CRAFTING THE WITCH:
GENDERING MAGIC IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

by
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................. 7

CHAPTER ONE
“ARE YOU A GOOD WITCH OR A BAD WITCH?”: AN INTRODUCTION TO
MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE MAGIC. ................................................................. 9

CHAPTER TWO
GENDER-BENDING: TRANSFORMATIVE POWER IN TWELFTH- AND
THIRTEENTH-CENTURY ARTHURIAN LITERATURE .............................................. 29
 I. Where are the Witches?: The Absence of Wicked Witches in Early Arthurian Legend 29
 II. When is a Knight not a Knight?: Gender Mutability in the Romances ............... 33
 III. Healing for Love: Arthurian Women Transform the Wounded Body .............. 43
 IV. Who Needs Witches Anyway?: Giants of the Arthurian Otherworld............... 55
 V. Transforming the Future: Prophecy and Liminality ........................................ 64
     Transforming Gender: The Prophet as Androgyne ......................................... 67
     Shifting Subjectivities: The Prophet at the Border of Humanity ................. 78
 VI. No Ladies Ever Did Better! .............................................................................. 88
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS – Continued</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FROM RAGS TO RICHES OR THE STEP-MOTHER'S REVENGE:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRANSFORMATIVE POWER IN LATE MEDIEVAL ARTHURIAN ROMANCE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Extreme Makeover, Medieval Style.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Nipping the Bud: Taming the Churlish Knight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Double Your Pleasure: The Loathly Lady Revealed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. The Wicked Witch as Mother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE LADY IS A HAG: THREE WRITERS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAGIC IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Who is the Fairest One of All?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Brewing Trouble: The Dark Side of Magic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. “That same wicked witch”: (Still) Villifying Feminine Magic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty is the Beast: Love Magic and Lusty Witches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wicked Old Witch: The Invasion of the Hags.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Her fruitfull cursed spawne”: Magical and Monstrous Mothers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE WITCH IN COURT: LITERARY ECHOES OF LEGISLATIVE POLICY.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

This project documents and analyzes the gendered transformation of magical figures occurring in Arthurian romance in England from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. In the earlier texts, magic is predominantly a masculine pursuit, garnering its user prestige and power, but in the later texts, magic becomes a primarily feminine activity, one that marks its user as wicked and heretical. The prophet becomes the wicked witch. This dissertation explores both the literary and the social motivations for this transformation.

Chapter Two surveys representations of magic in the texts of four authors within the Arthurian canon: Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, and Lagamon. These writers gender magic similarly (representing prophecy and certain forms of transformative magic as masculine and healing as feminine) and use gendered figures to mitigate the threat of masculine power posed by the feudal patriarchy present in England and France in the twelfth century.

Chapter Three explores representations of two magical characters who appear in a group of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century romances associated with Gawain: the churlish knight and the loathly lady. The authors of these romances privilege gender conventions radically different from those in earlier models and conjure a figure neglected by the earlier writers, the wicked witch. In particular, representations of the witch as a wicked stepmother reflect the anxiety created by expanding space for women (especially mothers) in previously exclusively male arenas of English society.

In Chapter Four, I follow the romance tradition into early modern England, studying the work of Malory, Spenser, and Shakespeare. For these authors, the wicked witch (alternately represented as temptress or crone) is connected specifically to maternity; the
severe anxiety about maternity in these texts is representative of widespread concern about mothers and motherhood in sixteenth-century England.

Chapter Five traces the legislative policy governing prosecution of witches in England and offers suggestions about the relationship between legal climates and literary representations of magic. Though prosecution of witchcraft is now extremely rare in the U.S., filmmakers still rely on medieval and Renaissance models to inform their representations of witches. Once she arrived, the witch never left.
CHAPTER ONE

"ARE YOU A GOOD WITCH OR A BAD WITCH?":
AN INTRODUCTION TO MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE MAGIC

I don’t know any witches. Well, perhaps that’s not completely accurate: a student recently stopped me on the stairwell, having just come from a class where the day’s topic happened to involve medieval magic, and told me, “I really enjoyed your lecture. I’m Wiccan, you know.”

“Thanks,” I said, “I’m glad you liked it.”

“Are you Wiccan?” she continued, peering shyly under her bangs.

I smiled at her, “No. I really just study medieval magic.” Our conversation ended abruptly, and it wasn’t until much later that I realized I was the one who killed it. With my casual dismissal, I created a division, a clear indication that I thought there was a big difference between what I do and what she does, between the scholar and the witch. I might as well have said, “I don’t believe in magic, you silly girl.” So though I met a witch, I didn’t really get the chance to know her. Let me try again.

I don’t know any witches very well.

Perhaps that’s not completely accurate either. I do know some witches quite well: I know the Wicked Witch of the West so intimately that I can recite all her lines from The Wizard of Oz, and I know the familiar chant of the Weird sisters, “Double, double, toil and trouble”; I know Circe and The Witches of Eastwick, the mistress of the tempting gingerbread house and the nefarious Morgan le Fay; I know all the pretend witches, the literary witches, the witches we create, control, and manage to suit our own desires. It’s the real witches I don’t know, the women and men who practice magic themselves.
And I am not alone. Though there are many scholars who interview and study people who perform magic, the vast majority don't discuss personal relationships with magic-users.¹ In fact, at the 2003 International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo, the attitude towards the practice of magic in the panels I attended was one of affectionate tolerance, the kind of attitude one adopts towards children. In the academy, we are fascinated by fake witches, but we look down on "real" ones. We are not unlike those European folks in the Renaissance whose love for the witch-figure resulted in her frequent appearance in drama and romance, but whose distaste for practicing witches led to the widespread slaughter of tens of thousands of people. We are no longer violent towards those who call themselves witches; instead, we prefer to roll our eyes and let them do as they will, as long as they don't do anything illegal. The literary space created for witches allows us to enjoy fully something that might otherwise be uncomfortable or embarrassing.² And the literary witch is certainly an enjoyable figure.

In fact, the literary witch is so fascinating that we owe her not only for the millions of pages of scholarship she's already inspired, but also for something much more dear to my heart, my two-hundred pages—these pages. When I was beginning my Master's coursework at Florida State University, I asked myself a question, and this project is my attempt to answer it. My inquiry was simple: how did Morgan le Fay become a witch? Interested in witches and magic from childhood, I met Morgan during high school when I read *The Mists*

¹ The only literary critic I've encountered who discusses practicing witches at length is Diane Purkiss, whose shrewd analysis in *The Witch in History* nevertheless maintains an attitude of scholarly disbelief (which almost implicitly carries disdain, no matter how much we try to keep ourselves "objective").

² Magic's operation in this instance is much like the way that our modern cinematic space allows us to create unacceptable violence on a massive level, violence which is extraordinarily popular and makes the film industry billions, while at the same time our political leaders alternately condemn (e.g., in the case of Columbine, September 11th, and Oklahoma City) or praise (in the case of Kosovo, Afganistan, and Iraq) similar acts of violence when they occur off the screen.
of Avalon, and I developed a fondness for Marion Zimmer Bradley’s strong, troubled character. She was a witch, but a twentieth-century witch, a figure reclaimed by feminists from the misogynist representation in the prose of the *Morte Darthur*. When I ran into her again, at the beginning of my Master’s coursework, in the pages of Chrétien’s romances and Lagamon’s *Brut* (dressed as Argante), I enjoyed these cameos by the healing, magical woman I remembered. But the next semester, when I finally saw her in her most popular starring role, the wicked Morgan of Malory’s opus, I hardly knew her at all. This woman was a malicious, sexually-aggressive manipulator with an unmotivated hatred towards Arthur’s court—a wicked witch. At the very end of the *Morte*, I saw a glimmer of Morgan’s former self, the one Bradley worked to restore, when she makes her final appearance to take Arthur for healing on the magical island of Avalon. How did this woman, famous in early Arthurian tradition for her healing magic, become the vicious thorn lodged deep in Arthur’s side?

This question led to other questions. Was Malory’s representation idiosyncratic or did other authors treat Morgan similarly? When did she change? Were there other witches who weren’t always bad women, villains who used to be heroines? Did Merlin undergo a similar transformation? Was this unique to the Arthurian genres or representative of a wider literary trend? What social factors may have affected the change in representation? What does the change mean for constructions of femininity and masculinity? Questions such as these led to this study, which documents and analyzes the gendered transformation of magical figures that occurred in Arthurian romance as it developed from its earliest widespread manifestations in the twelfth century to its flowering in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England.
To explain my project more fully, I need to tell you a story. Though I don’t know any “real” witches, I’ve been fascinated with the fantasy of witches my whole life. When I was in fourth grade, my friend Alison and I played a game that allowed us to be magical and free from the dictates of both gravity and societal convention—but we were fairies, good witches, not wicked. We thought witches were bad, despite the fact that we had both seen Glinda the Good Witch of the North in the annual airing of *The Wizard of Oz* on television. The same year, however, I gleefully dressed up as a wicked witch for Halloween. I have a picture from that night: after I put on a black dress, carefully tattered at the hem and the sleeve, green make-up complete with fake warts and blacked-out tooth, and a pointy black hat, my mother snapped a photo of my delighted, chesire-cat grin. I loved being a wicked witch!

It’s easy for me to understand why a child raised on Disney and musicals might fantasize about having magical power. But there are two additional aspects of this childhood story that bear further investigation: the first is my choice to model my magical behavior on female figures exclusively, and the second is my binary division of magic into good and bad. Two kinds of binary division happened at once—I distinguished between male and female characters, choosing to identify myself with the female characters (and thus rejecting one of the terms of the binary), and then I distinguished between good and bad magic, choosing to identify myself with both at different times (rejecting neither, but prioritizing good as normal and bad as “costume,” as other). My investigation of the magical figures in Arthurian literature explores these two modes of binary division, analyzing the gendering of magical behaviors in tandem with the polarization of magical characters. This strategy allows me to investigate the relationship between the gendering of
magic and the villainization of certain kinds of magical practices, including (and especially) witchcraft, in Arthurian texts from the twelfth century to the seventeenth.

*The Gender Binary or Why I Picked Female Models*

When I chose models for my magical behavior as a young child, my conception of gender was rooted in biological essentialism: because I am female (i.e., I had a vagina instead of a penis), I had to act feminine. I don’t remember being told I was a girl, I just remember knowing—speaking and thinking about myself as a girl. Though the categories male and female do not adequately cover the range of sexual identities permitted by biology, when many people learn to speak, we learn to categorize ourselves as either female or male, girls or boys. Because we must use the binary terms that (always already) exist in language, we must participate in classifying ourselves according to its structure (or risk isolation and/or social censure). Language provides an external system of organization for the mind, one we are forced to internalize if we wish to communicate with other humans and participate in most social activities. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, this power of language to dictate the terms of social interaction, including the structuring of human thought, is reflected in Jacque Lacan’s notion of the Symbolic. The Oedipus complex, in particular, is a metaphor for the way the law of the Symbolic subjects each child to the gendered divisions within language.

The Lacanian Oedipal metaphor is based on Sigmund Freud’s description of the process by which boys become boys and girls becomes girls. Before and during the Oedipal stage, the Freudian child experiences an idyllic unity with the mother, desiring to possess the mother and, simultaneously, to be her. The Oedipus complex involves the child recognizing the presence of a desiring third—the father—who prohibits the child from
possessing the mother by revealing her desire for the father. The child’s realization that the mother desires something else constitutes the Oedipus complex. In “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Difference Between the Sexes,” Freud argues that both boys and girls experience a bisexual orientation before and during the Oedipus complex; they both simultaneously desire to be the father (the one who desires) and the mother (the object of desire) (250). Freud elaborates: “even in boys the Oedipus complex has a double orientation, active and passive, in accordance with their bisexual constitution; a boy also wants to take his mother’s place as the love-object of his father—a fact which we shall describe as the feminine attitude” (250). In other words, Freud is arguing that the child feels a competitive rivalry for the father (an identification with the father and a recognition that the father desires the mother) and, at the same time, the child wishes to be the desire of the father (identification with the mother and a recognition that the mother enjoys being desired). To enjoy being desired is termed by Freud the “feminine attitude,” so, presumably, the “masculine attitude” would involve the active look—the sign of scopophilic desire. In Freud’s construction, the “genderless” child experiences a “bisexuality” (or an enjoyment of both desiring and being desired), which creates a tension that finds release in the child’s recognition of anatomical difference.

For Freud the revelation of anatomical difference is literal: the child sees someone of the opposite sex and realizes the genitalia are different. For boys, the moment in which they see that the girl has no penis is marked by disavowal and fetishism. The boy pretends that he did not see the absence of a penis on the girl’s body, and he focuses on a less frightening object instead (252). Later, when the threat of the father makes the “castration” he witnessed on the girl (via her absent penis) a possibility for his own body, the boy “resolves” the Oedipus complex. In his discussion of the corollary process for girls,
Freud is less convincing. Upon seeing a naked boy, the girl realizes that she has the “lesser” sex organ, because hers doesn’t stick out, a point Freud elaborates: “They [girls] notice the penis of a brother or playmate, strikingly visible and of large proportions, at once recognize it as the superior counterpart of their own small and inconspicuous organ, and from that time forward fall a victim to envy for the penis” (252). If we were to “psychoanalyze” Freud’s statement here, we could joke about the latent inferiority evident in his description of the “strikingly visible” and “large” members of the little boys he imagines, as well as his immediate conclusion that bigger is better. What is unclear here is why the little girl, who is presumably familiar with her own body (and maybe her mother’s), would presume that the little protrusion on her “brother or playmate” was actually the norm, causing her to view her own body as mutilated. Why would the little girl not feel the same disgust when confronted with this extra piece of dangling flesh that Freud presumes the little boy would feel when confronted with the bare body of the girl?\(^3\) If I have deliberately cast the male organ negatively in the prior sentence, it is to emphasize the bias that seems evident when Freud speaks of the female organs in this essay—his prose signals his own disgust. In the end, however, the problem lies not with Freud’s analysis of the girl’s response to the male organ, but with his focus on the biological penis rather than the Symbolic phallus.

Lacan’s use of the Oedipal narrative extricates it from Freud’s biological essentialism and reinterprets the story as an explanation of the way a child becomes a subject of language, with the phallus acting as primary signifier of the Symbolic. In “The Meaning of the Phallus,” Lacan is careful to make perfectly clear that “the relation of the

\(^3\) Lacan asks a similar question in “The Meaning of the Phallus,” questioning, “why the little girl herself considers, if only for a moment, that she is castrated, in the sense of being deprived of the phallus, at the hand of someone who is in the first instance her mother,” but he focuses on the child’s tendency to blame castration on the mother (76).
subject to the phallus is set up regardless of the anatomical difference between the sexes” (76). In other words, the two responses to the Oedipal drama characterized by Lacan are not necessarily tied to biological sex. In Lacan’s Oedipal model, the child’s recognition of the mother’s desire for the father (or whoever plays the father’s role) reveals the presence of the phallus, and all that it signifies. The display of desire demonstrates to the child that the mother does not have the phallus and the father does. The child then either feels afraid of being castrated (if it perceives that it has the phallus) or envious of the one who possesses the phallus (if it perceives that it does not have the phallus). The castrated subject is gendered feminine, and the subject possessed of the phallus is gendered masculine, but the stance a child adopts towards the phallus is not necessarily connected to anatomical difference. In fact, Lacan stresses the “constructedness” of the phallus and its tie to the penis, as Jacqueline Rose explains in her introduction to *Feminine Sexuality*:

Sexual difference is then assigned according to whether individual subjects do or do not possess the phallus, which means not that anatomical difference is sexual difference (the one as strictly deducible from the other), but that anatomical difference comes to figure sexual difference, that is, it becomes the sole representative of what that difference is allowed to be. . . .

The phallus thus indicates the reduction of difference to an instance of visible perception, a seeming value. (42)

Through the operation of language, anatomical difference, or the physical markers of the body, thus becomes translated into sexual difference, or the binary system of classification designating persons as “male” or “female.” The phallus is simultaneously a marker of sexual difference and of the Symbolic, and its dual function reveals the relationship between language and sexual difference: they are intimately connected, for the subject is subjected to
both at the same time. The sexual relevance of the Oedipal metaphor is illustrated here; just as the language designates us “male” and “female,” so must we designate ourselves.

In Lacanian theory, when subjects do allow anatomical difference to signify sexual difference, those subjects participate in the phallocentric order of the Symbolic, develop a normative (i.e., hetero-) sexuality, and engage in normative social interactions. When subjects do not allow sexual difference to be tied to anatomical difference, alternate sexualities emerge (some of which are extremely taboo and some of which are widely accepted) and behaviors develop which may exceed the allowances of normative society. To prevent such a reading from naturalizing normative sexualities and behaviors as determined by anatomical difference, we must keep in mind the arbitrariness of the phallic function and its construction of normative social interactions. Despite the arbitrary and false nature of the phallus (and thus, of the signifier), subjects are nonetheless subjected to the law of the Symbolic in order to interact with other humans through language. Language dictates that the subject adopt a particular stance towards the phallus, the marker of sexual difference. How the subject adopts that stance (and thus resolves the Oedipus complex) determines sexual difference.

If sexual difference is not tied to anatomy, how much looser must be the connection between gender differences and biological sex. Gender markers—including visual signals (such as hair length and distribution, body size, or presence of breasts), behavioral signifiers (including things like dating rituals, participation in sports, level of physical aggression, achievement in different academic fields, and so on), and discursive modes—reinforce both anatomical and sexual differences by extending the binary division between those castrated and those possessed of the phallus to include aspects of identity unrelated to the presence or absence of a penis (or phallus). Mainstream gender conventions naturalize the association
of biological sex with socially-constructed gender attributes: male and female must correspond to masculine and feminine, they whisper insidiously, anonymously.

Representations of gender in medieval and early modern literature form an important link in a chain of convention that stretches unbroken from the earliest extant manuscripts to the film edited only last week. Central to that ideological chain is the functioning of gender as a relational system that can shift and change even as it preserves the binary divisions supporting it.

Though psychoanalytical models of sex and gender operate on notions refined throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, we would be making a great mistake to assume that because gender theory was developed after the medieval and early modern period it has no value in helping us understand the literary representations of gender prevalent in those periods. On the contrary, in fact, as the psychoanalytical models often describe a logic internal to the text: for example, the authors of a group of fourteenth-century Middle English romances invoke the question “what alle women most desire?” centuries before Freud got around to asking.\(^4\) The popularity of romances structured around the revelation of women’s desire reveals a medieval interest in what we would now call sexual difference. It is especially important to view medieval and Renaissance texts with the lens of contemporary theory when the figures in these texts continue to appear in the most popular literary mode of the twentieth-century, the movies. Can it be that medieval and early modern conventions of gender still satisfy our fantasies as they did audiences a thousand years ago? Though I will try to avoid dense psychoanalytical explanations in my discussions, my analysis of gender construction in medieval and early

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\(^4\) This is Gower’s phrasing of the question as it appears in “The Tale of Florent,” from the *Confessio Amantis.*
modern texts is informed by the work of Lacan, the French feminist school, and the work of recent gender theorists (especially those in the growing field of masculinity studies).

*Good or Bad?: Magic and Transformative Power*

The allure of magic is that it gives power. It provides freedom from constraints of class or religion, from the limits of gender, race, or species, from political boundaries and physical obstacles. But it doesn’t exist—at least according to mainstream science. As a former biologist, I follow the view of modern science here, along with most of the other academics who study the elusive force (Murray-ites notwithstanding). I hope that despite my disbelief in its efficacy, this study respects the power of magic as social force that operates in literary, dramatic, cinematic, imaginative, personal, and many other spaces in modern society. In medieval and Renaissance England, where a much higher percentage of people believed in magic than do twenty-first-century residents of the U.S., its social power must have been far greater. This is the paradox of magic—it has infinite power or no power at all. And this is precisely what makes it so fascinating, both for the world of imagination and for the world of literature, where it is freed from the boundaries of science and becomes exactly the kind of power we wish for in our dreams.

In my childhood game-playing, I accessed magic through the world of the literary, the imaginary. My appropriation of a magical identity was dependent upon the social representation of a particular figure, the witch. When I identified myself as a magic-user, playing myself in world transformed by imagination, I wanted to be “good,” to remain within acceptable social standards even as I fantasized about having power over them. But when I wore the costume, transforming myself into an alternate persona, I wanted to be “bad,” to play the role of the deviant, the acknowledged villain, to flout the Christian
morality I grew up with in a safe social space. For me, good witches and bad witches
served different functions at different times. The power of magic, channeled through my
active imagination and a few cheap props, allowed me the freedom to transform myself—to
idealize myself or villainize myself—to make myself the glorious center of society or
marginalize myself in transgressive play. A similar polarization functions in medieval and
Renaissance representations of magic use, where magic acts as a lens through which to read
the response of chronicle and romance writers to various social pressures. Magic is so useful
precisely because of this polarization—it offers us a glance at what people see as extreme, as
the best or the worst. Whether represented negatively or positively, magical figures are by
definition different from the norm; they function as the other against which normative
conventions can be defined. In particular, describing and interpreting the gendering of
magical figures allows us to configure normative gender conventions by delineating their
boundaries, those liminal spaces where humanity fades into monstrosity.

So what exactly do I mean when I say magic? There are many different varieties of
magic, from alchemy and astrology to necromancy and witchcraft, and they all carry with
them the baggage of a long, long trip. The route of that trip can be traced through the
etymology of that modern catch-all term for things supernatural and marvelous, “magic,”
which entered the English language by way of the Old French magique, a term borrowed
from the Latin magica, a word itself taken from the Greek magike.5 The large number of
loan words in English referring to different types of magic demonstrates the influence of the
French, Latin, and Greek linguistic and literary traditions on medieval English conceptions
of magic: Old French (usually by way of Latin, by way of Greek) provides English speakers

5 All etymological information in this paragraph taken from the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary in two
volumes.
with alchemy, astrology, necromancy, prophecy, and sorcery, for example. But English authors had a native tradition of magic available to them as well, as reflected in words such as Old English elf (elf), wicca (witch), eotende (giant), witæge (wise man/advisor), and læce (healer/doctor). Sometimes Germanic and Mediterranean traditions coexisted: for instance, speakers of Middle English could choose a word derived from the Old English fjönd or deofel when they wanted to refer to a denizen of hell, or they could use a form of the Latin daemon. No matter which language they used, when medieval people spoke of magic in England, what exactly did they mean?

Ask a modern eight-year old what magic is, and you might get a bright smile and a list of Disney movies in response (or you might get a description of a former NBA star). Ask someone older, and you might hear about how magic is a mythical force that allows people to do seemingly impossible things. And if (magically) you could ask an average inhabitant of medieval or early modern England what magic is, you might get a surprising response. A country wife might define magic as the herbs she boils to heal her sick son; a cleric might speak of demons and their powers over earth-dwellers; a minstrel might speak of giants, witches, and enchanted castles. The answers would probably be as varied then as they are now, but as Bert Hansen notes in “Science and Magic”: “Magic in the Middle Ages was not marginal to intellectual life, nor an activity of ignorant, credulous, or superstitious people—or at least not of these alone. Magic . . . formed an important part of medieval thought and experience” (483). Medieval discourses surrounding magic were similar to modern discourses surrounding science; they were a shared way of classifying, understanding, and manipulating the world.

* From Old French alchemie, astrologie, nigromacie, prophètie, and sorcierie, respectively.
Scholars have often identified two major categories of magical practices present in medieval Europe, divine (or demonic) and natural (or occult), under which the various other types of magic can be classified. Richard Kieckhefer delineates the two categories in the introduction to his book, *Magic in the Middle Ages*:

> Broadly speaking, intellectuals in medieval Europe recognized two forms of magic: natural and demonic. Natural magic was not distinct from science, but rather a branch of science. It was the science that dealt with “occult virtues” (or hidden powers) within nature. Demonic magic was not distinct from religion, but rather a perversion of religion. It was religion that turned away from god and toward demons for their help in human affairs. (9)

Categories like these, while useful for analysis, cannot hope to describe adequately the complex interrelationships that existed between different types of magical practices, religious beliefs, and scientific theories.

Despite the precise definitions provided by modern scholars, it is often difficult to distinguish between different kinds of magic. Just when is conjuring the result of Christian faith and when is it the result of Satan? How do we know if the power of an herb to heal is determined by “occult” properties that require special preparation to invoke or by the qualities of the herb known by all medieval herbalists? The problem confounds even those who support the categorization of magic into binaries like divine and natural: Kieckhefer, for example, acknowledges that “demonic and natural magic are not always as distinct in fact as they seem in principle” (1). If a magic-user takes a lizard, prepares it in a special way (say by drying it out and then rinsing it with milk and blood), chants prayers throughout the

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7 The arguments of Richard Kieckhefer, Jeffrey Burton Russell, Valerie Flint, and Keith Thomas support these categories, for example.
preparation of the lizard, and places it under the doorstep of the victim’s home to cause illness, is that person practicing natural or divine magic? The lizard must contain occult properties, as it requires particular preparation to be effective, but the prayers call on the power of Christianity. If the magician wants the victim to get ill, and she does, is the magician also a prophet? Questions like these are impossible to answer, and in the end, the road down which they lead soon becomes a quagmire.

Whether magicians receive their power from religious faith, control over demonic spirits, or secret knowledge of nature, they operate because they have something special, a unique power that cannot be accessed by “just anyone.” This special quality, no matter how we categorize it, gives the magician the power of transformation. It is not the preparation of the magic which makes it magic (as the processes by which various types of magic function are widely different), but the effect it should have on the object towards which it is directed. Magic is used to change the current state of a person or thing: an alchemist changes one metal into another, a love-potion changes a person’s feelings, a healer transforms the body from sickness to health, an evil-eye transforms a healthy person into a sick person, a necromancer changes a dead spirit into an animated one, a demonologist changes the behavior of hell-fiends, and a prophet transforms the future by determining its course. The power to transform one thing into another is so important and so rare that it demands to be treated with the utmost reverence. This is what makes magic so special, so different, so useful to our understanding of medieval and early modern society.

None of the charms in the Anglo-Saxon Leechbook or Lacunaga feature all of these elements combined together in this way, but G. Storms’s Anglo-Saxon Magic provides examples of all of the techniques described—sometimes the elements appear discretely but other times they appear in various combinations. See especially pages 49-106 and 132-311.

In the U.S., both love and money can occupy the place of magic—if you pay enough, the doctor will heal you, the plastic surgeon will change your body, the make-up artist will beautify your face, the interior decorator
The Once and Future Witch: Arthurian Legend and the Presence and Absence of Witches

Arthurian legend has been associated with magic since its conception, when Geoffrey of Monmouth collected tales of a powerful king who managed to stave off the invasion of the Germanic tribes by uniting the warring tribes of Britain for a brief and bloody span. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, writers like Geoffrey of Monmouth and Chrétien de Troyes helped establish an Arthurian tradition rife with magical elements, from club-wielding giants and damsels with magical rings to wise prophets and potent healers. English romancers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries followed in the footsteps of the French romances and Latin chronicles, filling both the popular and literary versions of Arthurian tales with enchanted people, magical underclothes, and even a few witches. The sixteenth century saw the explosion of witches (and other female monsters) on the romance scene, accompanied by demons and sorcerers, a trend whose echo we hear in Shakespeare's magical plays. The Arthurian tradition continues to be one of the spaces in which modern authors and directors utilize magical tropes.

In the following study, I explore the strategies used by writers of Arthurian literature to gender particular kinds of magic as masculine or feminine, a process which results in the villianization of feminine magic, especially as exemplified by the figure of the witch. While Arthurian texts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries featured the occasional witch, usually practicing beneficial magic, texts produced during and after the fourteenth century present witches more frequently, especially wicked witches who practice forbidden forms of magic. Although the role of the villain was played by masculine giants in the twelfth century, after two hundred years the part began to go more and more often will transform your home, and so on. If you love someone enough, romantic comedies and talk shows tell us, you can change.
to the older lady with the throaty cackle and black hat, and by the sixteenth century, no one else could play the wicked witch.

Chapter Two, *Gender-Blending: Transformative Power in Early Arthurian Literature*, surveys representations of magic in the texts of four authors within the Arthurian canon: Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, and Lagamon. Though these authors write in different languages and centuries, their representations of magic share in a tradition inherited from Greek, Roman, and biblical sources, a tradition including prophets, witches, giants, and magical objects. Though witches were clearly available, these writers use them mainly as extras, background decoration with little importance, favoring the prophets and the giants instead. All four authors gender magic similarly, representing prophecy and certain forms of transformative magic as masculine and healing as feminine. In these texts, characters whose behaviors conform to a set of normative gender conventions (i.e., masculinity as aggressive action and femininity as passive inaction) practice beneficial magic without attracting a pesky stigma, whereas male characters whose masculinity is over-developed suffer not only condemnation but also death. Boasting extant manuscripts numbering more than 200 and 30, respectively, Geoffrey’s chronicle (the *Historia Regum Britanniae*) and Chrétien’s five romances are seminal examples of the two earliest Arthurian genres. Lagamon’s *Brut*, on the other hand, remains in only two manuscripts, and Marie’s *lais* appear in only five; these less frequently preserved texts offer perspectives which complicate the conventions developed within the work of Chrétien and Geoffrey. Despite their differences, the texts all work to explore and mitigate the threat of

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10 The five romances by Chrétien are *Erec et Enide*, *Cligés*, *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* (Lancelot, or *The Knight of the Cart*), *Le Chevalier au Lion* (Ywain, or *The Knight with the Lion*), and *Le Conte du Graal* (Perceval, or *The Story of the Grail*).
masculine power posed by the feudal patriarchy present in both England and France in the twelfth century.

The third chapter, From Rags to Riches or The Step-mother's Revenge: Transformative Power in Late Medieval Arthurian Romances, explores representations of two magical characters who appear in a group of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century romances usually associated with Gawain: the churlish knight and the loathly lady. This chapter pays particular attention to the representation of the churlish knight in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, The Greene Knight, The Turke and Sir Gawain, Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle, and The Carle of Carlisle; and I consider the loathly lady as she appears in John Gower's "Tale of Florent," Geoffrey Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale," The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelk, and The Marriage of Sir Gawain. The authors of these romances appropriate transformative magic to structure gender conventions that depart radically from those developed in the works of their predecessors. In addition to revamping constructions of gender, the authors of these romances conjure up a figure neglected by the earlier writers, the nefarious wicked witch. While a version of the murderous giant does appear here, the wicked witch replaces the giant as the villainized antagonist; what is especially revealing is that the witch shows up as a mother—a wicked step-mother, to be precise. The presence of the wicked step-mother, who appears only in the popular romances in this group, reflects the anxiety created by expanding space for women (especially mothers) in previously exclusively male arenas of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English society.

In the fourth chapter, The Lady is a Hag: Three Writers and the Transformation of Magic in Sixteenth-Century England, I follow the romance tradition into early modern England, punctuating the sixteenth century on either end with two monumental Arthurian romance-epics, Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur and Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queene. Both
authors characterize magic as a deceptive, illusory power reliant on control of demonic spirits, a representation William Shakespeare reinforces in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*. As demonic magic widened its influence, so did one of the most infamous figures associated with demonology, the wicked witch. Two versions of the wicked witch populate the magical landscapes of these three authors, the beautiful temptress and the hag. The juxtaposition of these two figures creates a construction of femininity that indict both the overtly alluring and the grotesque. While Spenser expands his condemnation, representing maternity as abject and grotesque itself, Malory and Shakespeare both handle maternity by leaving it out, absenting its influence. The anxiety over maternity in these texts is representative of a more widespread concern with mothers and motherhood during the sixteenth century in England.

Chapter Five, *The Witch in Court: Literary Echoes of Legislative Policy*, traces briefly the legislative policy governing prosecution of witches in England and offers preliminary suggestions about the relationship between the legal climate and literary representations of magic. Though the prosecution of witchcraft is currently extremely rare in the U.S., modern filmmakers still rely on medieval and Renaissance models to inform their representations of witches. There are many reasons I find cinematic representations of magic particularly relevant to the study of medieval and early modern texts: films are designed to be enjoyed communally, as were most medieval and many Renaissance texts (though people have clearly always been free indulge alone); a dramatic element pervades medieval and early modern texts, as audience engagement with the text was dependant upon the bard or scop performing it, just as film relies on the dramatic performance of actors; reading of medieval and Renaissance texts often included musical accompaniment, which served the same function as modern movie scores, heightening the drama and guiding
the mood of the presentation. Because both the medieval manuscript and the modern film rely on a similar mode of transmission, their strategies of representation are often strikingly consonant—medieval and Renaissance authors often anticipate the strategies of representation still popular in film. This chapter concludes with an exploration of the elements of medieval and early modern representations of magic in the George Miller film, *The Witches of Eastwick*, seeking to learn which tropes we still find satisfying and which we prefer to alter. Is the witch still wicked? We shall see.
CHAPTER TWO
GENDER-BLENDING:
TRANSFORMATIVE POWER IN TWELFTH- AND
THIRTEENTH-CENTURY ARTHURIAN LITERATURE

I. Where are the Witches?: The Absence of Wicked Witches in Early Arthurian Legend

Folks in the U.S. enjoy watching witches get killed on film—from classic films like The Wizard of Oz or Snow White to more recent flicks like The Craft, we happily attend cinematic screenings and replay video tape in our homes where witches are melted, thrown off cliffs, or blown into bits. You’ve seen this happen, although you may not have responded as ambivalently as I did. You see, I never wanted the witch to die. Diane Purkiss writes of her early encounters with the film, The Wizard of Oz (1939): “I always cast my long-suffering mother as the Witch, as if in an early effort to prove the connections between witch-stories and images of maternity” (1). When I acted out scenes from the movie, though, I was the Witch. I screeched my favorite line, “I’m melting, melting,” with empathetic abandon. What is so wicked about her? Sure, she looks a little different, and she has a crystal ball that gives her an edge on long-distance communications, but this is hardly grounds for execution. She tries in vain to acquire her sister’s shoes (to which she is the rightful heiress), frightening Dorothy in an attempt to get them back, but doesn’t actually harm the young girl. In fact, she doesn’t kill anyone, preferring to incapacitate them, making her worst crime a series of (empty?) threats. The movie doesn’t even try to present a case for her wickedness in the Oz sequence: the film instead marks her visually, inscribing “witch-
ness” on her body through signifiers like her long, warty nose and dark (green) skin, so that her wickedness becomes a physiognomic fact. She’s wicked because she looks wicked.

The Witch doesn’t begin the film with visual markers as extreme as those she later gains. When she appears as Ms. Gulch, she looks prissy and conservative, but she is not physically inscribed with difference in the same way. Instead, it is her behavior that is aggressive and threatening, creating sympathy for Dorothy’s situation and making herself look wicked. In Dorothy’s world, things may not be what they seem, but in the magical world of Oz, good witches are beautiful and wicked ones ugly. If it looks like a witch and smells like a witch, it must be a witch. Mustn’t it?

Let us not forget that the head of this land of munchkins, friendly neighborhood lions, and creepy flying monkeys is the imposing patriarch, the Wizard of Oz. Toto reveals the Wizard’s magic to be a grand illusion, the ability to disguise (and thus transform) his identity by creating a new one. The description of this transformative magic in L. Frank Baum’s book, The Wizard of Oz (from which the movie took its title), emphasizes its polyvalent nature, an element the movie downplays by presenting only one of the Wizard’s guises: in the book, the Wizard appears to each of the four travelers separately, presenting a unique persona to each of them by transforming himself into a large head, a beautiful lady, an enormous beast, and a ball of fire (Baum 110-118). The film version presents the ball of fire behind a massive head, combining the two images and emphasizing the illusion more than the transformation. Nevertheless, in both film and book, magic is connected to shifting identity, to the power of transformation.

1 This quote appears in The Witch in History.
In both versions of *The Wizard of Oz*, the Wizard's transformative illusions contrast with the kind of power possessed by the witches: both good and bad witches can appear and disappear at will, but they cannot change their outward appearances. In these texts, magic divides along gendered lines—magical women look like what they are, whereas magical men have the ability to change their appearance. The film, in particular, inscribes magic visually onto the female body, as with the beauty of Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, and the ugly namelessness of the Wicked Witch of the West. The sight of their bodies reveals the nature of their magic. The male body disappears behind a curtain—his ability to hide his physical appearance allows the Wizard to maintain his position, and the revelation of his body diminishes his magical cachet.

In this twentieth-century film, the body is the nexus between magic and gender, situating gendered signifiers within a visual matrix. Witches and wizards both possess magic, but it differs along gendered lines. The age-old system of binary gender, described and analyzed by an army of scholars wielding tools from a variety of disciplines, obtains here. That gender markers are bodily in this text is not unusual: theorists have long argued that we inscribe gendered signifiers on the body. What is significant here is the result of that binary system: ridding the wicked Witch of her power involves forcibly melting her body away to nothing, turning her latent feminine fluidity into real fluidity (a puddle on the floor), whereas ridding the Wizard of his power involves restoring his voice to his body and allowing him to return to the "real" world. First we witness the execution of malignant femininity and dissolution of the female body, which allows for the male body to resume ascendancy.

The Wicked Witch of the West is reminiscent, in certain ways, of her Renaissance grand-dames. In many of the infamous Renaissance witch-trials, the woman accused is a
covetous neighbor who has threatened a valued child, a description particularly suited to Oz's resident hag. Oz's Wicked Witch of the West is perhaps the most easily recognizable example of the wicked witches existing in 20th-century film and literature, a clear icon of the witch as she has come down to us from the early modern period. As Glinda informs Dorothy, not all witches are wicked.

When we look at classical literature in conjunction with English Renaissance texts, a long tradition of witchcraft emerges: witches are the most common kind of female magician, and the majority of witches are of the wicked variety. A majority is not all, however, and some witches are more like Glinda than her green-skinned counterpart. Calypso and Circe, from Homer's Odyssey, are examples of two witchy women who are not evil enough to warrant execution. Classical literature provides models of both the "good witch" and the "bad witch," but Arthurian romances and chronicles circulating in England during the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, in particular, lack wicked witches. Why? Though romance-writers drew freely on classical material, they chose to present only one of these figures, the good witch. This raises some questions. If there are no wicked witches, what magical villains are present in the texts? What narrative and cultural forces motivated their development? When are men or women wicked in these texts, and how does that wickedness relate to the link between gender and magical practices? Who has access to what kind of magic in these texts, and how does that access help define a particular kind of gendered identity? The following chapter is an attempt to answer these questions by exploring the notable absence of wicked witches in the early Arthurian romance and

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2 See Diane Purkiss, (especially Part II), and Deborah Willis's Malevolent Nurture (especially Chapter Two) for documentation of witches as neighbors who threaten children.
chronicle traditions. Instead of wicked witches, we find three other figures in these texts, the healer, the giant, and the prophet, whose representations variously support or subvert a binary set of normative gender conventions not unlike those described by Lacanian psychoanalytical theory. The first two figures are polarized—feminine healers are “good” but masculine giants are “bad”—but the prophet’s construction explores the more nebulous spaces in between.

II. When is a Knight not a Knight?: Gender Mutability in the Romances

After Cligés rescues his beloved in Chrétien’s romance of the same name, the narrator interjects a comment about the appropriateness of their behavior as lovers. This passage reflects a widespread interest within the Arthurian romance genre, the exploration of gender conventions through the forces of love and magic. Fenice, the heroine, and Cligés, the hero, have fallen in love, but their feelings remain secret. Both lovers “were so fearful of being rejected that they dared not open their hearts,” and though the narrator finds Fenice’s behavior quite acceptable, as “a maiden should be reticent and shy” (169), when Cligés behaves in exactly the same fashion, the narrator seems disappointed (if perhaps a bit ironic): “But why did Cligés hesitate? What was he waiting for? He, whose every deed was emboldened by her, afraid of her alone? God! What was the source of his fear, that caused him to cower only before a maiden, a weak and fearful creature, simple and shy?” (169). The narrator describes Fenice’s behavior as normal: because she is a maiden, she behaves as a maiden should. But Cligés is acting against his gender; he is passive when he should be

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3 All citations from Chrétien’s romances come from William Kibler’s edition. The translations are Kibler’s for all the romances except *Erec and Enide*, which was translated by Carleton W. Carroll.
active, silent when he should speak. Chrétien's narrator expresses shock at Cligès's hesitation, using zoological and sociological metaphors to naturalize the gender conventions being developed:

This was as if I had seen the hounds fleeing before the hare and the trout chase the beaver, the lamb the wolf, and the dove the eagle. Or imagine the peasant abandoning his hoe, with which he labours and earns his livelihood, the falcon fleeing from the duck, the gyrfalcon from the heron, and the mighty pike from the minnow; the stag would chase the lion, and everything would be reversed. (169)

His departure from normative masculine behavior is just as unnerving as if the very world itself had turned topsy-turvy—predators turned prey, peasants leaving their fields.

Comments like these, where the narrator addresses the issue of gender difference directly, are so frequent in Arthurian romances (especially those of Chrétien de Troyes), that Arthurian romance has developed a reputation for gender-bending. Gender is commonly an explicit concern for the authors of Arthurian romance, which provides a literary space for exploration of gender roles while still constructing (and endorsing) a normative set of gender conventions. This discussion of normative masculinity and femininity provides the foundation for my analysis in this chapter of magic, one of the few forces responsible for gender mutability in early Arthurian material.

Much recent Arthurian scholarship analyzes the role of romance writers in exploring the relationship between masculinity and femininity. For example, Friedrich Wolfzettel

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4 When I discuss "masculinity" or "femininity" in this chapter and throughout this project, I am referring to the conventionally coded markers—physical, behavioral, psychological, social, and so on—which members of a
edited a collection of essays, entitled *Arthurian Romance and Gender*, which all build on the foundation of the implied connection between the two terms in the collection’s title. Lee Tobin McClain asserts that Arthurian material, in particular, is “about gender anxiety, and interest in it peaks when questions of how to define gender roles especially occupy our mass psyche” (93), and Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner sees lyrics, romances, and *lais* as sites for dealing with “the issue of male/female relationships” (32). Scholars have debated what this concern with gender means, some arguing that the romances reinforce a binary system of gender based on masculine aggressive activity and feminine submissive passivity, and others arguing that they provide space, however temporary, for dissolving, collapsing, or questioning the binary gender system. Roberta Krueger explains how chivalric literature could provide a space for gender play while still endorsing normative gender conventions. Krueger notes: “Courtly romance opened up a discursive space for male and female readers in which boundaries could be temporarily confused, subverted or resisted—at least in the space of a fiction—even as they were maintained” (146). Krueger argues that the Old French romances examined women’s paradoxical role in chivalric culture—simultaneously

5 McClain’s essay, “Gender Anxiety in Arthurian Romance,” was published in *Extrapolation*. Bruckner’s essay, “Strategies of Naming in Marie de France’s *Lais*: At the Crossroads of Gender and Genre” appeared in *Neophilologus*. 6 See, for example, Ad Putter’s essay in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* for a reading of transvestitism in European chivalric romance as reflecting an anxiety about the mutability of gender roles, and his essay in *Arthurian Romance and Gender* for discussion of the rhetoric of effeminacy in Arthurian material. Judith Weiss argues that representations of women in Anglo-Norman romances are “ambivalent and inconsistent,” and that the women sometimes take on a masculine role (7). 7 See Krueger’s essay, “Beyond Debate: Gender in Play in Old French Courtly Fiction,” in *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance* (ed. Fenster and Lees), for evidence of the fact that courtly fiction was a literary space devoted to gender play, and her chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* for a discussion of gender mutability in the Old French romances.
deprived and possessed of power—and represented the transgressive behaviors of both knights and ladies, calling attention to the “ways that gender identities are constructed within language” and exploring “the transformative possibilities of fiction” (146). Romances, then, may feature gender transgression, but only when it’s carefully situated within the framework of a narrative otherworld.

The binary construction of normative gender in the romances and chronicles of Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and Lagamon is plainly evident. There are a few specific instances in which we can see most clearly the strategies used in early Arthurian literature to inscribe characters within a system of binary opposition. The initial descriptions of the heroes and heroines, for example, enact a characterization of femininity as static beauty and masculinity as valiant activity. Below, I offer a reading of the representations of normative masculinity and femininity, followed by an analysis of love’s power to blur gender binaries.

All four authors represent their leading ladies—their heroines—as very beautiful, often the most beautiful in the land, and frequently provide extended descriptions of the heroines when they initially appear. Their descriptions focus attention on the body, and more specifically, those parts of the female body which come to signify femininity, such as (long) hair, (smooth) face, or (high and round) breasts. We know our heroines are feminine

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8 Quotations from Marie’s lais come from Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby’s edition; for Geoffrey’s Historia, I use the Lewis Thorpe edition; and for Lagamon’s Brut, all citations come from the W. R. J. Barron and S. C. Weinberg edition (translations of the Brut are mine).

9 For women described upon first appearance in Chrétien’s romances, see pages 42, 128S, 156, 309, and 404; in Marie’s lais, see pages 56, 86, 105, 111, and 114; in Geoffrey’s Historia, see pages 159, 205, and 221; in Lagamon’s Brut, see lines 1105-9, 2488-2500, 5502-4, 7131-41, 9248-50, 9616-19, and 11090-8. For descriptions of the beauty of heroines, see pages 42, 46, 56, 128S, 133S, 156, 309, and 404 for Chrétien; for Marie, see 56, 64, 80, 86, 97, 105, 114, and 120; for Geoffrey, see pages 159, 205, and 221; for Lagamon, see lines 1105-9, 7131-41, 9248-50, 9287-9, 11090-8, and 14283-5.
women because the narrator lingers on this fact—it's what makes them desirable as lovers. The sexuality of the female body peeks through the clothes meant to contain it. Chrétien's Enide, for example, is dressed in a worn shift, but Erec can immediately see that "the body beneath was lovely" (Erec and Enide 42). The fairy-lady of Marie's Lanval wears a simple shift as well, which reveals her "well formed and handsome" body as "her side... was uncovered, as well as her face, neck, and breast" (74). The bodies described here are dangerously unprotected, revealed, and vulnerable to attack—completely unlike the masculine bodies which, as we'll see, are well-protected and strong, though not immune to suffering. The descriptions construct a female body that is beautiful because it is vulnerable—it is because her limbs are so delicate and her face so rosy that she demands the hero's attention.¹⁰

In addition to gendering the heroine's body as vulnerable, the romances visually mark the women by including details such as blond hair, light-colored (grey) eyes, or light skin, which privilege a white body.¹¹ Fairness or whiteness certainly refers to skin color, but it also carries a class signification. A person who had the luxury to stay out of the sun—an aristocrat or noble—would have a lighter complexion than a person forced to labor daily in sun, rain, wind, and snow—the peasantry. Both romance and chronicle heroes generally prefer ladies from noble families, women who are dressed well (as is Blancheflor in the above excerpt) and versed in the courtly art of graciousness.¹² When the beloved damsel

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¹⁰ For descriptions which include reference to conventionally feminine physical features, see pages 42, 56, 133, 136, 313, 325, and 404 (Chrétien), pages 56, 74, and 80 (Marie), and lines 2488-2500 (Lagamon).
¹¹ Chrétien's ladies who share these qualities include Enide, Saredamors, Laudine, and Blancheflor. Marie replicates Chrétien's conventional description in her brief descriptions of Eqmmtan's lady and Lanval's lady. Geoffrey and Lajamon both draw on the romance tradition in their even briefer descriptions of Guinevere (Gwenevere), Renwein (Rouwenne), and Ygema (Ygerne).
¹² For descriptions including racial and class markers like white skin or expensive clothes, see pages 42, 56, 67, 133, 136, 313, 325, and 404 (Chrétien), pages 56, 64, 74, 80, 86, 97, 105, 111, and 121 (Marie), page 221 (Geoffrey), and lines 2488-2500, 7131-41, 9348-60, 11090-8, and 12229-42 (Lagamon).
belongs to a family less noble than desired, as is the case with Enide, our hero promptly
grants her father two castles, elevating her family’s social status with the precious gift of land
and its accompanying revenue (60). The feminine aesthetic constructed here is very
selective—only white, upper-class ladies need apply.

A final aspect of the initial descriptions of the heroines contributes to the
construction of normative femininity as receptively passive—this is the narrative positioning
of the male gaze. Though there are many other ways in which the introductory depictions of
the heroines reinforce the gender binary, the heroines’ cheerful and patient acceptance of the
gaze in these descriptions is most revealing. Heroines are most commonly presented in
tableau—they stand, sit, or lie quietly while the heroes examine them. In Chrétien’s The Story
of the Grail, Blancheflor comes to greet Perceval when he arrives at her castle. After entering,
she stands motionless while the hero gazes at her, besotted by her beauty and her willingness
to be the object of the gaze (404). Similar scenes precede descriptions of Enide and Fenice
in tableaux as well: arriving in the hero’s presence, the maiden stands demurely and allows
herself to be observed, occasionally stealing a peek from under lowered lashes (42, 156). In
Marie’s Lancel, the heroine lies on a bed while the knight observes her body (74). In both
chronicles, Ygerna is the passive recipient not only of Uther’s gaze, but of the best plates at
the table and the most delicious wines, which he sends her at a feast because he is obsessed

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13 For example, another strategy for romance writers in particular involves alluding to the creative power of
Nature and God to help validate the beauty of the heroine. Making Nature responsible for the beauty of
whiteness provides a biological basis for a racist and classist aesthetic; mentioning God’s involvement adds to
the force of biology that of divine ordinance. Attributing beauty to God or Nature removes responsibility for
beauty from the lady herself—certainly she cannot be responsible for her own loveliness—and situates her
passively in relation to her own body. References to Nature and God occur on pages 42, 133, 156, 313, and
404 in Chrétien’s romances, and pages 56 and 64 for Marie’s Lancel. Another strategy for reinforcing conventions
of passive feminine beauty in Chrétien’s work is the explicit objectification of the lady through comparison to
objects and animals. Chrétien compares ladies variously to flowers (42, 74), mirrors (42, 133, 313), gems (133,
with her beauty (Geoffrey 205, Lagamon ll. 9245-9254). The lady allows herself to be observed, capitulating to the author’s demand for conventionally passive behavior.

If the elements I have discussed combine to locate ideal femininity on the static body of the white, upper-class woman, a similar set of features work to characterize ideal masculinity as located on the active body of the white, upper-class man. The descriptions of female characters focus on the body in stasis, whereas the descriptions of the male characters center on the body in action. Few of Chrétien’s introductory descriptions of the heroic knights take longer than a sentence or two. Instead, brief accounts of action characterize the descriptions of heroes in the romances, a trend continued in the chronicles: Lancelot first appears on a tired horse, madly chasing after the abducted Queen Guinevere (Chrétien, The Knight of the Cart 210); Yvain is introduced through his boast to avenge Calogrenant, followed by his immediate departure (The Knight with the Lion 332-3); Perceval’s first mention involves his mounting a horse to go riding (The Story of the Grail 382); as soon as Marie’s Guigemar is introduced, he “left the court, dispensing lavish gifts before he departed, and went off to Flanders, where one could always find war and strife” (“Guigemar” 44); and Geoffrey’s initial description of Arthur includes his age, his reputation for courage, his generous gift-giving, and his decision to “harry the Saxons” (212). Deeds are definitive in these examples.

Not only are the knights introduced through their aggressive actions, but their descriptions also commonly mention their already-existing reputations for valiant deeds and noble behavior. Whereas the authors frequently remind us of the heroine’s passive beauty,
they prefer to call our attention to the men’s active performance. In Chrétien’s *Erec and Enide*, Erec “had received great honour at the court” and was more “highly praised” than any other knight (38), and Cligés (titular character of *Cligés*) “knew more about fencing and archery than did King Mark’s nephew Tristan, and more about birds and hounds” (156). Marie’s Bisclavret is described as “a good and handsome knight who conducted himself nobly” (“Bisclavret” 68), and her introduction to *Milun* notes, “From the day he was dubbed a knight he did not encounter a single knight who could unhorse him” (97). In the *Historia*, Brutus’s unfortunate deeds are forecast before he’s born—we learn that he will kill both his parents, but “after he had wandered in exile through many lands this boy would eventually rise to the highest honor” (54). Laiamon’s text features a group of counselors deciding to bring “bezst aire cnihten” [the best of all warriors] to court to be crowned king—that warrior is Arthur Pendragon (9900). Deeds of war, in fact, are what distinguish femininity from masculinity in these descriptions: feminine women are (beautiful), masculine men act (nobly).

Unlike the heroine’s body, which features prominently in her physical descriptions, the body of the knight is mentioned almost exclusively within the context of battle. Scenes of arming present the knight’s body as it prepares for battle, girding male fortitude with strong leather and metal, a protected body constructed in opposition to the exposed female body.¹⁵ These description of battle-gear perform a similar function for masculinity as the description of the heroine’s body does for femininity—gender definition. The narrator typically emphasizes those parts of the body which signify masculinity, like the (broad) chest,

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¹⁵ There is an extended description of Arthur’s armor in Laiamon’s *Brut*, lines 10542-10562, for example, and Chrétien’s romances describe knights arming on pages 46, 395, and 399.
(thick) legs, and head, and provides the heroes with powerful phallic weapons like the sword, the spear, and the war-horse. Weapons and armor do not appear in descriptions of ladies—this is uniquely masculine equipment, guaranteeing the bearer a better position in the hierarchical social system dictated by feudalism.

The exquisite weaponry in many passages also indicates the tremendous wealth of the hero figures. Just as the heroine's rich furs reveal her to be aristocratic, so the hero's jewel-encrusted (sometimes magically-forged) battle-gear reflects his position at the top of the economic ladder. Armor, swords, and horses were expensive, and ideal masculinity relies therefore on wealth and high social standing to obtain the high-priced necessaries of knighthood. Fully armed and mounted on his charger, the hero is the fairest knight in the land, the epitome of masculine beauty, aggressive action poised for release.

It is not only the initial descriptions of idealized masculine and feminine characters that support a binary system of gender based on activity and passivity. Their behaviors also characteristically conform to a chivalric construction of masculinity as aggressive action and femininity as passive endurance. In early Arthurian literature, knights fight to save victimized ladies, a fact which shall become evident throughout the rest of this chapter. Despite what appears to be an oppressively rigid set of gender conventions, the behaviors of the characters in the romances do not always conform neatly to the accepted mold.

In the scene I discuss at the beginning of this section, the narrator questions Cligés's lack of aggressiveness towards Fenice. His masculinity should propel him to pursue her, to confess his love, but instead he is afraid. There are other instances in the romances where knights behave passively, failing to act or speak when they should, submitting to the
demands of a physically weaker person, or fainting when they see a sign of their beloved.\textsuperscript{16} Though they must often submit to horrific torture, ladies and damsels don't always behave passively, as in one striking example where "more than a thousand ladies" rush into a room where Fenice is being tortured by doctors and throw the cruel men out the window (196-7). Chrétien tells us, "No ladies ever did better!" Elsewhere, ladies manipulate their lovers or order them directly, rescue trapped knights, and organize tournaments for themselves to attend.\textsuperscript{17} There are a number of critics who see romantic love as a dominating force linked to this type of gender transgression in the romances: for example, Gary Ferguson uses Chrétien's \textit{The Knight of the Cart} to argue that male knights take on feminine characteristics when in love, and Vern L. Bullough discusses the medieval conception of lovesickness, inherited from Greek medicine, as a form of madness which feminizes men (38-9). Indeed, this is precisely what seems to have happened to Cligés, whose great love for Fenice causes him to fear her. Chrétien's narrator explains Cligés's unmanly behavior by claiming that "Whoever wishes to love must feel fear; if he does not, he cannot love," being careful to note that a man "must fear only the one he loves, and be emboldened for her sake in all else" (170). As long as the beloved inspires aggressive action in all matters except the romantic relationship, masculine submission to the force of love is perfectly understandable. Likewise, it is love that motivates Enide to repeatedly disobey Erec's order to be silent, enduring Erec's increasingly abusive tirades each time she breaks the rule, until she finally earns his respect towards the end of their adventures (69-97). Scholars like Sandy Feinstein

\textsuperscript{16} For example, Cligés and Guigemar both fear to speak of their feelings for their beloved (Chrétien 185, Marie 49), Elidus cries over his swooning lover (Marie 119), and Lancelot faints when he sees Guinevere's comb (Chrétien 225), as does Yvain when Laudine withdraws her love (Chrétien 330).
and Flora Alexander have made arguments which explore the ability of love to provide otherwise passive heroines with motivation to become aggressive.\textsuperscript{18} Love not only provides an excuse for gender transgression, but causes it, and love cannot be avoided or predicted.

Love does not account for all gender transgression in the Arthurian tradition, however. The chronicle writers largely ignore romantic love in their accounts of Arthur’s life, but many of their characters blur the boundaries of normative gender conventions nonetheless. There is another force present in Arthurian literature within both romance and chronicle traditions, a force which destabilizes convention, which blurs the division between masculine and feminine, creating (what I call) a gender mutability—an ability to appropriate gendered behaviors to consolidate or generate transformative power. That force is magic.

III. Healing for Love: Arthurian Women Transform the Wounded Body

If you are a bloody, partially dismembered knight, and you’re looking to find some help in the bizarre otherworld of medieval romance, you’d do well to find yourself an ointment-toting damsel. You could look for another knight with a healing herb, but it would take you much longer, and you might bleed to death. Luckily (for you and any other knights-errant), romances usually blend a heaping dose of feminine healing magic with generous portions of masculine aggression to produce the captivating cycle of assault, battery, and healing central to the romance tradition. Without the remarkable ability of magic and medicine to heal the human body, romance as we know it would not be possible.

\textsuperscript{18} In Chrétien’s \textit{The Knight of the Cart}, the ladies organize a tournament (273), and Meltagant’s sister rescues Lancelot when he’s trapped in a tower (288). There are many examples of ladies manipulating lovers, including pages 186-8, 263, and 277 in Chrétien’s romances, and pages 50, 69, and 115-6 in Marie’s lais.
Interspersed with riotous adventure and fighting with giants and dragons are scenes of the knights' ever-too-slow convalescence in the doting care of a lovely maiden. Without the healing women of romance, not only would there be more dead knights, but there would be no space for unmarried women (young or old) to participate in chivalric culture. Through their healing of the wandering knights, female characters can join the team, although they don't often get to play in the game of "whose lance is bigger?" Early Arthurian romance and chronicle traditions represent healing as an appropriately feminine behavior.

The healing women in the Arthurian texts considered here are an example of the polarization of magical figures which characterizes the romances. Though female healers are not always magical, they are usually good. By "good," I mean simply that the four authors unanimously represent feminine healing as a positive, beneficial force within the narrative world. Healing has traditionally been associated with women, especially domestic and folk remedies with quasi-magical (if not overtly magical) elements. Though it is often hard to determine whether or not a particular act of healing involves magic, female healing (known for its magical and quasi-magical elements) exists in an acute tension with the male, "scientific" study of medicine popularized by the rise of universities in the twelfth century.

Nestled within this intertwined matrix of magic and medicine, we find the best example of the early Arthurian version of the witch, a domestic "good witch" whose magic helps the heroine maintain appropriate femininity through a series of challenges. Chrétien's good witch, Thessela, from *Cligès*, reflects the tension between feminine healing and masculine

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18 See pages 54-55 of Feinstein's article, "Losing Your Head in Chrétien," and 31-33 of Alexander's "Women as lovers in early English romance. Judith Weiss also makes a similar argument about love affecting gender transgression (7-23).
medicine. Her character is the culmination of a variety of literary trends that conflate healing, domesticity, and community with feminine access to transformative power.

There are many healing ladies in Arthurian stories, especially in the works of Chrétien and Marie. Healing women are a necessary part of the cycle of violence comprising the action of the romances. Heather Arden documents the cyclical nature of the romances, arguing that the emergent pattern involves the hero undertaking combat, enduring a test, and obtaining aid or information as a reward (85-88). A woman is often the distributor of the reward, dispensing healing, revealing information, or offering her love. Healing of flesh wounds is thus one of the many services the anonymous damsels and ladies of romance are happy to provide for the wandering knights. Though these women have significant transformative power (they change wounded bodies into sound ones, after all), this power is limited by the strict subordination of female healers to the male figures who dominate the texts.

Healing in the Middle Ages was a notoriously gendered set of practices. In Woman as Healer, Jeanne Achterberg documents the presence of female healing throughout Western history. Domestic healing, she argues, or medicine practiced in the home by women, tends to be informal in training, is experience-oriented and orally transmitted, and focuses on preventing and healing common illnesses, easing pregnancy and childbirth, and first aid (often with botanical supplements and/or rituals that I suggest give it a quasi-magical quality). This kind of feminine knowledge has a history of subordination to the officially sanctioned, formalized, and (still) overwhelmingly male medical practice. Doctors and surgeons undertook some form of scholastic training with authoritative medical texts, and they usually charged for their services, which often included bleeding. Achterberg argues
that women have been closely associated with the practice of domestic healing throughout Western history, moving in and out of mainstream medicine in varying degrees at different times. She describes the situation for European women practicing healing in the early Middle Ages as follows:

The eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries were times of excitement and diversity for women healers. Domestic medicine continued to be practiced, even though the methods that survived the Dark Ages were of questionable value. The sociopolitical developments and the still-fluid religious tone allowed women to practice the healing arts with extraordinary freedom compared to the immediate past and future. The culture allowed an unheard-of emergence of women as physicians and ecclesiastics. (58)

Though at other times women have been banned from attending medical school, one center in Salerno, Italy, in operation from 1000 until 1811, had female faculty members during the early Middle Ages (48). Achterberg notes that though a domestic form of healing was commonly associated with women, the twelfth century in particular saw women participate in traditionally male medical practices.¹⁹ The early medieval acceptance of both domestic and medical healing by women documented by Achterberg is reflected in Arthurian literature, which presents healing as a normative, acceptable feminine activity.

The representation of domestic healing in the romances and chronicles makes little distinction between practices that involve magical elements and those that don't. Some healing women use simple medicine, the kind familiar to most people these days, such as

¹⁹ There were many women who worked in religious orders as healers, and some learned women wrote about medicine—Hildegard von Bingen, who wrote a medical treatise, is the most famous example.
dressing and bandaging wounds—a mundane form of healing which does not approach the slippery edges of the magical.\footnote{For example, Enide tends Erec's wounds personally until they reach Guivret's castle, where his two sisters meticulously cut the "dead flesh" away before they bandage him with an ointment (100-101).} Others rely on powerful ointments, potions, and herbs: in Geoffrey's \textit{History}, for example, Merlin prophesies that the foster-daughter of the Scourger will bring "a saucer of medicine" to restore the land after a huge calamity has destroyed it (183); Guivret's two "charming and cheerful sisters who know much about healing wounds" apply "ointment and dressing" to Erec's injuries in Chrétien's \textit{Erec and Enide} (100-101); and in Marie's "Le Deus Amanz," the damsel's aunt, who is "well-versed in medicines," having practiced the "art of physic" for thirty years, gives the damsel's young suitor a potion which would "restore all his strength to him" no matter how "weary, afflicted, or burdened he might be" (83-84). In each of these instances, the author refers to the healing as a medical procedure requiring an ointment or potion. It is often hard to determine precisely where medicine leaves off and magic picks up, as the effects of medicinal potions are frequently exactly the same as those of potions that seem more magical. The medicine of Guivret's sisters heals Erec as well as Arthur does when he uses Morgan le Fay's magical ointment, which is "so wonderfully effective that the wound to which it was applied, whether on a nerve or on a joint, could not fail to be completely cured and healed within a week, provided it was treated with the ointment once a day" (89). In the case of Marie's "Eliduc," the "bright-red" flower used by Guildelieic to heal Guiliadun possesses healing properties, but Marie does not designate it as magical. It's merely a "beautiful flower," which nevertheless
has a quasi-magical ability to restore life to the dead (124). Magic and medicine are so closely linked in these representations of domestic healing as to be nearly indistinguishable.21

Women are so frequently associated with quasi-magical domestic healing in the romances and chronicles that damsels with healing magic become a part of the landscape, like the parade of castles, knights, and dwarves found in romance or the never-ending supply of invading armies within chronicle tradition. Arthurian women who bandage wounds and nurse knights to health come from both the servant and the aristocratic classes, and their labor is often anonymous. The fact that most of the damsels who heal lack names reflects the mundanity of their presence: domestic healing is so commonplace that the briefest of descriptions suffices. Though they have power, their social position subverts that power, as they are economically dispossessed, performing their services for free (often in the name of love). It is because these damsels use domestic healing magic, accepted as the usual fare of average women, that they can play such an important role in the narratives without threatening the privileged position of patriarchy therein.

Morgan le Fay, on the other hand, is anything but mundane. The one named healer who appears in both the romance and chronicle traditions, she appears only as a name—an invocation of mysterious (but non-threatening) feminine healing magic. Borrowing from her reputation in Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*, where she and her sisters on the Isle of Avalon are known for healing, Chrétien mentions her twice as the maker of powerful ointments: Arthur uses her ointment to heal Erec's physical injuries, and an unnamed lady uses an ointment

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21 In a note about Odysseus's boar injury, Robert Renehan argues that "the combination of 'rational' medicine and 'irrational' magic in the treatment of an injury" was a practice dating from before the Indo-European diaspora (2). Bandaging was not effective without the corresponding chant; magic and medicine were not necessarily discrete practices. The Anglo-Saxon *Laxbók* provides additional evidence that elements of healing which seem magical to modern scholars may have been part of standard healing practices.
“Morgan the Wise” gave her to heal Yvain’s madness (Erec and Enide 89, The Knight with the Lion 332). Here, Morgan functions as a place-holder, a signifier of magical healing power. Her absence diffuses the latent threat of her transformative (healing) magic—though she may know much, her ointments circulate freely for the benefit of the masculine aggressive ethos. She herself is outside of society, but the fruits of her labor are available within it. Here we see evidence of a trend I describe more fully in a later section, the marginalization of overtly magical characters.

Lagamon’s version of Morgan, called Argante in the Brut, provides the best example of this trend. Lagamon situates Argante even more securely outside the chivalric court than does Geoffrey or Chrétien. In the Brut, Arthur describes Argante while mortally wounded after the battle of Camelford:

And ich wulfe uaren to Aualun, to uairest alre maidene,
to Argante þere quene, aluen swiðe sceone;
and heo scal mine wunden makeien alle isunde,
al hal me makeien mid halewiege drenchen.
And seóðe ich cumen wulfe to mine kineriche
and wunien mid Brutten mid muchelere wunne. (14276-82)

And I will go to Avalon, to the loveliest of all maidens, to the queen Argante, fairest of elven women; and she shall make well all my wounds, make me all whole with healing draughts. And afterwards I will return to my kingdom and dwell with the Britons in great contentment.

Lagamon not only places Argante in an otherworldly realm, Avalon, but also calls Argante “aluen” (lit. elven). He writes her as not human, a creature of fairy-world who stars in Briton yarns about the once and future king. Lagamon notes a few lines later that “Bruttes
ileueð gête þat he bon on luæc, / and wunnien in Aualun mid fairest alre aluen; / and lokieð euere Bruttes gête whan Arður cumen liæ” [The Britons yet believe that he is alive, and dwells in Avalon with the fairest of all fairy women; and the Britons still await the time when Arthur will come again] (14290-92). Lagamon indulges the reader’s curiosity about this absent figure with a glimpse of two beautifully-dressed women in a boat who come to carry Arthur’s body away, but they quickly disappear with Arthur, who does not return in the Brut (14283-7). Here, Argante acts as a screen against which hope can be projected: because of her mysterious healing power, her elven magic, she provides an avenue for Arthur’s death to be prevented. She exists only on the outside, to reinforce the inside.

Morgan/Argante has only a name, but her healing power is famous, whereas the mundane, ointment-toting damsels are anonymous. These two kinds of figures reveal a paradox common to representations of femininity: “woman” can be both a free-floating signifier of mysterious otherness or an integral, under-appreciated participant in daily life, she can be simultaneously exalted and subordinated. This trend is epitomized by the character of Thessela, in Chrétien’s Cligès, a servant who is also a (good) witch. Though she is limited to the domestic sphere, Thessela uses the feminine resources available to enable not only the protection of her mistress’s virginity, but also the restoration of the rightful heir to the throne. Her magical practices are domestic rather than exotic, but the consequences of her power are monumental.

Thessela is the witchiest of all Chrétien’s women. Though Thessela compares herself to Medea, a notorious wicked witch, she’s not wicked (159). In fact, she’s quite the opposite. Named for her homeland, Thessaly, “where diabolical enchantments flourish and are taught,” Thessela was born in a land where the women, in particular, “practice magic spells
and bewitchments” (159). She comes from a land where a community of women collect and
distribute magical knowledge, and she uses her extensive knowledge to accomplish some
amazing feats: she prevents the usurper Alis from consummating his marriage to Fenice by
crafting a potion which makes him dream of sex (161), she provides a concoction for Fenice
that makes her body simulate death (193), and when they are running away from Alis’s army,
“Thessela, their guide, kept them so secure by her enchantments and magic that they felt no
fear or dread of all the emperor’s forces” (204). She’s a good witch, and a powerful one too.

Thessela’s main function in Cligés is to help her mistress, Fenice, by facilitating the
relationship between Fenice and Cligés, the rightful heir to the throne. She employs her
magic only at Fenice’s behest, though she offers her magical assistance without solicitation
from the heroine. Each of the tasks Thessela must perform acts to balance the scales for
Fenice, which the narrative weights heavily on the side of the male aristocracy. Alis, the
emperor of “Greece and Constantinople,” retains his position because he swore never to
marry, so that Cligés, his dead brother’s son, would always be his heir. Alis breaks his vow
not to marry, sending Cligés to pick up the daughter of the German emperor, Fenice, to be
his bride. Cligés and Fenice fall deeply in love at first sight, but despite their obvious
suitability as a couple, Alis forces Fenice to be his own wife instead. Though she loves
another, she must marry the Greek emperor. Fenice is therefore the victim of Alis’s
treachery, and the situation demands action. This is the first time Thessela performs magic.
Fenice’s only recourse in this situation is magical deception, as she has no legal right to
refuse Alis and no physical means for preventing the union. Thessela’s magic is thus
justified as a means of self-defense, in that it allows Fenice to protect her virginity, an
important aspect of her ideal femininity.
Thessela accomplishes this by making Fenice a potion that will make Alis believe he is consummating his marriage to his virginal wife when actually he is merely dreaming. The following description of Thessela demonstrates the explicit connection between feminine magic and domesticity in *Cligés*:

I wish rather to speak of Thessela, who was ever intent on mixing and preparing her potions. Thessela ground her potion, adding spices in abundance to sweeten and temper it. She ground it and mixed it well, and filtered it until it was perfectly clear without a trace of bitterness, for the spices she used made it sweet and aromatic. By the time the potion was ready, the day was drawing to an end. (162)

Thessela prepares the potion carefully and thoroughly, like a cook fussing over a large meal, spending her whole day in pursuit of the right mixture. Both the reason for the potion (to protect Fenice’s virginity) and the site of its preparation (the kitchen) involve conventionally feminine spaces—the body, the hearth. This is characteristic: when Arthurian women practice magic, it’s domestic magic they use.

The next time Thessela uses her magic demonstrates the type of transformative magic available to female magic-users when they are not using their healing power. To escape her marriage to the unbearable Alis, Thessela offers to provide a potion (a ploy later made famous by its appearance in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*) that will make Fenice appear dead to everyone but her. Fenice agrees to feign death, saying to Thessela, “I am in your hands; take care of me” (190): she expresses willingness to erase herself (if only temporarily) for the sake of the relationship, and the result is an extreme loss of bodily control. Thessela’s potion makes Fenice “cold, colourless, pale and stiff” and masks “her
power of speech and breathing” (189). This transformation is the obverse of that in healing: rather than reactiving her, the potion plunges Fenice into extreme passivity, the perfect tableau, reminiscent of Chrétien’s descriptions of pale, silent heroines.

The extreme passivity of Fenice’s body does not convince the local doctors that she’s actually dead. Here, domestic magic directly opposes male medicine, pitting feminine magical healing against masculine scientific healing. The head doctor examines Fenice’s “corpse” and feels “beyond any doubt, that life was still in her body” (195). The irony here is of course that Fenice is alive—the doctor is correct. But he exceeds the boundaries of masculine aggression when he and the other physicians torture Fenice to prove that she lives, devising increasingly cruel torments, moving from deceptive language and threatening to beating and scalding with hot lead (196). Fenice endures it all silently, without revealing the truth, until “more than a thousand ladies” discover what’s happening, break down the doors, and toss the doctors out the window, rescuing Fenice from unchecked masculine aggression (196-7). Fenice’s passive suffering is characteristic of heroines throughout the romances considered here: the leading ladies commonly endure cruelty from enemies and beloveds, and often inflict violence on themselves. Fenice’s situation is a mixture of victimization and self-destruction—she volunteers to crystallize her passivity for her beloved, but her enemies torture her. The actions of the thousand ladies, however, is decidedly unfeminine.

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22 Of the five heroines in Chrétien’s Arthurian romances, four endure torture and extreme suffering (Enide, Fenice, Guinevere, and Laudine). Marie’s lais are also filled with female suffering, a trend explored by Renée Curtis in “Physical and Mental Cruelty in the Lais of Marie de France.” Kathryn Gravadal studies female suffering in Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law, which traces “the naturalization of the subordination of women in medieval French culture by examining representations of rape” (1).
As I mentioned above, when the women throw the cruel doctors out the window, Chrétien says, "No ladies ever did better!" (197). The characterization of the male doctors as brutally suspicious of women marks masculine medicine as largely responsible for the medieval tension between domestic healers and licensed doctors. In this narrative, the doctors' representation implicates masculine healing and valorizes the feminine practitioner. The male healers do the opposite of healing: they inflict deadly wounds and cause great suffering. Though these women may not be domestic healers, they can join together to help one another, and at least save one woman from torture. The community of women here recalls the community of magical women in Thessely, as their combined effort results in the appropriation of a transformative power usually available only to men in these texts, the power to fatally wound and kill. This episode stands out as an indictment of the abuse of masculine power, a theme we will see reprised often in my discussion of masculine magic below.

If masculine healing magic is destructive, feminine healing magic is excessively generative. After her tortures have finally ceased, the mere sight of Thessela inspires Fenice: "When Fenice saw her nurse she felt she was already fully recovered, so much did she love, believe, and trust in her" (200). In Thessely, it seems the recipe for domestic power calls for a healthy portion of essentialist representations of women as nurturers mixed with a heaping tablespoon of herbalist earth-mother. Thessela's domestic magic helps Fenice achieve what she wants, marriage to Cligès and restoration of his throne, but in a way that does not challenge or threaten gender norms. Fenice does not take direct action or confront her foes: her character conforms to an ideal femininity that finds non-aggressive, circuitous routes to specific objectives. Thessela's solutions for Fenice involve deception, rather than fighting,
and require absolute secrecy, rather than confrontation. Generally, domestic magic in these texts reinforces an essentialized notion of feminine behavior: feminine magic thus works best when women use the existing conventions of femininity advantageously. The authors of these early romances and chronicles ratify the conventions associated with ideal femininity, stressing conformity in their representations of female characters but granting a limited transformative agency to those women who wield magical power or act in union against an obvious threat.

There is growing evidence that aristocratic women experienced a decrease in relative freedom in Norman Britain. As Judith Weiss puts it, "Noblewomen in post-Conquest Britain appear to have enjoyed less political and economic power than either Anglo-Saxon women or their counterparts in France" (7). Perhaps because an individual woman's potential to present a threat was so strictly curtailed in the social sphere that cultural representations of women did not find it necessary to villainize them. Instead, the biggest threat to the questing knights is a masculine one. Now that we have explored the construction of feminine magic, it is time to turn our attention to the other side of this binary, masculine magic. It's time to meet the giant.

IV. Who Needs Witches Anyway?: Giants of the Arthurian Otherworld

Both the romances and the chronicles are characterized by the prevalence of fighting, battle, and war sequences, which contribute to the development of a masculine ethos of aggression. In both the romance and the chronicle traditions, ideal masculinity is

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23 Marie's *Lanval*, for example, features a lady who maintains strict secrecy in her liaison, though she actively seeks out Lanval's love.
expressed through aggressive fighting tempered by elaborate codes of honor, and these codes govern not only relationships between knights, as we've seen, but those between men and women and between different social classes. In fact, scenes of battle are the most common feature of three of the four authors' works considered in this chapter. Chrétiens, Geoffrey, and Lagamon continuously engage their knights in some form of battle: for Chrétien, individual jousts are most frequent, whereas for both chroniclers, pitched battles fill the folios. Just as the knights pose a real threat to their foes, often killing them, they are a danger to the non-military men of lower classes and to nearly all women. Kings and knights have power in large part because they are lethally violent, and violence of this caliber must be controlled if it is not to destroy all societal bonds and institutions. The authors considered here provide a multitude of examples of “bad” kings and knights, and more insidious foes such as giants, dragons, or demons, behaving outrageously, murderously rampaging through the countryside using their strength to inflict all manner of torture on the people living there. These are the bad guys, the foes against whom our heroes so valiantly toil, those who should be punished for their crimes against humanity. They demonstrate by negative example exactly what makes the knights different, what makes their aggressive action heroic. They are male figures who are so masculine as to require execution: bad, evil, wicked men. We've finally found our wicked witches.

The giants are by far the most populous group of non-human foes in both the romance and chronicle traditions. Semi-human figures drawn from classical, biblical, and Celtic models, the giants populated Britain before Brutus arrived, according to the

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24 Marie’s *lais* are not marked by the frequency of battle scenes—battles appear in only a few *lais*. Although I am tempted to offer a reading of this as related to the genders of the authors, it is difficult to be certain about
chronicles. The narrative is a colonizing one: when Brutus and his people are done exploring Albion, they force "the giants whom they had discovered into the caves in the mountains" (72) and thus take over the rich land. Later, the giants try to stage a comeback, but Brutus and his folks kill all but one, whom they save so he can wrestle one of Brutus's leaders, Corineas. Corineas "enjoyed beyond all reason matching himself against such monsters" (73). There is something special about fighting giants.

What makes giants so different from their knightly counterparts? Most knights follow a strict policy of "joust first, ask questions later," and the kings of the chronicles are ur-cowboys, forcibly expanding the range of their control and making their own justice. Fighting is so prevalent among kings and knights that at first glance it's difficult to tell the difference between our heroes and their foes. Both the titular knights of romance and their large adversaries fight with little provocation, both knights and giants take women as the prize of battle, and both fall down when hit hard enough with a blunt instrument. British soldiers in the chronicles exterminate an entire community of giants to gain control of the island, and both the British kings and giants fight to the death. We cannot tell friend from foe by observing how often or with what intensity a knight or king displays aggression, as the feudal system calls for swift and brutal defense of one's lands, if necessary. Instead, it is to the chivalric code that we must look to make sense of what kind of aggression reflects appropriate masculinity and what kind of aggression will get you killed—we must examine the reason for the fight and the manner in which it is precipitated, carried out, and ended.

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25 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's article, "Decapitation and the Coming of Age" surveys early models of giants.
One fight from *The Knight with the Lion* (Yvain) demonstrates well many of the details of chivalric honor. To summarize, Gawain agrees to fight on a damsel's behalf, but that damsel turns out to be an older sister who wants to dispossess her younger sister of her rightful share of lands inherited from their father (354-5). Yvain agrees to champion the younger daughter, and before the fight begins, we learn that Arthur favors the younger sister's position: "The king saw the maiden [the younger sister] and recognized her immediately; he was pleased and delighted to see her, for her sided with her in this dispute, as he wished to do what was right" (369). When the fight begins, Gawain and Yvain do not know who they are fighting because their armor obscures their identities. The knights clash and "their lances [shatter], though they were stout and made of ash" (371). They continue the fight with their swords until they are bruised and bloody, take a quick breather, and fight again, until finally "the two ceased fighting, for each realized that, although it had been a long time coming, he had finally met his match" (372). They exchange compliments, each saying that the other is better than any foe, and eventually reveal their identities, which leads to rejoicing and embracing, and both knights concede the fight.

Chivalric fights are motivated by issues of social importance (the position of women, property-rights, building a social support network, and so on), and the convention of fair fighting ensures that individual men won't be slaughtered outright. The conventions which govern the most common form of romance fighting, the joust, also help prevent unnecessary death or dismemberment. Typically, knights begin the battle with a formal challenge or some kind of verbal aggression, move into a high-powered joust with lances (which shatter), fall or leap off their horses to continue the fight with swords, and trade blows until they are bloody or maimed. At this point, the fight can end when a knight asks
for mercy or falls down (dead or unconscious). If a knight asks for mercy, the winner usually grants it, and the losing knight must take an oath to present himself as a prisoner to whomever the winner designates. The fight between Yvain and Gawain follows this pattern until the end, when both knights realize that they are evenly matched. This is a quintessentially chivalric moment—after proving their aggressive masculinity through vicious battle, the two knights grant to each other the victory, refusing to take it for themselves because of mutual respect for one another. The representation of chivalric heroism thus provides a grammar of jousting which stresses the importance of the following things: solid justification for the fight, a formal challenge, fair combat conditions, use of protective equipment, and an opportunity for non-fatal resolution of physical conflict.

Each of these elements, if integrated into a culture of masculine aggression, could potentially help to channel (and thus limit) the more extreme violent behaviors.

If this is an example of a chivalric fight, then how is a fight with a giant different? Let’s begin by taking a close look at Yvain’s fight with the giant Harpin in Chrétien’s *The Knight with the Lion*. Physically, the giant is marked in a number of ways. The giant appears on foot, with a large club, which distinguishes him from the knights who ride a war-horse and carry lance and sword. Harpin’s cruelty is emphasized by the ratty appearance of the men he has enslaved and his inappropriate sexual appetite: he wants to give the local lord’s daughter to his lackeys, so that “she would have a thousand knaves with her constantly, all

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26 If the larger structure of jousting in the romances helps create a controlled space for the aggressive physical violence integral to the construction of medieval masculinity, the pitched battles of the chronicles perform a related function: they offer an acceptable group of men—the foes—on whom pain can happily be inflicted. In fact, because the foes of the chronicles are most frequently rivals for the land, the heroes are obligated to fight, whether to secure the land from unfriendly giants (as does Brutus) or to protect it from being overrun by the greedy Saxon hordes (as does Arthur).
covered with lice and naked like tramps and scullery-boys, and all abusing her shamefully” (346). We don’t get a good look at Harpin’s body until the fight proper begins, but once it starts we zoom in closely.

Chrétien describes Harpin’s great mass piecemeal: as Yvain slices off bits of flesh, we hear their descriptions. First, “Yvain struck him such a blow to the breast that it ripped his bearskin; he moistened the tip of his land in his blood, the body’s sauce” (347). We see the chest as immediately marked—by the bearskin (which should be armor) and then by the bleeding wound. The giant displays excessive pride (always a danger to the brave) by daring not to wear armor, as knights always do, a point which Chrétien emphasizes, saying “he had so much confidence in his brute strength that he refused to wear any armor” (347). His punishment for relying too confidently on masculine strength is to endure feminization; the blood over which Chrétien lingers is the signal of his hidden feminine fluidity, the weakness beneath the façade of strength. Yvain moves in with his sword, slicing “from his cheek enough flesh for grilling” (347); this description further develops the cannibalistic trope. From meat, the giant’s flesh turns into a tree, as the lion enters the action by clawing off the bearskin, “like bark,” and ripping away “both nerves and flesh” from Harpin’s thigh. Yvain chops off Harpin’s arm, and runs him through, finishing him. Harpin’s fall is as loud as that of “a mighty oak” (348). The description of his huge body comes piecemeal, as if the enormity is too great to reveal all at once, and the final image, of a man as towering and imposing as a mighty oak, is provided only after the giant is already done for, while taking his dying fall.

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27 See Cohen’s article for a discussion of romances as a tool in the promotion of chivalric restraints among rowdy young knights (180).
Elsewhere, it is also the giants' physical differences that most immediately separate them from the ideal representatives of masculinity, the knights. Of the nine giants who appear in Geoffrey's *Historia*, five bear descriptions lavishing special attention on their physical characteristics. Gogamog is "particularly repulsive" and "twelve feet tall," so strong that he could tear up an oak tree easily after giving it one shake (72-3). The Giant of Wickedness terrifies everyone with the "piercing glance of his eyes" and later rides naked upon the back of the Dragon of Worcester (181). The Michel's Mont giant is of "monstrous size," a "foul" and "inhuman" monster (238-9). When Arthur first meets him, his face is smeared in pig's blood, and when the giant is finally defeated, he falls "like some oak torn from its roots by the fury of the winds" (240). The visible difference of the giants signals their social difference, their refusal to bow to the laws of chivalric social interaction, their inevitable display of egregiously inappropriate behavior.

Lajamon, in particular, pays special attention to the excessive appetites of the Michel's Mont giant, providing ample evidence for the giant's wickedness. The "eotende" [giant] abducts Eleine, Arthur's kinswoman, and her old nurse, for which Arthur personally seeks revenge. Lajamon expands considerably the scene just before Arthur arrives, which took only a few lines in the *Historia*. The giant returns to his fire, where Eleine's nurse remains bound, with "twelf swine iteied tosome" [twelve swine tied together], and prepares to cook them (12962). The whole time, "he to ðan wiue loh; / and sone umbe while he laid bi ðan wife" [he looked at the woman, and almost immediately he laid with the woman] (12966-7). His rapacious desires are so excessive that the sight of an abused old woman excites him enough to abandon food for the chance to rape her again. Lajamon's adaptation
emphasizes the sexual nature of the giant’s threat: unchecked aggression leads to sexual predation.

In early Arthurian literature, the giants function as examples of extreme masculine excess—their bodies, their appetites, the violent battles required to kill them. They reproduce the gazes, behaviors, and ethos of the knight-heroes, but with a difference: they behave without restraints. Their masculinity is not subject to the chivalric system of honor or the feminizing forces of love or magic, as is that of the knights and prophets. The giants are monstrous because their magical, semi-human existence places them beyond the margins of normative masculine behavior, which require the gender mutability provided by chivalric love and magical power. Both the romances and the chronicles participate together in using the giant figure to examine what the loss of mutability means for masculinity—violent aggression. The giants, the magical, essential manifestation of hyper-masculinization, embody an extrapolation of the aggressive urges so valued and so carefully regulated by chivalry. Killing the giants removes the problem of unrestrained masculine power from society.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen offers an analysis of the unique nature of the giant figure in early chronicle and romance in “Decapitation and Coming of Age: Constructing Masculinity and the Monstrous.” Cohen reads the decapitation of giants in the chronicles as both a political act declaring Arthur’s international prowess and a coming of age ritual, where the victor obtains the power of the dead monster. The romances preserve the second function, but the political valence disappears in these more personal stories of achievement. Cohen argues: “The defeat of the monster is an oniric fantasy of the triumph of order and a vindication of the tight channeling of violent drives into socially beneficial expression over
the usurpation of authority and status by transgressive individualism” (178). Specifically, the giant’s defeat “inscribes the romance compulsion to restraint, especially to sexual restraint” (181). At the same time, if there is such a thing as ideal masculinity, then there must also be other kinds of masculinities available: “The display of the severed head is at once an assertion of masculinity and an admission of its constructed nature—of the possibility of other masculinities, of a different gendering of behaviors” (181). The giants’ difference is far too wicked to let be, and the early Arthurian giants are systematically exterminated.

Arthurian giants reflect anxiety about violent masculinity in feudal society. Christopher Dyer discusses the patriarchal structure of feudal Europe in Making a Living in the Middle Ages, detailing the intricate webs of masculine authority spanning economic, political, and social spaces and the accompanying weight of responsibility. Richard Kaeuper argues that the chivalry in the romances was “an active social force” organizing the massive male violence that pervaded twelfth- and thirteenth-century medieval culture: “Chivalry was a code of violence in defense of a prickly sense of honor (and the honorable acquisition of loot to be distributed in open-handed largess) just as thoroughly as it was a code of restraint” (99-100). Even within the patriarchal feudal system, some men found their options limited, especially younger sons: as France and Joseph Gies argue in Marriage and Family in the Middle Ages, younger sons throughout Europe were often “disfranchised by primogeniture” and in England they were “not even classed as noble” (142). Because of their precarious situations, “young knights led a life in which pleasure mingled with violence, death was a commonplace, and turbulence reigned” (143). Though violence and masculinity were inextricably entangled, chivalry provided a means of managing that violence (although certainly not exterminating it).
The necessity for ordering the chaotic world of male violence results in literary representations, like those we have seen in this discussion, which privilege those men who allow forces like love or magic temporarily to feminize them. Normative masculinity is characterized by a gender mutability, as demanded by chivalry and enabled by forces like love and magic, and giantism seems to be the result of an inability or unwillingness to engage in submissive behavior. But is there a boundary in the other direction? Can someone have too much mutability, too much access to transformative power? To answer that, we must ask the prophet.

V. Transforming the Future: Prophecy and Liminality

To prophesy is to speak the future into existence. The prophet says, “this will be,” and for the prophecy to be true—that is, for it to be prophecy at all—it must “be.” The prophet, like a mother, births the prophetic utterance from the womb of the mind, and in turn generates the events which will transpire. The prophet, like God, speaks (“let there be light”) and it is so (“and there was light”). Prophetic speech transforms the world, determines the future by narrating it. The power of prophetic magic is the power of transformation.

A glimpse into antiquity reveals that representation of prophecy’s transformative influence evolved within a complex literary tradition. Writers in Greece and Rome commonly represented prophetic knowledge as determining the future, rather than merely

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28 I thank Naomi Miller for her observation that prophecy can be read as birthing the future.
29 This passage appears in Genesis 1:3. When referring to biblical material, I have generally tried to avoid quoting specific passages, because of the problematic nature of biblical translations. In the two places where I have quoted directly, I have used the translation of the New International Version.
Both pagan and Christian theologians attempted to solve the paradox of fate (or divine foreknowledge) and free will: to predict the future is to dictate it, and thus foreclose the possibility for human agency. By the time Geoffrey wrote the *Historia*, prophetic writing had developed a tradition of ambiguity which lent itself to myriad political (re)interpretations over the course of many generations. Because Galfridian prophecy involved animal imagery and vague genealogical references, almost any group could find a way to use the *Prophetie* to validate a range of political positions. As prophecy transforms the future, so readers of prophetic writing transform its meaning; transformative power seeps magically out of the narrative and into the hermeneutic space.

We can observe the effect of the transformative process of prophetic interpretation by tracing the development of the figure most commonly associated with prophecy in the Artharian legend, Merlin. Though the French writers of Arthuriana in the twelfth century show little interest in Merlin, his notoriety in the English chronicles is unparalleled. Merlin makes only the briefest of appearances in Chretien de Troyes’s influential Arthurian romances. In *Erec and Enide*, Chretien refers to the time of Merlin (119), implying that his day had long passed by the time Arthur and his knights roamed England. Chretien’s Merlin is a name only; we don’t learn anything else about him from the descriptions in the romances, as he is merely part of the magical landscape, a decorative addition to the

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30 See Fritz Grafs *Magic in the Ancient World*, especially Chapter 6, “Literary Representations of Magic,” for a discussion of this trend drawing on Lucan’s *Pharsalia* and Thoecritis’s *Pharmakeutria* (175-204).
31 Both Plato (in the *Republic*, among other places) and Aristotle (in *Nicomachean Ethics*, for instance) consider this problem, as do Augustine (in *City of God*) and Boethius (in *The Consolation of Philosophy*).
32 Keith Thomas discusses this tradition in *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, with an especially detailed section on the invocation of political prophecy during times of crisis from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries (113-150, 389-434); Karen Moranski corroborates his position in “The *Prophetie Merlini*, Animal Symbolism, and the Development of Political Prophecy in Late Medieval England and Scotland”; Jean Blacker analyzes “political apocalyptic” prophecy in “Where Wace Feared to Tread” (39-40).
fantastical environment of the knights' quests borrowed from the *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Marie de France neglects Merlin entirely. He appears not once in her *laís*, not even as decoration. Merlin is an English obsession.

Scholars usually credit Geoffrey of Monmouth with developing the figure of Merlin from oral Welsh tradition and popularizing him in the *Historia*, the *Prophetie Merluni*, and the *Vita Merluni*. Geoffrey's *Historia*, in particular, is the earliest text to collect the elements still associated with the figure of Merlin (such as his association with the birth of Arthur, his magical power, his mysterious father, his precocious childhood, his frequent disappearances, and so on). Merlin receives more attention in both the *Historia* and the *Brut* than any figure but Arthur. The enigmatic prophet is unique in his representation; nowhere in either text does another magician play such a critical role in the country's governance, nor does any other prophet occupy a position of such esteem and influence. Merlin is the premier prophet of the chronicles, and Arthur's reign is indebted to him.

In his extremely popular Latin chronicle, Geoffrey represents Merlin's prophetic power as linked to his ability to control his reputation through manipulation of his own body. Lagamon's text develops the connection more fully, emphasizing the relationship between prophetic utterance and the body. Through the figure of the prophet, both the chronicles and (to a lesser degree) the romances offer alternative constructions of gender which subvert the boundary between masculinity and femininity. In the chronicles (particularly the *Brut*), Merlin's control over his physical appearance manifests in at least two main areas: a) the strategic appropriation of visual gender markers of both masculinity and

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39 For a detailed documentation of Merlin's presence within early Welsh literature, see A. O. H. Jarman's "The Merlin Legend and the Welsh Tradition of Prophecy," in Bromwich, Jarman, and Roberts's *The Arthur of the*
femininity and b) the transformation of his body into the physical likeness of another. Merlin’s ability to transform his body to best suit the current situation provides the foundation for his immense prophetic power, but that same ability forces him into a perpetual state of liminality as well. Because Merlin is so extreme, his gendered behaviors do not really function as plausible reconfigurations of gender difference, and thus the space for gender play, while present, is limited.

Transforming Gender: The Prophet as Androgyne

Nicole Loraux’s *The Experiences of Tiresias* employs the figure of the titular androgynous prophet to suggest that ancient Greece privileged male knowledge of both masculinity and femininity. When Tiresias, “whose experience of both sexes gives him knowledge about feminine pleasure,” reveals the privileged knowledge he gained while transformed into a woman, two things happen: first Hera blinds him, and then Zeus grants him the power of prophecy (11). Though the female figure in this myth is enraged at male possession of female secrets, the male figure endorses the knowledge, even increasing Tiresias’s ability to obtain additional privileged knowledge. It is the transformation from male to female, from masculinity to femininity, which precipitates the renown Tiresias enjoys as a seer. Androgyny and prophecy are linked for Tiresias in a causal relationship; male possession of feminine knowledge generates prophecy. In the early Arthurian literature, as in the classical texts, mutability of gender plays an important role in the development of

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Fisch (117-46). For a discussion of the two Merlin traditions (Merlin Ambrosius and Merlin Celidonius/Silvestris), see also Jean Blacker’s “Where Wace Feared to Tread” (36-52).
prophetic power. And in Arthurian literature, when we talk about prophecy, we cannot
avoid thinking of that enigmatic old wizard, Merlin.

Merlin's representation in the English chronicles participates in the tradition of
androgyny exemplified by Tiresias, whose echo continued to resound throughout medieval
England (and well into the early modern period). One of the conditions of Merlin's
prophetic power is his ability to participate in the most extreme of gendered behaviors at
will, fluidly using the conventions of both masculinity and femininity to his advantage. In
the chronicles, Merlin possesses a wondrous ability to adopt with equal facility behaviors
conventionally associated with femininity and masculinity, strategically employing both poles
of gendered binary systems such as active/passive, public/private, body/spirit, and
presence/absence. This gender mutability contributes to the power and efficacy of Merlin's
magic, which manifests occasionally as shape-shifting or engineering, but most frequently as
prophecy. Merlin's figure draws on a common trope for both the romance and chronicle
traditions, where the men who practice prophecy commonly possess gender mutability—so
frequently, in fact, that the authors suggest an intricate connection between it and magical
power, though Lagamon's Merlin is the only figure who maintains an active control over his
own androgyny. Prophetic power is, after all, transformative power, the power of breaking
conventions, of crossing boundaries. Transforming the body and transforming the world
are not so very different.

In Marie's *Yonec*, Muldumarec, the shape-shifting hawk-knight who fathers Yonec,
exhibits the power of prophecy after receiving his death-wound. From the beginning of the
*laí*, Muldumarec has a great degree of control over his participation in gendered behaviors.
He can transform from hawk to knight and back again, possessing powerful shape-shifting
magic perfectly suited to gender mutability in its shifting appropriation of the forms of things. Though he may not appear to the unnamed lady until she has wished for him, thereafter the hawk-knight has the power to visit any time she is alone (131-34, 199-210). This arrangement juxtaposes masculine and feminine roles; it combines an active power—Muldumarec comes to her—with a reactive implementation of that power—he can only come when the lady calls for him.

Muldumarec's gender mutability becomes far more extreme than this subtle juxtaposition as the story progresses. As part of a plan to convince her of his Christianity, Muldumarec abandons the form of a "handsome and noble knight" and takes on the lady's form, transforming himself from an ideal male figure into an ideal female figure, from masculinity to femininity (115). He convinces her, and the two enjoy a clandestine relationship, the fruits of Muldumarec's magic, until the suspicious husband finally catches the lovers. When the husband gets involved, trapping and fatally wounding the hawk-knight, Muldumarec loses his transformative power, becoming permanently feminized, with a weakened body, leaking a trail of blood. The death-wound of this knight forces him into a permanently feminized role, an extreme example of passivity, silence, and feminine fluidity.

Before Marie's hawk-knight dies, while his body endures the suffering of his death wound but before his ability to self-construct has been snuffed out entirely, he displays a tremendous prophetic power. On his deathbed, the hawk-knight receives a visit from his lady, who traveled to his otherworldly land by following his blood-trail, and he prophesies that their son, Yonec, will one day grow to be a great knight. At a feast, Muldumarec's son will discover his tomb, at which time the lady will tell Yonec his father's story and present him with his father's sword (342-436). The hawk-knight is a true prophet: when the fated
feast finally happens, Yonec kills his step-father, the murderous husband, fulfilling the prophecy and avenging his real father's death (465-544). Muldumarec's prophecy not only comes true, but secures his succession, as Yonec becomes lord of the land (544-550).

In this example, Muldumarec possesses powerful transformative magic—his prediction avenges his death and provides his child with wealth and power. But he accesses prophetic knowledge only after the destruction of his body and the consequent revocation of his transformative ability. Though Muldumarec's prophetic knowledge is accurate, Marie does not offer prophecy as an effective means for obtaining information for average people; in fact, she marks this prophet as unable to sustain life. The wages of prophecy are death, it seems. And yet, Merlin, the most popular Arthurian magician, whose mysterious life became fodder for both awe and mockery in the following centuries, is primarily a prophet. Unlike the abortive prophets of early Arthurian romance, the Merlin of the chronicles navigates the tricky waters of gender mutability with great skill and showmanship, landing himself eventually upon the fertile island of prophetic power. The French romances warn against the difficulty of using prophetic power without sacrificing one's life, and the chronicles reinforce that warning in the figure of Merlin.

Miranda Griffen argues that Yonec, Milun, and the anonymous TydoreliXi reflect "patriarchy's anxiety that it has to rely on the body and, above all, the word of woman to guarantee its stability: a fear underlying a good deal of medieval (and modern) misogyny" (51). Griffen claims that the narrative undermines any degree of certainty about Yonec's paternity by implying that the entire affair with Mildumarec was the fantasy of the imprisoned wife (52-3). The preponderance of magical material in the romances with which Marie's lais share so much leads me to believe that this is a magical, rather than an imagined, episode. Except for the possibility that Mildumarec was merely a figment of a distraught wife's imagination, the narrative elements generally conspire to support Yonec as Mildumarec's "true" son: Marie's declaration that she will tell the story of how Yonec's parents met, the positioning of the husband as jealous captor, the public revelation of Yonec's parentage, and the presentation of Yonec as true heir at the end of the la illustrate all suggest that Mildumarec was Yonec's father.

Chretien also features prophets with gender mutability, such as the fool of Perceval (who predicts Kay's defeat) or the knight in Yonec (whose body becomes a kind of prophetic sign).
In his extremely popular chronicle, Geoffrey represents Merlin’s prophetic power as linked to his ability to appropriate masculine and feminine behaviors. The *Historia* presents Merlin as alternately masculine and feminine, a trend Lagamon exaggerates in the *Brut* by emphasizing Merlin’s careful and deliberate orchestration of his own gender construction. Geoffrey commonly uses femininity to signal the prophetic moment, and Lagamon builds on this, creating a Merlin who uses gender conventions to achieve what he wants.

Geoffrey introduces us to Merlin very briefly. Advised by the local wise-men to find a fatherless boy to sacrifice, Vortigern sends his men on the search. They rest from their long search in the outskirts of Carmarthen, where some local children are playing in a field. Geoffrey writes, “A sudden quarrel broke out between two of the lads, whose names were Merlin and Dinabutius” (167). Geoffrey embroils Merlin in an argument as soon as we meet him, introducing him in a context of aggressive behavior, and Lagamon’s version of this scene also strongly marks Merlin as a bully. Lagamon describes the scene: “Vmben ane stunde heo bigunnen striuinge, / alse hit wes auer laje imong childrene plffige; / }>e an }>e o6erne smat and he j>eos duntes abad” [After a while they began fighting, as it was ever among children at play; the one smote the other and he endured the dints] (7765-67). The one who smote turns out to be Merlin, accused by the unfortunate recipient of the blow, Dinabuz. Merlin thus begins his quick rise to fame by striking another child.

Geoffrey and Lagamon both introduce Merlin by way of his aggression, a trait properly belonging to those ideal representatives of masculinity, the knights, but not

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36 There is still critical debate over whether or not Lagamon used Geoffrey’s text in addition to his primary source, Wace’s *Roman de Brut*. Regardless of which position one defends (and there are many), Lagamon’s choices about retaining or altering Wace’s text invest the entire text of the *Brut* with Lagamon’s approval. Whether following Wace or deviating from him, Lagamon’s text is a result of his decisions; I therefore treat Lagamon’s text as a unique work in its own right, not as a translation.
necessarily to Merlin, a fatherless boy. Laȝamon’s Dinabuz voices the argument: Merlin is inappropriately aggressive here because Dinabuz is a “kinges sune” [king’s son], whereas Merlin is “of noht icumen” [sprung from nothing] (7772). Dinabuz actually overstates the case: Merlin’s maternal grandfather was a king, but his unknown paternity clearly convinces Dinabuz that Merlin is of no account. Though Merlin’s gendered behavior transgresses what Dinabuz sees as a class boundary, potentially creating trouble for Merlin, it is precisely Merlin’s appropriation of masculine gender conventions (regardless of their acceptability for his class or biological sex) that allows him to escape unharmed both the mildly dangerous situation with Dinabuz and the more deadly one to follow with Vortigern. Merlin’s fight with Dinabuz reveals him to be the fatherless boy Vortigern’s magicians claimed must be sacrificed to solve the problem of the king’s unstable fortress foundation. Though this incident prompts his potentially deadly interaction with Vortigern, it also precipitates Merlin’s fame, as it allows for the revelation of his prophetic power. Of the two, Laȝamon’s is the more extreme representation, but both authors introduce this important figure as aggressively masculine. Though Merlin’s aggressive behavior here causes him to be taken into custody, both writers characterize him as easily appropriating femininity and masculinity in order to reclaim authority over his body.

Merlin’s inappropriate aggression in this scene places him at mercy of Vortigern and (temporarily) restricts him to a submissive, feminized role. In both chronicles, Merlin and his mother have no choice but to submit to the demands of the king: Vortigern’s political and physical power force Merlin into a passive position, the recipient of threats and accusations. In the Brut, Vortigern’s questions to Merlin’s (unnamed) mother carry an implicit threat, as he repeats the phrase, “Gode læuedi, sæi me—sæl scal iwurce” [Good lady,
say to me—it would be good for you to do so] before asking about her family and Merlin’s father (7819, and again at 7826). Telling her that it would be good for her to answer his questions is tantamount to threatening her should she refuse, and the subtlety is not lost on Merlin’s mother, who submits reluctantly but politely, answering all Vortigern’s questions, narrating her story humbly, and bowing her head demurely when she finishes (7805-55). Her obedient, submissive behavior marks her as conventionally feminine, and she remains properly within the boundaries dictated by conventions of class and gender.

Though he should be likewise constrained by his youth and class to submit to his monarch, Merlin does not wait for his questioners in either version, instead taking the initiative and interrogating Vortigern. Geoffrey includes a detail highlighting the presumptuous nature of Merlin’s decision to question his sovereign. Vortigern’s reaction to Merlin’s demands in this scene reflects the strangeness of his behavior: “The King was amazed at what Merlin said” (168). Merlin uses masculine aggression in an extreme way—inappropriately questioning the monarch—to gain control of the situation, manipulating first the king and then the magicians. After challenging the king, Merlin frightens the magicians into silence, extreme passivity; his offense in this case is to challenge the magicians, asking them to explain what he knows they do not understand, and providing the answer when they are silent (168-9). His prophetic knowledge provides him with the crucial information that finally bests the magicians, and his calculated appropriation of aggression allows him to transgress the class boundaries that would otherwise prevent him from controlling the situation.

In the Brut, Merlin models his language after the king’s questions to his mother, saying: “King, þine men me habbeoþ inumen, and ich æm to þe icumen; / and ich iwiten
wulle what beon þi wille, / and for wulche þinge ich æm ibroht to kinge” [King, your men have taken me, and I have come to you; and I will know your will, and for which reason I am brought to the king] (7884-6). Through his language here, Merlin assumes the masculine, questioning gaze of the king: just as Vortigern designates the social position of Merlin’s mother by calling her “lady” at the beginning of his question, so Merlin specifies Vortigern’s rank when he begins his interrogation, naming him as “king”; just as Vortigern provides motivation for Merlin’s mother to answer him in his veiled threat, Merlin stresses the injustice of his unwarranted arrest before demanding to know why he is there; and just as Vortigern exposes Merlin’s mother’s private knowledge of Merlin’s father to the whole court, Merlin publicly reveals Vortigern’s sinister plans for him. This strategy reverses their roles, allowing Merlin to temporarily appropriate Vortigern’s (masculine) power.

Both Geoffrey’s and Laȝamon’s narratives offer depictions of Merlin using aggression to help him overcome the powerlessness of his low-ranking position in society when taken into custody by Vortigern. In Laȝamon’s version of this scene, Merlin uses the same aggressive questioning with Vortigern and his magicians as he did in the Historia, but couples it with the more feminized, passive strategy of arranging for someone else to perform the murder of Joram and his followers. In the Brut, Merlin’s appropriation of masculine behavior—in this case, active pursuit of his potential enemies—begins as soon as his mother finishes her story about Merlin’s spiritual father, as it does in the Historia. Challenging the king, dangerous behavior for a bastard of any age, would be particularly inappropriate for a child; that Merlin does it so aggressively speaks to the strategic extremity of his behavior—Laȝamon’s Merlin more extreme still.
In the *Brut*, when Merlin hears that Vortigern wants to kill him, he explodes into rage: “Nulle hit nauere God seolf, þæ gumenene is lauerd, / þat þi castel stonde for mine heorte blode, / ne nauere þi stan wal stille ne ligge” [Never will God himself, who is lord of men, allow that the castle will stand for my heart-blood, nor will the stone wall ever lay still] (7906-8). Merlin identifies Joram as the false prophet whose prediction called for Merlin’s blood, and he demands that the king give him the prophets’ heads if he can prove them false (7909-22). These details do not appear in Geoffrey’s text, and their inclusion here marks Merlin as extreme: he becomes extremely angry, presumes to speak for God, and then demands that Joram and his followers be executed if they cannot meet his challenge. The rest of the scene is similar to Geoffrey’s, with Merlin questioning Joram and his followers, although Lagamon draws it out, adding dialogue and new details to lengthen the scene and heighten the dramatic tension. Because Merlin has demanded Joram’s death if he cannot answer correctly, however, this scene becomes more than Merlin’s aggressive shaming of the older men; Merlin embraces a passive manipulation here, accomplishing an aggressive feat (murder—conventionally accomplished by men) by proxy, using a non-physical strategy to accomplish a bodily effect. Here Lagamon’s Merlin uses both active and passive strategies to accomplish not only the saving of his own skin (which he manages in the *Historia*), but revenge on his would-be executioners as well.

The *Historia* characterizes Merlin as displaying exaggeratedly feminized behaviors just before and after his prophetic trances. Immediately after Merlin’s aggressive confrontation with Vortigern, when asked to explain the meaning of the two fighting dragons discovered under the foundation of Vortigern’s fortress, Merlin “burst into tears,” entering a prophetic trance and narrating the *Prophetie Merlini* (171). Merlin moves from aggressive questioning to
extremely feminized crying, and this shift marks his greatest prophetic utterance. Merlin
cries before prophesying elsewhere in Geoffrey’s narrative as well: when ordered by Uther to
explain the ominous dragon-star that appears at Aurelius’s death, Merlin “burst into tears,
summoned up his familiar spirit, and prophesied aloud” (201). As Fiona Tolhurst
Neuendorf argues, Merlin’s tearful prophetic trances “evoke the prophetic powers of the
Cumaean Sibyl and other prophetic figures in the Aeneid” (28). In addition to classical
models, Geoffrey’s descriptions of Merlin associate him with emotional sensitivity (his tears),
affective spirituality (his tears, trances, and prophesy), and witchcraft (his familiar spirit),
behaviors medieval authors often attribute to women.37 Prophecy and femininity become
intertwined here, as Merlin’s prophetic knowledge appears during his bouts of feminized
behavior. Geoffrey characterizes Merlin as feminine through behaviors like these, and in
other scenes (like the one discussed below) hints at the self-conscious control of his own
gender construction which Lagamon would develop more fully.

Geoffrey sets Merlin up in direct opposition to the masculine quality of strength
during the trip to fetch Giant’s Ring from Mount Killaraus. Merlin challenges Uther’s
troops: “Try your strength, young men . . . and see whether skill can do more than brute
strength, or strength more than skill, when it comes to dismantling stones!” (197). Merlin
designates “brute strength” as obtaining to “young men,” implicating both gender and age in
his construction of physical prowess, linking masculinity with youth (and conversely, by
implication, femininity with age). When the young men fail to move the stones, Merlin

37 For documentation of emotional sensitivity and affective spirituality as gendered feminine by medieval
authors, see Caroline Walker Bynum’s Jesus as Mother, especially Chapter Four, “Jesus as Mother and Abbot as
Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing” (110-169). Scholars arguing that witchcraft is a
feminine (or feminized) practice are so numerous as to defy summary, but a few I rely heavily on are Diane
derides strength, laughing at the men before dismantling the ring "more easily than you could ever believe" with his skill and his "gear" (198). By rejecting strength, Merlin aligns himself with femininity. He does not use his body to move the stones, but his magical knowledge, accomplishing what he should not be able to do by embracing an otherness that convention suggests should not belong to him (he is, after all, a young man himself).

Geoffrey explicitly condones Merlin's strategy in this scene: "Merlin . . . put the stones up in a circle round the sepulchre, in exactly the same way as they had been arranged on Mount Killaraus in Ireland, thus proving that his artistry was worth more than any brute strength" (198). In this scene, Merlin overcomes a physical obstacle while rejecting an important marker of medieval masculinity, strength, using a more feminine strategy involving magic to accomplish what strength could not. As he also employs masculine behavior to overcome a class barrier when he confronts Vortigern and his magicians, his success with both strategies seems to endorse his use of the gender binary to his advantage.

Merlin's brand of appropriated androgyny affords him great power, and Lajamon's description of his ritual among the stones reflects the magical cachet he enjoys in the chronicles. Though Geoffrey's Merlin uses his skill and some equipment to move the stones, acting less like a wizard than an engineer (197), Lajamon's Merlin performs a distinctly magical ritual in front of a politically important audience, an act that contributes to his carefully constructed (feminine) mystique. After Merlin clears the Giants' Ring, emptying his stage, he begins his show by riding around and examining the ring. Lajamon describes

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38 Judith Weiss argues in "The Power and the Weakness of Women in Anglo-Norman Romance" that "learning, skill, and wisdom" are often attributed to the female characters in Anglo-Norman romance; she reads skill as a feminine trait when opposed to masculine strength (13).
the performance: "prie he eode abuten, wiðinnen and wiðuten, / and sturede his tunge alse
he bede sunge” [thrice he rode around, within and without, and moved his tongue as if he
sang/chanted prayers] (8701-2). There is no special equipment, only the power of Merlin’s
magic, which Lagamon tells us involves Merlin’s body (moving throughout the stones) and
his language (the chanting). Merlin’s body and his language are critical for the efficacy of his
magic—the men are able to move the stones when Merlin’s ritual is complete (8708-9). Just
as his magic works in this scene by relying on both his body and his speech, his
appropriation of gender relies on the same two factors. Merlin absents his body from
masculinity by not acting (and thus opposes strength, a physical manifestation of masculinity),
yet he uses language aggressively to assert his authority over Uther and his men.

In the chronicles of both Geoffrey and Lagamon, Merlin often appropriates the
conventions of both masculinity and femininity. Though Lagamon’s Merlin is the only
figure who practices gender ambiguity self-consciously, other Arthurian prophets also
commonly display both masculine and feminine behaviors, often to such an extreme that
their humanity is threatened. These extreme cases function as a warning which reinforces
the normative gender conventions popularized by heroic figures; though magical
manipulation of gender may be profitable, there is a catch. Even Merlin, adept at self-
construction, sometimes spins wildly into the liminal spaces of humanity, where life and
death are locked in infinite flirtation.

_Shifting Subjectivities: The Prophet at the Border of Humanity_

Gender mutability characterizes Arthurian prophets, as we have seen. In the
chronicles, Merlin’s magic involves his ability to construct and reconstruct himself, especially
through his gendered behaviors. His most important act of magic, however (the shape-shifting deception required to orchestrate Arthur's conception) moves from assumption of gender roles to assumption of another subjectivity. Transformative prophetic power allows for gender mutability, but it impacts the development of the prophesying subject in other ways as well. Through their representations of Merlin, Geoffrey and Lagamon work together in suggesting that magical power relies not only on gender appropriation, but on self-reconstruction. Successful magic happens when the practitioner can adopt alternate subjectivities and not lose the self. In the two figures we've seen, the prophets manage this task with greater or lesser success: Marie's Muldumarec excels at transforming his self, changing subjectivities with great facility until the husband's careful trap locks him into a permanently feminized form, but Merlin is far more successful.

In the Historia, Merlin arranges Arthur's conception by transforming Uther, Ulfin, and himself into Gorlois, Jordan, and Britaelis, respectively. The three must look, act, and speak as their likenesses for the disguises to work. Though Merlin's "new" and "unheard-of" drugs will make Uther "resemble [Gorlois] in every respect," Uther completes the ruse "by the lying things he said to [Ygerne], things which he planned with great skill" (206-7). Appearance is critical to identity, but a convincing imitation requires more than physical likeness—speech and behavior represent the subject as well. Construction of the self and construction of gender both demand participation from mind and body: one looks and acts the part, whatever it may be.

Lagamon's version of this scene expands the elements necessary for a convincing disguise. When Merlin offers to help Uther deceive Ygerne, he says: "ich con swulcne lechecraft þe leof þe scal iwurðen, / þat al scullen þine cheres iwurðen swule þas eorles, / þi
specche, þi dede imong þere dugeþe, þine hors and þine iwede, and al swa þu scalt ride” [I know such magical craft as will be valuable to you, that your whole appearance shall become like the earl’s, your speech, your behavior among the warriors, your horse and your clothes, and you shall ride like him] (9448-51). Læamon describes identity in terms of appearance and speech, as does Geoffrey, but also reminds readers that personal demeanor, clothes, equipment, and bodily movement must also reflect the person one wishes to imitate for a disguise to be effective: representing the subject thus involves an array of signifiers.

Læamon expands Geoffrey’s construction of the self, but his characterization of Merlin’s transformative power differs from that in the earlier chronicle. Geoffrey’s Merlin uses drugs to transform Uther, Ulfin, and himself so that they can successfully imitate specific subjects. Læamon, however, creates an ambiguity that only intensifies Merlin’s mysterious ability to shift his subjectivity. Læamon simply does not mention how Merlin transformed his party. He offers an extended version of Merlin’s explanation of identity, as I have discussed, but elides over the magical transformation, saying only: “þas þinges forþriehte þus weoren idihte” [these things were done forthwith] (9472). Though he notes the difficulty of the magical operation in his lengthy list of elements required, Læamon doesn’t explain how Merlin accomplishes the transformation—Merlin just does it. This strategy has a dual effect: 1) it emphasizes the impossibly difficult nature of the task, suggesting that only someone very powerful, like Merlin, could ever perform it and 2) it implies that no one really understands how Merlin’s magic works. Merlin is magic because he can transform one subject into another without recourse to drugs. Here, transformative magic is cerebral, not requiring the domestic props of feminine healing magic. Merlin has some other power, a power related to his ability to transform the future by predicting it. Merlin’s secret
knowledge gives him power: he fathoms the subject, and he is the only one who does. This is what makes him different from others, the foundation of his magical power.

One of the effects of Merlin’s unique representation in the Brut is that Laȝamon allows him to wrest his autonomy back from the kings who inevitably want to use his abilities for their own ends. Whereas the Merlin of the Historia is at each king’s beck and call, the Merlin of the Brut commands the three kings with whom he interacts, only assisting when he chooses, and the kings must cajole and bribe him, sometimes with little success. The fact that the kings must search for Merlin in the Brut, instead of ordering him to come as they do in the Historia, reflects the increased stature Merlin enjoys in the later work. For example, when Aurelius’s engineers are stymied by the problem of raising an ever-lasting monument to the fallen Britons, bishop Tremorien suggests that Aurelius seek Merlin’s help.

His advice stresses how careful they must be when entreatying Merlin to come:

\[
gif \ aei\ mon\ hine\ mihte\ ifinden\ uppe\ jissere\ wælde\ 
and\ to\ je\ ibringen\ þurh\ æies\ cunnes\ þinge,
and\ þu\ his\ iwille\ drigên\ woldest,\he\ þe\ wolde\ runen\ selest\ ræden,
hu\ þu\ mihtest\ þis\ weorc\ makien\ strong\ and\ sterk
þet\ a\ mihte\ ilæsten\ þa\ while\ men\ leoueden.\ (8480-85)
\]

If any man might find him anywhere in the country, and bring him to you through any skillful means, and (if) you would do his will, he would provide you with the best counsel, how you might make this work strong and enduring so that it might last while men live.

Tremorian’s long list of conditions for Merlin’s participation emphasizes how much power Merlin has; if they can find him, if they can get him to come to the king, and if they acquiesce
to his demands, then he will give them advice. When Aurelius’s knights finally find Merlin, waiting for them by a spring, they are “afæred þat he fleon wolde” [afraid that he would flee], unsure that the king’s authority will influence the mysterious “witege” [prophet/magician] (8513). Merlin reminds them that he is not obligated to obey the king, telling them, “tif ich swa wolde, ne mihte ge me finden” [if I so wished, you could never find me] (8517). Merlin’s statement here reiterates his autonomy: no power but his own can possibly move him to answer the king’s summons. Though the entire kingdom must obey the king, Merlin can do as he pleases, appropriating the masculine authority of the monarch.

Uther has more trouble than Aurelius in finding Merlin and obtaining his help. After Uther’s coronation, Merlin disappears, and Laȝamon writes: “Merlin him ætwende, nuste he nauere whidere, / no nauere a worlde-riche to whan he bicome” [Merlin went away from him (Uther), he had no idea where, nor what in the world had become of him] (9070-1). Uther cannot locate Merlin at all, despite offering “gold and gersume” [gold and treasure] to anyone who can find him (9075). Merlin’s protracted absence here fires Uther’s emotions: “þe king wes swi6e saeri and sorhful an hcorte / for ne les he nauere leouere mon seo86en he wes an liuen, / neouere nennc o5er, ne Aurilie his bro&er” [The king was very sorrowful and sad at heart because he had never, in all his life, lost a man he valued more, not even his brother Aurelien] (9082-84). That Uther values Merlin over Aurelius reflects Merlin’s elevated social position: he is more important than both monarch and brother. Though Geoffrey’s Merlin is certainly a key figure in the Historia, Laȝamon’s Merlin outshines every monarch he encounters.

In addition to Merlin’s positioning as superior in power and influence to kings, Laȝamon presents Merlin as taking the initiative in matters Geoffrey assigns only to his
monarchs. In the Giant's Ring episode, for example, whereas Geoffrey’s Aurelius “ordered Merlin to erect round the burial-place the stones which he had brought from Ireland” (198), Laȝamon’s Aurelius is not even there when Merlin reassembles the stones. When Aurelius, “i þan norþ ende” [in the north end] of England, hears the news, he calls an assembly to celebrate Merlin’s achievement (8718-25). Laȝamon praises Merlin’s actions here: “Mærlin heom gon ræren alse heo stoden ærer, / swa næuer nan oþer mon þene craft ne cuþe don; / ne næuer ær þer biforen nes na mon swa wise iboren / þæt cuþe þet weorc rihten and þæ stanes dihten” [Merlin did erect them as they stood before, as no other man could ever do with magical arts, no never before was any man so wise born, who could perform that task and move the stones] (8714-7). Not only does Merlin act without consulting the king, but Laȝamon commends him as the only person capable of accomplishing this amazing feat. In the Brut, Merlin is more powerful than the king because he is unequalled in skill and wisdom, because he is unique. His power is a function of his singularity.

We have seen how Merlin occupies a unique position within Laȝamon’s narrative as an androgynous magician. We have also seen how Laȝamon emphasizes Merlin’s magical power, creating a figure of more mystery and influence than the Merlin of the Historia. In the Brut, Merlin’s especially adept appropriation of both masculinity and femininity, and the consequent heightening of his magical prowess, distinguishes him from the other normative characters in the chronicles. In Laȝamon’s chronicle, Merlin is more powerful, but his constant movement between genders and subjectivities becomes excessive, transgressive—prophetic power does not come without consequences. During his most powerful prophetic moments, Merlin faces the loss of his humanity.
Lagamon’s descriptions of Merlin’s behavior during and after his prophetic trances emphasize Merlin’s extreme difference, his liminal humanity. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva describes the abject as that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). In his ability to shift between different genders and subjectivities, Merlin occupies an abject, liminal space: as a prophet, he is “in-between” divinity and humanity; his gender frequently becomes “ambiguous”; and his transformative power treats borders as malleable. Merlin is a figure of abjection, but what kind of abjection? Kristeva distinguishes a pre-Christian abject from a Christian notion of abjection, arguing that the pre-Christian sacred is two-sided. One side, purity, privileges “the social bond” derived from the father-murder fantasy described in Freudian psychoanalysis, and the other “like a lining, more secret still and invisible, non-representable, oriented toward those uncertain spaces of unstable identity” is the impure abject, which must be expelled to reinforce social boundaries (57-8). For the “Christic subjectivity,” on the other hand, the abject “is no longer exterior. It is permanent and comes from within,” and it changes “the pure/impure dichotomy into an outside/inside one” (113-4). Because Christian theology suggests that “nothing that enters a man from outside can make him unclean,” a figure like Christ, whose inner purity is without question, can surround himself with lepers, prostitutes, and other people of questionable cleanness. Like Christ, whose abjection eventually leads to his martyrdom (further proof of his purity), Merlin’s outward signs of abjection—his beast-like seizures, his deathly pallor—threaten his humanity.

In the *Historia*, as I discuss above, Merlin bursts into tears before prophesying. In the *Brut*, however, Merlin behaves ever more strangely. After his first prophetic utterance,
when he foretells the deaths of Vortigern, Aurelius, and Uther, Merlin falls into a lengthy silence (8007-41). This puzzling silence is just the beginning: when Aurelius asks Merlin how the Giant’s Ring can be moved, he prompts a prophetic trance affecting Merlin so profoundly that Aurelius offers him a private chamber in which to rest: “pus seiden Mærlin, and seo66en he sæt stille, / alse þeh he wolde of worlden iwiten. / þe king hine lette bringen into ane fære bure / and wunien þerinne æfter his iwille” [Merlin said this, and after he sat very still, as if he would depart this world. The king had him brought into a fair bower and let him rest there as he pleased.] (8601-4). Aurelius fears Merlin will leave the world, lose not only his humanity, but his life. Merlin’s most ostentatious display of oddity comes when Uther asks him to explain the dragon star that appears at Aurelius’s death:

Merlin sæt him stille longe ane stunde
swulc he mid sweuene swunke ful swi6e.
Heo seiden þe hit isegen mid heore ægen ægen.
þat ofte he hine wende swulc hit a wurem weore.
Late he gon awakien; þa gon he to quakien,
and þas word seide Merlin þa witege: . . . (8935-40)

Merlin sat very still for a long time, as if he were dreaming busily and silently. They who saw it with their own eyes said that often he twisted as if he were a worm. Finally he began to awaken; then he began to quake and shake, and Merlin the prophet said these words. . . .

Here Lajamon compares Merlin to a worm (or serpent) and gives him a seizure. Merlin is both bestial and close to death; his humanity hangs precariously in the balance between man and beast, life and death. Merlin, expert at crossing boundaries like male and female, scratches in these scenes at the thin gauze separating humans from the other animals, and
almost transgresses the bounds that sustain life. The prophetic trance takes its toll on
Merlin's body, and he becomes extremely tired after prophesying (8979). He must rest after
his exertions; prophecy is demanding, dangerous work, and it threatens Merlin's life more
seriously each time he uses his power. The more he prophesies, the more he becomes
abject. The more abject he is, the more fame and goodwill he receives.

As Merlin's mysterious and strange behavior illustrates, transformative power
propels prophets into the liminal spaces of humanity.® Merlin approaches the borders of
humanity, but he never crosses them in the chronicles. Though he avoids the fatal results of
liminality by avoiding death, Merlin's body vanishes nonetheless from the narrative
immediately after he arranges for Uther and Ygerna to beget Arthur. His character
disappears, but his prophetic power remains. Indeed, well after Merlin's disappearance from
the narrative, his prophecies continue to appear, prompting Françoise H. M. Le Saux to
make this observation: "Merlin's Arthurian prophecy is repeated at each of the turning-
points in Arthur's life, to the extent that it may be considered a major artistic device in the
episode" (139). Merlin's prophetic offspring continues to haunt the lines of the Brut long
after his physical presence is gone, even appearing in the chronicle's concluding lines.⁴⁰

In his representation of Merlin as the abject prophet, Lagamon expresses an
ambivalence towards the sacred reflected in the characterization by Kristeva discussed
above. The prophet is both revered and estranged, divine and abstract. Ambivalence also
pervades Lagamon's treatment of prophetic knowledge. Lagamon problematizes the power

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⁴⁰ Marie's hawk-knight, Muldumarec, also demonstrates the deadliness of pushing subjectivity beyond its limits.
The extreme nature of his self-transformation goes too far; not only does he transgress gender conventions,
but he also defies humanity by becoming a bird. As a bird, he receives his death-wound. His prophecy also
outlasts his body, allowing his son to avenge him.
of prophecy through his characterization of Merlin, as we have seen, but also through his failure to include the *Prophetie Merlini* in his translation of Wace's version of the *Historia*. Lagamon's primary source, Wace's *Roman de Brut*, omits the *Prophetie*, but Le Saux argues convincingly in *Lagamon's Brut: The Poem and its Sources* for Lagamon's familiarity with both the *Historia* (which contained the *Prophetie* as its seventh book) and the *Vita Merlini* (94-117). That Lagamon chose to omit the lengthy prophecies but lavish attention on their speaker reflects an ambivalence towards prophetic transformative power. He references the prophecies, but does not translate them; he cannot ignore them, but will not include them.

The cultural reception of prophetic writing in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries likely influenced Lagamon's attitude towards prophecy, intensely refined from Geoffrey's material, and his decision to omit the *Prophetie* from his chronicle. Jean Blacker argues that twelfth-century writers exhibited a "cautious" attitude towards political prophecy, as if an error in translation "might entail consequences" (37). Lagamon may have been affected by a political climate which treated prophecy with ambivalence or worse, intolerance. While his chronicle explores a variety of liminal appropriations of gender and subjectivity afforded by transformative power, the textual ambivalence towards prophecy combats its threatening power by casting it as simultaneously generative and deadly.

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40 Mention of Merlin and/or his prophecies appear in lines 11490-506, 11898, 15350-8, 13964-5, 14200-2, 14288-97, 16064, and 16078.
41 His chronicle employs ambivalence in other thematic arenas as well. In "Lagamon's Ambivalence," for example, Daniel Donoghue supports the claim that the *Brut* expresses "an ambivalence toward the past which Lagamon demonstrates throughout his chronicle and which can be seen as part of a wider cultural ambivalence in twelfth- and thirteenth-century England" (537). This ambivalence creates a narrative space in which Lagamon demonstrates that he "does not abhor his Anglo-Saxon heritage—he cherishes it, but he does so in a way that justifies its decline" (563). Lagamon's ambivalence towards Merlin and transformative prophecy allows him to pay them a similarly ambiguous compliment.
Lagamon's prophet is like the phoenix: the fledgling prophecy is born only through the death of the fertile speaker, whose utterance is left to find a life of its own.

VI. No Ladies Ever Did Better!

In these four authors of Arthurian romance and chronicle considered in this chapter, we saw communities of women healing one another in what is represented as acceptable defensive behavior against masculine threats. I have already suggested why masculine aggression may have figured prominently in the central conflicts of the romances and chronicles of twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Under the feudal system, the most important relationships were those between men, as women under Norman rule in England, in particular, had few rights. Treatment of female characters and feminine magic reflects this one-sided view of women, as part of the system of economic exchange that accompanies feudal government. Though spaces did exist for women in the French romances (our one thousand ladies and the good witch Thessela), the chronicles neglect women in a substantive sense, using them as icing on the narrative cake.

The tensions present in early medieval English society do not exist for contemporary U.S. citizens, but the theme of female community working to eliminate a male threat still chimes pleasantly in our ears. For example, in the recent film, Practical Magic (based on the Alice Hoffman novel and directed by Griffin Dunne in 1998), the narrative features a family of witches, ostracized by the community for generations, who finally gain acceptance in the community when they ask their neighbors to join with them to destroy a male zombie-demon. One of two twin daughters, Gillian (played by Nicole Kidman), finds herself involved with an abusive beast of a boyfriend, Jimmy (Goran Visnjic), whom she has taken
to drugging when she wants a few hours to herself. When her sister, Sally (Sandra Bullock), stumbles into the situation, the boyfriend ends up dead from an accidental overdose. A modern version of the monstrous giant of medieval romance, Jimmy's demonstration of overly aggressively masculine behavior precipitates the violent situation in which the necessary response turns out to be accidental execution.

The female community must intercede after the two sisters have failed in their various attempts to first reverse and then hide their crime. The film represents the magic as domestic, involving potions brewed in the rambling kitchen, herbs grown in a sunny breakfast nook, and women with brooms (and one mop), and the exorcism ritual itself take place in the kitchen. These witches are like the medieval good witches, and their participation together allows them to destroy the masculine source of their problems, just as the thousand ladies saved Fenice from her victimization at the hands of the surgeons. Though we no longer suffer from oppressive laws denying our rights, and our situation compared to that of medieval women so far improved as to prevent comparison, women (and men) in the U.S. still respond to narratives, such as that in Practical Magic, which provide strategies for defending against, avoiding, or otherwise mitigating the aggressive violence of men. That we still need such strategies points to the insidious pervasiveness of patriarchal tolerance (and thus promotion) of male violence against women.

Medieval authors certainly did not forget the figures so common in these early texts, but they inevitably adapted them to suit a changing set of social and ideological needs. Though the chronicle tradition continued in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, the authors did not change the tradition as radically as did the late Middle English verse romancers, who reinvented the game. No longer do the heroes find themselves presented
with easy targets, and giants may turn out to be knights, or hags may turn into beautiful ladies. The world of romance becomes more insidious, more duplicitous, and we find a figure who held little interest for the authors considered in this chapter, the wicked witch. She's waiting for us.
CHAPTER THREE
FROM RAGS TO RICHES OR THE STEP-MOTHER’S REVENGE:
TRANSFORMATIVE POWER IN LATE MEDIEVAL ARTHURIAN ROMANCES

I. Extreme Makeover, Medieval Style

There’s something deliciously enticing about watching someone get a make-over. You see the “before” shot, either as a photograph in its daytime television incarnation, or perhaps as a bedraggled, downtrodden figure whose mundane life occupies the screen behind the opening credits of a movie—and you see the “after” shot, too, when the beaming make-over recipient steps out to model her new look, or the bedraggled lady turns out to be drop-dead gorgeous after all. You always see the “after” shot—it’s the pay-off—but its revelation is deferred. You don’t get the climatic “after” until you’ve seen, in the most gloriously minute detail, the “during.” What occupies most of the make-over narrative is describing the mechanisms which effect the make-over, the critical change from bad (or less preferred) to good. How does someone make change happen? What mysterious mechanism allows a prostitute to become a millionaire’s wife, a “heartless guttersnipe” to turn into a lady, or a lowly farmer transform into an inter-galactic Jedi knight? Judging by the prevalence of these narratives in popular U.S. media, we really want to know.

This is not a new narrative. The brothers Grimm discovered a version of this story when they collected the fairy tales of Germany. They called it “Aschenputtel,” and the Cinderella story still resonates for twentieth-century audiences, as evinced by the range of popular adaptations (both cinematic and televised), from Disney’s Cinderella and the recent Ever After to ABC’s musical Cinderella and looser adaptations such as Annie, My Fair Lady, or
Pretty Woman. In all these stories, the Cinderella character gets what ABC would call an “Extreme Makeover.” As in the recent reality-show where recipients receive free plastic surgery and a new wardrobe in addition to help with hair and make-up, someone always provides Cinderella with what she needs to transform. Someone else transforms her. Cinderella can’t help herself—she needs intervention, in practically every version. In twentieth-century visual adaptations, it’s usually one of two persons: either a fairy godmother practicing magic or a rich, powerful man.¹ That magic and money occupy equivalent positions in different versions of this tale reflects the mystification of wealth that inevitably pervades a society predicated on a capitalist economy.

Magic or money may catalyze the transformation from before to after, but we also need to examine what originally puts the “rags” girl in her position. In the case of Cinderella, it’s the death of her father which makes possible the cruel mistreatment inflicted by her evil step-mother. In the case of twentieth-century monetary adaptations, such as Pretty Woman or Annie, it’s the bad fortune to be born into poverty, a situation that also highlights the issue of the absent father. In both the fairy-tale and the capitalist versions of these stories, the younger female is victimized because she lacks the protection of a father-figure. In both versions, the transforming agent arranges for the make-over to result in the acquisition of a protective masculine authority figure for the young lady, a husband. As long as we get her paired off, the films say, she’ll be fine!

Male make-over recipients are also prey to marital match-ups, though the masculine version of the Cinderella story (the transformation of the frog into the prince) is more

¹ For versions using the fairy god-mother, see Disney’s Cinderella, Maid to Order, and ABC’s Cinderella, for versions using the rich man, see Pretty Woman, Annie, and Ever After.
difficult to locate in modern cinema. In the modern masculine response to the female make-over, the male figures who change function differently. When I started this chapter, I asked a friend of mine if she could think of any male versions of the Cinderella story. We started suggesting movies, such as *Star Wars* (Luke from farmer to Jedi knight), or *City Slickers* (where all the characters change from disaffected urbanites into caring country folk), or even *Superman* (the transformation is obvious). Each time we thought of a new example, I said, “That's not quite right. In this movie, he changes himself. In that movie, he's also responsible for his own transformation.” We were hard-pressed to find a male Cinderella—someone whose transformation is dictated to him by an external source; instead, the male figures facilitated their own transformations. Though we did finally think of a couple examples (such as the protagonists of *Can't Buy Me Love* or *Drive Me Crazy*), it was clear that make-over stories are gendered; they reflect the traditional conventions with which we are all familiar, which nominate masculinity as active force and femininity as receptive passivity. In short, “frog princes” generally enjoy agency, whereas “Cinderellas” don’t. This gendered erasure of the male “frog” figure, the replacement of the helpless frog with a privileged figure who transforms itself, is not a medieval inheritance. Instead, the popular medieval versions of the make-over narratives treat both the male and female “transformee” as someone who cannot effect a transformation alone.

Two popular transformation—or “make-over”—narratives appear in a good number of Middle English Arthurian romances composed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These narratives focus on the make-over of a loathly lady and a churlish knight, the transformation of these carnivalesque, grotesque figures into idealized representatives of masculinity and femininity. The loathly lady story, in particular, shares much with the
Cinderella tale, such as the change from abject poverty and unattractive physical appearance to wealth and beauty, the presence of an outside agent with transformative power, and an evil step-mother figure who creates the distressing situation in the first place. And the churlish knight story shares certain elements with modern tales of the masculine frog-prince narrative, such as the emphasis on the behavior of the protagonist and the tendency towards including violent action as part of the central plot. These superficial similarities, however, do not outweigh the larger structural differences between medieval and modern “make-over” adaptations.

The differences between the modern and the medieval versions of these tales illuminate the unique perspective on the relationship between transformative power and gender conventions evident in many late medieval romances, a relationship founded on the twin factors of behavior and appearance. While the modern version recapitulates an ancient gender binary, the medieval romances represent both male and female make-over recipients as lacking agency in their own transformations. This is not to say that the stories are not gendered; on the contrary, the fact that there are two traditions, one focused on male-male relationships and one focused on male-female relationships, suggests that the romances in these sub-genres were explicitly concerned with structuring gender roles and identifying a normative set of gender conventions. But the inability of the figure to change her or his own situation in the medieval versions is not dictated by gender, as in most of the modern film versions of this story. Instead, the loathly lady and churlish knight legends eschew polarization of gender (i.e. masculinity vs. femininity) in favor of developing the distinction between ideal and inappropriate (i.e. bad masculinity/femininity vs. good masculinity/femininity). Though the construction of masculinity, in particular, departs from
the conventions developed in the texts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Middle English verse romances follow the traditional representations of femininity more closely. Despite the conventional endings, the medieval make-over romances offer more space for experimentation with gender roles than that afforded by the earlier Arthurian texts.

The other key difference between medieval and modern make-overs manifests in the shadowy figure behind the initial transformations. While modern audiences watch the evil step-mother abuse and manipulate Cinderella, medieval listeners rarely get a glimpse of the powerful woman with the transformative power, the wicked witch. The fourteenth- and fifteenth-century romances rediscover the classical wicked witch, neglected by the previous Arthurian material, and they bring her across the channel (from France) to play the villainess. This mysterious mother replaces the excessively masculine giants of earlier chronicle and romance traditions as the narrative threat. The rise of the wicked witch in the popular verse romances corresponds with an increasing space for women to wield economic and political power within fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England.

II. Nipping the Bud: Taming the Churlish Knight

You sit down to eat, grateful for the bountiful feast spread before you. You chat with your friends about the latest tournament, about your fashionable outfit, about the roast fowl. You lift your glass to take a drink of wine, and you notice, out of the corner of your eye, the biggest man you’ve ever seen. You turn to get a better look, and your gaze lingers on his muscular body and expensive clothes until you suddenly, joltingly realize—he’s bright green. What do you do? What do you think? A trick? Make-up? Some strange play of the light? When the characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are confronted by the huge,
"enker-grene" [bright green] knight who shows up on his horse in the dining hall, the people at King Arthur's court wonder what it could mean, eventually deciding that the apparition must be the result of "fantoum and fayryge" (240). The Green Knight is so remarkably different, so incredibly other, that his physical presence creates a logical problem for those attending Arthur’s holiday feast. Something’s fishy. Is it magic?

After introducing the Green Knight, the mysterious author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* indulges our curiosity, using nearly 100 lines to describe the “aghlich maystcr” [terrible master]. The poet does not tell us first, as we might expect, that the Knight was colored “in grene” (151), but that his body is extraordinarily large. He appears to be “most in þe molde, on mesure hyghe,” a “half-etayn” [the biggest man in the world, tall in measure, a half-giant] (137). The poet focuses his initial description on the Green Knight’s body: his broad “bak” and “brest,” his “worÞily smale” waist-line, his “lyndes” and “lymes so long and so grete” [back, breast, worthily thin, loins, and limbs so long and so great] (143-144, 139). The Green Knight’s physical perfection is exaggerated—he is a super-knight, a super-man, excessively masculine. Other details contribute to this hyper-gendering, such as the Green Knight’s bushy beard, which “ouer his brest henges” [over his breast hangs] (182), and his behavior, which is unruly and aggressive. The Green Knight’s masculinity is so excessive, in fact, that his humanity is simultaneously threatened and expanded—he’s a half-giant, beyond the bounds of the merely human. He is an ambivalent figure whose appearance silences the entire court, which waits for Arthur to address his transgressive behavior.

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2 All quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in this chapter come from the edition by William Vantuono, but the translations are mine. Numbers refer to lines, not pages.
Though the poet meticulously describes the great mass of the Green Knight before mentioning that he was “all ouer enker-grene” [all over bright green], he uses the word “grene” eight times in the next forty lines, emphasizing the non-human color of the creature. As men or women were about as likely to have bright-green skin in medieval England as they are in the twenty-first-century U.S. (the Incredible Hulk notwithstanding), this detail marks vividly the Green Knight’s incongruity—he is a supernatural marvel, and his presence creates a carnivalesque rupture.

*Rabelais and his World*, Mikhail Bakhtin’s now famous discussion of medieval and Renaissance carnival, argues that carnivalesque imagery is characterized in part by a principle of inversion. Carnival, the fearless, “festive laugh” of the people, effects at least two kinds of inversion: degradation and misrule. Degradation is “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level” (19). Degradation manifests itself most commonly in images of the body—what Bakhtin calls grotesque realism. The grotesque body is not that of “the biological individual,” but of “the people,” and it is therefore “grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable” (19). In addition to the material degradation of the body, carnival practices provide participants with an alternate (or other) space where normative hierarchical structures can be challenged. Unlike the official feasts of the Church, which “sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it,” carnival “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” and was therefore a “feast of becoming, change, and renewal” (9-10). Though Bakhtin pictures carnival as a space for progressive resistance, critics of Bakhtin, such as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in “Bourgeois hysteria and the carnivalesque,” have argued that it in fact served as reinforcement for the state/church complex. Carnival was seasonal, like
spring, and it went away after a while, leaving its participants to carry on the work of tilling the fields, caring for the animals, making cloth, or doing any of the other myriad tasks which they performed in order to keep the aristocracy in luxury. Although during carnival the world turned upside down, the state's designation of carnival as the (only) appropriate space for anti-hierarchical (and thus potentially dangerous, resistant) behavior effectively banned such behavior from any other realm. Equality was fine in the carnivalesque marketplace, but not in the institutions of power, which relied on inequity. White cites Georges Balandier, whose description is worth reproducing here: “The supreme ruse of power is to allow itself to be contended ritually in order to consolidate itself more effectively” (italics White's, qtd. in White 60). While the world was awry for carnival, the people attending could release pent up energy and frustration, using the celebratory energy usually drained or depleted by daily labor to renew their spirits (and, consequently, their ability to work). The carnivalesque elements function similarly in the romances considered here, marking inversion as a temporary alternative to hierarchical structure that nonetheless serves to reinforce that structure.

The churlish knight (our green friend) appears in a number of late medieval romances featuring Arthur's nephew Gawain, including Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (henceforth abbreviated SGGK), The Greene Knight (Greene), The Turke and Sir Gawain (Turke), Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle (Carle), and The Carle of Carlisle (Carlisle). In each of these versions of the churlish knight story, the knight is characterized by his carnivalesque appearance, a descriptive trope not used in the earlier Arthurian material discussed in
Chapter Two. I’ve already provided some examples of the way the knight’s description in *SGGK* marks him as carnivalesque, and this imagery pervades the other versions as well. Sir Bredbeddle, the knight in *Grene*, for example, evokes the carnivalesque by dressing festively in “full gay” clothes and armor, “a jolly sight to see, / When horse and armour was all greene” [very festive; a jolly sight to see, when horse and armor were all green] (74, 79-80).

The churlish fellow in *Carle* is a “dreadful man” who is “two taylors yardus” wide and “nine tailloris yerdus” high [dreadful man; two tailor’s yards; nine tailor’s yards] (248, 256, 258).

Not only is he a giant, but his features are also grotesque, overly exaggerated:

He seemd a dredfull man:

Wytt chekus longe and vesage brade;
Cambur nose and all full made;
Betwyne his browus a large spane;
Hys mogth moche, his berd grave;
Over his brest his lockus lay
As brod as anny fane. (248-54)

He seemed a dreadful man: with checks long and visage broad; turned-up nose and all foully made; between his brows a large span; his mouth large, his beard grey; over his breast his locks lay as broad as any basket.

The language of this passage constructs the figure as radically other—the poet first tells us that the knight is “dreadfull,” and then narrates each of the details causing the condition of dreadfulness. The poet goes on to note that his “fyngeris” are as large “as anny lege that we ber” [fingers; as any leg that we bear] (266-7), prompting the audience and the narrator to

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3 All quotations from the churlish knight stories besides *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* come from the edition of Thomas Hahn, which collects Gawain romances in a volume entitled *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*.
join together as the “we” who bear the normal legs against the “he” whose fingers stand out so clearly. The Carlisle poet reins in the exaggeration, describing the churlish knight’s hands as the size of “breads that wives may bake,” but adds demonic lights to his eyes: “With two great eyen brening as fyre, / Lord, hee was a lodlye syer” [with two great eyes burning as a fire, Lord, he was a loathly sire] (186, 181-2). The Turke poet eschews excess description, relying instead on widespread knowledge of exotic stereotypes to fill in the details, saying merely, “He was not hye, but he was broad, / And like a Turke he was made / Both legg and thye” [He was not tall, but he was broad, and like a Turk he was created, in both leg and thigh] (13-15). Whether described at length or merely invoked by a name, the iconography of carnival would have been immediately recognizable to a medieval audience; thus the carnivalesque marking of characters like the churlish knight (and the loathly lady, as we’ll see in the next section) helps signal to the audience that something is “up,” things are not as they seem, perhaps magic is involved.

In addition to the primary carnivalesque figure, a carnivalesque logic structures the churlish knight story, a tale of topsy-turvy inversion which only dissolves back into the usual hierarchy once Gawain’s authoritative presence reasserts the King’s laws. There is transformative power at work here: one agent originally transforms the churlish knight and a second agent transforms him back. The question is, who controls the transformative power in these texts? As we recall, the prophets of the chronicles exercised the most control over transformative magic, the healing women of romance coming in a close second with the transformation of wounded bodies. These traditions continue to flavor the churlish knight narratives. The titular characters in both Turke and Carlisle draw on religious power to
transform themselves, reminiscent of Merlin’s control over his self-representation in the
chronicles. Both Greene and Carle, on the other hand, give us our first glance at Arthurian
wicked witches by granting them the power of transforming others. In all these popular
romances, Gawain possesses the power to transform the churlish knight back into a good,
chivalric knight. The much longer SGGK, a literary adaptation of popular material, provides
inversions within inversions, turning Gawain’s transformative agency back against him.
Analysis of the transformative power within these texts will shed light on the nature of the
cultural work performed by both the popular and literary versions of this story.

The details of each version differ slightly, but all the churlish knight stories share
critical plot movements: a) Arthur and court are engaged in a communal, aristocratic activity
(i.e. feasting or hunting) when the initial conflict develops; b) the conflict centers around the
figure of the churlish knight, who either shows up at court to challenge Arthur⁴ or is
encountered by chance as a few knights seek lodging for the night⁵; c) Gawain accepts the
challenge and visits the churlish knight’s castle; d) at the castle, Gawain undergoes a series of
tests or challenges, during which he usually performs very well; e) the challenges culminate in
a final beheading sequence, which releases the churlish knight from the enchantment that
made him churlish to begin with; f) Gawain is (joyfully) reunited with Arthur’s court. The
variations in this plot are less revealing than are the answers to the following questions: What
makes the “churl” a churl? Why is his masculinity marked as inappropriate? What makes
Gawain so much better a man? Why does Gawain’s performance of masculinity result in
transformative power? Whose transformative power catalyzes the carnivalesque inversion

⁴ Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, The Greene Knight, and The Turke and Sir Gawain
⁵ Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle and The Carle of Carlisle
responsible for the action? Where does that power come from? These are the questions that drive the following discussion.

So what makes the churl churlish? We know immediately that he is not a regular knight by his exaggeratedly grotesque appearance. In medieval literary tradition, the outward form often reflects the inward character, as we saw with the representations of giants in the early medieval romances and chronicles. The giant's great stature reflects his exaggerated, rigidly masculine essence—that his essence is thus "flawed" compels his execution. The churl functions in a similar way: his behavior flouts the dictates of the chivalric system, separating him from the aristocratic world. The churlish knight, like the giant, exceeds the boundaries of appropriate masculinity, and this earns him a beheading in most versions of the tale. Unlike their gigantic predecessors, however, the churlish knights are not so aggressively masculine that they need to die. Instead, their "true" essence is released—they are transformed into perfect models of aristocratic chivalry. The inappropriate behavior and grotesque appearance are merely illusion, a distasteful coating covering the goodness inside.

It is the churlish knight's behavior towards Gawain that most clearly demonstrates the nature of his threat to chivalry. In all the versions considered here, the churl challenges Gawain in a series of tests which measure his ability to negotiate male-male relationships by adhering to chivalric virtues such as keeping one's word (trowthe), showing respect to other men regardless of their station (courtesye), remaining pure and chaste (clannes), and being brave and strong in the face of fearsome challenges (courage). The initial visit from the churl in SGGK, Greene, and Turke, for example, is a two-part exam: a) it tests Arthur's reputation for courtesy by challenging his tolerance for insubordinate behavior and b) it probes the Round
Table's reputation for unparalleled courage by challenging the knights' bravery when confronted with a clearly-marked, exaggerated threat. Instead of asking for hospitality, as knights in romances usually do when they approach a new castle, the churlish knight demands a boon. In *SGGK*, the churlish knight’s behavior is particularly rude: from his initial appearance, when he rides his horse into Arthur’s hall, the Green Knight challenges the conventions of romance, and by implication, the dictates of chivalry. The green churl flouts the established hierarchy, pretending not to recognize the King, and rudely impugns the knights' masculinity, calling them “beardless children.” Despite his provocative challenge, the churl asks not for a fight, but to play a “Christmas game” (283). Arthur’s tolerance of the rude behavior reveals him to be an appropriately respectful host, but his knights do not rise to the challenge of the churl's game, forcing Arthur to accept the challenge himself. The Green Knight thus prompts a reversal of the usual chivalric situation, where the king is protected from challenges by his knights. Arthur’s court recklessly flirts with dishonor in this scene. In the two “Carle” romances, the churl also demonstrates a disdain for hospitality, but as a host rather than a guest: he provides a surly porter who hems and haws before granting the hunting party lodging for the night, scares his guests with his wild animals and grim greeting, and goes so far as to strike a man of the cloth, Bishop Bodwin. In these romances, the chivalric testing is also directed at Arthur’s court, represented by Gawain and his two companions, Kay, and Bishop Bodwin, who fail the tests Gawain manages successfully. These tests are the mechanism by which Gawain transforms

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6 *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* omits the beheading sequence entirely.
7 In the world of medieval romance, the hospitality shown by one aristocratic stranger to another is a central part of the story’s action, allowing the long quests characteristic of the genre. In a world where settlements are farther apart and less easy to move between, where there are no hotels at every highway intersection, respect
the churlish knight. His chivalric demeanor emphasizes the changing construction of masculinity in the romances, and differs from the masculine ideal endorsed by the twelfth- and thirteenth-century authors considered previously in that his submissive obedience, rather than his aggressive violence, wins him accolades.

Despite the importance of submissive obedience, Gawain must still prove that he can fight, and tests of courage (courage and strength) appear in all five romances. In SGGK, Greene, and Turke, they come at the beginning, when the churlish knight offers the blow exchange. By accepting the challenge, Gawain demonstrates both strength (in chopping the knight’s head off) and courage (in defeating a monstrous foe). By showing up for the return blow, Gawain shows that he has courage in the face of certain death. In Carle, Carlisle, and Turke, Gawain also performs feats of strength, beating a group of giants at giant-tennis in Turke and lifting huge wine goblets in Carle and Carlisle. In the latter two romances, the churlish knight asks Gawain to throw a spear at his head, and Gawain complies, chucking the spear with such force that it shatters upon hitting the wall above the churl’s head. He clearly passes with flying colors.

An important aspect of Gawain’s ideal courtesy involves respect for the rules and possessions of his host. A perfect example is a scene in Carle and Carlisle, where Gawain wins his host’s respect with his kind treatment of the churl’s foal, stabled with the war-horses belonging to Gawain and his companions. Kay and Bishop Bodwin treat the foal poorly, throwing him out into the rain, and they each earn themselves a hard blow from the churl for their pains. But Gawain brings the foal in from the rain, covering the rain-sodden

for the conventions of hospitality likely had more resonance than it may today. This is the same kind of hospitality lauded in Odysseus’s journeys.
creature with his own mantle, and the churl thanks him graciously for the favor. When dinner is over, Kay and Bodwin go to one chamber, but Gawain goes to the lady's bed; the sequence of events here suggests causality—it is because Gawain passed the test of courtesy that he continues on to the test of his chastity (and it is because Gawain passes the test of chastity that he goes on to the beheading sequence, as discussed below).

Part of the chivalric code demands that a guest respect the host and his household, including his wife and children (trowthe); another aspect suggests that a knight should be chaste (clannes). Both Gawain's trowthe and his clannes are tested a bedroom scene common to four of the five romances, where the churlish knight's wife offers herself to Gawain, who may kiss but must go no further. In the "Carle" romances, the churl asks Gawain to undress, climb into bed, and kiss his wife in front of him. In both versions, Gawain goes overboard: the narrator of Carle tells us, "When Gawen wolde have doun the prevey far, / Then seyd the Carle, 'Whoo ther! / That game I the forbede'" [When Gawain would have done the private act, then said the Carl, "Whoa there! That game I forbid you."] (466-8), and though the churl in Carlisle warns Gawain to "doe no other villanye," Gawain's "flesh began to warme" and he "had thought to have made infare" [do no other villainy; flesh began to warm; had thought to have intercourse] (338, 342-3). In each case, the churl stops Gawain from proceeding, but praises him for obeying orders. Apparently, though Gawain wanted to have sex with the churl's wife, the fact that he stops when told redeems him.

Compared to Gawain's response to the wife in the two Green Knight romances, though, Gawain's behavior here seems motivated more by the churl's presence (the test of trowthe) than a desire to remain chaste before the Lord (the test of clannes).
Though SGGK’s Gawain is also driven by respect for his host and loyalty to his oath, Gawain’s dedication to chastity is connected explicitly to his Christianity in the most famous of the churlish knight romances, SGGK. Not only does the poet spend roughly fifty lines expounding upon Gawain’s pentangle and its connection to Christian chivalry (619-669), but the titular hero also enjoys a special relationship with the Virgin Mary. A picture of Mary appears on Gawain’s shield, and Gawain prays to Mary when lost in the wilderness on his way to the Grene Chapel. In fact, Castle Hautdesert materializes as if in answer to Gawain’s prayer: “Nade he sayned hymself, segge, bot þrye / Er he watȝ war in þe wod of a won in a mote” [He had not blessed himself, the man, but thrice before he was aware in the woods of a dwelling within a moat] (763-4). The poet invokes Mary on the third morning of the bedroom sequence, reminding us that “gret perile” stood between the Lady and Gawain “nif Mare of hir knygt mynne” [great peril; if Mary did not think of her knight] (1768, 1769), and the virgin does indeed keep him safe from sexual dalliance.

Gawain’s motivation for maintaining chastity in Greene, an adaptation of SGGK, is more ambiguous than in the earlier version. When Sir Bredbeddle’s wife comes to Gawain’s bedchamber to kiss him and tempt him sexually, he tells her: “Your husband is a gentle knight, / By Him that bought mee deare! / To me itt were a great shame / If I shold doe him any grame, / That hath beene kind to mee” [Your husband is a gentle knight, by Him who bought me (at a) dear (cost)! For me it would be a great shame if I were to do him any harm, who has been kind to me.] (383-6). His chastity is not motivated by Christian idealism; rather, he doesn’t want to offend his gracious host. He is obligated to respect his

8 The Christian element in SGGK has been the object of much critical inquiry. See, for example, Robert W. Ackerman’s “Gawain’s Shield: Penitential Doctrine in Gawain and the Green Knight” or Thomas D. Hill’s
host, and he does so even though the churlish knight is not present. Gawain’s desire to obey the chivalric obligation to his host is in fact his greatest strength, as most of the challenges Gawain faces in these tales require him to mitigate his aggressive brutality with deference before men and women with more economic, social, or political power. The aggressive masculinity of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century romances and chronicles has been refined by the mill of time (and the generations of Normans in England), and this ideal knight is far less lusty and destructive than his Arthurian forefathers.

The beheading sequences of the churlish knight tales attract their fair share of critical attention. These interpretations help us to catch a glimpse of the kind of cultural resonance a beheading scene may have generated for a medieval English audience. What is especially relevant to my consideration of gendered magical practice is the effect of the beheading on the churlish knight figure. In the early romances and chronicles, when a giant is killed (a process often including a beheading), he is dead. There is no coming back. He’s gone, the threat eliminated for good. Not so in the later Middle English versions.

The authors of late medieval romance treat transgressors quite differently than do their earlier counterparts—the Middle English poets (symbolically) castrate the churl, but they don’t kill him outright. Gawain, the ideal representative of courtesy, of chivalric knighthood, performs the ceremony, chopping the knight’s head off in a gesture that anticipates for this twenty-first-century reader the long-awaited moment when Luke Skywalker removes the mask of his nemesis, Darth Vader, to reveal his loving father beneath, restored to goodness and returned to the Force. This comparison is especially apt in the case of Carlisle: when Gawain’s stroke cleaves the churl’s head from his body, the

"Gawain’s Jesting Lie: Towards an Interpretation of the Confessional Scene in Gawain and the Green Knight."
formerly bewitched knight stands up, now “Of the height of Sir Gawaine” instead of “fifty cubitts” tall (399, 187). Gawain aims his deadly force at the mask, the false head of the monster, and thus breaks the enchantment. As his challenges have proven, the victory comes because he is the best example of knighthood. His courtesy gives him the transformative power that breaks the spell. Respectful submission has replaced aggressive violence as the foundation of ideal chivalry.

If Gawain breaks the spell, acting as the ideal representative of knighthood, who first bewitches the churlish figure who dominates these narratives? What force pushes the chivalric knight into the realm of grotesque churl? These romances offer two alternatives.

In Carle, an early fifteenth-century tale, the churl is responsible for his own initial transformation: twenty years ago, the churl “maked a vowe” to God, saying “Ther schulde never man logge in my wonys / But he scholde be slayne, iwys, / But he did as I hym bad” [made a vow; there should never any man lodge in my dwelling, but he should be slain, in truth, unless he did as I bade him.] (518, 520-3). Just as Merlin controlled the way others perceived him, this knight can summon divine power to achieve his metamorphosis into a churl. His oath is effective, as his reputation attests, and Gawain is the only one to whom God grants the victory. This form of transformative power, which relies on the divinity for its efficacy, links chivalric courtesy with Christian morality: God rewards the perfect knight.

The other wielder of transformative power in these romances is that nefarious figure, my obsession in this study, the wicked witch. The author of Carlisle doesn’t name or describe the witch directly, preferring to leave her in the shadows, and provides only the following explanation:

The Carle sayd, “Gawaine, God blese thee!”
For thou hast delivered mee
From all false witchcrafft—
I am delivered att the last.
By nigromancé thus was I shapen,
Till a knight of the Round Table
Had with a sword smitten of my head,
If he had grace to doe that deede.
Itt is forty winters agoe
Since I was transformed soe.
Since then none lodged within this woonn
But I and my whelpes driven them downe.
And but if hee did my bidding soone
I killed him and drew him downe,
Every one but only thee.” (401-15)

The Carl said, “Gawain, God bless you! For you have delivered me from all false witchcraft—I am delivered at last. By necromancy thus was I shaped, until a knight of the Round Table had with a sword smitten off my head, if he had the grace to do the deed. It was forty winters ago that I was transformed so. Since then none lodged within this dwelling but that I and my whelps drove them down. And unless he did my bidding immediately, I killed him and drew him down, every one except for you alone.”

The churl does not say it was a witch who transformed him, but the term “witchcrafft” implies the unnamed witch. The poet neglects to establish clear motivation for the witch’s transformation of the churl, which makes her actions seem cruel and wicked indeed.
The Greene poet goes much further, not only naming the witch, Agostes (mother-in-law of Sir Bredbeddle, a.k.a. the Green Knight), but providing a detailed description of her powers:

Itt was witchcraft and noe other
That shee dealt with all
Shee cold transpose knights and swaine
Like as in bataile they were slaine,
Wounded in lim and lightt.
Shee taught her sonne the knight alsoe
In transposed likenesse he shold goe
Both by fell and frythe. (50-7)

It was witchcraft and no other that she dealt with. She could transform knights and servants (to look) as though they had been slain in battle, wounded in arm and leg. She taught her son the knight also, (so that) he could go in transformed disguise, both by moor and by the woods.

The text explicitly designates witchcraft as transformative, transferable power—witches like Agostes can make things appear different than they are, and they can pass their magical knowledge on to others. The Greene author provides a more thorough explanation of the churl's interest in Arthur's court (and Gawain in particular) than does the Carlisle poet. Agostes's daughter, married to Bredbeddle, was in love with Sir Gawain because of his prowess in battle. Agostes sends Bredbeddle to court with the hope of luring Gawain to their castle so her daughter can meet him. Bredbeddle has reasons of his own:

To Arthurs court will I mee hye
For to praise thee right,
And to prove Gawaines points three—
And that be true that men tell me,
By Mary most of might. (68-72)

To Arthur's court will I go to give you [the court] your due, and to test
Gawain in three areas, whether that which men tell me is true, by Mary, most mighty.

The transformation sequence in Greene is a deliberate test of a specific knight in the court,
rather than a test of all who happen upon a certain castle, as in Carlisle. Though the witchy
mother-in-law is sneaky, she doesn't hurt Gawain. On the contrary, the adventure adds to
gawain's fame and provides him with a beautiful wife; seen in this light, the actions of
Agostes seem quite benevolent. She's more like a fairy god-mother than a wicked step-
mother.

The SGGK poet's infamous Morgan le Fay character reflects the varied
representations of witches with transformative power in Middle English romances. While
Carlisle makes her seem evil and Greene makes her seem helpful, SGGK incorporates both the
positive and negative representations of female transformative power in its ambivalent
portrayal of Morgan le Fay. Her physical appearance is grotesque, and the poet explains
precisely what's wrong with her by comparing her loathliness to the beauty of Lady Bercilak:

Bot, vnylyke on to loke þo ladyes were,

For if þe gonge watȝ ðep, yolȝe watȝ þat oþer.

Riche red on þat on rayled aȝquere;

Rugh, ronkled chekeȝ þat oþer on rolled.

Kerchofes of þat on, wyth mony cler petleg,

Hir brest and hir bryȝt þote bare displayed,
Schon schyrerṣen snawe þat schedeg on hilleg.

þat oþer wyth a gorger waþ gere ouer þe swyre,

Chymbled ouer hir blake chyn wyth mylk-quiete vayles;

Hir frount folden in sylk, enfoubled ayquere,

Toret and treleted wyth tryfleȝ aboute,

þat nogt waþ bare of þat burde bot þe blake broges,

þe tweyne ȝyen and þe nase, þe naked lyppeg,

And þose were soure to se, and sellyly blered. (950-63)

But unlike to look upon those ladies were, for if the young was vibrant, withered was the other. Rich red adorned the one's face everywhere; rough, wrinkled cheeks rolled down the other. Kerchiefs (were) on the one, with many clear pearls, her breast and her bright throat displayed bare, shining more brightly than snow shed on hills. That other with a gorget was clothed over the neck, bound over her black chin with milk-white veils; her front wrapped in silk, veiled everywhere, with embroidered edges and meshed with details about, so that nothing was bare on that bird but the black brows, the two eyes, and the nose, the naked lips, and those were sour to see, and extremely bleared.

Preceding and following this description, the narrator asserts that Morgan is “heȝly honowred wyth hajjeleg aboute” and “a mensk lady on molde” [highly honored with nobles all around; an honored lady on the earth] (949, 964). By juxtaposing claims to the ancient lady's honor with a long statement of how ugly she is, the poet creates an ambivalent picture—she is noble and important but ugly and old. Her duality is another side of the carnivalesque inversion expressed in the churlish knight figure; because she is noble, her grotesque physical appearance subverts the usual privileging of beauty as nobility, turning conventions of ideal femininity upside-down. Through this description in particular, the SGGK poet invokes the figure of the loathly lady, whom I shall discuss at length in the next
section. The loathly lady, like the churlish knight, presents a grotesque exterior which hides a “good” interior—for the loathly lady, the conventionally feminine interior. But Morgan is not a loathly lady, exactly, as her appearance does not change; instead, she’s the one who transforms others.

In the case of Morgan le Fay, the golden nugget her loathly exterior disguises is her transformative power. The poet takes great pains to obfuscate Morgan’s identity early in the poem; he describes her at length, but gives her no name, and hides her true function by appropriating the conventions of another folk tale of transformation, the loathly lady story (the corollary tale to the one being told in SGGK). The narrator preserves the mystery until the shocking revelation of her true identity in the last section of the poem. Gawain asks the churlish Green Knight to say his name, and he replies:

Bercilak de Hautdesert, I hat in pis londe
Þurȝ myȝt of Morgne la Faye, þat in my hous lenges,
And koyntyse of clergye bi craftes wel lerned,
þe maystrés of Merlyn mony ho taken,
For ho hatȝ dalt drwry ful dere sumtyme
With þat conable klerk; þat knowes alle your knyȝtȝ
at hame.

Morgne þe goddes
þerfore, hit is hir name;
Weldeȝ non so hyȝe hawtesses
þat ho ne con make ful tame. (2445-55)
Bercilak of Hautdesert, I am called in this land through might of Morgan le Fay, who in my house lives, and knowledge of lore through crafts well learned, the mysteries of Merlin many has she acquired, for she had dallied in delight once with that competent master; all your knights know that at home. Morgan the goddess therefore, it is her name; none wield so much pride whom she can not make fully tame.

Bercilak's explanation names Morgan as the force behind his political power, through her magical craft. He calls her a “goddess” [goddess] (rather than a witch), but there are enough goddess-witch figures traipsing around classical literature to provide a model for this kind of witch (Calypso is one example that pops immediately to mind). In addition to authenticating Bercilak's lordship, Morgan devises the plan to send him to Arthur's court, “For to assay þe surquidre, gif hit soth were / þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table” [In order to test the pride, whether it was true, that which has spread, (rumor) of the great renown of the Round Table] (2457-8). Assessing the pride of the Round Table knights is certainly a worthy reason to send a knight to court, in the world of romance—such a test allows the knights to show their courage and flaunt their courtesy. This makes Morgan seem like an ally of the court, helping them to realize their flaws and therefore correct them. But Bertilak's explanation includes a strange detail: “Ho wayued me þis wonder your wytteȝ to reue, / For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe / Wyth gopnyng of þat ilke gomen þat gostlych speked / With his hede in his honde birfore te hyȝe table” [She cast this enchantment on me to remove your wits, for to have grieved Gwenevere and caused her to die, with the sight of that same man who spoke frighteningly, with his head in his hand before the high table.] (2459-62). Apparently, in addition to testing the court, Morgan wanted to scare Gwenevere to death. The inclusion of this detail casts doubt over the entire
enterprise; if the whole thing was just a way for one woman to hurt another woman, then what does it mean? Is it really a test of the Round Table?

SGGK's Morgan le Fay, the witch lurking behind the carnivalesque churl who invades Arthur's hall and threatens Gawain's life, is a problematic figure. Is she good or bad? Does she want to hurt the queen or help the court? Is she loathly or honorable? Is she a powerful magical force or merely Merlin's lackey? Is she marginal or foundational to the story? It's difficult to say exactly how Morgan functions within this complex narrative. Part of that difficulty can be attributed to the deliberately ambiguous and ambivalent representation of her figure in the poem, but part of the trouble comes from the poem's overarching narrative arc. SGGK is, after all, a churlish knight tale, a story usually involving the transformation of a gigantic, grotesque churl into a perfectly chivalrous knight through the extraordinary courtesy of Gawain, as we have seen. But that doesn't happen in this story. Instead, Gawain himself undergoes the metamorphosis.

Three of the five churlish knight stories feature the knight's radical transformation through Gawain's chivalric excellence. The Green Knight stories do not follow this pattern; instead, when the churlish knight tests Gawain, our hero fails one of the tests! This is radical, huge, momentous—not because the knight has a flaw (Chrétien's knights are notorious for mistreating their lovers, as do Erec and Yvain, among other misdeeds), but because of the nature of the flaw. It's not that Gawain is a coward. As I document in Chapter Two, knights often use magic rings to prevent harm in exactly the same fashion as Gawain intends to use the girdle. It's that Gawain breaks his word. The word of a knight is sacrosanct; it is only because knights keep their word that the whole system of sending hostages back to the king can operate as it does in medieval romance. Specifically, Gawain
breaks his word by keeping the girdle when he should have given it to Bertilak. At the moment he does this, Gawain's transformation is complete—his hiding the girdle is the culmination of a transformative process that begins the moment Gawain arrives at Castle Hautdesert. When he leaves Arthur’s court, Gawain occupies a powerful masculine position: he has chopped the head off his enemy, armed himself in the dual protective glory of Christianity and chivalry, and set off on a quest to honor his word as a knight. Once he enters the world of the churlish knight, a world of carnivalesque inversion, Gawain slowly metamorphosizes from masculine aggressor into feminine object.

When Gawain arrives at Castle Hautdesert, it is not unlike Arthur’s court: the denizens feast for the holidays, play games, exchange kisses, and foster a festive atmosphere where even the losers laugh (60-71). Bertilak engages Gawain in the exchange game, laying the groundwork for what will become the primary inversion of the poem. Bertilak’s game prohibits Gawain from hunting with the men for the duration of his time at Castle Hautdesert, requiring him to keep the company of the Lady Bertilak. Romance convention dictates that Gawain should be an honored guest at the hunt, but Bertilak restricts Gawain to the domestic world of the castle, physically imposing a spatial inversion, as it were. Gawain soon internalizes this externally imposed inversion, becoming more and more feminized as the poem goes on.

The bedroom scenes, offered in tandem with the hunting episodes, highlight Gawain’s incremental journey towards internalizing a feminine subject-position. Henry Savage noted the way this parallel structure situates Gawain as the Lady’s prey and shows Gawain’s behavior to be similar to that of the beasts hunted each day by Bertilak, and critics
have made arguments in the same vein ever since.\textsuperscript{9} Gawain becomes the passive love-object, and the Lady becomes the active pursuer, the temptress who both possesses and seeks to be the object of the phallic gaze.\textsuperscript{10} The Lady reveals more of her body each day, tempting Gawain more aggressively each time, until she enters his bedchamber on the third and final day with barely any clothes on at all: “Her \textit{þryuen face and hir \textit{þrote þrownen al naked, / Hir brest bare birfore, and bihine eke}” [Her lovely face and her throat were laid all naked, / Her breast bare in front, and her back also bare.] (1740-41).

The first conversation between Gawain and the Lady centers on her control of his body. The Lady says Gawain has been “\textit{tan as-tyt}” and threatens to “\textit{bynde}” him to his “\textit{bedde}” [quickly trapped; bind, bed] (1210, 1211). Gawain yields to the Lady, but begs her to release him. She refuses, saying that even though they are sitting on a bed, they should merely “\textit{karp}” [talk] (1225). Though the Lady invokes sexuality through her near nakedness and her intrusion into Gawain’s boudoir, she immediately revokes any chance for Gawain to act, channeling his bodily tension into discourse, and positioning him as the passive recipient of her action. The poet is careful to note that, in every instance, the Lady kisses Gawain—she is the kisser, and Gawain the kissee. Her deliberate inversion of conventional gender roles forces Gawain’s involuntary inversion, his adoption of a sexually passive behavior pattern. Though the Lady forces Gawain’s initial inversion, he participates more actively in his own feminization as the story develops.

\textsuperscript{9} In addition to Henry Savage, Avril Henry and R. E. Kaske support this view, among others.
\textsuperscript{10} The poet draws our attention to her gaze explicitly, noting on each of the three days she visits Gawain that she sneaks in to watch him as he sleeps (see ll. 1193-94, 1476, and 1742-56). I call the gaze phallic to highlight the way this situation reverses the classic psychoanalytical masculine/feminine structure.
If Gawain spends his days being seduced by Lady Bertilak, he spends his nights seducing her husband. Gawain must kiss his host, and the poet delicately gestures towards both the homoeroticism of the act and its feminizing elements. The description of Gawain’s kiss on the first knight illustrates the awkwardness of his situation: Gawain “hasppeʒ his fayre hals his armes wythinne, /And kysses hym as comlyly as ho couȝe awyse” [clasps the lord’s neck within his arms, and kisses him as courteously as he could devise] (1388-9). He must adhere to his bargain with the Lord, and yet remain within the bounds of heterosexual masculinity. On the second day, Gawain adopts the same stance as before, holding his host around the neck and kissing him “hendey” [nobly] (1639), ritualizing the interaction. By the last day, however, Gawain’s attitude has changed; his kisses are offered “as sauery and sadly as he hem sett couȝe” [as enthusiastically and soundly as he could place them] (1947). His repeated kissing of the lord juxtaposes the lord/vassal relationship with the heterosexual relationship; this parallel positioning marks Gawain as vassal or beloved—servant or wife.

In the final stage of his feminine inversion, Gawain actively chooses to use the green girdle rather than face his opponent with no defense. The girdle, like the carnivalesque Green Knight with whom it shares its color, is a harbinger of feminine inversion, given to him by a woman, and allegedly imbued with powerful defensive magic. At Arthur’s court, bastion of idealized chivalric masculinity, Gawain was the aggressor, using his strength for offensive maneuvers. At Castle Hautdesert, Gawain is on defense, helpless against the threat of decapitation but for the girdle. Though his feminine talisman can protect him from death, it cannot protect him from his symbolic castration—Gawain’s grand finale.

Though the churlish knight’s beheading sequence results in his return to glory in Carlisle and Turk, for SGGK’s Gawain the process of his symbolic castration is humiliating.
The Knight knicks him, causing a permanent scar, a signifier of Gawain's flawed knighthood. Gawain's change from perfect knight to dishonorable man is as complete a transformation as the churlish knight's; Gawain has lost perfection, pre-lapsarian innocence. When the Green Knight tells Gawain that he only "lakked a lyttel," Gawain cries, his face turning red, and he "schrank for shome" [lacked a little; shrank for shame] (2366, 2370-2). Gawain's confrontation with his own lack (i.e. his castration), marker both of feminine difference and of every subject of language, results in an explosive diatribe against women of no less than fifteen lines (2414-28).

Though he blames women, the poem emphasizes that it is Gawain's strict adherence to the masculine chivalric ideal that in fact fosters his inversion and his eventual transgression against that ideal. Gawain originally volunteers for the Green Knight's challenge to free Arthur from the obligation; his commitment to knightly courtesy then embroils him in the exchange game with Lord Bertilak; finally, his dual loyalties to chivalry and Christianity demand that he deflect the Lady's advances with tact and grace, preserving her feelings and his own chastity. Adhering to the masculine ideal causes Gawain's feminine inversion—being a man turns Gawain into a woman. Within masculinity lies femininity.

The SGGK-poet's construction of gender is by no means conventional. This version of the churlish knight story exists in a single manuscript, written in the north of England for a literary, rather than a popular (i.e. illiterate), audience. While the short verse romances use Gawain's figure to reinforce the Christian-infused ideology of chivalry, SGGK's representation of Gawain invokes a carnivalesque inversion of gender roles. This is a reversal of the crisis of masculinity reflected in the excessively masculine giants of medieval chronicles. Instead of behaving too aggressively, SGGK's Gawain is overly passive, a
feminized version of what used to be the premier masculine icon, the knight. This is one side of a twin social “coin”: the pervasiveness of the chivalric idea of submission, coupled with a changing economic system allowing the merchant “class” to achieve wealth rivaling that of the landholding aristocracy, creates a crisis of masculinity (where lack replaces excess) reflected in the literary version of this otherwise normative tale. The other side of the coin—increasing social power for women—is likewise reflected in the female version of this transformation story, featuring the loathly lady and her nemesis, the wicked witch.

III. Double Your Pleasure: The Loathly Lady Revealed

In the Disney version of Cinderella, we know that the step-sisters are ugly. We know this because the filmmakers show us the difference between the ugly girl and the pretty girl. Cinderella, the heroine from whose perspective the story is told, is petite with dainty features, but the step-sisters are tall and gangly, with exaggeratedly large noses, brows, hands, and feet. Their clothes are brightly colored and highly decorated, festive compared to the muted tones of Cinderella’s work clothes or her white, fairy ball-gown. Exaggeration is one of the key elements of carnivalesque imagery, and its use here signals to the audience the humorous awkwardness of Cinderella’s step-sisters. The director reinforces their deviance from the conventions of feminine beauty by showing us a scene of the sisters trying to make music: one sister stumbles along a melody with her flute as the other sister stretches her voice almost up to the notes. From this scene we travel to another room in the house where Cinderella’s soft, delicate voice picks up the melody, and she seems to be a natural soprano. See the difference, the film asks us? See how feminine that Cinderella is?
A similar kind of carnivalesque exaggeration characterizes the descriptions of the loathly lady in the Arthurian romances in late medieval England. Like Cinderella's step-sisters, she is the negative example: beware becoming this kind of hag! Her transformation allows her to function as both the ugly sisters and the beautiful Cinderella, all rolled into one character. The loathly lady, like the churlish knight, may represent all that medieval authors encouraged women not to be, but the loathly veneer hides a most lovely core. Unlike the churlish knight, however, the lady does not require a beheading. Instead, to tame her a chivalrous knight must marry her and be willing to consummate the marriage. Marriage replaces castration in this story—the replacement speaks for itself.

The story of the transformation of the loathly lady has appeared in English romances since at least 1299, when it appeared in “an interlude performed at one of Edward I's Round Tables” (Hahn 41). It appears in at least four extant versions, including John Gower's “Tale of Florent” (henceforth abbreviated Florent) and Geoffrey Chaucer's “The Wife of Bath's Tale” (Wife's Tale) as well as the anonymous The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle (Wedding) and The Marriage of Sir Gawain (Marriage). This story revolves around an exchange of information; the loathly lady provides the answer to variations of the question “What thynge is it that wommen moost desiren?” in exchange for marriage to a noble knight—often Gawain. The narrative of the loathly lady is overtly concerned with feminine desire, as the central question implies. This question is representative of the masculine questioning gaze, which seeks to uncover the mystified woman, and the poets take great fun in answering the

11 Quotations from “The Tale of Florent” come from the edition of the Confessio Amantis edited by Russell A. Peck; I have used the Riverside Chaucer, edited by Larry D. Benson, for citations from “The Wife of Bath's Tale”; citations from The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle and The Marriage of Sir Gawain come from Thomas Hahn's edition.
12 The phrasing of this question comes from Chaucer's Wife's Tale.
unanswerable question—sometimes at length. Gender is clearly at stake in this version of the Gawain transformation narrative, which focuses on male-female relationships. Both the loathly lady and the churlish knight narratives explore gender through the transformation of the inappropriate figure into the perfect specimen, but the version dealing with femininity is marked as overtly concerned with the question of gender difference. The fact that the female version of the narrative is the one which signifies difference both reflects the medieval scientific view of woman as the “second sex” and anticipates the situation in U.S. academia, where “gender studies” can often mean “women’s studies,” and the category of masculinity still remains in many spaces as the unquestioned and un-theorized norm.¹³

Structurally, the loathly lady and churlish knight versions of the transformation narratives share many important features: the conventional opening, which sets up the entrance of the carnivalesque character; the unconventional behavior of the character, which presents a challenge to the knight-hero’s chivalry; the knight-hero’s unparalleled courtesy, which breaks the enchantment; and the final scene, which reasserts the importance of the normative royal court. The differences in structure occur in those places where the feminine gender of the carnivalesque figure necessitates alternate strategies to those used in the churlish knight story to ensure the heterosexual marriage central to medieval romance. First, the loathly lady does not show up in court or challenge anyone who comes to her castle. She sits and waits for the knight to come to her. This allows the knight-hero—Gawain in the two popular versions, Florent in Gower’s version, and an unnamed rapist knight in

¹³ Of course this is not true of those many gender theorists upon whose work my own discussion stands, especially those theorists in masculinity studies. I merely wish to point out that even today, it is often the category of femininity that demands investigation, which stands out as the other to be studied. Though I obviously believe strongly in the importance of attending to questions of gender, I do not think this necessarily means studying “women’s issues” exclusively (thus risking the “ghetto-ization” of “women’s issues”).
Chaucer's—to meet the lady who will become his wife while actively searching, displaying masculine behavior sanctioned by the romances. Second, the loathly lady wants the Gawain-figure to marry her. This is the corollary to the challenges of courage, chastity, and courtesy comprising the central episodes for the churlish knight tale. The knight's wife is a reflection of him: in most of Chrétien's romances, for example, the heroine's beauty matches the hero's good looks so perfectly that they must surely be meant for one another. To marry a loathly hag is to risk tainting yourself with her physical grotesqueness (and for the medieval world, the implied spiritual grotesqueness that must accompany the outward sign). The marriage is not only a test of the knight's willingness to provide a public display, but the marriage contract demands consummation as well, a fact the loathly lady must mention when her husband is reluctant to perform his duty. The third difference from the churlish knight's transformation is its catalyst. In the churlish knight tale, the beheading sequence breaks the spell. The loathly lady doesn't require castration, however, as she is female (and is, in effect, always already castrated, even if she appears to possess the phallic gaze because of her active pursuit of her intended husband). Instead, the knight must grant her sovereignty—when he grants her possession of the masculine phallic gaze, she becomes the perfect (heterosexual) object of that gaze, a beautiful woman.

Though the details vary, all four loathly lady romances follow a similar plot line: a) the main knight acts to place himself in a dire situation (either by making foolish choices or by attempting to save Arthur from the consequences of his actions); b) to prevent his execution, the knight must learn the answer to the question "What do women desire?" within a specified time period; c) the knight searches, but cannot find the answer; d) he comes across the loathly lady who offers to provide the answer if he will grant her a boon; e)
he agrees to this exchange, and uses her answer to save himself when the time comes; f) the lady claims her boon, the knight’s hand in marriage, and he is obligated to comply; e) they marry, and the lady encourages the knight to consummate the marriage, which the reluctant husband finally agrees to do; f) upon demonstrating his willingness to perform the marital duty, the loathly lady transforms into a beautiful maiden and offers the knight a choice related to her physical appearance; g) rather than choosing, the knight grants the choice to the lady, who is then truly released from her spell and will remain beautiful all the time.

Though they use roughly the same plot line, the authors of the loathly lady romances craft tales with widely different meanings. As with the churlish knight romances, we must ask a few questions to guide the analysis of this story: What makes the loathly lady so loathly? Why is her femininity marked as inappropriate? What’s the importance of her transformation back into a beautiful maiden? Why is the knight able to break the enchantment keeping her loathly? What gives him transformative power? Who caused her original transformation, the carnivalesque inversion responsible for the action? Where does that power come from?

Let’s start with the first question, what makes the lady so loathly? The romancers focus attention on three main areas: her physical appearance, her aggressive behavior, and her poverty. Two of the romance poets relish the initial description of the loathly lady, spending more than a few lines detailing her grotesque appearance. Their descriptions appear another below (with facing translations):

Florent his wo ful heved uplefe
And syh this vecke wher sche sat,
Which was the loathlieste what
That evere man caste on his yhe:

Florent his woeful head uplifted,
and saw this creature where she sat,
which was the ugliest person
that ever man cast his eye on:
Hire Nase bass, hire browes hyhe,  
hire yhen smale and depe set,  
Hire chekes ben with teres wet,  
And riveled as an emty skyn  
Hangende doun unto the chin,  
Hire Lippes schrunken ben for age,  
Ther was no grace in the visage,  
Hir front was nargh, hir locks hore,  
Sche loketh forth as doth a More,  
Hire Necke is schort, hir shuldres courbe,  
That myhte a mannes lust destroube,  
Hire body gret and nothing smal,  
And schortly to describe hire al,  
Sche hath no liht withoute a lake;  
Bot lich unto the wollesak  
Sche proferth hire unto this knyght,  
And bad him, as he hath behyht.  
(1674-97)  
Gower's Confessio Amantis  
"The Tale of Florent"  

Her face was red, her nose snotty withalle,  
Her mowithe wyde, her tethe yalowe overe alle,  
With bleryd eyen gretter then a balle.  
Her mowithe was nott to lak:  
Her tethe hyng overe her lyppes,  
Her chekys syde as wemes hipses.  
A lute she bare upon her bak;  
Her nek long and therto greatt;  
Her here cloteryd on an hepe;  
In the sholders she was a yard brode.  
Hangyng papps to be an hors lode,  
And lyke a barelle she was made.  
And to rehearse the fowlnesse of that Lady,  
There is no tung may tele, securly;  

Her face was red, her nose low, her brows high,  
her eyes small and deep set,  
her cheeks wet with tears,  
and wrinkled as if empty skin hung down unto the chin,  
hers lips shriveled with age,  
There was no grace in the visage,  
hers front was narrow, her locks hoary,  
she looks as does a Moor,  
hers neck is short, her shoulders curved,  
(so much) that (it) might disturb a man's lust,  
her body great and nothing small,  
and shortly to describe her all,  
she has no limb without a fault;  
but like a woolsack,  
she proffers herself to this knight,  
and bade him, as he promised,  
so if she has been his warrant [the correct answer],  
then he should hold to their covenant,  
and be the bride-groom, she says to him.  

Her mouth wide, her teeth yellow all over,  
With bleary eyes even greater than a ball.  
Her mouth was not too small:  
her teeth hung over her lips,  
her cheeks as wide as women's hips,  
a lute she bore upon her back;  
her neck long and very wide;  
her hair clotted in a heap;  
in the shoulders she was a yard broad.  
Hanging paps (large enough) for a horse,  
and like a barrel she was made.  
And to rehears the foulness of that Lady,  
there is no tongue that may tell, surely;
Of lothynesse inowghe she had... Of ugliness enough she had...
She had two tethe on every syde She had two teeth on each side,
As borys tuskes, I wolle nott hyde, like boars' tusks, I will not hide,
Of lengthe a large handfulfe. of length a wide hands-breadth.
The one tusk went up and the other doun. The one tusk went up and the other down.
A mowthe fulle wyde and fowlle igrown, A mouth full wide and foully made,
With grey herys many on. with many gray hairs thereon.
Her lyppes laye lumpryd on her chyn; Her lips lay lumped on her chin,
Nek forsothe on her was none iseen— neck therefore was not seen—
She was a lothly on! (231-45, 548-556) She was a loathly one!

The Wedding of Sir Gauwin and Dame Ragnelle

Both descriptions follow the conventions of romance, focusing first on the ladies' facial features and then discussing her body. Instead of the conventional gray eyes that shine with an inner light, the loathly lady has orbs of either the small, deep-set or the bulbous, bleary variety. Her nose is large and snotty, she has shriveled lips and yellow teeth, and her neck is not fair and white (as are the necks of romance heroines), but large and brown.¹⁴ Her body is always large; exaggerated size is common to both the churlish knight and the loathly lady (it seems jokes about obesity did not start in the twentieth century after all). The author of Marriage is far more brief, but his loathly lady is the most deformed figure of the four romances:

Then there as shold have stood her mouth,
Then there was sett her eye;
The other was in her forhead fast,
The way that she might see.
Her nose was crooked and turnd outward,
Her mouth stood foule awry;

¹⁴ These authors also participate in the tradition of classist and racist aesthetics evident in the earlier romances of England and France.
A worse formed lady than shee was,

Never man saw with his eye. (57-64)

Then there where her mouth should have stood, then there was set her eye; the other was securely in her forehead, so that she might see. Her nose was crooked and turned outward, her mouth stood fouly awry; a worse formed lady than she was, never man saw with his eye.

This description pushes the loathly lady from carnivalesque to deformed; this woman exists only through the help of magical life support. Only Chaucer eschews the chance to linger over a lurid description, saying simply, "A fouler wight ther may no man devyse" (999). Just as the authors of Florent and Wedding spend more time on the lady's physical appearance than do the creators of Wife's Tale and Marriage, the same two authors also emphasize her behavior towards the knight to characterize the lady as loathly.

Wedding's loathly lady, for example, is far more active in obtaining her marriage than any of the heroines considered so far. She asks Arthur for Gawain's hand as the reward for saving her king's life, the reverse scene of the groom asking the father of the bride for permission to wed his daughter. The loathly lady demands to be wed openly, after declaring the marriage publicly throughout the countryside, despite the queen's advice to keep it private. Her grotesque presence drives the wedding preparations, and her aggressive behavior contrasts sharply with that of heroines, who usually wait for their heroes to pursue them. In fact, in her manipulation of Arthur and Gawain, the loathly lady most resembles the servant girls who carry messages for their passive heroines, especially The Knight with the Lion's Lunete, who argues convincingly to her mistress on Yvain's behalf. Aggressive femininity aligns with the working estate, the poor, in this interpretation of the legend.
The loathly lady's behavior at her wedding reveals her disregard for (or ignorance of) the aristocratic system of etiquette that includes such niceties as appropriate table manners or moderate food intake. The loathly lady is "nott curteys," according to those at the wedding, eating "as moche as six that there wore" [not courteous; as much as six who were there] (602-3). The implication is obvious; the other guests eat only one-sixth of what she eats, so she stands out as voracious, excessive, another carnivalesque trope at work. She eats everything they set before her, continuing to consume until the servants "drewe clothes and had washnen" [drew (off) the table-cloths and washed up] (620). Though none of the other versions feature a gluttonous feast scene, they all present a bedroom scene where the lady asks her husband to have sex with her.

Though medieval women were often reputed to be lusty creatures who participated readily in sexual adventures, it is far more common for men to initiate those sexual interludes in Middle English literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* provides a wealth of examples, including scenes as varied as boys fighting to win marriage as a prize ("The Knight's Tale") to a would-be lover grabbing his intended's crotch as a (successful) pick-up ploy ("The Miller's Tale"). In the three loathly lady tales featuring a wedding night bedroom scene, the bride pursues the husband.16 Her aggressive sexuality is yet another example of her inappropriate femininity. In *Florent*, the loathly lady takes action when her husband turns himself away from her in bed: "In armes sche beclipte hire lord, / And preide, as he was torned fro, / He wolde him torne ayeinward tho; / 'For now,' sche seith, 'we ben bothe on'" [In arms she clasped her lord, and prayed, as he was

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15 The loathly lady asks for Florent's hand in Gower's poem, and Chaucer's loathly lady asks the rapist knight to marry her as well. The fragmentary *Marriage* departs from this pattern: Arthur suggests the marriage to Gawain.
turned away, that he would turn again towards (her); “For now,” she said, “we are both one.”] (1790-3). Her pleading is effective, as Florent turns around shortly thereafter. In Wedding, Ragnelle makes the connection between Gawain’s sexual prowess and his reputation as a knight (his courtesy) when discussing his martial obligation: “A, Sir Gawen, syn I have you wed, / Shewe me your cortesey in bed; / With ryghte itt may nott be denied [Sir Gawain, since I wed you, you must show me your courtesy in bed; by rights it may not be denied.] (629-31). The lady goes on to say that he should at least kiss her “for Arthours sake” [for Arthur’s sake] (635). This ploy works too; Gawain says that he’ll “do more / Then for to kysse” (638-9). Chaucer’s loathly lady also asks the rapist knight about his less-than-amorous behavior in bed, smiling while she asks him “Fareth every knyght thus with his wyf as ye? / Is this the lawe of kyng Arthures hous? / Is every knyght so dangerous?” [Does every knight behave with his wife as you do? Is this the law of King Arthur’s house? Is every knight so disdainful?] (1088-90). As in Wedding, Chaucer’s lady explicitly connects the husband’s behavior in the bedroom to his reputation as a knight of Arthur’s house. She asks him to explain why he acts that way, rather than asking him to touch or kiss her, as the ladies in Florent and Wedding do.

In Florent and Wedding, it is in this moment, when the marital roles are completely reversed and the sexual aggressor has been turned into a passive (but willing) recipient, that the loathly lady transforms into the beautiful maiden. The knight-hero’s acquiescence to his role as object of desire in the bedroom foreshadows his later compliance in granting sovereignty to the loathly lady. In this transformation story, the knight’s courtesy relies on

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16 The Marriage manuscript is missing a number of leaves; one of omissions is the wedding night transformation scene.
his complicity in relinquishing the conventionally masculine role: he must not make the
decisions; he must not be the sexual aggressor; he must not be active at all. He must submit
to the lady as if she were a lord. The knight's submissive courtesy in these romances is
parallel behavior to that of Gawain in the churlish knight stories: he must obey the will of his
lady as he would obey the will of his host, lord, or king. But unlike the masculine version of
this narrative, where Gawain must alternately exercise his strength against male opponents
and then defer courteously to male VIPs, in the loathly lady story, Gawain's test is one of
restraint. Clearly the knight has physical power over the loathly lady (Chaucer's version
makes this point boldly with the rapist knight, as I discuss below), but he must allow her to
have physical autonomy before he breaks the spell.

Though the loathly lady transforms into a beautiful maiden once the knight submits
to her, she offers him one last choice, concerning her physical appearance (the focus of
much narrative attention thus far). In three of the loathly lady romances, after transforming,
the lady offers the knight a choice about her beauty: would he rather see her beautiful during
the day or at night, as he can't have both. We learn, as he does, that he has not yet won, as
the loathly lady will still be loathly for half of each day. When he grants her the decision,
validating her authority over her own body, then the spell is broken. The only reason he can
grant her this control is that as her husband, he is the legal owner of her body. His
transformation from powerful husband to powerless beloved permits her transformation
from loathly to beautiful. For the knight-hero, the behavior required for success is the same:
adherence to the chivalric virtue of courtesy (cortaysye), which dictates that he treat noble
lords and ladies with the utmost respect and obedience. Granting the loathly lady her own
will is the chivalric response—chivalry breaks the magical spell. Chivalry's efficacy against
enchantment is thus demonstrated in both the female and male versions of the make-over narrative.

If the courtesy of the knight returns the loathly lady to her beautiful incarnation, who originally transformed her into such a grotesque creature? In three of the four romances considered here, the perpetrator is the loathly lady's evil step-mother. Unlike the witches of the churlish knight story, whose widely varied representation makes it hard to categorize, the step-mothers of the loathly lady romances are all wicked witches. In *Wedding*, Ragnelle tells Gawain that she was “shapen by nygramanc’y and “by enchantment” at the hands of her “stepdame” [created by necromancy; by enchantment; step-mother] (691-3). She was doomed to appear loathly, as she says, “Evyn tylle the best of Englonde / Had wedyd me verament, / And also he shold geve me the sovereynte / Of alle his body and goodes, sycurlie. / Thus was I disformyd” [Until the best (knight) in England had wedded me truly, and also should give me sovereignty over his whole body and all his goods, surely.] (695-9).

In *Marriage*, the confession scene is similar, though interrupted by a missing page in the manuscript. The loathly lady tells the story of her father, “an old knight” who married “a younge lady”: “Shee witched me, being a faire young lady, / To the green forrest to dwell, / And there I must walke in womans liknesse, / Most like a feeind of hell. / She witched my brother to a carlish B. . . .” [She bewitched me, being a fair young lady, (banishing me) to the green forest to dwell, and there I must walk in this woman's likeness, most like a fiend of hell. She bewitched my brother into a churlish B. . . ] (179-83). The writing stops here, with what may have been the word “baron,” implying that the wicked step-mother bewitched both children born to her husband's first wife. Gower's *Florent* finds himself married to the daughter of the King of Cizile, who tells him, “my Stepmoder for an hate, / Which toward
me sche hath begonne, / Forschop me, til I hadde wonne / The love and soverainete / Of what knyht that in his degre / Alle othre passeth of good name” [My stepmother, because of the hate she had developed towards me, transformed me until I had won the love and sovereignty of whichever knight of his station exceeds all other knights of good name.]

(1844-49). This is the only version which even attempts to provide motivation for the stepmother’s witchy behavior, but it’s a flimsy one at best: the step-mother hated the daughter. Must step-mothers hate their daughters? These medieval authors do not spend time explaining the step-mother’s antagonism, treating it as a self-evident fact. Who is this evil mother who lurks behind transformative power, using it to punish her step-children? This is the question I devote the next section of this chapter to answering. First, I want to explore Chaucer’s version of the loathly lady story more fully. In a number of ways, Chaucer’s version is unlike the others, adapting a popular topic for an aristocratic audience. Before I turn to the wicked witches of the medieval make-over, I would like to mention her notable absence here.

Though the evil step-mother appears in three loathly lady romances, she is nowhere to be found in Chaucer’s version. In Wife’s Tale, the action does not center on the knight’s ability to act chivalrously and thus foil the evil step-mother, but on the transformation of an unrepentant criminal into a proper knight: just as SGGK folds the loathly lady story into its churlish knight structure, Chaucer’s loathly lady story includes an element of the churlish knight tale. A comparison of Chaucer’s Wife’s Tale with the other loathly lady stories provides an insight about Chaucer’s appropriation of traditional material to suit the richly developed characters who populate The Canterbury Tales. Chaucer’s attribution of this tale to the Wife of Bath facilitates the change of focus which so radically transforms the tale’s
meaning. This change creates a narrative that focuses on the transformation, effected by women, of an unruly knight into a submissive husband, rather than on the returning of an inappropriately "loathly" monster to the form of a docile, beautiful woman. Although there are many differences between the versions of the loathly lady romances, an examination of the following key points makes the shift in focus clear: the premise for the quest, the appearance of the loathly lady, the circumstances of the marriage arrangements, and the circumstances of the choice. It is in these areas that the crucial distinctions can be made.

From the beginning of the tales, it is clear that the quests to determine what women really want are predicated on significantly disparate circumstances. In *Wife's Tale*, the knight has "rafte" the "maydenhed" from an innocent "mayde walkynge hym bifron" [ripped; maidenhead; maid walking before him] (886-88). When the knight is brought to Arthur's court for justice, the Queen and her ladies beg for his life and present him with a challenge: his life for the answer to the question, "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren?" (905). On the other hand, in *Wedding and Marraige*, Arthur and Gawain do not quest to discover "whate wemen love best in feld and town" as a punishment for rape (91); rather, Arthur must answer the question to satisfy the challenge of a figure who echoes the churlish knight (*Wedding's Sir Gromer Somer Joure and Marraige's Baron*). *Florent's* knight slays a man who attacks him, and his kinship to the emperor is the only reason the man's relatives offer him the question quest rather than killing him outright in revenge. Though the crimes committed by Arthur and Florent show their abuse of power (by being a careless lord and by killing another man, respectively), the rapist commits a crime related directly to the issue of women's sovereignty.
In Chaucer's rendition of the tale, the question asked is germane to the crime the knight committed; the knight rapes a woman (taking away her sovereignty), and then must spend a year thinking about what women want. This makes the question paramount—it is, in fact, what the knight needs to learn to prevent future occurrences of rape. In the other versions, however, the question of what women desire is completely unrelated to both the circumstances that bring Arthur (or Florent) to the woods and the crime Arthur (or Florent) allegedly commits. One effect of this is to trivialize the question being asked; it is less important that the knight think about what women want and more important that he exhibit noble character by keeping his word during the ensuing adventure. Another consequence of these differences is that in *Wife's Tale*, it is difficult to like the rapist knight, whereas the knights of the other versions suffer manipulation at the hands of strangers, making their characters far more sympathetic.

The circumstances under which the knight-hero first encounters the loathly lady further distinguish the narratives. The Wife of Bath tells us that the knight, after searching for the answer until "the day was come that homward moste he toune" [the day had come that he must turn homeward], meets the loathly lady in a glade he passes on his way home (988). Chaucer is careful to point out that the knight heads home only "Whan that he saugh he myghte nat come therby . . . what wommen love moost" [When he saw that he might not come thereby . . . what women love most] (984-5); in other words, the knight has given up—he has admitted that he does not know what women want, can not name it and thus assert control over it—when he "chances" upon the true answer. *Wedding's Arthur*, on the other hand, returns from his search with "a monethe" left, and decides to "seke a lytelle more / In Yngleswod Forest" when he meets Dame Ragnelle [a month; seek a little more in
Inglewood Forest] (216-7). Arthur receives his answer while in pursuit of it, whereas Chaucer's knight is rescued by circumstance (much like his earlier rescue by the Queen and her ladies), or more specifically, by the chance intervention of a woman. The popular romance casts its hero as an active participant in his own salvation; had Arthur not decided to search further, he may not have been saved. Wife's Tale, on the other hand, presents a relatively passive knight saved purely by the intervention of female characters.

Once the wedding has been negotiated, the answer given, and his life saved, the knight-hero in the three versions of the loathly lady romance not penned by Chaucer does not have much else to do. Whereas Chaucer's knight must listen to a lecture of over one hundred lines from his new wife and make a difficult decision before she changes, Gawain and Florent must merely agree to consummate their marriages before seeing their wives transformed into a "fayre madame" [fair madam] (Wedding 648) and the "faireste" lady "That evere in al this world he syh" [fairest; that ever in all this world he saw] (Florent 1804-5). In Wedding, Dame Ragnelle requests that Gawain "kysse [her] att the leste," and Gawain replies by assuring her that he "wolle do more / Then for to kysse" [kiss her at least; will do more than kiss] (639). Immediately, Dame Ragnelle becomes "the fayrest creature / That evere he sawe, withoute measure" [the fairest creature that ever he saw, without measure] (641-2). Gawain, already rewarded with a beautiful wife, is then offered the choice between having a wife who is "fayre on nyghtes" and "fouUe on days" or just the opposite [fair at night; foul during the day]. Similarly, in Florent the knight turns away from his bride when he sees her naked body, but after some pleading, she convinces him to turn back towards her. When he sees her, she has already transformed into a beautiful maiden of eighteen.
In *Wife's Tale*, the above sequence of events is altered. Before he agrees to anything—before he even speaks in response to the long lecture, the lady presents Chaucer's knight with the question of whether he would prefer an ugly, but "trewe, humble wyf" or a "yong and fair" bride likely to have extra-marital urges [true, humble wife; young and fair] (1221, 1223). His inability to make a choice between these two undesirable options, as indicated by his "sore" sighs, is presumably one of the things that prompts him to offer the choice to his wife (1228). Importantly, though, the knight in Chaucer's tale chooses to grant his wife sovereignty before being rewarded with his wife's announcement that she will be "bothe fair and good" (1241). Chaucer's knight does not get to make his decision while looking at a lovely damsel, nor is he assured of a beautiful wife at least half the time, regardless of his decision, as are Gawain and Florent. In the version of the tale offered by *Wedding, Florent, and Marriage*, the knight's decision to let the bride decide her own fate seems perfunctory when compared to the decision Chaucer's knight grants his lady. The genre more commonly features the transformation of the loathly lady (and thus the knight's decision can be superficial), but Chaucer's version focuses on the transformation of the knight (necessitating a more substantial choice).

Whether Chaucer's focus on the female characters and women's desire for sovereignty is the result of his appropriation of a lost text, the manifestation of his "reading" of the tale, or a variation deliberately altered to suit the Wife of Bath's character is less important than the effect of his decision to present the familiar loathly lady tale in the manner he did. Chaucer's tale is clearly about the rehabilitation of an errant knight, whereas the focus of the later popular romances is parallel to that of the churlish knight, transformation through interaction with the most chivalrous knight. *Wife's Tale* is unique.
among surviving versions of the loathly lady legend in its representation of women as central figures of authority and controllers of the action. Chaucer’s adaptation of the legend allows the Wife of Bath to transform a phallocentric interrogation of women into a literary world where women can effect positive changes in the men around them, where “sovereignty” is not merely a dream, but a powerful truth. Chaucer’s loathly lady (who works in service to the proto-feminist, Alice) exists as the agent of her own transformation alongside the more misogynist representations of second wives attacking their step-children. What social factors may have prompted the development of such polarized representations of feminine magic within the literary tradition of one figure? What’s the cultural recipe for a witch?

IV. The Wicked Witch as Mother

Of the nine loathly lady and churlish knight romances considered here, six feature witches as the initial wielders of transformative power. Of those six witches, four are mothers—three step-mothers and one mother-in-law. What’s up with all these evil mothers? Psychoanalytical theory has an answer for mother-hate, and one that I believe makes sense when applied to individual psychology. What psychoanalytical theory does not explain, however, is why the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw the rise of villainized mother-figures (cast as witches) in its popular literature. As we saw in the last chapter, the twelfth- and thirteenth-century French romances and English chronicles do not feature wicked witches, but the Middle English romances clearly do. In fact, the author of *Sir Perceval of Galles*, the Middle English version of Chrétien’s *The Story of the Grail*, carefully inserts a

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17 As so many have detailed this issue, I will not rehearse it here.
wicked witch where none previously existed. In Chrétien's version of this legend, the titular character defeats the Red Knight in his first battle, takes the Red Knight's armor, stops to sojourn with a gentleman who teaches him all about arms, and then continues his journey without further ado. The Middle English poet abandons Chrétien's storyline shortly after Perceval defeats the Red Knight, omitting the stop-over at the local arms academy in favor of a jape aimed at the Red Knight's mother, whom he then uses as the butt of a series of cruel jokes (whose climax is a witch-burning). The Red Knight by himself is no longer an emotionally satisfying threat, no longer a stand-alone villain—the author clearly felt his audience would want something more, something witchy.

The jokes about the Red Knight's mother begin when Perceval, dressed in the late Red Knight's armor and astride his horse, meets the mother of his dead foe. Her introduction designates her clearly as a witch: "Till on the morne at forthe dayes, / He mett a wyche, as men says" [(He rode) until on the morning, late in the day, he met a witch, as men say.] (826). She runs up to Perceval, telling the man she thinks is the Red Knight that she heard he was dead and she's glad to see him alive. Perceval realizes who she is, and perpetuates the deception by saying very little. This encounter, told from Perceval's point of view (i.e. the audience shares Perceval's privileged knowledge), allows the audience to be in on the joke: we are silent with Perceval while the witch condemns herself. And she does condemn herself, confessing willingly: "Mi sone, and thou ware thare slayne, / And thyn armes of drawen, / I couthe hele the agayne / Als wele als thou was are" [My son, if you were slain, and your arms ripped off, I could heal you again as well as you ever were.] 849-52. She's a healing witch, drawn from any number of classical and medieval traditions of

18 I've relied on Mary Flowers Braswell's edition of Sir Perceval of Galles throughout this chapter.
women healers, but her healing is necromancy, one of the least tolerated forms of magic. She raises the dead. Wicked, wicked witch.

The Middle English poet indulges the audience, whom the mysterious minstrel clearly thought would enjoy a good witch-burning about this time—and if we can judge a medieval audience by the survival of its literature, they loved it! When Perceval hears her confession, he stabs her on his spear, carries her over to a fire into which he threw the Red Knight, and “keste the wiche in the hete” [cast the witch into the heat] (862). In true action-hero style, Perceval taunts the wretched woman with a one-liner, saying “Ly still and swete / Bi this son, that lyther swayne!” [Lie still and sweat by your son, that wicked swain!] (863-4). I can almost hear the soundtrack playing heavy guitar riffs over the shot of Perceval mounting his horse and riding off into the sunset. The Middle English adapter adds a wicked witch where none previously existed and then brings Perceval along to kill her. And the privileged piece of information we learn about this wicked witch is that she’s a mother.

The figure of the witch as mother occupies an important place in Renaissance scholarship. One of the scholars most influential for my work is Diane Purkiss, whose *The Witch in History* argues that in the Renaissance in England, “some women’s stories of witchcraft constituted a powerful fantasy which enabled women to negotiate the fears and anxieties of housekeeping and motherhood” (93). Purkiss also examines the way in which the body of the witch in Renaissance texts is a “fantasy-image of the huge, controlling, scattered, polluted, leaky fantasy of the maternal body” (119). Deborah Willis’s *Malevolent Nurture* argues that “the figure of the witch was closely intertwined with that of the mother” (17). In an analysis of witchcraft conflicts at the village level in England, Willis notes that “early modern women and men were most likely to fear a specifically magical danger when
they got angry at someone who resembled their mother or nurse" (29). Both Purkiss and Willis situate the conflation of witchcraft and motherhood as an early modern phenomenon. Based on the examples considered here, it may be that the association of motherhood and witchcraft has its roots in medieval soil.

As we have seen, the rise of the wicked step-mother happens in the fourteenth century, after the decline of Norman feudalism saw the beginnings of a new mercantile economy grow in its vacancy. Christopher Dyer’s *Making a Living in the Middle Ages* traces the economic history of England, documenting the development of a market economy replacing the primarily agricultural system of feudal England. Beginning during the thirteenth century and continuing into the fourteenth, England experienced an urban expansion.19 Dyer mentions that especially in the early stages of this system, working-class wives were increasingly expected to contribute to the family’s income, and this change increased women’s economic power while also adding yet another marital obligation (159). Widespread famine and disease in the fourteenth century turned economic expansion into recession, however, and this is the period in which most of the romances in this section were composed, though they continued to circulate as manuscripts well into the sixteenth century.20 This establishes at least one reason to desire an economic scapegoat. But why women? More specifically, why mothers?

In part because of the changing economic system and in part because of the labor shortage after the plague, women played an expanded role in the developing mercantile

19 See pages 101-227, in particular. Frances and Joseph Gies also document an economic expansion in the thirteenth century in *Marriage and Family in the Middle Ages* (157-185).
economy of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages*, Frances and Joseph Gies argue that after the Black Death, “a considerable number of the laborers were unattached women” (239). Social and economic factors like these may have created tension between working men and the women who cut themselves a piece of the economic pie, but this does not explain why wicked witches should suddenly become prevalent in a literary genre where they had previously been rare, why step-mothers who possess magical power should be evil. *Marriage and the Family* offers a clue for the mystery of the wicked step-mother: especially after the plague racked fourteenth-century England, the age difference between (older) husbands and (younger) wives increased, and many women found themselves widowed at a young age (277). Maryanne Kowaleski’s “The History of Urban Families in Medieval England” examines the number of widows in pre-plague London, citing that “about 61 percent of male testators left surviving widows” (55). This percentage rises to 82 by the end of the century (55). According to the Gieses, young widows often remarried, a situation fraught with potential perils: “the remarrying young widow (or the girl marrying a widower) frequently found herself confronted with another problem: step-children” (284). Because of changing inheritance laws, “Stepchildren sometimes sued stepparents over rights to property” (285). For example, the development of “jointure” (a new type of marital contract providing for “joint tenancy of land by husband and wife during their lifetime”) in England eventually meant that upon the death of her husband, “A jointured widow might acquire most or even all of her husband’s estates instead of merely the dower third” (190). This economic conflict points the finger squarely at usurping widows, the most likely kind of person to be step-mothers. Step-mothers are threatening because they disinherit children, and this threat finds its metaphor in the
transformation of the attractive, upper-class child into the grotesque, lower-class loathly lady or churlish knight by the step-mother. Doing the chivalric thing, following the rules, these romances tell us, will restore the children to their rightful state (as landowners).  

We are still keenly aware of the delicate economic situation of non-traditional families. Writers of the recent adaptation of Cinderella, *Ever After* (1998), represent the conflict between the daughter and the step-mother as rooted in common interest in ownership and management of the land once belonging to the deceased father/husband. In this film, Drew Barrymore’s Cinderella (Danielle de Barbarac) becomes a servant in her father’s home after he dies suddenly, under the rule of the petty, self-centered step-mother, Baroness Rodmilla de Ghent (played with delightful wickedness by Angelica Huston). Danielle expresses her interest in her father’s manor when she tells a friend that she would be glad if her step-sister married the prince, because the step-family would move to the castle and she would be free to “turn things around” on their struggling farm. Though there are likely to be as many factors involved in the late medieval rise of the romance wicked witch as there are surviving manuscripts, what is clear is that her popular literary debut was a resounding success. She appeared with more frequency as the fifteenth century wore on, and by the sixteenth century, she was everywhere.

The wicked witch retains her maternity as she travels into the Renaissance, and in many ways the maternal connection grows tighter. In the late medieval romances, the

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21 I must note here that the two “literary” versions of these stories, *SGGK* and *Wife’s Tale*, do not feature a usurping step-mother figure, preferring to substitute a healing-goddess (Morgan le Fay) and a Christian moralist (the loathly lady), respectively. Rather than developing this distinction as yet another example of a high-art/low-art schism, I prefer to let the differences stand as strategies for influencing what were clearly highly specific audiences. Chaucer wrote for the court in London, and the *SGGK* poet wrote for a limited audience at best, whereas the other romances—the popular romances—are “popular” because they were likely composed with a more general audience in mind.
wicked step-mother is certainly wicked, but like the modern make-over fairy-tale, her power can easily be thwarted if folks just follow the rules. The wicked witches of the Renaissance are more slippery, less easy to tame or outdo, more sinister and more exaggerated as well. The maternal witch is not merely bad, but downright evil, and magic itself becomes suspect. Something wicked this way comes.
1. Who is the Fairest One of All?

The first thing we hear from the lips of the evil queen in Disney’s *Snow White* isn’t the line for which she is famous, the line repeated by generations of American children, “Magic mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?” Instead, her first words summon the spirit within the magic mirror, commanding her “slave” from the “furthest spaces” to attend her. Her spirit possesses secret knowledge, knowledge that allows the queen to make important personal decisions, like whether or not to kill her step-daughter because of her unparalleled beauty. The evil queen is known for being vain and self-serving, but we seldom remember that she’s a conjurer of mysterious, knowledgeable spirits. First and foremost, in fact, the queen is a conjurer, what medieval and Renaissance audiences might have called a necromancer or a demonologist.

Her interest in beauty is undeniable—she does seem to care very deeply about her success on the local fashion scene. Isn’t it true that beauty is power, after all? Especially for women, the story goes. The queen is quite shrewd, actually, to watch the competition closely, but her Machiavellian tactics in her dealings with Snow White make her unsympathetic. Some mother, right? Her apparently vain interest in outward appearance only seems vain when read in the context of the late twentieth-century U.S., where it has become politically incorrect to value beauty overtly (even as our mass media joyously
engages in worshipful adoration of outward beauty and youth). In medieval texts, as we have seen, outward physical appearance reflects inward moral character: when we meet a grotesque hag in the forest or a club-wielding giant on the road, it is a clear signal that Something is up. But the evil step-mother of Disney's *Snow White* is not a grotesque hag, nor does she have the exaggerated features of the "ugly" sisters in *Cinderella*, Drizella and Anastasia, though her story is also an adaptation of a fairy tale collected by the Grimms (called "Schneewittchen"). Quite the contrary, in fact—she's beautiful, with sumptuous clothing and a delicate red mouth under dark, mysterious eyes. The tale requires the Queen to be vain about her beauty for its main action.

I think the wicked Queen is quite lovely. But as far back as I can remember, whenever I watch the film, she scares the bejesus out of me. When her pale face first appears, reflected in the smoky magic mirror, it still sends shivers skating across the back of my neck. She's beautiful, but she's ee-vil! She's the opposite of the loathly lady, whose grotesque shell hides a pearl of goodness: the queen's beautiful veneer covers a core of pure hatred and ill will. Her transformation into the old hag with the tempting apple reconstructs her figure in a way that aligns it more closely with medieval typology—it is as if her moral character has been moved from the inside to the outside, the mask removed. Again, this feels like the loathly lady story in reverse, except that the transformation is supposed to make the lady less threatening. But what's less threatening about the classic witch-hag figure, the old lady stooping and hunching her way up to a little cottage, her eyes glittering maniacally over a warty nose and cragged features?

What's less threatening is that in her hag guise, the wicked Queen is recognizable as wicked (at least by the audience, as Snow White seems to have no sense about these things).
She fits the profile. In the U.S., a number of horror and thriller movies which did very well at the box office feature villains who are not what they seem to be or who do not fit the cinematic stereotype of the "crazed killer": from the hugely influential *Psycho* to more recent films such as *Kiss the Girls*, *From Hell*, or *Scream*. These villains are frightening because they seem so harmless, they seem to be the good guys.¹ The same principle is at work in *Snow White*, whose wicked queen is first revealed to be evil and then destroyed. In these kinds of stories, what's especially horrifying is when you can't tell who the bad guys are, when evil appears good.

For the authors considered in this chapter, one of the most pressing problems related to magic is that it disguises and deludes, allowing wickedness to mask itself. There's no way to tell whom to fight, because the magician may appear to be a pious hermit, the witch may appear to be a beautiful queen. The villains can hide because of their magical illusions and tricks, and magic itself becomes implicated through constant association with malicious and manipulative deception. As magic becomes more and more debased, dependent upon demons and deceptive illusion, it becomes more and more a practice of wicked old witches: in England, the Renaissance is the time for witches. In Malory's *Morte Darthur*, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, and Shakespeare's plays, for example, witches lurk on the

¹ In the interest of not ruining the films for those who haven't seen them, I'll address the villains only here in the footnote. Spoilers ahead! In *Psycho*, Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) is an attractive man who turns out to be a cross-dressing psycho; in *Kiss the Girls*, the villain is played by Cary Elwes, a cop who turns out to have "issues"; in *From Hell*, Johnny Depp shocks Victorian society with his revelation that Jack the Ripper was an aristocrat (played by Bilbo Baggins himself, Sir Ian Holmes). In *Scream*, the slashers are two popular high school boys, Billy Loomis (played by Skeet Ulrich) and Stuart Mocker (Matthew Lillard).
margins, cackling and brewing potions, trapping men and making mischief in an abundance unmatched by the earlier medieval Arthurian romances.²

The first section of this chapter traces the development of demonology, a critical factor for the literary production of witches: demonic magic relies on the coercion of spirits who provide magical power based on illusion and deception, the primary tools of the devil. Widespread belief in demonology, beginning in the late fifteenth century and flourishing in the sixteenth, founds a corollary interest in the wicked witch. When demonology and witchcraft collided, the result was the Renaissance witch, whose presence marks all magic as potentially evil. The wicked witch of the early modern period is maternal, as are the medieval witches, but in the sixteenth century, the maternal connection to witch becomes definitive. In particular, Spenser expands the trope of maternal malevolence to include not only witches, but demonic monsters as well. The maternal threats within the literature reflect a more widespread concern with maternal roles throughout English society in the sixteenth century. The maternal witch responds to a deep-seated anxiety about maternity that modern audiences share with audiences in sixteenth-century England. It is the Renaissance wicked witch we still meet when we turn on our televisions or slip into darkened movie theaters with popcorn; it is this wicked old witch whose cackle still strikes that tiny flame of horror. I'll get you, my pretty!

II. Brewing Trouble: The Dark Side of Magic

²I have used Eugene Vinaver's edition, Malory's Works, for all citations from The Morte Darthur; quotations from The Faerie Queene come from Thomas P. Roche, Jr.'s edition; all Shakespearean quotes come from The Riverside Shakespeare, edited by G. Blakemore Evans.
Shadowy shapes slip through the woods, some in the air, some on the ground. One by one, they materialize at a clearing where the dewy grass glistens in the moonlight. They dance together, and as the movements become more frenzied, the cry of a baby lingers high in the breeze. There’s a fire, and the women take turns adding ingredients, chanting and dancing until a dark shape appears. The ladies’ dancing becomes erotic, and it is not long before the movements become sexual. The sounds of passion, of prayers and songs to the night, of laughter and howling, continue until just before dawn, when the figures melt away, one by one, back through the forest and the skies, back to their homes.

The scene I have just described is a composite picture of the set of elements which became the “witches’ sabbath” in the late fifteenth century: flying, nightly meetings, cannibalism (especially of children), naked dancing and orgies, sexual intercourse with the devil representative of a demonic pact, and ritualized magical spells. These elements pervade clerical and literary representations of magic, in particular, implicating witches as participants in a communal society of transgressive women in league with the devil. But there is another version of witchcraft, described by Deborah Willis in Malevolent Nurture:

The “typical” witchcraft case began when an older woman had a falling out with a neighbor—often another woman, usually a younger one. The older woman tended to be poorer, and frequently the falling out occurred after she had gone to her neighbor with a request for food or some domestic item or for access to land, and the neighbor refused her request. The woman went away, cursing her neighbor openly or muttering under her breath. Later, some misfortune happened to the neighbor or her family. A child fell sick, a wife or husband died, cattle or sheep died, a freak storm destroyed the crops,
the milk went sour, the butter would not turn. The neighbor recalled the
cursing of the old woman and suspected the misfortune was the product of
her witchcraft. (31-32)

This description is a generalization derived from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century
witchcraft trial records and related pamphlets. This domestic conflict seems almost to be the
polar opposite of the erotic, exotic representation above—the time changes from night to
day, the bodies turn from naked and sexualized to clothed and asexual, the community of
women morphs into conflict between women, and the magic moves from a general desire
for evil to a specific instance of malevolence. What a change is here!

Both versions of witchcraft represented above had currency in the cultural milieu of
sixteenth-century England. By the sixteenth century, two traditions of magic, which can be
roughly equated with the categories “natural” and “divine,” had merged into one.3 The
“natural” tradition featured “a widespread and diffuse system of common spells, charms,
blessings, potions, powders, and talismans employed by many people at all levels of medieval
society,” a description borrowed from Michael Bailey’s “From Sorcery to Witchcraft” (965).
The “divine” tradition posited that “through very complex and detailed invocations of
demons,” a magician with “the prerequisite ritual training and Latin literacy” could coerce
demonic spirits and thus make use of the spirits’ magical power (966). “Natural” magic
includes, for example, the practice of healing magic and the love-potions brewed by the
good witch Thessela, and it seems also related to the domestic conflict above. “Divine”
magic, on the other hand, lurks behind the prophetic knowledge of Merlin, whose father is a

3 See Chapter One of Richard Kieckhefer’s Magic in the Middle Ages for a more thorough description of these
two categories.
fiend, and motivates the witches' sabbath, a celebration of the devil. During the fifteenth century, these two traditions combine to leave the sixteenth century the cursed legacy of full-blown demonic witchcraft.

If the two descriptions of witchcraft above seem incompatible, it's because they reflect polarized extremes, eroticized and domestic, present in representations of witches in England in the sixteenth century. Beliefs about witchcraft included both kinds described above, and a wealth of variations in between. As many scholars argue (providing a long list of reasons), the threat of demonic involvement spread during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries to the extent that all magic could potentially be deemed the result of traffic with demons. Traffic with demons was heretical, and the punishments could be severe, even fatal. The two kinds of witches explored in the latter half of this chapter, the temptress and the hag, function as examples of the two extremes discussed here.

In the works of Malory, Spenser, and Shakespeare, the spread of demonic magic is reflected in the frequent appearance of “feends,” “spirits/sprites,” and “demons,” whose presence here is far more frequent than in the Arthurian romances and chronicles of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. In fact, they are so common in these texts that they become inseparable from the magic with which they are associated; Malory, Spenser, and Shakespeare structure magical power so that the control of demonic spirits becomes responsible for its efficacy. The literary trend echoes a widespread belief: anyone who practiced magic could potentially be accused of working for the devil.

Beginning at least as far back as the representations in the Bible, the devil has been associated with temptation via the power of illusion and deceit. As Brian Levack
summarizes in *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, “One of the most important powers that the Devil had was the power to create illusions” (33). In some romances, a knight who meets a foul hag may end up marrying a beautiful maiden. But in others, a knight who meets a lovely maiden may actually be in league with the devil himself. “Things are not always what they seem,” a modern fantasy film warns, a refrain picked up from the lingering voices of the likes of Malory, Spenser, and Shakespeare. For these authors, whose works circulated during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, magic (because of its association with demons) is generally deceptive, false, and tricky—it is illusion. Disguises, deceptions and lies, fake or false people and objects: there is no end to the medley of wriggling and twisting forms of magic swimming in the early modern sea of illusion. The discussion below provides examples of the strategies used by Malory, Spenser, and Shakespeare to associate their magical characters with demonic spirits and deceptive illusion. As the second half of the chapter focuses on the primary practitioner of demonic magic in the early modern period, the wicked witch, and thus covers the female characters who exemplify these trends, this discussion draws most commonly on the male examples.

Merlin’s character in Malory’s *Morte Darthur* provides an illustration of the change produced by magic’s construction as a deceptive and demonic practice. In the English chronicles, Merlin is an important part of the story; his mysterious power enables Arthur’s conception. In Malory’s romance, he plays a larger role in Arthur’s life, sticking around after pandering for Uther to teach the lad Arthur a few things before disappearing from the text very early (on page 81 of Vinaver’s 726-page edition). Generally, he serves as Arthur’s

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4 Christopher Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* also participates in this trend.
5 Sarah (played by a young Jennifer Connelly) hears this repeatedly in *Labyrinth*, a classic fantasy film.
advisor, giving him military and marital advice. With a few notable mistakes (namely, murdering baby boys and letting Arthur marry Gwenevere), Merlin’s advice is usually helpful, and in some cases, absolutely necessary to Arthur’s success. Malory’s Merlin follows the chronicle tradition in making Merlin an important, beneficial part of Arthur’s early reign. Merlin’s primary function in the *Morte* mimics that in the chronicles—he’s the possessor of special knowledge and the resident prophet—but he is also a deceptive and wily master of disguise, a fiend.

Merlin has an arsenal of deceptive transformative magic at his disposal: he turns himself and Arthur invisible to avoid re-fighting Pellinore, he disguises himself as a beggar, a fourteen-year-old child, an old man, and Jordan, and he makes others fall asleep. One of his favorite tricks, designed to showcase his knowledge and teach his pupil through experience, is to show up disguised and administer a set of questions, a test of sorts. When the examinee fails, Merlin lectures the chastened student, often Arthur. Though this kind of deception is harmless, Merlin’s fondness for this kind of trick is characteristic of his association with deceit and illusion in the *Morte Darthur*.

Merlin is obviously a trusted advisor for Arthur, but he is not an unambiguously “good” person by any means: he is not a hero-magician, but a mysterious and potentially dangerous sorcerer. His paternity remains in question for Malory, although his characters are aware of the rumors about Merlin’s spiritual father. Uwayne tells Morgan, for instance, that “men seyde that Merlyon was begotyn of a fende” [men say that Merlin was begotten by a fiend] (90). Merlin is the son of a demonic spirit, and his fiendish nature must have come

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Merlin advises Arthur about military strategy on pages 13-15, 16-17, 47, 49, 58-59, and 61. He unsuccessfully discourages Arthur’s marriage to Gwenevere on page 59.
to mind when audiences heard Malory’s retelling of one of Merlin’s more insidious deceptions, the transformation of Uther into Gorlois for the purpose of getting Igerne into bed. This scene can be read as a kind of rape, and indeed comes off that way in the chronicles, where Igerne responds positively to his sexual advances because she really thinks Uther is Gorlois. Malory takes a few steps to mitigate the deception in his version: by the time Uther reaches Tintagel, Gorlois has been dead “more than thre houres” [more than three hours], a fact that erases the sin of adultery, and the narrative elides over the actual moment when Uther deceives (and therefore rapes) Igerne, spending more time on the after-effects of Arthur’s conception (5). Igerne nonetheless finds out about the deception almost immediately, and though “she merveilled who that myghte be that laye with her in lykenes of her lord,” she takes no public action: “she mourned pryvely and held hir pees” [she wondered who that might be who lay with her in the likeness of her lord; she mourned privately and held her peace] (5). Igerne’s private mourning speaks to her feelings about the situation: she feels there is something to be mourned, a loss about which she would like to speak, but must hold her tongue instead. Details like this tarnish Merlin’s reputation, a fact Malory emphasizes when his characters call Merlin a “wytche” after learning the truth about his role in Arthur’s conception (12). Merlin’s moral ambiguity leaves him open to accusations of witchcraft, a practice that marks him as allied with the devil.

If Merlin’s transformative magic seems dangerous and “witchy” to the rebel kings allied against Arthur, how sinister must Merlin seem when he advises Arthur to “sende for all the children that were borne in May-day,” and put them “in a shyppe to the se” [send for all the children who were born during May; in a ship (headed) out to sea] (37). The ship

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7 Pages 35-6, 4 and 25, 29, 5, and 34, respectively.
founders, and all the “lordis sonnys” and “knyghtes sonnes” [lords’ sons; knights’ sons] are killed except, of course, Mordred (against whom the murderous episode was directed, in a desperate attempt to prevent a prophecy foretelling Modred’s murder of Arthur). Merlin takes the rap for the dirty deed, as “many putte the wyght on Merlion more than on Arthure” [put the blame on Merlin more than on Arthur] (37). Just as Igerne is silenced by Merlin’s deceptive ploy, the parents whose children were callously murdered remain silent as well: “So what for drede and for love, they helde their peece” [So whether for dread or for love, they held their peace] (37). Like Igerne, these people felt (either out of fear or out of love) that they needed to remain silent in the face of Merlin’s fiendish cruelty.

Perhaps it’s this decidedly dark side which prompts Nineve to attack Merlin. When the old wizard falls “in dotage on the damesell” [into doting (adoration) of the damsel], she uses his emotion against him: “she made Merlion good chere tylle sche had lemed of hym all maner of thynges that sche desyred” [she feigned good cheer for Merlin until she had learned from him all manner of things that she desired] (76). After Nineve learns Merlin’s secrets, she still finds him dangerous, and Malory tells us that “she was aferde of hym for cause he was a devyls son” [she was afraid of him because he was a devil’s son] (77). By mentioning this detail here, Malory reminds us that Merlin’s magic is demonic, fueled by his supernatural parentage. As soon as she sees her chance, Nineve imprisons Merlin: “So by hir subtyle worchynge she made Merlyon to go undir that stone to latte hit wete of the mervayles there, but she wrought so there for hym that he come never oute for all the craufte he coude do, and so she departed and leffte Merlyon” [So by her subtle working she made Merlin to go under the stone to let her know about the marvels there, but she worked it for him so that he never came out, despite all the crafts he could do, and so she departed
and left Merlin] (77). Though Merlin's prophetic moments far outnumber his seedier
exploits, when it comes to the figure of Merlin the prophet, his story often horrifies rather
than impresses. His figure has lost much of its earlier grandeur, tainted by his association
with the devil, magical deception and manipulation, lechery, and the murder of innocent
children.

In addition to linking the most magical male character in the *Morte Darthur* with
demons, Malory's dialogue makes frequent use of an idiomatic curse using the word “devil.”
For example, in “Of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius,” sir Borce uses the expression
during a pre-battle pep-talk to criticize cowardly behavior: “And he that faynes hym to fyght,
*the devyl have bis bones!*” [And he who fears (refl. himself) to fight, *the devil have bis bones!*] (italics
mine, 128).  This idiom is particularly useful for this discussion because of the way it
constructs the speaker's relationship to the devil. In this kind of expression, a person speaks
aloud a desire for the devil to perform a specific service. If the “short-hand” of the idiom
were to be written out “long-hand,” it might be something like the following statement: I
wish the devil would perform revenge on someone I can’t/won’t perform revenge on
myself. Even when intended in a metaphorical sense, such a statement creates a parallel
power structure to that of demonic magic, where the person controls the demon by means
of a performative utterance. Specifically, this idiom suggests that people can turn to demons
for assistance, a controversial view for a Christian theology. Though Malory makes greater
use of demonic figures and language than both the writers of the French romances and the
short Middle English verse romances, his text merely scratches the surface of a bottomless
pit of demonological rhetoric. Spenser and Shakespeare, however, have fallen in.
Malory's *Morte Darthur* links magic with illusion and demonic spirits, but Spenser's *Faerie Queene* demonstrates most strongly the representation of magic as demonic illusion. His epic is filled with tricky magicians and false ladies who turn out to be witches or demonic spirits, impressive men or women who turn out to be monstrous creatures, and manipulative villains. The best example of a Spenserian specialist in deception is the master of disguise himself, Archimago. Whether or not he is a demon or even Satan himself, Archimago's association with hellish fiends and demonic spirits exemplifies a trend apparent in the work all three authors considered in this section: the association of magic and those who use it with demons.

From the moment he appears, disguised as a pious hermit, Archimago operates by means of deception and illusion. After convincing Redcrosse and Una to lodge with him because he's disguised as a holy palmer, Archimago uses his "Magick bookes and artes" to deceive Redcrosse and split up the couple (I.i.36.8). He conjures two demonic spirits, one who visits Morpheus to beg a "fit false dream, that can delude the sleepers," and one who becomes a false Una (I.i.38-43, 45-6). He combines the lusty dream (illusion) with the presence of the false Una (deception) to tempt Redcrosse into wavering in his knightly commitment to chastity or, even better, abandoning it entirely. When Plan A doesn't work, Archimago moves on to Plan B, setting up a scene where the false Una and another spirit provide a peep-show for Redcrosse. Archimago's tenacity pays off, as Redcrosse does abandon Una. Archimago's magic here is pure illusion, and he deceives the pair for no other reason than that he loathed Una "as the hissing snake, / And in her many troubles did most

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8 There is another example of this expression on page 142.
pleasure take" (I.ii.9.8-9). His hatred appears unmotivated, hatred for hatred's sake, and we later see Archimago opportunistically abuse nearly everyone he meets.

The name “Archimago” points to the allegorical meaning behind the duplicitous magician’s malignance: glossed variously as “the great master of the false image,” the “architect of images,” or simply “archmagician,” the two parts of the name suggest 1) that the figure is exceptionally good at what he does, which 2) has something to do with illusion.9 The great master of the false image is the devil himself, and Archimago’s hatred is thus allegorically motivated: falseness battles the truth in the clash between Archimago and Una. Though his later encounters do not fall so easily into perfect allegory as does this first episode, Archimago needs no external motivation to deceive: he simply is deception. Spenser explains his power in great detail as Archimago considers his options for luring the unprotected Una to his side:

He then devise himselfe how to disguise;
For by his mighty science he could take
As many formes and shapes in seeming wise,
As ever Proteus to himselfe could make:
Sometime a fowle, sometime a fish in lake,
Now like a foxe, now like a dragon fell,
That of himselfe he oft for feare would quake,
And oft would flye away. O who can tell
The hidden power of herbes, and might of Magicke spell? (I.ii.10)

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9 The first gloss here comes from Thomas P. Roche’s edition (1079n), the latter two from the Norton anthology (Abrams, ed. 639n).
Archimago can transform himself into anything he wants, as Satan's disguises are limitless. Archimago uses magical illusion throughout the poem until his disappearance in Book III, but his manipulative ploys do not always require as large an expenditure of magical energy as does Redcrosse. Sometimes Archimago just lies.

Spenser associates Archimago with deception in both magical and non-magical arenas; in addition to the transformative magic mentioned above, Archimago often manipulates his victims by spinning a convincing yarn, by garden-variety lying rather than magical illusion. When Archimago meets Guyon in Book II, for example, our evil enchanter is on Redcrosse's trail, but as Redcrosse has proven difficult to re-ensnare, the enchanter "chaungd his minde from one to other ill: / For to all good he enimy was still" (II.i.5.4-5). Archimago is the enemy of all good knights and ladies, too opportunistic to be devoted singly to one foe. As soon as he sees Guyon, he begins "to weaue a web of wicked guile" (II.i.8.4). His deception is a masterful performance, as he must first adopt "a faire countenance and flattring smile," then switch to "feigning then in euery limbe to quake," and finally become "pale and faint" when he discusses his main subject, the rape of a "virgin cleene" by Redcrosse knight (II.i.8.5, 9.3, 9.4, and 10.4). Though his story is detailed enough to incite Guyon's "fierce ire," it does not require magical power—it requires good acting. Archimago consistently engages in deception, using any means available to manipulate his victims.¹⁰ His use of magic subordinates magical power to deceit, casting it as a tool for deception, part of the trappings of illusion. Lying and magical illusion are two sides of the same coin in this story, a coin stamped with Archimago's face.

¹⁰ Another example of Archimago's non-magical deception occurs in Book II, when Archimago convinces Braggidochio and Trompart to attack Guyon and Redcrosse in revenge for Mordant and Armania (II.iii.11-18).
Demonic spirits and deceptive illusion also pervade representations of magic in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*, three of Shakespeare's most magical plays. Of these three, *Macbeth* is the only one featuring witches on stage; thus I discuss this play in the second part of this chapter, which focuses on the figure of the wicked witch. In the following discussion, I restrict my examples to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. In these two plays, almost every instance of magic involves spirits or demons of some kind. Generally, the two masculine magical pairs (a male magician commanding a male spirit) featured in these plays are morally ambiguous, sometimes acting for the good of others, but more often using illusion to support selfish or malicious agendas. In both plays, the male magical figure uses power over demonic spirits and secret knowledge to gain the advantage over his adversary: Oberon has both the knowledge of the magical love-flower and the power to command Puck to fetch it, giving him an edge in his quarrel with Titania; and Prospero has both the knowledge that his enemies travel by ship off the coast of his island and the ability to force Ariel into creating a tempest, giving him the opportunity to strand his foes. Both men use their knowledge and their control of spirits to torment and torture their foes, using magic in the service of deceit and manipulation.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon desires control over Titania, and their relationship is marked by jealousy and mistrust. The king and queen of the Fairies accuse each other of infidelity, reveal that their quarrel is wreaking havoc on the countryside, and then mention the current source of conflict: the son of a "vot'ress of [Titania's] order" (II.i.123). Even though Titania's reason for wanting to keep the boy are compelling (she loved the mother, so she wants to harbor the son), Oberon can't force her to relinquish the "little changeling boy" (II.i.120). He consequently resolves to make "torment" her
punishment (II.i.147). This is a lover's quarrel, the result of what is clearly a long and troubled relationship. Oberon and Titania seem equally at fault in the conflict, both refusing to compromise their positions. Faced with an equal playing field, Oberon decides to cheat—to use magic to take advantage of the opposing team. Because Shakespeare provides Oberon with a sympathetic foe, rather than one who is unequivocally evil, the fairy-king's decision to trick Titania into compliance seems underhanded rather than heroic.

Oberon's magical knowledge is also tinged with a deceptive hue. After deciding to torture his wife, Oberon confesses to Puck, his spirit, that he knows of a magical love-charm because he happened to observe as Cupid's stray arrow fell into "a little western flower" (II. i. 66). Cupid's arrow fills the flower with "love's wound," giving it magical power: "The juice of it on sleeping eyelids laid, / Will make or man or woman madly dote / Upon the next live creature it sees." (II. i. 167, 170-2). His secret gaze provides him with his magical knowledge, and Oberon doesn't even get the flower himself: he sends Puck on the magical errand. Oberon's spying provides him with magical power, and he uses that power in an ever-widening sphere of influence. The ability of the fairy-king to become invisible allows Oberon a perfect opportunity to delude the lovers into believing they are alone, thus providing Oberon with an opportunity to meddle. Oberon's well-motivated but poorly executed decision to give Helena a secret edge with Demetrius backfires, causing the two human women to endure a psychological torture that reflects the physical humiliation Titania suffers. Oberon's careless prank on his wife and the lovers makes magic into the play-toy of revenge, the power to create the illusion of love as a tool for punishing women (for it is women who suffer at the hands of Oberon's deceptive games).
Prospero's case against his enemies appears better. Antonio and Alonso have dispossessed him, and Sebastian plots with Antonio against Alonso. Prospero has a reason to mistrust them, and he has a vested interest in getting his kingdom back for Miranda. But Stephano and Trinculo are harmless buffoons who simply like to drink and boast, and Ferdinand has done nothing to deserve the cruel deception that makes him think his father and uncle are dead. Though Prospero is vindicated in the end when he regains his dukedom and finds a royal husband for his daughter, his actions along the way are represented as mean-spirited and tyrannical.

Prospero's relationship with Ariel, his spirit, demonstrates the magician's tendency to abuse situations in which he has gained power. Prospero exerts influence over Ariel because, as he often reminds the spirit, he released Ariel from the tree in which Sycorax imprisoned him. Though Prospero's repeated insistence that Ariel owes him service in repayment for saving his life, Ariel's pleas for freedom come so often and with such urgency that it's hard not to feel sorry for the spirit who acts as Prospero's slave. The first time Ariel brings up his "liberty" is right after he calls the storm and arranges for the ship's riders to be stranded across the island. The spirit asks Prospero to release him as promised, but Prospero balks, saying "Before the time be out? No more!" (I.ii.246). Ariel begs Prospero to have mercy, reminding his master of the good work he has done: "I prithee, / Remember I have done thee worthy service, / Told thee no lies, made thee no mistakings, serv'd / Without or grudge or grumblings. Thou did promise / To bate me a full year" (I.ii.246-49). Prospero responds with what my students call a "guilt-trip," making Ariel recite aloud the lesson of his entrapment and Prospero's "merciful" role in the spirit's escape in order to resuscitate Ariel's feelings of indebtedness (I.ii.250-293). Unlike Puck, who wishes to engage
in more mischief than Oberon allows, Ariel does not want to continue helping Prospero. That he desires freedom so vehemently makes Prospero’s continued deferral of the release date seem more problematic as the play goes on. It seems Prospero uses the illusory promise of freedom to manipulate Ariel into performing complicated tasks, a practice he continues until the very last lines of the play; his last statement to the spirit does not grant him freedom, but provides him with yet another condition of release. Prospero promises to provide “calm seas” and “auspicious gales” for the return voyage to Naples, and then tells Ariel to arrange it all: “My Ariel, chick, / That is thy charge. Then to the elements / Be free, and fare thou well!” (V.i.317-9, italics mine). In one last “if” clause, Shakespeare emphasizes that Prospero’s control over Ariel is based on the duplicitous manipulation of the spirit’s sense of gratitude. Magical power comes directly from deceit in this relationship.

In addition to holding the carrot of freedom in front of Ariel’s nose, Prospero also deludes and abuses Caliban. Though Caliban did allegedly “seek to violate the honor of [his] child” (I.ii.346-8), Prospero’s abuse of the wretched monster has no limit: Prospero calls Caliban a “poisonous slave,” and accuses him of being begotten “by the devil himself” (I.ii.319-20). Caliban returns the abuse without hesitation, but his story reveals the underlying power dynamic of their relationship:

This island’s mine by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak’st from me. When thou cam’st first,
Thou strok’st me and made much of me, wouldst give me
Water with berries in’t, and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn by day and night; and then I lov’ed thee
And show'd thee all the qualities o' th' isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile.
Curs'd be that I did sol All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king; and here you sty me
In this hard rock, while you do keep from me
The rest o' th' island. (I.ii. 331-44)

Though Caliban is heir to the island through his mother, he nonetheless willingly becomes
Prospero's subject, and Prospero rewards his help by imprisoning him. During the present
time of the play, Prospero and Caliban are embroiled in a master/slave relationship where
Prospero rules Caliban by tormenting him with magic. In both plays, the male magical
protagonist uses his power to deceive and manipulate others, to consolidate his own power,
and to correct situations he sees as unjust. Though Oberon and Prospero are powerful and
sometimes benevolent, they are ambiguous figures, not completely evil, but not really heroic,
either. They are dubious sorcerers, dabblers in the demonic arts, whose motivations cannot
be trusted, and whose magic tends towards illusion. The male magic-users I have discussed
here may not all personify evil (although Archimago may do exactly that), but they all
practice a tainted magic, a magic thick with the guilt of its marriage to those nefarious
minions of evil, the bane of Christianity, the demons.

III. “That same wicked witch”: (Still) Villifying Feminine Magic
The wicked queen of *Snow White* possesses the power to transform herself, from sinister beauty to cackling hag. Presumably, she has the power to change back, but she never gets the opportunity to use it, as the dwarves chase her over a cliff and she falls to her death. Her power is fascinating, and the Disney artists linger over the details in the potion-brewing scene, my favorite cinematic representation of the domestic magic of the witch. This scene, which takes place in a dungeon-like kitchen complete with hollow skulls and a large black cauldron, highlights the domestic nature of the magic. The Queen has a recipe-book from which she works, adding a drop of this and a dram of that, and the products of her toil are a potion and a poisoned apple, domestic artifacts. The attack itself is domestic: an older woman offers a younger woman apples for baking. The domesticity of the magic throws its malice into sharp relief; such malevolence seems out of place in a setting we associate with nurturing care. In many ways, the wicked Queen typifies the Renaissance literary witch: she embodies both manifestations, the beautiful, evil temptress and the ugly, old hag; she uses transformative magic to trick and deceive her victims; and in the end of her story, she receives her punishment (death!). As a stereotypical example of the wicked witch, she seems to leap right out of the sixteenth century, perfectly preserved for modern audiences by the artful animators at our most popular magic shop, the wonderful world of Walt Disney.

Disney's witch is domestic, but she is not maternal, despite her role in the film as the step-mother to the little princess. Her animated representation neglects one of the most important aspects of early modern witchcraft, an element emphasized by the characteristics of witchcraft as they developed by the sixteenth century, the pervasive influence of maternity. The “witches’ sabbath” typically involves sexual intercourse with a demon or the devil himself, after which the witch gains control of an imp or familiar (a demonic spirit in
the form of an animal), who comes to suckle at her “witch’s mark” or “witch’s teat,” which Deborah Willis describes in *Malevolent Nurture* as a “third nipple by which [the witch] feeds her familiars” (33). When the witch acts, “her witchcraft is frequently directed against the children of her neighbors and almost always against domestic activities associated with feeding, nurture, or birth” (34). Maternity thus structures 1) the way the witch gets her power (through her sexual liaison with the devil, she obtains a child-substitute in the form of the suckling familiar) and 2) the way she exerts it (the domestic nature of the conflicts themselves). Maternal tropes found the construction of the two most common kinds of witch figures in the works considered here, the temptress and the hag, the pre- and the post-maternal, the beginning and the end of motherhood.

*Beauty is the Beast: Love Magic and Lusty Witches*

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Judy Garland’s Dorothy can’t believe it when she hears that Glinda is a witch. When asked by Glinda, “Are you a good witch or a bad witch?” Dorothy replies, “I’m not a witch at all! I’m Dorothy Gale, from Kansas.” Glinda is certain that someone in the party must be a witch, so she confirms that it’s not Toto before repeating her question. Asked again to define the kind of witch she is, Dorothy responds, “I’ve already told you. I’m not a witch at all. Witches are old and ugly!” The munchkins begin to giggle, and the young Miss Gale, unaware of her faux pas, asks Glinda, “What was that?” Glinda smiles affectionately at Dorothy, the way a mother smiles when she humors a child: “The Munchkins. They’re laughing because I am a witch. I’m Glinda, the witch of the north.” When Dorothy hears this, she’s completely abashed, and she protests that she’s “never heard of a beautiful witch before.” Glinda instructs Dorothy gently before moving
on, “Only bad witches are ugly.” This exchange reveals a difference between the way Dorothy and the residents of Oz view magic. For the denizens of Oz, Dorothy is naïve and uninformed, as they know what English authors have known for hundreds of years: some witches are beautiful.

In the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the figure of the beautiful witch (a vision borrowed in part from classical authors) began to appear in Arthurian literature, where she had not been before. These witches are described as physically beautiful and sexually alluring, and they seek to ensnare knights by any and all means. One of the defining characteristics of the beautiful witch, the pre-maternal witch, is that she craves sex, and much her of deceptive magic works towards arranging and executing extra-marital affairs. Her desire for sex is a function of her pre-maternal nature, and for this temptress beauty and sexual power are inextricably intertwined. But the beauty is merely a façade. Underneath, hidden away, the beautiful temptresses are wicked witches, just like their crone counterparts: they are loathly on the inside. The medieval loathly lady shows us that people who seem loathly can actually be good and beautiful: sometimes loathliness is only skin deep. The late medieval and Renaissance authors respond to that figure with a question: if an ugly woman can be beautiful on the inside, then why can’t a beautiful woman be ugly on the inside? Maybe beauty can sometimes be skin deep as well, Malory, Spenser, and Shakespeare say: each author constructs a beautiful temptress-witch whose sexual allure is both her power and her undoing. The representation of beautiful witches as hiding their grotesque and evil natures behind a veneer of beauty contributes to the construction of magic as demonic, deceptive illusion that occurs elsewhere in the works of these three authors.
Malory's most famous beautiful witch is the nefarious Morgan le Fay. Arthur's three half-sisters make their first appearance in the *Morte* at the wedding of Uther and Igrayne, where the elder two, Margawse (Gawain’s mother) and Elayne were married to Lott and Nentres, respectively. The young Morgan did not marry, but “was put to scole in a nonnery, and there she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye” [was put to school in a nunnery, and there she learned so much that she was a great scholar of necromancy] (5). Before we learn anything else about her, we learn that Morgan is a necromancer, a practitioner of a kind of magic commonly associated with witches in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. She’s quickly married off to Uriens, and we don’t see her again until her mother brings her to court. At this point in the text, we learn that Morgan “was a fayre lady as ony myght be” [was as fair a lady as many might be] (30). After these two brief, static introductions, which highlight her magic and her beauty, we see Morgan in action, and boy is she busy.

Morgan le Fay is bad. She seduces Accolon, tries to murder both the king and her husband, imprisons Lancelot and assaults him sexually, tricks Tristram into becoming her delivery-boy, drugs Alexander so that his wounds won’t heal, tortures an innocent woman, steals Arthur’s sword and scabbard, and perpetuates a custom at her castle of forcing single knights into combat against two or three knights (and imprisoning those who lose). She’s decidedly wicked. As we’ve seen, her malfeasance strays beyond the realm of the sexual, but true to her type (the temptress-witch), Morgan is also a very lusty woman.

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11 Michael Bailey traces the process by which witchcraft became linked with necromancy in “From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages.”

12 In order, pages 88, 50 & 90, 151-2, 339-43, 392-6, 478, 49-50, and 367.
The episode which most characterizes Morgan’s attempts to deceive and imprison knights who refuse to “dally” is the abduction of Lancelot. The notorious knight goes to sleep under an apple tree, never a good idea in a romance (as Sir Orfeo teaches us, for example), as the locale is notorious for making sleepers more vulnerable to magic (149). Sure enough, Morgan comes along with three other queens, The Queen of North Galys, the Queen of Estlonde, and the Queen of the Oute Isles (all of whom are repeatedly associated with Morgan and with enchantment generally, so that Malory provides Morgan with a community of female magic-users, or a coven). When the queens see Lancelot, they begin arguing amongst themselves, and each one says she “wolde have hym to hit love” [would have him as her love] (151). Morgan enchants Lancelot so that he will remain asleep for seven hours, and they take him back to her castle so that they can force him to choose among them. In this scene, the four women, led by a witch, become so overcome with lust when they see a sleeping knight that they feel compelled to kidnap and imprison him.

Lust drives Morgan even further. In her most ambitious scheme, Morgan tries to murder Arthur and install her lover, Accolon, in his place. Soon after Morgan marries Uriens, Arthur entrusts his magical scabbard to her protection. Because Morgan “loved another knyght bettir than hit husbande, kynge Uriens, othir Arthur” [loved another knight better than her husband, king Uriens, or Arthur], she arranges for the creation of “anothir scawberd for Excaliber lyke it by enchauntment” [another scabbard for Excalibur (just) like it, by enchantment] (49). Later in the story, Morgan uses the false scabbard in an attempt to murder her royal brother. The wicked fay arranges for an enchanted ship (with beautiful damsels) to meet Arthur, Uriens, and Accolon as they are hunting, and when the three board the ship, they fall asleep. While sleeping, they are transported by damsels to various spots in
preparation for Morgan’s secret plan to force Accolon to fight Arthur. She gives the real sword and magical scabbard to Accolon to use in the fight against Arthur and his false replacement weapons. Her plan almost works, but for the intervention of Nineve, who saves Arthur’s life (84-90).

This episode in particular associates Morgan with demonic power. When Accolon awakens from his experience on the enchanted ship, he immediately realizes what must have happened and explodes into anger: “Jesu, save my lorde kynge Arthure and kynge Uryence, for thes damysels in this shippe hath betrayed us. They were fendis and no women” [Jesus, save my lord king Arthur and king Uriens, because these damsels in this ship have betrayed us. They were fiends and no women.] (84). While the fight between Accolon and the king is winding up, Morgan attempts to murder Uriens with a sword. When Uwayne finds his mother wielding a sword over the head of his father, he calls Morgan a fiend, saying, “Men seyde that Merlyon was begotyn of a fends, but I may sey an ertheley fende bare me” [Men say that Merlin was begotten of a fiend, but I may say an earthly fiend bore me.] (90). Though Morgan is not using magic in the moment Uwayne accuses her, her attempt to assassinate Uriens is the culmination of the complex magical deception which imprisons Arthur, forces Accolon to fight the king, and places Uriens at Morgan’s mercy. Her use of magic marks her and her associates as demons, fiends, just like the “devyl’s son,” Merlin. Morgan is thus represented as an effective and devious threat to the king, someone those around Arthur must watch and fear.

Malory still allows Morgan, despite her anti-social activity, to play an important role in Arthur’s death scene, a role which in some ways redeems (or at least mitigates) the negative characterization that comes before, and certainly makes her character far more
complex and paradoxical. Directly after the battle outside Salisbury with Mordred, the
mortally-wounded Arthur tells Bedwyr, "I muste into the vale of Avylyon to hele me of my
grevous wounde" [I must (go) into the vale of Avalon (in order) to heal (lit. heal myself of)
my grievous wound] (716). Immediately thereafter, Morgan le Fay and her group of witchy
queens, this time the Queen of North Galys, the Queen of the Waste Lands, and Dame
Nineve, float up in a mysterious barge (716). Her role here is positive: she comes to take
Arthur to Avalon to be healed, and her bevy of witchy women bewail Arthur’s death. But
wait—is this the same Morgan who tried to murder her brother? Is this the same Morgan
whose hatred of the Round Table is so extreme that she imprisons Arthur’s knights simply
because they are his knights? This is a different woman entirely, a woman we’ve seen before,
in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Taken from the chronicle tradition in which
Morgan’s primary function is a healing one, and completely out of character for the figure
Malory paints prior to this scene, this moment hearkens back to a kinder, gentler Morgan, a
benevolent lady who loves her brother.

The difference between Morgan’s characteristic wickedness and her appearance in
the barge scene reflects a trend towards duality evident throughout the Morte Darthur (and
echoed by Spenser and Shakespeare). Malory treats his witches ambivalently: they can be
good or bad, they can switch between evil and kindness without warning, and the results of
their handiwork are often mixed. The duality in Malory’s representation of the beautiful
temptress is a manifestation of the divide between her moral character and her outward
appearance: her beauty covers her wicked core. Morgan exemplifies Malory’s construction
of beautiful witches as paradoxical and ambiguous, sometimes helpful and alluring,
sometimes revealing the hidden, frightening side. 

Where Malory's lovely ladies perplex, Spenser's beautiful witches leave no room for doubt: they are evil, through and through. The list of Spenser's beautiful witches includes Duessa, Lucifera, Acrasia, Phaedra, Ate, and Munera, all of whom fit the same profile as Malory's witches: they are beautiful (at least on the outside), they are pre-maternal, voracious sexual predators, and they use deceptive magic to ensnare knights. But Spenser adds an element lacking from Malory's figures, the revelation of the grotesque core hidden behind the beautiful exterior, the "Snow White factor." In *Snow White*, the beauty of the wicked queen hides her evil at first, but her transformative power soon betrays her, and she transforms herself into an ugly hag, a grotesque ancient. In this guise, she dies, making the hag her final form—her "true" form, the outside that can reflect her moral character through the medieval convention of the grotesque. But Snow White's evil step-mother follows in the footsteps of a delightfully wicked and devious witch who haunts *The Faerie Queene*, the "false sorceresse," Duessa (I.ii.34.8).

Upon introducing Duessa, the first wicked witch to appear in his epic poem, Spenser immediately sexualizes her, describing her "scarlet red" dress covered with jewelry and trinkets, "The which her lavish lovers to her gave," and noting the "courting dalliance" and "wanton play" between Duessa and her lover (I.ii.13.114, 14.118-121). This is Duessa's art, clothing herself in the trappings of beauty, disguising herself with tempting sexual symbols. After Redcrosse defeats Sans Foy, Duessa tells her story, and Redcrosse's response demonstrates the effectiveness of Duessa's beautiful mask—as Duessa narrates a story in

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13 Nineve is another example of an ambivalently magical woman in the *Morte Darthur.*
which Sans Foy takes her prisoner, threatening her virginity, Redcrosse “in great passion all this while did dwell, / More busying his quicke eyes, her face to view, / Then his dull ears, to heare what she did tell” (I.ii.26.5-7). The story doesn’t matter nearly as much as Duessa’s beauty. Enthralled by Duessa’s physical charms, Redcrosse swears to be her knight, giving her ample time to begin the next step, seducing the naïve knight of Holiness.

And seduce she does! When they rest in the “coole shade,” the flirting commences directly: “Faire seemely pleasaunce each to other makes, / With goodly purposes there as they sit” (I.ii.30.1-2). Redcrosse decides to express his love artistically, and grabs a bough from one of the trees for a garland, which spawns the Fradubio episode and interrupts Duessa’s flirtations. Later, she tries again, fainting after Fraudubio’s story so that Redcrosse runs to her side and “oft her kist” (I.ii.45.8). Redcrosse moves from flirting to kissing in this scene, building towards abandoning his Christian morality entirely. Redcrosse again takes a break in the shade, where “the Witch” finds him and begins her seduction act again, this time with greater success. Redcrosse drinks from the nearby spring, which happens to be enchanted so that anyone who drinks the water becomes “dull and slow” and “faint and feeble” (I.vii.5.8-9). Thanks to the landscape of the fairy world, Duessa finally leads Redcrosse into sin: “Yet goodly court he made still to his Dame, / Pourd out in loosnes on the grassy ground / Both carelesse of his health, and of his fame” (I.vii.7.1-3). Duessa’s sexual drive is typical of the beautiful witch, whose sexual appetite motivates her deceptions.

Lest the reader also be seduced by Duessa, Spenser includes repetitive warnings or clues, such as Fradubio’s baleful tale or the narratorial condemnation at the beginning of Canto 7 (Book I). Fradubio’s entire story indicts Duessa. He begins by calling Duessa “a false sorceresse” whose favorite activity is bringing “knights” to “wretchednesse,” and goes
on to hint that her beauty is false, saying that the “faire Lady” guise “did fowle Duessa hyde” (I.ii.34, I.ii.36.9). Fradubio tells of how at first he could not decide who was more beautiful, Duessa or his prior love, Fraelissa. His story reveals that Duessa has power over the appearance of others as well herself, when she uses her “hellish science” to raise a fog which turns the beautiful Fraelissa into a “foule ugly forme” (I.ii.38). Finally, Fradubio’s story presents us with a glimpse of Duessa’s “true” form, the ancient witch-hag. All the witches in Spenser’s fairy-land must “do penance for their crime” about once a month, which apparently involves being unable to use their powers of illusion on the day of “Prime.” Fradubio catches sight of Duessa “in her proper hew,” and finds that she is “A filthy foule old woman” whose “neather partes” are “misshapen, monstrous,” and “more foule and hideous, / Then womans shape man would beleve to bee” (I.ii.40-41). Behind the façade of beauty lies the grotesque hag, the woman whose sexual organs are not alluring, but monstrous. For Spenser, the most frightening aspect of Duessa’s character is her precious secret, her monstrous femininity. What men think should be beautiful transforms into something more horrifying than they can even imagine. Spenser uses the beautiful witch to construct feminine magic as both deceptive and sexual, (re)casting femininity with the same mold used by generations of male writers to disparage women. This is the virgin and the whore rolled into one, the lady who can first be worshipped for her beauty and then reviled once her sexual desire is revealed, a perfectly constructed example of the anti-feminist villainess. Duessa is the kind of witch we love to hate.

In fact, Duessa’s character, explained so fully early on in *The Faerie Queene*, serves as a model for our encounters with the other lovely witches who populate the Spenserian fairy-
land. Spenser provides an explicit warning describing Duessa's magical power at the beginning of Canto VII:

What man so wise, what earthly wit so ware,
As to descry the crafty cunning traine,
By which deceipt doth maske in visour faire,
And cast her colours dyèd deepe in graine,
To seeme like Truth, whose shape she well can faine,
And fitting gestures to her purpose frame,
The guiltlesse man with guile to entertaine?
Great maistresse of her art was that false Dame,
The false Duessa, cloked with Fidessaes name. (l.vii.1)

This description works to free knights from responsibility for falling victim to deceptive magic—who is wise enough to avoid the power of illusion? There are a few levels of meaning created here: ironically, Spenser asks the audience "who could know?" with a giant wink, as we turn to one another and whisper, "I knew!"; he also alludes to the devil's relationship with the Christian, marked by Satan's constant attempt to deceive and manipulate innocent souls; Spenser links femininity with deceit and devilishness, rationalizing men's sin in terms of the always-already sinful woman; and he implicates magic as the tool of hell's minions, the foes of Christian virtue.

Both Malory and Spenser represent beautiful witches as sexual predators, women who deceive men to satisfy various lusts and imperil their souls. Shakespeare's approach to the lovely witch also associates her with lust and sexual desire, but creates that link quite differently. Though many of Shakespeare's plays feature beautiful heroines, few feature
beautiful witches, and the closest figure to the temptress so prevalent in Malory and
Spenser's works is the Queen of the Fairies, Titania. Titania is not really a witch—she's a
fairy—but Shakespeare's use of her character makes her subject to sexual desire in a reversal
of the beautiful temptress role. Titania, beautiful mistress of magic, becomes the victim of
bewitchment, the besotted fool. The play features multiple manifestations of the temptress
in reversed or anti-conventional roles, and these scenes interact with one another to
reinforce the gendered conventions associated with heterosexual love relationships.

Shakespeare foreshadows his treatment of Titania before she even appears, when
Egeus claims that Lysander "bewitch'd the bosom of [his] child" (I.i.27). Hermia bewitched
by Lysander—already the feminine temptress (seen in the romances of Malory and Spenser)
is replaced by a masculine figure. We soon learn that the play will show us that same
replacement again, when Oberon announces his plan to use the magic of the purple flower
to make Titania fall in love (II.i.160-72)—and again, when Helena accuses Demetrius of
creating an unnatural situation by forcing Helena to pursue him:

Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase;
The dove pursues the griffin; the mild hind
Makes speed to catch the tiger—bootless speed,
When cowardice pursues and valor flies. (II.i.231-4)

Helena finally states the problem explicitly; she feels that "We cannot fight for love, as men
may do, / We should be woo'd, and were not made to woo" (II.i.241-2). Her interpretation
presents a picture of the traditional temptress figure. The temptress does not pursue
actively, by announcing her love or fighting over a knight; instead, she develops physical
beauty and acts sexually alluring, encouraging the knight in a manner more passive-
aggressive than direct. Helena's belief that women should be on the passive end of love relationships is a manifestation of the same gender binary operating in the medieval romances.

By the time Titania's great comic scenes appear, Shakespeare has laid an extensive groundwork preparing the audience for the moment. What Hermia and Helena do through discourse alone, Titania does in fact: the fairy-queen fawns and simpers, bewitched by a foolish man with the head of an ass. Titania falls hard, and Shakespeare gives her overwrought dialogue that can be played for great humor when performed: "What angel wakes me from my flow'ry bed?" or "Thou art as wise as thou art beautiful" (III.ii.129, 147). How funny to see a woman acting like a love-struck man! What better way to remind her of her place as passive recipient of the male gaze within a patriarchal sexual economy? It's absurd to think of her pursuing. The humor of the scene works because Titania acts against conventional type. When we leave the figure of the beautiful temptress, we leave the realm of humor as well—the representations of wicked hag-witches focus on the threatening and grotesque rather than the sexy or comical. Though also a maternal figure, the hag takes us from before conception, when sexuality is critical, to after the child has matured, when the maternal impulse has outlasted its purpose. Her asexuality marks her as different from the beautiful temptress, but we know that she's really the same thing.

Wicked Old Witch: The Invasion of the Hags

When the wicked Queen of Disney's Snow White transforms herself into the hag, a few major alterations take place: she ages significantly, she curls into a stooped hunchback, her dress turns black and ragged, her facial features become large and exaggerated, her body
loses its “feminine” shapeliness, and her voice deepens to a raspy cackle. Aside from the color of her skin, which in *Snow White* is pasty white, the hag-queen looks a lot like the Wicked Witch of the West from the film version of *The Wizard of Oz*: she, too, is an older woman, who frequently stoops, wears a ragged, black dress, has large facial features (namely her warty nose), few signs of conventional femininity, and a raspy cackling voice. This is the witch little girls mimic on Halloween, with pointy hats and fake warts, the witch on Halloween stickers, paper plates, and specialty candy. This is the stuffed witch my mother sent me one year in late October. This is our wicked witch. But we borrowed her from the Renaissance.

Arthurian romance has always had room for older, care-giving maternal figures: Chrétien's Thessela, who helps her mistress keep her virginity and feign death, is perhaps the most fully-developed example from the texts considered in this study, but Marie de Troyes features the helpful aunt from Salerno in *Les Deux Amants*, and the Middle English romances specialize in older, advice-giving women, especially in the form of the loathly lady. These women are witchy, practicing domestic forms of magic, especially healing and love magic, but they are not wicked. They generally assist the protagonists of the story, as we've seen, and their representations are often positive. By the sixteenth century, however, the space available in literature for what we might today call a “good witch” has vanished, leaving the wicked, older, advice-giving witchy-woman—the hag—in her place. Malory’s Brusen, an enchantress, demonstrates well the characteristics of the medieval “good” witch, while Spenser’s unnamed witch of Book III (maker of the false Florimell) and Shakespeare’s weird sisters provide examples of the Renaissance witch-hag.
Though Malory's beautiful enchantresses never approach the hag type as closely as do the witches in the Renaissance texts, his elderly nurse-witch, Brusen, is a half-remembered great-aunt of the hag-witch. During the century after Caxton published the *Morte Darthur*, representations of the wicked witch drifted far away from the benevolent maternal witch figure found in that influential text (and borrowed from such figures as Chrétien's Thessela, from *Cligès*). In a few important ways, the Renaissance writers build on the model of the elderly care-taker who does whatever she must to protect her mistress: 1) they emphasize her age and post-reproductive condition (often by visually marking her body as post-maternal), 2) they increase her malevolence (especially by associating her with demons or hell), and 3) they emphasize the destructive nature of her domestic magic. These changes create a hag-witch who functions as a condemnation of feminine power seeping outside the realm of the maternal: the hag is too old to bear children and thus gain the limited maternal authority associated with child-rearing, but she uses her power anyway, outside the domestic sphere. Her uncontrolled magical power is the threat here—with no male figure to channel that power, whether a husband or a son, the hag is loose, avoiding the circumscription of gender convention, avoiding the roles of mother, wife, or sexual object. Mitigating her threat in the narrative is the fact that both Spenser and Shakespeare adopt a strategy of marginalization when constructing their hag-witches, so that it is never clear that they are in complete control of their magic.

Malory introduces dame Brusen as "one of the grettyst enchaunters that was that tyme in the worlde" (479). He eschews all physical description of the witch, preferring to allow her actions to speak for her (Malory's trademark). Both Spenser and Shakespeare, on the other hand, spend time describing the physical appearance of the witches in their work,
emphasizing their age and their grotesqueness. Spenser’s nameless “witch,” referred to
variously as “the Hag,” “the wicked Hag,” or “the vile hag,” mother to the lazy churl who
falls in love with Florimell, lives in a “gloomy hollow glen,” where she resides alone so “that
her deuilish deedes / And hellish arts from people she might hide” (III.vii.6). She dresses in
“loathly weedes” and makes “ghastly” faces, staring “with hellish arts from people she might hide”
(III.vii.6.4, 14.6, 7.6). Spenser emphasizes her age and her post-reproductive status together:
“This wicked woman had a wicked sonne, / The comfort of her age and weary dayes, / A
laesie loord, for nothing good to donne” (III.vii.12.1-2). Not only is she an older woman,
whose maternal necessity has passed (her child is grown, a “lord” now), but her maternal
skills are impugned by the fact that her son is a lazy man who refuses to work or do anything
at all (III.vii.12). Spenser’s witch is an old hag, whose impoverished solitude reflects her evil
nature.’

Shakespeare’s weird sisters, the notorious witches from Macbeth, offer directors a
wonderful opportunity in representation; they can choose what kind of witches they want
the sisters to be, and the many versions of Macbeth on film attest to the diversity of witch-
tropes that exist in addition to the hag with whom I am concerned in this study. There are
textual suggestions for the witches’ appearance, however, as Banquo describes
them in Act I:

What are these

14 Compare Spenser’s description of the two hags, Enuie and Detraction. When Arthegall meets the pair,
Spenser tells us they were “Two griesly creatures; and, to that their faces / Most foule and filthie were, the
garments yet / Being all rag’d and tatter’d, their disgraces / Did much the more augment, and made most vugly
cases” (V.xii.28.6-9). Of particular interest is Enuie’s extended description, which includes details like “dull
eyes,” “foule heare,” skinny lips like “raw liver, pale and blew,” very “foule and durtie” hands, and which
notes that she’s holding a snake that she eats, w/ “bloudie gore and poysion dropping lothsomely” from her lips
(V.xii.29-30).
So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth,
And yet are on't? Live you? or are you aught
That man may question? You seem to understand me,
By each at once her choppy finger laying
Upon her skinny lips. You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so. (I.iii.39-47)

Banquo is specific: the figures are "wither'd" and "skinny," suggesting their age, and "wild in their attire," and though they are "women," they have "beards." He specifies age, strange clothing, and lack of femininity—the classic hag figure. Later, Macbeth calls the women "secret, black, and midnight hags," confirming their witch-hag status verbally (IV.i.48). In both Spenser's and Shakespeare's visual representations of the hag-witch, her outward signs of difference (marked by her age, clothing, and use of gender conventions) reflect her inner malevolence. As we shall see, the hag-witch is visually marked because of her association with the demons who give her magical power.

The medieval good witch does not use demonological magic. Brusen, for example, employs love-potions, simple lies, and secret knowledge to assist King Pelles in his quest to make Lancelot sleep with Elayne, Pelles's daughter. Pelles knows of a prophecy which says that Lancelot would beget on Elayne "the good knyght by whom all the forayne cuntrey shulde be brought oute of daunger; and by hym the Holy Grayle sholde be encheved" [the good knight by whom all the foreign countries shall be brought out of danger, and by him

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15 Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*, for example, merges the three witches into one extraordinarily creepy woman.
the Holy Grail shall be achieved] (479). Because of this prophecy, Pelles seeks a way to force Lancelot (who, as everyone knows, loves only Gwenevere) to sleep with his daughter, and Brusen offers the solution. She sends a ring like Gwenevere's to Lancelot to arrange a tryst at a nearby castle. When Lance arrives, Brusen tells him that Gwen awaits him in the bedroom and gives him a "kuppe of wyne" which charms him so that he becomes "so asted and madde that he myght make no delay but wythoute ony let he wente to bedde" [cup of wine; so besotted and mad that he could endure no delay, but without any hesitation he went to bed] (480). In his enchanted lust, Lance goes in to the room, where Elayne awaits him instead of his queen, and they have sex. In the morning, Lancelot opens the windows, breaking the spell, and then "he knew hymselff that he had done amysse" [he knew that he had done amiss] (480). Brusen's ploy involves knowledge of Gwenevere and Lancelot's habits (the ring incident), a potion creating tremendous sexual desire, and lies—it does not involve demonical spirits or hellish powers.

Not only does Brusen's magic forego recourse to demons, it also remains within the domestic sphere. She assists a father in managing the sexual life of his daughter, taking over for Pelles in arranging the tryst and stepping into a parental role with Elayne (who is never consulted about the matter). While Pelles retains the paternal authority to choose the daughter's sexual (and usually, marital) partner, Brusen has authority over the bedroom, becoming the manager of the practical aspect of the sexual economy. Brusen's domestic magic is characteristic of the medieval good witch, and though the Renaissance hag-witch borrows her predecessors' methods, she mixes them with the power of demons and employs them for different ends.
Spenser's "Hag," from Book III, also uses domestic love-magic. Her son desires Florimell with "brutish lust," rather than "love," as Spenser tells us, so much that when "the faire Virgin" leaves the witch's hut, the "Chorle" son goes mad with woe: "He knockt his best with desperate intent, / And scratcht his face, and with his teeth did teare / His rugged flesh, and rent his ragged heare" (III.vii.20.3-5). The witch pities her son's condition, and tries in vain to heal him "With herbs, with charms, with counsell, & with teares" (III.vii.21.2). Spenser distinguishes these approaches, so similar to those used by Brusen, as distinct from the "deuilish arts" to which the Hag turns next, after "all other helpes" have failed (III.vii.21.6, 9). The Hag sends her "hideous beast" to fetch Florimell or eat her, if things don't work out (III.vii.22.2). Though Spenser does not explicitly call the monster a demon, his introduction of the beast as the Hag's use of "deuilish arts" and his language when describing the beast—it has a "hellish gorge" and feels "deuilish despight" (III.vii.29.2, 28.7)—argue for its demonic origins. Domestic magic fails the Hag, so she moves outside the domestic realm, conjuring a weapon to use against Florimell.

When her "Monster" fails, despite the magical "charmes" which protect the beast against weapons, the Hag must use more demonic magic (III.vii.23.6, 35.9). This time, she brings hell into the home, using a demonic "Spright" as the basis for her creation: as she is post-reproductive, with no ability left to create a child through the power of her body, she must conjure spirits from hell to provide herself with creative power (III.viii.4-8). Spenser robs her of what is almost always an important attribute of conventional femininity, her fertility. First, she consults the "Sprights," who are the "maisters of her art," for advice about how to heal her love-sick son, and they suggest the false Florimell ploy—one we've already seen Archimago use when he fashions a demon into a false Una (III.viii.4.4-5). Then
she gathers materials with which to mold the body (and Spenser includes a recipe for the making of a conventional romance beauty, with “two burning lampes / In silver sockets” for eyes and “golden wyre” for hair), and places “A wicked Spright yfraught with fawning guile” in charge of animating the body (III.viii.7.1-2, 7.6, 8.1). This Spright is identified overtly with Satan, as he was one of the many spirits who fell “with the Prince of Darknesse” into damnation and hell (III.viii.8). The Spright is a master of “counterfeisance,” with “all the wyles of wemens wits” at his disposal—hell is the perfect place from which to learn the art of deception, for Spenser (III.viii.8.8-9). The Hag's demonic magic works to pacify her son, and he is pleased with his false lady (until Braggadocio snatches her away). The Hag gains her magic by harnessing the power of spirits, and she generally uses those spirits in the service of her undeserving son.

Shakespeare's witches are also tied to the power of hell and its demons. The weird sisters meet with Hecat, or Hecate, the goddess of sorcery and enchantment. A pagan deity, in the Christian schema, is a kind of demon, a false spirit, and Hecat even tells the witches to meet her “at the pit of Acheron” (III.v.15). Like Spenser's Hag, Hecat has control over demonic spirits, as she announces to the sisters: “I'll . . . raise such artificial sprites / As by the strength of their illusion / Shall draw him on to his confusion” (III.v.25-29). Likewise, the weird sisters control spirits, as they reveal when they offer Macbeth the opportunity to hear the relevant prophecies from their “masters” mouths. These masters turn out to be visual apparitions, spirits, who appear in various forms to tell Macbeth of his inevitable downfall. Through their association with Hecat and with prophetic spirits, the weird sisters reveal that their magic, too, is drawn from the power of the spirits. The witches show no obvious signs of Christianity throughout the play, and in fact, their beliefs appear to be
diametrically opposed to those of the Christian God, as I discuss below. As the witches have no access to Christian spirits, the late sixteenth-century structure of spiritual power dictates that they must be using infernal spirits.

During the play, we see the weird sisters use their control over spirits to gain prophetic knowledge (which they tell Macbeth and Banquo) and to torment Macbeth with apparitions. But the manner in which the witches contact the spirit-world is derived directly from the domestic magic of the medieval good witch: the sisters brew their magic. The play offers one famous scene, in particular, which represents the magic of the witches as domestic, "kitchen" magic, similar to that used by Thessela when brewing charms for Fenice. This scene is, of course, Act IV, Scene I, where the weird sisters await Macbeth's return visit by preparing a magical potion in a cauldron. Chrétien's domestic witch, Thessela, prepares her charms in two scenes from Cligés (both discussed in Chapter Two): first, she grinds the potion, using "spices in abundance" (162), and then she blends and mixes the draught with unspecified ingredients gathered "well in advance with everything she knew was needed for the potion" (193). Both Chrétien's designation of spices as key ingredients and his generalized descriptions of grinding, blending, stirring, and mixing work to create the image of a cook in a kitchen, preparing a meal. Shakespeare's witches invoke exactly this kind of culinary convention in the cauldron scene.

Act IV begins with the witches' appearance: "'Tis time" to begin brewing "the charm," as one witch calls the contents of the cauldron (V.i.3, 38). The women take turns adding ingredients to the "charmed pot," simmering them over the fire until the charm is ready and then cooling it rapidly to make it "firm and good" (Vi.9, 38). This is not an unusual domestic scene, women cooking together, but unlike Chrétien, Shakespeare
describes the recipe in rich detail. His strategy in this scene mirrors the strategy of Spenser in representing witches—both authors emphasize the malevolence of the witch, the result of her involvement with the devil. She is evil because she seeks out the devil to gain his power; but she seeks out the devil because she is evil. It’s a revolving door, a two-sided coin, a Möbius strip, a Christian conundrum we’ve seen before, with Eve: though the devil actively tempts, the woman receives the blame.

For Shakespeare, this means that the weird sisters prepare a cauldron full of increasingly more frightening and offensive ingredients. The first sister begins with the “poison’d entrails” of a “toad” who lay under a stone for thirty-one days, a foul-smelling but otherwise not horrible choice (IV.i.5-6). The second sister takes a step further, adding a mix of creature-bits that includes many denizens of the night or the underground, such as the oft-repeated favorite “eye of newt” or its lesser-known cousins “wool of bat,” “blind-worm’s sting,” or “howlet’s wing” (IV.i.14-17). She links the witch-brew with the underworld explicitly when she chants, “For a charm of pow’rful trouble, / Like a hell-broth boil and bubble” (IV.i.18-19). The third sister’s ingredients most clearly establish the witches as transgressors of social boundaries. The third witch moves from mythology (“scale of dragon” IV.i.22) and traditional magical herb lore (“root of hemlock” IV.i.25) to murder (“liver of blaspheming Jew,” “nose of Turk and Tartar’s lips,” “finger of birth-strangled babe / Ditch-deliver’d by a drab” IV.i.26, 29, 30-31). Her murder victims come from social groups commonly villainized in late medieval and Renaissance literature, including both local indigents (the prostitute) and the inhabitants of the Middle East and Asia (the “Jew”, “Turk,” and “Tartar,” who are, of course, not Christian). Not only is she guilty of murder, but she uses body-parts from people marginalized and denigrated by mainstream society as
key elements in her charm. The witches of *Macbeth* find themselves awash in blood, from the “baboon’s blood” used to cool the charm to that of the unfortunate Duncan and Banquo (IV.i.37).

The weird sisters don’t seem to have any reason for offering Macbeth the prophetic knowledge they possess. Shakespeare leaves aside the question of motivation, an issue over which he usually lingers, allowing the witches simply to be evil. They don’t require motivation—they are wicked witches, who use their association with fate to torture a man and his wife. Perhaps their intervention is “necessary” to promote the founding of the Stuart line (through Fleance), perhaps they are merely an embodiment of the temptation of the devil, but the witches of *Macbeth* are strictly functional—they embody evil. As in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, the allegorical nature of wicked witches (hags and temptresses alike) precludes reasons or motivations: the witches attack Macbeth because they are wicked; the witches attack the Faerie knights who wander through their land because they are pride (Lucifera), duplicity (Duessa), sexual desire (Acrasia), discord (Ate), envy (Enuie), and slander (Detraction). They have no purpose beyond that of their function—they embody all motivation towards evil.

Though Spenser and Shakespeare provide their witches with all the power of hell, they curtail the expression of that power within their texts. Their witches are often marginal to the main action, and their power is frequently weak or ineffectual against their primary targets. Spenser’s Hag, for example, lives “far from all neighbors” so that she can “hurt far off vnknowne, whom euer she enuide” (III.). Her “herbs” and “charmes” fail the first time she tries to use them, when attempting to heal her son’s love-sickness, as does the monster she sends after Florimell (though his mutilation of her horse does cause a few problems).
Her fake Florimell works to satisfy her son until the ruling spirit flees the scene with Braggadocio—the Hag can’t maintain control over the spirit she conjured. Though the false Florimell does cause trouble for the knights of Book IV, she does not accomplish her primary mission (the healing of the son). None of the Hag’s actions affects the story-line until her magic frees itself from her control, and only then, once her power has been removed, can the spirit work for discord. Likewise, the two hags, Enuie and Detraction, don’t frighten Arthegall, who “seem’d of them to take no keepe,” continuing on to “Faery Court” without further ado (IV.xii.42.9, 43.9). Spenser’s hags operate ineffectually, and they pose only a limited threat, one which knights can easily overcome.

Shakespeare’s marginalization of the Macbeth witches is a more complicated affair. The appearance of the weird sisters in the first scene of the play places them in what appears to be a central position: they introduce us to the main conflicts and tell us about the central character in the story, Lord Macbeth. As the play continues, it becomes more clear that while the sisters seem to have some influence on Macbeth’s mental state, it is impossible to determine whether that influence derives from magical power possessed by the sisters or from Macbeth’s own ambitious desires. As the tradition of skepticism regarding witchcraft did not begin in the seventeenth century, but represents a continuous arc from Augustine to the ambivalent James I (and beyond), we can’t say with absolute certainty whether the actors playing the witches (or the play’s author) would have believed the characters powerful or deluded (and I’ve seen the witches played both ways, in theatrical and cinematic productions).

For Shakespeare, of course, Sycorax is the quintessential marginalized witch. Sycorax is always already absent: she is dead before the play begins, yet the overwhelming
memory of her previous presence drives characters to invoke her story repeatedly. Caliban's version of the story has already figured in my discussion, when he reminds Prospero that he is heir to the island ("This island's mine by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou tak'st from me."). Sycorax left her son a parcel of land, doing her duty as a single mother (well before Murphy Brown and The Gilmore Girls) to provide for her son. Caliban fails in this scenario, offering his mother's legacy to an abusive surrogate father when his mother's absence leaves him alone. To Caliban, Sycorax is "my mother," but to Prospero, she is "the foul witch Sycorax" and "this damn'd witch Sycorax" (I.ii.331, 258, 263). Prospero gives us the only piece of information we learn about Sycorax's physical appearance, calling her a "blue-ey'd hag" (I.ii.269). Though the editors of the Riverside Shakespeare gloss this phrase as "with dark circles around the eyes," it also recalls the gray-eyed heroines of romance (1615n). A blue-eyed hag seems to be exactly the figure lacking in the works of Malory and Spenser—a combination of the beautiful temptress and the grotesque hag. Such a figure defies possibility, however, and her body must be completely absent for this characterization to be possible. The absent Sycorax can be anything the characters want her to be—Prospero's hag, Caliban's mother, Ariel's original master and imprisoner. If the absent maternal body of Shakespeare's The Tempest is a generative screen onto which figures can be projected, the uniquely Spenserian figure of the "present" maternal body is quite the opposite, an over-determined grotesque, a pregnant hag.

"Her fruitful cursed spawne": Magical and Monstrous Mothers

Less than eleven stanzas into the first Canto of Spenser’s Faerie Queene, Book 1, Redcrosse Knight and Una find themselves at the mouth of Errour's cave. We catch but the
briefest of glimpses of the “Gentle Knight” and his “lovely Ladie” before they rush headlong into danger’s path. What leads them here? How is it that our hero, full of the best intentions, finds himself faced with his first enemy, and what is the nature of that enemy exactly? Spenser tells us that “as they past, / The day with clouds was suddeine overcast, / And angry Jove an hideous storm of raine / Did poure into his Lemans lap” (I.i.6.4-7). The violence of the rainstorm in this passage signals a kind of rape, and the earth becomes the victim of a sexual assault, perpetuated by a masculine god who relentlessly pours a “hideous” fluid into his feminized victim’s lap. The viciousness of the attack sends “every wight to shrowd,” and Redcrosse and Una likewise seek cover in “a shadie grove” so bountifully full of vegetation that it hides “heavens light” (I.i.6.8, 7.5). Once inside, they are entranced by the many birds and the vast variety of trees, catalogued carefully in two full stanzas; they are “led with delight” to travel further and further within (I.i.10.1). The pathways multiply, creating “so many pathes, so many turnings” that they soon become hopelessly lost (I.i.10.8). “Amid the thickest woods,” our hero and heroine find a “hollow cave,” in which Errour lives (I.i.11.6-7). In this scene, a rape—a violent sexual encounter—forces the pair to proceed through a landscape of generative excess, with a surplus of birds and trees and paths, and leads them to a pregnant womb, a womb bursting with a monstrous, threatening evil. And this evil, we discover, is a mother.

Maternal femininity characterizes most of the female monsters Redcrosse encounters throughout Book 1, but Errour’s maternity is the most readily discernible. Our first introduction to her is unequivocal; she is “A monster vile, whom God and man does hate” (I.i.13.7). She is half-serpent, half-woman, a coupling described as “Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine” (I.i.14.9). Her grotesqueness, Spenser reveals, is directly
related to her generative maternity, magical in its extreme fecundity: a thousand babies suckle on her “poisonous dugs,” and she uses “her fruitfull cursed spawne” as a weapon, spewing her progeny at Redcrosse when threatened (I.i.15.6, 22.6). Errour is, in fact, an embodiment of maternal abjection. The abject is also the pre-object, the thing we hold near yet separate, that which allows one to begin delineating a discrete self, an ego separate from the other. The mother, as the first object, is also the first abject. The mother is abject not because she is other, but because the fantasy of her absolute power threatens to overwhelm the burgeoning, not-yet-fully-differentiated ego. Lacanian psychoanalysis calls the period in which this fantasy arises “alienation,” and uses the term “phallic mother” to signify her apparent omnipotence. As Julia Kristeva puts in *Powers of Horror*, the pre-subject, caught within the ambivalence of alienation, wherein the ego and object have not yet been delineated clearly, fears its “very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother” (64), and it is this fear that motivates abjection of the maternal body. For Kristeva, “fear of the archaic [or phallic] mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power” (77).

Spenser’s description of Errour, and of the other monsters that populate *The Faerie Queene*, situates monstrosity firmly within a discourse of abjection, inextricably linked to the abject maternal body and to the fertile sexuality that engenders it. This representation of the maternal is Spenser’s way of expanding the indictment of maternity from the witch-figure, which marginalizes pre- and post-maternal bodies, to include abjection of maternity proper, moving from the corrupt sexual temptation of the temptress and the ancient, asexual body of the hag to the grotesque body of the mother.

Despite Spenser’s ostensible concern with holiness in Book 1, *The Faerie Queene* notoriously circles around the problem of chastity, and its nemesis, sex. Critics have long
argued that, throughout the poem, Spenser's malevolent women are associated with sex and sexuality. In her essay "Nightmares of Desire: Evil Women in The Faerie Queene," for example, Sheila Cavanagh writes: "Nightmarish women largely attempt to seduce men away from the field and from virtue, using sex as their primary weapon" (317). Others have made similar arguments, and on this one point, they agree: The Faerie Queene is obsessed with sex. The Errour episode of the first Canto functions as an introductory metaphor for Spenser's fascination throughout Book 1 with the corrosive power of sexuality and its resultant maternal generativity. In this sequence, Spenser foregrounds an equation that becomes the model on which he builds with each new malevolent creature: sexual union mandates excessive fertility, which is itself abject. Errour, who seems to be the classic phallic mother, threatens to engulf Redcrosse, wrapping him in her voluminous tail, smothering him, and prompting Una to shout, "Strangle her, else she sure will strangle thee" (I.i.19.4). To save his own subjectivity, Redcrosse must abject Errour, and the materiality of that abjection is highlighted in this scene. Redcrosse's touch spawns more generative excess, prompting Errour to vomit, a fertile bile likened to the excessive fertility of the Nile, and it isn't until Redcrosse castrates Errour, chopping off her head, that he is able to escape her threat. In Spenser's fantasy, castrating the mother poisons her, reversing her generative power: when she dies, Errour's offspring feast on her blood, gorging themselves to death. Her fluidity thus brings death, in opposition to the most maternal of fluids, milk, which sustains life. Generative excess, dangerous because it cannot be controlled, devours itself. Read in this way, the Errour encounter marks sex as threatening and corruptive and characterizes maternity as the necessary (and monstrous) consequence of the sexual relation.
As we have seen with both Erreur and Duessa, castration reveals the way in which fertility hides lack, robbing Erreur of her brood and Duessa of her transformative power, and it is precisely this secret lack that is monstrous to Spenser. Redcrosse encounters repeated demonstrations of this principle, but consistently fails to recognize its implications.

Sumptuous excess characterizes the house of Pride, domain of Lucifera: the building is "bravely garnished," covered in "golden foile," with "many loftie towers. . . goodly galleries. . . faire windowes, and delightful bowres" (I.iv.2.6, 4.4, 6-8). "Great troupes of people" travel towards the house, and "Infinite sorts of people abide" within (I.iv.3.1, 6.7). What Redcrosse does not realize, but we suspect, is that behind this fertile façade, the "hinder parts, that few could spie, / Were ruinous and old" (I.iv.5.8-9), and Spenser's description here echoes his description of Duessa’s nether regions. When the Dwarfe discovers the "huge numbers" of "caytive wretched thrals" in Lucifera’s “dongeon deepe,” we see that her generativity is decayed, and therefore monstrous (I.v.45.8-9). The womblike dungeon produces creatures “that [waylè] night and day,” like children born into death (I.v.45.9). Pride generates naught but sin, turning people into nothing but “carkases of beasts in butchers stall” (I.v.49.2). Here again, a carefully contrived excess covers a lack, a poisoned fertility.

Castration and decay also characterize Night, whom Duessa calls “most auncient Grandmother of all,” identifying her as the wellspring of all maternity (I.v.22.2). Duessa invokes “great Nightès children,” trying to goad her into avenging the death of Sans joy and the defeat of Sans foy (I.v.23.8). Night, however, as Duessa learns, does not really possess this power; though she goes with Duessa to retrieve Sans foy, she cannot save him, and the two must bring him to the underworld, to death. Night’s description reveals her as one of
Spenser's abject mothers: "her abhorred face" is "so filthy and so fowle" that even wolves and owls, creatures of night, shriek to see it (I.v.30.9). Her children, like those of the other castrated mothers I've discussed, are doomed, born into eternal death, as Night is the "mother . . . of falsehood, and root of Duessaes race" (I.v.27.6-7). Her legacy is duplicity and façade, signifying the way in which maternal presence masks phallic absence.

There are several other examples of Spenser's consistent conflation of sex with generative excess and monstrous, reversed maternity: Orgoglio's exaggeratedly large body becomes nothing more than "an emptie bladder" when Arthur defeats him, and his castle floor is covered in the "bloud of guiltlesse babes" (I.viii.24.9, 35.6); Despair's womb-like residence furnishes a space in which he can work to promote death, echoing Redcrosse's experience in Orgoglio's lair (I.ix.33-54); and the final foe, the dragon, is "monstrous, horrible, and vast . . . swolne with wrath, poysen, and with bloody gore," and possessed of a serpentine tail reminiscent of Errour's (I.xi.8.7-9). Spenser's gendering of the dragon as male should strip him of visible signs of femininity, but the swollen, fluid-filled body marks him as pregnant. The dragon, Redcrosse's penultimate challenge, therefore presents the most convincing and impenetrable pretense of phallic omnipotence, thwarting each of our hero's efforts to pierce its gargantuan, swollen body, and nearly killing Redcrosse twice. It is not until Redcrosse uses the dragon's excess against it, ramming his sword down the huge opening of its "darksome hollow maw" (another womb) that he is able to defeat the beast (I.xi.53.8). The dragon is so threatening, its façade so convincing, that people worry, even after its death, that "in his wombe might lurke some hidden nest / Of many Dragonets, his fruitfull seed" (I.xii.10.5-6). His fertility is so monstrous, so excessive, that even death seems too weak to counter it. In this example, maternity encompasses the masculine body as well.
Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is the most extreme example of the construction of maternity as a monstrous, threatening force, but the works of Malory and Shakespeare also address the issue of monstrous maternity. I'll confine my comments here to one Shakespearean example, from *Macbeth*. When Lord Macbeth begins to share his misgivings about the intended murder with Lady Macbeth, she questions his masculinity, telling him that he will be "a man" only if he dares to go through with the plan (I.vii.49). In this conversation, she uses a striking example to make it clear to her husband how loyal she is to her oath:

>I have given suck, and know
>How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
>I would, while it was smiling in my face,
>Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
>And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
>Have done to this. (I.vii.54-59)

Lady Macbeth conjures the most frightening image, that of a murderous mother, to illustrate the depth of her commitment to her word. Avoiding monstrous maternity is not worth breaking an oath. Susan C. Staub analyzes the representation of "child murder" in early modern pamphlets and "street literature" in "Early Modern Medea: Representations of Child Murder in the Street Literature of Seventeenth-Century England."16 Not only does Staub document the popularity of murderous mothers in "early modern dramas, broadsheets and news pamphlets," but her analysis reveals a tendency in these literary genres to characterize the murdering mothers as "decidedly unnatural, monstrous, and sexually promiscuous" (333, 335). Richard Kieckhefer reveals the medieval ancestry of the Renaissance interest in child-
murders in “Avenging the Blood of Children: Anxiety Over Child Victims and the Origins of
the European Witch Trials,” where he argues that fifteenth-century European witchcraft
trials show an early tendency to accuse witches, in particular, of abducting and eating
children. The invocation of the murderous mother in Lady Macbeth’s speech allows
Shakespeare both to conjure an entire legacy of monstrous maternity and to tap into the
popular interest of his audience in just a few lines.

Both the maternal representations of witches and other strategies for demonizing
maternity in the texts discussed in this chapter reflect a more widespread concern with
maternal roles in the sixteenth century. The recent work being done on mothers and
maternity in the Renaissance suggest a number of strategies of representation. Deborah
Willis, for example, who writes about the connection between witches and mothers in
Malevolent Nurture, says, “Witches were women, I believe, because women are mothers:
witchcraft beliefs encode fantasies of maternal persecution” (6). Willis cites changing
familial and legal conditions as part of the reason for anxiety about maternity: specifically,
tension over the management of finances in elite families where mothers might act “in ways
that disadvantaged their male heirs” and developments in law allowing married women and
widows “the significant right to file suits on their own behalf in Chancery court—suits that
often brought them into conflict with their children” (17). As more research becomes
available, it is increasingly clear that many representations of maternal power glorify rather

16 This essay appears in Maternal Measures, edited by Naomi Miller and Naomi Yavneh.
17 The kind of work being done in this field varies widely, from Diane Purkiss’s analysis of maternal tropes
associated with witchcraft in The Witch in History, to the collection of essays edited by Naomi Miller and Naomi
Yavneh, Maternal Measures, which explores “a striking range of positive and negative constructions of female
caregiving in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (1).
than villainize, but the wicked witch (and the other kinds of monstrous mothers related to her) explores the maternal “dark side.”

The figure of the murdering mother is perhaps one of the most disturbing images we continue to produce. She was certainly a popular figure in the Renaissance, and though she does not appear frequently in contemporary film, we do see her commonly enough in other forms of media. Unfortunately, where she appears most is the news, as we gape in awe at sensational accounts of women who have killed their children, whether by driving them into the water or leaving them in a hot car. This seems the most monstrous of paradoxes—that someone who can create life should be willing then to kill what she created. We continue to marginalize this kind of figure, blaming the actions on mental illness, extreme poverty, or even on lack of education.

Despite such grim representations of “real” mothers in the news media, there are less pessimistic representations of maternal hostility. For example, a “cult-classic” fantasy film from the 1980s, Labyrinth, offers a contemporary look at the instinct towards monstrous maternity, resolving that instinct through a magical fantasy quest that simulates the murderous instinct in an otherworld not unlike that of medieval and early modern romance. Sarah (played by a young Jennifer Connelly), the daughter of a quasi-wicked stepmother, must watch her younger half-brother; she is forced into the role of surrogate mother, a role she rejects as violently as she does her step-mother’s comments about her tardiness. She expresses aloud the desire of a murderous mother, that her child be taken away from her (in this case, through its symbolic death, transformation into a goblin). Her expression of this desire makes it true, and the Goblin King (David Bowie in super-tight tights) snatches her brother away to his castle, where he will turn the baby into a goblin after a ritual amount of
time. Once she enacts her desire in the fantasy world, she regrets it, and the rest of the
movie follows her journey to rescue her brother from the otherworld (the underworld?). In the end, of course, she regains possession of Toby, the baby brother, and returns to accept the maternal role she’s clearly meant to play. Though the film’s restrictive construction of femininity as maternity can frustrate a female viewer, its creation of a fantasy space in which hostile feelings about maternity can be explored and resolved without horrible consequences promotes needed tolerance of a range of relationships to maternity available for women. Sarah must love and care for her brother, but he is just her brother, after all, and not her child. The movie ends with her recognition that her hostile feelings are ok (she lets her fantasy-world friends enter the real world, bringing her explorative space back like a souvenir from her journey), and as the credits roll, we can imagine she is free to make her own choices from now on.

Contemporary representations of maternity such as this one work towards mitigating maternal hostility towards children without recourse to the trope of the monstrous mother. In this film, there are no witches, though there is a shrill-speaking step-mother who complains that Sarah treats her “like a wicked step-mother in a fairy story.” This film’s initial solution to the problem of the step-mother is akin to Shakespeare’s: it erases her. As the story develops, Labyrinth offers an alternate solution in the figure of Sarah, who works out her maternal hostility in the course of a traditionally masculine quest narrative. The generally positive tenor of the movie is largely due to the magic of Jim Henson’s puppets, but relies also on the fact that magic, the operative force in the world of the Goblin King, is no longer perceived by the audience as an immediate or viable threat. Is there a connection between
literary representations and the current legal climate? As I argue in the concluding chapter, you betcha!
CHAPTER FIVE
THE WITCH IN COURT: LITERARY ECHOES OF LEGISLATIVE POLICY

The safest generalization [about those accused of witchcraft] is that fingers would point most quickly at someone who had established a reputation for being a bad, disagreeable neighbor. Dorothea Hindremstein, tried by a municipal court at Lucerne in 1454, is a perfect example. Some time earlier her mother had been burned for sorcery in Uri, and if Dorothea had not fled she would have been burned as well; in the meantime she had been made to swear that she would not return to Uri. Her neighbors and even her husband at Lucerne eventually concluded that she had inherited her mother’s power to lay curses on people. One neighbor woman told the court how her child had gotten into a fight and shoved Dorothea’s child into the mud. Dorothea came out and angrily threatened that the witness’s child would never forget this offense. Within twelve hours the offending child began to grow ill, and he lay sick for three weeks. Who could doubt that Dorothea’s curse had taken effect? Another neighbor told how he had been careful not to antagonize Dorothea because of her ill repute. Yet he told how other people had quarreled with her and had soon suffered the consequences: illness of half a year’s duration, death of a fine cow, or blood instead of milk from a cow. How had Dorothea done all this? The man could not explain—indeed, the witnesses were generally unconcerned about the precise mechanism of the supposed sorcery—but he feared that if she and her family were allowed to live they would inflict still more damage. Then he said no more, fearing that he might be ill repaid for his testimony.

In many ways Dorothea fits the stereotype of the “old hag.” Many of the women prosecuted for sorcery seem to have been old women who had no family to support them, or who received no support from the family they did have. Doubtless they tended, like Dorothea, to be ill-natured sorts, who bore resentment toward those about them and inspired resentment in return.

Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*

Dorothea Hindremstein, Richard Kieckhefer tells us in the above excerpt, is a perfect example of the witch-hag. She is a real-life embodiment of the kind of witches I argue figure prominently in Renaissance literature, it would seem. Or is she? Let us consider the above passage. Dorothea suffers accusations of witchcraft because she is a bad neighbor, according to Kieckhefer’s reading here, a view consonant with the one developed more fully in Robin Briggs’s *Witches and Neighbors*. Briggs argues that the conflicts which precipitated witchcraft accusations arise from long-standing, localized tensions that need an outlet for resolution, and the specificity of those conflicts is not suited to overarching generalized explanations (such as those made by most scholars when discussing the witchcraft phenomenon). Thus, people who lived in close contact with one another for...
decades might end up embroiled in witchcraft accusations—this seems a bit like Kieckhefer’s “ill-natured” neighbors.

But Kieckhefer’s example doesn’t really fit this explanation. Dorothea is not a long-time bad neighbor whose constant irritations drive those around her to protect themselves: Kieckhefer says she moved to Lucerne from Uri, where her mother was burned for practicing magic. Dorothea was an outsider with a reputation for witchcraft inherited from her mother, not a long-term member of the community. Kieckhefer’s description of Dorothea’s practice of witchcraft defies his summative explanation that so assuredly tells us Dorothea “fits the stereotype of the ‘old hag’” (193). Dorothea had children who played with those of the accusing mother in the first example Kieckhefer notes, which suggests that she was not “old,” but probably around the same age as her accuser. Dorothea is not a woman “with no family to support her,” as Kieckhefer mentions both her husband and at least one child in his description of her offenses. Finally, though Kieckhefer accuses Dorothea of being the one who “inspired resentment” because of her “disagreeable” nature, his examples both tell the reverse story. In the first instance, the accusing mother’s child pushes Dorothea’s child into the mud, at which point Dorothea intercedes to chastise the offending child. In the second example, the male witness attests to Dorothea’s reputation for witchcraft (her unfortunate dowry), and then recites the local gossip about the accused woman. In both of these cases, Dorothea is the recipient, not the initiator of the aggression. My point here is simple: the literary stereotype of the witch-hag can easily eclipse the specificity of the individual people actually accused of practicing witchcraft.
This is a problem endemic to scholarly work on witchcraft, a point Diane Purkiss makes convincingly in her deconstruction of the "the myth of the Burning Times." Although she focuses on the figure of the healer-witch associated with certain feminist appropriations of fertility mythologies, the effect is similar: critics, historians, theorists, and other scholars often disregard the details in search of the bigger picture, the larger ideological issues at stake. This fact is surely frustrating to someone looking for the truth about the identities of the real women and men accused of being witches, but it is also demonstrative of the remarkable power of narrative to structure perceptions and thus transcend everyday life. The reason we continue to study magic and witchcraft in particular results just as much from our ability to mold medieval and early modern discourses to suit the needs of contemporary culture as it does from a desire for information about those time periods. I am, of course, no different. I am certain that my readings of the development of magical figures in Arthurian literature are colored by my understanding of similar figures currently popular in American film and literature. In fact, it is in part because of contemporary representations of the witch-figure that I believe this study to be important. Witchcraft is no longer a viable threat to most residents of Europe and much of North America, largely because of disbelief in its efficacy, yet we continue to draw on figures popular in the medieval and early modern periods, when the percentage of population who believed in magical power was much higher.

So does belief matter? Is the popularity of the witch in early modern texts a reflection of a more widespread belief in witches? There is, of course, no way to determine what people actually believe in any period, including our own. We know what we believe.

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1 This phrase is part of the title of Chapter One, in The Witch in History.
(perhaps), and we know what others tell us they believe (whether over a cocktail or with ink and vellum), and we can observe people’s behaviors—but do we know with certainty what they believe? In lieu of certainty, we can at best hope to explore and interpret the evidence (whatever we consider appropriate evidence to be). In this project, my purpose was to describe and analyze trends in the literature (favoring literary evidence over social, cultural, anthropological, or historical studies), and that task occupies the bulk of the preceding pages. Though I have tried to identify a few of the most salient social factors for the authors and representations of gendered magic considered, my discussion is by no means an exhaustive one, and the complex web of power structures which comprise societal relations cannot be explained adequately in as short a space as I have devoted to them. I have not yet explored the relationship of the prosecution of magic to my analyses, and this is part of my purpose here, as analyses of the legal system are especially useful in answering the question of belief in the efficacy of magic.

Why is the analysis of a legal system potentially useful to the question of belief? Because generally we don’t bother to go through the ponderous processes of the legal system unless we believe the grievance is serious. Though people with money can potentially take advantage of legislation more easily than those without (and this must have been even more true for those who lived in the highly stratified society in England from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries), there is still a level of bureaucratic procedure that prevents most of the frivolous cases from bothering the authorities (although some would argue that is no longer true). Even when people abuse the judicial system by making unfair accusations, they must provide a charge likely to be believed by a judge or jury. Analysis of the legislation against witchcraft and the circumstances of specific cases thus offers some
insight (though limited) in what was considered threatening enough—and believable enough—to demand legal action.

There are many scholars who have analyzed the legislation about and prosecution of witches and witchcraft. I cannot possibly hope to add original scholarship to the monumental works produced in this field in just a few pages, nor do I attempt such folly. Rather, I would like to highlight a few major aspects of the development of magic- and witchcraft-related law in England to illustrate the manner in which the literature and the law influence one another. Generally, in times when the law is relatively relaxed, when few cases of magic-use or witchcraft are prosecuted, the literature tends to represent magical characters as less threatening, and when legislation becomes more strict and cases come to trial more frequently, the literature tends to feature representations of magical figures which are more extreme and sinister.

In medieval England, secular courts usually prosecuted magic-users only if the magic was both heretical and harmful, and the method of prosecution was accusatorial. Kieckhefer outlines accusatorial procedure as follows:

Until the late Middle Ages . . . municipal courts retained what is known as “accusatory” procedure: a trial would begin only when an aggrieved party pressed charges in court and took responsibility for proving them; if the accusers did not prove the allegations, they would typically be liable to the same punishment that the accused would otherwise have suffered. (189)

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2 There are many books with significant sections (and sometimes the entirety) devoted to analysis of the witch-hunts within a legal context, including Anne Llewellyn Barstow’s *Witchcraft* (especially Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 7), Brian P. Levack’s *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (Chapters 3, 6, and 7), Alan Macfarlane’s *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (Chapters 1-6), Edward Peters’s *The Magician, the Witch, and the Law* (Chapter 6), and Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Chapter 14).
In light of the consequences for accusing someone else of using harmful magic, it's no surprise that few cases against sorcerers and witches appear in legal records. In England, Anglo-Saxon laws were generally lenient towards magic use, and prosecution generally occurred only when the magic was used for harm or destruction. In fact, when it came to night-flights, a precursor to the more fully developed witch’s sabbath of early modern witchcraft, the attitude of the court was often one of skepticism. In this time of few prosecutions and significant skepticism, the magical figures who appear in the texts surveyed in this study are often represented in a positive way, as Chapters One and Two demonstrate. The narratives use magical giants and churls as the most prominent threats (although usually easily dispatched) while the records of prosecution suggest that violent men were prosecuted in secular courts far more often than were magic-users of either gender. The most complex and ambiguous representations of magic in the early Arthurian material involve prophetic power, a kind of magic important to Christian doctrine, and thus probably more widely believed in than other forms of magic less connected to or disparaged by the church (like medicine or necromancy). Here, skepticism seems to provide space for playful use of magical figures, but the more familiar, accepted magical practices reflect ambivalence and fear.

At some point after thirteenth century, English secular courts began to adopt an inquisitorial procedure influenced by both ecclesiastical and secular law in continental

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3 Alexander Murray and Brian Levack both cite the _lex talonum_ as the relevant code governing accusatorial procedure ("Medieval Origins of the Witch Hunt" 67 & The Witchhunt in Early Modern Europe 70).  
4 R. Trevor Davies discusses Anglo-Saxon law in Four Centuries of Witch Beliefs, arguing for English leniency until the reign of Elizabeth (13-15). Cf. Hughes’s discussion of Anglo-Saxon law in Witchcraft (154-55) and Thomas’s discussion in Religion (466-7).  
5 Murray also provides evidence for skepticism towards aspects of witchcraft in both secular and ecclesiastical courts from as far back as the ninth century to as late as the mid-fifteenth century.
Europe. I say at some point because different scholars support a variety of opinions about when inquisitorial practice really came to England: Richard Kieckhefer and Alexander Murray name Pope Gregory IX’s appointment of inquisitors for heresy from 1227 to 1241 as the beginning of inquisitorial procedure, but Michael Bailey cites the decree of Pope John in 1326 (Super illius specula), which condemned all sorcerers to excommunication and “other appropriate penalties” (967); others, such as Pennethorne Hughes, point to Pope Innocent III’s 1484 bull, Summis desiderantes affectibus, which condemned magical practices as heretical; and still others maintain that inquisitorial practice didn’t fully set in until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the parliaments of Henry VIII (in 1542), Elizabeth I (1563), and James I (1603) each passed successively more strict acts punishing the crime of witchcraft.

In the courts of late medieval and early modern England, fear grew that all magic might actually be the result of traffic with demons, and this judicial climate soon permeated other textual genres featuring representations of magic. As scholars have exhaustively documented, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw prosecutions (and executions) for witchcraft in record numbers. Here, where belief is strongest and the criminal witch is the most threatening, the literary witch also reigns queen, experiencing another interlude of

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6 Kieckhefer’s Magic in the Middle Ages (190), and Murray’s “Medieval Origins of the Witch Hunt” (68-9).
7 This appears in an article from Speculum titled “From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages.”
8 Hughes discusses this in Chapter Twelve of Witchcraft (166-7).
9 Brian Levack offers a comprehensive discussion of the legislative changes spanning the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries in Chapter 3 of The Witchhunt in Early Modern Europe (especially pages 69-76). Others who corroborate include Macfarlane (14-20), Thomas (442-3), H.C. Erik Midelfort in “Were There Really Witches?” (193), and Ronald Holmes in Witchcraft in British History (69-82).
10 Keith Thomas’s discussion, in Religion and the Decline of Magic, of the development of demonic magic as a crime is comprehensive (435-65), and Levack, Davies, Murray, Bailey, and Midelfort all agree that fear of demonic magic as a pervasive threat developed in the late-fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, as do Christina Lamer and Russell Hope Robbins.
11 All of the scholars cited so far support this idea, though estimates about the number of witchcraft trials and executions vary widely.
popularity in what has been far more than fifteen minutes of fame throughout the history of Western literature. The fifteenth century saw the rise of writing specifically designed to link women, witchcraft, and diabolic activity (the quintessential work of this nature is Jacob Sprenger and Henry Kramer's *Malleus maleficarum*), and, as I argue in the third chapter, some of the most influential authors of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries participate in the conflation of femininity with demonology and monstrous maternity.

In England, witch persecution officially ended with George II's repeal of penal laws against witchcraft in 1736, and it became illegal to feign the possession of magical power. If we have any witchcraft legislation still existing in the U.S. (and we might), it is not enforced. As Christina Larner puts it *Witchcraft and Religion*, "the truth is that nobody cares" about practicing witches these days (83). Larner overstates the case here—certainly the people who practice the two kinds of contemporary witchcraft she describes as still practiced, modern Wicca and Satanic cults, care very much about what they do. But we no longer fear witches. We indulge them. Perhaps with Satanic cults, there may still be fear that the rituals would require human or animal sacrifice, but the women associated with a pre-industrial fertility religion don't suffer accusations of cannibalism and night-flights. Instead, they are accused of benign practices such as dancing, self-help, or gullibility. Perhaps the most culturally loaded charge is that of lesbianism, which of course carries its own complex matrix of social signifiers. Generally, though, we treat witches as I treated my student, with affectionate (or for some, perhaps, irritated) contempt.

Though there are no more prosecutions of witches to fuel our interest, we still find the witch a remarkably satisfying figure, both in academic and popular circles. The wealth of
material written on magic and witchcraft in the medieval and Renaissance is staggering (and the bane of a graduate student trying to complete a dissertation project); scholars in history, literature, anthropology, psychology, and cultural studies have each taken a crack at the mystery of the witch-hunts. Writers and directors in the U.S. get in on the act as well, continuing to represent and resolve anxieties about femininity in the spaces of popular literature and film. I have already discussed the traces of medieval and early modern magic in *The Wizard of Oz*, *Cinderella*, and *Snow White*, but it is not only in films about or for children that magic weaves its spell. In George Miller's film, *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), for example, witchcraft functions as the method by which the tensions within a small New England community can be resolved, much as it does in the "bad neighbor" model discussed above.

From the first scene in *The Witches of Eastwick*, Miller shows us that the three witches exist in conflict with the other members of the town. *The Witches of Eastwick* opens with a high shot over a quaint New England village, and the shot lingers on the small white church, establishing for the viewer that this story is set firmly within the bounds of white, middle-class America—ordered, "proper" society. The next few shots introduce the three other women who will create the perfect man: the shot of the church dissolves into rows upon rows of small fertility figurines, with large bulging (pregnant) bellies and protruding breasts, made by Alex (played by Cher), the first of the three witches; next, we see Suki (Michelle Pfeiffer), blond hair swept hastily into a clip so that bits fall out haphazardly, a single mother with six little (blond) girls, and we overhear her telling her disappointed brood that they will be eating zucchini jam on their PB & J sandwiches today. Both of these shots associate

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12 See Thomas (443) and Hughes (178).
femininity with fertility and maternity, a typical strategy of biological essentialism. Alex's profession, sculptor, marks her as potentially marginal (the off-beat artist), and Suki's many children and obvious poverty mark her as both marginal and possibly excessive (six is more children than average for an American family).

After this, we finally meet Jane (Susan Sarandon), the third witch, and the one most firmly entrenched in the values of proper morality at the beginning of the film. She is represented as a conservative divorcee: her hair is braided primly down her back; her dress, reminiscent of Dorothy's in *The Wizard of Oz*, is well below her knees; and she is devotedly conducting the precise rhythm—modeling the proper order—for her band students. Her non-sexualized appearance does not stop the reigning authorities from sexualizing her, however; we only learn of Jane's divorce (final today!) because the school principal takes the time to disturb her classroom to remind her and pinch her bottom, suggesting that they might "be able to work something out" together now that she is single. Jane accepts the harassment silently, observing the rules of etiquette that prevent her from mentioning the sexual advance in front of the schoolchildren, and it is obvious to the viewers that following the rules of middle-class morality gets this woman nowhere.

As we discover in the next few scenes, these women are disgruntled with the town, especially the men it offers them as potential partners and lovers. In the first scene with all three women (at a meeting where Jane leads the school band) the director reveals the connection between the repressive culture and the women's desperate resort to magic. After enduring the band and the singing of a local goody-goody, Felicia, our three witches look terribly annoyed as the sexually-harassing principal prepares to make a long-winded speech. Through quick cuts from the women to the sky, the editing suggests that the three women
call up a violent thunderstorm through some form of unified wish-magic, forcing the empty

ceremony to a quick end.

As the women sip martinis later in Alex’s home, freed from the obligation of their
children, they remark that each one of them had wished for something to happen to halt the
tedious speech. Throughout this scene, where the three women are often pictured
triangulated within the frame of the shot, they talk freely to one another about the sexual
behaviors of the male authority figures in their lives (Jane’s principal, Suki’s editor),
transgressing the bounds of polite society’s discourse, until Alex finally stops them,
frustrated. She moves the conversation to talk of their relationships (ended by “death,
divorce, and desertion”), their lack of sex, and their unfulfilled desires—in short, their
dissatisfaction with the lifestyle demanded by the town. That this behavior is transgressive is
demonstrated by Jane’s shock at some of the things Alex says, as when Jane tells Alex she’s
“over-simplifying” when Alex points out that the other two women’s marriages were
reduced to procreation: “[Suki’s] husband leaves her because she has too many kids. [To
Jane] Your husband leaves you because you can’t have any.” Their response to these
tensions is to engage in witchcraft.

Unlike the early modern trials described by Briggs and others, the method of
resolution in this movie does not involve accusing a neighbor of witchcraft to oust her from
power; instead, the women use witchcraft to explore alternatives to adhering to the
expectations of their sexually repressive town. Though the strategy is similar to one used in
early modern England, the point of view has changed: we’ve moved from the prosecution to
the defense; we’re rooting for the witches. When Jane asks Suki and Alex, “Who should we
be looking for?”, the three women begin to work together to weave a spell, empowered by
their speech and clinking martini glasses. The implication is clearly that these women must
work together to effect change in the world. The qualities they conjure include, in summary:
charismatic tolerance ("someone nice, someone you could like"); "someone you could really
be yourself with"; "someone you could talk to"), sexualized body ("handsome," "not too
handsome," "nice eyes," "nice ass," "huge" [said of his penis], "who cares—as long as it
works, it's in" [also]), and a mysterious quality ("a stranger, interesting," "a tall, dark prince
traveling under a curse," "a foreign prince on a big, black horse"). What they want is a man
with feminine qualities, a female with the phallus. What they get is the devil.

The devil figures prominently in Renaissance texts, as I discuss in the third chapter,
sealing his demonic pacts by fornicating with prospective witches, and this is precisely what
Daryl van Horn promptly accomplishes when he arrives in response to the conjuration (as
that what it must have been, since the devil responds). He seduces Alex, Jane, and Suki one
after the other, playing on their frustrations with mundane life, sexual repression, and the
responsibilities of motherhood, respectively. Their sexual liberation marks their cultural
liberation: they no longer care about the rules of Christian morality, abandoning monogamy
and heterosexuality for sexual freedom and experimentation, and for a time they experience
an Edenic world where they slowly become more cognizant of their magical abilities. The
utopian magical freedom does not last, however; it buckles under the pressure applied by
middle-class morality—the "normal" people of Eastwick. Jane is surrounded by judgmental
"home-makers" in the market, where she is trying to buy cookies and other sweets in a slinky
dress that does not hide the fact that she is not wearing a bra. This scene shows us the
proper reaction of "normal" people to such blatantly uncontrolled sexuality, and the women
mutter to one another as Jane walks away. Suki tells us that her daughters have endured
teasing at school because of their mother’s inappropriate sexuality, and Alex seems visibly shaken by the violent murder of Felicia (the self-righteous owner of the local rag at which Suki works), an event which Daryl leads the women into catalyzing. Apparently the devil went a bit too far.

As it turns out, the freedom the witches create for themselves comes at the price of ostracism from their community and the rejection of middle-class morality—or rather, its violent annihilation through sacrifice of human life. The ladies conclude that their sexual liberation comes at too high a cost, and they decide to banish Daryl. The method by which the women eliminate their conjured demon operates on the medieval principle of sympathetic magic: because one thing resembles another, they have a connection enabling the two items to influence one another magically. The women create a wax image representative of Daryl, marking areas like his heart, his penis, and his head. When Jane points out that it “doesn’t look very much like him,” Alex counters with, “It doesn’t have to.” Representations, then, as long as they evoke the image of the referent, do not have to be exact replicas or photographic depictions; they can be rough likenesses, with a few symbolic touches, and be just as effective at altering reality. In *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Taussig explains how the “magic of mimesis,” or the “making and existence of the artifact that portrays something” is thought to “[give] one power over that which is portrayed” (13). *Witches* draws on this “natural” assumption—that the copy of a thing “acquires the power of the represented” thing (Taussig 16). Their representation functions as it “should,” and they successfully rid Eastwick of their demon, after an appropriately long prelude and chase.

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13 Taussig goes further, asking if the detail called for in writing (giving examples, evidence, substantiating claims) is nothing more than an invocation of the mimetic impulse (16).
scene, of course. Instead of the town exterminating its witches, as the Renaissance witch-
story so often goes, the witches of Eastwick band together to save the town from the
devil—the witch and the witch-finder are rolled into one, and it's Daryl who crosses the line
when he moves from self-help magic to homicidal magic.

The epilogue provides an empowering resolution to the problem of the tensions
within Eastwick, one which does not require sacrifice of the women who behave
transgressively. After destroying Daryl (he disappears into thin air), the women stay in his
mansion (why they got it we do not find out), bear his sons, and continue their life in a
different way than before. The women have discarded the lifestyle that asks them to find
male partners, instead banding together in a supportive community of women. This
community replaces the need for witchcraft, and successfully, we are shown: in this utopian
space, the women work and tend their children together, free from the hassles of their prior
lives. The female community, which resolves the tensions associated with patriarchy by
replacing it with an egalitarian democracy, makes feminine magic unnecessary.

This is a resolution shared by another, less playful film about witches, *Practical Magic*, where
the women of the town band together at the end to protect one of the witches from a
demonic, masculine threat. Both films shift the witches' function from that of antagonist to
that of protagonist, validating the efficacy of "magical" femininity and villainizing "demonic"
masculinity. In doing so, they offer an alternate resolution to the story of the witch as
handed down by our early modern predecessors, one which does not involve the
subordination of women's rights, desires, and power to repressive patriarchal systems, but
encourages women to help and trust one another. I must admit that I like these endings,
these bids for a new kind of tolerance, which whisper to me that next time I see my Wiccan student, I should try not to scare her away. I like these endings very much indeed.
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