

# Re-examining the Role of Women in Medieval Literature: *Beowulf*, *Juliana*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a Case Study

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**Abstract** This paper revisits some of the stereotypical readings of women's depictions in medieval literature as presented in *Beowulf*, Cynewulf's *Juliana*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in an attempt to provide a deeper understanding of these women's roles within the cultural and historical contexts of these literary works. To that end, a feminist reading of the female characters in the chosen texts, highlighting their strength, intelligence, and agency, is provided to challenge the popular images of medieval women which range from the helpless and subservient in warrior societies of Old English texts to the manipulative temptresses and evil shrews responsible for men's failings in Middle English texts.

**Key words** Anglo-Saxon women; women and comitatus; Medieval Romance; Medieval Poetry

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In the introduction to their book *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen explain how the continued and increasing interest in the presentations of women in medieval writings parallels to some degree that of tracing women's presentations in other periods; an inquiry they believe generally grew out of the feminist social movements that started in America and Europe in the 1960s (3). Damico and Olsen point out that the concern

with women in medieval literature addresses writings in Middle English rather than writings in Old English or Anglo Saxon. This could have resulted from having to learn Old English, which constituted an obstacle for those interested in inspecting the field. Other reasons, such as the lack of named women writers of Old English Poetry, might have played a role in directing feminists towards Middle English texts, beside the general conception that Old English poetry deals primarily with warrior societies, thus “expounding a warrior ethos of interest only to men” (Damico and Olsen 4).

This, however, did not distract scholars from conducting studies that attempt at forming a somehow comprehensive view of the representations of women in medieval literature. Indeed, tracing the presentations of women in medieval literature, which comprises about 700 years of literary production divided between Old English and Middle English writings, is by no means a simple task, especially when Old English poems and lyrics are concerned. However, some general conceptions regarding women in both types of texts have become dominant over the years, and this paper aims at understanding some of these conceptions as presented in the chosen literary works and providing alternative readings that reflect a deeper understanding of these women’s roles in light of the cultural and historical contexts of these literary works. The wide scope of literary production in the medieval era dictates limiting the study to some of the popular works which feature female characters in Old and Middle English texts, such as *Beowulf*, Cynewulf’s *Juliana*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Women in Anglo-Saxon literature have usually been seen by nineteenth century critics as passive servants and victims of men and traditions in the warrior society (Damico and Olsen 13). Critics base this argument on depictions of women in *Beowulf*, the only surviving Old English epic. However, a more comprehensive reading of the text, especially as a poem representative of its time, reveals the important role the female characters in the text play from a social and aesthetic perspective. This can be achieved by taking a closer look at the traditions of the Anglo-Saxon warrior society as presented in the poem, such as the wergild and warriors’ allegiance to their king as understood through the heroic code of ‘comitatus’. Although comitatus is mainly concerned with warrior conduct, it is also perceived as an “institution,” one that “made use of underlying cultural and social apparatus” (Evans 2) and which “can be seen as the common thread that ... ran through and bound together the very fabric of Dark-Age Britain” (1). One of these social and cultural apparatuses was intertribal marriages as part of the “frith” or peace-weaving practice. Laura Maxwell explains that an interweaving of family

threads for the purposes of enlarging and securing tribal identity and allegiances for one king or leader formed an essential part of comitatus, and that “intermarriages among tribes were physical representations of intertribal treaties [...] called frith, in which physical objects of value that represented the tribe were exchanged” (Maxwell).

As peace-weavers, Anglo-Saxon women played a significant role of maintaining peace between tribes, especially ones at war in warrior societies. An example of this can be seen in *Beowulf*, which features a number of female figures playing one of three main roles: the peace-weaver, the queen as a mead hall hostess, and the monster. Princess Freawaru, King Hrothgar’s daughter, for example is engaged to the “gracious Ingled,” a betrothal which “the guardian of the kingdom sees good in/ and hopes this woman will heal old wounds/ and grievous feuds” (*Beowulf*, lines 2027 – 2029). The political weight of the princess’s marriage lies in its anticipated and hoped-for ability to bring peace between two warring tribes. To this end, one can argue that the importance of peace-weavers is equivalent to that of warriors in protecting their tribes and maintaining peace. The difficulties women had to go through in their mission as peace weavers can be seen in the example of Queen Hildeburh, who loses her brother, her son, and her husband in the intertribal wars between her people, the Danes, and her husband’s tribe, the Frisians. Despite Hildeburh’s initial success in maintaining peace for a while by bearing a child that represents the bond between the two tribes, eventually the peace is disrupted and she ends up mourning the loss of her family members as well as her failure as a peace-weaver and a peace-keeper (Andrade 20).

Although Hildeburh’s mission does not fully succeed, Queen Wealtheow seems to be successfully carrying out her role as a “peace-pledge between the nations” (*Beowulf*, line 2017). While there is no clear reference to her background or what disputes she helped pacify, Wealtheow is depicted as the gracious queen of the Danes and a skilled hostess as she moves around the mead hall passing the cup to the glorious warriors:

Wealtheow came in,  
 Hrothgar’s queen, observing the courtesies.  
 Adorned in her gold, she graciously saluted  
 the men in the hall, then handed the cup  
 first to Hrothgar, their homeland guardian,  
 urging him to drink deep and enjoy it, (lines 612-617)

\* \* \*

So the helming woman went on her rounds  
 queenly and dignified, decked out in rings,  
 offering the goblet to all ranks,  
 treating the household and the assembled troop,  
 until it was Beowulf's turn to take it from her hand.  
 With measured words she welcomed the Geat  
 and thanked God for granting her wish (lines 620-626)

The quoted lines highlight the role of the queen as a hostess, welcoming the Danish thanes and Beowulf, a warrior from another clan, into the mead hall. Although this passing of the mead has generally been interpreted negatively by critics as a mere act of servitude on the part of women, Byron Edgington points out that it is a highly ritualistic tradition that “bestow[ed] recognition on specific thanes, or men who had distinguished themselves in battle” according to their status, which renders women’s role in this case a political one (Edington and Edington). This practice can also be seen as an implementation of *comitatus* among the members of the same tribe, since “the mead cup was served in order to mark the allegiance of each man in his turn to the king, whose mead hall they occupied” (Edgington and Edington). Looking at it this way, the passing of the mead as a queen’s role is as powerful as that of the queen being the one who rewards warriors for their bravery with appreciation tokens of her choice, the way Wealtheow endows Beowulf with gifts after slaying Grendel (*Beowulf*, lines 1191-1220).

The queen’s powerful presence in the hall, her participation in political decision making, and her command over the warriors can be detected in her speeches, some of which are quoted below as a good example for negating the conception of a queen’s role as a mere entertainer or a servant passing drinks around. In the first speech, Wealtheow advises her husband Hrothgar to reconsider choosing Beowulf as an heir to the Danish throne as she believes that Hrothulf, Hrothgar’s nephew, is a better fit, especially when it comes to the future of her sons. In the second speech, while celebrating Grendel’s defeat, she addresses Beowulf and the rest of the warriors in the Mead Hall reminding them to be the men and warriors they are expected to be, ending her speech with a reminder of the importance of her request as their queen:

And now the word is that you [Hrothgar] want to adopt  
 This warrior [Beowulf] as a son. So, while you may,  
 Bask in your fortune, and then bequeath

Kingdom and nation to your kith and kin,  
 Before your decease. I am certain of Hrothulf.  
 He is noble and will use the young ones well.  
 He will not let you down. Should you die before him,  
 He will treat our children truly and fairly. (lines 1175 – 1183)

\*                    \*                    \*

Here each comrade is true to the other,  
 Loyal to the lord, loving in spirit.  
 The thanes have one purpose, the people are ready:  
 Having drunk and pledged, *the ranks do as I bid*. (lines 1228 – 1230)

Despite being given less attention than Queen Wealtheow, Queen Hygd is also presented as the gracious wise hostess Wealtheow is, passing the mead around the hall, and bestowing praise and gifts on deserving warriors. Her wisdom and sense of leadership is seen in her choosing Beowulf as a successor to her husband's throne instead of her own son whom she believed was not strong enough to protect the people and the land at the time of his father's death (*Beowulf*, lines 2369 – 2373). Choosing the Geats' best interest against all odds is another example of the political role of Anglo-Saxon queens in this poem. Hygd's grace and nobility of character are contrasted with Queen Modthryth; Hygd's foil and an example of the wickedness and monstrosity to be avoided by Anglo-Saxon women. It is worth noting that not much is known about Modthryth since the part of the manuscript in which her story appears was severely damaged, which does not really give the reader a chance to analyze her character or understand the reasons behind her violent actions. However, examples of her "terrible wrongs," such as torturing and killing "any retainer ever made bold/ to look her in the face" (lines 1933-1934), are emphasized in a way that sheds light on how different she is in comparison with the other queens in the poem:

Great queen Modthryth  
 perpetrated terrible wrongs. (lines 1932-1933)

\*                    \*                    \*

[...] Even a queen  
 Outstanding in beauty must not overstep like that  
 A queen should weave peace, not punish the innocent  
 with loss of life for imagined insults. (lines 1940-1943)

Although the bard refers briefly to her "reformed" ways after marrying King Offa,

Modthryth's temper, violence, and tendency to shed blood are emphasized as unnatural and unacceptable for women, mirroring the violence of one of the three monsters Beowulf faces: Grendel's mother. The real nature of Grendel's mother is disputed, mainly due to the different translations of the original text. While some critics see her as a non-human monster which merely exists as another challenge that Beowulf has to face and successfully overcome in order to rise in ranks, others see her as a human being who is described in a way that emphasizes the "monstrosity" of her behavior in the eyes of the Anglo-Saxon society. In *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*, Jane Chance argues that Grendel's mother is "rather oddly, described in human and social terms, and through words like *wīf* and *ides*, normally reserved for human women" with *ides* indicating the status of the woman as a lady of a high social rank or a queen (95). Chance also explains that masculine pronouns are used in reference to Grendel's mother in the Old English text, along with adjectives that translate as "monstrous woman," "a lady-monster woman," "warrior," "destroyer," and "[male] guardian" (95). The fact that the last three adjectives are masculine in Old English can be seen as an indication to her unfeminine strength and violence as a woman who seeks revenge and fights her own battles as an *aglæca*, a word which not only means "monster," but also translates as a "strong adversary" and a "fierce combatant" (95).

The problem with Grendel's mother seems to be that she "arrogates to herself the masculine role of the warrior or lord" in a way that "blurs the sexual and social categories of [gender] roles," all of which makes her "wretched or monstrous to an Anglo-Saxon audience" (Chance 97). Accordingly, this depiction shows her as an antitype of the previously discussed women and an inversion of the ideal Anglo-Saxon woman. While her actions are justified as those of a grieving mother avenging her son's death, unlike Mordthryth's actions, both women are seen as "strife-weavers" (Carr-Parker) who threaten the peace and stability of those around them, which in itself highlights the importance of the other women's role as peace-weavers and gracious hostesses implementing *comitatus* in their own ways.

The importance of abiding by the heroic and social codes of *comitatus* and peace-weaving as presented in *Beowulf* prevail across Old English texts. However, these concepts acquired new religious meanings with the spread of Christianity as they were utilized in ways that serve religious themes (Greenfield 109). Naturally, Jesus becomes the ultimate lord, and allegiance to him is expressed in his followers being devoted Christians who spread his message and protect fellow Christians. Accordingly, Christian saints become the new heroes in these texts, and their powers and strengths, unlike Beowulf's, are rather spiritual than physical, which gives room

for Christian female saints, like Juliana, to become the protagonists of such texts.

In two out of five Old English poems depicting lives of saints, Cynewulf introduces the Christian saint heroine in *Juliana* and *Elene*. Although *Juliana* is now regarded the only Old English work that renders the *passio* of a female saint into poetry in a way that distinguishes it from any other contemporary texts featuring female Christian saints (Fredrick 61), the practice of reading this poem allegorically has diminished the significance of Juliana's character and the overall value of the poem. Damico and Olsen explain how the allegorical reading of Old English texts as abstractions not only tends to reduce the significance of certain events and situations, but also reduces characters, both male and female, into mere types that lack any depth or individuality:

Allegory reduces the person to a less-than-human figure who stands for something more than human. Elene is a "figure or type of the church", Juliana is "the initiator, embodiment, and new exemplar" of "central and potent Christian events"<sup>79</sup>. The result of such interpretations is to diminish the reader's engagement with what is essentially feminine in the flesh-and-blood heroine. (as qtd. in Damico and Olsen 13)

A closer reading of the text shows Cynewulf's depiction of Juliana as that of a full-fledged, warrior-like character in the Anglo-Saxon sense. Although Juliana's story is based on a Latin prose that appears in more than one place, as in the *Acta Sanctorum* and Bede's *Martyrologies* (Fredrick 61), Cynewulf's adaptation of it not only expands it, but also highlights the spiritual struggle of the heroine, which is considered the poetic and theological concern of the poem. In the Latin *Vita*, for example, Juliana is depicted as slightly deceitful at the beginning, as she first demands that her pagan suitor Eleusius becomes a prefect before she marries him, but then after he gains the prefecture she demands he converts to Christianity, which angers him and leads to her eventual imprisonment and death. Cynewulf presents a more straightforward Juliana by omitting the first request, and having her boldly tell Eleusius that she will never marry him if he does not become Christian:

Condemning it all, Juliana spoke a word *amongst*  
*a multitude of men*: "I can say to you that you need not  
 trouble yourself so greatly. If you adore and believe  
 in the True God and exalt his praise, you would recognize  
 the Comfort of Souls and I would immediately, without faltering,

be prepared to submit to your desire. Likewise I say to you,  
 if in fact you confide in an inferior god through devil-worship,  
 or call to heathen idols, *you cannot have me*  
*nor can you compel me to be your wedded wife.*  
*Never will you, through your violent spite,*  
*prepare so harsh pain of severe torments*  
*hat you should turn me from these words.”* (emphasis added, lines 44b-57)

The quoted lines show how Juliana stands up to her father and Eleusius, the rich and powerful senator who also happens to be the emperor’s friend, and fearlessly tells him that she is not afraid of what he could do to her for rejecting him, as her relationship with God is stronger and more important to her than anything he could promise her or threaten her with. In the parts to follow, Eleusius’s anger and his fear of the emperor if he converts to Christianity culminate in him punishing her through physical torture, imprisonment, and eventually killing her. Cynewulf’s portrayal of a darker, more sinister Eleusius in his adaptation is meant to show his character’s “zeal in the service of devil-inspired idols,” a zeal that matches and consequently contrasts with Juliana’s “fervid Christianity” and unwavering faith (Greenfield 111).

Juliana’s defiant spirit is never subdued throughout the poem, and can be seen in her withstanding all the torture she is subjected to, such as being hung by her hair from a tree and beaten for hours, and in her confrontation with the devil or the demon in prison. The scene in which the devil visits the imprisoned Juliana as an angel in disguise, in an attempt to get her to revoke Christianity, is another example of how Cynewulf expanded the story to emphasize Juliana’s heroism. The devil’s “quick collapse” and betrayal of his lord Satan once Juliana seizes him forms a “contrast to the saint’s steadfastness in her faith under much greater duress” (Greenfield 112). Her patience is emphasized through the devil’s lamentations as he realizes he has betrayed his lord, again shedding light on the strength and courage she managed to maintain through all her trials in a way that makes her worthy of becoming a martyr by the end of the poem.

Cynewulf’s portrayal of this Christian female heroine goes beyond the mere representation of a type. Juliana is drawn as a strong, courageous, patient woman with a strong belief in God and Christ as her savior. In “Warring with Words: Cynewulf’s Juliana,” Jill Fredrick argues that Juliana is a warrior in the Anglo-Saxon sense and the seriousness of her predicament requires a presentation similar to that of an epic hero. He points out that the opening lines of Cynewulf’s adaptation of Juliana are similar in nature to that of epics, especially *Beowulf*, as both poems

open with “Hwaet!” and the syntax of the first three lines of *Juliana* is similar to the epic statement in *Beowulf*: “Listen! We have heard...” (64). Cynewulf’s use of language and descriptions of the emperor’s destructive actions in a war-like scene, similar to that found in *The Battle of Maldon* for example, are seen as his way of creating a world more appealing to his audience (Fredrick 65) and one which fits the heroism of the protagonist. And while her battles, unlike Beowulf’s, are mainly spiritual in nature, she engages in verbal battles, known as flyting, similar to those Beowulf and Unferth engage in. Juliana’s flyting and long speeches defying her father and Eleusius initiate the action of the poem while her flyting with the devil which visits her in prison emphasizes her steadfastness and loyalty to Christ, her Lord. Her loyalty to Christ and her refusal to forsake him or her faith, especially in her battle with the devil, falls under the Germanic code of comitatus, which renders her an Anglo-Saxon warrior.

Moving from Old English poetry to the medieval romances brings attention to some new presentations of women which emerged as a result of the evident shift in themes, heroic codes, and social values of the romance as a genre that found its way into Middle English after the Norman Conquest of 1066 and the exposure to French literature. The subject matter of the romance as a genre is usually concerned with the chivalric adventures of knights, either set in or related to Camelot, Arthur’s court, and the Knights of the Round Table. The knight’s courageous and heroic deeds are usually motivated by his feelings for a lady as part of courtly love, which before turning into scandalous affairs and adulterous relationships was initially considered an ennobling force of idealized platonic love that inspired the knight’s heroic actions in hopes of gaining his lady’s love or favor (Schwartz). Serving the lady with the same obedience and loyalty the knight owes his lord, her husband, whether she knows of his love or not, brings attention to the ladies of the romance as subjects of praise and inspiration or motivation for the knights who seek to implement the chivalric code by honoring these women. However, with the changes in the nature of courtly love over the years and the dominant medieval Christian belief that women are the source of all sins, women in the romances came to be presented as wicked independent agents who are powerful enough to manipulate the action of the romance. An example of this can be seen in the women of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which is considered one of the most popular romances of the Arthurian Legends.

Four women appear in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a poem which depicts the adventures of a courageous Gawain on his way to fulfill his end of a beheading-game challenge that a mysterious Green Knight dares Arthur and

the Knights of the Round Table to take part in as he interrupts a New Year's Eve celebration in Camelot. These characters can be seen as examples of two popular images of women in the Fourteenth Century: the gracious lady deserving of a knight's servitude and worthy of being a source of guidance and inspiration, and the evil manipulative woman who tries to sabotage the knight's mission or deter him from abiding by the chivalric code. Apart from Queen Guinevere, who will be discussed shortly, Virgin Mary represents the first type of women in this poem, while Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay represent the second type.

Queen Guinevere only appears at the beginning of the poem, sitting next to Gawain in the feast held at Camelot and praised for her noble character and charm as the "the goodly" and "fair queen, without a flaw" (*Gawain*, line 81). While one can argue that Guinevere's depiction in this poem is rather passive and barely has any impact on Gawain, the fact that she is mentioned again towards the end of the poem when the Green Knight reveals his identity and explains how Morgan le Fay sent him to Camelot to frighten Guinevere prompts the reader to think about the relationship between these two women and how it initiated Gawain's quest. It is also important to remember that both Morgan and Guinevere appear in a number of Arthurian legends, the former is usually depicted as a villain, while the latter plays different roles from the gracious queen to the adulterous wife across the legends, which accordingly requires a deeper knowledge of the legends for a better understanding of these women's characters and relationship.

Guinevere's presence in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is overshadowed by the powerful presence of Virgin Mary, a clear example of Christianity's impact on the literature of the time and a testament to her important status in the Middle Ages as one "which would rival that of [Christ]" (Barberet as qtd. in Vigil 3). Gawain is depicted as Mary's knight as he prepares for his journey; her image is etched on the inside of his shield for protection and guidance, and the pentangle on the other side can be interpreted as a religious symbol representing the five joys of Mary or the five wounds of Christ integrated in the chivalric code at the time. Besides getting his strength from looking at Mary's image, he continuously prays for her and asks for her guidance and protection throughout his challenging journey to the Green Chapel of the Green Knight. His special relationship with Mary and his solid faith in her ability to provide him with the patience and courage he needs to survive the hardships of his journey is what gets him to Bertilak's castle, which he comes across after praying for her guidance in finding a place where he can attend Christmas mass. In this sense, Virgin Mary, a symbol of spiritual love, chastity, and faith, can be seen as the lady whose affection Gawain seeks and the one he tries to honor

by maintaining his Christian faith and abiding by the chivalric code of conduct, especially in Bertilak's castle.

Bertilak's castle, unknowingly to Gawain, is where his chivalry, courage, and faith are really put to test—a test administered by two women: Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay, the old lady living in the castle. Although Gawain does not have any direct interaction with Morgan, he eventually learns that she is Arthur's half-sister and a vengeful witch whose jealousy of Guinevere and desire to test Arthur's knights have started the whole quest. Consequently, he realizes that his real challenge is not in facing the Green Knight, but in his encounters with Lady Bertilak “who represents the traditional female archetypes of courtly love, disobedience, lust and death” (Arkin).

During his stay in the castle, Gawain is entrusted with the women as Bertilak goes hunting, on the condition that upon Bertilak's return both men have to exchange their winnings for the day over a period of three days. This is where Gawain's real challenge starts, as the seemingly gracious Lady Bertilak persistently tries to seduce him during her husband's absence. Although she is presented as a beautiful temptress whom Gawain can barely stand up to, Lady Bertilak is a smart woman whose power lies in her command of language and her ability to figure out Gawain's weakness in such a short period of time. Although he is known to be an eloquent speaker, Gawain's skill fails him with Lady Bertilak who, being a skilled speaker herself, gets him to become her knight on the first day, and shames him into granting her several kisses throughout the three days by emphasizing the importance of courtly love as one of the main ideals of chivalry. In her “Controlling the Feminine voice in *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” Cindy Vitto describes Gawain's test as a “linguistic” one:

Although Gawain believes his quest involves a physical challenge, the real contest is a linguistic one, and without doubt he loses [...] she always speaks at significantly greater length than does Gawain, and, except for the second morning, she initiates the conversation. (10-11)

In this sense, language is portrayed as a dangerous weapon which women can skillfully use to win their battles. By reminding him of the expected behavior of a knight, stressing the importance and significance of courtly love, and referring to his reputation as a knight, Lady Bertilak succeeds in conflicting Gawain's loyalties and shaking his moral values. Although he rejects the lady's sexual advances in the bedroom scenes as a way of honoring Bertilak's trust and the Christian ideal

of chastity, she still appeals to his knighthood in accepting her kisses first, and then accepting her love token on the third day: the magical green girdle that would protect him from the blows of the Green Knight. Gawain's fear of dying at the hands of the Green knight and his belief in the girdle's magical ability to protect him from death put his Christian faith to test. Interestingly, this is the only scene in which he does not pray for Mary or ask for her help in warding off the lady's attempts to seduce him, and while Lady Bertilak fails to take him down through sex and golden offerings, she eventually succeeds when she gets him to put his faith in magic instead of God, or Mary in this poem, which was considered a heretical act at the time. As he shifts his loyalty from Mary to Lady Bertilak, she easily convinces him to hide the girdle from her husband "for her sake" (*Gawain*, lines 1863-1864), which results in him breaking his pact with Bertilak—the pact that turns out to be the real challenge of the Green Knight. The Green Knight's challenge isn't really about Gawain physically surviving a beheading game; it is about him adhering to the chivalric codes of honesty and loyalty, which he broke by not telling Bertilak about the magical girdle.

To his dismay, when he discovers he was deceived by a woman, Gawain associates Lady Bertilak with the temptresses mentioned in the Bible, such as Eve, Delilah, and Bathsheba, in a speech that is known as the misogynistic part of the poem:

But if a dullard should dote, deem it no wonder,  
 And through the wiles of a woman be wooed into sorrow,  
 For so was Adam by one, when the world began,  
 And Solomon by many more, and Samson the mighty  
 Delilah was his doom, and David thereafter  
 Was beguiled by Bathsheba, and bore more distress:  
 Now these were vexed by their devices – 'twere a very joy  
 Could one but learn to love, and believes them not. (lines 2414-2421)

Comparing Lady Bertilak to the biblical temptresses reinforces the dominant biblical archetype of women as the reason behind men's moral failings and accordingly behind the demise of chivalry at the time. Devotion to women instead of God, as presented in Gawain's actions, was viewed by the church as the main reason behind chivalry's decline in the fourteenth century as it continued to drift away from the religious ideals it sprang from only to be absorbed by the ideals of courtly love (Arkin). In this sense, as Maureen Fries puts it, Lady Bertilak "becomes

the ambivalent mirror in which the knight pictures his own potential for moral achievement or moral failure in terms of the male warrior ethos such literature was designed to glorify” (qtd. in Arkin). However, by prioritizing courtly love and Lady Bertilak over Mary and the chivalric ideals of honesty and loyalty he is supposed to keep with her husband, Gawain fails his test.

The other woman testing Gawain’s faith and chivalry is Morgan le Fay, a powerful, vengeful sorceress, the reader is told, whose main goal is to disrupt Camelot’s peace and challenge the Knights of the Round Table. Surprisingly, she does not have any lines of her own, and apart from a brief description of her ugliness in comparison to Lady Bertilak when Gawain first meets them at the palace, she is only mentioned towards the end of the poem when the Green Knight reveals that she is the “goddess” who orchestrated the whole quest with her magic. In “The Female Spell-caster in Middle English Romances: Heretical Outsider or Political Insider” Barbara Goodman points out that Morgan is one of six female spell-casters found in medieval English romances composed from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. Interestingly, none of these spell-casters admit practicing witchcraft in any of the texts they are featured in or give any accounts explaining how they accomplished their goals through magic; their powers are always revealed by other characters who “accuse” them of being witches (Goodman 46), as can be seen in the following lines:

Through the *might* of Morgan le Faye, *that lodges at my house*  
*By subtleties of science and sorceress’ art,*  
 The mistress of Merlin, she has *caught many a man* (emphasis added, lines  
 2446-2448)

\* \* \*

Morgan the Goddess, she  
 So styled by title true;  
*None holds so high degree*  
*That her arts cannot subdue.* (emphasis added, lines 2452 – 2455)

\* \* \*

She *guided* me in this guise to your glorious hall, (emphasis added, lines 2456)

\* \* \*

She *put this shape upon me* to puzzle your wits,  
 To afflict the fair queen, and frighten her to death  
 With awe of that elvish man that eerly spoke  
*with his head in his hand before the high table.*(emphasis added, lines 2459-2462)

According to Bertilak, Morgan is such a powerful witch who has “caught” many men through her spells, including himself, in a way that suggests that she is living in his castle against his will and that he was sent to Camelot, also against his will, as the scary immortal Green Knight who roamed the hall with his head in his hands after being beheaded. Although the reader does not see Morgan engage in any of these actions, it is understood that Bertilak and his wife act as her agents. Associating her with magic is enough to present her as a powerful evil woman who is capable of challenging Arthur and his knights, since practicing magic became associated with heresy during the fourteenth century and “witches were certainly believed to perform magic with the aid of demons, indeed via the supplication and worship of demons” (Bailey 962).

While the depiction of Morgan le Fay as the wicked witch lurking in the shadows with the sole aim of destroying Camelot is the most popular reading of her role in the Arthurian legends, fact remains that she is one of the legends’ most ambiguous characters due to the inconsistencies of her presentation in the different works. In his “Masks of the Dark Goddess in Arthurian Literature: Origin and Evolution of Morgan le Fay” John Shearer looks into the original depiction of Morgan’s character, which is inspired by Celtic oral tradition and Greek mythology, and the transformation this positive image of the healer undergoes mainly due to the rise of patriarchal Christianity and its impact on the cultural and literary ideals of the time (1150 – 1485). Shearer also explains that the different roles Morgan assumes, from a healer to Arthur’s nemesis, can be understood as the different masks a deity wears in Celtic mythology in which gods and goddesses play different roles from one story to the other, “appearing as friend in one instant and as foe in the next” (9). Hence, contrary to the widely accepted interpretation of her role in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as the evil trickster whose ultimate aim of the challenge is to humiliate Gawain and Arthur by extension, Shearer points out that Morgan’s role can be seen as that of the “Oresteian Mother” who subjects Gawain to these difficulties “to reveal his strength of character” (33) and help him overcome his shortcomings. She is also referred to as the “Celtic Dark Goddess” whose healing powers are metaphorically manifested through the various tests she subjects Arthur and his knights to throughout the legends in order to “reveal hidden truths” so that the “corruption [of Camelot] can be combated and healing can begin to take place” (34).

Looking into the different presentations of Morgan le Fay in the Arthurian legends requires an independent study on its own. The same can be said of a comprehensive study of the varied roles and depictions of female characters across

medieval writings, especially Middle English literature, which witnessed a humble emergence of works written by women and dedicated to women, such as Marie de France's secular work on courtly love, Margery Kempe's religious autobiography *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women*. While the chosen works for this study are but a fragment of an abundance of works divided between Old and Middle English texts, their popularity has contributed in creating stereotypical images of medieval women that range from helpless and subservient to manipulative and evil shrews responsible for men's sins and shortcomings. In an attempt at providing a deeper understanding of these women's roles within the cultural and historical contexts of these works, this paper revisits these popular stereotypical readings and provides alternative ones that highlight the importance of the role of women in these texts by shedding light on their skills, motivations, and agency.

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