

[11] The *Vita* survives complete in only one manuscript, dating from the latter part of the thirteenth century: British Library MS Cotton Vespasian E.iv.ff. 112v-138v. on which all editions of the poem have been based.

[12] The inscription reads "Guide my pen, Robert, glory of the bishops; for we know that Philosophy has filled you with its holy nectar and made you universally learned, so that you might prove yourself the foremost teacher in the world. Approve, then, my project, and be ready to be more indulgent to this poet than was that other whom you have just succeeded, attaining an honor well-deserved." *Vita* 53.

[13] Kieckhefer, Richard. "The Common Tradition of Medieval Magic." In *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 104-6. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

[14] Bailey, 80.

[15] Bailey, Bishop, Doggett, Jolly, and Kieckhefer all express this view on some level, and in no uncertain terms agree that magic and healing were indistinguishable from one another in relation to medieval medical treatment.

[16] Kieckhefer, 56.

[17] "Over four hundred simples, or preparations from an individual plant, were known in the Middle Ages. These were applied by practitioners of all classes" Doggett, 27.

[18] *Vita*, 101.

[19] Bailey, 82.

[20] *Vita*, 103.

[21] Fries, 1.

[22] Saunders, Corinne. "White Magic: Natural Arts and Marvellous Technology." In *Magic and the Supernatural*, 118. Rochester, New York: D. S. Brewer, 2010.

[23] In her book on the language of women in medieval medicine Louis Bishop provides ample evidence of a primarily oral transfer of knowledge: Bishop, Louise M. "Galen's Shadow: An Outline of Medieval Medicine and Healing." In *Words, Stones, & Herbs*, 11–43. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007.

[24] Bishop, 11.

[25] Bishop, 54.

[26] Kieckhefer, 106.

[27] Louise Bishop offers an extensive analysis of the medically-relevant language and tropes surrounding the Yseult or Isolde character within the *Tristan Legend*. Her analysis includes material from both the Beroul and Thomas of Britain versions. *Words, Stones, & Herbs*, 37-41.