Morgan le Fay, Ambiguity and the Supernatural in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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Introduction

I wanted to start my talk, not with a quotation from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but one from Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*.[1] The Wife starts her tale in this way:

> In th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,
> Of which that Britons speken greet honour,
> Al was this land fulfild* of fayerye.   *filled full*
> 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. (857-63)

Here the Arthurian universe is imagined as a legendary past, still affirmed by the Britons, in which the "olde opinion" still persists that the world is full of "fayerye". This word *fayerye* can mean either fairies or the supernatural magic associated with fairies (the word is ambiguous, as we'll see again shortly). What has driven fairies from the world? The Wife continues:

> But now kan no man se none elves mo,
> For now the grete charitee and prayeres
> Of lymytours* and othere hooly freres*,   *mendicant friar / friars*
> That serchen* every lond and every streem,   *overrun*
> As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
> Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,
> Citees, burghes*, castels, hye toures,   *towns*
> Thropes*, bernes*, shipnes*, dayeryes –   *villages / barns / stables*
> This maketh that ther ben no fayeryes. (864-72)

It is apparently the wanderings of mendicant friars that are responsible for the departure of fairies from the world. Now, the Wife has just been exchanging words with the rather corrupt friar in her group of pilgrims; her introduction to the world of her tale thus contains much playfulness, irony and satire in the context of the Canterbury Tales. But it also functions as a kind of allegory for a historical process actually happening in the world.

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[1] This paper is from a talk given at the conference *Tradition and Innovation in* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, which took place in Nancy, 21-22 November 2024. I have tweaked the language a little, and added a few references and footnotes, but otherwise the paper is largely as given. Many thanks are owed to Colette Stévanovitch for hosting the conference and providing such congenial conditions to discuss the poem.

We can describe this process as a simultaneous *sacralisation* and *desacralisation*. It is a sacralisation, inasmuch as medieval Europe is still subject to an ongoing process of Christianisation. It is a desacralisation, inasmuch as beliefs in alternative or unorthodox sources of supernatural power are driven out; these are demonised or rationalised.[2] Also present in the Wife's words is a cultural nostalgia for the "land fulfild of fayerye," a world now vanishing – though its very possible that Chaucer's attitude towards this nostalgia is ironic.

I wanted to begin with these quotations because I think the changes they represent are important to romance attitudes towards the marvellous and the supernatural, and especially important to the character of Morgan le Fay.

The Ambiguity of the Transtextual Morgan

Who is Morgan le Fay? First of all, she is a transtextual character, meaning very simply that she is a character that can be found in more than one text.[3] There are, then, many Morgans, or many versions of Morgan. Living as we do in a world of screens feeding us fictional figures that are not only transtextual but also highly transmedial, we do not need to dwell much on the basic concept. It is worth noting, however, that unlike, say, Sherlock Holmes or Frankenstein, there is no "original" version of Morgan to keep further versions in check or establish a first point of comparison. This is a typical situation for medieval characters.[4] In order to understand the transformations a transtextual character undergoes in a specific text, we need to do so in reference to the whole tradition.[5] When it comes to Morgan, this tradition is particularly rich and complex. In order to keep things brief, however, we can only afford a quick glimpse, with emphasis on one aspect: her ambiguity.

My working thesis is that a character can be ambiguous in one of two ways:

1. The signs about the character in the discourse lead to an ambiguous representation. Is the character X or Y? (A form of *epistemic ambiguity*.[6])
2. The character becomes an ambiguous sign in the discourse. Does the character-sign *mean* X or Y?

We are in the first instance dealing with information pointing two to equally plausible but mutually exclusive conclusions, and in the second with a sign conveying two mutually exclusive meanings. With

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[2] One culmination of the demonisation side of this is of course the witch hunts of the Early Modern period. For more about the historical process generally, see Richard Firth Green's *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, which I assume takes its name from this Chaucer quote. For the concepts of *sacralisation* and *desacralisation* see the website of the Tübingen research group "De/Sacralization of Texts": https://uni-tuebingen.de/en/research/core-research/dfg-research-units/desacralization-of-texts/

[3] See Richardson, "Transtextual Characters."

[4] See Philipowski 120.

[5] This is also important to bear in mind because the idea of an "origin" for the character was a preoccupation of scholarship for a long time; see especially the theses of R. S. Loomis and associates, suggesting Morgan was descended from Celtic goddess. Whatever the philological or anthropological gains might be from proposing such an origin, it doesn't much help us to understand how Morgan is used in individual works.

[6] See Rohmann et al.: "We define epistemic ambiguity as the state in which at least two hypotheses coexist in the process of making sense of a given information base. These hypotheses refer to the same totality of evidence, are mutually exclusive, and cannot be resolved on a more abstract level, and none of them can be completely rejected" (123).

a slight simplification, we can state that the transtextual Morgan is primarily ambiguous in the first way.[7] That is, what is at stake in her ambiguity is our difficulty in establishing *what* she is.

Morgan is first attested in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* (c. 1150) as a mysterious, beautiful figure who rules over the island of Avalon, which is a kind of paradisical Otherworld in which there is neither work nor death. King Arthur is said to be taken to her after his final battle to be healed. She is described as follows:

> [Avalon] is the place where nine sisters exercise a kindly rule over those who come to them from our land.[8] The one who is first among them has greater skill in healing, as her beauty surpasses that of her sisters. Her name is Morgen, and she has learned the uses of all plants in curing the ills of the body. She knows, too, the art of changing her shape, of flying through the air, like Daedalus, on strange wings. At will, she is now at Brest, now at Chartres, now at Pavia; and at will she glides down from the sky onto your shores. (Qtd. in Larrington 8)

We can see that she has magical healing powers and is capable of shapeshifting and translocation. Nonetheless, Geoffrey declines to specify how she has these powers. Are they acquired or innate, human or supernatural? After Geoffrey the written record seems to bounce back and forth between these two options, as can be seen in the following table, which contains selected appearances from Geoffrey to the middle of the thirteenth century:

Text	Genre	Date	Supernatural or Human?
Benoît de Sainte-Maure, *Roman de Troie*	Romance	c. 1155-1160	Fairy
Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide*	Arthurian Romance	c. 1170	Human (but called "Morgan le Fay")
Étienne de Rouen, *Draco Normannicus*	Chronicle / Satire	c. 1170	"eternal nymph" (fairy?)
Jaufre	Arthurian Romance	c. 1180	Fairy
Gerald of Wales, *Speculum Ecclesiae*	Chronicle (?)	c. 1180-1190	Human (called "goddess" by the Britons)
Hartmann von Aue, *Erec*	Arthurian Romance	c. 1180-1210	Fairy

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[7] The simplification consists of our elision of the gap between the discourse of an individual text, which this definition is based on, and the discourse established by many texts. The intricacies of transtextual ambiguity will be considered in more detail in my forthcoming PhD dissertation *Ambiguity and Character in* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

[8] The alleged presence of *nine* sisters, along with other elements of the passage, has sometimes led to suggestions of a classical influence on this description, which seems plausible – though it is notable that, when the passage goes on to name the sisters, there end up being only eight (Larrington 8, 200n6). A classical influence here shouldn't lead us to discount the identification of Morgan with the supernatural, however, as Larrington assumes (9). While Larrington is understandably sceptical of the thesis of R. S. Loomis that we can find a precise origin for Morgan in the deities of Celtic mythology, there is no reason why classical influences cannot exist alongside Celtic and Christian in the creation of this character, especially seen transtextually; all the evidence, indeed, suggests this. The history of Morgan's representation can incorporate many influences without that meaning we should reduce her to any of these in particular.

French prose romances (*Lancelot-Grail* Cycle, Post-Vulgate *Roman du Graal*, Prose *Tristan*)	Arthurian Romance	c. 1215-1250	Human
Adam de la Halle, *Jeu de la feuillée*	Satire	c. 1265	Fairy
Claris and Laris	Arthurian Romance	c. 1265	Fairy

Note the variety of genres: not only is she a quasi-historical figure and an essential part of the story taken up by the Arthurian romances, but she becomes a property of romance in general, a fairy-figure *par excellence*. I will mention details from a small selection of these texts. In Chrétien de Troye's *Erec and Enide* she is human and now King Arthur's sister – but she is also called Morgan le Fay, that is, Morgan *the fairy*. Chrétien doesn't explain the name, and its use here suggests that by this point she was widely known by it. By contrast, in the satirical *Draco Normannicus* she is depicted as an "eternal nymph," which possibly indicates a fairy (Wade 5), though the nomenclature displays an indefiniteness typical of the non-Christian supernatural (I'll return to this issue below). That she is somehow both a supernatural figure and Arthur's sister is hard to account for but probably only heightens the satire, which mocks the genuine beliefs of some Britons: that Arthur was a real historical figure and that Morgan healed him, making him immortal, so that he might someday return to lead them (the myth later known as that of *the once and future king*). This British view of her as a supernatural agent is confirmed by Gerald of Wales, who mocks the Britons for calling her a "goddess." Hartmann of Aue, however, has no compunction in non-satirically calling her *Feimurgân* and describing her as a powerful and dangerous fairy in his Middle High German adaptation of *Erec and Enide* (Larrington 11). The French prose tradition takes up the human version of the character and integrates her much more into the narrative, incorporating her as Arthur's sister, making her a bitter rival to Guenevere, giving Merlin the role of lover and teacher to her, and making her an adversary to the Round Table, an (as time goes on) an increasingly villainised one at that. It is this version of the figure which is taken up by many but not all Arthurian romances afterwards. In non-Arthurian romances, she continues to be portrayed as a supernatural creature, namely, a fairy (Wade 19).

James Wade sums up this rather disorienting situation as follows: "In no apparent chronological or otherwise logical pattern she vacillates across romance between being the sister of Arthur skilled in magic and a fairy whose powers are intrinsic to her Otherworldly nature" (9-10). Wade's material on the history of Morgan is extremely useful, but I want to nuance his statement here in two ways.

Firstly, the situation is indeed complex, but is there no logic and no chronology? French prose romances of the thirteenth century are notable for Christianising many of the Celtic and unorthodox supernatural elements of the Arthurian tradition. It seems likely that part of their goal with regard to Morgan is to neutralise the unorthodox elements of her character. This would put their treatment of Arthurian material precisely in line with the sacralising and desacralising processes described above, processes which have a definite logic and chronology to them.[9] At the same time there are of course creative forces that are either resistant or indifferent to these processes and maintain the tradition of

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[9] Wade does in fact note that the French prose romances represent a trend but chalks these up to purely narrative concerns: "Morgan's vacillation between human and fairy is more a product of *poiesis* – of authorial needs across various plot strains – than any all-encompassing evolution (or de-evolution) of her character" (21; see also 17).

treating her as innately supernatural, whether for political, religious or aesthetic reasons.[10] My assumption (which still requires further elaboration at a later point) is that there are two traditions operating at the same time with competing images of Morgan: a clerical tradition in which she is fundamentally human, and a popular tradition, originally stemming from the Britons but not restricted to them, where she remains part of the unorthodox supernatural.

Secondly, we saw above how Morgan was called a *nymph*, a *goddess* and a *fairy*. In the tradition of treating her as supernatural, there does seem to be some uncertainty about what kind of being she is, especially earlier in her history. Rather than immediately categorise her as a fairy, it might be better to talk about her as a supernatural being. As a supernatural being she may indeed be a fairy, but also a goddess, a nymph, or simply – something else. There is thus a great deal of indeterminacy in the idea of Morgan as supernatural; this leads to ambiguity, where a number of terms are available to describe her.[11] Likewise, each of these terms itself exhibits what is called *referential indeterminacy*. In other words, it is difficult to know what the terms refer to. What exactly is a "fairy"? Is a "fairy" the same as a "goddess" or are these different types of being? How do we know? Furthermore, the terms are contested. While the belief in fairies might form part of the political and religious life of a Briton, without meaning at all that this person is not a Christian, a Cistercian monk preoccupied with purifying the supernatural along Christian lines might tend to reconfigure the idea of fairy as a demon. In other words, we are dealing with ideas of the supernatural about which there is a great deal of uncertainty and conflict.

We should regard Morgan, then, as transtextually ambiguous between human and supernatural. A medieval adapter or poet working with the traditional material must then consider how to deal with this. Though it was not entirely a free choice, constrained as poets were by their sources, we could present the creative problem as follows: do they disambiguate the character, presenting her as clearly one or the other option, or do they incorporate the ambiguity in some way into the narrative itself?

An Example of the Marvellous

With that we can, finally, turn to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The main function of Morgan le Fay in the poem is often said to be as an explanation for the marvellous events of the narrative. What is meant by marvellous events? We can look at this by means of an example:

> There was lokyng on lenthe   the lede to beholde,
> For uch man had mervayl   what hit mene myghte
> That a hathel and a horse   myght such a hue lache
> […]
> All studied that there stod   and stalked him nerre
> With all the wonder of the world   what he work schulde.
> For fele sellyes had thay sene,   bot such never ere;
> Forthy for fantoum and fayrye   the folk there hit demed. (232-40)
> (There was looking at length to behold the man, for everyone wondered what it might mean that a man and a horse could take such a hue […]. All who stood there pondered and crept closer to

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[10] In regards to politics, she was, as mentioned above, fundamental to the "British hope." In regard to religion, understood in the loose sense, fairies and the like were an essential part of medieval folk beliefs and embedded in everyday life. In regards to aesthetics, there are of course numerous advantages in including a supernatural character in a narrative (it is these advantages that James Wade focuses on in his treatment of Morgan).

[11] Céline Savatier-Lahondès, in her contribution to the conference, noted the same phenomenon with reference to Queen Mab of the Celtic tradition.

him with all the wonder of the world as to what he might do. For many marvels had they seen, but never such as that; thus for phantom and fairy the folk there deemed it.)

This passage is from the end of the description of the Green Knight after he first enters King Arthur's court. The court are struggling to understand what they are seeing. There is thus immediately a double emphasis on the act of looking – "lokyng," "beholde" – stemming from their feeling of "mervayl." They've never seen anything like this knight with his green hair, green horse and possibly (this notion is not always accepted) green skin. The word "mervayl" is echoed in its synonym "wonder," before the astonishment comes to designate the wondrous object itself in another related word, "sellyes."[12] We're clearly in the semantic domain of the marvellous: of inexplicable events, as well as inexplicable causes. The court represent this causation to themselves in their interpretation of the sight as "fantoum and fayrye." This is a collocation meaning primarily magic: not the natural magic of scientists or the demonic magic of necromancers, but inexplicable, dreamlike, supernatural magic, the kind associated with fairies. The above-mentioned ambiguity of *fayrye* also comes into play here: the creatures themselves are suggested in this interpretation (the Green Knight will later be called "an alvisch man," that is, *elvish* or fairy-like; 681). Note that this interpretation of him as "fantoum and fayrye," in keeping with the inexplicability evoked quite deliberately by the passage, is not very specific. As with interpretations of Morgan, we can see the indeterminacy at work which is characteristic of the marvellous. As Jacques le Goff notes:

> the marvellous as such is not really compatible with rational explanation. One characteristic of the marvel is its dreamlike instability. In other words, one awakens from a marvel as from a dream; with the return of cognition the marvellous either vanishes like smoke or is transformed by rationalization into knowledge of another kind. (41)

The marvellous is not amenable to rational explanation: when it is rationalised, it is no longer the marvellous. It is this task of rationalising, and thus dissolving, the marvellous that Morgan is supposed to achieve.

The Explanatory Function of Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain*

Morgan le Fay is not identified until the end of the text. Before this, she is simply an old lady in the castle where Gawain encounters the Lord and the Lady, and where he undertakes the exchange of winnings. I won't elaborate here on her appearances during this episode except to say that, though her status and importance is signalled in various small ways, she remains mostly part of the general background of conviviality and hospitality that we find there. The majority of the information we have about her we receive from the Green Knight at the end as part of this explanations. Here is the moment where the scene we just looked at is (implicitly) explained:

> "Bertilak de Hautdesert   I hat in this londe,
> Thurgh myght of Morgue la Faye   that in my house lenges
> […]
> Ho wayned me upon this wyse   to your wynne halle
> For to assay the sorquydrye,   if hit soth were,
> That rennes of the grete renoun   of the Rounde Table.

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[12] Both *mervayl* and *wonder* can function in Middle English to denote both the feeling that the marvellous gives rise to and the marvellous object itself, while *selly* solely designates the object.

> Ho wayved me this wonder   your wyttes to reve,
> For to have greved Guenore   and gart her to die
> With glopnyng of that ilk gome   that gostlyche speked
> With his hed in his hande   before the highe table." (2445-62)
> ("Bertilak de Hautdesert I am called in this land. Through the might of Morgan le Fay, who lives
> in my house […]. She sent me in this way [as the Green Knight] to your good hall, to test its
> pride – if it is true, that which circulates of the great renown of the Round Table; she sent me to
> rob your wits with this wonder, in order to have grieved Guinevere and caused her to die with
> terror of that same man who spirit-like spoke with his head in his hand before the high table.")

This is the "big reveal": the Green Knight tells us that he is Bertilak – a human lord, in other words, and not a strange, monstrous and possibly supernatural being. We then learn that it is through the "myȝt" or power of Morgan something is the case, though relation of the something in question is interrupted by a description of Morgan and her skills – I'm treating this as a parenthesis, excising it here, but will return to it below.[13] The thread is picked up when we are told that "Ho wayned me upon this wyse to your wynne halle": Morgan transformed him into the Green Knight. She is responsible for the marvel the court witnessed. We also learn that she wanted to test the pride ("sorquydrye") of the court, that she wanted to distress the court and either distress or kill Guinevere (depending if we take the word "die" literally), and that the Green Knight himself was a kind of spectacle designed to do this.

It has often been said that this is not very satisfying as an explanation for what has happened in the story. The problem with it is that it is drastically incomplete. Here is a (not exhaustive, but hopefully indicative) list of questions that it gives rise to:

1. Why does the text not focus more on Guinevere's reaction if she's at the centre of Morgan's plan?
2. How does the elaborate testing of Gawain figure in the plan?
3. Are Morgan's intentions malevolent (as they seem to be), benevolent or neutral? How does this affect how we should view the Green Knight or the test?
4. How important are the Green Knight's intentions and perspective to this plan?
5. How is Morgan on the one hand at a distance from the court (knowing their renown only by hearsay, not recognised by Gawain) and somehow implicated in their affairs (Guinevere's enemy, known to the court as Merlin's mistress)?

In other words, there are logical, aesthetic, and thematic issues with the use of Morgan as an explanation for what has happened in the poem. How are we to approach these?

Morgan Explained in *Sir Gawain*

Let's fill in the parenthesis we missed out earlier and see if this will help us:

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[13] I follow Tolkien et al. (also 2446n) in reading 2448-55 as a parenthesis, or rather a parenthetical thought leading to grammatical irregularity (the rhetorical figure here is *analocuthon*). Putter and Stokes figure this differently, however, suggesting (in 2446n) that the Green Knight is saying he rules Hautdesert by the power of Morgan. I think the interpretation of Tolkien et al. makes more sense because, if we take the prepositional phrase "Thurgh myght of Morgue la Faye" to refer to the previous line, as Putter and Stokes do, the more evident reading would be that he is *called* Bertilak de Hautdesert because of her, which doesn't make much sense. There's no grammatical sign that Hautdesert is in focus except as part of a name.

> "[…] Thurgh myght of Morgue la Faye   that in my house lenges
> And quoyntyse of clergye,   by craftes wel lerned,
> The maystres of Merlin,   mony has taken;
> For ho has dalt drury   ful dere sumtyme
> With that conable clerk: that knowes all your knightes
> At hame.
> Morgue the Goddes
> Therefore hit is her name.
> Weldes non so high hawtesse
> That ho ne con make ful tame." (2445-2453)
> ("[…] Through the might of Morgan le Fay, who lives in my house, and [has] the knowledge of scholars, [and is] well-learned in magical arts, [and] has acquired many of the masteries of Merlin – for she has dealt formerly in full dear love with that admirable scholar, as all your knights at home know. Morgan the goddess, therefore it is her name. None stand so high in pride, that she cannot make full tame.")

The first thing to note is that she has "taken" the magical masteries of Merlin; in other words, she has acquired her powers. A few lines later we learn that

> "Ho is euen þyn aunt, Arþurez half-suster,
> Þe duches doȝter of Tyntagelle, þat dere Vter after
> Hade Arþur vpon, þat aþel is nowþe." (2464-66)
> ("She is even thine aunt, Arthur's half-sister, the daughter of the Duchess of Tintagel, with whom dear Uther later had Arthur, who is now famous.")

So she has been put into a human genealogy, namely as Arthur's half-sister, and she was in love with Merlin. On the face of it, then, this is very much the Morgan of the prose romances; Putter and Stokes identify the *Lancelot* as principal source (2446-66n). This enables us to establish a background with regards to her actions in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Hatred of Guinevere is the principal motivation ascribed to her antagonism in the prose romances (see Larrington 40-44), and this is carried over along with her role as an antagonist. The relation to the prose romances may also answer a further question that this biographical account of Morgan gives rise to, namely, how is Morgan both the half-sister of a young Arthur and an old lady? This could potentially be explained with reference to the *Suite de Merlin*, in which she is described as prematurely aged by her magic (Larrington 25). As this is not explained in *Sir Gawain* itself, however, the information can't be regarded as definitive. Relatedly and more importantly, such an appeal to these probable sources can't really answer our other questions above, those questions being to do with the coherence of this text. What seems to be happening is that the poet allows material from the tradition to overpower this coherence.

It is not only the logical and thematic coherence of the narrative that is in question. If we return to the above description of Morgan's powers, we can see that there is something incoherent about Morgan herself. We have already noted that she acquired her powers. This is stressed via the word-choice: she has "quoyntyse of clergye," is in "craftes wel lerned", and has gained the "maystres of Merlin", who is described as a "clerk". In other words, she is put in the human context of learned, scholarly knowledge. But we still see in this passage those epithets that describe her as a supernatural creature: *Morgue la Faye* and *Morgue the Goddes*. What to do with this juxtaposition?

The use of *Morgue the Goddes* has been explained with reference to a passage in the *Lancelot*, which makes it clear that the epithet is given by the people because of her magical abilities:

> it was a fact that Morgue, King Arthur's sister, knew about enchantments and spells more than any woman … so that … throughout the land no one spoke of her as a woman, but everyone called her "Morgue the goddess" (qtd. in Putter and Stokes 2447-48n)

The *Lancelot* is clearly giving a rationalisation of the name, much as Gerald of Wales does in a more historical fashion in his *Speculum Ecclesiae*.[14] The aim, of course, is to explain away the tradition of thinking of Morgan in terms of the supernatural. Is *Sir Gawain* making the same argument then? If so, this is done in a very strange way. There is no mention of the people, and thus of the decisive moment of naming her based on her powers. What the text says can be paraphrased as something like *Morgan acquired her powers from Merlin therefore her name is Morgan the Goddess*. The strangeness of this argument can be seen if we reformulate it as follows: *Morgan's powers are not divine, therefore she has the name of a divinity*. This puzzling statement is one step away from a full contradiction: *Morgan's powers are not divine, therefore she is divine*. Now, reticence is a hallmark of the poet's style, and there are many places in the poem where things left implicit and vague.[15] But why be reticent about such a key argument?

I think the poet lets a palimpsest of the character in her supernatural form appear. It's true that, just as the picture of the story that the explanations give rise to is not entirely coherent, this portrait is not entirely coherent. But this incoherence is not arbitrary. I think the idea here is to retain some of the mystery and power of the supernatural version of the character *without endorsing it*.

We see something similar as the Green Knight exits the narrative. Instead of returning to his castle like the normal knight we now know he is, he is given the exit of someone of mysterious intent (see Putter and Stokes 2478n):

> Gawayn on blonk ful bene
> To the kynges burgh buskes bolde,
> And the knight in the enker grene
> Whiderwarde-so-ever he wolde. (2475-78)
> (Gawain, on horse, full fair, to the king's castle he goes swiftly, and the knight in the bright-green [goes] whither-so-ever he would.)

Gawain goes *bolde* to a named and known location. In contrast, the Green Knight disappears into the inexplicable, "with all the autonomy and mystery of a fully supernatural being," as James Wade puts it (33). Likewise, Morgan's mystery is retained in the text by the presence of her supernatural monikers, even though they appear at the expense of her coherence.

The Ambiguity of Morgan in *Sir Gawain*

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[14] You can read Gerald's account of Arthur's death and burial here: https://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/gerald-of-wales-arthurs-tomb

[15] For example, when Arthur's court are silent in the face of the Green Knight's opening words, we read the following: "I deme hit not al for doute, / Bot sum for cortaysye" (either "I think not all of them [were silent] for fear, but some for courtesy"; 246-47). Who are the "sum" here? This is a vague word; it's not even clear how many are meant, let alone who is meant. I'd like to think that Gawain is one of them. But it's impossible to know for sure. Such little puzzles are part of the joy of this poem. (In fact, this part is even more puzzling than I'm letting on here: both *al* and *sum* are ambiguous between different parts of speech, leading to yet more readings of the lines. But I'll let the reader look into this themselves should they wish.)

Does this make her an ambiguous representation? Is she both human and supernatural? I'm not yet sure. But I want to propose that she is certainly ambiguous in a different way. The *Gawain*-poet is not using Morgan to create a coherent explanation for the events of the text but to point to two different traditions outside the text for dealing with the unorthodox supernatural: one rationalising it, and one preserving it in the marvellous. In other words, she becomes an ambiguous sign, *meaning* both the known and the unknown, the explicable and the inexplicable, the rational and the marvellous, the orthodox and the unorthodox. One consequence of this is that the explanations and the use of Morgan don't foreclose a multitude of different and often conflicting interpretations of the text and its other characters. The Green Knight, for example, can be interpreted in either orthodox or unorthodox ways, as an angelic judge or as a mischievous and ambiguous fairy. In a much stranger way than Chaucer, then, the *Gawain*-poet participates in both cultural change and nostalgia, both rationalising the apparently unorthodox and preserving its power.

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