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## Goddess and Mortal: The Celtic and the French Morgan le Fay in Tolkien's *Silmarillion*

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### Goddess and Mortal: The Celtic and the French Morgan le Fay in Tolkien's *Silmarillion*

#### Abstract

Few characters change more in their depiction throughout 'traditional' Arthurian literature than Morgan le Fay, who transitions from the benevolent and supernatural Queen of the Isle of Apples to the mortal sister of King Arthur with a complicated relationship to her brother and his court. These two versions of the Arthurian enchantress are represented in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* and the French Vulgate Cycle, and they parallel two of Tolkien's prominent female characters in *The Silmarillion*: Lúthien and Aredhel. Establishing parallels between Monmouth's Morgen and Tolkien's Lúthien demonstrates both a connection to the Celtic tradition and a departure from that tradition through a positive portrayal of female power. While Morgan le Fay has often been portrayed as a sinister antagonist to Arthur and his court, recent scholars have reframed her role in the narrative as a challenge to the individual and systemic flaws within Camelot. Applying this perspective to Aredhel's narrative allows for a new interpretation of her character, her brother Turgon, and the fall of Gondolin.

#### Additional Keywords

Morgan le Fay; Geoffrey of Monmouth; Vita Merlini; French Vulgate; Aredhel; Luthien; Turgon

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## GOODESS AND MORTAL: THE CELTIC AND THE FRENCH MORGAN LE FAY IN TOLKIEN'S *SILMARILLION*<sup>1</sup>

CLARE MOORE

AT THIS POINT IN TOLKIEN scholarship, it seems unnecessary to start at the very beginning in justifying a connection between Tolkien's "Matter of Middle-earth" and the Arthurian "Matter of Britain," despite—perhaps—Tolkien's own words on the subject. Verlyn Flieger ("Matter of Britain," "Tolkien's French Connection"), María José Álvarez-Faedo, and others have successfully done that already. Tolkien was intimately familiar with the swath of Arthuriana, started and never finished his own alliterative poem on the matter, and adapted these characters, stories, and themes into his own creative work (Flieger, "Matter of Britain" 140). What is left, then, is to explore which characters, which stories, and which themes find their way from Arthurian literature into Middle-earth—and to use the Arthurian lens to deepen our understanding of Tolkien's work.

Flieger writes that there is no Arthur in *The Silmarillion* ("Matter of Britain" 132), but I propose there are several Morgan le Fays. Flieger notes and Susan Carter explores the parallels between Morgan le Fay and Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings*, but *The Silmarillion* also possesses female characters who resonate with various iterations of Morgan le Fay from traditional Arthurian literature. Over time, Morgan le Fay undergoes more change than perhaps any other figure in the Arthurian canon, shifting from her first appearance as an almost divine Celtic goddess with no relation to Arthur himself to a decidedly mortal sister (or half-sister) with a complex relationship to her brother and his kingdom. These two Morgans, represented most decisively in Geoffrey of Monmouth's "Morgen" in *Vita Merlini* and in the Morgan of the French Vulgate Cycle, are practically two different people, and therefore it should be unsurprising that these two versions of Morgan le Fay manifest in two very different characters in Tolkien's *Silmarillion*.

Lúthien, with her beauty, hospitality, healing powers, island residence, and ability to shape-shift, bears a strong resemblance to Monmouth's Morgen, Queen of the Island of Apples—another example of the Celtic influence on Tolkien's work and a positive portrayal of female power. Aredhel—headstrong,

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<sup>1</sup> A portion of this paper was first presented at Mythmoot IX: Remaking Myth in June 2022.

independent, sister to a king and seeking to escape the confines of his kingdom—embodies many of the themes set into motion by the Morgan of the French Vulgate Cycle that highlight the flaws of a seemingly perfect kingdom. She, like the French Morgan le Fay, demonstrates an ambiguity that can still be read as the empowerment of the female character.

In establishing parallels between Lúthien/Morgen and Aredhel/Morgan le Fay, I am not seeking to prove any explicit intentionality on Tolkien's part to incorporate Morgan le Fay into Middle-earth. The especially strong parallels between Lúthien and Geoffrey of Monmouth's enchantress suggest that Morgan le Fay was a part of Tolkien's "cauldron of story," which suggests Tolkien's familiarity with Arthurian canon outside of the male characters and stories that immediately come to mind at the mention of King Arthur. It also suggests that Tolkien's understanding of Morgan le Fay as a character and powerful female figure extended beyond the depiction of her found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a poem Tolkien loved and translated. The Morgan of this poem, though open to nuanced reading and interpretation, embodies many of the problematic qualities assigned to Morgan le Fay and women like her by the male writers of traditional Arthurian literature: mainly, a negative view of female sexuality and power (Fries 6). Tolkien was very familiar with the Gawain poet's Morgan, but this is not the kind of woman he created for Middle-earth.

The larger goal of this paper, then, is to establish that, whether Tolkien (consciously or subconsciously) took inspiration from Morgan le Fay or not, finding parallels between Morgan le Fay and Tolkien's female characters allows readers and scholars to apply the new and—dare I say it—feminist work being done in Arthurian scholarship to Middle-earth. This work, some of which is explained throughout this paper, allows for new readings of characters like Lúthien and, even more importantly, Aredhel. The parallels explored in this paper, while they do strengthen the connections between Tolkien, Arthuriana, and Celtic mythology, are most important because they create new readings of Tolkien's female characters that at different times present both unambiguously positive portrayals of female power and empowerment found through ambiguity of character.

The parallels between Geoffrey of Monmouth's Morgen and Tolkien's Lúthien deepen the connection between Tolkien's legendarium and Celtic influences, but this in turn highlights the uniqueness of Monmouth and Tolkien's positive view of female power in their work. Several scholars have studied Celtic influences on Tolkien's work. Dimitra Fimi establishes Tolkien's familiarity with Celtic stories and literature, noting parallels between Irish and Welsh tales and Tolkien's First Age narratives, as well as French Arthurian romances ("Mad' Elves and 'Elusive Beauty,'" "Tolkien's "Celtic" type of

legends"). Flieger provides a general overview of the Celtic influence on Tolkien's conceptions of fairy, otherworlds, and journeys ("Celtic Connections"). Rhona Beare notes the Celtic connections between Lúthien and the work of W.B. Yeats (7), and Marjorie Burns connects the Morrigan, a Celtic war goddess, with Galadriel (112)—a known influence on Morgan le Fay as well. This work has established a connection between Tolkien and Celtic sources, and this paper will build on the Celtic inspiration for Lúthien by tracing her heritage through Geoffrey of Monmouth's Morgen in *Vita Merlini*, another source with known Celtic influences.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* contains the oldest surviving mention of Morgan le Fay, and it is worth quoting in full because she only appears in one section of the narrative at the very end of the story:

...Nine sisters benignly empowered  
Rule there over all those who arrive at that island from our lands.  
First and most skilled of them all, both in healing and beauty, is Morgen,  
Who has a knowledge of plants, both their uses and curative powers;  
Such is her skill that she knows how to change her own shape, and on  
wondrous  
Wings she can fly just as Daedalus flew, and she flies past the cities,  
As is her wont, or she glides through the air then alights on your  
shoreline;  
And she imparted her knowledge of science and maths to her sisters,  
Moronoe, Mazoe, Gliten, Glitoea, Gliton,  
Tryonoe, and that Thiten most famous for playing her lyre.  
Thither we carried poor Arthur when grievously wounded at Camlan:  
Steering our ship was Barinthus, who knew both the tides and the  
heavens,  
So he could guide us in safety to Morgen, who welcomed us warmly.  
Arthur was laid in her chamber on her own bed with its golden  
Coverings: there she did lay her own hands on his wounds and did  
ponder  
Long, then at last she declared his wounds could be healed if he stayed  
there  
And he agreed to be treated by her: so we gladly accepted,  
Leaving the king in her care and departing on favourable currents.  
(Monmouth 93-94, lines 759-776)

Most scholars agree that *Vita Merlini* was influenced by classical sources,<sup>1</sup> Celtic mythology, and Monmouth's own creativity. Monmouth was himself, after all, from Wales—though he spent most of his life in Oxford and his ancestry is

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<sup>1</sup> For Morgen, the classical sources of Medea and Circe (Larrington 8).

potentially traced through Brittany or elsewhere. Like Tolkien, Monmouth would have been familiar with the Celtic tradition around him, and the Celtic influence on his work is undeniable (see Paton, Hebert, Tolhurst, Fries). The Morrigan in particular is a widely recognized source for Morgan le Fay (Hebert 5, Burns 111, Paton 11). One of the war-goddess's most notable traits is the ability to shape-shift, usually into a crow or raven (Green 154). Fries notes there are many similarities between Morgan le Fay and the Morrigan (15n3), but the ability to shape-shift into a form that flies is a quality only found in the Morgan le Fay from Monmouth's version of the tale, which will be notable later in the analysis of Tolkien's Lúthien. Lucy Allen Paton's definitive *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* explores in-depth the Celtic and fairy influences of Morgan le Fay,<sup>2</sup> and so rather than reiterate the work of Paton, I want to assume two points established by this research regarding Morgan le Fay and move forward: that she is a figure with recognized Celtic influence and that the sources of her Celtic influence are figures of ambiguous nature. Therefore, a connection between Monmouth's Morgen and Tolkien's Lúthien elaborates on previously established Celtic influences on Tolkien through the Celtic influence of Morgen's character, and both Morgen and Lúthien differ from these Celtic sources in that their authors present them as unambiguously good figures of female power.

The primary parallels between Lúthien and Morgen are beauty, healing, hospitality, island-dwelling, and shape-shifting. Monmouth writes, "First and most skilled of them all, both in healing and beauty, is Morgen" (93, line 761). Lúthien's beauty is well-noted, too. Tolkien describes her as the most beautiful of all the Children of Ilúvatar (*Silmarillion* 165), "so great was her sudden beauty revealed beneath the sun" that Celegorm captures her against her will hoping to marry her (173), Sauron hears rumors of her beauty (174), Morgoth lusts after her (180), and she is the "most beautiful of all living things" (183). Tolkien repeatedly establishes her ethereal beauty. Maria Rafaella Benvenuto and Nancy Enright explore how her beauty is more than physical (42 and 122, respectively), and Lisa Coutras presents a thorough treatment of the theological significance of beauty in Tolkien's work in her book *Tolkien's Theology of Beauty*. Beare examines the connection between this kind of ethereal beauty and the Celtic tradition through the work of W.B. Yeats (7). All of this work analyzes the significance and deeper meaning that beauty conveys in Tolkien's work. Beauty as symbolic of goodness, power, divinity, and female perfection reflects not only Lúthien but Morgen as well. Monmouth elevates Morgen apart from her sisters immediately through her beauty while directly tying it to her skill and healing. Beauty is one aspect of her worthy nature, a

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<sup>2</sup> There is also Roger Loomis' "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddess."

physical symbol of everything in her being that makes her queenly and powerful.

Lúthien's healing abilities also parallel Morgen's. Cami Agan describes her ability to heal as a bodily power (169), Benvenuto as a creative power (49), and Tolkien describes multiple instances of her healing as an important aspect of her character. After Curufin wounds Beren with an arrow, Lúthien heals him "by her arts and by her love" (*Silmarillion* 178). After Beren loses his hand, Lúthien sucks out the venom of Carcharoth and "put forth her failing power to staunch the hideous wound" (182). Beyond physical healing, Lúthien heals Beren's beleaguered spirit. Beren comes to Doriath tormented by the horrors of his previous life, "grey and bowed as with many years of woe," but after he catches sight of Lúthien "all memory of his pain departed from him" (165). Lúthien's love restores him not only to "joy so great" but to his own heroic nature (166), inspiring him to pursue the seemingly hopeless quest to retrieve a Silmaril. In Thingol's court, Beren is "filled with dread" until he looks upon Lúthien's (and Melian's) face, but then fear leaves him "and the pride of the eldest house of Men returned to him" (166). In this way, Lúthien and Beren mirror the physical and spiritual healing that Morgen offers Arthur at the end of *Vita Merlini*, promising to not only restore his physical health but to restore his spirit to its rightful kingly nature.

Similar to Morgen's healing, though, Lúthien's power is connected with plants. Morgen has an extensive knowledge of plants, "both their uses and curative powers" (Monmouth 93, line 762). This is how she will heal Arthur upon his arrival to Avalon. Lúthien's connection to nature is also well-noted by scholars (Benvenuto 49, Beal 12). Tolkien uses a plethora of natural imagery to describe her person. Her mantle is sewn with golden flowers, her glory is compared to the leaves of trees, clear waters, and stars above the mists, and her singing causes flowers to grow (*Silmarillion* 165). She often demonstrates a power over the natural world, which Tolkien portrays as a form of healing. Lúthien breaks the "bonds of winter" and flowers spring from "the cold earth where her feet had passed" (165). Her very presence heals the natural world from winter into spring. This is the case after she rescues Beren from Sauron: "flowers lingered where Lúthien went" (176), after Beren loses his hand and she heals him: "it was spring again" (183), and at the end of her story when she returns to Doriath to heal the "winter of Thingol" (188). Most importantly, however, the scenes depicting her healing abilities are always closely connected with plants and nature. After the attack of Celegorm and Curufin, Lúthien heals Beren specifically with an herb from the forest (178), much like Morgen will heal Arthur after his injuries. Both Morgen and Lúthien's healing powers are closely connected to plants and a knowledge of the natural world.



Another connection between Morgen and Lúthien is their hospitality. Morgen welcomes the wounded Arthur warmly to her home (Monmouth 94, line 771). Likewise, Lúthien brings Beren to Doriath as an honored guest even as her father King Thingol seeks to imprison him (*Silmarillion* 166). Tolkien highlights Lúthien's sense of hospitality by contrasting it sharply with her father's cold reception of Beren. She introduces him proudly when Beren is struck dumb in Thingol's presence: "He is Beren son of Barahir, lord of Men, mighty foe of Morgoth, the tale of whose deeds is become a song even among Elves" (166). She honors him as a kingly figure after she has revived him not from a physical death, but from a physical and emotional despondency he carries with him upon entering the forests of Doriath—similar to how Morgen welcomes Arthur to the Island of Apples. Lúthien's sense of hospitality is also highlighted through a contrast with Curufin and Celegorm. Upon meeting the sons of Fëanor abroad, she reveals herself to them, expecting to be treated according to elven ideals of hospitality, but, consumed by desire to possess her, the brothers imprison her (173). This is the opposite of how Lúthien greeted them and treated Beren in Doriath.

Both Morgen and Lúthien also dwell on mystical islands. After Lúthien has rescued Beren, won the Silmaril, and chosen mortality, she and Beren live in Tol Galen, "the green isle" (188), while Morgen rules over the Island of Apples (Monmouth 93, line 794). The isles are linked by descriptors of living things: green and apples. In addition, when Tolkien writes of Beren and Lúthien's "retirement" in Tol Galen, he writes that "all tidings of them ceased," that the Eldar called the land "Dor Fim-i-Guinar, the Land of the Dead that Live," that "no mortal man spoke ever again with Beren son of Barahir; and none saw Beren or Lúthien leave the world, or marked where at last their bodies lay" (*Silmarillion* 188). This language resonates strongly with the end of the Arthurian myth, Arthur's fate, and Avalon. No one sees Arthur die; he (usually) has no grave. Rather than a traditional mortal ending, Arthur sails away to Avalon.<sup>3</sup> More than simply living on islands, however, Morgen and Lúthien seem to share sovereignty over their spaces. Morgen is the foremost of her sisters, the queen, and while Lúthien and Beren are the only two living on their island Lúthien is indeed queenlike. She is "crowned" with the Silmaril after it becomes embedded in the Nauglamír, making her the "vision of greatest beauty and glory that has ever been outside the realm of Valinor" (235). At this point, Beren has been slain in battle against the dwarves, so Lúthien oversees her island home alone, and while she bears the Silmaril Tol Galen is a vision of Aman and "no place has

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<sup>3</sup> For work exploring parallels between other locations in Arda and Avalon, see Huttar, Flieger ("Matter of Britain").

been since so fair, so fruitful, or so filled with light" (235). A true description of Avalon and its queen.

Most unique, though, is the parallel between Morgen and Lúthien's ability to shape-shift. Monmouth writes, "Such is her skill that she knows how to change her own shape, and on wondrous / Wings she can fly just as Daedalus flew, and she flies past the cities, / As is her wont, or she glides through the air then alights on your shoreline" (93, lines 763-765). Likewise, Lúthien is able to change her form. In order to approach Morgoth's stronghold, she disguises herself "in the winged fell of Thuringwethil" (*Silmarillion* 179). As Beren howls under the moon in the guise of a wolf, Lúthien "wheeled and flittered above him" in the guise of a vampire (179). At first glance, Monmouth's flying fay seems much more marvelous and benevolent than a vampire (or vampire bat), but the negative connotation of the vampire motif extends only to Lúthien's choice of disguise in order to enter an evil stronghold. The ability to fly appears to be Lúthien's own magic, as is her ability to take any shape.

Flight connects Lúthien to a long mythological and folkloric tradition of flying women, women who are usually also dancers like Lúthien (Young 3). Supernatural women who can fly are also linked to death, rebirth, and immortality (3). This is certainly true of Lúthien and Morgen, as Lúthien restores Beren to life through her physical and spiritually healing of him but also takes on mortality—and therefore death at some future point—in order to be with Beren. She is "reborn" as mortal, and yet she also obtains immortality through song and legend throughout Middle-earth's unfolding history. Likewise, Morgen comes to Arthur when he is near death and offers him preservation, which legend suggests will result in a type of rebirth when he returns to England. She also extends to Arthur, and herself, immortality through story. Most importantly, however, the specific quality of flight as the manifestation of both Lúthien and Morgen's ability to shape-shift implies transcendence, which Serinity Young describes as the ability to "go beyond, to rise above limits, to exceed or surpass others or what has been done before, to be superior, and above all to be free from constraint" (7). Lúthien rises above limits and constraints when she escapes from her father's prison in Doriath, escapes captivity from Celegorm and Curufin, when she bests Sauron and Morgoth, and perhaps most of all when she wins Beren back in the halls of Mandos. In the Halls of Mandos, she transcends even her fate as an elf, becoming mortal. Much of her transcendence can be interpreted from her power and agency exercised throughout the narrative, but her ability to shape-shift, and in shape-shifting fly, further strengthens her transcendent nature.

Thomas Honegger finds a parallel between *William of Palerne* (c. 1350) and the skin-changing of Beren and Lúthien, but the specific ability of flight also connects Lúthien to Morgen (and to the Morrigan, as noted earlier). While

Morgan le Fay shape-shifts in other ways in later Arthurian literature, such as turning to stone, her ability to shape-shift into a flying form is unique to Monmouth, just as Lúthien's ability to disguise herself as a vampire is a power unique to her in all the legendarium. More than the other parallels between these two enchantresses—beauty, healing, hospitality, a mystical island dwelling—this ability to shape-shift is singular in both works of literature.<sup>4</sup>

Beauty, healing, sovereignty of an island realm, and especially shape-shifting appear in Celtic mythology and Medieval literature as demonstrations of power, often female power. The women from these traditions, such as the Morrigan, usually exhibit these qualities in ambiguous ways—they are mischievous, self-directed, and even malevolent. The Morgen of *Vita Merlini* is important to the tradition of Morgan le Fay in Arthurian texts not only because she is the first recorded appearance of the figure, but because she is a positive portrayal of female learning, power, and sovereignty (Tolhurst 127-8). In contrast to Arthurian Britain, Morgen's kingdom is stable, peaceful, and healing (127, 129). She embodies both the traditional roles of healer and the nontraditional roles of teacher and ruler without any caveats, restrictions, or critiques from her male author (131). She is void of any sexualization, which can be interpreted as a limited understanding of female power or a fearful view of female sexuality, but in the broader contexts of Arthurian literature, this lack of sexuality removes Morgen from the more devious figures of Celtic mythology like the Morrigan (and Corrigán) and from the Morgan of every other major work of Arthurian literature during the Medieval-through-Victorian era. This is not to say that female power can only present itself in the absence of sexuality, but in regards to Morgen this freedom from sexuality is constructed purposefully to remove any negative aspects to Morgen's power. Monmouth takes the necessary steps within his own historical context to present an unambiguously positive portrayal of female power.

Similarly, Tolkien follows many of Monmouth's patterns to present Lúthien as an unambiguously positive figure of female power. Never in the text are her decisions, actions, or desires framed in such a way that suggest they are anything less than good. Rather, it is the male characters who attempt to thwart her desires (Thingol, Celegorm and Curufin, Sauron, Morgoth) whom Tolkien casts as negative or evil forces. Lúthien's power is seemingly unrestricted. She pursues her own desires without judgment from the text, and Tolkien constructs her plainly as a hero—perhaps *the* hero of his entire legendarium.<sup>5</sup> Like

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<sup>4</sup> Tolkien's other female shape-shifter is Elwing, who changes into a seabird to search for her husband Eärendil. Elwing's form can also fly, and like Lúthien she only changes once. For more discussion of Elwing's shape-shifting, see Larsen.

<sup>5</sup> For further exploration of Tolkien's construction of Lúthien's power and agency, see my essay "A Song of Greater Power" in *Mallorn* 62.

Tolhurst's analysis of Morgen, this depiction of Lúthien offers a positive view of female power, learning, and desire—but a clear vision of good is not the only way Tolkien constructs powerful female characters.

Fast forward nearly one hundred years after Monmouth, sail across the English Channel, and Arthurian legend is now flourishing most vigorously in France through literature that will become known as the Vulgate Cycle, Lancelot-Grail, or Lancelot Prose. This is a series of anonymous works, compiled of five main pieces, written in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. Unsurprisingly, Lancelot figures prominently, but so does Morgan le Fay, though a lot has changed for the enchantress.<sup>6</sup> She is still intelligent and capable of magic, but she is now Arthur's sister,<sup>7</sup> which has striking implications for the French Morgan. First, it means that she is now human and in no way mystical or divine, despite her ability to learn magic, because any innate supernatural qualities would also be connected with Arthur, as her brother, which would damage his heroic reputation (Larrington 13). Second, this moves Morgan out of Avalon and into Arthur's court and its politics (29). Arthurian scholar Carolyne Larrington writes that the "brother-sister bond is one of the most significant in women's lives; a relationship which lasts as long as life itself, it places Morgan in an unparalleled position of intimacy with her brother" (29). This places Morgan close to Arthur and in the center of all the action of his court, as opposed to her singular entrance at the end of the narrative in *Vita Merlini*. While she will retain her position at the end of the story, her character is now an integral part of Arthur's life and not just his death.

Both her human nature and her position at court allow Morgan to cause quite a bit of mischief for Arthur and his knights, but many contemporary scholars interpret her role not as "villain" but as the primary foil to Arthur and his court, highlighting issues within individual knights, the chivalric system, and the "ideal" community of Camelot (Hebert 70). This complex interpretation of the French Arthurian texts deepens not only our understanding of Morgan le Fay, but also the underlying purpose of the Arthurian legend. Finding this literary structure in Tolkien's work, specifically in the role the Noldorin elf Aredhel plays in *The Silmarillion*, allows for a more nuanced perspective of both Aredhel (an often overlooked, under-analyzed, and even maligned character) and the familial and societal structures she inhabits through her relationship with her brother Turgon and his kingdom of Gondolin.

Melanie Rawls's analysis of Aredhel is typical of how scholars and fans often interpret Aredhel's character and her role in the fall of Gondolin, and I

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<sup>6</sup> Fanni Bogdanow traces Morgan's (Morgain's) development within the French prose romances.

<sup>7</sup> Or niece or cousin, but always some kind of kinswoman (Paton 136).

want to quote Rawls at length to understand what has become a somewhat standard view of Aredhel, and to lay the groundwork for how reading Aredhel through the lens of the French Morgan le Fay can lead to a different interpretation that is empowering rather than condemning:

To begin with, Aredhel is rash (masculine)—she takes action without understanding. Against good counsel, she leaves Gondolin, then rashly decides to change her road and ride in perilous country. (It is, perhaps, understandable that she has grown tired of her confinement in Gondolin, however beautiful the city, and has developed a wanderlust. But her desire for freedom endangers many others, and she seems not to care.) She is then ensnared by Eöl, the Dark Elf, who more or less coerces her consent to marriage. She manages to corrupt her son Maeglin with her dissatisfaction, which leads directly to his fatal covetousness of Turgon's kingdom and Turgon's daughter. She dies trying to protect her son from his father's jealous assault with a javelin; her brother Turgon then executes her husband in revenge. She has helped create a set of circumstances that generates actions both harmful and evil. In the end, she is powerless to achieve any of her desires or to protect those she loves. (109)

I am going to set aside the gendered lens that is the overall thesis of Rawls's essay, and the fact that "coerced consent" is an oxymoron. Rawls's conclusion is that Aredhel is without understanding, does not care for other people, is powerless to protect the people she loves, and is the predominant cause of the downfall of Gondolin. Understanding Aredhel's character and her role in the narrative in a similar way to how Morgan le Fay functions in the French Vulgate Cycle can challenge this perspective and provide an alternative reading of Aredhel's character.

Aredhel is not the easiest character to interpret. In a world where fate and free will seem to intermingle freely and precariously, her independence seems to be inextricably linked to the downfall of one of the three elven sanctuaries of the First Age. Lynn Whitaker, author of the most significant scholarship on Aredhel, "Corrupting Beauty: Rape Narrative in *The Silmarillion*," identifies two possible readings of Aredhel's independence: resistance to male authority and an awakening sexuality (52). These interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and both correspond to the French Morgan. One of the most significant developments between Monmouth and the French Vulgate is the sexualization of Morgan le Fay, usually for demeaning ends (see Fries). Whitaker also notes that Aredhel's decisions can be read as the source of her own fall and the fall of Gondolin, whether she made her choices as a free agent or an elf constrained by the doom that followed the Noldor (53).

A parallel with Morgan le Fay, however, creates the possibility of a new interpretation of the responsibility for the fall of Gondolin and Aredhel's role in it, one that does not indict Aredhel but her brother Turgon and the structures he has created in Gondolin.

Upon first glance, Morgan and Aredhel share some "superficial" qualities. In sharp contrast to the damsels-in-distress that populate some Arthurian fiction, they both have strong builds. In the French Vulgate, Morgan is somber, with a "rounded build, not too thin and not too plump"; "comely in body and in features; she stood straight" with "wondrously well-made shoulders" (*Story of Merlin* 362). Tolkien first describes Aredhel as tall and strong, loving to ride and hunt in the forests, often in the company of the sons of Fëanor (*Silmarillion* 60). She is "fearless and hardy of heart" (132). Closest with her brother Turgon and the sons of Fëanor, Aredhel seems to prefer the company and friendship of men. Morgan does as well, no longer ruling as one of nine sisters but closest with her brother Arthur and her male lovers (her husband and paramours vary within the French literature).

Physical characteristics are not unimportant when examining female characters, especially when they are written by men and understood within their historical and cultural context (even today). The borderline "masculine" descriptions of both Morgan and Aredhel imply an "unfeminine" sense of agency and independence. I put these gendered terms in quotation marks because Tolkien and our (presumably male, though not necessarily) Arthurian author write through the traditional gendered lenses of their times, but this by no means requires that modern readers must interpret the agency of Morgan and Aredhel as masculine, as Rawls seems to do. Aredhel can speak for both herself and Morgan when she tells Turgon, "'I am your sister and not your servant, and beyond your bounds I will go as seems good to me. And if you begrudge me an escort, then I will go alone'" (*Silmarillion* 131). Likewise, Arthurian scholar Jill Hebert can be speaking of Aredhel when she writes, "Morgan is problematic because she neither conforms to conventional models of 'good' and 'bad' femininity nor adheres to the traditional place of women in society" (3). Aredhel and Morgan both occupy nuanced roles in their narratives, in liminal spaces on the traditional binaries of male/female and good/evil of their cultures (both fictional and in the historical context of their authors). Indeed, they seem to defy the binaries their societies attempt to dictate to them, or—more accurately—transcend them. This complicated role in the narrative, for both Morgan and Aredhel, has often been interpreted as a critique of their characters, but what feminist scholars such as Hebert suggest is that rather than reading these stories as critiques of female agency, power, or independence, we can read these narratives as a critique of the structures against which these women struggled.

Gondolin is very Camelot-esque. It has a divine purpose, “commissioned” by one of the Valar when Ulmo comes to Turgon in a dream to urge him to build a secret elven stronghold in the hidden vale of Tumladen (*Silmarillion* 114-5). The city is “fair indeed,” “[h]igh and white were its walls, and smooth its stairs, and tall and strong was the Tower of the King,” where “shining fountains played” (126). It is both a beauty and a refuge, a “city on a hill,” and Ulmo tells Turgon that his kingdom will stand the longest against Morgoth, but that Turgon should “love not too well the work of thy hands and the devices of thy heart; and remember that the true hope of the Noldor lieth in the West and cometh from the Sea” (125). Ulmo’s warning to “love not too well the work of thy hands” is a common theme in Tolkien’s work, and it brings about many downfalls in Middle-earth. Its foreshadowing implies that it is Turgon’s mis-ordered love of his creation, his city, that will bring about the downfall of Gondolin. The role Aredhel plays as Turgon’s sister serves to highlight Turgon’s mis-ordered love by providing a foil to his insular vision for his kingdom and government.

Turgon and Aredhel share the intimate brother-sister relationship that Larrington describes regarding Arthur and Morgan, and this sharpens their positions as foils. Aredhel stays with Turgon in Nevrast, where Turgon and his people dwelt before they built Gondolin, and she goes with him to the hidden kingdom when it is completed (*Silmarillion* 131). Aredhel has options in choosing where to reside and which company to keep—she could have stayed with her other brother Fingon or struck out on her own earlier—so it is telling that she stays so long (over 200 years) with Turgon, but there are hints at their familial affection throughout the entire narrative. Turgon’s heart is “heavy at her going” when she departs Gondolin, and not just because of his sense of foreboding at her departure. When her escort returns to Gondolin to report her missing, Turgon is angry but also grieved (132). After getting lost in the forest of Nan Elmoth, married to Eöl, and bearing Maeglin, “there was awakened in Aredhel a desire to see her own kin again” (134). Aredhel misses her family, of whom she is closest with Turgon. Turgon’s grief at her parting and Aredhel’s desire to see her brother again speak to their affection and care for each other, though the most revealing evidence of the intimacy of their relationship is the joy at their reunion. When Aredhel returns to Gondolin with Maeglin, she is “received with joy” (136). Turgon sees in Maeglin “one worthy to be accounted among the princes of the Noldor” because of his relation through Aredhel.<sup>8</sup> He

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<sup>8</sup> Maeglin is an obvious Mordred figure. He desires a woman he cannot, and should not, have. He is related to the king and at odds with the more saintly and kingly figure of Tuor. He betrays his king and his family, and has evil intent in his desire to achieve both power and the woman he desires. He is the one who actively brings about the fall of Gondolin by betraying its location to Morgoth and leading the forces of evil in the attack and

declares: "I rejoice indeed that Ar-Feiniel has returned to Gondolin [...] and now more fair again shall my city seem than in the days when I deemed her lost" (136). He even treats Eöl with great dignity, though Eöl snuck into Gondolin, because of his connection to Aredhel (137). Eöl, however, responds bitterly to Turgon, and attempts to slay Maeglin, actually killing Aredhel. After the death of his sister, Turgon has Eöl thrown off a precipice to his death, showing no mercy in his grief (138). All of these instances demonstrate the deep affection and bond between Turgon and Aredhel.

Despite their opposing wills at times, Turgon and Aredhel seem to share a genuine love and respect for each other. Indeed, since Turgon's wife died during the crossing of the Grinding Ice, Aredhel is his closest female family member. Likewise, Morgan serves this role for Arthur in the Vulgate Cycle. She is described as Arthur's closest relative (*Death of Arthur* 33). When Arthur visits her home, she is overjoyed to see him, declaring, "You're in the one house in the world where you were most wanted, and there's no woman in the world who loves you more than I, and indeed I ought to love you as much as is humanly possible" (33). They talk through the night, and it is Morgan who tells Arthur of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair. After that, Arthur only lets Morgan into his room (36). This intimacy and preference for his sister is mirrored at the end of the narrative when Arthur is dying. When Arthur sees Morgan in a ship coming to him, he immediately rises to join her (129). And all this after the text describes her as "treacherous Morgan" (31). Their brother-sister bond prevails at the end, superseding all of their previous conflict, similar to Aredhel and Turgon.

The intimacy of the brother-sister relationship between Aredhel and Turgon strengthens the contrasts between their perspectives of the outside world, which is how Aredhel's independence and agency point to the defects in Turgon's actions and decisions. After Aredhel's death, Turgon welcomes another visitor to Gondolin: the human Tuor.<sup>9</sup> It is upon Tuor's arrival in Gondolin that Turgon remembers Ulmo's warning, but "Turgon was become proud, and Gondolin as beautiful as a memory of Elven Tirion, and he trusted still in its secret and impregnable strength, though even a Vala should gainsay it" (*Silmarillion* 240). Even more important than the cardinal sin of pride, though,

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attempting to seize Idril. However, though Maeglin is the one who directly precipitates the downfall of the kingdom, Turgon's role (including his blind Arthurian faith in someone who is plainly not to be trusted) is a pivotal part of the events leading up to the actual fall of the city.

<sup>9</sup> Tuor is the most Arthurian figure in this story, perhaps in the entire legendarium. His childhood is spent separated from family and his birthright, he finds a sword in Vinyamar that signals his destiny, he marries the lady he loves which will form a love triangle, and he joins the royal family of a golden city that is nonetheless in danger if he cannot save it. There is also no evidence of Tuor's death, or of his return to the world of the living.



is what Tolkien writes about Turgon and his people's attitudes to the suffering of others. Tolkien says that after coming forth for one great battle against Morgoth, "the people of that city desired never again to mingle in the woes of Elves and Men without [...]. Shut behind their pathless and enchanted hills they suffered none to enter, though he fled from Morgoth hate-pursued" and "Turgon shut his ear to word of the woes without" (240). Turgon's pride will go before his fall, but even greater a transgression is his lack of care for the suffering of others against a shared foe. The struggle against Morgoth is by no means over, but Turgon and his people abandon the elves and men still living openly in Middle-earth to the wrath of Morgoth and completely withdraw from the world and its troubles.

This is in contrast to Aredhel's attitude toward the broader world. Her reasons to leave Gondolin are personal—she wants to be free and reunited with her friends, the sons of Fëanor—but this implies a care for other people as well. Turgon vows never to march to the aid of any of the sons of Fëanor (240-241), and, whether the sons of Fëanor deserve his help or not, this is a failing on Turgon's part. Aredhel's desire to seek out others sets in motion events that will come to bear in Gondolin, but Turgon's rejection of others is the greater grievance. It is not only a turning away from Ulmo, but a rejection of the compassion, support, and unity that Tolkien expresses throughout all his work as essential for prevailing against evil and ensuring the survival of a kingdom.

Aredhel is not only a portrayal of an independent female character, but her female agency is directly contrasted to Turgon's passivity in a way that highlights this passivity as a failure. This is the role Morgan le Fay plays in the French Vulgate. As noted by Hebert, Morgan's repeated episodes consistently test Arthur's knights, tests they repeatedly fail because they are "more loyal to themselves and to the (often self-serving) concepts of chivalry and/or courtly love than they are to Arthur" (79). This mirrors Turgon's attitude. He fails to be faithful to Ulmo, adhering to his own misguided wisdom and forsaking the plight of others. Turgon's withdrawal from the larger world of Middle-earth becomes the policy of the entire kingdom, creating a systematic flaw in the system through an insular worldview. Aredhel offers the alternative perspective. She challenges Turgon's system, and her story is not only about succeeding or failing in achieving her own desires but about revealing the larger issues and dangers facing Gondolin and Middle-earth. In that sense, it is almost essential to the narrative that she fails to find her friends and maintain her freedom as her narrative progresses because her ability to achieve her desires is not solely up to her. Aredhel requires a safe and stable world in order to move about Middle-earth freely, but her brother has failed to provide—or even attempt to provide—such a world for her or anyone else. A character like Lúthien may be able to transcend all the dangers in Middle-earth to achieve her

heart's desire, but she is a once-in-four-ages being. Most people, Aredhel included, need Turgon to create a safer world. It is a king's obligation and ultimately both Turgon and Arthur fail to do this. The tragedy is that, as his foil, the sister suffers the consequences of her brother the king's failures.

Unlike Lúthien, Aredhel's agency is not unambiguous in its depiction, but it is her ambiguity that makes Aredhel an effective character in the story of Gondolin. Burns writes that Tolkien's "most common and most effective means of adding moral complexity is to link ideal characters with specific negative ones, thereby suggesting a darker, undeveloped side" (94), that Tolkien's conception of female power is found in two moral extremes (embodied in Burns through Melian and Ungoliant): "the power that affirms life and the power that takes life away" (125). However, Tolkien establishes the effectiveness and complexity of Aredhel's character the opposite way. She has no spider counterpart. The moral complexity of her character is found within her nature and not an outside foil, and that is what makes her both interesting and empowering as a female character. It is notable that Aredhel's independence and agency shifts dramatically after encountering Eöl,<sup>10</sup> so much so that she seems like a completely different person, but that is a topic for another essay. The independence, agency, and even unrest found in her character during her departure from Gondolin and wanderings through Middle-earth represent a more complex understanding of an empowered female, one not usually understood as "good," but that is exactly why Aredhel's ambiguity is important in understanding how Tolkien constructs his female characters. She offers a different perspective.

Movement throughout the narrative and landscape of Middle-earth is not only found in the benevolent female figures such as Lúthien, but in the ambiguous characters like Aredhel. This is not to negate the unambiguous characters—a completely positive view of female power has its place in literature. Literary analysis has fluctuated greatly in the past in regards to which female characters are "empowered," and continues to fluctuate today. Too often, sides are chosen in determining what depictions define "strong female characters," a line drawn in the sand between depictions that are wholly positive with no nuance and depictions that require all female figures to have darker

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<sup>10</sup> Yvette Kisor proposes that at this point in the story it is Eöl who plays the role of fairy seductress (a Medieval and Arthurian trope), ensnaring an object of his desire through enchantment (32), which implies not only a reversal of power but a reversal of roles—one Aredhel's character fails to recover from completely. How Aredhel's agency shifts throughout the narrative based on her encounters with other people and spaces certainly deserves more research. I do not think, however, that Aredhel ever displays the kind of sexual desire that Kisor is writing about, though she draws on Tolkien's use of the Celtic figure of the Corrigán, not unrelated to the Morrigan and Morgan le Fay.

edges. The beauty and effectiveness of Tolkien's work is that he offers both the unambiguous and ambiguous views of how women can embody power and agency. This provides the perspective that female power can be a wholly good thing and also leaves room for the nuance, complexity, sympathy, and reality found in ambiguous female characters.

Let us revisit Rawls's analysis of Aredhel. Rawls describes her as rash, but I would call her independent, for she does not act without understanding. She understands the need to engage with the world at large and look beyond the walls of Gondolin. Turgon's failure to do so helps facilitate the fall of Gondolin, which is brought about by many players and many circumstances. Aredhel does care deeply for people, namely her brother, her son, and her friends. Rather than being powerless to protect those she loves, she saves her son's life (and her husband's, momentarily, before he dooms himself). More importantly, her powerlessness is not of her own making. By failing to make Middle-earth a safer place, Turgon has a hand in his sister's circumstances. But despite the circumstances she finds herself in, Aredhel makes so many of her own choices, from leaving and returning to Gondolin to saving Maeglin, and that is empowering. Aredhel is not as straightforward as Lúthien, but Tolkien does not construct her in the same way. Rather, he creates her role in the narrative with ambiguity, and it is in this ambiguity that she becomes empowered to challenge the systemic flaws of Gondolin's ideology.

I want to question, then, why Lúthien receives such a positive reception from Tolkien fans and scholars and Aredhel does not. Do we praise Lúthien and critique Aredhel because we already know how both stories end? That Lúthien triumphs and Aredhel fails to save herself and Gondolin, that Lúthien finds romance and Aredhel does not—though her life is full of loves of other kinds. These two women are not dissimilar. Lúthien could have easily said to Thingol, "I am your daughter and not your servant, and beyond your bounds I will go as seems good to me" when her father imprisoned her. She and Aredhel share an independent spirit, but do we accept Lúthien's more readily because her independence and power are unambiguously portrayed as good and deployed in the service of a romantic love? Do we condemn Aredhel because Tolkien constructed her narrative more ambiguously and her desire is not directed towards a love story?

Túrin's actions and decisions mirror Aredhel's in many ways, too—actions and decisions that also bring about death, the destruction of cities, and tragic ends. And yet he is, perhaps surprisingly, received with more affection, understanding, and interest by his audience than Aredhel. Are we, as readers, made uncertain by female ambiguity? This is, I think, one of the main reasons why Morgan le Fay has long suffered at the hands of her writers and readers, though current Arthurian scholarship is doing much to rectify her situation. If

we can do the same to Aredhel, I believe we will not only take more from her story than we have before, but also understand her better in the way Tolkien created her to be.

Lúthien, Aredhel, and Morgan le Fay are vital figures in their narratives, with roles just as important as those of the kings and heroes. They provide a conscious critique of societies and systems that are easy to idealize, reminding the audience of the flaws within the system—that shining walls do not compensate for compassion and active engagement with the world. This is one of the most important messages of Tolkien's stories, exemplified throughout all of his major narrative works: *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. So I would like to end with one more example of a figure from the legendarium who serves as a striking reminder that even the best of heroes is never wholly worthy. He may be the most unlikely Morgan le Fay figure, but no one has a more poignant scene as a Morgan le Fay-styled challenge to the heroic knight complex than Sauron himself. When Finrod and Beren approach Sauron's tower in Tol-in-Gaurhoth, Finrod faces Sauron in a contest of power through song. Finrod's power is great—he is one of Middle-earth's greatest heroes—but Sauron prevails when his song reminds the audience of the Kinslaying, and Finrod falls before him (*Silmarillion* 171). When thinking of Arthurian legends or Middle-earth, it is easy to picture powerful kings, shining cities, and exciting adventures, but Tolkien always goes out of his way to remind us that Middle-earth is a fallen world. Its systems are imperfect. Its heroes are flawed. It is only by coming together as people that we can compensate for our own failings and face the greater evils of our age.

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